

**FROM AUTO-FLAGELLATION TO COMMUNAL LOVE:
THE SEX(Y) CORAZÓN OF JOHN RECHY
AND HOM(E)OEROTICS**

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ABSTRACT

John Rechy, the eternal literary outsider or “outlaw,” as he prefers, has provided nearly sixty years of sharp, critical analysis through several written media—journalistic articles, short stories, essays, plays, memoir, and the novel. Throughout his corpus of novels, he writes of the protagonist’s “search for a substitute for salvation,” as Rechy decolonizes himself from the false promises of the Catholic Church. I take themes from several of Rechy’s novels to expand my theory of hom(e)erotics, a process for queer Xicanx men to decolonize ourselves from the auto-flagellation of internalized misogyny and homophobia, systems we observe and absorb from institutions like the Church, the State, the Family. Rechy’s six decades of writing is alternately a history lesson and a grim portent, particularly as we document over four decades of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, an issue that few people consider to be a problem of any significance, particularly in the field of Chicana and Chicano Studies.

KEYWORDS: John Rechy, HIV/AIDS, internalized homophobia, internalized misogyny, Anthony Avalos.

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“I strongly believe that the general despisement of homosexuals has at its roots the hatred of women by the heterosexual structure... And the reason behind it all is that they are threatened by women.”—John Rechy, in a 1996 interview with Charles Isherwood for the *Advocate* magazine”.

1. THE CRIME

Living in a neighboring community in the Antelope Valley of Los Angeles County, Anthony Avalos, all of ten years old, did not understand why his parents treated him so badly. They did not treat his siblings this way. His mother and her boyfriend even encouraged them to participate in the abuse of their brother, lest they receive similar treatment. Only Anthony was dangled over a balcony. Only Anthony was starved and locked in a cupboard. Only Anthony had to eat from the trash. Only Anthony was forbidden to use the restroom until he soiled his pants. Only Anthony had to kneel on uncooked rice until his knees bled. “What did I do wrong?” was all Anthony could ponder as he endured this treatment for weeks. The

reason his mother and her boyfriend subjected Anthony to such torture is because he had recently returned from school and declared, “I like boys.” Because Anthony made this naïve declaration in a house where toxic masculinity ruled, he suffered unimaginable abuse until he fell into a coma and died at the hospital. In a heteronormative world, ten-year-old Anthony Avalos committed the “crime” of liking boys. Feeling betrayed by the boy’s transgression of his masculinity, and disgusted by what they interpreted as the boy’s effeminacy, his own mother and the man with whom she was raising her children felt it was their duty to punish and torture him to death, subjecting him to months of physical and emotional torture after his declaration (Thereof).

In this essay, I will argue that toxic masculinity is not just a feature of patriarchy and heteronormativity. I tackle the toxicity of patriarchal masculinity in the gay cisgender world, stemming from internalized homophobia and the violent sexual practices perpetrated out of a sense of self-hatred rather than erotic desire. Chicano queer author John Rechy argues that internalized homophobia originates from an even deeper social hatred, internalized misogyny, that Rechy documents in his decades of observing the homosexual erotic underground. Throughout his corpus, Rechy lauds the feminine—regardless of the body it inhabits—femme queens, whether they are in drag or effeminate men, and ridicules the hypermasculinity of a subculture of gay cisgender men.

External forces, such as the Catholic Church’s institutional misogyny and homophobia, compound societal misogyny into an internalized “fem/cide.” Related to but differing from femicide, or the murder of poor brown women because they are poor brown women, as we see in the case of the serial murders along the El Paso/Juárez border, I argue that some gay men attempt to extinguish their feminine side because of the immense pressure to conform to patriarchal norms, and in effect commit murder of the feminine within. This, I argue, is the true source for toxic masculinity in the queer cisgender world. I utilize the spelling, “fem,” as the term is used in the current discourse of online dating apps, accompanied by a litany of other restrictions, usually based on age, body size, and race, e.g., “No fats or fems. DDF [disease and drug free], UB2. No over 35s. No Blacks or Asians.” I define “fem/cide” as the murder of the male body’s

internal femininity by acts of femme-shaming, bottom-shaming, transwoman phobia, and a panoply of other behaviors perpetrated by insecure gay cisgender men to perform, or more accurately, to don a mask of toxic hypermasculinity—to hide one’s mascara (make-up) with a *mascara* (Spanish for mask). The killing of the woman inside conforms to society’s narrow view of masculinity, particularly for gay and bisexual cisgender men of color. Unfortunately, some gay men internalize the same hatred of the feminine that murdered Anthony Avalos.

I call the process of recognizing and deconstructing the toxic masculinity of patriarchal violence and unearthing the motivation behind the fatalistic sexual practices a percentage of gay cisgender men engage in, hom(e)erotics. Embedded in this construction is the intersection between homosexual erotic practices, internalized homophobia, and the misogynistic gender politics learned at home. Rechy’s work will help me further distill my ideas in this essay.

An integral aspect of hom(e)erotics is reckoning with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The field of Chicana/o Studies continues to neglect the epidemic, despite rising seroconversion rates amongst gay and bisexual Xicanx and Latinx cisgender men and transgender women. Whatever the reason, like Chicana lesbian feminist scholars have done for nearly four decades, I make a place at the table for gay and bisexual Xicanx cisgender men, especially those of us living with HIV and a place on the altar for those who succumbed to the disease. Previous generations of gay men participated in radical grassroots organizing, coming together to confront the grim specter of AIDS in such revolutionary organizations as ALLGO and ACT UP!¹, and now the AIDS crisis is merely an endnote lost amongst the digital rubble of amateur pornography featuring the acts of “slamming”², “breeding”³, and “stealth breeding”⁴. Sadly, academia conveniently turns its gaze away from the mounting AIDS crisis, in effect, replicating the murderous silence of the Reagan administration.

Rechy, along with documenting the gay male underground of pre-Stonewall America, provides an undercurrent of gender analysis akin to Anzaldúa’s in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. As the Chicano Movement struggled and disintegrated because of its devotion to cultural patriarchy, Rechy was creating texts challenging the status quo regarding gender and sexuality. In his novel, *Rushes* (1979),

Rechy writes of a subculture of the gay male community mimicking the white supremacist patriarchy of the larger heterosexual culture. This subculture's participants bifurcate the community into roles of dominant and submissive represented by the code of colored handkerchiefs. Rechy exposes the toxic cruelty upon which this world is constructed in other texts in his corpus, as well. The participants engage in acts of degradation and humiliation based on power rather than desire and pleasure. *Rushes* allows me to reframe gay men's sexuality rooted in true *erotics*, desire, and pleasure rather than power, violence, and humiliation.

2. THE EVIDENCE— “MASC 4 MASC”/MASK 4 MASK/ MASCARA 4 MASCARA (ENGLISH & SPANISH)

The following online profiles and blogs are evidence of the (d)evolution of subcommunities akin to that found in *Rushes*. Rechy provides a critique of extreme sadomasochistic sexual practices as a portent for the horrific violence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic soon to pass.

The section heading refers to the intersection of toxic masculinity and sexuality within a gay cisgender male context. The gay dating world is immersed in app culture, yet even before the era of the smart phone, on-line personal ads, and ones in print periodicals the same cliché remained present “MASC 4 MASC” (a hypermasculine-performing gay cisgender man proclaims he is only attracted to other hypermasculine-performing men). “Straight-acting” is another descriptor of gay men who distance themselves from any feminine traits. Gay men's hypermasculinity, the “MASC 4 MASC” crowd, strains its credibility with its misogynistic poses that one could interpret the slogan as “MASCARA 4 MASCARA,” as in the cosmetic. For gay Xicanx and Latinx men, this could be read as “MASK 4 MASK,” as “mascara” means “mask” in Spanish. Either translation works as hypermasculine men don the façade of heterosexuality by any means necessary. The “straight-acting” poses are such caricatures they may as well be wearing make-up or a Phantom of the Opera mask. The “tough guise” is their own form of drag, albeit with none of the authenticity or artistic flair of real drag.

My theory of hom(e)erotics involves the difficult proposition of cisgender gay Xicanx men examining and relinquishing our male privilege, thus making amends to the women whom we have

hurt and ostracized. This privileging of men, particularly cisgender, heterosexual men, is rooted in the patriarchy of multiple institutions, but for a plurality (nearly half of all U.S. Latinx people identify as Catholic, according to the Pew Research Center) of gay Xicanx men, the Catholic Church is what first shackles us to traditional gender roles. Rechy's essay, "Holy Drag!" details how the Catholic Church, the world's first "old boys' club," relegated women to a second-class status and continued the condemnation of homoerotic desire. In this brief but passionate essay, Rechy exposes the hypocrisy of the institutional misogyny and homophobia of the Catholic Church, the same institution where the majority of young gay Xicanx boys begin to negotiate their homoerotic desires amidst the decontextualized verses from the Bible condemning homosexuality, Daniel A. Helminiak's text, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality* (2000) reveals the biblical verses as mostly misinterpretations of the original text.

According to Rechy in an interview with Debra Castillo, the gay Xicanx boy is born behind enemy lines⁵. Even within the womb, the hope for a macho son to emulate his virile father rather than a submissive daughter pervades the fetal development. In the home, the gay Xicanx boy in his innocence does not realize his transgression when he plays dolls with his sister. The gay Xicanx boy bears witness to the silent subservience of his grandmother, mother, and sisters as they toil in the kitchen and serve the men, never protesting that they must eat after the men, a fitting symbol of their gendered positionality in the family. The gay Xicanx boy witnesses their mothers' policing of his sister's femininity as it relates to the comforts of men—cooking, cleaning, and child rearing—as his older brothers enjoy complete sexual freedom. Innocuously, the gay Xicanx boy steals glances at his older male relatives' genitalia in the bathroom, in the locker room after swimming, on camping trips, subconsciously realizing this is the root of his unexplained desires. While his parents gift age-appropriate items—sports equipment and video game consoles—to their son, the girls do not receive toys as much as they are training aids for future lives of domesticity in the forms of Easy Bake Ovens, Betsy Wetsy dolls, and Disney princesses. As the gay Xicanx boy witnesses the material advantages for hypermasculinity and possessing the "right" biology, how does he cognitively process this misogynistic treatment of his sister—the blatant unfairness of the situation?

Even if the gay Xicanx brother prefers to play Barbie Dream House with his sister over Hot Wheels with his older brother, his fearfully observant mother forbids it, lest it awaken the patriarch's wrath. Thus, she commands he go outside and roughhouse with his brothers, not realizing the homoeroticism of such physical contact. Growing up, the gay Xicanx boy consumes the available popular culture—everything from compliant Disney princesses to bloody UFC cage matches to his mother's casta-system telenovelas—reinforcing a heteronormative reality he subconsciously knows he must adopt, even if the price is donning a permanent mascara (mask).

The gay Xicanx boy winces internally at his culture's homophobia as his father, uncles, and older brothers join the "Puto!" chant during the World Cup and as they casually use terms like "maricon" and "fag," thrown like daggers at men who do not meet the standards of hypermasculinity. The result of these observations is an internal wall built around his budding homoerotic desires and his emotional sensitivity. He learns to suppress the creativity bubbling within him. He feigns interest in girls and joins the choral patriarchy as he participates in the marginalization of his sisters and other women and effeminate boys. He elevates his mother to the straight-jacket positionality of sainted mother, similar to the Virgen de Guadalupe, thus stripping her of desire, pleasure, agency, and humanity. He learns to treat other women as second-class citizens, even if he relates to them more than to his father and brothers. The gay Xicanx boy retreats further into the closet, remaining in stasis as if he were frozen traveling to a far corner of the galaxy. His growth remains stunted, and he will remain a scared little boy, terrified someone will discover his secret; so, he learns to lie, to hide behind an act of hypermasculinity, never grasping that such performativity alerts any astute observer to his homosexuality as much as if he were in drag lip-synching to Eartha Kitt's gay anthem, "I Love Men" (1984). For some gay Xicanx boys, like Anthony Avalos and Gabriel Fernandez before him (both killed by their homophobic parents in 21st-century Southern California), who suffered greatly for the crime of not adhering to traditional masculinity and who did not realize the transgression of their respective effeminacy, the alternative could be a violent and cruel death at the hands of the people charged to love and protect them⁶.

Masculinity for traditional Latinx families is a precious and fragile commodity. Some boys like Gabriel Fernandez and Anthony Avalos who did not meet their respective family's threshold of masculinity become victims of patriarchal violence, sometimes of the most extreme kind. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues the medical establishment is complicit in such violence in its privileging of traditional masculinity in boys and gay men in her essay, "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys," published in the anthology, *Tendencies* (1993). Sedgwick connects the APA's decision to de-pathologize homosexuality with its move to establish the phenomenon of transgressive gender identity expression as a "disorder":

"extremely and chronically effeminate boys"—this is the abject that haunts revisionist psychoanalysis. The same DSM-III that, published in 1980, was the first that did not contain an entry for "homosexuality," was also the first that *did* contain a new diagnosis, numbered (for insurance purposes) 302.60: "Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood" (156).

As a boy, I veered towards the feminine, as I fully "participate[d] in the games and pastimes of girls," to use the violently constricting language of so-called mental health professionals. Twirling to Wonder Woman, playing with paper dolls, lip-synching to Donna Summer, dressing in my mother's jewelry, and learning to cook from my grandmother were all activities I *enthusiastically* engaged in my prepubescence. Was I pathological? Should my parents have admitted me to some sort of gender identity disorder clinic? Should I have undergone electroshock therapy, or perhaps a lobotomy? Fortunately, my parents and grandmother did not police my gender performance until after my parents' divorce. My mother, perhaps anticipating my *jotería*, monitored my gender when she remarried, as my then-stepfather exhibited the stereotypical traits of a hypermasculine (and closeted) man.

In his novel, *Rushes*, Rechy writes of a subculture of the gay male community mimicking the white supremacist patriarchy of the larger heterosexual culture. Moreover, the subculture's participants bifurcate the community into roles of dominant and submissive represented by the code of colored handkerchiefs. Rechy exposes the

toxic cruelty upon which this world is constructed in other texts in his corpus, as well. The participants engage in acts of degradation and humiliation based on power rather than desire and pleasure. The following online profiles and blogs are evidence of the (d)evolution of subcommunities akin to that found in *Rushes*. Rechy provides a critique of extreme sadomasochistic sexual practices as a portent for the horrific violence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic looming on the novel's horizon.

3. EXAMINING VIOLENT SEXUAL PRACTICES: THE PATH TOWARDS IKÚ (DEATH)

Toxic Masculine Sexuality Eleggua, the trickster of the pantheon of Yoruba orishas, mediates all communication between the realms of the divine and the material. If angered or disrespected, Eleggua can block any petition from humans and even open the path towards Ikú, Death. The crossroads, one of the many signifiers of Eleggua, is the most accurate trope for the gay cisgender Latinx community as we enter the fifth decade of HIV/AIDS consciousness. Even though the gay Latinx community possesses the knowledge to lessen the risk of seroconversion, especially with the recent advent of the prophylaxis, PreP, a majority of this population does not engage in safer-sex practices. As Rafael M. Díaz asserts in his important text, *Latino Gay Men and HIV: Culture, Sexuality, and Risk Behavior* (1998), the lack of cognitive awareness of high-risk and safer-sex practices is not the problem. HIV seroconversion continues to rise among gay Latinx men because of a complex set of sociological and cultural factors, including the racialized form of toxic masculinity, more commonly known as machismo, coupled with internalized homophobic shame (57-58).

The current iteration of such violent sexual practices is a product of four decades of HIV confusion, hysteria, fear, apathy, and stigma. The last of these outcomes—the historical and current stigmatization of gay men living with HIV—helped to create the conditions for the growth of a subculture engaging in the fetishization of HIV and the taboo acts of exchanging bodily fluids, including those that do not transmit the virus causing AIDS. For gay men who came of age during the initial years of the epidemic, the healthcare community pathologized our bodies, our desires, and the sexual acts in which we engage. Gay men feared their bodily fluids and those of other

men, particularly their own blood. The film, *Jeffrey* (1995), contains a poignant and revealing scene of the fear overtaking sexually active gay men during the pre-cocktail era of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The protagonist, Jeffrey, is a sexually active gay man living in Manhattan and in the opening scene, we bear witness to the sexual paranoia gripping Jeffrey's sexual partners interspersed with sexualized advertisements and the mainstream news media's sensational coverage of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Over the opening credits, fireworks a-la-the-1970s sitcom, *Love American Style*, add to the romantic strobe light-effects as we hear the moaning ecstasy of man-on-man sex. Jeffrey halts the sex as he alerts his partner of the condom breakage, who panics. Then a montage of Jeffrey's sexual experiences reveals the state of sexual relations in an urban gay community during this historical period. Jeffrey's next tryst suggests another activity instead of intercourse; he just wants to cuddle—like “bunnies.” The subsequent man demands current bloodwork results, the name of his healthcare provider, and a list of Jeffrey's sexual partners. In the following scene, a naked man cowers in a chair wrapped in saranwrap and wearing a hospital mask and latex gloves. Then comes the crux of the film: Jeffrey decides to eschew future sexual activity in a monologue, “Sex is too sacred to be treated this way. Sex was never meant to be safe or negotiated or fatal.” He then refers to his most recent sexual encounter, a situation where the man weeps and confesses, “I'm sorry. It's just, this used to be so much fun.” The implication of his fear and his statement reflect the PTSD of witnessing the horrific deaths of thousands of gay men the previous decade and a half.

Surprisingly (or perhaps not), stigma against gay men living with HIV continues and is reinforced by gay men who are HIV-negative. Gay men have created and perpetuated a discourse of cleanliness not unlike that broached about Mexican immigrants. The proliferation of online dating applications with references to being “clean” (possessing an HIV-negative status) and a demand for no “bugs” (a reference to HIV and other sexually-transmitted infections) is coupled with the date (sometimes over a year old) of their most recent HIV-negative test result date are routine in the area for self-description. The HIV-negative test result date is usually displayed last and serves as a sort of badge of honor and privilege. In the section listing the qualities they are seeking in a potential playmate or partner, HIV-negative

men seeking other HIV-negative men is the most common. This is not surprising, but it also excludes the population of men living with the status of “HIV-undetectable.” The purpose of the HIV-awareness community’s latest campaign’s, “U=U,” standing for “Undetectable equals Untransmittable,” is to defeat such stigma.

Campaign strategies like these notwithstanding, the digital dating applications allow for HIV-negative men to “serosort,” or to only search for men who *identify* as HIV-negative, which may or may not be accurate. Advertising an inaccurate HIV-negative status is problematic and dangerous in this era of increasing criminalization of persons living with HIV accused of withholding or misrepresenting their status to a sexual partner, as the rates of prosecution of such cases are becoming more common. In *Punishing Disease: HIV and the Criminalization of Sickness* (2018), Trevor Hoppe links the racialized “War on Drugs” and the homophobic (non)response to the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. Hoppe reveals the government’s motives move beyond mere social control; “the criminalization of HIV is but one of the more recent examples in public health history of an effort to control disease by coercion and punishment—what this book terms *punitive disease control*” (5). Indeed, those in their 40s and older may remember the calls for sequestration of people living with HIV and even tattooing as a means of easy identification. The criminalization of HIV, as Hoppe argues, does nothing to decrease the rise in seroconversions. Rather, this social policy adds to the stigma and continues the legacy of criminalization.

Intersecting with Rechy’s critique of toxic masculinity, or fem/cide, is an examination of violent sexual practices. In certain passages of *City of Night*, *The Sexual Outlaw*, and one of his more recent texts, *After the Blue Hour*, Rechy demarcates a line between acts motivated by true erotic desire in the search for carnal pleasure and sexual excesses approaching a rote biological function based on power and humiliation. In no other text does Rechy illustrate the path more starkly or meaningfully than in *Rushes*, a narrative set in a “western and leather” gay bar that discriminated its clientele, who had to meet certain phenotypic, masculinity, and age restrictions. Signs with the warning, “No Fats, No Fems, No Over 35s,” were common in these types of gay bars in the decade following the Stonewall Rebellion. I cannot help but compare these restrictions to those my indigenous

grandfather encountered as a migrant farmworker throughout the Southwest, “No Dogs or Mexicans Allowed.” Set in a fictional bar called *Rushes*, which according to the author is based on a now-defunct gay bar in New York City, the narrative follows a group of friends one sultry Saturday night at the bar and for after hours at the adjoining sex club. *Rushes* personified the hierarchy based on heteronormative ideals—to look and act “straight.” In these kinds of bars, patrons had to adhere to a code of hypermasculinity in both dress and manner.

Like his earlier works, Rechy takes the reader on an ethnographic time machine to forgotten eras of gay male life. In *City of Night*, Rechy exposes the twilight world of hustlers and scores in the urban metropolises of the U.S. during the historical period of post-McCarthyism, an era that persecuted and exposed gay and lesbian government workers than it ferreted any members of the Communist Party, and the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969, the uprising in the West Village of New York City started by transgender women of color, most notably Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. *The Sexual Outlaw: A Documentary* chronicles three days of a “sex hunter” who defies the heteronormativity and homophobia of the legal system by openly cruising public locales such as the Santa Monica pier, the corridor-like streets of Hollywood, and frequenting bathhouses and sex clubs. Interspersed between the sex hunter’s adventures are newspaper articles and voice overs of imaginary speeches protesting the institutional homophobia of the criminal justice system and the heterosexual public’s tacit approval of such gestapo tactics. *Rushes* documents a decade of alleged LGBTQ+ “freedom,” yet after ten years of sexual excesses, Rechy exposes the fractious state of the LGBTQ+ “community.”

Nowhere are the fissures of the LGBTQ+ “community” more violent and destructive than the increasing movement of “bug chasers” and “Gift givers,” cisgender men who have sex with other men for the purpose of transmitting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases and infections. “Bug chasers” are men who are HIV-negative and are actively seeking to be “pozzed,” a slang term constructed from the term, “poz,” a shortening of HIV-positive. “Bug chasers” seek the “Gift” [in blog posts, the term is almost always capitalized to denote its importance], the human immunodeficiency

virus, from “Gift givers,” men with high viral load who do not use condoms and have eschewed further medicinal treatment. Men with high viral load are known in this “community” as “toxic” and often have tattoos of the symbol denoting a biohazard.

“Bug chasing” is not a new phenomenon but other destructive behaviors and identities have emerged from this practice. Intersecting with the practice of “bug chasing” and “Gift givers” are men who engage in “slamming,” or shooting up crystal meth, known as T, “slam sharing,” or the act of injecting T (short for “Tina”) and then immediately sharing the needle with another person with the express intent of seroconverting the recipient with HIV, hepatitis C, and other blood-borne viruses. Other high-risk sadomasochistic activities include the use of a “cruel condom” as a method to break the delicate anal tissue and facilitate direct semen to blood contact, “pozzing” parties where groups of HIV- negative men are the receptive partners for men who are not only HIV-positive but have an active viral load, Satan worship, white supremacy in the form of embracing Nazi ideology, and other taboo sexual practices, such as zoophilia, scat, and “rosebudding,” the act of fisting an anus so violently it causes rectal prolapse and often involves another person coming into oral contact with the colon. These high-risk sexual activities are not new but because of the proliferation of social media, amateur pornography, and the availability of professional adult film entertainment on the Internet, are easily accessed by curious voyeurs. We will see later how Rechy described the origin of such violent practices in his work in the era before the HIV/AIDS epidemic decimated the gay male community.

Just prior to the pivotal historical moment when HIV moved into the gay community in the United States, the 1970s represented a decade of unapologetic sexual freedom in the first years after the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969. In the documentary, *Gay Sex in the '70s* (2005), the filmmaker comments to one of the first interview subjects regarding the bacchanalian era of the twelve-year period between June 28, 1969, the recognized beginning of the LGBT rights movement, and June 5, 1981, the publication date of the report in the CDC-supported, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, which documented five cases of gay men stricken with *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, of whom two died. This twelve-year period represents a sexual “golden age” for

the gay male community. However, no one could foresee the horrific scenes of the AIDS epidemic—healthy young men wasting away to living skeletons, their skin spotted with leper lesions and often shunned by their families and even by healthcare professionals. Before the AIDS epidemic, however, sexual excesses like hypermasculinity and drag queen culture were part of gay camp culture.

Susan Sontag explains in “Notes on Camp” (1964) the criteria by which camp—as both an aesthetic and a desire—can be understood.

As a taste in persons, Camp responds particularly to the markedly attenuated and to the strongly exaggerated. The androgyne is certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility... Camp taste draws on a mostly unacknowledged truth of taste: the most refined form of sexual attractiveness (as well as the most refined form of sexual pleasure) consists in going against the grain of one’s sex. What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine...The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious (10).

In an episode of *The Simpsons* titled “Homer-phobia” and guest starring the master of Camp, the film director, John Waters, the aesthetic of Camp is explained to Homer by the character voiced by Waters (campily named John), as “the ludicrously tragic, the tragically ludicrous.” John attempts to further explain Camp to Homer by providing examples, such as, Last Supper TV trays or inflatable furniture. In contemporary popular culture, drag queens, with their exaggerated aesthetic of femininity and the exaggerated hypermasculinity of cisgender men who take steroids to achieve muscular gains of ridiculous proportion are examples of gay Camp. John Rechy recalls the comments of a passing drag queen when he was once cruising in Hollywood shirtless, “Your muscles are as gay as my drag, honey.” Ever the well of knowledge, the drag queen understood how she and Rechy occupied opposite ends of the spectrum of gender performance.

Although now considered part of camp culture, the musical group, The Village People, represents the type of masculine ideal for bars such as Rushes. The Village People consisted of “macho

men” who donned the attire of masculine tropes: the construction worker, the cop, the cowboy, the Native American, and the leather man. The group’s music celebrated gay male culture with such iconic and lesser-known songs, such as, “YMCA”⁷ (1978), “Macho Man” (1978), “Fire Island” (1977), “Go West” (1979), and “In the Navy” (1979). With their syncopated disco beats and peppy synthesizers that were particularly popular in both bars and gyms, the Village People’s songs and music videos frivolously celebrate and promote a strain of queer masculinity that seems to reject any sense of femininity. The exaggerated macho-ness of these songs underscored the performers’ queer masculinity, but also transmitted the idea that gay men are “real men,” too, and what they want is not an effeminate body, but a highly masculine one, an extreme representation of the heterosexual male. The bar, *Rushes*, excises any femininity from between its walls in the form of excluding cisgender women (although one cisgender woman, a local celebrity fascinated by this subculture of gay men, manages to invade the club’s inner sanctum) and policing the cisgender men who dare attempt to enter. Thus, this type of gay bar practices an early form of fem/cide, in addition to ageism and body-shaming.

4. DO NOT CARE

An online application titled, *Bareback Real Time* (bbrt.com), provided my entry into the world of “bug chasers,” although I had read about this practice in the early 2000s. However, a profile on the bbrt.com site piqued my curiosity, which engaged my personal and intellectual research agenda. The bbrt.com website is not unlike other dating websites targeting men who have sex with men. What is unique about bbrt.com is its specialization in men who are seeking to engage in unprotected sex. The bbrt.com website description states, “BarebackRT.com community for men cruising for raw man on man Bareback sex. No condoms.” A user must create a profile to view and respond to other users and as a disclaimer, I was a member of the website before I conducted this work. As a sexually active gay man living with HIV, dating is difficult. When I disclose my HIV-undetectable status to a potential dating or sexual partner, I rarely receive a response—most often I am “ghosted.” If I am granted the courtesy of a rejection response, he usually couches his explanation in fear. Often, they do not understand the distinction between a

person living with an HIV-positive status versus a person with a status of undetectable.

To reinforce Díaz's research findings, most of the men who respond to my disclosure in fear are Latinx men. I find it incomprehensible that so many sexually active men living in an urban center with countless gay bars, bathhouses and sex clubs, and LGBTQ+ community centers providing services to the Latinx community, would react with such fear and not inform themselves about the advances in HIV science. Several of the men, all Latinx, claimed to not know what the terms, "T-cells," "viral load," and "undetectable" meant. I highly doubt these men are abstaining from sexual activity or get tested after each sexual encounter. This lack of knowledge coupled with the reticence of the field of Chicana/o Studies to incorporate the topic of gay male sexuality and the intersection of the effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic borders on the criminal, and is complicit to the crimes of the Reagan administrations homophobic silence.

The aforementioned silence and ignorance notwithstanding, the bbrt.com facilitates more transparency from its users. HIV status is one of the first personal traits listed in a user's profile. The programmers list both "Positive" and "Undetectable" as options, among other statuses. One I find disturbing, problematic, and intriguing is "Do Not Care." Firstly, I wonder who would designate his status under this category. Secondly, why would the programmers of bbrt.com have felt compelled to have included such a category? Did the website designers possess some insight into the gay community that a barebacking site was needed and would be profitable? The owner of the bbrt.com is Wet-Media, Incorporated, a Tucson, Arizona-based company, which describes its vision as:

Wet-Media, Inc. is a motivated world wide social networking website development and hosting company. Our innovative ideas and niche-based websites satisfy our member's [*sic*] demand for a more concentrated effort of bringing people together. By recognizing the social need of individuals interested in less diverse niche-based websites, we are introducing and providing our websites to the world one niche at a time; [*sic*] customer focused with accuracy and effectiveness" (www.wet-media.com).

Nowhere on the website does Wet-Media, Inc. indicate its involvement with online dating applications nor does it mention explicitly its connection with the LGBTQ+ community. However, the website designer includes colored tiles representing the Pride flag, an obvious signifier of the LGBTQ+ community. BarebackRT.com represents one of Wet-Media's "niche-based websites"—the niche of men who have sex with men and choose to participate in the activity of "barebacking."

The BarebackRT.com website, like other dating websites, allows the user to conduct a profile search based on a myriad of characteristics. HIV status is one of the characteristics a user can search the database of profiles. A user can select the HIV status filter, "Do Not Care," with no other search criteria, and the site will yield over 500 results in the United States. Five hundred is the maximum number a user may peruse. The status of "Do Not Care" is what intrigues my critical thinking yet frightens my primal survival instincts. Not only was I alarmed at the amount of men who "do not care" about their HIV status, I questioned why the designers of the website, www.barebackrt.com, felt this filter was necessary to add. Another HIV status descriptor is "Don't Know" which is also troublesome, albeit honest. Like the characters Rechy constructs in *Rushes*, the men who "do not care" about their HIV status occupy an existential category centered on and defined by their next sexual conquest. Coincidentally, Grove Press published *Rushes* in 1979, just when the virus began to infiltrate gay men's bodies in the major urban centers of the United States. Ever prescient, Rechy's text describes the violent sexual practices of gay men in the 1970s, similar to the "slamming" and "poz conversion" gatherings increasingly evident on social media.

One profile I stumbled upon as a user of bbrrt.com is what motivated me to pursue this line of research as it relates to Rechy's work. The profile picture owned by the username, "Pozchar," startled and intrigued me. "Pozchar" lists his residence as Los Angeles and is a 26-year-old Latino gay man who is strapped to a wall with what looks like yellow police crime tape with the ironic message, "DO NOT ENTER." "Pozchar" is nude with a black circle strategically placed in front of his phallus and is holding an unidentifiable book or box (perhaps a home HIV-test to ensure his next partner's status?)

“Pozchasr” is wearing sunglasses looking angled towards the ground. Centering himself in his profile picture as a “crime scene” speaks to the state of the gay men’s community and movement, something Rechy warns of in *Rushes*. “Pozchasr”’s profile contains the headline, “Bug chaser here,” with the biohazard symbol before and after the headline. The biohazard symbol has become the main trope, along with a scorpion, to represent the Gift-giving and Bug-chasing community.

Many men sport a biohazard tattoo to flaunt not only their status as HIV+ but their active viral load as opposed to being undetectable, in other words, their “toxicity.” “Toxic” is another term specific to the “Bug-chasing” and “Gift-giving” community. Having an active viral load, rather the state of being “toxic,” is a crucial distinction as the status of being HIV-positive is stratified between symptomatic, asymptomatic, undetectable, and AIDS. Symptomatic and asymptomatic are terms distinguishing between the state of showing signs of the virus, e.g., your immune system weakening and your body breaking out with survivable illnesses, like thrush (an oral yeast infection), swollen lymph nodes, and weight loss. Asymptomatic is living with the virus showing no signs of any of these types of indicator illnesses. An AIDS diagnosis, according to the University of California at San Francisco, is applied to a person who is HIV+ and exhibits one or more of the following characteristics: “Less than 200 CD4 T cells per cubic millimeter of blood...CD4 T cells accounting for less than 14 percent of all lymphocytes, a type of white blood cell, [and/or] one or more of the illnesses listed below” (<https://www.ucsfhealth.org/conditions/aids/diagnosis.html>). Over twenty illnesses are listed, ranging from pulmonary diseases (pneumocystis jiroveci) to ones of the eye (cytomegalovirus) and the brain (toxoplasmosis). Without treatment, once a person crosses this threshold, she/he/they rarely recovers.

“Pozchasr,” thus, straddles the border of uncharted territory of the AIDS epidemic. For three decades, the HIV epidemic devastated two generations of gay men—those who were already sexually active in 1981 and those who came of age in its grim specter. The post-death camp generation of gay men, to which “Pozchasr” belongs, should, theoretically, possess lower numbers of seroconversion as by the mid to late 1990s, as safer sex practices and the release of the AIDS drug

cocktail should have mitigated the rise in the rate of new infections. However, “Pozchasr’s” intersectional identity of belonging to the millennial generation and being gay and Latino puts him at greater risk for HIV seroconversion⁸. Furthermore, “Pozchasr’s” ethnicity as a Latino who has sex with men places him at further risk, as the rate of HIV seroconversions increased by 13% over the years 2011-2015, according to the CDC’s webpage, “HIV and Hispanic/Latinos” (<https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/raciaethnic/hispaniclatinos/index.html>). Even if he were not “chasing” the virus, “Pozchasr’s” intersectional location in three high-risk groups —Latino, gay, and youth— places him in a marginal location, far from the agenda of mainstream LGBT politics and identity. Other than his identity markers and a series of explicit pictures of his genitalia, “Pozchasr’s” profile describes his own HIV status as “Do Not Care.”

The profile of “Pozchasr” contains X-rated shots of different parts of his genitalia and his posterior, each with a different caption detailing his appetite for HIV-positive sexual partners. As is the case with much of the gay dating apps, men auto-dismember themselves rather than displaying their whole selves; men become body parts as if left over from a laboratory from a sexualized Dr. Frankenstein. The second picture highlights his posterior with nothing but a jockstrap. The camera focuses on the crevice between his smooth cheeks with the caption, “Poz me.” This imperative sentence is for a selective audience—men with active viral load seeking to “share” their “Gift.” Interestingly, in every blog and profile I have perused regarding “bug chasers” and “Gift givers,” the term, “Gift,” is always capitalized. Perhaps this community capitalizes “Gift” in reverence and awe of the transformative nature of the virus, like the Catholic rite of transubstantiation.

Not coincidentally, in her supreme series of *Vampire* chronicles, the legendary Anne Rice calls the transformation of a mortal into a vampire as the “Dark Gift,” a dialectical process wherein the vampire gives some of her/his blood to the mortal and the mortal transmits some of her/his blood to the vampire until they are fused into a distinct lineage. Knopf published the first novel in the series, *Interview with a Vampire* (1976), years before the HIV epidemic, which Rice based on a short story she had written in the late 1960s. In the universe of Rice’s vampires, a sort of parental lineage emerges once a vampire

gives her/his “Dark Gift” to another, as the vampires are selective with whom they share this transformative power. With the “poz chasing” community, however, the “POZ Brotherhood,” can only be expanded, as tumblr blog user, “karluso,” wrote on World AIDS Day 2018: which is observed every December 1st, “For this day... we should all convert a neg hole to celebrate.” After decades of fear, stigma, and revulsion, the virus is now desired, fetishized, and coveted by a subset of the gay men’s community.

The www.barebackRT.com website, like other online dating applications, allows for a variety of search functions. Because of the extreme nature of this particular website’s target user audience, a user can search by such criteria as, “Gives Loads Anal,” “Takes Loads Anal,” “Gives Loads Oral,” and “Takes Loads Oral.” The website, as indicated by its name, centers around the act of unprotected sex, especially anal intercourse. Based on my reading of Rechy’s *Rushes*, the men are the “sons” or descendants of the characters in the novel. *Rushes* is a snapshot of the era, literally the year, before the entry of the HIV virus into the gay community. Forty years later, after countless deaths, community organizing, stigma, the rise of crystal meth, and medical advances, gay and bisexual men of color, like “Pozchasr,” are carrying the cross of the epidemic into its fifth decade.

Rushes speaks to a similar despair as Rechy describes the sexual excesses of the late 1970s. Because of the abundance and availability of sex with other men in urban centers, gay men explored potentially physically violent acts of BDSM and psychologically violent acts of degradation. Throughout his corpus, Rechy reveals his disdain for the hardcore S/M and leather scenes as they fetishized hypermasculinity and sexual practices based not on pleasure but humiliation. This distinction must be made; Rechy is not a sexual fascist nor does he critique from a place of internalized homophobia based on Catholic guilt. Rather, Rechy offers a warning about such sexual practices meant to dehumanize each other. Having lived with the colonized mind of internalized homophobia and internalized misogyny, the gay men engaging in BDSM practices are performing a type of auto-flagellation, according to Rechy. Sexual pleasure between two men is not a sin, Rechy argues, but our families, the Church, and the State have all conditioned us to see a sinner in the mirror. When our families refer to our lovers as “roommates,” when the Church condescendingly

states they love the sinner but hate the sin, and when the State does not provide for affordable access to the lifesaving drug of PreP, gay men read these signals as methods of dehumanization. Desiring “toxic loads” after using “dirty rigs” and “toxic slams” is the next step of this dehumanization, except we do this to ourselves.

The plot of Rechy’s novel continues from the bar to a sex club next door, *The Rack*, which opens after last call. At first, *Rushes* and *The Rack* are a refuge from the gay-bashers who torment the establishments’ clientele. However, as Endore, the protagonist, moves through the twisted decay of sexual zombies, he realizes the violent acts of BDSM are manifestations of the gay-bashers’ viciousness. Rechy’s prose creates an Inquisition-like atmosphere as Endore maneuvers his body through a gaggle of eager supplicants and experiences an epiphany:

Whack! the slap of flesh lures.

Why am I here? Thoughts rush to protect him. The sexhunt, endemically ours, its unique joy and opulent profligacy, yes, earned, outlaw defiance against repression, yes, that, converted, full, unique, ours, envied by others attempting imitation, yes. But he knows that that is not here at the Rack, and that the Rack is the inevitable extension of the *Rushes*—and that what he loves and has vaunted in the sexhunt is not in the nightly deaths of mean bars nor in the charade of filth and pain. No, the Rack is permeated by the punishment *for* sex. He sees this clearly and with anger: This is what they have done to us! And he sees this as clearly but with sorrow: And this is what we do now to ourselves in ritual reenactment of *their* hatred, and we masquerade it all as masculine strength. It is only charade, a part of him argues, only a charade, a willing charade, all willing. But he knows the psychic bleeding is as real as the rancidity that coats these ugly rooms; and, recognizing with equal clarity his own part in the hateful ritual, he knows that later, oh, yes, later, he will bear reliable witness to it all, and to his contribution to it. Now he will surrender to the onslaught of the Rack (218).

The generation of men Rechy portrays as fictional characters in *Rushes* represent the precursor to the generation of men living under the specter of four decades of fear. Endore from *Rushes* and “Pozchasr” from online dating world are connected by what they both seek. Endore’s realization of the “charade” of violent masculinity and his

eventual capitulation to the “onslaught of the Rack” (218) presages the embrace of “Pozchar” of the “Bug chasing” and “Gift giving” community. The Rack welcomes only a select few, as bouncers weed out the undesirables—the “fats, femmes, and the over 35s.” Conversely, the “Bug chasing” and “Gift giving” community shuns no one who is willing to drink from the chalice of HIV toxicity.

The masks of toxic masculinity the men in Rechy’s *Rushes* don are constructed by fear. The fear of being considered feminine or having any traits associated with women. Internalized misogyny is the reason for the dress code enforced at both *Rushes* and the Rack clubs featured in Rechy’s texts and at all similar bars in the gay community. A warped fear of the virus motivates “Bug chasers” as the fear of being perceived feminine drove the previous generation to perform violent masculinity. For four decades, gay men have lived in a stasis of fear—Anzaldúa’s “Coatlicue State.” In her description of this stage of “mestiza consciousness,” Anzaldúa writes of the self-loathing experienced by Chicanos yet can also be applied to this subset of gay men:

As a person, I, as a people, we, Chicanos, blame ourselves, hate ourselves, terrorize ourselves. Most of this goes on unconsciously; we only know that we are hurting, we suspect that there is something “wrong” with us, something fundamentally “wrong.” In order to escape the threat of shame and fear, one takes on a compulsive, repetitious activity as though to busy oneself, to distract oneself, to keep awareness at bay. One fixates on drinking, smoking, popping pills, acquiring friend after friend who betrays; repeating, repeating, to prevent oneself from “seeing” (45).

The “seeing” to which Anzaldúa refers is a critical awareness of one’s situation and trauma, a vision of one’s path towards healing. The fear, however, blinds us and maintains us in a cycle of internalized and projected violence. I discovered examples of such fear within the “Bug chasing” and “Gift giving” community on the popular blog, tumblr. Before the removal of pornographic material from the app on December 17, 2018, many bloggers on tumblr belonged to this community. One such blogger uses the name, “Latino Bug Chaser.” His interactions with other bloggers and his “followers,” over 80,000 users followed “Latino Bug Chaser” at one point, illustrate the fear and resulting outcomes in the decades after the waves of deaths due

to HIV complications. “Latino Bug Chaser” elaborates on this fear and his choice to seek the virus:

Starting this blog to journal my thoughts and experiences as I embrace The Gift. Latino guy here. Not crazy, not insane. Just taking a less traditional approach. While many try to fight the odds, I have come to terms with the inevitable conclusion and instead chase the Virus. Through the chase I lose the fear and only by embracing it can I be free.

In a post on his blog, “Latino Bug Chaser” discloses his status of taking PreP and of waiting for the “right man” from whom to accept the “Gift.” Not only is the term, “Gift,” capitalized, but “Latino Bug Chaser” also capitalizes “Virus.” While the outside observer may conclude these men hold a flippant attitude towards the epidemic, the reverence this community feels approaches the religious. In *Rushes*, each chapter begins with a biblical verse, as Rechy analogizes the rituals of the Catholic Church with those of the bar and the sex club and establishes similarity of the spaces within the opening paragraph, “Mixed with the heated odor of the congregated flesh, the rot-tinged scent of ‘poppers’ will hover like cummy incense” (11). “Poppers,” like incense overwhelm one’s olfactory sense and causes an association with a situation or place. For gay men, the club or the bathhouse becomes a space of congregation with like-minded seekers of solace and strength—it is our ritual mass. “Poppers” are an aid for gay men to acclimate from the heteronormative world of rigid conformity to a queer space of temporal liberation.

“Latino Bug Chaser” is not alone in his mission of choosing to seroconvert. Scrolling through his blog, other tumblr users express their admiration for the intent of his blog. Of course, many users also judge his choice for “chasing” the virus with many men referencing the horrific history of the epidemic in its early years. The “Bug chasing” and “Gift giving” community is gaining mainstream momentum, if still located at the margins of LGTBQ identity and politics, perhaps pushing the boundaries of such.

As in *The Sexual Outlaw*, Rechy condemns the homophobia of the outside world, the divisions created by the alleged gay “community” based on age, gender, phenotype, and gender performance, and the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church. Although “Latino Bug Chaser” does not include any references to Catholicism or any vein of spiritual

tradition, other tumblr bloggers associate seroconversion as a type of transubstantiation. The tumblr user, “666sodomite” posts a message, “I BELIEVE IN THE COMMUNION OF SODOMITES. FELCH⁹ DEMONIC SEED FROM THE RAVAGED TEMPLEHOLE OF ANOTHER MAN AND SPIT IT INTO HIS MOUTH, “THIS IS MY BODY AND BLOOD.” “666sodomite” posts a picture of man with an open mouth, with his tongue ready to receive the semen from the anus crouched directly above. This tumblr blog contains hundreds of pictures and drawings of erotic imagery designed to blaspheme traditional images of Christ, the bible, and other iconography. Common posts on “666sodomite’s” blog include inverted crucifixes, bibles sprayed with semen, and images of Baphomet with an erect phallus. Even as a purported ex-Catholic, I find the images and messages jarring but realize this is a protest against two millennia of hypocritical attitudes towards sexuality, women, and queer people.

Rechy writes of such hypocrisy with an eloquent rage. Having been raised in a Mexican Catholic environment on the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez border, the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church is one of Rechy’s favorite targets, yet he critiques its institutional oppressions in a knowledgeable, humorous, and artistic manner in the essay “Holy Drag!” from his anthology, *Beneath the Skin: The Collected Essays of John Rechy* (2004):

After the mass: there they came, the opulent squadron of prelates making their processional way toward the sacristy, past entranced parishioners in the pews, the Cardinal at the helm, followed by high prelates —the young good-looking ones cherishing their coveted place close to the Cardinal, and he clearly cherishing theirs... Then it all turns ugly. These men are the hypocrites who uphold the strictures of the political party they represent —the Church— strictures that have condemned and damned and tortured and persecuted and prosecuted and ostracized countless human beings throughout history: during the Inquisition, burning and torturing innocent people for blasphemy, sexual transgressions; strictures that today account for a climate of condoned hatred toward all who deviate from their sanctimonious admonitions and prohibitions and accusations about sex, homosexuality, divorce, birth control, and (until recently but the entrenched hatred lingers) the ‘complicity’ of Jews. These are the men, these prelates, who today uphold some of the most corrupt notions

about society, resulting in gay-bashings, unchecked births creating poverty and hunger, the lessening of women. These are so-called abstinent men! (Abstinent? Really? Surely the hypocrisy extends beyond their mouthings of abstinence, into their guarded cloisters.) Yet they presume authority over all sexual matters! Why abstinent? In early centuries, popes and cardinals and priests married and had children —and kept mistresses and misters— and amassed staggering wealth. Marriage produced heirs, though, and that contained an explosive threat to the Church's vast wealth. What if the heir of a prelate laid claim to the Church's wealth? The demand for celibacy solved that detail (219-220).

“Latino Bug Chaser’s” blog offers more insight into the community of “Bug chasers” and “Gift givers” through interactions with other tumblr users. Forced to negotiate decades of the politics of respectability as mainstream LGBT politics shifts from the radical margin to neoliberal acceptance, “Latino Bug Chaser” and the user, “Verspig17”¹⁰ engage in a brief dialogue eliciting provocative responses. “Verspig17” poses the following question on “Latino Bug Chaser’s” feed:

I was wondering if anyone else feels the same about this or am I alone...I have mixed thoughts on chasing and converting. In a way I just want it, go on meds and be done. No more worrying or wondering. But I also do [not] want it from just a random stranger. I want to pick who I get it from. Hopefully he understands how special of a bond we will have after that. I have chosen his DNA to merge with mine and have chosen his to be come [*sic*] part of me forever.

The user, “Verspig17,” speaks of creating a biological bond passed on from the “Gift giver” to the “Bug chaser.” In this community, the members often refer to being “impregnated” with their “seed.” The virus creates a familial bond between the two men, often framed in paternalism. I have read responses to “Bug chasing” videos where the blogger refers to the virus as the “Gift giver’s” “AIDS babies.” Most often, the members of this community speak of joining the “POZ Brotherhood” and removing the shackles of fear and the respectability of safer-sex practices.

“Latino Bug Chaser” responds to “Verspig17” with the following entry:

You're not alone man. That's how I started my blog as I started exploring my own mixed feelings about what it meant to be a bugchaser. Just remember whatever your personal choice is it's yours alone and also not set in stone. I get your feeling of "getting it over with." I was tired of sweating bullets every time I went in for an STD test or I got the flu [in] the middle of summer. I felt like this fear prevented me enjoying bareback lovemaking. Currently, I am on PreP and believe me I got as much flack about being a bugchaser as much as when I got on PreP for not being a true bugchaser. Again, this is a very intimate choice and also not set in stone. I got on PreP because I felt it gave me more control in picking the right guy. For me ideally I'll find a man that I can share more than a bed. Who will want to breed me and make me his. Then I'll know it's time to stop PreP. [In] the meantime I get to have awesome sex with POZ guys that also deserve much loving.

The dialogue between these two tumblr users evokes the conversations of the main characters of *Rushes*, who debate the existential nature of their lives as gay men. Chas cannot fathom another world more desirable than the one they inhabit—one where their masks of constructed masculinity are most desired. Just as Rechy argues that the Church's promise of eternal salvation is a false proposition, he also warns gay men of such a world, not unlike the priesthood, excluding cisgender women and feminine gay men.

Being highly controversial and problematic, the topic of "Bug chasing" and "Gift giving" is a conversation critical to our survival as gay men. Thus, I was not surprised the dialogue between "Verspig17" and "Latino Bug Chaser" elicited passionate responses from a myriad of other tumblr users. Most of the respondents did not answer "Latino Bug Chaser" or "Verspig17" directly; rather, they began dialogues within the comments section. A "Gift giver" named, "rtrey29," writes of the symbolism seroconverting by choice can mean to both parties:

It's definitely an intimate moment when you are taking the load that converts you. If it's by choice on the bottoms part, then that's the way of telling your top that you love him enough to carry a piece of him inside you for the rest of your life. It should definitely be respected by the top as much as it is by the bottom, almost like a second virginity. I get that it's hot [to] be able to fuck and truly enjoy it like a cock slut after you convert, but a true bug chaser is...just after the bug.

The user, “rtrey29,” claims to be off of his HIV regimen and is “toxic,” which in this community means he has an active viral load and is sought after by “Bug chasers” for his “Gift.”

When a person first hears of these subpopulations of gay men, the immediate reactions are revulsion and judgment, as the tumblr user, “Quickbrew,” responds, “Or you could just stay on prep. You aren’t insane you’re cruel. The men who died horrible deaths alone in state run hospitals. You’re an asshole. Shame on you for trying to get poz.” “Quickbrew” adds to his message, “Just spit on their unmarked graves. It’s faster.” Another tumblr user, “Sotampajack,” shares his journey with HIV:

I’ve been pos [HIV-positive] since 1988. I am a long-term survivor of aids. I’ve had shingles 3 times (most painful opportunistic infection ever!) Try lighting yourself on fire—that way you can experience it without getting it. Hospitalized with Pcp [pneumocystis pneumonia] 4x. All before there was effective treatment. And just 6 months ago I had 10 [vertebrae] replaced with 3 steel rods due to ‘MAC.’ [A degenerative illness developed after the immune system begins to fail.] Another OI [opportunistic infection] that infected my spine. I’ve had to learn to walk again.

“Sotampajack” writes two addenda to his main post directed to user “askmelaterbitch,” “it’s not all fun and bareback games,” and to “quickbrew,” “bugchasers aren’t hot. They’re stupid.” These two users’ responses were the most critical and judgmental. Critique and judgment are predictable responses to such blog postings yet surprisingly rare. Most responses are supportive and other users echo their own desires for conversion. Many users post their area code and sometimes their actual city pleading for “Bug chasers” to “gift” them.

The other respondents, however, expressed support for “Latino Bug Chaser” and “Verspig17.” Many comments also displayed a sense of camaraderie because of the two users’ choices. Upon first reading the initial blog postings and the responses, I felt overwhelmed with a similar sense of incredulous judgment. Knowing the history of the AIDS epidemic, having worked as a health educator targeting queer men of color to reduce their risk of HIV, and having lost friends to the disease, I could not read any of blogs belonging to “Bug chasers” and “Gift givers” for a few days. However, because of the relative recency

of this phenomenon, I gathered my resolve to think critically about this subpopulation of gay men living with HIV and those who desire to seroconvert. As Rechy documented the reality of the violence of the leather/BDSM bars and sex clubs in the late 1970s in *Rushes*, I bear the responsibility of describing the new level of violence as the numbers of gay men of color seroconverting grows without any semblance of emergency from mainstream LGBT political “leaders.”

The act of “barebacking” and that of “Bug chasing” and “Gift giving” are taboos, practices not socially acceptable in the era of “safer sex shaming.” Like cisgender women being “slut shamed” for the outrageous act of verbalizing the enjoyment of sensual pleasure, gay men are not supposed to have “too much” sex, certainly always “safer sex.” What is “too” much sex is an unsettled question for our community but the act of using condoms, and now, taking PreP, is non-negotiable.

An early publication discussing these taboos is found in the online trove titled, *Queer Rhetoric Project*. The *Queer Rhetoric Project* “is an archive of key texts and speeches dealing with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights.” The site contains a drop-down list of categories of speeches. Under the category, “AIDS,” is a speech titled, “No Limits: Necessary Danger in Male Porn,” presented by Paul Morris at the World Pornography Conference in Los Angeles, California, during the summer of 1998. In one of the earliest writings about the phenomenon of “barebacking,” “Bug chasing,” and “Gift giving,” Morris contextualizes the acts within the larger framework of the breadth of sexual identity amongst gay men. Morris does not decry the increase in barebacking in gay pornographic videos. Rather, he considers this act as “necessary” for the gay community, as the dichotomy of sexual acts deemed “‘safe’ or ‘unsafe’...inevitably magnifies the allure of danger.”

Morris strives for honesty with the world of gay pornographic films—barebacking, the desire for “toxic” tops, “Bug chasing” and “Gift giving” are occurring. For nearly four decades, different institutional structures have warned gay men against our own erotic desires and acts, as we may contract a deadly virus. During these past four decades of the AIDS epidemic, gay men have learned to fear their bodies and to fellate the near-religious dogma of safer-sex practices. As with any war, the soldiers eventually fatigue. Instead of

fearing their bodies and fluids, some gay men are fetishizing them, regardless of the physiological and social consequences. Ultimately, these men have agency, yet I fear another tsunami of deaths, not unlike that of the late 1980s to mid-1990s.

5. THE PATH TOWARDS THE LIGHT—CREATING COMMUNITY OUT OF LOVE

The femicides of Ciudad Juárez continue amidst the peaks and valleys of cartel-related violence occurring over the first two decades of the millennium. The abduction, torture, rape, mutilation, and murder of these primarily young, primarily dark-skinned Mexican, working-class women are interchangeable cogs in the machinery of a global economy where capital, raw materials, and finished goods are not confined to arbitrary borders, yet common people fleeing the spectrum of violence are caged like diseased vermin. In Alicia Gaspar de Alba's novel, *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005), Ivon Villa, the amateur sleuth who stumbles into solving the mystery of the femicides due to the abduction of her sister, concludes that rather than ask the question of *who* is killing the women of Juárez, the question should be posed as *why* the murders are occurring without accountability. The young maquiladora workers whose fingerprints mark some component of electronics designed to convenience the lives of first-world citizens bear the brunt of the violence of neoliberal capitalism. The femicides of Ciudad Juárez continue as the neoliberal wheels of free trade progress with little to no oversight or regulation. The fem/cides, the killing of the internal femininity in cisgender gay men, are linked to the femicides in that the perpetrators operate under the same principle—the devaluation of women and traits deemed as feminine in patriarchy. Some boys survive their formative years with minimal damage; others like Gabriel Fernandez and Anthony Avalos die at the hands of their parents.

The contexts creating the conditions allowing for the murders of these two boys are eerily similar, especially when framed within this cultural and historical moment of increasing LGBTQ+ visibility and acceptance, albeit overwhelmingly white and middle-class. Gabriel and Anthony lived in working-class, Xicanx homes with hypermasculine paternal figures and mothers who pledged allegiance to the violence of patriarchy. As the protagonist in *Desert Blood*

analyzes the hopelessness of combatting institutional systems of violence such as endemic poverty, centuries of colonial racism, and cultural and religious misogyny, I ponder upon the analogous forces facilitating the murders of Gabriel and Anthony, thus continuing Sedgwick's "war on effeminate boys" (154), particularly when gay men privilege the traits of hypermasculinity and the trait of "straight-acting," which are forms of internalized misogyny, as I have argued Rechy illustrates in several of his texts. For those of us who manage to escape Rechy's "enemy camp" of homophobia, what is our respite, what is our nourishment in the mirage of some gay men seeking membership in the "POZ brotherhood?"

The men seeking to trade HIV strains and viral loads are starving to be part of something greater than their individual selves. In rebuking the politics of respectability and acceptance, these men long to be part of a community. As a person who has lost friends to the AIDS epidemic, I find myself questioning the motives of the "Bug chasing" community and why a "Gift giver" would willingly choose to eschew his medications to become "toxic." These men are risking criminalization, public condemnation, and their very lives. From a Rechy perspective, I realize that one could pose similar questions to men who dared venture out in public in drag, to men cruising tea rooms and public parks, and to those individuals who formed groups like the Mattachine Society, ACT UP!, and ALLGO.

In *The Sexual Outlaw*, Rechy's protagonist openly cruises streets with "No Loitering" signs and with law enforcement ready to entrap men daring to act upon their forbidden desires. As Rechy has illustrated throughout the breadth of his work, many institutions—the Church and the State, particularly—continue to condemn homoerotic desire and acts. Two men can marry but in most of the United States, we have no employment protection. Less than fifty years have passed since the American Psychological and Psychiatric Associations declassified LGB people as pathological. Less than twenty years have passed since the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the remaining sodomy laws. The criminalization of HIV+ people who fail to disclose continues to rise. Homelessness amongst LGBT youth is increasing. For every victory we achieve as LGBTQ+ people, the Church, the State, and a portion of heterosexual society push back against these gains and many issues remain. To paraphrase the book title

of one of the original members of ACT UP!, Michelangelo Signorile, “It’s not over.”

Rechy’s *Rushes* creates a discursive moment regarding desire, pleasure, violence, and toxic masculinity at a critical juncture of queer existence—the historical moment before the AIDS epidemic devastated our community. Because of the queer Holocaust occurring in the urban centers of the United States during the 1980s and 1990s, this dialogue never occurred but with the rising HIV seroconversion rates among gay men of color, the (in)accessibility and seeming infallibility of PreP¹¹, and the relative ease of acquiring crystal meth, we stand at a precipice before another wave of deaths affects our community. Without passing moral or psychiatric judgment or relying on the criminal justice system to strip gay men of their agency, how do we reconcile the motives of the “Bug chasers” and “Gift givers”? How do we stop flagellating ourselves for the so-called sin of our queer desire, and find the communal love that that Rechy calls “a substitute for salvation”?

While I do not judge or condemn the men for their actions—that belongs to the role of religious and governmental institutions—I do recognize and empathize with their desires as ones based in a violent absence of love. These men who revel being part of the “POZ brotherhood” are crying out for any type of community, the type Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera imagined when they rioted against the police at the Stonewall Inn on June 28, 1969. Love inhabits the type of community I reference, the kind created and fostered by ALLGO and ACT UP! when LGBTQ+ people faced an existential threat. In the post COVID-19 pandemic, our communities face a similar peril.

bell hooks provides a definition of love in her text, appropriately titled, *All About Love: New Visions* (2000), as “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth...Love is as love does. Love is an act of will—namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love” (4-5). My work is an act of love for many, but particularly for gay Xicanx men who are living with HIV and those negotiating the fear of the virus with their own fleshly desires. I choose to love the men of the bugchasing/Gift-giving scene, as we are part of the same community. I do not condone the white supremacy

or the misogyny or the violence based on self-hatred evident in their blogs; I cannot and do not condemn *them*. Instead, I weep for these brethren, as they have fallen prey to the schisms of internalized homophobia and misogyny and have been ostracized by the HIV-phobic attitudes held by HIV-negative gay men.

Regardless of one's judgment of the "Bug chasing" and "Gift giving" community, these men belong to our community and whatever sanctuary they find in their actions is their "substitute for salvation" and a substitute for a cure. As Rechy states in the quote above, when we realize the great lie of salvation extolled by the Catholic Church and other hierarchical religions, we seek some substitute to fill the void, illegal drug use and hypersexual activity increasingly being two common methods utilized by gay men. Consequently, the intersection of hypermasculinity, meth use, unprotected and violent sexual practices, the fetishization of AIDS and the self-inflicted murder of what Anzaldúa calls the Divine Feminine are resulting in higher rates of HIV seroconversion as we trudge beyond the fifth decade of the epidemic.

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NOTES

- 1 ACT UP! Stands for AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, an HIV/AIDS awareness group formed in 1987. ALLGO stands for the Austin Latina/o Lesbian and Gay Organization, a grassroots group that was founded in 1985.
- 2 Slamming is the act of injecting crystal methamphetamines via a syringe.
- 3 Breeding is the act of unprotected anal sex with the intent to ejaculate in the bottom's anus.
- 4 Stealth breeding is the act of breeding unbeknownst to the bottom.
- 5 Castillo, Debra. "Outlaw Aesthetics: Interview with John Rechy." *Diacritics*, vol. 25, no. 1, Spring 1995, 113-125.
- 6 For more about the tragic fate of 8-year-old Gabriel Fernandez, see the Netflix documentary, *The Trials of Gabriel Fernández* (2020). Also, see Mahita Gajanan, "The Heartbreaking Story Behind Netflix's Docuseries, *The Trials of Gabriel Fernández*." *Time Magazine* online. Originally published February 26, 2020. Updated March 3, 2020. <https://time.com/5790549/gabriel-fernandez-netflix-documentary/>.
- 7 John Donald Gustav-Wrathall's text, *Take the Young Stranger by the Hand: Same-Sex Relations and the YMCA* (1998), details the history of the Young Men's Christian Association and its transformation from a Protestant organization designed to mold young white boys into the future business and civic leaders of the United States to a signifier of gay male sex and the precursor to the modern bathhouse.
- 8 According to the Centers for Disease Control's webpage, "HIV Among Youth," in 2016, 8,451 youth (ages 13 to 24) received an HIV diagnosis in the United States. Of these cases, Latino men who have sex with men accounted for 25% of the new seroconversions, second only to Black men (<https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/age/youth/index.html>).
- 9 Felching is the act of eating semen out of an anus.
- 10 In gay men's vernacular, a "pig" is a broad term for a man who will engage in high-risk, taboo fetishes, such as barebacking, felching, water sports (urine play), BDSM, fisting, scat, and other activities. Men do not have to engage in all of the acts listed to be a "pig." However, "pigs" often advertise that they have few or no "limits."

- 11 To date, two men who have sex with men have contracted rare strains of HIV while adhering to PrEP (<https://www.poz.com/article/second-man-contracts-rare-hiv-strain-apparently-adhering-prep>). Another man who has sex with men contracted HIV while on PrEP, but researchers believe his frequency of unprotected sex contributed to his seroconversion (<https://www.poz.com/article/prep-fails-third-man-time-hiv-drug-resistance-blame>).