

# Writing bugchasing ethnoperformance: Creative representations of online interactions

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## Abstract

In this piece, I discuss the creation of ethnoperformance as a method of exploring and representing online spaces. I highlight the need for writing that acknowledges the influence of technology in online communication and argue for the suitability of ethnodrama as a writing method. In particular, I focus on bugchasers – men who fetishize HIV – and their online discussions. Bugchasers' comments to a forum, articulated as a five act ethnoperformance, serve as a case study to showcase how this form of writing allows users to discuss their negotiations of fantasy/reality while also acknowledging the uncertainty of online spaces and the mediation by technology. I finally defend the view that the visceral reactions ethnodrama produces generate interesting reflexive standpoints from which to research stigmatized practices and ideas.

## Keywords

Ethnoperformance, fantasy, HIV/AIDS, internet, representation

Bugchasing, the fetishization of HIV infection among gay men, has garnered considerable media and academic attention in recent years. However, as a phenomenon, it is difficult to contextualize and assess: both its association with gay sexuality and its stigmatized status make it particularly challenging to determine its historical origins or access those who engage in it, also known as bugchasers. Today, bugchasing remains important in the fast-changing context of HIV. In the global North, the availability of PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis, a medication which prevents HIV infection), the development of effective anti-retroviral therapies and the recognition that ‘undetectable = untransmittable’<sup>1</sup> have made it

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possible that, in countries such as the UK, more than 70% of those infected with HIV will not pass on the virus through the exchange of bodily fluids (Brown et al., 2017). This complicates the reality of bugchasing, a sexual practice based on infection. At the same time, we have seen a flourishing of online venues such as Twitter, Facebook, and GPS-enabled smartphone apps that have created a multitude of spaces where bugchasers can both meet others and discuss their desires.

While previous research has analysed the motivations and meaning-making processes of bugchasing, it has failed to engage with the uniqueness of online venues. In turn, it has ignored the ways in which these online spaces influence bugchasing practices. In contrast, this study proposes a reflexive and creative engagement with online venues as a way of exploring their influence on bugchasing dynamics online and bugchasing discourse. In the accompanying ethnoperformance, a written performance script based on research data, I showcase the experience of researching these spaces and exploring the embodied feeling of doing fieldwork. I believe the form of 'ethnoperformance' proves valuable in emphasizing the ways an internet-based forum not only facilitates but actively mediates the engagements – including research – occurring within it. In the following pages, I will discuss the background to bugchasing research, the justification for having selected ethnoperformance as a way of presenting my research data and the methodology employed. This article is framed within a larger research project concerned with establishing what bugchasing is, its significance for those engaging in it and their use of the internet.

## **Bugchasing online: In need of exploration**

Available research on bugchasing encompasses two fronts: first, exploration of bugchasers' motivations and the meanings they ascribe to HIV and, second, quantitative approaches attempting to measure the phenomenon and describe its participants. This article will briefly review both. A wide variety of reasons have been given as motivating bugchasing behaviour: some have described it as a reaction to the historical 'imposition' of safe sex as the only viable practice which has led to a backlash or a 'resistance habitus' (Crimp, 1988; Crossley, 2004; Patton, 1990); others have argued that the establishment of HIV as a manageable chronic condition may have led to a degree of complacency (Cheuvront, 2007; Gauthier and Forsyth, 1999; Gonzalez, 2010; Power, 2011), while others still suggest that the juxtaposition of negative and affirmative discourses of HIV may have mutually undermined each other (Rofes, 1999). At the same time, several authors have suggested that bugchasing may be a way of foreclosing the anxiety around the risk of HIV infection (Dean, 2011; Hammond et al., 2016; Moskowitz and Roloff, 2007) or gaining a sense of agency over bodies and destinies (Groves and Parsons, 2006). Some researchers have concluded that HIV may be seen as a way of accessing a community, obtaining group solidarity, addressing survivors' guilt and establishing transhistorical connections (Dean, 2009; Gauthier and Forsyth, 1999; Morris and Paasonen, 2014). HIV has also been discussed as a method of gaining subcultural

capital (Dean, 2009; Gauthier and Forsyth, 1999; Thornton, 2005) and as an icon of risk taking (Dawson et al., 2005; Grov and Parsons, 2006). Yet other scholars suggest that bugchasing is a rebellious dislodging of sexuality from epidemiology or the product of barebacking pornography (Dean, 2009; Gauthier and Forsyth, 1999). At the same time, a large amount of work has focused on studying the new significations that the virus has for bugchasers, suggesting that it may be used as a way of genealogical connection, masculinity, and empowerment (Graydon, 2007; Reynolds, 2007). Other fields, such as media studies (Lee, 2014), gender studies (Robinson, 2013) and public health (Hammond et al., 2016; Holmes and Warner, 2004) have also contributed to these debates. Some ethnographic work is available, such as García-Iglesias (2019).

A significant proportion of research has taken a quantitative approach with the intention of measuring the prevalence of bugchasing and describing its participants, and has turned to online dating sites for evidence. Dawson et al. (2005) sampled 100 profiles from barebackcity.com (now defunct) and analysed users' reported HIV status and the status they desired their partners to have. They established that bugchasers were present, even if their levels were 'extremely low' (2005: 81). Also on the same site, Tewksbury (2003), analysing over 800 profiles, also concluded that very few men were actively seeking partners with a different HIV status. Grov (2004) reached a similar conclusion when, out of over 50,000 online profiles in a dating site, he could only identify 55 clearly 'displaying some form of intentional desire to either infect or be infected with HIV' (2004: 337–338). With a similar methodology, Grov and Parsons (2006) sampled 1600 profiles of self-proclaimed bugchasers or gift-givers,<sup>2</sup> finding that 70% of those using the labels 'bugchaser' or 'giftgiver' on their profiles actually expressed interest in partners with the same HIV status, concluding that bugchasing 'identity did not consistently match behavioural intentions' (2006: 500). Moskowitz and Roloff (2007: 353) followed a similar process and determined that 'most [users] were not looking for seroconversion, but were looking for ambiguous situations or partners' where HIV infection could occur but was not certain.

This corpus of research faces two major challenges: first, the available studies focus on only two websites (both of which are now defunct) without parallel explorations of more contemporary sites (e.g. Tumblr, Twitter and smartphone apps such as Grindr and Scruff). Second, there is little acknowledgement on the part of researchers of the fact that people's desires as expressed online cannot be assumed to directly reflect their offline practices. In this way, Dawson et al. argue that 'it may be a leap of faith to equate advertisers' report of their HIV status [on a sex advertisement site] with their actual serostatus.<sup>3</sup> It is not uncommon to have misrepresentation in Internet profiles' (Dawson et al., 2005: 80). Robinson calls for further ethnographic research to explore how bugchasers 'are taking up these online discourses within their everyday (sexual) lives' (2013: 108). These calls have been spearheaded by Grov (2006) who compares the tolerance for bugchasing discourse on two websites focused on barebacking.<sup>4</sup> He concludes not only that fantasy and non-fantasy discourses are juxtaposed in those sites, but that the design

and moderation of the forums directly promotes and/or hinders explicit bugchasing narratives within the sites. Thus, he concludes, it is not only necessary to focus on the available profiles but also on the ways in which the sites create and police their own spaces.

These considerations have been at the forefront of internet ethnography and history, with Markham (2018) arguing that ‘the internet is so ubiquitous that we don’t think much *about* it at all; we just think *through* it’ (2018: 1129). Bugchasing research until now has been particularly prone to disregarding the uniqueness of online spaces and the ways in which they mediate users’ participation and dynamics. Race (2015), talking about the hook-up app Grindr, suggests that ‘it is difficult to understand the shape of this culture . . . without getting specific about the affordances, formats, design features and uses of online hook-up devices’ (2015: 254) in a way that does not consider them as simply facilitating but as mediating the sexual encounters they allow. In a similar tone, Crooks (2013) suggests that many of our online interactions do not occur *through* internet platforms but are *created* by the platform design. Thus, bugchasing as we think of it today (through the exchange of instant messages, emails, videos, photos and postings to forums, etc.) is indebted to the very online spaces through which it takes place.

The stigmatization and statistical rarity of bugchasing has made it particularly dependent on the internet, which allows bugchasers to meet likeminded partners in online venues where geographically distant participants engage in emotional, social and/or sexual encounters. While the purposeful seeking of HIV happened before the spread of the internet – and still happens offline – it would be wrong to assume that online bugchasing is simply a transposition of offline practices. Rather, returning to the point that Race (2015) has made, bugchasing is profoundly indebted to the design, functioning and affordances and limitations of the online spaces where it exists. Adopting this point would mean adopting Brügger’s idea of ‘born-digital’ materials as those which ‘never existed in any other form than digital’ and do not ‘have any non-digital original to go back to’ (2019: 17). That is, while bugchasing happens offline, it is not the direct equivalent of online bugchasing, with its unique dynamics and practices. Thus, the object of this article – bugchasing online – is the product of a transformation, a different avenue for research with its own considerations and problematics without a direct offline equivalent.

### **Methodological background: The impossibility of truth?**

Inheriting from this research background, this section focuses on exploring how the unique characteristics of these online spaces mediate bugchasing encounters online and the processes of meaning-making happening therein. In order to illustrate this interplay between users and the online venues, this article draws from three methodological sources: Orbach’s (1999) *Impossibility of Sex*, Cooper’s (2005) *The Sluts* and the field of ethnodrama and ethnoperformance. In this section, I will explain the significance of each of these sources and how the current piece complicates and develops them.

Susie Orbach's (1999) *The Impossibility of Sex* is an investigation into the role of sexuality in our lives through the stories of several of Orbach's therapy clients. Orbach, who is a psychoanalyst herself, bases the stories on true cases but fictionalizes them so that each section presents composite characters and alters identifying information. This process generates what she calls 'patients-on-the-page', which are fictional composite characters that allow her to reflect on the patients' and therapist's emotional processes and on the interpersonal dynamics taking place within the counselling session and relationship. At the same time, their compositional nature preserves patient privacy. While Orbach chose a quite linear first-person narrative to present her experiences, I feel that a more disjointed technique would better reflect my data. It is also worth noting that, like the composite characters of Orbach, the composite users I create for this ethnodrama also prove useful in guaranteeing user anonymity.

Something like a 'user-on-the-page' is what Dennis Cooper (2005) creates in his novel *The Sluts*. The novel focuses on the story of an escort named Brad and is narrated through snapshots of a website where gay male escorts are reviewed, as well as emails and chat-room transcripts. Cooper introduces a multitude of narrators in the form of 'users' who post reviews. As the plot develops, the narrators become increasingly inconsistent, obscure and unreliable, to the extent that Brad's own existence is questioned. This is best represented through formal techniques inherited from the website it tries to represent, such as inconsistent postings, dates, commentary from the moderator and so on. In this way, Cooper represents how people engage online behind veils of (perceived) anonymity and, by refusing to provide any other form of narration or any final explanation regarding the offline situation it narrates, Cooper also emphasizes the impossibility of accessing a definite truth beyond the web. *The Sluts* is a major formal influence on this work, as it evidences that a realistic portrayal of online venues requires a recognition of their unreliability. While this unreliability is perhaps common across research, this article showcases the process of accepting the unreliability inherent to online spaces, the impossibility of determining an offline truth. Yet this acceptance does not mean resignation: as I show, research can accept this uncertainty while still producing engaging analyses of online dynamics, discourse negotiation and so forth. even if these are limited to the online realm and take the form of fictionalized accounts.

At the same time, the practice of ethnodrama proves a useful way of presenting data. Saldaña (2005) defines ethnodrama as 'a written script [which] consist[s] of dramatized, significant selections of narrative collected through interviews, participant observation, fieldnotes' (2005: 2). The script may be performed for a live audience (in which case we use the term 'ethnotheatre' to refer to the particular use of theatrical production techniques) or can solely be meant to be read, as 'closet theatre'. This approach performs a delicate balance between 'allegiance to the lived experiences of real people' (Saldaña, 2005: 3) and the requirements of the theatrical medium: that is, ethnodrama ought to function both as ethnography *and* drama. A further term, more open in its possibilities, is 'ethnoperformance', which stands for 'interpretative event[s]' (Denzin, 1997: 97) – which include ethnodramas and

ethnotheatre but also other forms such as performance events or public readings. In his book, Denzin (1997) provides a genealogy of the practice, which includes antecedents in Bakhtin and Turner, the narrative turn in humanities, for example in the work of Bochner and Ellis, and the principles laid out by Goffman who ‘sees culture as performance’ (Denzin, 1997: 91). Denzin argues that performance is the ‘most powerful way for ethnography to recover yet interrogate the meanings of lived experience’ (1997: 94–95) particularly in the ‘taboo spaces in which the unrepresentable in the culture is felt and made visible’ (1997: 93). In this way, ethnopformance – the use of performance art techniques to represent data – poses interesting potential for the current work.

There is a long history of ethnodramas and ethnopercormances, many of which blur the boundary between academic and non-academic texts. Within the field of academia, I am particularly indebted to the work of Ellis (2004) who narrates her own experiences of abortion and the death of her parent, as well as that by Tillmann (2001, 2015), which focuses on the author’s experiences with bulimia, divorce and gay–straight friendships. In her book, Tillmann (2015) constructs one of the chapters as an ethnodrama based on interview material, fieldwork and autoethnographic data. In this case, the script is not a finalized product, but rather, its writing is conceptualized as a process through which researcher and participants reflect on their own experiences and negotiate lasting representations. In these works, the dramatic form serves to introduce the non-verbal and emotional aspects of the research process in a visual and creative way that renders them accessible for a multitude of audiences.

Even though works such as Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* and Moises Kaufman’s *The Laramie Project* (in collaboration with members of the Tectonic Theatre Project) would not fit within the scope of academic work, these plays are nonetheless based upon extensive interview and ethnographic work, using verbatim or edited quotations as key aspects of the final product. A common aspect among many of the ethnopercormative authors is a commitment to social justice and change. For example, Mienczakowski (2003) and Hamera (2018) both actively engage the audiences in the creative process and develop open forums to discuss after the shows. This is also a main aspect of Nathaniel J Hall’s 2018 *First Time*, which discusses HIV infection and combines materials from group discussions and the author’s own experiences.

While none of these practices have been strictly adopted for the current work, they all pose interesting antecedents and influences: the creation of fictionalized accounts, the importance of accepting unreliability and the use of dramatic formal conventions to introduce further information and present the material in a more accessible way. Overall, I employ the current text to render accessible to the reader the experience of doing fieldwork within these online spaces, and to highlight how some of the site’s affordances and limitations influence the processes occurring there. In the absence of a truth about what goes on beyond the screen – offline – this text presents a different truth, an embodied experience of accessing and (perhaps unsuccessfully) trying to make sense of the multitude

of voices in this online space. In so doing, not only is the reader invited to experience the researcher's challenges, but also encouraged to be more attentive to the ways in which users interact with each other and with the website to construct bugchasing discourses.

### **Methodology: Using ethnodrama to explore online interactions**

The current text is the product of fieldwork conducted on the main bugchasing section of an online forum. The 800 threads with most replies were sampled. Of these, 77 were considered relevant and analysed, featuring a total of 3065 individual posts (an average of 40 posts per thread). The threads had been published between September 2010 and March 2018. Three criteria were used to select threads. First, threads were included that were 'unique', meaning that they addressed little-discussed topics within the bugchasing groups (such as the negative aspects of HIV infection). Second, there were threads that complemented material obtained from both the interviews I had previously conducted as part of a larger research or material considered by previous researchers. These threads were also included. And third, threads were also included which featured active user participation, meaning that users engaged in significant discussions or debates and not only posted URLs to pornographic material.<sup>5</sup> The selected threads can be loosely classified in three main areas: personal narratives (where users, either the original poster opening the thread or other users share anecdotes or experiences), debates, and those where the user opening the thread seeks advice. Obviously, there is significant overlap. For example, a user's post seeking advice may create grounds for debate or compel other users to share their own stories.

A further criterion for thread selection was the dynamics the users posting on the thread evidenced: particular attention was paid to those threads where users engaged over long periods, replying to each other's posts, breaks of communication occurred (such as users deleting previous messages), or moderators/administrators acted to remove, ban, or edit users' posts. I believe the inclusion of these threads best exemplifies the digital character at play and how the affordances and design of the site produces certain dynamics in the forum. Particularly relevant posts were then selected from each thread. Emergent themes were identified across the sample of posts: discussions of PrEP, the role of pornography, views of HIV medication, negatives of HIV infection and of bugchasing, views of online dating sites, fantastical imagery and relationship advice. Other themes, such as personal anecdotes regarding bugchasers' first-time experiences or relationships with health institutions, were considered but have not been included in this piece. All these themes were manually coded.

Two overarching criteria guided the selection of excerpts from the forum to be included in the final text. The first was a search for the equilibrium that underlies any ethnodramatic text. Saldaña argues that 'an ethnodrama is a data corpus – with all the boring parts taken out' (2005: 16), but also acknowledges that the researcher-writer ought to find a difficult balance between being representative of

the research material and entertaining. In this way, I felt that simply selecting those quotations or posts that were more illuminating or enlightening would defeat the realism of a forum where the majority of posts are, indeed, repetitive and poorly articulated. Without introducing, at least, a symbolic amount of these posts, there would be no representation of how the forum actually works. Secondly, I was interested in showcasing the ‘fantasy’ discourse, which a significant proportion of my interviewees had talked about. This kind of message is very enthusiastic about bugchasing, contains a large number of ‘mythical’ ideas about the fetish (such as HIV as pregnancy), is extreme in its content (such as claiming that dying of AIDS is the hottest possible outcome of infection) and is lengthily verbose. Typically, users posting these messages are perceived by others as ‘meth-heads’, users whose posting comes under the effects of methamphetamines or other drugs (commonly referred to as chemsex<sup>6</sup>). A main interest of this text is to showcase the tension existing between the ‘fantasy’ discourse and the discourse that other users promote. The latter, while still favouring bugchasing, does so from a more realistic and complex perspective.

The posts selected were then paraphrased, with the identifiable information – in the few cases where this was present – changed, and arranged in a fictional set of conversations which, in a similar tone to Orbach’s character-on-the-page, combined features of several threads and users. Rigour was ensured by comparing the produced text to interview material and actual threads on the forum. It was also at this point that the decision was taken to abandon more orthodox theatrical format and move towards a form influenced by performance art. Saldaña argues that ‘the key [to writing ethnodrama] is to consider the appropriateness of the story’s medium’ (2005: 2). Thus, I felt that imposing live actors and plot upon these conversations was inadequate. First, my interview participants had highlighted that these online spaces were important for them, but very few rendered them as significant social spheres, they rather appeared as instrumental objects within their masturbatory or sexual routines. In this way, generating a sustained dramatic plot would impose a continuity and consistency foreign to the intermittent use of this venue by many participants. Returning to my previous point about the impossibility of accessing a truth beyond the screen, I felt that introducing traditional characters would humanize the users beyond what is experienced when reading the posts. While it is true that a significant amount of non-verbal clues are given (by style of writing, uses of language, usernames, etc.) users remain, for the most part, anonymous on the website. Finally, it is worth noting that while this text is not directly intended to be performed on stage, it uses stage directions to help highlight some of the dynamics that take place in the online space it represents: these stage directions highlight the sometimes choral voices of the forum, the ‘pings’ emphasize the permanent updating of the forum, and some of the notes on how sections are read are representative of how the writing and editing of those entries provides connotations to the text itself.

The adoption of creative methods should not mean overlooking ethical principles. Two major issues arose during the creation of this text. The first is an matter of representation: while this forum is representative of the bugchasing group (as the



majority of interviewees mentioned it), the process of selecting statements and arranging them performs a difficult balance between being creative and faithful. As mentioned earlier, the temptation to only represent the most shocking of posts had to be balanced by an interest in representing – if in a much smaller scale – the existence of large swaths of the forum characterized by more realistic or repetitive comments. The second issue has to do with a risk of intromission: after all these are sexual spaces where users talk about their intimate sexual fantasies and experiences, and where they expect a degree of privacy and collegiality. Extracting posts from this context may not only denaturalize them, but also betray users' motivations for sharing them in the first place. The available ethnographies on bathhouses and other sex venues (such as Bérubé, 2003; Dean, 2015b; Delany, 1999) provided valuable examples of the use of contextualization to frame any troubling passage within its particular setting – in this case, this critical discussion preceding the text frames it.

Conquergood's (2003) exploration of the ethics of ethnodrama was also enlightening. His ethics are articulated in four quadrants alongside two axes (identity-difference and detachment-commitment). Good ethnodrama should balance the four quadrants to attain a 'dialogical' stage at the centre. Deviating and favouring one of the four quadrants creates 'ethical pitfalls'. The first pitfall is the 'curator's rip-off' which exploits a group's culture for the researcher's benefit. In this case, I feel the larger exploration of bugchasing practices, its contextualization within the online space, and the comparison of the source materials to material obtained from interviews and that collected by other researchers provides a more comprehensive and round view of the fetish which prevents a degree of rip-off.

Conquergood also argues that 'a facile identification' with the group represented can render 'performances marked by superficiality' that are articulated around the simplistic notion of 'we're all the same'. This pitfall, which he terms 'enthusiast's infatuation,' is also prevented to an extent by the profound and reflexive consideration of the fieldwork and by seeking supportive and contradictory instances in my work. The third pitfall, the 'curator's exhibitionism', is characterized by a 'fascination with the exotic' where the 'performer wants to astonish rather than understand'. In this case, shock is valued over genuine contact. As explained earlier, the selection of posts has been carefully done so that all elements that could prove shocking are framed within a context and where non-shocking elements are also present. Finally, the 'sceptic's cop-out', which simply refuses engagement with the topic in any depth, is challenged by the very process of accessing the site, performing fieldwork and generating a play which does not aim to foreclose the debate with facile answers but rather produce a visceral response that generates further questions and reflections on the audience.

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These discussions frame the accompanying text by providing a review of its methodology and a summary of the bugchasing research it complicates. Doing so not

only places the text within a larger scientific and historical context, but also highlights the ways in which this text departs from previous research. This departure is double: first, I have chosen to focus on the ways in which bugchasers interact with their online spaces and how the characteristics of these spaces influence the development of bugchasing discourse. Second, I have also chosen the form of a ‘closet ethnoperformance’ – an ethnoperformative script intended to be read – to allow the readers to gain insight into the workings of online spaces, but also to experience the process of research. The overall goal is to complicate the research available to date, which already has considered the content of bugchasing discourses, but has failed to explain their production, and which also has used online sites as material but has failed to explore their uniqueness. The ethnodramatic text is organized in four ‘threads’ created by fictional users and addressing different themes. These sections are composites of those found in the forum under analysis. After the text, a final section will provide an analysis and conclusion to this work.

## **Poz Ping**

Cast:

59,857 users (as of 10 February 2019)

TopXLToxic – administrator

*Staging:*

Within a darkened room, three black male mannequins stand in the centre. As voices read the posts below, different faces are projected over the mannequins. In the background, a soft mechanical hum is present throughout the performance.

[*loud ping*]

**POZCUMLOVER** *opened the thread ‘why do we chase?’*

**POZCUMLOVER:** In my case, it was an expected evolution. Since I started getting fucked raw, poz loads always were more sexy. It didn’t take me long to started actually chasing. I’ve now been fucking poz guys for a year and I’ve just converted. I’m not a proud 25 poz bottom. What about others?

[*there is an explosion of simultaneous voices that quickly subside*]

**GERMANPOZ:** Like you, I just had to accept the gift. I have so much raw sex that I’m gonna be poz for sure, so why not relax and enjoy the ride?

**LUCIFERSUBPIG:** There are many chasing bottoms who wait nine months before getting the test, that way they can feel like it’s a pregnancy and the test the birth. Is getting HIV just like getting knocked up? You’re just creating a new life, becoming

immortal in a fresh new live. If you think about it, you're also looking for a guy to poz you like a woman looks for a daddy for her vaghole. You can even let your bug grow inside your body, like a child. [*louder, deeper*] Is HIV a gay man's child?

WHTHOLE: I agree. Fuck, nothing hotter than getting to carry another guy's baby in my guts.

AC1979: Fuck yeah, those guys who stop their meds and just waste away are just fucking proud of their virus.

DIRTYLONDON: Come on, this is taking it too far. Like I get some may feel a connection, but I personally never think of the bug as a baby, that's just weird.

NYCPIGPOZ: This is such a creepy post, giving me super bad vibes.

TOPXLTOXIC (ADMINISTRATOR): I agree this is a weird post. It's for things like this that @lucifersubpig got banned once.

PETER POZ: Actually, I think @lucifersubpig is right. I've also thought about this. From my view, why we gift/get it's because we have no other way of getting pregnant. We can exchange DNA and alter a chaser's as part of the gift. After all, pregnancy is our natural instinct just like it is for any other human or non-human animals. We're here to fuck like animals. This is the most similar thing we have to making babies. This is why I think it's such a big thing for many people, at least for me. @Pozcumlover you started this thread, hope this answers it.

VANEG28: Meh this is so much BS. I've ALWAYS bb since I was like seven and yet I'm still fucking clean. I'm 28 and so disappointed, how can I be a proud fucking slut and not have HIV to prove it?

RAWCHRIS: That's so true, @vaneg28. There's no way to really be a slut if you're neg. So stupid to avoid it.

WHITE4COCK: @Rawchris does that mean I'm not a slut because I'm neg and on PrEP? I've probably have had more sex last week that you've had all your life.

PARISPIG: Who is in this with me to get full AIDS? It's the DEFINITE being owned by another man...the idea of toxic seed eating your body inside out, sharing it in other holes...so HOT! Now I'm POZ and I'm gonna giving to as many cunts as I have time to...it's my calling!

USEME48: Fear is a key aspect. If you search the internet most of it seems to be very hedonistic and erotic but it's just a bunch of guys trying to get over the fear of getting the virus so that they can enjoy sex again.

BBEARNYC: Guys, I think we're forgetting that most guys on here, at least the ones I've talked to, are not really chasing, we just like GREAT sex. The thing is that we have to accept we're gonna get pozzed if we're BB sluts.

MARTINNZG: I disagree @useme48. In my experience bugchasers are either fakes (we all know who we are talking about here) and poz guys (or those who know they're poz but waiting on a test) who are trying to cope with their diagnosis and getting some added enjoyment.

DRACO21: @Parispig that's your opinion, but I bet almost everybody feels different. This place is full of fakes and crackheads saying they do things they don't and IMO most of the posts are just fantasy. For most of us barebacking is about the intimacy and connection with another guy, not about risk. I have no clue how trying to avoid a disease is stupid? @Rawchris if you have a good sober answer, please share.

*[Immediately after the last word by DRACO21, there's another loud ping]*

### **ADAM59 opened the thread 'becoming a chaser?'**

ADAM59: Long story short, I've been with the same boyfriend for the past 11 years. I love him to death and wouldn't do anything to intentionally hurt him BUT over the past few months I've grown more and more into chasing. Like I can't cum if I don't think about poz guys anymore. Finally, yesterday I told my boyfriend and, lo and behold, he said it was hot and that he'd help me find poz tops to rape my hole. Can't wait to visit the sauna this weekend.

*[there is an explosion of simultaneous voices that quickly subside]*

BOY4POZ: Well done! You're lucky to find a boyfriend like that, sharing the love of the bug with another guy is such an intense communion. Good luck with the chase!

MAXOSPN: Congrats on opening up. Keep up updated on your adventures.

MEXSLUT: I love sharing my bugchasing desires and shocking people. I need them to know who I really am.

PERVPOZ19: Same here. I like my boyfriends to be so wasted and skinny that my family gets worried. I brought a full blown guy to meet my friends and they asked me whether he was sick. My cock got so hard!

KRUGCHASER: I try expose myself over Facebook, like I'll like and follow bugchasing sites and friend wasted guys. Waiting on the friends and relatives I have on facebook to ask me about it. I'll cream my jeans when they do.

HAILAIDSNZ [*quickly*]: The final frontier for the Bug Chaser is to have no shame about his identity, no problem identifying as a poz cumhole. It's far beyond identity . . . it's being PROUD of yourself and being incredibly happy about being a sick pervert who gets turned on by a virus that will eventually kill you!!! Many people would suffer, but catching a deadly disease is the most amazing feeling for a bugchaser!!! Obvs psychopath Bug Chasers like me rejoice in revealing our 'evil' side (at times super childish and immature) and love finding new ways of hurting the people who love us!!! Introducing your family to a wasted sick boy is so hot and I'm sure there are more ways to worry and hurt the people who want us to leave healthy lives!!! I feel bugchasers I've never met to be more family, I love them so much because our greatness lies in our perversion!!! I'd be up to help another bugchaser plan a sick prank that would traumatize his family. I know it's disgusting and childish but watching them suffer by discovering their loved boy is a true evil fucker is a moment all us Bug Chasing Brothers would carry huge grins as we hurt them!!! :-)

IRISHNEG25: Little bit off topic, but here it goes. My boyfriend is poz and unmedicated (we can't afford his medications at the moment) and has a high viral load. It's kind of a big issue because he is terrified of getting me infected and, although we use condoms, I can still feel he's frightened all the time. We've been talking about our relationship and how it would be if he pozzed me. At first, he refused but I know he's considering more and more and, last week, we were having sex in the shower and he slipped and asked me if I wanted his poz load in my cunt? So hot! We both came loads. So maybe it's the way to go. Do you think I should let him poz me?

*[there is an explosion of simultaneous voices that quickly subside]*

SILVERFOX: Obviously! You're so fucking lucky to have a HVL boyfriend. Go for it and make your relationship extra-special.

PETERPOZ: I'd like to impart a word of caution. As much as you love your boyfriend, HIV is for life. You can't know if you're gonna be with this guy in five or ten years, but HIV is forever. By all means, go chase it if YOU want it, but don't do it just because your BF wants it.

TIM34TOP: I'd say that's the best way to have a level playing field.

DRACO21: I know so many guys who got the bug because their boyfriend or husband wanted them to and then broke up. Sure it's hot in the moment, but what about the medical bills? The sickness? Will your relationship stand all that?

LUTONSEX: I'd give anything to find someone to share everything with, even his bug, go for it buddy!

ALEXXL: Nothing hotter than poz talk while being fucked, but think about the implications: if you can't afford his meds, what will happen if you also become poz? It's all very hot but the reality is far more complex

SCOTOXIC: Come on guys. He wants it. It's obvious his hole is begging for a poz load. I say go for it and enjoy the ride. YOLO.

TEXASCHASER42: I'm kind of in the same situation. I'm 40yo and have recently ditched condoms over the last couple years and going BB, and I love it. Sex feels so good, so natural. I don't know how I've spent so many years without feeling another's man spunk in my ass. I'm more and more tempted to chase to be able to enjoy my sexuality more freely and not have to worry about PrEP or all that crap. But there's something holding me back, I guess, because I've not really gone all the way. If you're a real poz barebacker or chaser (and I can figure out the fakers quite quickly) let me know how you managed to start on this path. True answers only!

*[there is an explosion of simultaneous voices that quickly subside]*

DIRTYKY188: Simple. When I think about poz cum flooding my ass my cock gets rock hard. My cock know what's best so I just go with it.

SEXPERVLN: The way I see it, you either choose to not worry about it (it will come for sure!) or go chase and enjoy the ride.

NEGPARI37: @DirtyKY188 I wish I was that calm and sure about it! Truth is that getting pozzed is a major change and although I love fucking with poz guys and jerk off to poz videos I'm not sure I'm ready for it yet.

LUCIFERSUBPIG *[very slowly, as if pulling every word out of himself]*: How can you not want the eternal life that AIDS gives you? It's the most beautiful thing...to achieve immortality and wisdom...those are things mere mortals can't dream of getting to. AIDS gets you a spot in the heaven, flying with the white doves high up above the clouds carrying the angels dressed in white who died in the 80s and 90s. What a beautiful would it would be if everyone had full-blown AIDS and there weren't any meds? It would be utopia! Peace on earth. We have to pray that one day a POZ cumwhore chaser will be President of the US. I hope it comes soon.

DRACO21: I cringe when I see guys ask the internet whether they should chase. Clearly, if you have to ask a bunch of random anonymous people on a forum you're not ready to chase.

ADAM59: Original poster here, lost the login to the previous profile. I got knocked up about two years after starting to actively chase it. You can too!

*[An unintelligible chorus of voices explodes and slowly subsides until only a slight noise is left in the background]*

TOPXLTOXIC (ADMINISTRATOR): Welcome to the club! Now it's time to share the gift!

TOXICROD: You're in the right place then! Tell us more about it.

NEG4POZCUNT: Congrats! Can't wait for the day I'm pozzed too.

*[ping]*

**GuestTWINK4POZSA opened the thread 'anyone wants to die of AIDS?'**

GuestTWINK4POZSA: Anyone here wants to die of HIV? I'm just curious as I'm 19yo and starting to feel more and more bugchasing and I have a detailed fantasy of how I want to be pozzed and what I'll do after. I want the virus to spread in my body until I die and I even know how I want them to get rid of my body after I die of HIV. I'll explain it all in future posts. Ideally, I want HIV to take hold of my body quite fast, so I'll go for a drug resistant superbug. It may take some time, as I'm top only. I'm not sure yet if I'll go through with it but I'm more and more temped to although there are some details that need working out first. Anyone else into the idea?

BIGLOADWANTED: Fuck yeah! That's so fucking hot!

*[This sentence remains for a few seconds as an echo]*

ROSEBUDBOY: Sounds like you got a perfect plan! Don't hesitate and just start fucking. May take some time to get it as you're top, but make sure to fuck hard and long so that there's a lot of bleeding to get HIV in your bloodstream too.

XYMAN167: With the meds today there's not need to die fo AIDS unless you have a read deathwish.

GuestTWINK4POZSA: @Xyman167 I don't want to go on meds. I want to die from a med resistant strain.

HOLEREADY43: Great plan @xyman167. Got me boned up just reading your post.

GuestTWINK4POZSA: Thanks guys but are you aware that I plan on dying very quickly once I'm pozzed?

TOPXLTOXIC (ADMINISTRATOR): I'm moving this post to the bugchasing section as it doesn't really fit within the sexual health section.

*[there's another digital ping]*

DRACO21: How exactly do you plan on getting it @twink4pozsa?

GuestTWINK4POZSA: Not sure yet. My idea was to go to a 'sex house' and just have many poz bottoms ride my dick raw so that I can catch aids then I would just stay there and waste and keep spreading it to more guys who come until I finally succumb to it.

LUTONPOZ: Hot! I wish I was one of the bottoms to be bred by a wasting poz top!

DRACO21: Hot for sure, but sounds more like a fantasy than something doable. Not trying to be negative, but that's quite unlikely to happen. My suggestion is to keep it a fantasy until you figure your life better and enjoy as much sex as possible before committing to it.

*[prolonged silence]*

PETERPOZ: Have you noticed that the 19yo with a very clear plan to convert and die quickly disappeared from the forum? He joined and only posted that one day and never longed again. Sounds to me like a youthful passing fantasy and that's for the best I think. 19yo is way too young to take life-changing decision. Of course it makes us old perv bone up when we think of a cute young guy getting pozzed but being real most guys that age don't even know what they'll do at uni, so making life plans is probably not the best.

POZBREEDER: Best of luck to him! Let us know what sauna you're at so we can go ride your diseased dick.

HORNY4POZ: @Peterpoz I'm more inclined to think he simply went through with it on another site. Wish him the best!

*[ping]*

*HAILAIDSNZ opened the thread 'going all the way'*

HAILAIDSNZ [with interferences and static noise]: I spent so many years trying to get knocked up it doesn't make sense that now that I'm poz I'm killing my virus with meds and try to make it undetectable. I am a proud AIDS cumwhore and I want my strain to be wild powerful and potent, I want to feel it spread inside me every day. I've been on G and meth all weekend and finally decided to go all the way and become a true AIDS slut – I've fucking destroyed my supply of meds, with no way of getting a refill now. NO way out, NO last-minute dramas. I'm one with



the bug now. First we dropped each pill in bleach and then down the drain. That's it, my cock is so fucking hard dripping venomous precum all over the place that we fuck up the delivery of next month's meds. With two months off meds, I'm sure I'm gonna grow a fucking resistant and POWERFUL bug. I'm just here stroking my rock hard posion rod and doing more meth and I know I'm making the right decision.

MARKBB: What the actual fuck? This is why healthcare is so fucking expensive. Do you even know how much those meds are? Do you even pay for them? At least you should have given them to the poor or like to a charity. African children dying don't have the luxuries we do.

TOMBBBTTM: Well done @hailaidsnz. If we work so hard for our virus why would then we try and kill it? Let it run wild and free.

DADDY4SON: You're right @markbb, those who think full blown is hot have their brains rotten from all the tina and G or have no fucking clue what they're saying. I wish they had seen when meds were not there in the 80s. Can't imagine what's hot in seeing a friend die in a hospital, unable to breathe.

TOXICWEAPON [*shouting the capitalized words*]: Very hot! But that's not enough. When the next batch comes you have to do your virus a favour and take the pills for two weeks as normal, then skip dose and then finish the month skipping the second to last. 90% adherence is the goal to get resistance to all treatment cocktails. The ultimate aim is the failure of all treatment combinations. Save ALL skipped doses and use them to maintain the resistance. That way we can help return the virus to its original POTENT AND UNTREATABLE state like in the GOOD OLD DAYS when HIV = death.

[ping]

## Conclusion

This ethnodrama is a challenging text that may well provoke a visceral response in the reader. In a way, I hope this embodied viscosity triggers spaces of reflection from which to challenge both the reification of the bugchasing community as a radically queer group and the facile othering and condemnation of bugchasers and their discourse. This ethnodrama is less about providing definite answers about *why* bugchasers fetishize HIV and more about exploring *how* they fetishize it, particularly in the online sphere.

Within the ethnodrama, a multitude of possible loci of criticism exist. First, several users explain their bugchasing desires as a form of erotic self-harm and, even suicide. This has already been theorized by Cheuvront (2002, 2007) and continues a long-standing relationship between sexuality – particularly queer

sexuality – and death (e.g. Aydemir, 2007; Edelman, 2004), which is frequently mobilized when discussing HIV/AIDS (e.g. Bersani, 1988). There is, within the comments in the play, a distinct sense of nostalgia for the AIDS crisis, which, while shockingly phrased here, is not unique to bugchasing discourses (see Dean, 2011 for an academic example; and Murphy, 2016 for a fictional one). These comments also evidence the appropriation of heterosexual reproduction to frame HIV infection as a form of kinship and genealogy (Dean, 2009). In this same way, bugchasers on this forum also appropriate health discourses: far from ignorant about the effects of HIV infection and its treatment, some users exhibit great awareness of these narratives and they include them in their erotic repertoire.

Previous reviewers of this text were particularly shocked by the last message, focused on developing drug resistance and the equation of AIDS and death. There are two reasons for the inclusion of that passage. First, while most of the script intends to highlight a dialogue between ‘fantasy’ posts (more extreme and verbose) and ‘rational’ ones (still favourable to bugchasing but more realistic in its potential), the final post seems to bridge both: it is clearly written, knowledgeable in its instructions and concise in its meaning and yet its content is extreme, beyond what most other posters would dare to say. It is this combination of characteristics that makes me, and previous readers, feel particularly strong about it. The strength of my feelings is the second reason for its inclusion: out of the thousands of posts I read for this research, this made me feel the most uneasy and thus, I felt it *must* be included. In his poem ‘Ground Swell,’ Mark Jarman argues that ‘you write about the life that’s vividest’. I feel this post is perhaps the one that most vividly represents the emotional and intellectual complexities of this research.

This is also the reflexive element of this text. While the researcher does not feature as a character in the text – this would have been too unrealistic, as I did not participate in the forum during the fieldwork – the text remains reflexive in the way in which I have composed a final script that is emotionally significant for me and for the readers. I have chosen excerpts based on their relevance but I have also inevitably been guided, in part, by my own emotional reactions to certain posts or phrasings. It is this process of composing and reading that makes this piece reflexive.

Overall, this text has two objectives. First, it seeks to explore the ways in which bugchasers negotiate bugchasing discourse online and how the unique characteristics of the sites influence said negotiations. Second, it hopes to create *in the reader* the embodied feeling of accessing this site as a non-participant, of reading these texts and appreciating its dynamics and uniqueness, and grappling with the impossibility of finding a ‘truth’ beyond the screen. While a few ‘users’ appear several times throughout the script, only an attentive reader would be able to pick these and establish some form of character. At the same time, the lack of any significant plot and the constant breakdown of communication through the intromission within conversations of other characters render it particularly unsettling and make it difficult to reach any final conclusion. These objectives have guided the stylistic choices of the ethnodrama and the selection of information to be included. No piece could represent the entirety of the dynamics through which the internet mediates our interactions. Rather, I have

selected the aspects of the online space that I feel best help to achieve these stated goals. However, I recognize that other pieces – with other goals – may well select other alternative approaches and designs.

This performance text is not intended to be performed for a live audience, Saldaña (2005) rightly argues that for ethnotheatrical pieces the collaboration between researchers and practitioners of theatre is necessary, a collaboration that has not happened in this case. Rather, it is intended to show the potential of ethnoperformance as a way of illustrating the ways in which online spaces mediate the activities they allow in an accessible and experiential way. It draws from previous work both on autoethnography, literature and ethnodrama to explore the potential of these techniques within the field of internet studies, something which has not been previously considered. The script is not real, but neither is it entirely fiction. It does not correspond to any one conversation, or any one day of fieldwork, but it summarizes and condenses both the interactions available online *and* the experience of conducting fieldwork as a non-participant. This is an experiment, itself an exploration, a continuation and a breaking away.

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### **Notes**

1. Current medications allow many people living with HIV to reach ‘undetectable’ status, meaning the amount of viral units in their body is so low they cannot infect others. See Prevention Access Campaign (2016) for a key summary of this, and Dean (2015a), Felicianantonio (2017) and Jones (2017) for a discussion of its implications.
2. Gift-givers are HIV-positive men who fetishize infecting others.
3. Meaning someone’s HIV status.
4. Barebacking is the eroticization of condomless anal intercourse (see Dean, 2009).
5. A large number of the threads with most replies are compilations of pornographic material or some form of list (such as actors living with HIV). While a large number of users reply to these posts, they mostly limit their replies to posting photographs, videos, etc., thus not being considered as actively engaging.
6. Chemsex is a gay and bisex-cultural phenomenon involving the interaction of drugs (mainly crystal meth, mephedrone and GHB/GBL), technology in the form of hook-up apps and pornography. It consists of extended sexual sessions known as ‘chill outs’ where the sexual experience is enhanced by the drug use.

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