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Review of Facing It: AIDS Diaries and the Death of the Author

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Ross Chambers, *Facing It: AIDS Diaries and the Death of the Author*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998. 145 pp. ISBN 0472109588.

Reviewed by Julia Epstein

Ross Chambers is one of our pre-eminent scholars of the nature of narrative. In *Facing It*, Chambers takes the case of AIDS writing—with its insistent witnessing of an epidemic, a historical and cultural moment, a death sentence, and the impulse to survive death through representation and storytelling and image—to argue that diseases can have rhetorical as well as somatic and moral stakes, and that the reader or viewer is as important as the writer or creator or producer of a text of witnessing. To witness, according to Chambers, “implies a certain belief in there being a future.” He goes on, “In a situation of extremity the desire to survive in order to tell the tale is the essential sign, whether or not that desire is requited, of a certain refusal to become merely a passive victim” (viii). The author dies, but the text survives because the author is “dying to tell,” and that mediated survival is a political act rendered authentic by the literal death of the author. The onus to continue the political action falls on the reader, and “reading is necessarily and inescapably a form of mourning” (32).

This process yields a narrative and representational circumstance in which the author survives his own death through the act of writing, and transfers from himself to the reader the responsibility of bearing witness. These stories witness rather than memorialize, and it is the telling of the story rather than the story itself to which they bear witness. Indeed, Chambers challenges the received notion that memory is the central fabric of classic autobiographies such as those by Augustine or Rousseau, and instead argues that the autobiographical impulse is “only in part memorializing and in fairly large part also about standing up to be counted” (6). Chambers argues that “ultimately it is necessary to read all AIDS diaries—the very existence of which signifies the choice to *live one’s death* and to write it, as an alternative to throwing in the towel” (Chambers’ italics, 16). AIDS autobiographies employ the structure of chronicle but they are episodic, contiguous, quotidian, and immediate, and they do not and cannot conclude. There can be no final entry. They pass on the obligation to tell and retell the story to the reader, in much the same way as HIV infection itself is transmitted. They transmit, according to Chambers, “the virus of writing and reading” as “a prophylactic practice” (8). The reader will acquire the markings of this virus as the writer has acquired the markings of a central trope of AIDS diaries, the lesions of Kaposi’s sarcoma.

Chambers offers critical analyses of three AIDS texts: Hervé Guibert’s video *La pudeur et l’impudeur* (1990-91), Tom Joslin’s video *Silverlake Life: The View From Here* (1993), and Eric Michaels’s written autobiography *Unbecoming* (1990). Guibert goes about his dying in a kind of slow motion, with an acutely self-conscious version of self-observation, finding AIDS marvelous because “[c]’était une maladie qui donnait le temps de mourir, et qui donnait à la mort le temps de vivre, le temps de découvrir le temps et de découvrir enfin la vie” (55). AIDS demands that those afflicted with it confront mortality; analogously, writing is like AIDS, in that it entails that the author face the inevitability of his own demise. At the same time, the writing of AIDS uses representation as the means for the survival of the author beyond his death, for the transcendence of mortality. The AIDS diarist chooses to die writing. Chambers reads two central moments in

La Pudeur et l'impudeur, the key one of which is a suicide experiment that calls into question the temptation of the person with AIDS to disappear. In going beyond this experiment, Guibert limns the stakes of his survival through writing and the response he requires of those who receive his text.

Tom Joslin's video diary, completed by Peter Friedman, documents his death from AIDS in tandem with the trajectory of the disease in his lover, Mark Massi, left behind to gather Tom's ashes and to face his own illness in his turn. Mark's survival within the video figures the survival of the viewer watching from outside. More straightforward than Guibert's video, Joslin's work insists on the dailiness of living with AIDS. Whereas Guibert is mostly solitary, Joslin portrays his dying as a community process. He wants to render AIDS more visible, to offer the viewer what Chambers calls "an education in seeing" with an ethics of truthfulness and asking and telling and showing. Within the video, Tom's lover Mark stands in as the immediate survivor who will bear the responsibility to continue Tom's work, both as a witness and as a person who will confront his own death from AIDS. Cameras, photographs, images, marks and symbols are everywhere in *Silverlake Life*. Videotaping Tom's death itself, the moment toward which the video moves and then goes beyond, represents "that moment on which discursivity has no purchase and the consequent survival of the authorial subject under the transformed guise of textual subjectivity" (76). In Guibert's work, that moment appears as a form of haunting. In Joslin's video, the moment is technological on the one hand and suffused with the spirituality of love on the other.

Eric Michaels's confrontational anxiety in *Unbecoming* responds viscerally to the witnessing projects of Guibert and Joslin, whose videos raise the questions of "how to die into a text that will visit my survivors; how, as a survivor, to respond adequately to textual visitation." To the extent that Michaels foregrounds this anxiogenesis of AIDS writing, Chambers argues, "AIDS . . . will have been [among other things] . . . an epidemic of rhetorical anxiety: anxiety about being read, anxiety about reading" (79). Michaels figures this anxiety by producing the textual equivalent of the performance of the difficult patient: he works to produce social discomfort through his titular "unbecoming." He refuses to be a victim, he refuses to die quietly; he acts out an oppositional stance which he believes to be socially justified. The figure of this stance resides in a photograph of the author, naked from the waist up, his torso and face covered with Kaposi's sarcoma lesions, his dark hair and beard scraggly and out of control, his lesion-marked tongue sticking out at the viewer, both to display the lesions and to express a literal, oppositional, impudent response to his bodily markings and their effect on viewers. Michaels sets himself the job of provoking and unsettling his readers by insisting on "the preposthumous condition of living with AIDS" (86). He describes his lesions as "morphemes" that he can string together into sentences (88).

So Michaels laments, complains, whines, and bitches (a set of activities Chambers tags, rather unnecessarily, as both Jewish and queenly). These acts of difficultness are covers for anxiety and paranoia—both lamentation and paranoia, Chambers argues, relate to resistance: the "continuity between a certain performance of unbecoming and an unbecoming social performance" is an exasperated and "inspired kvetching" (90). "To be a difficult patient is an alternative to paranoia," and essential to a discourse of resistance (94). Chambers asks, "Why . . . should a gay P[erson] W[ith] A[ids] resist AIDS, when it is so easy to go under? Because resisting is what

gayness, as a social phenomenon, is all about. In that sense the gay P[erson] W[ith] A[ids] has no option but to be a difficult patient” (94).

Whereas Guibert and Joslin use the medium of videotape in its “home movie” idiom, Michaels resorts to a combination of the last will and testament and the academic position paper, the latter a reflection of his anthropological training and his work with an aboriginal tribe in Australia. He writes a manifesto on the “art of being difficult” (99) in which the frontispiece photo of the author with his lesions front and center represents “a continuing policy of defiance and destabilization, harassment and difficultness” (107), in which Michaels appears, in contrast to the well-groomed picture on the back of the book, as a wild man, the sort of person he may once have studied as an ethnographer.

In the diaries Chambers reads in *Facing It*, he discerns a central theme: a refusal to play the victim role allocated to AIDS patients, a refusal made because of and through the conscious context of homophobia in which these authors write. These diaries are complicit, in some sense, with the HIV virus whose calamitous workings on the body they describe. At the same time, they flaunt the author’s status as a stigmatized other, a member of an afflicted minority. In the chapter entitled “Dying as an Author,” Chambers discusses the politics of AIDS writing and “seeks to propose a protocol . . . for the reading of AIDS diaries not so much as a ‘set of rules,’ perhaps, but as a way of positioning the texts such that the writing of AIDS, with the complicity and the mythologization it entails, becomes clearly understandable as an act of witness” (32). Part of the political act of these authors is an act of “self-decontamination” (28), a way to embrace the stigma that has been imposed on one by embracing not just AIDS but homophobia, the source of the original contamination. Writing protects against homophobia, an even more insidious disease than AIDS because it triggers genocidal hatred.

Given Chambers’s choice of subtitle, he inevitably comes to Roland Barthes’s notion of “the death of the author” at the end of his commentary. The authors of these diaries have literally died, and their deaths both authenticate their texts and disempower them, ceding to readers and viewers the political and social work of destabilization through their survival: “the best-intentioned reader is necessarily drawn in the direction of the hegemonic, enforcing norms and conventions, by way of tidying up and containing the manifestations of textual disorderliness” (112). Chambers moves deftly from Barthes’s discursive notions about Authors and Critics, scriptors and readers, to a notion of witnessing and mourning, of living to tell the tale as well as dying to tell the tale. As Alain Emmanuel Dreuilhe puts it in *Corps à corps*, “Je rêve d’endoctriner, d’enrégimenter tous ceux qui lisent, pour qu’ils me sauvent” (cited on 119). AIDS diaries require, argues Chambers, that we read as mourners, and mourn as readers; they underscore at once the power of representation and the inadequacy of responding to a message that has been deferred until after the author’s death.

Chambers notes that gay men share with other disadvantaged and stigmatized populations their affliction with AIDS, and he points out that AIDS always works “the proverbial double whammy” added to an already dire world of “underdevelopment, poverty, prejudice, moralism, and homophobia” (17). Yet Chambers makes only a passing gesture to the availability of an authorial voice, albeit posthumous, for the middle-class gay men who write most of the AIDS diaries we have. These writers are provocative and confrontational political actors who use the

occasion of their dying of a disease closely coupled with their social status as outcasts to write (and underwrite) a new politics of active resistance, a resistance to social stigma that may become more effective than anything yet developed to resist the viral load of HIV. People with AIDS in Uganda or Thailand, IV drug users, ghettoized women, homeless gay men, and others who share economic oppression do not have the same access to the pen or the camera to record their stories, to bear witness, to pass on the responsibility for authorship. Indeed, in a long footnote that acknowledges some of the privilege of AIDS diary-writers and the existence of more numerous others who share this fatal disease, Chambers raises key issues that it would have been fruitful for him to interrogate at further length.

Chambers remarks that for non-Western and/or non-gay oppressed minorities, AIDS may be experienced “in a life already defined as burdensome, as simply an additional burden.” Between parentheses, Chambers states that World War I reportage largely came from the officer class rather than from enlisted men because “the rank and file [had been] partly inured to the conditions of trench warfare by those they endured in peacetime industrial employment.” Surely it is an exaggeration to parallel early twentieth-century factory work with the obscene filth, brutal cold and hunger, and abject fear of combat, as it is a stretch to call AIDS “simply an additional burden.” Chambers goes on to observe that, because the gay male community is the only population whose intellectuals have been decimated by AIDS, “first-person AIDS witnessing—as opposed to documentary reporting and the ‘as told to’ mode prevalent in Central American testimonial—tends to be largely a gay practice of AIDS writing” (18).

Because the texts under analysis in *Facing It* present themselves, in whole or in part, as documentary evidence of a moment in medical and social history, one wants Chambers to ask why the documentary impulse has not taken other communities of AIDS suffering as subject matter? Is there something about this particular infection, this “self-contamination,” that predisposes AIDS to first-person accounts, that derives pleasure from the paradoxical games of language and representation that educated Western gay men, and their counterparts in the fields of literary criticism and cultural theory, play with the process of dying, bearing witness, and surviving into textuality? That remains the question that *Facing It* poses. The twentieth century, Chambers believes, has produced an epidemic of emergencies and thus an epidemic of witnessing literature, each with its own set of tropes and imperatives. “Can criticism fight disease, save lives?” he asks. “Clearly not. But critics can mourn, and in addition they can participate in projects of witness” (128). Chambers adds to this chain of deferred messaging with *Facing It*, and ends by asking his readers how we will respond to his critical work of witnessing and mourning.