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Tracking the Bugchaser: Giving *The Gift* of HIV/AIDS

And the love, whatever it was, an infection.—Anne Sexton

Introduction: MSM = HIV?

It is a fact universally acknowledged that the HIV/AIDS pandemic is one of the most destructive public-health emergencies in human history. Famously called “the plague” by no lesser authority than Larry Kramer, the virus and syndrome of human-acquired immune deficiency is normally seen as a scourge laying waste to human life. Moreover, more sensitive recent HIV-surveillance methods indicate that the incidence—the annual rate of new infections—and, hence, the scope of the epidemic is greater than the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had previously calculated, rising from an estimated 40,000 new infections to a figure closer to 60,000 newly infected in the U.S. alone since the advent of the pandemic.ⁱ According to the CDC report, despite the tremendous treatment successes, more people are becoming infected than ever before. What are the implications of a global epidemic raging stronger than ever before, perhaps infecting more people worldwide than ever before, while those infected by HIV now stand a better chance of living a “normal” life than ever before, thanks to the relative efficacy and accessibility of HIV/AIDS treatment, at least in the West?ⁱⁱ

This is one of the evolving contradictions in the “epidemic of significations,” to borrow Paula Treichler’s phrase, that HIV/AIDS unleashed on an unsuspecting public in 1981. First affecting the so-called “4H” groups—homosexuals, heroin addicts, Haitians, and hemophiliacs—HIV/AIDS now weighs heavily on heterosexual communities of color. This expansion of the populations affected by the epidemic has shifted the ground of public-health activism within the

community originally most active in battling governmental indifference to the ravages of AIDS: gay and bisexual men, which the CDC now terms merely a “subpopulation” ensnared in the cruel probabilities of HIV transmission.ⁱⁱⁱ Evolving from “gay cancer”—the so-called “G.R.I.D.,” or gay-related immune-deficiency—to an equal-opportunity vector of transmission, AIDS is no longer a gay disease, or even a Western one.

It is a paradox, therefore, the extent to which prevention science has focused and continues to focus on the population construct of “men who have sex with men” (MSM) to the exclusion of other segments of the overall population. The visibility of public health campaigns targeting MSM maintains a social contract between sexual behavior between men and HIV transmission, despite our knowledge of HIV as an equal-opportunity pathogen transmitted just as likely through vaginal as through anal sex. It is ironic that we continue to worry about the high rates of infection in MSM communities, particularly among younger and MSM of color, according to the latest epidemiological studies.^{iv} There is a whole lot of public hand-wringing over MSM—specifically, hand-wringing over increasing incidence rates within this population, precisely despite decades of focused HIV-prevention efforts dedicated to diminishing the impact of HIV/AIDS within communities of gay and bisexual men. Despite the global face of the epidemic, it seems, MSM remain the epicenter of the epidemic and the public discourse that surrounds it.

As neutral public-health parlance for gay- and non-gay- identified men whose HIV-risk behavior is homosexual sex, “MSM” indicates the evolution and the lack of evolution, simultaneously, of our public imagination regarding—literally looking at—AIDS. As a cover for “gay and bisexual” without seemingly reducing the behavior to sexual identity as such, the public health discourse on MSM continues to center on the elevated risks of HIV transmission

between men. These risks, it seems, are constructed as greater than those linked to heterosexual contact—unless, of course, said contact depends on an MSM vector of transmission: the so-called “down-low” brother carrying the virus into the general population. There is a triangular nature to this transmission scheme, whereby homo-sex is the agent of contamination infiltrating supposedly HIV-naïve populations of heterosexual women (and, coming full circle, heterosexual men). This epidemiological transmission plot seems familiar and this is no coincidence. Let us briefly recall Ryan White and other infected hemophiliacs, the threat to the general blood supply, the banning of homosexual men from donating blood to this time, and the construct of “innocent victims” of HIV in the early discourse surrounding the epidemic. A guiding premise of this paper is that we are still living in, or re-living, this originary era of AIDS.

It is a fact universally acknowledged, then, that AIDS and homosexuality are closely linked. This context equates unprotected homosexual intercourse and risk of HIV transmission. Moreover, it is this context that forms the cultural frame of reference for the widespread study of “barebacking,” a term that refers to intentional, unprotected anal sex between men.^v Bugchasing, or the desire to become infected with HIV, will be the cultural icon that I will explore through rhetorical analysis of recent representations of this figure that, in the words of Tim Dean, forms a subset of barebacking, the contemporary “culture” of male homosexual risk (84).

For the remainder of this introduction, I will present recent literature on barebacking within the gay male community as a way to frame the context for my argument regarding the figure of the bugchaser in contemporary American culture as a *rhetorical* figure above all. Which is to say, that my argument focuses on the rhetoric surrounding this figure and suspends the language of crisis that bugchasing seems to evoke in most public-health-minded research.^{vi} Second, this paper will demonstrate the rhetorical analysis of the bugchaser in two key texts.

One is an infamous feature in *Rolling Stone* magazine, the other a far more intriguing independent documentary film that appeared around the same time, which I will analyze in greater depth. Both cultural objects, however, serve the needs of my larger argument, which will explore the extent to which countercultural figures such as the bugchaser—and Patient Zero, before him—function, in the words of Barry Adam, as disciplinary “panic icons of the popular imagination: demon infectors, ... monster AIDS transmitters” in order to police the social norms that define “safer” sexual practices among gay and bisexual men (170).

This paper, however, will focus on the often hidden premises underwriting these prevailing social norms. As David Halperin notes, the establishment of an HIV/AIDS–prevention public-health apparatus allows for the scapegoating of behaviors and the representation of these sexual behaviors as “deviant” collective identities (23, 133n75). Halperin’s recent book-length essay, *What Do Gay Men Want?*, merits summarizing at length, insofar as it serves as a trenchant political intervention that questions the posture of concern that seems to “ratify” the public-health establishment’s tendencies toward sensationalizing and stigmatizing of homo sex (Halperin 23). He argues, in large part, that governmental and academic institutions often collectivize gay and bisexual men—in official terms, MSM—in order to track and combat the HIV/AIDS pandemic. But, in so doing, HIV prevention tends to stigmatize homosexuality. Insofar as it becomes a vector for the virus, homosexual behavior becomes a problem needing the state or the HIV/AIDS apparatus and its efforts at surveillance, systematic containment, and behavioral transformation. The population thus becomes a target of scientific scrutiny, and the distinction between moral judgment and epidemiological concern over homosexual risk-taking blurs. Halperin warns, “epidemiological evidence provides a convenient vehicle for ratifying moral and psychological judgments” against sexual minorities

(23). He adds, “the perennial need for effective HIV/AIDS prevention strategies has once again made it possible, as well as politically palatable, to ask ... psychological and psychoanalytic questions about the nature of gay male subjectivity that had long been considered quaint, pointless, or prejudicial, and that had in any case been discredited by their implication in the protracted and shameful history of pseudoscientific homophobia” (30). Further, he cautions that “HIV/AIDS prevention allows such a normalizing strategy to proceed under the politically virtuous cover of enlightened concern for the downtrodden ... stigmatized groups are pathologized on the pretext of victim advocacy” (23). In other words, both official and community accounts serve to conjure these “popular” figures—and, in particular, *bugchasers*—through the discursive apparatus of HIV prevention, surveillance, and treatment that we might term *AIDS Inc.* This discourse matrix mythically transforms homosexual behavior into coherent sexual “subpopulations” without seeming to do so. Bringing the neutral term of “men who have sex with men” back to the future as “gay and bisexual men” is a discursive regime that tracks MSM as coherent subpopulations or collective “identity categories,” as Dean himself does (84).

While Halperin warns that the codification of behavior as “cultural identity” tends to hate the sin and construct the sinner, Dean’s essay turns this argument inside out, and represents a coolly “anthropological” approach geared to “accord respect” toward the so-called “culture of barebacking” (92, *Ibid*, *passim*). Dean’s intervention attempts to de-stigmatize barebacking by using a progressive psychoanalytic perspective, an approach that Halperin, ironically, argues is part of the larger problem of psychological discourse historically serving to codify and marginalize homosexuals.^{vii} In a brilliant move, Dean aligns barebackers to assimilation advocates in the greater LGBT community—“queer outlaws” as correlates of “gay in-laws” (82)—thereby striving, as does Halperin, to undo the psycho-medical establishment’s moral

judgment against this subcultural group. Yet, even in a highly sympathetic treatment toward barebacking such as Dean's, bugchasers stand out as extreme. They seek to "literalize the exchange" of bodily fluids and HIV, replacing sexual fantasy with the reality of HIV (84). In Michael Warner's terms, the bugchaser represents the ethical residuum, a liminal figure whose motivations come closest to challenging our common sense of the "normal" because he is closest to the transvaluation of all values—the eroticization and pursuit of a deadly virus—that, according to Halperin's incisive account, homosexuality still represents.

"For this reason," Halperin states, "it is crucial to detach our models of gay male subjectivity from discourses of mental health" and the "epidemiology of risk" and an "obsessive concern with HIV" (29). In order to do so, however, I argue that it is important to track this extremely marginal yet culturally resonant figure of the bugchaser. As a rhetorical construct, the bugchaser is projected by a state-sponsored discursive regime and reflected in media representations. This paper will argue that the figure arises, in Dean's terms, as a "literal" embodiment of hetero and homonormative discourses that, with the advent of HIV, situate male homosexuality within the morbidity and disability context of AIDS. Bugchasers thus function as the most resonant panic icons or unreconstructed emblems of a supposedly morbid homosexual desire for—*or as*—HIV.

My insistence, however, on our culture's ideological equation of male homosex with HIV requires a brief demonstration, which I take from Dean's inventive and influential account of barebacking "culture." In his essay, Dean seeks to demystify and depathologize barebacking, approaching such presumably "unintelligible sexual behaviors" "in their own terms, rather than exclusively in terms of sexual normativity" (92). Because Dean's account of barebacking lacks the sensationalism and normative disciplinary outlook on these behaviors—and, I would add,

these *figures*—it is rather surprising to note how his essay also experiences a rhetorical or conceptual slippage between unprotected anal intercourse—i.e., barebacking—and HIV transmission—what barebacking *might*, though not necessarily, mean. As Michael Shernoff states in his psychotherapeutic intervention into MSM sexual risk, “It is important to note that heterosexuals [also] engage in sexual intercourse without condoms,” albeit without the social stigma or state surveillance that attends homosexual “barebacking,” a disciplinary context that anchors the term’s use as specific to this subpopulation (27–28).

Dean interprets barebacking as a coherent cultural practice, reading male homosexual desire for unprotected sex as “how to do things with HIV” (87). Yet, suspending the specter of the bugchaser for a moment, barebacking is not necessarily bugchasing (or giftgiving). That is to say, most empirical studies corroborate the conclusion reached by Dawson et al. that “the large majority of cases advertising for bareback sex, even in a worst-case scenario, involve interactions ... specifically designed to minimize HIV transmission” (81).^{viii} In other words, most barebacking reflects considered decisions *not* to spread the virus among HIV-infected men, decisions *not* to incur becoming infected between HIV-negative bisexual and gay men. Moreover, it is crucial to understand that despite “[a]necdotal evidence” of bugchasing and giftgiving as the “‘eroticization’ of HIV and the role it may play in increased incidence of unprotected anal intercourse,” “*no empirical evidence exists either to support or disprove the existence, let alone the prevalence, of this phenomenon*” (Dawson et al. 74; emphasis added).

Hence, despite a remarkable lack of empirical evidence, the bugchaser persists as an apocryphal figure in our contemporary cultural landscape. Fittingly, this paper studies the implications of such a widespread cultural construct. I argue that we must situate the bugchaser within a dominant discursive regime that maintains a phobic attitude towards HIV/AIDS and the

homosexual figure that it invokes in its wake. Indeed, narratives regarding homosexuality and HIV/AIDS are quickly beginning to center on the titillating figure of the bugchaser. Perhaps the most famous instance of this cultural practice, Gregory Freeman's infamous feature, "In Search of Death," was arguably responsible for mainstreaming the term "bugchaser" and infamous for falsely reporting that "at least 25 percent" of all HIV-infected gay men were deliberately chasing the bug^{ix}. The bulk of my analysis, however, centers on *The Gift*, an independent film that I believe illustrates the contradictions inherent in the state of ideological and serological apartheid that seems to define metropolitan LGBT communities in the U.S.

This AIDS apartheid, a *cordon sanitaire* that the bugchaser figure, by definition, trespasses, is a cultural and social phenomenon built on contradictory messages regarding AIDS as both a disabling and enabling condition. The discourse of disability rights transforms our perceptions of the HIV epidemic, and it is this discourse that is paradoxically operative within LGBT communities that also seek to protect MSM from HIV. *The Gift* represents this doublespeak in the gay community as a tragic and correctable social remnant of AIDS activism before the public-health focus shifted to protecting MSM from infection. This focus remains the reason why the bugchaser flouts all conventions of sexual decorum and the regime of health that paradoxically seeks to eradicate the AIDS crisis while celebrating the lives of PWAs. The bugchaser, I believe, serves to concentrate the issues prevalent in our contemporary moment of AIDS activism and public health. "He" threatens to reverse almost thirty years of anti-HIV messages by exposing the contradictions inherent in scientific progress that renders HIV/AIDS, from a radically queer disability-rights perspective, a socially enabling and *positive* style of life.

Can the Bugchaser Speak?

Since Stephen Gendin's interview with Tony Valenzuela, "They Shoot Barebackers, Don't They?" (1999), mainstream representations of giftgivers and bugchasers identify these figures as real. Accordingly, their depictions in mainstream and independent media—whether "gay" or "straight"—are produced according to a normalizing rationality of fascination, repugnance, and unintelligibility: *Why would anyone want to get HIV?*^x However, portrayals of historical, as opposed to fictional or imagined, bugchasers and giftgivers are few and far between. As a result, only recently has this fugitive counter-cultural figure come to light, in the wake of the more conventional rise in unsafe-sex norms within queer male communities as a whole. In an effort to explain the documented shift in social norms that have attended the increase in so-called barebacking within communities of men who have sex with men, the public health establishment, as well as independent and mainstream media, have seized on the extreme figure of "the bugchaser." This coalition of straight and gay forces, unique in our time, is perhaps the most striking result of the fascinating spectacle of such so-called deviant gay male sexual desire. Such a hetero-homonormative world, implicating what I term the "official gay community" and anti-homophobic forces within the public-health establishment in the U.S., projects the figures of the bugchaser and his vampiric cousin, the giftgiver, as troublesome and politically irritating for its own hygienic vision of the uninfected gay male body and unthreateningly "safe" sexual behavior in the LGBT community. As Dean notes, the gay-marriage agenda of mainstream LGBT rights groups best exemplifies this assimilationist vision.^{xi}

As a countercultural figure for the male homosexual desire to acquire HIV, "the bugchaser" strikes a normally situated subject as the more transgressive of the two modes of homosexual desire for HIV.^{xii} Giftgiving somehow fails to raise the same baffling (and ultimately unanswerable) questions about such sexual motivation. Rather, the giftgiving side of

the equation mobilizes fairly straightforward responses of public health containment and legal action. Hence, legal discourse contains the threat of the giftgiver, but is helpless in the face of the bugchaser who actually desires HIV seroconversion. Efforts to understand the *causes* of bugchasing and giftgiving proliferate as much as the sex panic (literally) “regarding” the behaviors themselves, despite the absence of any consensus about the actual prevalence of this “niche” of subcultural sexual practices. And yet, given the countercultural valence of these queer longings, external or anecdotal representations are all we have to go on: efforts to bring the bugchaser and giftgiver to light inevitably seem to interpellate persons who, by the very nature of their coming forward to speak the “truth” of their desire, no longer truly represent that desire (a typical bind of subcultural interpellation). Like the “ex-gay” figure, the bugchaser who yields to the ideological imperative to speak about his desire betrays a defining tenet of that desire: its secrecy, its fugitive opposition to the norms of society that media spectators represent.

Correspondingly, the topic of bugchasing, giftgiving, and barebacking warrants a more extensive treatment than the scope of this paper allows. For this reason, I will focus on the “bugchaser” side of the equation, bracketing for the most part the “giftgiver” from this discussion. The giftgiver, like the “down-low” figure, is articulated slightly differently, evoking the trope of criminality directly. This paper mainly focuses on the spectrum of fantasies about the bugchaser as a figure closer to “us,” meaning the HIV-uninfected mainstream of gay and straight society. The potential reality of willful HIV transmission, of course, problematizes the analysis that I provide, which is centered on explaining our culture’s symptomatic fascination with the spectral image of the bugchaser and, more broadly, with homosexual deviance, as it intersects with fears about HIV/AIDS. Bugchasing is constructed such that its very nature is grounded on its inherent incommensurability with the truth effects of normalizing discourses of

HIV/AIDS and gay sexuality. Yet, as Dawson et al. note, anecdotes of bugchasing do not an empirical queer reality make.

In view of that fact, this paper argues that the figure of the bugchaser uncannily functions as a limit-case for prevailing cultural discourses that regulate and articulate a normative vision of “the” gay male subject—discourses of safer sex, normalized gay desire, HIV-prevention, and the healthy (uninfected) male homosexual body. I would argue that an important effect of his rhetorical deployment is to foreground—by disciplinary processes of negative interpellation—these discourses of normative sexual desire and healthy embodiment. I use the term “uncanny” because bugchasing is an eerily familiar yet radically ulterior embodiment, the return of a culturally repressed desire for transcending HIV/AIDS by a return to “liberated” gay sexual norms not seen since the “plague years” of the 1980s. Such a fascinating and repugnant imbrication of desire and death, and the morbidity of gay desire itself, is a fairly familiar trope in our culture, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has noted, and so the bugchaser’s normalizing function—metonymically like that of *AIDS itself* in HIV-prevention messages—involves disciplining transient desires for sexual risk-taking as recklessly inviting HIV acquisition.^{xiii} Hence, the bugchaser is an iteration of the 1970s gay genie *out* of the bottle. And his deployment by the mainstream media, as a trope and as an overdetermined sexual narrative of fallen-ness, performs the disciplinary function of reminding the negatively interpellated, normalized gay male subject of the repercussions that attend such an anachronistic disavowal of AIDS merely for the sake of sex.

Hence, a question for this paper is, Can “the bugchaser” be said to “exist” outside of discourse? And, moreover, can he be said to exist outside of a discursive regime that situates HIV at the heart of homosexual behavior, thereby regulating gay male embodiment and what

counts as normal gay sex? What truth effects about homosexuality, deviance, and HIV-positive social existence does the ideological deployment of the “bugchaser” produce? In light of these questions, this paper will take it as axiomatic that bugchasing and giftgiving are identity categories and behavioral patterns discursively produced. As a rhetorical figure, the bugchaser is mediated by narratives of “deviant” homosexual practices that intersect with the epidemic of significations that is HIV/AIDS. In this Foucauldian sense, it would be wise to suspend belief about these “phenomena,” about whether they “exist” in the same sense we might say foot-fetishists exist, because of the fundamentally “other” qualities ascribed to bugchasing and giftgiving: deliberate and intentional self-destruction, willful murder, the desire to un-create life itself. Such a rap sheet differs *qualitatively* from other, more pedestrian sexual aberrations—and, I will argue, this is no mere coincidence. Bugchasing, in particular, invokes an existential menace to the normal self. We construe the bugchaser as radically ineffable, literally impossible to comprehend or empathize with—and the “we” encompasses both hetero- and homosexual positions of normality, positions of cultural privilege, at odds with the lived experiences of actual historical gay subjects and their negotiations across the HIV/AIDS and safer-sex division of gay community space.

Indeed, the dominant narrative of bugchasing as homo-decadence should make a gay-friendly audience suspicious. Is bugchasing a chimera—a purely discursive invention, a mythical serpent biting its own “tail”? Or is it an infinitesimally prevalent, symbolic subcultural practice that becomes legible only as it is co-opted by the normalizing processes of cultural incorporation? Even if we do suspend our disbelief for a moment: Let us say that bugchasing and giftgiving *do* exist in a phenomenal sense as a coherent subcultural network of socio-sexual practices. Further, let us say that they *are* founded on the disruption of normal cultural values

and, hence, that this subculture *does* locate itself in opposition to homo–heteronormative culture. Saying this, does it then allow us to present it, occupy it, see it from within? Given ideological constraints on the possibility of knowing the “truth” about the bugchaser’s existence independent of these normative tales, can the bugchaser speak? If he does, what does he say? What personal explanation, in other words, can possibly displace the spectacular aberration of his desire? It would behoove us to maintain a certain methodological distance and self-consciously write ourselves, as well as the bugchaser, into our critique; we already know he is not listening. It is in this rhetorical sense that the bugchaser does not “exist.” Above all, inquiries into bugchasing tend to stabilize his constitutive “outside” as our own homo–heteronormative world.

Giving *The Gift*: Tracking the Bugchaser^{xiv}

Two significant media representations of bugchasing and giftgiving are Louise Hogarth’s independent documentary film, *The Gift*, and Gregory Freeman’s infamous *Rolling Stone* magazine article, “In Search of Death,” both originally appearing in 2003.^{xv} Appropriately enough, both of these mediations set up a similar dynamic of disciplining HIV/AIDS as a fatal medical condition, by disciplining bugchasers as pathological for their inscrutable desire for such a fatally disabling condition. *The Gift* and “In Search of Death,” however, operate at very different registers. The independent documentary film is a complex treatment of the HIV/MSM social matrix, and the latter yellow journalism at its best. And yet, both of these media reproduce the official rhetoric of AIDS Inc. by representing “fallen” figures of HIV seropositivity. Such media interventions work to contain the menace of a supposedly spreading (not unlike HIV itself) culturally liberated perspective on HIV/AIDS: that is, the *social model* of disability. This viewpoint sees disability—in this case, being HIV-positive or a Person With AIDS—as an

enabling, rather than disabling (not to mention morbid), social condition, a form of empowered embodiment and communal belonging. AIDS Inc. beholds HIV through the medical model of disability, as a disabling and morbid condition, one that it seeks to contain in the form of the spectacular deviance of bugchasing and giftgiving.

For instance, in the following passage, Gregory Freeman, the *Rolling Stone* reporter, frames the issue of bugchasing in typically stark terms—us versus them:

While the rest of the world fights the AIDS epidemic and most people fear HIV infection, this subculture celebrates the virus and eroticizes it... Carlos has been chasing the bug for more than a year in a topsy-turvy world in which every convention about HIV is turned upside down. The virus isn't horrible and fearsome, it's beautiful and sexy.... In this world, the men with HIV are the most desired, and the bug chasers will do anything to get the virus. (66)

Freeman's binary construction (between "the rest of the world," which "fights" HIV/AIDS and the "topsy-turvy world" of this "underground" subculture, which turns "every convention about HIV ... upside down") exemplifies what queer "crip" theorist Robert McRuer, following John Erni, terms dominant culture's "morbidity" fantasy of eradicating HIV/AIDS by, implicitly, implying the fantasy of eradicating HIVers and PWAs. As McRuer suggests in "Critical Investments," this normative ideological frame marginalizes HIVers and PWAs as "basically already dead" or "secretly wishes they were" (228–29).

Freeman's conventional depiction of HIV/AIDS as a "ruthless killer" denies any possibility of situating HIV from an AIDS-centric cultural perspective in the public sphere, as "HIVer" and "Poz" publications and advocacy groups do out of political necessity (45). The emphasis on bugchasers, hence, precludes analyzing the dynamics of HIV in the gay community

or the complexities of HIV/AIDS experience within that community as anything but tied to a perverse desire for death. By presenting gay men with HIV/AIDS only negatively, as facilitating a minority sexual fetish, the article positions them, at best, as sinners of omission and, at worst, “as criminally culpable for satisfying someone else’s death wish.” Freeman’s sensationalist report boils down any nuances of gay desire across the social field of HIV/AIDS to a form of unredeemable deviance. This naturalized ideological re-presentation of the diseased and disabled gay male body, in the form of reporting on the “chase,” reinforces a dominant reading of HIV-positive gay men as ineluctably undesirable precisely because they signify only the vectors of death and disease that bugchasers seek: In this “topsy-turvy world,” it is “the men with HIV”—“horrible and fearsome,” by metonymy, because infected with the virus—who are the “most desired.”

In sum, the article’s admittedly “outsider” perspective serves to re-inscribe HIV/AIDS and gay male sexuality within an age-old, unreconstructed account of homosexuality as morbidity itself, under the guise of an anti-homophobic inquiry into a transgressive subsection of this community. Freeman’s report is thus complicit in exploiting dominant fixations on the eradication of AIDS (and homosexuality?) by producing a form of queer sexual dissidence that conveniently corroborates this AIDS-phobic and *homophobic* social fantasy.

The media firestorm this article provoked provides evidence of how bugchasers, spectacularly represented by the mainstream press, are mobilized to speak the “truth” about AIDS and the sordid “realities” of non-normative (i.e., deliberately unsafe) gay sex. Hence, “Carlos” *himself* echoes the homo/heteronormative cultural logic of morbidity about the virus: “I know what the risks are, and I know that putting myself in this situation is like putting a gun to my head” (Freeman 45). In the closing scene of the article, Freeman asks Carlos what he will do

once he gets the “gift.” Carlos is said to reply that he might “move one to become a gift giver” (48): “If I know that he’s negative and I’m fucking him, it sort of gets me off. I’m murdering him in a sense ... and that’s sort of, as sick as it sounds, exciting to me” (Ibid). That the last word is the reiteration of the “sickness” of Carlos’ desire closes the vicious circle of HIV proliferation and bugchasing–giftgiving that the article would want us to consider as the reason for its intervention. Instead, a *queer* reading of such a representation would denounce it as serving to reinforce the collusion between the “bugchaser” and normalizing discourses on the depersonalized, demonized abjection that HIV/AIDS (and homosexuality) is made to represent.^{xvi}

That Doug Hitzel, star of *The Gift*, makes an appearance in the *Rolling Stone* article as well, illuminates the paradoxically normalizing function of the “bugchaser” narrative and trope, as represented within dominant hetero and homo culture. As “Carlos” predictably goes along with the “bugchaser” role ascribed to him in a complex ideological operation that naturalizes such a role as subculturally coherent outside of its theatricalization in mainstream media, so does Doug Hitzel reprise his latter-day role as an “*ex*-bugchaser.” His encore in *Rolling Stone* eerily echoes Hitzel’s narrative in the latter part of *The Gift*, when, after his HIV conversion, he addresses the camera as if he were addressing himself: “Are you happy now? Happy now?” His mantra, which constitutes the climax of the film, performs the same function in the article. That is, Hitzel’s repeat performance, which includes this refrain, provides unmistakable “proof” that the bugchaser embodies a false consciousness about AIDS, that he is under a macabre self-delusion, which easily recalls dominant cultural scripts about sexual danger and the fall.^{xvii} Hitzel’s command performance as cautionary tale of the prototypical “gay boy” tempted by “the gift” neatly provides ideological alibi for a homo/heteronormative audience riveted by such

dominant cultural reinscriptions of the “fallen” figure of the solitary homosexual, as well as by the morbidly pathological nature of gay desire itself (Freeman 47). Just as “Carlos,” the article’s unrepentant bugchaser and future giftgiver, serves to personify and naturalize such AIDS-phobic and (internally) homophobic cultural prescriptions, as an “ex-bugchaser,” Hitzel too complies with the morbidity construct in an almost parodic self-theatricalization.

By disciplining gay sex and the “killer” that is HIV/AIDS, both film and article mobilize bugchaser figures to do their work. *The Gift*, however, corrects Freeman’s omission of HIV-infected subjects and thereby complicates the article’s exclusive reliance on the morbidity fantasy as ironclad alibi for its sensationalist portrayal. While deploying the morbidity trope (the film titles include a stylized “X-ray” of a smoking gun hidden within a penis), in addition to presenting stereotypical portraits of two bugchasers, Doug Hitzel and “Kenboi,” Louise Hogarth’s film also convenes an HIV-positive support group of gay men on disability due to the side effects of their medications. This lends the film a richness and depth that the article misses in its narrow, sensationalistic, “us” versus “them” conception of HIV and “queer” gay sex. *The Gift*, indeed, attempts to register the wealth and diversity of gay subcultural communities and, while it too codifies HIV/AIDS according to a *medical* model of disability, the film includes brief glimpses of a quite different, and non-stigmatizing, cultural conception of gay HIV/AIDS sociability, what I term the “Poz” perspective on HIV/AIDS.

The Gift seeks to explain the bugchaser/giftgiver phenomenon as the negative result of the “normalization” and institutionalization of HIV/AIDS within the gay community, accusing AIDS service and HIV-prevention organizations of caring more about not “hurting the feelings” of HIVers than about preventing HIV within the largely uninfected gay population. As a result, *The Gift* casts the support-group members in a crucial supporting role. That is, they are

interpellated as avatars of the chronic disability and social “death” that HIV/AIDS are meant to represent, and serve to anchor the overriding anti-HIV, anti-risk (anti-sex?) message that the film conveys.

For example, the film sets up a dialogue between the support group and DeeJ, an HIV-negative gay man, to discuss both the necessity and difficulty of remaining uninfected after protease inhibitors stabilized HIV/AIDS into a chronic medical condition. Following HIV prevention science, the support group and the film both echo messages about the deleterious consequences of the protease era—a medical breakthrough blamed for the documented rise in sexual risk-taking in the gay community.^{xviii} Adhering to its apologetic, interventionist role, the Poz group asks DeeJ what keeps him negative. Eventually, “fear” is identified as the major reason why he still plays it safe. DeeJ visibly hesitates when asked point-blank to name the reason for his fear: “death,” he says. And Jim, in his role as a vehicle for the anti-risk, anti-AIDS message of the film, blurts out, “*Say ‘death’! We need to hear ‘death!’*” In this manner, the film stages a scene of rare cross-cultural understanding across the fraught lines of HIV/AIDS diagnosis, which is nonetheless contained by its ideological subordination of this dialogue to a zealous, programmatic reliance on the morbidity fantasy as a way to “save” gay men. Jim’s notion that it is *HIVers*—and not the uninfected—who “need to *hear ‘death’*” signifies the group’s quixotic, normalizing role—its crucial corroborative role as object lesson for the film’s central concern: the vast numbers of uninfected, at-risk men who have sex with men.

Underscoring the morbidity narrative of AIDS, the closing “where are they now” scene has a mordant split-screen of the four HIVers in close-up, with the signs of facial wasting rendered unmistakable. The film certainly seems intentional in its deployment of the “freak show” motif in its montage of these visibly scarred and scaring infected bodies; the captions

under each member read “on” or “still on disability,” further underscoring the focus on the medical model of HIV as a disabling condition for an ideologically recuperated normal viewer.

That it takes a village of HIVers to raise consciousness about the fatality of AIDS, especially given the vitality and social cohesion of the support group meant to deliver this grim message, however, qualifies the film’s message of HIV as total morbidity and disenfranchised disability. It adds another layer of irony to *The Gift*’s interventionist stance, that it mobilizes such vibrant subjects to indemnify their own supposed complicity in advancing a culture of desire for HIV and ambivalence toward AIDS. In reality, these men attest, they are only living, after all, and certainly not wantonly giving “the gift.” Nonetheless, the film’s narrative closure frames the Poz gay group as a spectacular cautionary tale and as ideological instrument to shore up a disciplinary regime that produces and contains the bugchaser, the giftgiver, and HIV/AIDS in order to save the “normal” gay viewer, constructed as definitionally HIV-uninfected and at risk of succumbing to the lure of unsafe sex. Anything but protected homosex, following the normative logic of the film and AIDS Inc., immediately signals the macabre sign of HIV, which from this perspective is “death” itself.

The dramatic irony inherent in a group of Poz men being mobilized to echo discourses of HIV/AIDS as an unrecuperated, abject medical condition invariably leading to death creates a palpable slippage between the tenor and the vehicle of the group. Such ironic distancing between message and messengers creates a legible gap between the Poz members’ complex stories of adjustment and survival and their flat-line deployment by the documentary’s single-purpose program. Understandably, some group members subtly deviate from the script. A key instance of such narrative dissonance occurs as they reconvene to scrutinize a wall covered with HIV-prevention ads. Jim takes up the suggestion promoting HIV-negative “beer busts,” modeled

after “HIV beer busts,” a form of in-group socializing among HIVers developed as a response to the ostracism Poz men experience. Arthur eloquently demurs from the idea to create beer busts for uninfected gay men, or from even including them in HIV-positive beer busts, by saying that what Jim is proposing, is “*basically ... ‘No HIV-positive men allowed.’*” Arthur dissociates from the group’s purification narrative and sets aside the supposed need to reclaim social space from gay HIVers, viewing it as misplaced: “You need an *HIV-positive* beer bust because HIV-positive people need to know that this is a place where they’re gonna feel very welcome and they’re not gonna have to worry about the stigma of having AIDS or HIV.” In this brief departure from the script, Arthur’s displacement of a disciplinary discourse that seeks to co-opt infected gay men to recoup the perceived losses of the “normal” gay subject finds its articulation precisely along the lines that the film so diligently occludes: the difference between an authorized, *medical* model, and a resistant, *social* model, of HIV/AIDS. He expresses what, to him, given his exasperation in the scene, needs no explanation: “HIV-negative beer busts or ... HIV-negative *life ... is there ... that is the world.* The HIV-positive world is the *exception.*”

In this scene, both models of HIV—morbidity or sociability—circulate to quite different degrees. In *The Gift* as a whole, however, both social and medical models articulate the post-protease inhibitors experience of HIV/AIDS as manageable form of chronic disability. But whereas one constrains it as an abject and fatal condition, the other recuperates it as a culturally resistant, necessarily oppositional, and liberatory model for living with HIV/AIDS. This moment thus marks a slippage between the film’s dominant meanings of what it means to be HIV-positive and a seemingly unscripted eruption of Poz self-representation. Such a slippage challenges the film’s ironic deployment of culturally capitalized HIVers—social insiders—to mount its outsider exposé of the medical ravages and morbid fantasy of the “reality” of

HIV/AIDS. Hence, Arthur's utterance recalls the rejection of disablement as a solitary and abject medical experience by the disability rights movement. In solidifying the claims to recuperate the *social* (and, to some, liberatory) dimension of HIV/AIDS existence, Arthur also resists the hegemony of able-embodiment sustained by medical and epidemiological discourses.

It is important, at this point, to heed Robert McRuer's reminder of HIV/AIDS as a potentially *enabling* condition under the social, and not the medical, model of disability. McRuer intervenes in both queer studies and disability studies by intersecting them at the juncture of HIV/AIDS. Hence, McRuer's perspective echoes Arthur's resistance to re-pathologizing "gay Poz" experience and social space. McRuer reads such a form of minority-group formation as analogous to the cultural disability movement's revalorization of "crip" as a liberated group identity. While official messages of HIV/AIDS in the gay community insist on HIV/AIDS as a purely medical, abject existence, which exploits and propagates AIDS stigma in order to effectively "fight" the virus, resistant "Poz" messages of HIV/AIDS, such as Arthur's, fight the stigma attaching to the virus within homo and heteronormative cultures. That *The Gift* contains both valences, with the social model of HIV/AIDS tightly reined in by the larger medical model of HIV-prevention, indicates a fault line that divides the gay community: a line between paradoxical prohibition and stigma, and celebration and Poz pride. It is precisely this internal division that the film represents and seeks to redress, by way of its investigation and intervention into the "world" of bugchasers, as well as by its attempt to co-opt the Poz support group as a two-dimensional, morbidly medicalized image of HIV/AIDS experience as inexorable decay.

The bugchaser, by definition, crosses this fault line, moving clandestinely from prohibition to celebration by disregarding the able-bodied interpellation of HIV-negative

ideology. He reveals the phobic medical model of HIV as merely contingent, and not necessarily the most meaningful way of interacting with the virus as it mediates gay desire and sociocultural practices. While the film and other normative HIV interventions frame bugchasers as radically other to an ideal HIV-negative subject—Deej functions as just such an interpellation, literally hailed on the basis of his HIV status alone for the making of the film—*The Gift* also allows for moments, such as Arthur's, of gay Poz resistance to such norms. These moments denaturalize compulsory able-bodied hegemony, which is a term I borrow from McRuer, to note how the uninfected gay male body is “rescued” from the specter of HIV-centered gay life by socially disabling the *infected* gay body and its claims to public space. Arthur's “suggestion,” couched in the language of diplomacy given the context of the film, reminds the group of the historical recuperation of HIV/AIDS as an empowered form of disability from the beginning of the epidemic: turning objects of science into subjects of social activism that transformed the way science and medicine operated on the collective body of AIDS (McRuer 222; Hollibaugh et al. 129).

Hence, it is understandable the extent to which a film like *The Gift*, in tracking the bugchaser and his disruption of a naturalized HIV/AIDS able-bodied hegemony, also points the finger at the HIVer—both at the “giftgiver” and, implicitly, at his non-threatening, domesticated cousin, represented by Jim, Arthur, and the others. By extension, it is perhaps also understandable the frustration with which the film, which I read as being situated at the precise intersection of hetero and homonormative worlds, blames gay culture as a whole, for incorporating and thereby authenticating Poz social existence. *The Gift* blames the legacy of AIDS-activist gay culture for creating HIV beer busts, in other words, as well as for only representing “AIDS lite” and not the grim medical realities of AIDS's advanced stages.^{xix} The

documentary as a whole blames the heroic development of an institutionalized system of medical and social networks of care, precisely because these *enable* HIVers and PWAs (whether or not actually on disability) to in many ways enjoy better lives—better connected, supported, etc.—than many of their sexually stigmatized and only provisionally culturally enfranchised HIV-negative brethren. The war between the medical and social model of Poz existence has already been lost in the gay community, *The Gift* would have its viewers believe, and this is a tragedy.

Yet, how is it possible that both things are true at once: that HIVers have too much cultural capital and take up too much social space, with their HIV beer busts and Gay Men’s Health Crisis and countless other activist-inspired and now widespread advocacy groups and social service providers, and nevertheless also remain culturally marginalized, individually stigmatized, and effectively rendered invisible from the (gay or straight) public sphere—and hence needing and deserving of such services? And is this truly what those chasing the bug seek—and what those that have it seek to give?

Pandora’s Paradox

These questions point to the epidemic of signification of HIV/AIDS, whose multiple meanings are mutually contradictory and yet enact a powerful force in terms of producing myriad social and cultural effects, both at global and local levels, and often at cross-purposes. The epidemic, the virus, the syndrome: a paradoxical Pandora’s Box, a form of “gift” that depends precisely on community norms to create the conditions for it to become a life affirming diagnosis, a socially recuperated form of disability, or quite the opposite. Twenty-five years into the age of AIDS, its material and symbolic multiplicity generates interactive and contradictory meanings, which create an epistemic breach within the gay community. Because AIDS effected

the re-medicalization of the homosexual body, and because despite the cure/morbidity fantasies that discipline HIV/AIDS, this body just will not go away: it persists as the queer love that *dared* speak its name, for its very survival. Hence, the ideological trace of HIV/AIDS, whether liberated or medicated, as *the* totalizing sign of homosexuality constitutes a cultural crisis that threatens the normalization of gay identity in the public sphere. Interventions such as *The Gift* resist this menacing re-medicalization of the gay *able* body by projecting the HIV/AIDS stigma outside this body's imaginary domain, re-stigmatizing the HIVer and *his* infected body as safely abject, outcast, and thereby constituting the homo-norm.

It is precisely the iterative reinforcement through re-presentation of the medical model of HIV/AIDS—as seen in official gay culture's methodological distancing from HIV/AIDS, especially in its most threatening guise, the bugchaser and the Poz model of queer enablement he sees as a gift—which allows for the liberatory social model of *homosexuality* to emerge. The collective gay subject of social assimilation, threatened by the persistent construction of AIDS as “Gay-Related Immune Deficiency,” the “gay plague,” disavows HIV/AIDS as an enabling mode of gay life, because of the paradoxical Pandora's box it unleashes when it considers this reality. Hence the emphasis on normalizing spectatorship, on reproducing the figures of the bugchaser and giftgiver as specters of this disavowed queer residuum and the social model of HIV.

McRuer's call for a “critical investment in disability” might be unfeasible to the extent that HIV/AIDS stigma remains an integral part of gay culture's paradoxical stance toward normalizing its politics, on the one hand, and containing Poz communities that remain publicly disavowed, on the other. McRuer's advocacy of yoking a “critically queer / critically disabled” perspective remains, in this sense, an ideal: “a critically disabled perspective, like a critically queer perspective, resists domestication ... and instead demands access to public spaces and

conversations currently configured to reproduce only the limited perspective of the abled body” (236). Official gay culture’s “investment” in compulsory able-bodiedness—its proliferation of the “limited perspective of the [HIV-negative] abled body”—reiterates the methodological distancing of HIV/AIDS in order to repress its paradoxical social enablement of Poz bodies at the heart of its normalizing project. Such a conformist regime of homosexual bodily health actively ignores the cultural practices and reverse-discourses of queer Poz communities and bugchasers who disavow such methodological or social distancing and replace the gay normate’s constitutive fear of HIV/AIDS with a radical desire for the “bug.”

However, Poz HIVers—i.e., those interpellated by the activist-inspired social model of their condition as enabling and empowering—do not necessarily consider themselves “critically disabled” or “queer crips,” in McRuer’s disability-rights sense of the word. Yet, they resolutely engage in cultural recuperations of their bodily sign and socio-sexual practices, and in so doing refuse to go quietly into the ghetto of de-sexualized quarantine. Insofar as we can speculate about such a construct, giftgivers and bugchasers proliferate by displacing the stigmatization of HIV infection. As such, their second-order recuperation of the Poz “crip” profile amounts to an oppositional incorporation of such norms, instead of a continued resistance to them. Bugchasers and giftgivers signify gay culture’s iterative efforts to contain the return of the repressed. What is repressed is the official LGBT community’s radical interdependence on and persistent disavowal of the “queer crip” / “gay Poz” mode of life, precisely in order to discipline this paradoxically enfranchised and disenfranchised sector of the gay population.

Bugchasers and giftgivers co-opt the necessity of de-stigmatization for a specific end, ironically trading on a “cripped-out” Poz identity as a perversely erotic disabling condition. Bugchasers’ desire for the gift, and the giver’s desire to “gift” them, in other words, takes AIDS

activism's liberation of a Poz identity one step further—or one step back—to build their own resistant forms of sexual counterculture. As such, their HIV/AIDS-*philia* suggests one means of crafting a radical “critically disabled / critically queer” sensibility. Hence, the amount of discomfort evoked by giftgivers and bugchasers partially stems from these figures' seemingly perverse co-optation of normal gay culture's cultural rehabilitation of HIV/AIDS as a queer “crip” / Poz experience. Such a wholesale recuperation of a socially progressive, disability-rights model of HIV/AIDS, however, remains implicit—and visible only in culturally dissonant examples, presented to serve as limit-cases and cautionary tales, of just such a threatening dis-identification with socially normalized, HIV-uninfected, men who have sex with men.

Conclusion: Political Ethics of AIDS

What it means for gay men to seek or give the “gift” of HIV, in other words, entails the cultural narratives of a gay collective identity, as well as this identity's internal contradictions with regard to the resonant ideological legacies of first-wave AIDS activism and its radical survival instincts. Despite having fought against pathologizing meanings of homosexual viral existence and having died for the development of medical therapies to render HIV/AIDS a chronic but manageable condition protected by the ADA and other disability-rights statutes, a progressively normalizing and normalized gay culture remains conflicted about its successes.

By redefining what it means to be HIV-infected or be a person with AIDS, both in palatable activist-inspired or sexually dissident forms, however, gay male culture seems to disavow the ramifications of its own radical political past and the potential proliferation of subcultural derivations of such activism in the present.^{xx} We may thus view the bugchasing and giftgiving discourse as *queering* and “*cripping*” homo desire and the cultural hierarchy of

medical and social models of HIV/AIDS as they circulate in said communities. As Carrie Sandahl notes in her article on queer theory and disability studies as seen through the theatrical work of solo autobiographical performers, the most important point of convergence between queer theory and disability studies is both disciplines' "radical stance toward concepts of normalcy; both argue adamantly against the compulsion to observe norms of all kinds" (26). Hence, despite the important analytic and contextual differences between them, "Poz" communities hinge on subverting the medical establishment's hegemony over nonce sexual and bodily identities as forms of deviance and abnormality, albeit while advocating a species of HIV separatism. An HIV/AIDS apartheid, however, that remains intact, save for the spectacular exception, that intersection where these proximate yet distant worlds cross and overturn.

For us to find the bugchaser, then, we find only a negative reflection of ourselves: an image of ACT UP, *Diseased Pariah News*, and *The Advocate* and *Out Magazine*. He is an emergent instantiation of the gay movement's cultural memory, which remains latent in gay community normalizing practices since the domestication of AIDS itself—and its resulting quarantining from the official face of the gay-rights movement—after HIV's therapeutic disappearance from the public sphere. As we come to terms with homo culture's underlying disavowals of the persistence of HIV/AIDS, especially but not simply in the Poz model of gay identity, we continue to proliferate the sins of bugchasing, the "crimes" of giftgiving, and such, in order to paradoxically purge that residuum from public discourse. Hence, to re-enact the saga of the threat of the bugchaser/giftgiver, is to temporarily express and contain the threat that HIV/AIDS poses to homonormativity and to the latter's disciplining of vibrantly abject forms of Poz experience. This spectacular threat is disavowed in order to maintain its constitutive function of paradoxically enabling a hygienic fantasy of the normal gay subject and his

disciplined sex drive, and continues to proliferate through displacement everywhere that bugchasing is to be found.

The rhetorical deployment of bugchasing and giftgiving as morbid fantasies enacts both gay male and popular culture's normalizing disavowal of HIV/AIDS as a collective discourse of fear of the Other and desire for the Other. These ambient fantasies rehearse attitudes toward the monstrosity of gay desire and gay desire for the monster—our collective fascination with and titillating fear of the HIV-infected body as queerly enabled *because* queerly disabled. The “freedom” that Valenzuela and Gendin spoke of, to escape the compulsory able-body management of an HIV-negative lifestyle, indicates the degree to which such cultural legislations of acceptable relations to one's body and to the Other's body no longer obtain in the progressively and *alternatively* normalizing worlds of Poz experience. To avoid the potential collapse of the official project of gay incorporation into the main (blood) stream, figures such as the bugchaser and giftgiver compulsively reiterate the Patient Zero trope to secure the consent of the collective gay subject, to be a spectator to, instead of ever inhabiting, the “anti-” normality of Poz existence. The bugchaser's proliferation through displacement secures the hegemony of homosexual hygiene and able-bodied submission and sanctions the official role of the community for the larger hetero public sphere.

Here I am drawing from Douglas Crimp's reading of the “Patient Zero” figure as a mythological construction that serves to emblemize our culture's fascination with disseminating pathologizing narratives of the HIV-infected male homosexual as an intentional and wanton vector for lethal-disease transmission. Randy Shilts is best known for “inventing” Gaetan Douglas as HIV/AIDS' “Patient Zero” (a label used to designate the originary transmitter of an infectious agent to a naïve population). Shilts' Patient Zero is an avatar of gay

promiscuity: He infects scores of men, who in turn go on to infect hundreds of others, and so forth, thereby setting off the geometric expansion of the epidemic from “ground zero.” My analysis suggests that figures like the bugchaser and giftgiver, as well as others, such as the “down low” and the “super virus” case of the promiscuous methamphetamine user with a supposedly hyper-virulent strain of HIV, serve as cultural flashpoints. The iterative deployment of these Patient Zero narratives—all “repetitions with a difference”—rehearse the originary trauma of AIDS as a homosexual plague by displacing such trauma onto a spectacular figure of the malleable “other” for public consumption. This is not to say that such figures do not exist interdependently, but to say that their iterative representations serve this key hygienic function—to mark the uninfected body politic by tracking the vampiric specter of Patient Zero supposedly stalking it. This hegemonic gay able body is encoded and re-coded—enabled—precisely because of the continuance of the distancing theater of deviance.

A key political and ethical challenge that barebacking, and bugchasing and giftgiving *in extremis*, present to a normalized gay or hetero viewer is this.^{xxi} To what extent do such minoritizing fictions advance or derail the “liberation” of homosexual communities when such liberation progresses in the form of the cultural assimilation of dominant social norms—and the concomitant displacement of queer bodies and Poz perspectives onto panic icons such as the bugchaser himself? The provisional answer would be that they force such a homo–heteronormative coalition to come to terms with what is lost by incorporating sexual minorities as identities and as political communities in their own right. This analysis suggests, therefore, that it is possible, from a queer disability-rights perspective, for this critic to align the bugchaser with a radical queer critique. Barebackers, bugchasers, and, most poignantly, giftgivers, radically challenge the assimilation of “gay” as an “all-but-hetero” normative collective identity

(the contemporary homonormativity of marriage, adoption, and so on). Such dominant identitarian fictions, as McRuer points out, remain territorialized as regimes of able bodies and hygienic sexual desire that threaten queer and crip practices and beliefs that seem free from such constraints—a “freedom” upon which gay liberation, in its 1970s heyday, “prided” itself. That Poz gay subjects are routinely called upon to justify their cultural capital—to wish it away or atone for it, given its presumed effect on queer sexual behavior—suggests that the politics and ethics of queer AIDS are incommensurate.

Following Michael Warner’s thesis about the trouble with “normal,” such queer anti-homonormativity constitutes the ethical residuum covered over by a mainstream gay “politics of acceptance” and hygienic normalcy. Both popular and independent representations of bugchasing, barebacking, and giftgiving represent these limit-cases as ideological forms that invoke even as they menace normative regimes of gay assimilation and able-bodied health. These regimes, as dependent on the scientific establishment of AIDS Inc. that furthers the agenda of eradication or stigmatization of HIV, thereby deny Poz MSM the significant cultural capital they have accrued in the post–protease-inhibitor era of the AIDS crisis. Such subcultural gay—or rather, *queer*—capital, won through decades of activism and eccentric homo-normalcy, has transformed both themselves and the broader LGBT community. This capital is what the bugchaser trades on, the proverbial return of the repressed that threatens to dislocate the homonorming whole—even as its negative reflection marks the limits of official normalizing gay discourse. Our own normal gay–straight regime demands that these queer *anti*-norms, as personified in the vampiric bugchaser, be brought to light, to prevent the secret conversion of HIV-negative minds.

ⁱ I refer to the August 2008 publication of the CDC’s revision of the annual incidence of HIV in the U.S. The actual report on the CDC website states that “in 2006, an estimated 56,300 new HIV infections occurred—a number that is substantially higher than the previous estimate of 40,000 annual new infections.” The CDC, however, cautions that we must not assume that incidence rates actually increased. Rather, the upward revision could be an effect of newer instruments, which, moreover, suggest that “the annual number of new infections was never as low as 40,000 and that it has been roughly stable since the late 1990s (with estimates ranging between 55,000 and 58,500 during the three most recent time periods analyzed).”

ⁱⁱ Here I am speaking of our so-called post–protease inhibitor era of AIDS treatment, dating to the mid- to late 1990s, which has transformed an AIDS diagnosis from an automatic death sentence to a chronic and debilitating medical condition: a form of disability. The *POZ* magazine website lists nine classes of anti–HIV medication, while the lifespan of a person who undergoes early detection and treatment of HIV/AIDS is understood to be potentially as long as that of anyone with a chronic yet manageable illness. See, for instance, Bruce R. Levin et al.’s 2000 AIDS Conference report on treatment, which states in a section titled “Epidemiologic Consequences of Treatment” that “multidrug chemotherapy substantially prolongs the life of HIV–infected persons. For those who can afford this relatively expensive therapy or otherwise have access to these drugs, multidrug chemotherapy has literally been a lifesaver.”

ⁱⁱⁱ See the CDC’s *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*, 12 Sept. 2008, discussed below.

^{iv} The most recent data available at the time of this article are in the CDC’s *MMWR*, 12 September 2008. An editorial note states that given their 2006 study of new HIV infections in the U.S., “more than 25 years after the first report of AIDS, the disease continues to affect the

MSM population more than any other in the United States.” The fact that the MSM population and HIV are so closely interlinked, “more than 25 years after the first report of AIDS,” seems noteworthy for the CDC because of the wider expansion of the pandemic into other subpopulations—including numbers in the Black community in particular that far exceed those in other ethnic groups in the U.S. (Ibid). While MSM and HIV seem interlinked from the historical emergence of HIV in the 1980s to this day—as the MMWR indicates in the quoted passage—the equation of HIV and MSM seems rhetorical insofar as the incidence is disturbingly high, yet not as widely reported, in non-MSM communities: “High-risk heterosexual contact was the predominant transmission category (80%) among females but accounted for 13% of new infections among males” (Ibid). Hence, while the numbers among males (72 percent) are almost entirely attributable to MSM risk, among women heterosexual risk is the main transmission factor. Focusing on MSM, therefore, misses the evolution of the pandemic among women and minimizes the extent to which HIV risk ought no longer to be primarily associated with male homosexual sex.

^v For the debate over defining barebacking as intentional or even unintentional unprotected anal sex between men, cf. Michael Shernoff, Tim Dean, and David Halperin (especially 116n26 and 122n39), *passim*.

^{vi} This is not to say that I am willfully discarding the potentially devastating effects on the MSM and other populations from barebacking or bugchasing. Rather, the intervention my paper seeks to make is to question whether the bugchaser is that much of a real phenomenon at all, and to investigate the social effects of the public media’s semi-hysterical rhetoric surrounding bugchasing.

^{vii} It is helpful to note that the official diagnostic instrument of the American Psychiatric Association, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, only de-pathologized homosexuality in 1973. In my view, AIDS marks the stigmatizing re-medicalization of homosexuality. Independently, Halperin comes to the same conclusion: “We cannot afford in the present context not to challenge the new, medicalized model of gay male subjectivity” (29). His focus on subjectivity is, however, distinct from my own rhetorical analysis of actual mediations of this “medicalized model” of a particularly impacted figure of *spoiled* “gay male subjectivity”: that of the bugchaser figure.

^{viii} Here I am also drawing on Halperin’s ersatz survey of epidemiological data that corroborates Dawson et al.’s account of the minimal, if traceable at all, historical existence of bugchasers. Halperin’s conclusion echoes Dawson et al.’s: “barebacking that involves *deliberate, intentional unprotected sex between HIV-positive and HIV-negative men*, though it may be fantasized about, practiced, or even celebrated among a few fringe groups, seems to be extremely rare” (Halperin 17; emphasis in original). See also Halperin 12n38. For a more credulous yet extremely sympathetic account of this figure as a phenomenal entity, see Shernoff, esp. “Introduction and Overview.”

^{ix} Here is the actual quote from Freeman’s article: “Cabaj estimates that at least twenty-five percent of all newly infected gay men fall into that category” (“Bug Chasers: The Men Who Long to Be HIV+”). The doctor to whom Freeman attributes the estimated number of bugchasers later recanted this number as a misrepresentation. See, for example, this entry written by a physician in the field of HIV/AIDS, published in an online forum on bugchasing: “According to Freeman’s *Rolling Stone* article, a mind-boggling 25 percent of new gay male HIV infections are due to bug chasing. And Freeman bases that astonishing statistic on one

doctor's completely unsubstantiated estimate.... Within days of publication, Cabaj [the doctor Freeman reports provided this figure] denied giving Freeman the 25 percent figure. Admitting he has conducted no studies on the matter and has no hard data, Cabaj told *Newsweek*, "That's totally false. I never said that' " (Robert Frascino, "Forum on Fatigue and Anemia: My Boyfriend is a Bug Chaser [Bug Chasers and Gift Givers]"). This paper will cite the print publication of Freeman's article, using the corresponding page numbers, where possible.

^x A main thrust of my argument is that we can never truly know the extent to which bugchasing and giftgiving are discrete subcultures or merely expressions of transient desires and sexual behaviors. Only representation can afford us an answer, which is precisely the problem posed by adducing phenomenal existence to such mediated accounts of subcultural forms of group identity.

^{xi} Gregory Tomso helpfully summarizes the major scientific literature on this phenomenon, as well as proposing an ethical approach toward the stigmatized figures of the "barebacker," "bugchaser," and "giftgiver." For an excellent psychoanalytic framework for the processes of desire—both social and interpersonal—possibly at play in the bugchasing/giftgiving "phenomenon," see Dave Holmes and Dan Warner. For a comprehensive account of barebacking from a "psychosocial" perspective, see Perry Halkitis, et al. Halperin summarizes the current literature on HIV/AIDS prevalence and incidence research, including the National Institutes of Health's landmark EXPLORE study and the CDC-funded Young Men's Survey.

^{xii} By "normal" I mean situated vis-à-vis social norms of so-called healthy embodiment as normatively understood: that is to say, not diseased, not disabled, and not infected.

^{xiii} Here I am referring to Sedgwick's study of cultural binaries (such as "wholeness/decadence" and "utopia/apocalypse") where the homosexual figures as both a site of, and an incitation to,

scenes of death and decay: “From at least the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, scenarios of same-sex desire would seem to have had a privileged . . . relation in Western culture to scenarios . . . of genocide” (127–28). Sedgwick adds that “one of the few areas of agreement among modern Marxist, Nazi, and liberal capitalist ideologies is that there is a peculiarly close, though never precisely defined, affinity between same-sex desire and some historical condition of moribundity, called ‘decadence,’ to which not individuals or minorities but whole civilizations are subject” (128).

^{xiv} For more on the significance of the gift as a symbol of kinship and social exchange, see Dean on the anthropology of barebacking, “Breeding Culture: Barebacking, Bugchasing, Giftgiving,” discussed below. My discussion largely eschews anthropological considerations, unlike Dean’s, in order not to presuppose the phenomenal existence of bugchasing. This paper thus avoids a hermeneutical approach and suggests that the fascination with such fugitive figures as bugchasers is the more germane object of study. For a similar perspective, see Halperin, esp. Chapter II, in which he suggests that it is the scientific establishment that ought to be called the “bug chaser” in its perennial hunt for homosexual HIV transgressors.

^{xv} Perhaps coincidentally, this is the same year in which *Bugchaser*, a 16-minute film directed by Jose Daniel Bort, premiered at the Austin Gay and Lesbian International Film Festival, according to the International Movie Database. The film’s tagline, according to the International Movie Database, is “Join the secret quest of death.” Similarly, the popular Showtime drama *Queer As Folk* also featured a bugchaser character in its fourth season (2004). I selected Freeman’s article and Hogarth’s film for their intertextual resonance, as represented by Doug Hitzel’s appearance in both works. The bugchaser literature, however, seems only to keep expanding, notwithstanding the dearth of empirical evidence to justify the media’s fascination.

^{xvi} Both reporter and reported exploit this fantasy of morbidity, and in light of the ideological pressure to conform to the preferred reading of HIV/AIDS, it is unclear to what extent there is a subject—a bugchaser—prior to his interpellation in this project of containment as reinforcement of our culture’s continued representation of HIV/AIDS.

^{xvii} Addressing the camera as if he were addressing himself, Hitzel reenacts his own “mirror stage,” that moment of recognition when he finally got what he thought he wanted: HIV seroconversion.

^{xviii} The film’s investment is firmly in a specific construct of a gay (male) community, whereas prevention science and public health address the issues of sexual risk more broadly as prevalent across a broader spectrum of men who have sex with men—i.e., not simply limited to men who self-identify as “gay.” For the ambiguity inherent in this nomenclature—insofar as a behavioral category is reconstituted as a catch-all pseudo-identity—see introduction above.

^{xix} *The Gift*’s official instrument for articulating this critique is a practicing gay psychotherapist by the name of Walt Odets, who attests that the LGBT community lost its focus from its overriding mission—to prevent and eradicate HIV. He thereby gives voice to what amounts to the flip side of the coin of the morbidity trope: the “cure/containment fantasy” of HIV/AIDS (Erni 53). Odets claims that gay culture’s ratification of the HIV lifestyle, in its refusal to say that “there’s something wrong with” people with AIDS/HIV, in fact facilitates the emergence of risky sex and by, extension, of figures like the bugchaser, who seem to exploit precisely this vindication of the social model of HIV/AIDS and a queerly normative Poz lifestyle.

^{xx} If living with HIV/AIDS is an intrinsic fact of gay experience and sexual practice, and the enormous complexities of HIV/AIDS are already culturally recuperated as a continuum of health and chronic illness, what is it about the social stigma of “disability” that effectively dis-

interpellates gay male culture, perhaps *especially* those living “on”—and with—HIV/AIDS disability? To what extent are some facets of gay male culture “bent” on disavowing an implicit reliance on the protection of disability rights and the concerted effort of normalizing HIV/AIDS experience, while this same disability model facilitates their cultural management or subcultural valorization of HIV/AIDS stigma?

^{xx} Those who take up the terms of a virus and call it a “gift,” depend on an *already* normalized yet disavowed framing of HIV/AIDS as a valuable, if not intrinsic, part of everyday gay experience: what Odets in *The Gift* calls the unfortunate “entanglement” of gay pride and AIDS consciousness. But how unfortunate is it?

^{xxi} And I think “viewer” is the right term, given the constitutional exteriority of such fugitive fictions to that larger fiction, that of a normalized social field subtended by regimes of ideological purity and bodily health, which these countercultural figures paradoxically define and reinforce.

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