



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Viral breedings

Citation for published version:

Garcia Iglesias, J 2020, 'Viral breedings: HIV as pregnancy among bugchasers', *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2020.1744408>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/18902138.2020.1744408](https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2020.1744408)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies

Viral Breedings: HIV as pregnancy among bugchasers

--Manuscript Draft--

Full Title:	Viral Breedings: HIV as pregnancy among bugchasers
Manuscript Number:	RNOR-2019-0031R2
Article Type:	Special Issue Article
Keywords:	HIV; bugchasing; queer theory; masculinity
Manuscript Classifications:	Gender; Masculinity
Abstract:	<p>Bugchasing is the fetishization of HIV among some gay men. Bugchasers, who thrive in online forums and social media, have generated complex subcultural narratives of the virus as a vehicle for intimacy, connection, and masculinity. While this practice has been addressed from public health and media studies, relatively little analysis has been conducted on their sex stories. In this article, I use the sex story 'Andy is HIV+' to explore how bugchasers appropriate the language of both HIV prevention and heterosexual reproduction to narrate new forms of vertical and horizontal kinship. These new forms are articulated through HIV infection: bugchasers 'breed' each other with their 'poz babies' and become 'brothers' and 'lovers.' While Dean (2009) has already discussed bugchasing kinship, I explore the practical implementation of these forms of relationality to address existing gaps in the literature. In the second part of this article, I also complicate existing research on bugchasing kinship by considering how the fictional nature of the materials under analyses problematizes our theoretical developments and our assumptions about the men producing the texts. In particular, I suggest that theoretical research on kinship should be accompanied by in-depth consideration of how fictional narratives translate into lived experience.</p>

Viral Breedings: HIV as pregnancy among bugchasers

Jaime García-Iglesias
The University of Manchester

Biographical note

Jaime García-Iglesias

Jaime García-Iglesias is a PhD candidate in sociology at The University of Manchester. His research explores bugchasers' motivations, their social relations and their use of social media and PrEP through online ethnography, interviews and creative writing. He has a background in English (University of Oviedo, Spain) and Critical Theory (University of Nottingham). He is particularly interested in HIV and its role in gay sexuality, creative writing methods, stigma and taboo practices, and the use of online technologies for sexual wellbeing.

Author information:

Jaime García-Iglesias

Jaime.garciaiglesias@manchester.ac.uk

Twitter: @JGarciaIglesias

ORCID: 0000-0002-8841-5635

Address:

Arthur Lewis Building, 3rd Floor, Sociology

The University of Manchester

Oxford Road, M139PL

Manchester, UK

Viral Breedings: HIV as pregnancy among bugchasers

Bugchasing is the fetishization of HIV among some gay men. Bugchasers, who thrive in online forums and social media, have generated complex subcultural narratives of the virus as a vehicle for intimacy, connection, and masculinity. While this practice has been addressed from public health and media studies, relatively little analysis has been conducted on their sex stories. In this article, I use the sex story 'Andy is HIV+' to explore how bugchasers appropriate the language of both HIV prevention and heterosexual reproduction to narrate new forms of vertical and horizontal kinship. These new forms are articulated through HIV infection: bugchasers 'breed' each other with their 'poz babies' and become 'brothers' and 'lovers.' While Dean (2009) has already discussed bugchasing kinship, I explore the practical implementation of these forms of relationality to address existing gaps in the literature.

In the second part of this article, I also complicate existing research on bugchasing kinship by considering how the fictional nature of the materials under analyses problematizes our theoretical developments and our assumptions about the men producing the texts. In particular, I suggest that theoretical research on kinship should be accompanied by in-depth consideration of how fictional narratives translate into lived experience.

Keywords: HIV, masculinity, queer, family, bugchasing.

In a post from September 12, 2010, a user of the forum *Breeding.zone* wonders:

There are a lot of bottoms¹ who are choosing to wait nine months before getting tested, just so they can equate the pozzing process and conversion with a female's pregnancy and giving birth. Is becoming poz the male equivalent of the birthing process? Is HIV a gay man's child?²

This statement establishing the parallelisms between HIV (i.e. 'becoming poz', meaning acquiring HIV) and heterosexual pregnancy, describes a narrative at the heart of bugchasing, the eroticization of HIV among gay men. In this paper, I continue existing work by addressing this narrative, but I complicate it by considering its fictional character. Demographically varied, these men resort to online platforms to find others, fantasize and arrange for offline sex with the intent of contracting HIV. This eminently online character (García-Iglesias, 2020) is evidenced by the abundant engagement of bugchasers on platforms such as *breeding.zone*, a forum featuring over 60,000 users, mostly from the US and UK, and containing thriving and popular bugchasing sections. This article analyzes a sex story from this site, 'Andy is HIV+'. In analyzing a fictional sex story, I am able to consider these narratives in light of pre-existing research but also to challenge their fictional nature and complicate their meaning for bugchasers.

This forum provides space for bugchasers to engage in processes of semantic negotiation and resignification of HIV, turning it from a phobic object to a desirable social bond. Treichler argued that AIDS was not solely a biomedical phenomenon but also an "epidemic of signification" insofar as it has given rise to a "parallel epidemic of meanings, definitions, and attributions" (Treichler, 1999, p. 1). Her argument can still be applied to HIV today. Exploring the transformation of HIV into a form of kinship is

¹ 'Bottom' refers to the receptive partner in anal intercourse, 'top' to the penetrative partner.

² The forum excerpts have not been edited, but usernames have been modified for anonymity. The stories are publicly available online.

particularly relevant at a time of notable change for HIV in the western world, with the availability of effective drug therapies, the acknowledgment of undetectability, and the increasing use of PrEP³. It is also particularly complicated: even though HIV no longer implies a death sentence for most people living in the globalized north, it is nonetheless a chronic debilitating condition and its stigma produces severe social and economic side-effects. This complication is also highlighted by González, who argues that

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. (Gonzalez, 2010, 99)

That is, the bugchaser rejects the medical-disability discourse of HIV and seeks to establish the virus as a meaningful ‘sociocultural practice.’

This article aims to illustrate existing research about bugchasing kinship, but also significantly complicate it by considering its fictional nature. The use of a sex story such as ‘Andy is HIV+’ allows me to provide examples of narratives of kinship but also becomes a useful standpoint from which to discuss the fictional character of these narratives. Doing so is essential, I believe, not only because existing research has mostly overlooked online written content (including sex stories) but because there is little discussion about the degree to which much of the bugchasing language and imagery is fictional. First, I provide an overview of the context of bugchasing and the available research with a focus on those texts that consider masculinity and kinship. Second, I summarize the content of the story, its popularity, and its significance. Third, I consider the resignification of HIV as a mechanism of ‘viral kinship’ that allows these men to ‘breed without women’ and establish ‘brotherhoods’. I do so in two sections: one focused on ‘vertical’ kinships in the form of genealogy and fatherhood, and one exploring ‘horizontal’ constructions of brotherhood. Finally, I complicate these theories of kinship by examining the fictional character of the sex story and suggesting the need to consider it alongside the lived experience.

Bugchasing

Bugchasers, gay men who eroticize HIV, talk with others about their desires and frequently engage online to construct fantasies. Research suggests that some self-identified bugchasers will seek to be infected ‘offline,’ while some only fantasize with this practice online. Thus, bugchasers are a varied group that includes: men who fantasize about the virus through online social media without any intent of contracting it ‘offline’, others who make their search for HIV a key part of their daily life, and yet even some who are already infected with HIV and seek to be ‘recharged’ with a new viral strain (García-Iglesias, 2019). The availability of social media has made

³ Effective anti-retroviral medications make it possible for people living with HIV to manage the replication of the virus in their bodies and, in many cases, attain ‘undetectable’ status, meaning they cannot pass the virus onto others. PrEP—pre-exposure prophylaxis—is an HIV prevention strategy that uses anti-retroviral medication to protect HIV-negative people from the virus. People take PrEP when at risk of exposure to prevent infection if exposed (Peabody & Nutland, 2018). Unlike anti-retroviral therapies used to treat someone living with HIV, which have to be taken for the rest of a person’s life once infected, PrEP is only advised for people during periods of risk of HIV (Carlo Hojilla et al., 2016).

bugchasing into a significant point of interest in discussions around HIV and sexuality with some key actors such as the pornographic studio Treasure Island Media, notorious for producing some movies supposedly featuring HIV transmission (see King, 2012; Morris & Paasonen, 2014). Bugchasing should not be confused with barebacking, the erotization of condomless anal intercourse among gay men. While all bugchasers are necessarily barebackers (receptive anal intercourse remains the most likely sexual route of infection), not all barebackers engage in this practice with the intent of contracting HIV and many may even take active measures to prevent infection from happening (such as serosorting, strategic positioning⁴ or PrEP) (Crossley, 2004; Gonzalez, 2012; Grov, 2006; Robinson, 2013). Besides, while barebacking has attained a certain mainstream status within the gay community (particularly in mainstream pornographic productions), bugchasing remains largely an obscure, taboo practice few dare to speak about openly.

Bugchasing and its media representations through pornographic productions have garnered some scholarly and media attention, most frequently by those attempting to establish the motivations and reasons for the practice. Some researchers have framed bugchasing as a backlash to the imposition of safer sex (Crimp, 1988; Crossley, 2004; Patton, 1990). Others have argued that bugchasing is the product of complacency brought about by the transformation of HIV from a death sentence to a manageable chronic condition (Cheuvront, 2007; Gauthier & Forsyth, 1999; Gonzalez, 2010; Power, 2011). In a similar tone, Rofes (1999) argues that the simultaneous availability of negative and affirmative discourses of HIV may undermine HIV prevention efforts.

Authors have also looked at the significance of bugchasing. Some have argued that it is a way of foreclosing anxiety around potential HIV infection (Dean, 2011; Hammond, Holmes, & Mercier, 2016; Moskowitz & Roloff, 2007a, b) or a path to an increased agency (Grov & Parsons, 2006). The practice has also been said to provide access to community, group solidarity, addressing survivor's guilt, establishing intimate connections and gaining subcultural capital (Dean, 2009; Gauthier & Forsyth, 1999; Morris & Paasonen, 2014) as well as serving as a mode of risk-taking (Dawson et al., 2005). The same scholars also suggest that bugchasing serves to produce a rebellious dislodging of sexuality from epidemiology, with the virus being conceived of as genealogical connection, masculinity, and empowerment (Graydon, 2007; Reynolds, 2007).

Of these, Tim Dean's work in *Beyond Sexuality* (2000), *Unlimited Intimacy* (2009), and other pieces (2008, 2011, 2012, 2015) remains key. In his seminal study of barebacking and bugchasing, *Unlimited Intimacy*, Dean argues that these practices are a means of intimacy and hospitality between strangers, whereby HIV is conceived of as a vehicle for different sorts of connections outside heteronormativity. Also looking at barebacking and bugchasing, Robinson (2013) argues that the notion of 'breeding' common among these men to signify internal anal ejaculation is borrowed from "the charmed circle's heterosexual, procreative discourses in order to constitute their own understanding of taking another man's load" (116) in reference to Rubin (1999).

⁴ Strategic positioning is the act of choosing different sexual 'positions' (e.g., receptive or penetrative partner in anal intercourse) depending on the partners' HIV status, as different positions imply different risks of transmission. Serosorting is the practice of choosing sexual partners based on HIV status or perceived status.

The role of masculinity in bugchasing is highly contested. Several scholars have established a more binary divide whereby the bugchaser is perceived as lacking masculinity, as opposed to a hyper-masculine viral gift-giver⁵. In this way, Reynolds suggests that

the bug chaser is considered to be both female and feminine as they have not yet been masculinized and empowered by infection with HIV. [...] bug chasers will often have female-related screen names [...] and will describe their anus and rectum as ‘pussy’ or ‘mancunt’. They necessarily take a sexually submissive ‘bottom’ (insertee) role during sex and are objectified, and physically and verbally ‘abused’, during conversation. (Reynolds, 2007, p. 262)

Dean (2009) provides a different interpretation: bugchasers’ lack of fear regarding HIV transmission proves their masculinity, and yet at the same time, he argues that there also exists an appeal “to be mastered by someone more masculine” at the heart of bugchasing. Both fearlessness and submission are masculine (Dean, 2009, 55). He further argues that submissive receptive partners (‘bottoms’) exhibit a process of hypermasculinization within the subculture as a response to society’s perception of them as feminized (56). This debate around masculinity is also picked up by Lee (2014) in his discussion of barebacking, who argues that, instead of hypermasculine, bottoms—as represented in Treasure Island Media’s productions—are simply ‘masculine’ given the sheer feats of athleticism and strength required to perform their sexual activities. He argues that it is this juxtaposition of masculinity and homoeroticism that “co-opt hegemonic masculinity from heterosexuals, presenting hegemonic masculinity as hybrid, as queered” (115).

The ideas of procreation and kinship make bugchasing debates particularly relevant not only for masculinity but also for queer studies of sociality. Juana María Rodríguez (2011) asks us “to consider the role of queer social bonds, community futures and the relevance of sex at this precise historical moment, a moment where the demands of neoliberalism emphasize individual exchange and benefit” (332). Within this context of increased individuality, favored by the individual agency of PrEP and the responsibility of undetectability, where “gay men are seen as responsible actors who should act to avoid HIV infection” (Robinson, 2013, p. 102) bugchasing could well be understood as both “queer world-making and world-shattering” (Weiner & Young, 2011, pp. 223-224).

Bugchasing presents a relational perspective described by Dean (2009) as ‘unlimited intimacy’ between strangers. In his view, bareback and bugchasing cruising “entails a remarkable hospitable disposition towards strangers [and a] distinctive ethic of openness to alterity” (179) that replaces narratives of disease and death with narratives of kinship (69). However, while Dean develops his observations on cruising in significant depth, less is discussed about the practicalities of establishing kinship through HIV. In particular, he provides little empirical information or examples as to how those kinships are conceptualized or experienced by bugchasers themselves. This paper addresses that gap by focusing on just that exploration of the realities and fantasies of bugchasing kinship through the analysis of ‘Andy is HIV+.’ Furthermore, in

⁵ Gift-giver is a term used by bugchasers to refer to men living with HIV who infect others.

using an online sex story, I also seek to explore the ways in which these narratives are fictional and how they can be transposed to ‘real life’.

In the following section, I provide the necessary background to the story ‘Andy is HIV+’ as source material, including the justification for its use. Then, I move to the exploration of bugchasing kinship as vertical and horizontal before moving to the discussion of the story’s fictional character and the implications of this for our understanding of bugchasing.

‘Andy is HIV+’

This article analyses the story ‘Andy is HIV+’, written by versbbguy, a user of the internet forum breeding.zone. The forum, property of the New York company Studio3X and run by an internet user under the nickname rawTOP, is an amalgam of interconnected sites focusing on barebacking and bugchasing. As of February 2020, the forum had over 64,000 users. ‘Andy is HIV+’ is one of the many sex stories published in the ‘Bug Chasing and Gift Giving Fiction’ board of the ‘Backroom’ section. ‘Andy is HIV+’ is a sex story composed of ten chapters published in fourteen installments between August 17 2016, and April 9 2017. As of February 2020, the story remains in the top ten most popular, with over 77,800 views and over a hundred replies or comments—mostly praising the author.

‘Andy is HIV+’ focuses on Andy’s transformation into a bugchaser. The story starts with a preface where Andy, 23 years old, is diagnosed with HIV, which both troubles and arouses him. Then, the narrative rewinds a whole year to a few days before Andy’s twenty-second birthday. From that point on, the narrative follows Andy’s relationship with Mark and Jacob. Mark is a bugchaser with whom Andy establishes a sexually-charged emotional relationship after a first casual encounter. Jacob, a man living with HIV, is Mark’s, and later Andy’s, gift-giver. The story depicts Andy’s slow penetration into the world of bugchasing, as well as it chronicles in detail, his penetrations by Mark and Jacob. The highlight of the narration is Andy’s attendance at his first bugchasing party, where he performs as a bottom for a variety of men. Up until then, Andy is seen questioning his arousal at the possibility of infection. In the party, he embraces his bugchasing desires. Mark is diagnosed with HIV shortly after that. The story concludes with Andy and Jacob planning on passing on the virus to another man.

The narrative features an interesting dyad: on the one hand, an intimate relationship develops between Andy, Mark, and Jacob. This relationship, conceived in terms of pairs (Andy-Mark and Andy-Jacob), remains key to many of the chapters of the story and allows us to see the characters maturing and acquiring roundness. On the other hand, however, the story also foregrounds the role of group sex in bugchasing by devoting five chapters to a bugchasing sex party. This paper considers both relationships to illustrate how they form juxtaposed vertical and horizontal kinships.

The analysis of ‘Andy is HIV+’ in terms of kinship contributes to debates on bugchasing by looking at a previously understudied piece of cultural production, the sex story. Research on bugchasing has eminently focused on pornography and online profiles and contributions, with some notable but hardly generalizable exceptions (Dawson et al., 2005, Chevront, 2002, 2007, Freeman, 2003, Dean, 2009, Scarce, 1999). This background compelled me to consider alternative source materials, also in

line with Grover's call to overcome the "superficiality of most AIDS reporting" and engage in research "in the trenches" (Grover, 1992, pp. 230-231). This story allows me to engage with the cultural productions at their source and explore the processes of meaning-making in this bugchasing space.

The sex story's fictional nature also serves to complicate understandings of bugchasing discourse. Crossley argues that "fictional and autobiographical sources provide an essential source of in-depth insight into how gay men have thought, felt, and behaved (sexually) in the context of varying social conditions" (Crossley, 2004, p. 228). In particular, the story's fictionality allows us to gain insight into bugchasing discourses in an 'idealized' world not marred by biological, medical or daily considerations. In so doing, it serves to illustrate bugchasing discourses at their essence but also questions the nature of these discourses: just how many theoretical arguments can we build based on fictional materials? Should we aim to incorporate 'lived experience' in our discussions of bugchasing kinship? If so, how? These are questions that I take up in the last section of this paper.

Finally, 'Andy is HIV+' is particularly more interesting given the story's popularity within the forum and the eminently positive responses from readers who show identification, arousal and agreement to the story's content:

I imagined myself in Andy's place...omg I would be in a state of bliss! Fuck this is a hot pozzing story! NICE! (August 24, 2016)

Versbbguy every fucking story of yours is SO hot!! Eager for more of Andy's story! (August 21, 2016)

Great story and each part just keeps getting hotter and better (August 30, 2016)

By considering an explicit sex-story, I am also tying up with previous studies of gay sexuality and HIV that have taken the pornographic cultural production as their source (Dyer, 1985; King, 2012; Mowlabocus, Harbottle, & Witzel, 2014). In particular, Dyer suggests that "homosexual desire has been constructed as perverse and unspeakable; gay porn does speak/show gay sex" (Dyer, 1985, p. 27). This is even more so given the taboo nature of bugchasing, as sex stories produced in anonymous online forums remain an effective way to access narratives and images hard to obtain by other empirical means.

Experiments in viral kinship

On his paper about online bugchasing groups, Graydon explains how bugchasing "narratives convey [...] threatening social relationships, describing how bodies and fluids usually kept separate are intimately combined; men become able to reproduce without women, giving 'birth' not to newborns but to the newly infected" (2007, p. 288). This argument is illustrated by Andy when he describes the attendees to the sex party: "Even so there's a decent mix of ages and body types. I count... [...] One of the bottoms is a hot guy in his 50s, then there's a 28yo and one twinkish looking guy" (November 7, 2016). In this excerpt, we can appreciate a sense of genealogy from the

oldest guy in his 50s to the youngest ‘twink’⁶ who are connected (or seeking to be connected) through HIV. In this way, the virus provides a vehicle to establish kinship relationships that take, at times, the genealogical form of heterosexual reproduction even if new members are produced in the place of ‘babies’. Tim Dean emphasizes the significance of kinship through HIV by posing the following question: “what would it mean for a young gay man today to be able to trace his virus back to, say, Michael Foucault?” (Dean, 2009, p. 89). This quote conceives kinship in vertical or genealogical terms but, Dean also argues, kinship through HIV for bugchasers may also well take a horizontal form in which the exchange of HIV transforms “community into consanguinity,” developing a sense of “fraternity” and “brotherhood” (Dean, 2009, p. 78). Both modes, vertical and horizontal, genealogy and brotherhood, are not exclusive and can coexist. Vertical modes of sociality would be those that parallel reproductive heterosexuality, whereas the horizontal ones would provide alternative forms of brotherhood, friendship, and alliance.

Bugchasing, as represented in the story ‘Andy is HIV+’ provides both modes in non-exclusive ways: it is both a monogamous relation and group belonging, both a transhistorical genealogy of descent and the creation of boundless brotherhoods with peers. It is both things at the same time. In this paper, I illustrate how the story ‘Andy is HIV+’ juxtaposes them in its narrative. In so doing, I acknowledge the existing work but also advance it by providing empirical considerations to the creation of kinships. By focusing on ‘Andy is HIV+’ I complicate the fictional character of these materials and the narratives that rest upon them. I start by illustrating the forms of vertical and horizontal kinship before moving to a discussion of their fictional character. In particular, I will first contextualize the creation of vertical kinship through the notion of ‘chain of history,’ pregnancy/genealogy, and fatherhood. Then I will focus on horizontal forms of relationality through brotherhood and membership. In so doing, I hope to clarify how these links occur simultaneously and are non-exclusionary.

HIV as a ‘chain of connection’ from the past: vertical kinship

The idea of vertical kinship through fatherhood and pregnancy arises from Sontag’s early work on *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1988) where she argues that:

The fear of AIDS imposes on an act whose ideal is an experience of pure presentness (and creation of the future) a relation to the past to be ignored at one’s peril. Sex no longer withdraws its partners, if only for a moment, from the social. It cannot be considered just coupling; it is a chain, a chain of transmission, from the past. (Sontag, 1988, pp. 72-73)

Sontag argues that the threat of possible HIV infection forces a longitudinal approach to sex encounters where current encounters are always related to each partners’ previous encounters, establishing a historical form of relation, “a chain of transmission”, a sort of ‘chain of connection’. While Sontag conceives of this genealogical connection as a detriment to the sexual experience, bugchasers reclaim the ‘chain of connection’ as a positive aspect of their sex, insofar as it allows them to broaden the possible experience by metaphorically incorporating their partners’ past partners. In this way, any sexual act, even that between two men, becomes group sex.

⁶ ‘Twink’ is gay slang to refer to young (or young-looking) men, generally with little to no body hair or beard, and slim build.

This process of enlargement is evidenced in the story by Andy's interest in knowing how the men he is having sex with have been infected and whether they have infected others before. For instance, at a given moment during the sex party, Andy is talking with Mark as they watch how a multitude of men penetrate Mark. Andy says:

Mark returns and comes around to my side of the bed, he bends down and he's close enough so he can speak softly in my ear, "your bud over there is so hot, he's taking poz loads like a champ,... he might leave here infected", I have to ask, "How you got it right?" He nods and continues, "First guy that fucked him, been poz 'about five years or so now," "Fuck", "And Jacob took the host's cum, he's resistant to Truvada, pretty sure that's who tagged me." I'm not sure what all that means but [...] a steady flow of precum is draining from my soft cock, I feel like such a slut" (December 18, 2016)

Slightly later, as another man is penetrating Andy, he narrates: "I started wondering if the guy fucking me ever actually infected anyone, and will his load be the one that knocks me up" (December 27, 2016). In these two moments, infection is traced through a genealogy of viral transference. In the first quote, Andy attempts to map the network of infection that ties the bugchasing group together. By linking each man to others through their infection, Andy appreciates the variety of relationships that tie the group, generating a sense of bonding and arousal. In the second excerpt, Andy wonders whether he will become the latest link to the chain of viral transmission and what other 'links' may have come before him. This genealogical character is key to the erotic appeal of bugchasing: Andy is not aroused by the transmission of the virus alone, but by the virus' capacity to engender forms of connection that tie him to other men in the group. It should be noted, however, that establishing these linkages is extremely difficult biomedically, as establishing with certainty the source of someone's infection is, currently, an expensive, unreliable, and mostly unavailable process⁷.

Vertical kinship is particularly emphasized in the form of fatherhood in the relationship between Andy and Jacob. Jacob hopes to act as gift-giver to Andy, that is, be the person who passes HIV onto him. This relevance is emphasized by the appropriation of terms such as 'breeding' and 'knocking up' to refer to internal anal ejaculation and the possibility of infection, which are frequently used in the story:

It isn't but moments later when he grunts that he can't hold back any longer, "Gonna nut ... gonna cum", "Fuck yea ... breed my ass ... fucking breed me!", I blurt it out, I can't believe I'm saying the words. (September 5, 2016)

I speak right into Alec's face, "Fuck yea! Fucking breed me... fucking knock me up!" (December 27, 2016)

⁷ Due to the latency period (between infection and potential diagnosis) of HIV and the number of partners that Andy has in the story, it would be impossible to determine reliably the source of infection. Phylogenetic testing (which tests for similarities between two people's HIV viruses) can identify similar viruses but is not yet proven to identify directionality of infection (see <http://i-base.info/htb/31573> for the latest updates on this [last accessed February 24, 2020]).

“’bout to ’bout to cum”, “Fuck yea” my only response, “Want my poz babies?”, he asks, although I’m not sure he expects an answer. (December 27, 2016)

Lee argues that the reproductive metaphors “provide [...] language through which to understand and describe barebacking as an erotic discourse. The acts of ‘breeding’ or ‘planting seed’ refer not to sexual intercourse, but to fluid transfer—the focus is on the ejaculate, which may or may not carry the HIV virus” (Lee, 2014, 110). Lee addresses in his paper barebacking (not bugchasing), but some of his conclusions can well be applied to this practice. In particular, his suggestion that bugchasers may ‘borrow’ existing language and resignify it in ways such as those quoted above. This process has more generally been discussed by Plummer as “poaching metaphors” (Plummer, 1995).

However, the relationship between ‘fathering’ and ‘pregnancy’ is most evident in the following passage between Andy and Jacob:

Jacob proceeds to tell me about his “surprises.” He tells me that later this week he and I will visit a doctor friend of his, and I will get properly tested for HIV. “I think its time we find out if you’re poz babe...”, I know, and then he drops the other shoe, “I want to know if you’ve got my strain, Mark’s strain or someone else’s,” he says, “Sounding a little hopeful that it’s his, I think. (April 9, 2017).

This excerpt quite literally echoes discussions around pregnancy, fatherhood, and paternity that take place in heterosexual relationships. Jacob does not only seek to establish Andy’s HIV status, but also to determine the source of his infection, hopeful there is a viral relationship between them. While these desires are unlikely to be feasible, they are also evidenced in research. For instance, one of the participants in Holes and Warner’s study is a gift-giver who “shares his cell phone number with those he exchanges semen with and assures them that they can meet again: ‘Call me any time, anything you want, ask about me or ask about anything. I’m there, I’m there as your friend, as your father’” (Holmes & Warner, 2004, p. 13).

Further emphasis can be made if we consider that, very much like heterosexual pregnancy, HIV infection implies a latency period (‘window period’) of generally three months between exposure and diagnosis. While this period makes it particularly challenging to establish the source of someone’s infection, it allows users like the one whose post opens this article to argue for even closer parallels between heterosexual reproduction and bugchasing. One user of the forum *breeding.zone* comments:

There are a lot of bottoms who are choosing to wait nine months before getting tested, just so they can equate the pozzing process and conversion with a female’s pregnancy and giving birth. Is becoming poz the male equivalent of the birthing process? (September 17, 2010)

While this comment is particularly interesting in its implications, it is nonetheless medically unrealistic: a strict routine of testing and abstinence would be necessary for someone to be able to trace the source of their infection reliably. Tim Dean argues that bugchasers’ emphasis on fatherhood through HIV is a surprisingly retrograde emphasis on blood ties deeply influenced by heteronormativity and distant from the experiments in queer family making of the Gay Liberation (Dean, 2009, p. 90). The story does

evidence this: although great attention is placed on group sex during the party scene, the event is focused around the three main characters (Andy, Mark, and Jacob) who act as a nuclear family of sorts. However, bugchasing does not only articulate vertical forms of kinship. The following section looks at the establishment of ‘horizontal’ kinship in the form of ‘lovers’ and ‘brothers.’

Horizontal Kinship: Lovers and Brothers

As opposed to a vertical form of kinship, the story ‘Andy is HIV+’ also illustrates a horizontal approach to kinship in the form of brothers and lovers. These two terms, far from exclusionary, are joined together to generate metaphorically incestuous relationships. This is evidenced early on in the story, for instance, when the sex party hosts explains: “We’ve got 5 horny bottoms tonight, but these two, specifically, want to be brought into the brotherhood” (December 10, 2016). The idea of an HIV+ brotherhood confronts traditional stereotypes of people living with HIV as socially isolated outcasts. This ‘brotherhood’ of sorts is established by mutual recognition of and alliance with other bugchasers. For example, at a moment in the party, Andy makes contact with another of the bottoms there, Alec:

We aren’t looking directly at each other, but I can hear his moans and I can feel his breathe, “Please. Oh yeah man, fuck... oh fuck, dump another poz load in there”, he moans, he’s completely lost in the moment. It’s then that I realize that Alec and I aren’t any different. I can feel Alec’s breathe, he can feel my breathe [sic], and we’ve accepted the fact that we’re both likely to be HIV+ from tonight’s sex. I’m encouraging his top to infect him, and he’s doing the same for me. (December 27, 2016).

In this excerpt, Andy constructs a kinship that’s horizontal in its scope and occurs through identification with other bugchasers and a mutual sharing of desires. Both Andy and Alec recognize themselves in each other’s shattering ecstasy (Muñoz, 2009) and, as brothers, engage in mutual solidarity by encouraging their respective gift givers to infect them. This form of horizontal kinship exists alongside the vertical one. For example, Andy and Mark—both infected by Jacob—experience both at the same time: on the one hand, they are ‘brothers’ to the same ‘viral father’, Jacob, but, at the same time, they are lovers. Dean already pointed to the incestuous nature of bugchasing (2009), arguing that this promiscuity “enlarges the horizon of potential intimacy” (80). In the story, Andy, Mark, and Jacob obtain from each other different forms of sexual pleasure but also of emotional support and commitment, broadening their sexual and emotional engagements.

The establishment of kinship relationships and the broadening of the sexual and emotional support that these allow is of particular interest when considered in relation to the masculine and/or hypermasculine performances of bugchasers. Lee (2014) argues that silence is an icon of masculinity in pornographic productions, and yet in ‘Andy is HIV+’ the characters engage in extensive talking and conversation as a way of resignifying HIV, transmitting meanings, and establishing networks of kinship. In this way, they perform a queering of masculinity that juxtaposes both traditional roles (stern fatherhood, silent sexual partner) and alternative frameworks (brothers, emotional supporters) in non-exclusionary ways. After having illustrated existing theories of

bugchasing kinship through an empirical example, I will now move to complicate these theories by considering the fictional character of the story.

Complicating bugchasing kinship: fiction and reality

‘Andy is HIV+’ illustrates the resignification of HIV from a phobic object to a means of generating powerful vertical and horizontal forms of kinship that resemble both heterosexual reproduction and fraternity through viral transmission. I have illustrated the theorization of Dean (2009) and others, continuing their work to provide practical exemplifications of the processes of resignification and kinship. However, I am interested in the very fictional character of the story and its implications for any conclusions we may draw from it. On February 11, 2017, one of the readers of the story comments: “Wonderful writing. Dangerous too. Could make one cave in...”. Through this brief post, we appreciate the uneasy relationship between fiction and reality at the heart of this and many other bugchasing materials. In *Unlimited Intimacy* (2009), Tim Dean discusses at length the visual representation of HIV in pornography and the degree to which it is a fictional representation, given the impossibility of filming a virus or, for that matter, infection. However, he (and the researchers who have followed on this) spend little time discussing how this same impossibility to ascertain infection happening may complicate his theorizations of bugchasing kinship.

As explained in the opening of this article, ‘Andy is HIV+’ is a fictional story. It presents a world devoid of medical realities, in which one’s source of HIV can be ascertained easily and in which racial, social, and cultural dynamics are all but present. Andy accesses a bugchasing world in which every man is sculptural and well endowed, sexually aroused, and sure of the source of his infection. Even more so, the story was written in an online forum by an anonymous user, and all those who commented on it were equally anonymous. This is not unique to this paper: much, if not all, bugchasing research has focused on pornographic productions, forum messages, or online dating profiles, with little consideration for the fictionality of these types of media. This does not mean that the conclusions we may obtain from analyzing this narrative are invalid, but rather that we need to carefully consider how they are influenced by the fictional nature of their source material.

This is highlighted by Brandon Robinson in his article on barebacking. In his piece, Robinson uses excerpts from a barebacking to discuss the queer potential of this sexual practice. However, he acknowledges:

Future research should seek to interview these men in order to see if they are actually enacting these behaviors offline, and how these men are taking up these online discourses within their every day (sexual) lives. Despite these limitations, though, a discourse around barebacking is happening online, in which many barebackers are partaking in—either by reading the posts or commenting themselves. (Robinson, 2013, 108)

There is value in exploring the forms of kinship that bugchasers narrate in productions like ‘Andy is HIV+’. They allow us to discuss the resignification of HIV and the appropriation of reproductive metaphors by a niche group of gay men. But this exploration ought to be combined with a clear awareness of the limitations of our materials and, in turn, our analysis. My argument is less of a clear answer and more of a

query. I asked in the opening of this article how reliable our theoretical readings of bugchasing could be if we base them solely on fictional materials without simultaneously discussing the nature of these materials. In this particular case of bugchasing kinship, I believe that we run the risk of ignoring that kinship—as represented in ‘Andy is HIV+’ (and, pornographic movies, or other texts)—exists in a fictional universe. Ken Plummer, discussing the repositioning of sexuality in symbolic interactionism, explains:

When I read some of the wilder textual analyses of the queer theorists [...], I do sometimes wonder just whose worlds I am entering. They rightly raise very challenging ideas, and I am often excited when I read them. But I also have a gnawing feeling that they are very much removed from the ordinary everyday lived experiences of sexuality that most people encounter across the world in their daily lives. (Plummer, 2003, 521)

In the same way, when we theorize the forms of kinship that bugchasers narrate, we ought to remain conscious of the very fictional nature of the universes in which they are taking place. In one of his most recent contributions to the discussion of barebacking (and, ostensibly, bugchasing), Dean suggests that focusing on whether these practices are ‘queer enough’ is unwise as it “eludes the complexity of the phenomenon” (Dean, 2019, 288). In the same way, we should not focus solely on how bugchasers construct kinship as vertical or horizontal, how they represent masculinity or fail to do, etc. These reflections, by themselves, ignore the fictional character of their source materials. I suggest that we need to account for the many ways in which readers and/or bugchasers experience the ‘broadening of sexual intimacy’, the ‘juxtaposition of vertical and horizontal kinship’, and the ‘incestuous nature of being brothers and lovers’ in their lived experience. That is, also, in relation to the complex medical, technological, and social contexts in which their sexual encounters necessarily exist.

This work was supported by the School of Social Sciences at The University of Manchester and by the Cultures, Languages and Area Studies at The University of Nottingham. Special thanks to Dr Hongwei Bao.

Bibliography

- Carlo Hojilla, J., Koester, K. A., Cohen, S. E., Buchbinder, S., Ladzekpo, D., Matheson, T., & Liu, A. Y. (2016). Sexual Behavior, Risk Compensation, and HIV Prevention Strategies Among Participants in the San Francisco PrEP Demonstration Project: A Qualitative Analysis of Counseling Notes. *AIDS Behav*, 20(7), 1461-1469. doi:10.1007/s10461-015-1055-5
- Cheuvront, J. P. (2002). High-Risk Sexual Behaviour in the Treatment of HIV-Negative Patients. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy*, 6(3), 7-25.
- Cheuvront, J. P. (2007). Attaining Meaning in the Face of Sexual Risk Taking and Risk-Taking Consequences. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 8(1), 69-85.
- Crimp, D. (1988). How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic. In D. Crimp & L. Bersani (Eds.), *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (pp. 237-376). Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Crossley, M. L. (2004). Making Sense of 'Barebacking': Gay Men's Narratives, Unsafe Sex, and the 'Resistance Habitus'. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 43, 225-244.
- Dawson, A. G., Ross, M. W., Henry, D., & Freeman, A. (2005). Evidence of HIV Transmission Risk in Barebacking Men-Who-Have-Sex-With-Men: Cases from the Internet. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy*, 9(3-4), 73-83.
- Dean, T. (2000). *Beyond Sexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dean, T. (2008). Breeding culture: Barebacking, bugchasing, giftgiving. *Massachusetts Review*, 49(1-2), 80-94.
- Dean, T. (2009). *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dean, T. (2011). Bareback Time. In E. L. McCallum & M. Tuhkanen (Eds.), *Queer Times, Queer Becomings* (pp. 75-99). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Dean, T. (2012). The Biopolitics of Pleasure. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 111(3), 477-496. doi:10.1215/00382876-1596245
- Dean, T. (2015). Mediated Intimacies: Raw Sex, Truvada, and the Biopolitics of Chemoprophylaxis. *Sexualities*, 18(1-2), 224-246. doi:10.1177/136360715569137
- Dean T. (2019) The Raw and the Fucked. In: Varghese R (ed) *RAW: PrEP, pedagogy, and the politics of barebacking*. London: ZED books, 257-281.
- Dyer, R. (1985). Male Gay Porn: Coming to Term. *Jump Cut*, 30, 27-29.
- Freeman, G. A. (2003, January 23). In Search of Death. *Rollingstone.com*.
- García-Iglesias, Jaime. (2019). Wanting HIV is 'Such a Hot Choice': Exploring Bugchasers' Fluid Identities and Online Engagements. *Deviant Behavior*. doi:10.1080/01639625.2019.1606617
- García-Iglesias, Jaime. (2020). "Writing bugchasing ethnoperformance: creative representations of online interactions." *Sexualities*: forthcoming.
- Gauthier, D. K., & Forsyth, C. J. (1999). Bareback Sex, Bug Chasers, and the Gift of Death. *Deviant Behaviour*, 20(1), 85-100.
- Gonzalez, O. R. (2010). Tracking the Bugchaser: Giving 'The Gift' of HIV/AIDS. *Cultural Critique*, 75.
- Gonzalez, O. R. (2012). Review of Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking by Tim Dean. *Cultural Critique*, 81, 125-132.

- Graydon, M. (2007). Don't bother to wrap it: Online Giftgiver and Bugchaser newsgroups, the social impact of gift exchanges and the 'carnavalesque'. *Culture Health & Sexuality*, 9(3), 277-292. doi:10.1080/13691050601124649
- Grov, C. (2006). Barebacking websites: electronic environments for reducing or inducing HIV risk. *Aids Care-Psychological and Socio-Medical Aspects of Aids/Hiv*, 18(8), 990-997. doi:10.1080/09540120500521137
- Grov, C., & Parsons, J. T. (2006). Bug Chasing and Gift Giving: The Potential for HIV Transmission among Barebackers on the Internet. *AIDS Education and Prevention*, 18(6), 490-503.
- Grover, J. Z. (1992). AIDS, Keywords, and Cultural Studies. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, & P. Treichler (Eds.), *Cultural Studies* (pp. 227-276). New York: Routledge.
- Hammond, C., Holmes, D., & Mercier, M. (2016). Breeding new forms of life: a critical reflection on extreme variances of bareback sex. *Nursing Inquiry*, 23(3), 267-277. doi:10.1111/nin.12139
- Holmes, D., & Warner, D. (2004). The Anatomy of Forbidden Desire: Men, Penetration and Semen Exchange. *Nursing Inquiry*, 12(1), 10-20.
- King, M. S. (2012). The Most Important Gay Porn Film Ever? *Huffpost*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/mark-s-king/the-most-important-gay-porn-film-ever-made_b_1658846.html
- Lee, B. (2014). It's a Question of Breeding: Visualizing Queer Masculinity in Bareback Pornography. *Sexualities*, 17(1-2), 100-120.
- Morris, P., & Paasonen, S. (2014). Risk and Utopia: A Dialogue on Pornography. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 20(3), 215-239.
- Moskowitz, D. A., & Roloff, M. E. (2007a). The existence of a bug chasing subculture. *Culture Health & Sexuality*, 9(4), 347-357. doi:10.1080/13691050600976296
- Moskowitz, D. A., & Roloff, M. E. (2007b). The Ultimate High: Sexual Addiction and the Bug Chasing Phenomenon. *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity*, 14(1), 21-40.
- Mowlabocus, S., Harbottle, J., & Witzel, C. (2014). What We Can't See? Understanding the Representations and Meanings of UAI, Barebacking, and Semen Exchange in Gay Male Pornography. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 61(10), 1462-1480. doi:10.1080/00918369.2014.928581
- Muñoz, J. E. (2009). *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press.
- Patton, C. (1990). *Inventing AIDS*. New York: Routledge.
- Peabody, R., & Nutland, W. (2018). Questions and answers on PrEP. In PrEPSTER (Ed.).
- Plummer, K. (1995). *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*. London: Routledge.
- Plummer, K. (2003). Queers, bodies and postmodern sexualities: a note on revisiting the "Sexual" in symbolic interactionism. *Qualitative Sociology*, 26: 515-530. DOI: 10.1023/ B:QUAS.0000005055.16811.1c
- Power, J. (2011). Epilogue: Bug Chasers and Criminals. In *Movement, Knowledge, Emotion: Gay Activism and Hiv/Aids in Australia* (pp. 159-166).
- Reynolds, E. (2007). 'Pass the Cream, Hold the Butter': Meanings of HIV Positive Semen for Bugchasers and Giftgivers. *Anthropology & medicine*, 14(3), 259-266. doi:10.1080/13648470701694693

- Robinson, B. A. (2013). The Queer Potentiality of Barebacking: Changing, Whoring, and Breeding as Utopian Practices. In A. Jones (Ed.), *A Critical Inquiry into Queer Utopias* (pp. 101-128). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rodríguez, J. M. (2011). Queer Sociality and Other Sexual Fantasies. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 17(2-3), 331-348.
- Rofes, E. (1999, April 8). Barebacking and the New AIDS Hysteria. *The Stranger*.
- Rubin, G. S. (1999). Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality. In R. Parker & P. Aggleton (Eds.), *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader* (pp. 143-178). New York: Routledge.
- Scarce, M. (1999, February 1). A Ride on the Wild Side. *POZ*.
- Sontag, S. (1988). *AIDS and its Metaphors*. London: Allen and Allen.
- Treichler, P. A. (1999). *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Weiner, J. J., & Young, D. (2011). Introduction: Queer Bonds. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 17(2-3), 223-241. doi:10.1215/10642684-1163382