

# “MESSAGE QUEENS”: AIDS PROTEST LITERATURE, THE GAY COMMUNITY AND WRITING AS A POLITICAL ACT

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## ABSTRACT

The explosion of the AIDS epidemic in the early Eighties, and the subsequent position in which the gay community had found itself, brought the need for writers to become politically engaged. The protest took different forms and activism was interpreted differently by different authors. Larry Kramer became very politically engaged and criticized both the government and the gay community; David Feinberg was aggressive but preferred humor as a weapon to protest; Sarah Schulman described the protests alongside the process of gentrification in the Village area. All their texts, and many more, have contributed to saving and shaping both gay culture and the gay community.

Keywords: AIDS literature, protest, gay literature, humor

## INTRODUCTION

When the AIDS epidemic exploded in the early 1980s, the American gay community was hit the hardest, especially at first. In the beginning, the disease manifested itself through a variety of uncommon symptoms, and the nature of both the illness and the means of contagion was a medical mystery. The fact that, at first, the epidemic seemed to be only affecting the gay community pushed both the American government and the mainstream press to *de facto* ignore it for a long time. Hence, the history of AIDS has become inextricably tied to the history of the American gay community. This connection is apparent in the works produced by many gay artists during the AIDS age. Here I will look at how writers during the Eighties and Nineties reacted to the epidemic, using their work as a tool for protest and representation. The analysis will include different literary genres, and I will be focusing on the voices that better embody the different nuances of the protest during this time.

Especially during the early years, the absence of a cure and the mystery of how the disease was transmitted made information (along with medical research) the crucial element in the fight against AIDS. The silence kept by the institutions, then, was considered to be as lethal as the illness itself, because “until a cure ... is developed, *only*

information and mobilization can save lives” (Crimp 1987, 12). For most of the Eighties, the gay community saw a world the rest of society did not – author Sarah Schulman opens her novel *People in Trouble* stating: “it was the beginning of the end of the world but not everyone noticed right away. Some people were dying. Some people were busy” (1990, 1). Since no one else was paying attention, the gay community needed to raise its voice, and many of those who chose to speak up and speak out were writers. In the Eighties, in particular, the line of distinction between author and activist became blurred, and the two figures often ended up overlapping. This situation brought significant consequences not just for the fight against the disease, but for the history of the gay community. It might also be one of the reasons why, when HIV/AIDS became a manageable condition after the discovery of protease inhibitors, AIDS literature as a genre, as well as most academic writing on it, ended in the late 1990s. AIDS literature, then, is connected at its core to its function of protest. Monica Pearl, one of the few scholars to deal with AIDS in recent years, stated that “print has been one of the primary media for AIDS representation” (2013, 3). Through print, Pearl argued, and through “an increasing sense of reliance on literature among a growing and changing gay population ... [,] a gay community coalesced and redefined itself and spread word about ways to protect oneself and others from illness and take care of oneself if one became ill” (2013, 3). The situation pushed writers to employ different literary genres: mainly fiction and drama, sometimes poetry. However, since most AIDS literature authors belonged to the gay community, what they wrote was greatly influenced by autobiographical experiences. Therefore, the line between fiction and non-fiction was often blurred as well, and this reinforced “the postmodernist conviction that just as there can be no separation between private and public, so also there can be no separation between art and politics” (Pastore 1993, 16). Hence, essays and memoirs were a big part of AIDS literary production, and autobiographical fiction could be considered the main AIDS literature subgenre: gay writers told their own stories in order to survive.

The fact that the inspiration was significantly autobiographical, and the resulting social and political role of literature in representing the experience of the gay community, gave a new meaning to the act of writing itself. AIDS authors wrote with a sense of urgency rarely employed in other genres: as playwright and activist Larry Kramer put it, “it’s not often that writers are so placed on the front line of history in the making,

and I felt an obligation as well as the desire [to speak out]" (1989, 65). Works of literature had the double responsibility to protest and spread information about the disease across the gay community. One of the most recurring examples of the latter is the list of symptoms. During the early years of the epidemic, in particular, when little was known about the disease, many AIDS texts presented a list of the most common symptoms: Kaposi's sarcoma lesions, night sweats, pneumocystis pneumonia, swollen lymph nodes, and so on. Such specific details both expressed the human reality of the disease and informed as many people as possible about the first signs of contagion. Expedients like these made AIDS literary texts an "underground" source of information, and were so widely used that, in 1993, scholar Sharon Oard Warner argued, "what I know about AIDS – about living with it and dying from it – I have learned from literature" (1993, 491).

This use of information is also a sign of another important feature in AIDS and, more broadly, gay literature: the relationship with the audience. Gay literature, up to this point, had assumed the presence of a generally straight audience to whom the very existence of gay experience had to be explained or justified. Now, gay texts explicitly assumed "the existence of a more or less sympathetic gay audience" (Stambolian 1986, 6). Furthermore, one of the main AIDS literature publishers was Stonewall Inn Editions, an explicitly gay line founded by St. Martin's Press in 1987. Warner argues that "as one might predict, most of the writing about AIDS is being done by gay writers, but readers may not realize that most of this writing is published in collections marketed primarily to gay readers. ... I begin to realize just how segregated that market is. ... Because few people outside the gay community are exposed to these stories, few are reading them. And we all need to be reading them" (1993, 495). These texts were often popular within the LGBTQ community, especially in big centers like New York or San Francisco. It took the Nineties, though, with authors like Michael Cunningham and Tony Kushner, for AIDS literature to reach a wider audience.

Besides protest and information, the political use of AIDS literature also had the intent of testimony. The gay community was living in a parallel world as it pertained to AIDS, and gays were being turned "into walking time-bombs" (Whitmore 1988, 205) by the disease. Therefore, writing became a way for gay authors to shine a light on stories that nobody would have otherwise told. Author George Whitmore defined the situation as if "along what looked like a losing hand, I'd just been dealt the assignment of a

lifetime” (1988, 206). The fact that, along with spreading information and protesting, AIDS literature was depicting the everyday human struggles PWAs (people with AIDS) went through while being ignored by the rest of society, gives this genre a peculiar position in the literary landscape.

During the years, several authors and critics (many of them Jewish) put forward a challenging comparison between AIDS literature and Holocaust literature. Although running the risk of sounding hasty (the Reagan administration obviously did not exterminate gay people in concentration camps), this comparison makes sense when we consider that a significant number of citizens, many of them belonging to a group that did not encounter the support or the interest of the government, were dying with no one paying attention. Furthermore, we can observe an overlap of gay and Jewish themes, for example with the recurring description of the Village as a “ghetto.” Besides housing the biggest gay community in the United States, New York is the center of American Judaism, and the use of the word “ghetto” indicates that here Jews and gays often occupied “the same social, as well as geographic, space” (Bachmann 2008, 91). In *People in Trouble*, the idea of ghetto evolves into the image of New York as a death camp: “our city is so stratified that people can occupy the same physical space and never confront one another. New York is a death camp for thousands of people, but they don’t have to be contained for us to avoid them. The same streets I have fun on are someone else’s hell” (Schulman 1990, 113). The fact that most people are leading normal lives, while others are dying horrible deaths, is crucial to understand AIDS literature in general and the Jewish metaphors in particular. These are defining years for the gay community, so much so that “the AIDS epidemic was to become the central fact of its history... as elemental an event for this fledgling community as the Holocaust was for Jews” (Denneny 1993, 38).

The main difference between AIDS and Holocaust literature, however, resides in the former’s element of protest. AIDS authors depicted the tragic circumstances the gay community was in as socially not dissimilar to the marginalization the Jewish community had experienced in the 1930s in Europe. AIDS authors, on the other hand, were not survivors: they were describing an ongoing situation, they were writing “reports from the combat zone” (Denneny 1993, 46). Furthermore, AIDS writers found themselves in a peculiar position: many of them were already sick and were writing against the clock, while others were writing about a sick friend or lover but knew that in just a few months

it could be their turn to get infected. All of these elements entail that “AIDS writing is urgent; it is engaged and activist writing; it is writing in response to a present threat; it is in it, of it, and aims to affect it” (Denneny 1993, 46). The sense of urgency in AIDS literature also has to do with words being, at some point, the only effective tool to fight death. In a context where many authors were already sick, and others lived in fear of contracting the virus, writing had a “talismanic power to ward off death. The Scheherazadian gesture in AIDS literature is one toward sustaining life” (Pearl 2013, 117). The act of writing, then, becomes lifesaving in and of itself.

The sense of urgency is, in this respect, one of the fundamental trademarks of AIDS writing. This urgency is also reflected in a significant authorial choice: many great AIDS novels notwithstanding, the generally preferred literary genres are the short story and the play. This choice happened, mainly, for practical reasons: there was a need to get the word out, and these two genres took less time to write and could provide more immediate effects. During the early Eighties, in particular, the most important texts produced were either short stories or plays. In 1985, two of the earliest pieces of AIDS writing came out within a few weeks of each other, and both of them were plays: William Hoffman’s *As Is* and Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart*.

Aside from the variety of genres, a significant element to emerge in analyzing AIDS literature is its stylistic diversity. Despite being one genre, produced by one community, mainly based in one city, during a specific time, the ways to describe the experience of the epidemic vary dramatically. While some authors thought fitting to depict the fight against AIDS using war language and metaphors, others considered it inappropriate; some preferred to describe the reality of the illness without naming it explicitly and others made it a point to mention every detail specifically; some chose to express the tragic realities of AIDS through the lens of humor, others considered it out of place. The result is, in the words of scholar Emmanuel Nelson, “a diverse body of literature that documents, disrupts, testifies, protests, and even celebrates” (1992, 3). This diversity also makes AIDS protest literature a rich tapestry of literary voices. Here I will analyze the works of three authors who interpreted the concept of protest in different ways, representative of the varied role protest has in AIDS literature. Some of them, like Kramer, are present in most AIDS-literature critical texts, others (Feinberg in particular) are maybe less known but not less relevant. The analysis will approach each

of these authors by focusing on what makes their interpretation of protest significant in AIDS literature and gay culture at large.

#### THE POLITICAL PROTEST OF LARRY KRAMER

From a protest literature point of view, the most prominent figure in the AIDS context is playwright Larry Kramer, who, by his own admission, “uses words as fighting tools” (1989, 145). In 1982, Kramer co-founded Gay Men’s Health Crisis, the activist organization that during the early years would take care of PWAs and spread information about the disease. Kramer was also one of the first people to write about AIDS, and his 1985 play *The Normal Heart* is still one of the most important works about the epidemic, so much so that in 2014 Ryan Murphy adapted it into a movie for HBO, for which Kramer himself wrote the screenplay. The play recounts the early times of the epidemic, and the beginning of GMHC up to Ned’s (Kramer’s alter ego) ousting by the rest of the board because of his aggressive ways of protesting, especially New York City Democratic Mayor Ed Koch. While it is a well-known fact that the Reagan administration fundamentally ignored the epidemic for years because it considered it to only affect the gay community, it is probably less known that Koch acted (or refused to act) in a similar way – both figures electing “silence as the most effective means of gay repression” (Denneny 1993, 38). The involvement of writers in politics and the explicit protests directed at Koch are present in several AIDS texts to the point that, along with Reagan, Koch is arguably the main political figure against which AIDS protest writing developed. Housing the biggest gay community in the United States, during the epidemic New York also housed the biggest number of contagions. Activists compared Koch’s decision to ignore AIDS to the situation in San Francisco, where authorities treated the gay community with greater attention. In his novel *Eighty-Sixed*, author David Feinberg draws a comparison between how New York and San Francisco dealt with the epidemic, until one of the characters concludes: “Remind me to move to the West Coast when I get symptoms” (1989, 214). For a good half of Kramer’s play, the characters, members of GMHC, are desperately trying to get a meeting with the mayor and keep getting ignored.

Kramer’s activism has the peculiar characteristic of being critical and adversarial both with the institutions and the gay community. While attacking the president and

the mayor for not paying attention to AIDS, Kramer also heavily criticizes a community that, in the early Eighties, was still widely in the closet. The sexual liberation of the 1970s had brought a new life for the gay community, one in which people could live their sexuality more freely. This freedom, though, was experienced in an isolated way. Gay men *de facto* lived in a ghetto – they conducted a very free sex life in certain spaces, such as Fire Island, Provincetown, or the Village, and in many cases were still closeted at work or with their family. They lived in a sort of parallel dimension, in which at the time they were in many ways autonomous. After the explosion of the epidemic, the situation changed and the gay community needed attention. In this context, Kramer considered visibility as gay men crucial in the fight to be recognized by the institutions. This approach was met with hostility and fear by other GMHC members, who did not want to be publicly identified as gay and felt that attacking the institutions so openly would be counterproductive. When told they had to stay out of political statements, Ned says that “it’s going to be impossible to pass along any information or recommendation that isn’t going to be considered political by somebody” (Kramer 1985, 32). The differences on how to structure the protest widened the rift within GMHC: the majority of the board wanted institutional support for those who were sick, Kramer wanted visibility to prevent others from getting infected.

The other division Kramer brought within the gay community had to do with sex and abstinence. In 1978, before the epidemic, Kramer had written *Faggots*, a novel in which he heavily criticized the sexual excesses brought by the liberation. When AIDS exploded, in 1981, the ways of contagion were unknown, but sexual transmission was among the suspects from the beginning. In this context, Kramer very quickly started advocating for gay men to stop having sex until the crisis was over. The gay community met this request with outrage for different reasons, the main one being that, after enjoying a few years of freedom, they were afraid of going back into hiding. Singling sex out carried, in the eyes of many, a component of blame and shame for gay sex life, particularly since the issue was raised by someone who had already condemned casual sex in the past. This discussion is also at the center of *The Normal Heart*, and Kramer’s relationship with sex, in general, has been the subject of a few of his writings. Kramer’s position, of course, started to be read differently when medical research discovered that he was right, and unprotected anal intercourse was the main mode of contagion.

However, even after the discovery of how AIDS was transmitted (and the consequent possibility of safe sex), Kramer continued to hold extreme positions on this subject, which would suggest a complicated relationship with sex independently from the epidemic. The fact that he had been right about the contagion, though, along with the fact that he had been the first to sound the alarm, had earned him the nickname of “Cassandra” (Feinberg 1994, 15).

Kramer’s poetics are based heavily on oppositions: love and sex, gay and straight, and so on. One of the most compelling oppositions within the gay community at the time, though, was the one between dead and alive. For a long time, during the Eighties, an AIDS diagnosis meant certain death. Often, this entailed being considered as one of the dead while still being alive. Kramer wanted to speak to and for the gay community, and for years refused to take the HIV test, suggesting one just had to act as if he was positive. Poet and critic David Bergman sees a very interesting motivation for this, “based not so much on his fears that the test would exclude him from the ‘living,’ but on his desire to keep open the prospect that he is one of the dead” (1991, 134). This position is crucial to the dynamics of protest: Kramer has to feel a sense of belonging that legitimates him to speak out in the name of the gay community, with which he already had a controversial relationship. In this context, to depict the entire gay community as a group of potentially dead people makes the protest imagery more powerful.

Kramer’s situation during the first years of the epidemic has much to do with the evolution of the social position of the gay community since the late 1970s. The ghetto-like situation during the period of sexual liberation, criticized by Kramer in *Faggots* and celebrated by other authors like Andrew Holleran in *Dancer from the Dance*, changed the dynamic within the gay community. The social activities of gay men revolved primarily around sex and their relationship with the lesbian community was not so close: the community lived in an autonomous world, despite lacking social clout. The epidemic broke this balance: gay men needed to be helped by the institutions, and PWAs needed assistance. In *People in Trouble* Molly, the leading lesbian character, says that “when AIDS happened men needed more friends” (Schulman 1990, 76), describing the social change occurred in the gay community in the early Eighties. Bergman formulates this concept more precisely: “AIDS broke the spell of gay self-sufficiency. Suddenly, gay men needed government services and family support. However, their experience of



independence led gay men to demand help as fully enfranchised citizens and fully accepted sons. Such changes have, in turn, altered gay political thinking and rhetoric” (1991, 136).

This problematic relationship with the heritage of the Seventies sets the basis both for Kramer’s activism and the backlash he received from the gay community. In *The Normal Heart*, Mickey’s character had participated in the protests for civil rights, and in the first act of the play states that “the battle against the police at Stonewall was won by transvestites. We all fought like hell;” and he moves on to criticize the gays he calls the “Brooks Brothers guys” – the ones who preferred to blend in the general society (1985, 25). In Act Two, though, Mickey becomes the spokesperson for the position opposite to Kramer’s regarding sex, defending the victories of the Seventies:

I can’t take any more theories... The Great Plague of London was caused by polluted drinking water from a pump nobody noticed. Maybe it’s a genetic predisposition... What if it’s monogamy? ... I don’t know what to tell anybody. ... How can we tell people to stop when it might turn out to be caused by – I don’t know! ... I’ve spent fifteen years of my life fighting for our right to be free and make love whenever, wherever... And you’re telling me that all those years of what being gay stood for is wrong... and I’m a murderer. We have been so oppressed! Don’t you remember how it was? Can’t you see how important it is for us to love openly, without hiding and without guilt? (61-62)

It can be argued, though, that Kramer himself had an idea of “what being gay stood for,” rooted in a different reclaiming of gay identity. He translated his complicated relationship with sex into the affirmation that there is more to gay culture than sexual relationships. He expressed this idea in several ways in his work, but the main example is probably Ned’s monologue in the last part of *The Normal Heart* (1985), delivered just after he has been kicked out of GMHC:

I belong to a culture that includes Proust, Henry James, Tchaikovsky, Cole Porter, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Alexander the Great, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Christopher Marlowe, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Tennessee Williams, Byron, E.M. Forster, Lorca, Auden, Francis Bacon, James Baldwin, Harry Stack Sullivan, John Maynard Keynes, Dag Hammarskjöld... These are not invisible men. ... did you know that an openly gay Englishman was as responsible as any man for winning the Second World War? His name was Alan Turing and he cracked the Germans’ Enigma code so the Allies knew in advance what the Nazis were going to do – and when the war was over he committed suicide he was so hounded for being gay. Why don’t they teach any of this in the schools? ... The only way we’ll have real pride is when we demand recognition of a culture that isn’t just sexual. It’s all there – all through history we’ve been there; but we have to claim it,

and identify who was in it, and articulate what's in our minds and hearts and all our creative contributions to this earth. ... That's how I want to be defined: as one of the men who fought the war. Being defined by our cocks is literally killing us. Must we all be reduced to becoming our own murderers? Why couldn't you and I ... have been leaders in creating a new definition of what it means to be gay? (70-71)

## FEINBERG AND THE POWER OF HUMOR IN GAY CULTURE

Ned's monologue could be considered the first step in AIDS literature towards the reclaiming of an identity and a culture that were a lot more complex than people thought before the epidemic. After this, though, Kramer did not go much further in this direction, sticking more to the political protest side of his literary production. The reclaiming of gay identity, though, became a crucial topic in the development of AIDS literature and was employed as a theme in different ways. David B. Feinberg also used anger as a powerful literary tool to protest. Although he published a small production of writings before dying of AIDS in 1994, he is one of the best examples of a defiant reclaiming of a queer identity during the epidemic. One of the main elements that separate him from Kramer is his idea about the use of humor. While Kramer asserted his positions with inexhaustible seriousness, Feinberg, despite a vigorous commitment to protest, elected humor not only as a way to maintain sanity during the epidemic but as a more effective weapon to attack the Republican establishment.

As already mentioned, the use of humor in dealing with the epidemic was controversial within the gay community. In 1987, author Edmund White wrote a harsh critique on the use of humor in AIDS literature, and his opinion gained quite a following. In his essay "Esthetics and Loss," White (1994b) advises to

avoid humor, because humor seems grotesquely inappropriate to the occasion. A sniggering or wise cracking humor puts the public (indifferent when not uneasy) on cozy terms with what is an unspeakable scandal: death. Humor domesticates terror, lays to rest misgivings that should be intensified. Humor suggests that AIDS is just another calamity to befall mother camp, whereas in truth AIDS is not one more item in a sequence, but a rupture in meaning itself. Humor, like melodrama, is an assertion of bourgeois values; it falsely suggests that AIDS is all in the family. ... Only a dire gallows humor is acceptable. (216)

Much of the use of humor in AIDS literature would prove itself to be opposed to White's view on the matter, except for that last line: AIDS-literature authors, as a matter of fact,

are not interested in employing humor to make their writings more palatable to a straight audience. Quite the contrary: they are addressing their community and are often attacking the authorities. This environment pushes them to use humor, and black humor in particular, to be even more explicit in their depiction of AIDS and their protest against the president, or the New York mayor. Humor, then, becomes a lens through which gay people can look at AIDS with resilience, and a way of expressing themselves in a much more outrageous manner. Feinberg is a perfect example of this idea.

During his short life, Feinberg published two heavily autobiographical novels, *Eighty-Sixed* and *Spontaneous Combustion*. The third book, *Queer and Loathing*, a collection of non-fiction writings, was published shortly after his death. The latter probably gives us the best insight into his poetics. About his use of humor, Feinberg argues that “in an absurd world, humor may be the only appropriate response. ... Humor is a survival tactic, a defense mechanism, a way of lessening the horror. I would probably literally go mad if I tried to deal with AIDS at face value, without the filter of humor. Once you joke about something, you appropriate it, you attain a certain amount of control over it” (1994, 87). Feinberg’s take on humor evokes a literary genre that did something very similar: the literature about the Holocaust. As mentioned earlier, AIDS literature and Holocaust literature have a few features in common: one could argue that the dynamic of black humor when dealing with tragedy and death is the most interesting one. The first element worth mentioning is that both the comparison to the Holocaust and the use of black humor in AIDS literature are mostly put forward by Jewish authors, so a portion of shared heritage is undoubtedly present, and the approach to these two tragic events becomes similar. Scholar Sarah Blacher Cohen argued that, for Jews, humor has been “a source of salvation. By laughing at their dire circumstances, Jews have been able to liberate themselves from them. Their humor has been a balance to counter external adversity and internal sadness” (1987, 4). This dynamic is very similar to the one occurring in AIDS literature. The main difference is that Holocaust literature developed in the aftermath of the Second World War, looking at the past, while AIDS literature arose during the emergency of the epidemic, so humor became a literary tool for protest: there is very little looking back at a tragic past.

Since AIDS literature was mainly addressing a gay readership, the use of humor gained a function in this context as well. The presence of humor in a gay text usually

involved references and an attitude close to gay culture. Humor thus became a critical element in the literary process of reclaiming gay identity. In this context, a crucial role was played, especially in Feinberg's works, by the concept of "camp."

Camp has the peculiarity of having a role in gay culture – in "Notes on Camp," Susan Sontag argued that gays "constitute the vanguard – and the most articulate audience – of camp" (1994, 290) – and of combining it with a humorous lens through which one could confront a world full of pain. If we observe how Sontag theorized camp in 1964, and how AIDS writers employed it, one may notice a specific evolution in how this concept is used and intended. Sontag identifies a few crucial characteristics that can be considered, at least until now, universally valid. For example, she describes camp as being "something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques" (1964, 275), having the "power to transform experience" (277), incarnating "a victory of ... 'aesthetics' over 'morality', of irony over tragedy" (287). The concept theorized by Sontag, though, was also "disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical" (277), with "a comic vision of the world. But not bitter political comedy" (288). This point is crucial in our analysis: like much belonging to gay culture in the AIDS years, the concept of camp underwent an evolution into a more engaged and political feature in gay literature, becoming "politically respectable" (Bergman 1993, 9) while expressing "an empathy with typical gay experiences" (Babuscio 1993, 28). An example of AIDS camp could be found in Tony Kushner's masterpiece *Angels in America*, in which the main character, who has AIDS, looks in the mirror and says: "I look like a corpse. A corpsette. Oh my queen; you know you've hit rock-bottom when even drag is a drag" (1995, 37). Camp allows AIDS writers to look at their reality differently and, moreover, to express it differently.

The guilt associated with sexual promiscuity present in Kramer's work becomes, in Feinberg, a defiant declaration of war. When, during the George H.W. Bush presidency, the epidemic had spread so much to the general population that it could no longer be ignored, the national political discourse started to differentiate between innocent victims, like children born with AIDS, and the implied guilty victims, in particular gays and heroin addicts, who had contracted the disease through some kind of "immoral behavior." To a certain extent, then, the assimilation to a community is independent of the individual's choice. Especially during the Eighties, an AIDS diagnosis would immediately be interpreted by the general society as an admission of

homosexuality. In her essay *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Sontag argues that “to get AIDS is precisely to be revealed, in the majority of cases so far, as a member of a certain ‘risk group,’ a community of pariahs. The illness flushes out an identity that might have remained hidden from neighbors, jobmates, family, friends. It also confirms an identity and, among the risk group in the United States most severely affected in the beginning, homosexual men, has been a creator of community as well as an experience that isolates the ill and exposes them to harassment and persecution” (1989, 24-25). This concept resonates in the famous passage in *Angels in America* in which Roy Cohn gets diagnosed, and refuses, as a prominent figure in America’s political conservative landscape, to be reduced, in his mind, to gay identity:

labels ... tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology, or sexual taste, but something simpler: clout. [...] Now to someone who does not understand this, homosexual is what I am because I have sex with men. But really this is wrong. Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me... ? (Kushner 1995, 51)

In this speech guilt is completely absent, and while Kushner arguably had fun giving Cohn a line protesting gay people’s social situation, the negative take on being perceived as gay remains. On the other hand, in his last book, Feinberg reclaims the label of pariah. In an angry tirade, he writes: “I’m sick and tired of all this talk about innocent victims. *I plead guilty*. I’m guilty of crimes against nature. I have done truly abominable things according to Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and the collected works of Jackie Collins. I’m the Jew that poisoned the wells; I’m the pinko that passed the atomic spy plans to the Russkies; I’m the Toon that framed Roger Rabbit. I’m the one *my own parents* warned me against” (1994, 15). This attitude combines protest with a defiant reclamation of gay men’s dignity as gay men, despite the innuendos pushed by the Republican establishment. Humor, already theorized by Freud as “an assertion of ... invulnerability”, a refusal “to be distressed by the provocations of reality”, something “rebellious” (1927, 162-163), in Feinberg blends with anger, sarcasm and a few cultural references to reach an over-the-top, sometimes even grotesque tone that can be identified as a new mode of AIDS camp, one with political relevance. AIDS-literary works combine political

engagement while, for the first time, reclaiming gay culture: for example, using quotes from divas in movies, often in black and white, usually starring Bette Davis; by quoting certain works of literature; by exalting androgyny and drag queens. All the while using a humorous tone. In this context, camp can be considered, like Sontag stated, a “private code.” Much of this attitude, and of its often being composed of these old, sophisticated, often obscure quotes and references, makes this a language that helps define the identity of the community. The urban element is also relevant: most of AIDS fiction is set in New York, which provides a rich and specific context, even language-wise. The “characteristic tone” in New York writing is identifiable with “skeptical humor, sardonic wit, disenchanting realism. A famously *hard* environment, New York inspires both stoic pride and chagrin” (Lopate 1998, XVIII). These features are not foreign to a “view of the world” through the camp lens.

If we analyze the landscape of minorities, it is impossible not to notice that the gay community occupies a somewhat peculiar position. As White has observed, “gay men are brought up by heterosexuals to be straight,” they are “not ethnic but a minority, not a polis but political, not a nationality but possessed of a costume, customs, and a patois. [...] A sterile nation without descendants but with a long, misty regress of ancestors, without an articulated self-definition but with a venerable history” (1994, 158). This history is what is summoned, by several AIDS authors, to unite the gay community in a time of crisis by giving it a common language, and to reaffirm its presence and legitimacy in American society.

#### SCHULMAN AND NEW YORK’S GENTRIFICATION

The New York environment, along with political involvement, is substantially present in the works of Sarah Schulman, one of the few women to write about the epidemic. Schulman filled her novels not just with details about AIDS, but also with some of the other practical and political implications of the epidemic, especially for what concerns New York City. The fact that the gay community was concentrated in Lower Manhattan made it possible to set many AIDS pieces in the same neighborhoods, creating a sort of recurring common literary space. The Village is an additional character in most AIDS writing, and AIDS texts often feature specific historical events in the neighborhood

throughout the Eighties and Nineties. When dealing with AIDS literature, and with New York AIDS literature in particular, politics become inseparable from fiction, and the urban environment becomes inseparable from the text: “specific stories are the product of specific spaces” – without the Village, AIDS literature would maybe not be impossible, but certainly very different (Moretti 1998, 100).

The Village landscape changed a lot as a result of AIDS. During the epidemic, Downtown Manhattan was subject to a harsh real-estate development following the precepts of Reagan’s FIRE economy. This operation, paired with the high number of AIDS deaths, changed the neighborhood immensely in just a few years. Many sick people were evicted; many apartments left empty by either evictions or deaths were occupied by straight, white, rich yuppies (Strausbaugh 2013, 933-46). The victims of the “social and economic trajectory” of Reaganomics were “creativity and unorthodox relationships” (Bachmann 2008, 88): this, obviously, did not make the lives of gay New Yorkers any easier, and several texts tackle this aspect, most notably Schulman’s *People in Trouble*. This novel gained some new-found fame recently, after the *New Yorker* published an article underlining how the ruthless real-estate entrepreneur depicted in the book is a not-too-hidden caricature of Donald Trump. Depicting a love triangle between a married couple and a young lesbian activist during the epidemic, this book is also considered to have been a non-declared inspiration for Jonathan Larson’s Pulitzer-winning musical *Rent*, an adaptation from Puccini’s *La Bohème* in the AIDS age. Schulman’s novel represented the Lower East Side from the “trenches of resistance against gentrification, eviction, squalor, homelessness” (Neculai 2014, 62) during the epidemic.

The specific issue of protest against gentrification and real-estate speculations in the Village area is at the core of the book. The bohemian atmosphere and the sexual liberation in the Seventies made the Village a mythical place in gay American culture. During the epidemic, though, real-estate speculation and gentrification further destroyed what remained of the community. In her novel, Schulman fights and protests against this (the real-estate developer is the ultimate bad guy in the book), but also pays homage to the gay spots in the Village that are starting to disappear.

The identification of a specific urban area as a sort of “homeland” helps to consolidate the idea of community, giving it an actual physical space of belonging that was already put in jeopardy by AIDS. This overlap is another reason why it is difficult to trace a line

of demarcation between literature and activism when it comes to AIDS. As already mentioned, many AIDS texts blend fiction with historical facts: for example, *People in Trouble* depicts the 1989 St. Patrick's Cathedral ACT UP protest. Other texts, like *The Normal Heart*, are intended to be read as historical documents: in the 2011 Broadway revival of the play, the audience left the theater with this note: "Please know that everything in *The Normal Heart* happened. These were and are real people who lived and spoke and died" (Kramer 1985, 78).

From the standpoint of literature consolidating the gay community, *People in Trouble* is also relevant when it comes to depicting the change of social dynamics within the community: from the bohemian life of sexual liberation to the formation of post-nuclear families to take care of PWAs. Many of those who got sick were already alienated from their families of origin because of their sexual orientation, and therefore had no hope of having a family member taking care of them after becoming infected. The frequent abandonments brought people together in the gay community, from lovers to friends to, often, simple acquaintances, to take care of each other, managing medications, hospital stays, funerals. During the plague, the gay community in the Village becomes a "whirlwind" where "everybody's connected. It's a human chain" (Feinberg 1989, 228-230). In Schulman's novel, when confronted by her lover about having no insurance in case she got sick, Molly replies, "I don't know ... I have a lot of friends" (1990, 113). In AIDS literature, words and relationships become the only defense against the epidemic, because "doing nothing is a position" (1990, 113).

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the epidemic, literature told the stories of people who were being ignored by mainstream society. The identity of the American gay community, which was greatly consolidated by the tragedy of AIDS, was defined in large part by artistic productions. The idea that the emergency cemented gay culture and the gay community is put forward in several texts. Most notably, in his non-fiction book *Someone Was Here*, George Whitmore reflects about the shift in the gay community from the Seventies to the Eighties: "was it a lifestyle – which implied, of course, that gay identity could be taken up and sluffed off as easily as a pair of jeans – a culture, a community? Clearly, it was a potent



subculture that made vital contributions on many levels, especially through fashion and the fine and performing arts, to the life of New York and the nation. Until the historical accident that signaled the advent of AIDS, however, it couldn't be called a community" (1988, 9).

The concept of protest to gain a legitimate place in the social discourse, however, culminated in the closing monologue of *Angels in America*. Throughout the play, Kushner masterfully walks on a thin line between activism and art. Political references recur often in the play, but the focus is not so directly political as in Kramer's or Schulman's work. The final monologue, though, is one of the most political speeches in AIDS literature: "we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. ... We will be citizens. The time has come" (1995, 280). The intention is, then, to claim a place for the now-consolidated gay community in American society and, by directly addressing the audience, Kushner "recruits others to carry on that work" (McRuer 1997, 173-174).

In a landscape in which literature represents and consolidates the community, camp has become a dialect representing "the voice of survival and continuity of a community that needs to be reminded that it possesses both" (Bergman 1993b, 107), and through which writers "put speech where there had been cultural silence. ... This writing lays before us an example of a living culture, culture as a spontaneous act, for culture is a complex social event that creates the public space in which a community comes into being through participation" (Denneny 1993, 43). Through testimony, political engagement and activism, then, AIDS literature ensures the survival not only of gay culture, but of the gay community. Nothing more than AIDS writers' engagement in the fight against the disease fully expresses the meaning of the slogan of Larry Kramer's second activist organization, ACT UP: "Silence = Death."

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