No Need to Wrap it:
An Exploration of Gift-giver and Bug-chaser
Newsgroups, Gift Theory, and Exchanging HIV as a Gift.

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A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts

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Ottawa, Ontario

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Abstract

In the 1990s after 10 years during which safer sex became the sexual norm for many gay and bisexual men in North America, a growing number disclosed they were engaging in unprotected anal sex, or 'barebacking.' While some barebackers sought greater intimacy and freedom and the fulfilment of a particular masculine ideal, other gay and bisexual men engaged in unprotected anal sex to facilitate the exchange of HIV. At World Wide Web newsgroups, self-identified Gift-givers and Bug-chasers post messages offering to give or receive HIV; exchanges where HIV is considered a gift. In the available literature on the phenomenon of Gift-giving, there is no consideration of HIV as described by Gift-givers and Bug-chasers, namely as a gift. By making reference to sociological and anthropological theories of gift exchange, I consider how exchanging HIV as a gift impacts self-identity and social roles in order to answer the question: why gift?

Acknowledgements

If may take a village to raise a child but it takes a lot of people to write a thesis too.

Thanks to thank Lorna Weir, professor, York University, for planting the 'seed' from which it grew. When I approached her about writing a paper on Gift-givers, it was she who handed me a book about gift exchange.

To my thesis advisor Bruce Curtis, professor, Carleton University, a big thank you for being gracious about my changing from a topic that greatly intrigued him (and I thought, myself), a governmentality analysis of blue box recycling, to one that intrigued me a little more. For his academic rigor, confidence in me, and sage advise that "you have to start out loving it," many, many thanks.

To my second readers, Blair Rutherford, associate professor, Carleton University, and Emma Whelan, assistant professor, Dalhousie University, thank you for your constant help, corrections and enthusiasm.

And of course my fellow grads, Robyn, Danny, Craig and Paul for commiserating with me so completely. And a special thanks to Craig for doing that final read through.

To my two dear friends Tara and Catherine a huge thank you. To Tara my housemate for letting me speak of the thesis, and to Catherine my running partner, for letting me run from the thesis.

Finally to my partner of 17 years David Pepper, the most principled, moral person I have ever known, without whose encouragement and a faith in my abilities (far surpassing my own), I would not have even begun; my deepest gratitude for giving me the greatest gift of all.

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Chapter One - Introduction

“If you are not scared, you have not been paying attention.”
Member, B.G.B., May 17th, 2001

As a caution to fellow Gift-giver and Bug-chaser newsgroup members, the above newsgroup message fails to convey how most members view their relationship with HIV. It is quite inaccurate to suggest that the members of newsgroups whose purpose is to exchange HIV as a *gift* are not paying attention and those that are should be afraid. The men, who participate in Gift-giver and Bug-chaser web-based newsgroups, do not fear conceiving of HIV as a Gift,¹ something to which they pay great attention. Perhaps this warning is more applicable to myself given my relationship with HIV/AIDS. As a typical middle class gay man, I most certainly am afraid of HIV and pay it quite close attention.

When in the late 1980s reports out of the United States described a mysterious illness that seemed to affect only gay men, I did not feel particularly at risk.² But I did have a sense of disquiet, not unlike that feeling one gets when walking along train tracks wondering, “was that a whistle I heard?” I felt something could be headed my way. Like many women and men, first I got involved by beginning to practice safer sex and then by volunteering at my local AIDS service organization. I got involved quite simply because I was afraid and if the best way to deal with one’s fear was to confront it, I walked right up and shook its hand. Within a few years I was working as a ‘safer sex outreach educator for gay and bisexual men.’

¹ In the text ‘Gift’ refers to HIV given as a *gift*. Written in italics *gift* refers to a *gift* in the usual sense. Please note Gift is used by newsgroup members as a noun (Gift), verb, (Gifting) and adjective (Gifted).

² The first such report was an article in the New York Times, July 3rd, 1981: “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals.” This was followed that same year by a report from the Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta, about cases of pneumocystis carinii pneumonia, a condition normally seen in elderly men of Mediterranean origin, appearing among otherwise healthy, urban, gay men in Los Angeles (Glinn 2003:1).

Knowing precious little about human sexuality in general but plenty about gay men and sex, I took on the job of HIV prevention educator for my community. The 'Safer Sex – Man to Man' program AIDS Committee of Ottawa that I coordinated was known for innovative approaches, such as going out to where gay and bisexual men had sex, namely parks and bathhouses.

While there was a 'support' element to my work, I did not engage in counselling those living with HIV. Occasionally, I would hear counsellors speaking of someone who deliberately became infected with HIV. Such stories seemed more akin to urban legends or the vicious myths of right-wing ideologues, in which poor women were said to get pregnant in order to collect more welfare, than credible accounts. But there was something about such stories, something that frankly made sense. Working at the heart of the AIDS service industry, I knew how much attention, assistance and pure kindness (and pure meanness) those infected with HIV and living with AIDS were granted. As a strategy for attention, assistance or simple recognition, getting HIV on purpose was perversely logical. That any particular benefits resulting from HIV varied hugely between white, urban gay men, women of all races and anyone seriously using drugs, did not seem to factor in.

Flash forward ten years. I was out of the 'AIDS biz,' back at school completing an undergraduate degree in sociology. I had returned to school wanting to leave HIV/AIDS behind and, once at the graduate level, I set out to write a Master's thesis on recycling and governmentality. Considering how blue box programs mobilized the citizenry to sort anew their garbage took me a good distance from HIV/AIDS. Truth be told, the study of blue box programs sparked few passions in me but it was an interesting and doable thesis topic.

Then I heard about Gift-giving. If I once considered perversely logical stories about people getting HIV as a means to an end, namely attention, services or assistance, then stories about men seeking HIV not as a means to an end but as an end in itself were just perverse. That men would do so, exchanging HIV as a kind of gift, seemed not just perverse but surreal.

This thesis considers the phenomena of Gift-giving and Bug-chasing. Self-identified Gift-givers are HIV positive men who offer to transmit— give— HIV to those requesting it. Bug-chasers are men who are HIV negative and wish to receive— be given— HIV. Within these planned exchanges the two parties involved refer to HIV as a Gift or the Gift. Little information exists within the academic literature about the purposeful exchange of HIV, although much has been written in the popular press. Those academic articles and stories in the popular press that do address Gift-giving tend to focus on its presence on the World Wide Web at Gift-giver and Bug-chaser newsgroups, chat rooms and web sites. Given the accessibility that the Web provides to researchers, I chose to consider Gift-giving as found on it, through a study of Gift-giver newsgroups. However, in a departure from the approach seen in the available literature, which considers Gift-giving as a deviant, possibly suicidal desire for HIV, I chose to consider not why HIV but— why Gift?

Review of the Literature on Gift-giving and Bug-chasing

I was able to find only a single academic article on the issue of Gift-giving and Bug-chasing. That article, “Bareback Sex, Bug Chasers, and the Gift of Death,”³ by Gauthier and Forsyth

³ ‘Bareback sex’ or ‘barebacking’ are terms commonly used by North American gay men for anal sex without condoms. That Gauthier and Forsyth chose to focus on Bug-chasing rather than Gift-giving, is a common feature of academic and media articles. Perhaps this is the case owing to the fact that while Gift-givers could give the Gift by engaging in barebacking without disclosing their HIV status, Bug-chasers must establish a partner’s HIV status before-hand unless they wish to leave finding a partner with HIV to random chance. For this reason I believe Bug-chasers are regarded as the more compelling story. The degree to which Bug-chasers

(1998) considered Bug-chasing to be a form of sexual deviance, similar to stripping, voyeurism, homosexuality, etc. Perhaps because it is as an emerging phenomenon, the dearth of literature indicates that many researchers have simply not heard of Gift-giving or perhaps its disturbing aspects dissuade research. However, the fact that this new phenomenon is strongly associated with the Web, which is itself an emerging venue for research, further reduces the degree to which Gift-giving is researched. While little academic literature exists, this is not the case for the popular press. What little academic literature there it shares with stories in the popular press a concern over how the Web may act to facilitate this behaviour.

Gauthier and Forsyth (1998:96) concluded that, while a number of sociological and behavioural factors were at play in Bug-chasing, researchers should pay particular attention to how “sometimes advances in technology may lead to unsafe sex” (1998:96). In a recent *Rolling Stone* article, Bug Chasers: The Men Who Long to Be HIV+, writer Gregory Freeman (2003:4) suggested that of the approximately 45,000 new HIV infections reported each year in the U.S., up to 10,000 of these were the result of Bug-chasing. This conclusion was based almost exclusively on the work of Dr. Bob Cabaj, director, Behavioural Health Services, San Francisco County.⁴ In *Rolling Stone*, Freeman (2003:1), like Gauthier and Forsyth, expressed a concern over the role the Web might play by suggesting “bug chasing could not exist without the Web, or at least it couldn't thrive” and without “web surfing and e-mail, it would have been practically impossible for bug chasing to happen in any great numbers.” In a related article, *Capital Xtra* writer Rory MacDonald (2003:1) warned readers that, just as

must communicate with those giving them HIV to establish they have the Gift, thereby creating some bond, reflects how we generally do not receive or expect to receive *gifts* from complete strangers.

⁴ *Rolling Stone's* article was widely criticized for being full of inaccuracies and false statements. Even its featured authority, Cabaj, said in a *Newsweek* story, that the “feature is false and it is impossible to know how many gay men deliberately go out to get infected... but the figure is likely to be very small” (Jake 2003:2).

“bathhouses were the source of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, the Web has become today’s modern vehicle of transmission.” This shared anxiety over the role the Web may play in enabling behaviour, due to its apparent capacity to make people aware of behaviours, is an expression of a long standing belief that the mere exposure to behaviour may lead to its adoption. Similar concerns have been expressed within the gay community regarding the emergence of bareback pornography. Because there is a fear “that talking about fantasy inevitably leads to people acting on it” (Altman 2001:1), there are those who worry that barebacking, even when presented as a sexual fantasy in a porn video, could move some men to have unsafe sex. As well, in discussions about the ethics of Web research, researchers are cautioned to keep in mind how as a forum the Web may enable deviant behaviours. As a result, researchers, through the use of non-judgmental language and adoption of an objective point of view, are cautioned they may legitimize behaviours and contribute to their spread (AOIR 2001:7).

Another common feature shared by academic and popular press articles is the degree to which they quite inaccurately describe Gift-giving, presenting what is known about it incorrectly. In all three articles, Gauthier and Forsyth, Freeman and MacDonald misread barebacking and Gift-giving, presenting them as the same behaviour. Gauthier and Forsyth (1998:89), in noting the lack of “literature on barebacking, especially expressed as a form of bug-chasing” have linked the two. Freeman (2003:1-2) admitted that his 10,000 new infections, were possible only if one employed a “more liberal definition of bug chasing,” meaning the inclusion of those men who, because of their being in denial about the risks of HIV, bareback but do not “call themselves bug chasers.” The *Capital Xtra* article highlighted not how many Gift-giver newsgroups or web sites existed but how many men belonged to

barebackcity.com,⁵ a popular bareback web site: “60,000 members... all willing to practice unsafe sex—a bug chaser’s pot of liquid gold” (MacDonald 2003:1). I would suggest it is only by conflating these two quite different sexual acts was it possible for these authors to present Gift-giving as such an alarming and substantive threat to public health.

Barebacking and Gift-giving are different sexual acts. Certainly the risks of contracting or transmitting HIV increase when men engage in anal sex without condoms, but as a goal barebackers do not seek this, while Gift-givers and Bug-chasers do. And while there are newsgroups devoted to bareback sex for both HIV negative and positive men, most advise that negative men do so only with other negative men, and vice versa. In this way barebackers are employing a strategy known as ‘serosorting’: seeking out sex partners whose HIV status is equal to their own (Suarez and Miller 2001:292). While not a completely effective strategy, it reflects attempts by barebackers to limit the risks of HIV while engaging in unsafe sex. That the two sex acts differ was borne out by my search of bareback newsgroup messages for words related to Gift-giving and Bug-chasing such as gift, sharing, brotherhood, which found only rare instances of their use.⁶ I suggest this is because barebacking is not equal to Gift-giving.

Review of the Literature on Barebacking

Clearly the literature on Gift-giving is limited and problematic. Yet there is a wealth of credible articles found in both the academic and popular press on barebacking. Having just established they are different acts, I run the risk of contradicting myself by now suggesting,

⁵ Barebackcity.com is one of the largest and most popular bareback web sites featuring companions ads posted by barebackers, bareback porn, and related links (<http://www.barebackcity.com> 2003).

⁶ Using the ‘search function’ common to the newsgroup platform, I conducted a number of searches and found few instances of ‘gift talk’ at bareback groups. While most barebacker newsgroup moderators make no statement either for or against Gift-giving, this behaviour is not part of the sexual practice of barebackers. Moderators, even if they fail to make their stance clear, are in a position to screen out any Gift-giver messages.

in effect, that barebacking can tell us something about Gift-giving. I do so, however, because the literature on barebacking is useful in that it speaks to the environment in which North American gay men began to once again engage in sexual risk-taking after years of HIV prevention education. Much of the appeal of barebacking and many of the rationales for it, as demonstrated by research, have a great affinity with the sexual ethic of Gift-givers. As we consider the literature on barebacking, I would ask the reader to pay attention to how dissatisfaction with safer sex, concepts of masculinity, new HIV treatments, HIV as an inevitable infection, and the erotization of HIV/AIDS work synergistically to enable the emergence of barebacking. Later we shall see how these factors contribute to Gift-giving.

In the early 1990s, after years of highly successful HIV prevention programming, community leaders, HIV prevention educators, and AIDS researchers feared significant numbers of gay men were once again having unprotected anal sex. Whether a new development or an ongoing phenomenon, HIV researchers worried that declining rates of new HIV infections among gay and bisexual men had led the focus of prevention efforts to shift to other at-risk populations, leaving gay men vulnerable (Suarez and Miller 2001:288). The degree to which there really was something 'new' happening among gay men was debatable. For example, in 1991, two major studies of HIV-related behaviour among gay and bisexual men in Canada found 23% had unprotected anal sex in the past three months (CAS 1993; COCQ-sida and Université Laval 1993).⁷ In 1994, surveys of gay men in San Francisco found 24% had anal sex without a condom in the past six months (Howard 1998:1). While some regarded the findings as indicative of a return to unsafe sex, others believed they demonstrated the

⁷ The Canadian national study, "Men's Survey: The Canadian Survey of Gay and Bisexual Men and HIV Infection" (Canadian AIDS Society 1993) and the Between Men: Sexuality and Social Environment in the Age of AIDS (COCQ-sida and Université Laval 1993).

existence of a sizable population of gay and bisexual men who had never adopted it in the first place.⁸ Of the newness of barebacking Saylor, (1999:1) suggests “in the ‘80’s we didn’t call it barebacking,” rather barebacking was just the “current nickname for unprotected anal intercourse between gay men.”

By the late 1990s, however, particularly in the United States, HIV prevention educators and researchers believed there was sufficient evidence to conclude that greater numbers of gay men now used condoms inconsistently or not at all, challenging the success of HIV prevention (Carballo-Diequez 2001:225; Suarez and Miller 2001:288).⁹ For example, by 1998 the number of gay men not using condoms in San Francisco was 37%, up from 24% in 1994 (Howard 1998:1). Still, there were those who disagreed that gay men having unsafe sex was new, as there were studies as far back as 1988 showing one third of urban gay men did not use condoms (Odets 1995:13).¹⁰

Whether or not a sizable population of gay men having unsafe sex was a new trend or an ongoing phenomenon, labelling it barebacking and speaking openly about it was new. Rather than perceiving barebacking as a failure of HIV prevention or men’s inability to adopt safer sex, barebackers suggest it has more to do with sexual freedom and making personal choices: “10 years ago people decided that sucking without a condom was OK. Other groups of

⁸ I would suggest that while U.S. educators largely believed the 24% figure demonstrated the great failure of safer sex, in Canada the 23% was regarded as evidence of its great success, given that condom use among gay men, pre-AIDS, was virtually non-existent. Suarez and Miller (2001:288) suggest that the sensationalist portrayal of barebacking makes it difficult to determine if barebackers really are men engaging in unsafe sex for the first time or simply those who have ‘come out’ about their always having done so.

⁹ The evidence for this is derived both from HIV prevalence studies and reported increases in the number of STD cases, such as syphilis and gonorrhea, which are considered measures of increased sexual risk taking.

¹⁰ Odets (1995:181-187) is sharply critical of AIDS educators in the United States for failing to come forward with what he regards as evidence of the ongoing failure of HIV prevention. Suggesting unprotected sex is commonplace, Odets (1995:181) faults prevention educators for denying this, stating “unprotected sex will remain impulsive and covert among gay men... but no less destructive for its public invisibility.”

people have now decided that fucking without condoms is OK” (Carballo-Diequez 2001:228). Rather than fault HIV prevention educators for a failure to convince gay men, some researchers stress the need to recognize that risk behaviours will likely always occur, even among gay men who are highly knowledgeable, motivated and skilled in terms of safer sex practice. When asked to explain why they take risks, men do not point to a lack of knowledge or motivation, but rather to the fact that in some situations unsafe sex is more meaningful, logical and natural— than safer sex (Adams and Sears 2000:24-25). Instead of regarding unprotected sex as the result of ‘accidents’ occurring in the ‘heat of the moment,’ HIV prevention educators were urged by the end of the 1990s to come to grips with the fact that men who had unsafe sex often “made up their minds to engage in unprotected intercourse” well in advance of doing so (Yep, Lovaas and Pagonis 2002:5). As the editor of POZ Magazine put it, “the reality is... many people on occasion view sex without condoms as a value more worthy— at least at that particular moment— than complete assurance they won’t get HIV” (Strub 1997:12).

That growing numbers of men had chosen unsafe sex and celebrated doing so, was at the forefront of gay community debates with the formation in 1997 of the ‘direct-action’ group *Sex Panic!*, whose pro-sex, particularly pro-public sex, stance sparked fears of a resurgence of pre-AIDS promiscuity. Larry Kramer, founder, Gay Men’s Health Crisis, regarded *Sex Panic!*’s celebration of “unconditional and unlimited promiscuity as the remnant of a best-forgotten age when homosexuality was defined in large part by frequent anonymous sex” (Barillas 1997:1). At the November 1997 Creating Change Conference of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, where *Sex Panic!* was hotly debated, porn star and sex worker Tony Valenzuela sparked a near riot when he gave a speech highlighting his having unsafe sex.

Valenzuela was denounced by the assembled crowd of 2000 of America's lesbian and gay political and community leadership, for stating that "the level of erotic charge and intimacy I feel when a man comes inside me is transformational, especially in a climate that so completely disregards its importance (Gendin 1999:50). Yet a mere two years later when mainstream gay columnist Dan Savage (1999:34), of *Out Magazine*, admitted to barebacking,¹¹ declaring, "doing away with condoms, has immeasurably improved my sex life," the outcry was muted. Savage was, in a way, revealing what Odets (1995:14) saw as the "pervasive lie" of HIV education: namely that gay men found safer sex "comfortable, satisfying and unproblematic." Yet while Savage's admission was not particularly news in 1999, it was notable in that it staked out a position first advocated by Australian HIV prevention educators in 1992. At that time, Australian prevention programmers began to emphasize the concept of 'negotiated safety,' whereby committed HIV negative partners stop using condoms unless a partner did something to jeopardize their HIV status by, for example, having unprotected sex outside the relationship (Kippax 1993:192). It took until the end of the 1990s for gay men in the U.S., like Savage, to ask, as the Australians had, why should two HIV negative gay men use condoms?¹²

Like Savage, barebackers believe sex is better without condoms. Safer sex is considered unnatural and at dozens of bareback newsgroups on the Web, barebackers declare they are men "who enjoy raw, skin-to-skin, natural sex with other men" (Member B.B. Jan. 23rd,

¹¹ According to Suarez and Miller (2001:288), people like Savage are not barebacking as the motivations not to use condoms between committed partners differ from those at play between casual/anonymous sex partners.

¹² Australia has long been regarded as a world leader in innovative HIV prevention for gay and bisexual men, while the United States has been regarded as one of the most backward. Whereas Australia, Canada and much of Western Europe adopted a risk-reduction approach to safer sex practice, U.S. efforts demanded a risk elimination approach. However, not everyone in Canada agreed with the Australian approach. I attended a Canadian AIDS Society Conference in Toronto, 1993, where the Australian's were denounced by Canadian HIV prevention educators, because they believed, "gay men could not be trusted."

1999).¹³ When barebacking, men report “the physical sensation is much better... the connection feels closer and more intimate” (Gendin 1997:1). In order to “feel truly connected” to one’s partner, men stress the need to feel the skin and warmth of their partner (Diaz and Ayala 1999:286).¹⁴ Moreover Yep, Lovaas and Pagonis (2002:7) suggest that for many gay men be it safe or unsafe, having sex is the only vehicle through which they feel a sense of connection with community; thus sex is akin to a ‘social amenity.’ HIV prevention education by emphasizing monogamy and/or a reduction in sex partners and the closure in many cities of sex venues like bathhouses, may have closed off for men, their only sources of connection to other men, a connection now offered by barebacking.

Barebackers champion the greater connection and intimacy of ‘raw’ sex, conceptually linking raw sex with an overtly masculine sexuality that celebrates risk.¹⁵ Raw sex represents “the essence of masculine, aggressive hot wonderful sex” and is considered the only kind real men have (Carballo-Diequez 2001:229). I suggest the masculine nature of barebacking is enhanced by the image evoked by the term ‘barebacking;’ none other than that most masculine of male archetypes, the Marlboro man, out riding the range, living by his own rules. Further heightening the masculine, even hyper masculine nature of barebacking and barebackers are the sharply delineated, gendered roles they adopt. “Tops” who take the

¹³ Neither the names or locations of newsgroups or members appear in the text.

¹⁴ Some men see condoms as an admission or accusation of illness. It is feared that condoms signal a belief that one’s partner is promiscuous or that by carrying them, one “is only thinking about or interested in sex, risking the possibility of being stigmatized as a whore” (Diaz and Ayala 1999:286).

¹⁵ Raw sex by its very nature involves the transmission of bodily fluids. Mary Douglas, in speaking generally about our sexual bodies and fluids, suggested these never exist in a ‘raw’ form as they are never free of cultural representations that mediate our experience of them. Sex is always mediated by models, images and representations (Grosz 1994:196-7). Barebacker ‘raw sex,’ therefore is a kind of paradox. Conceptualized as a response to HIV, truly raw sex can never exist freed of those conditions that mediate its emergence. This paradox is analogous to Derrida’s conclusion that the *gift* cannot exist because any *gift* that demands reciprocity or even recognition as a *gift*, which all *gifts* do, nullifies it. A true *gift*, a pure *gift* therefore, can only exist free of these demands. Just as there can be no pure *gift*, there can be no raw sex.

penetrative role are described as dominant, powerful, potent, hung, Masters, Coaches or Dads, while “Bottoms” in the receptive role, are submissive, available, sexually needy, Slaves, Boy or Pussies. When asked to explain why they engage in unsafe sex generally, men evoke a number of cultural beliefs about masculinity. While HIV prevention educators attribute to the ‘heat of the moment’ men’s failure to use condoms, men suggest their inability to control themselves sexually is an essential characteristic of their masculinity. Indeed many see as incompatible the notion of passion and cognitive control. These losses of control are perhaps the most prevalent explanation for unsafe sex among gay men (Diaz and Ayala 1999:282).

Even if men were able to move beyond a biological, essentialized reading of their sexuality, Odets (1995:189-190) suggests the gendered, hierarchical nature of the Top/Bottom dichotomy undermines efforts to play safe. To Bottom, to accept penetration, is to accept a feminized role, to be all that the Top is not, namely passive, receptive, vulnerable, compliant and giving. In the receptive role/position, Bottoms are less physically active and more likely to comply with the Top’s desires. To speak assertively from this sexual/physical position demanding condom use runs “contrary to the whole emotional timbre of the experience” (Odets 1995:190). Presumably for Tops the reverse is true, an insistence on using condoms reveals a feminine unwillingness to take risks and control. Yet for both Tops and Bottoms barebacking is a masculine act. Bareback porn producer, Paul Morris (1998:2) suggested this overt masculinity is an essential, uniquely American characteristic.¹⁶ In his view, American

¹⁶ Throughout my research I have often wondered if there is something about the experience of HIV/AIDS in the United States that enables barebacking, Gift-giving and Bug-chasing. While the web-based host for the newsgroups I studied is used across the globe, the number of U.S. bareback newsgroups is huge compared to other countries. There are hundreds of U.S. bareback newsgroups, but I have never found more than 10 for Canada or Great Britain. It is common for barebackers and Gift-givers from England, Germany and France to

men have a love affair with violence, danger and adventure. American men are by nature reckless and it is this reckless nature that he believes is behind “the current surge of experimentalism and risk-taking vitality in sexual practice,” specifically—barebacking. Speaking at the 1998 World Pornography Conference, Morris declared, “the moment of greatest excitement and commitment, the moment of communion, is also the moment of greatest physical jeopardy.”¹⁷ Morris’ sentiments reflect a view commonly held by barebackers that safer sex practices diminish personal freedom. Thus barebackers are taking back their sexual freedom (C.B.C Television 2001:1) as an expression of both sexual autonomy and a challenge to health and government authorities (Williams 2001:90). Bareback newsgroups on the Web suggest it is time to organize against “political or legislative measures... actions taken by gay groups, AIDS organizations, or businesses that support or infringe on our right to have natural, condomless sex” (Moderator B.A., Jun., 3rd, 2000).

While as an expression of self-determination, barebackers liken barebacking to “being fearless and sexually powerful... having sex when you want it without anybody telling you what to do (Carballo-Diequez 2001:230), others suggest their behaviour results from a belief that HIV infection is inevitable— so why protect yourself? Pointing perhaps also to ‘condom fatigue’ and ‘AIDS exhaustion,’ Odets (1995:14) concluded that when infection seems inevitable, gay men derive comfort from contracting HIV now rather than later: hence the number of men who report feeling *less* anxious about the future, *after* testing HIV positive.

post messages at U.S. newsgroups. As one European said, “I joined several Web groups on barebacking and pozzing to find those parties and orgies. No success over here until now. My country doesn’t seem to have such an actively organized conversion culture and scene yet” (Member, P.B.T.H., [Date Unavailable Due to Group Deletion]).

¹⁷ Morris’s Treasure Island Media produces hugely successful and controversial commercial gay bareback porn, highlighting the exchange of ejaculate, in films such as “Bones for Cumpuppy” and “The Hungriest Cum Hole” (<http://www.treasureislandmedia.com>).

Diaz and Ayala (1999:287-288) concluded the cultural associations between homosexuality and HIV/AIDS are so embedded as to make it difficult for some gay men to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS. Raised in a culture that strongly associates homosexuality with something dirty, evil and sinful, linking being gay with dying of AIDS is perversely logical. As something inevitable, HIV can engender resignation or rebellion. Diaz and Ayala (1999:289-290) believe barebackers rebel by invoking a kind of pre-AIDS sexuality they miss or never experienced, perceiving safer sex as a curtailment of sexual freedom by outsiders rather than an obstacle to be overcome: "So you hear all those stories... about how fabulous sex was in the 70's... fucking around without condoms. And you want to experience some of that."

Yet even if we take barebackers at their word, that they seek only intimacy, naturalness, self-determination and to express their masculine nature, the timing of the emergence of barebacking suggests other forces were at play. The emergence of barebacking as a publicly discussed, possibly growing new phenomenon coincided very closely with major HIV treatment breakthroughs made in the United States. Research (Carballo-Diequez 2001; Howard 1998; Suarez and Miller 2001; Williams 2001) suggests the failure of HIV prevention did not lead to increased unsafe sex, but rather the success of HIV treatments did. After a decade of marginal advances in treating HIV the emergence of HAARTs¹⁸ in 1995-6 sharply lowered death rates and dramatically improved the quality of life for those living with HIV/AIDS, who are able to afford and tolerate the treatments. Here I would

¹⁸ H.A.A.R.T. or highly active antiretroviral therapies quickly became known as HIV-cocktails. The image of HAART as a mixed party drink is completely at odds with what it means to be on the regime, involving ingesting dozens of pills daily. Allusions to HAART as a cocktail, were first made by anti-viral researchers because the regime mixed together a variety of HIV anti-viral medications. One has to wonder if portraying it thus contributed in some coming to see HIV infection as not all that bad.

point out that I was unable to locate any bareback, Gift-giver or Bug-chaser newsgroup in existence prior to 1998, with most not coming on-line until 2000.

So effective were new HIV treatments that there was talk that “AIDS may soon be seen as a long-term, manageable disease” (Waldholz 1996:1). The dramatic change in the experience of AIDS has been cited as a rationale for barebacking. A survey in San Francisco indicated that men who barebacked had somewhat more faith in the new treatments than those who did not, 69% versus 61%, agreed/somewhat agreed that: “HIV was no longer the death sentence it used to be” (Howard 1998:2). Perhaps the finding that those on HAART had such low viral loads (a measure of HIV in the blood stream), as to make them (potentially) ‘non-infectious,’ led some gay men to consider sex without condoms less risky than before (Williams 2001:90).¹⁹ And indeed several studies concluded that the effectiveness of HAART had caused many gay men to reconsider their commitment to safer sex practice (Suarez and Miller 2001:289). For many the visible signs of illness among their friends all but vanished (Carballo-Diequez 2001:226). HAART treatments made it harder to tell who among the crowds of “steroid-pumped muscular men” had HIV (Carballo-Diequez 2001:226). All of this led some HIV prevention educators to ponder if by “letting the treatments out of the bag” gay men were given license to return to unsafe sex (Hickson 1998:1).

While HAART improved the quality of life for those with HIV/AIDS, there was a concern that it heightened the appeal of being HIV positive, enhancing the erotic appeal of HIV.

¹⁹ Williams (2001:90) cautioned, however, that when accounting for their unsafe behaviours many men reported how improvements in HIV treatments reduced their concerns HIV/AIDS, but “these are likely post-hoc justifications rather than causes of behaviour.”

Pharmaceutical advertisements and magazines such as POZ feature beautiful, handsome, fit male models that are assumed to be HIV positive. On C.B.C. Television's Disclosure, in a feature called "Russian Roulette" (2001:1), a barebacker noted "there's a lot of pictures of really hunky muscular guys that almost makes positive living look appealing." This has only served to increase the fear that a wholesale 'eroticisation of HIV,' was underway, leading to increased risk taking (Suarez and Miller 2001:290). Reconceived as a manageable illness, AIDS is now experienced not in a visibly ill body but (at least in advertisements) in a remarkably fit, muscular and erotically powerful body. Rather than fault HAART breakthroughs for eroticising HIV/AIDS, Sheon and Plant (1999:1) suggest attempts by HIV prevention education to "manage desire" among gay men, produced instead a "transgressive desire," that fetishized certain sexual acts because they were dangerous, stigmatized and emotionally charged. Barebacking, they concluded, subverts HIV prevention, fetishizing "the very exchanges of fluids that have been prohibited between gay men" (1991:1).

The Gift of HIV

At the outset of this introductory chapter I posed the question: why Gift? Having reviewed briefly my own background in HIV prevention work, the literature related to barebacking, Gift-giving and Bug-chasing that outlined how they differ as sexual practices, I turn now to focus on HIV the Gift. In essence I am asking two questions, 1) Why think of HIV as a Gift? and 2) Why give HIV as a Gift? The first question addresses what is accomplished by referring to HIV as a *gift*, while the second considers what is accomplished by exchanging HIV. The first question considers giving HIV, while the second considers desiring it.²⁰ In the

²⁰ The deliberate exchange of disease-causing agents between people is not considered a form of *gift* giving but such exchanges are not unheard of. A recent Globe and Mail article noted that prior to the development of

chapter immediately following, I consider the Web as a unique vehicle for social interaction, and how researchers can engage in ethical research of Web users. While it was the case that my enquiry did not require ethical approval, it is useful to consider why this was so and, in addition, to establish what researching the Web entails ethically.

In the next chapter I review the anthropological and sociological theoretical literature on *gift* exchange. Here I highlight theories related to the social role *gift* exchange plays in establishing and maintaining social bonds and how exchange can transform an individual's sense of self, identity, role, and social relations with others. A key facet of this is the capacity of *gifts* to act as a form of communication. Linking together the impact of *gift* exchange on individual donors and recipients, enacting in them a transformation, with the capacity of *gifts* to communicate for donors and recipients, I describe *gift* exchange as a form of transformative communication. For newsgroup members, communicating about the Gift of HIV and the communication of the Gift of HIV, act to bring about a transformation.²¹ In the fourth chapter I interpret my empirical data to establish why HIV is given as a *gift* and why it is desired as a Gift. In answering these questions, I look to both the literature of *gift* exchange and of barebacking. Through *gift* theory, I am able to establish a rationale for conceiving of HIV as a *gift*. Based on what is known about barebacking, I make links between the narratives of Gift-givers and Bug-chasers and the appeal of condom-less sex generally.

vaccines, "at measles or mumps 'parties,' parents tried to expose their children to these illnesses" (Strauss, 2003:4).

²¹ I describe Gift-giving as a form of 'communication.' As a virus, HIV as something transmittable between people, is described as communicable in nature. In order to emphasize the communicative aspects of Gift-giver newsgroups and how through exchanging the Gift members are transformed, I liken this to communicating through HIV, drawing on its communicable nature.

Finally, I would like to stress that this enquiry did not set out to establish, nor did it by sheer accident establish, that any newsgroup members are in fact giving or receiving the Gift. That being said, throughout the text I take the messages of newsgroup members at face value as an expression of the desire for HIV and as apparent reports of the fulfillment of that desire.

Chapter Two - *Ethical Web Research*

“Whether the benefits and risks in on-line research are less or more than what occurs in the physical world remains to be determined as research enters this new technological frontier.”
Frankel and Siang (1999:3)

Frankel and Siang are unambiguous in their determination that, in contrast to research done in the physical world, the benefits and risks of on-line research have yet to be determined. Perhaps as social researchers we will never be able to state that any one approach is more or less beneficial or risky. However Frankel and Siang fail to define what on-line research is. Is it research conducted on-line? Or is it research of the on-line environment, of Web sites, and communities? If asked, I would have to answer that my on-line research was both. By making extensive use of the technological capacities of the Web I engaged in research both ‘on’ and ‘of’ the on-line environment. But as to the nature of the on-line environment Frankel and Siang offer a contradictory perspective, suggesting that it differs from the ‘physical world’ while metaphorically describing it as a ‘frontier,’ evoking a yet to be explored, yet to be populated, physical landscape.²² While the on-line world is different from the physical world and represents a new frontier that researchers have yet to explore, it is clearly inhabited. Given that the on-line world is populated and because the benefits and risks of on-line research have yet to be determined, as researchers we must determine before-hand what our ethical duties are. I begin this chapter with a review of the ethics of on-line research, establishing that my research into Gift-giver newsgroups was ethical in theory and practice. In conclusion I consider issues of methodology.

²² The term ‘electronic frontier’ was first used by Howard Rheingold, (1993) “The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier,” a title that reinforces the concept of people ‘living on the web,’ here as homesteaders breaking new ground in an empty land.

Carleton University's "Policies and Procedures for the Ethical Conduct of Research," (2000), make no specific mention of Web research. The kind of research I proposed, of on-line newsgroups that did not include interaction with human subjects, would be considered by the Board as research into the public domain and as such did not require its approval. The omission of mention of the Web in Carleton University's policies is not unique, as many institutions involved in research have yet to establish if Web research is sufficiently different from that done in the physical world to require specific guidelines.²³

The finding that my research did not involve human subjects is in keeping with generally accepted North American ethical standards for Web research. Research involving the analysis of text messages posted to on-line, publicly accessible newsgroups, that ensures the data cannot be linked back to newsgroup members, is not considered research involving human subjects.²⁴ In North America generally, publicly accessible newsgroups on the Web are considered as in the public domain and as such researchers do not need to secure the consent of either newsgroup moderators or members (Walther 2002:2; Eysenbach and Till 2001:1104; Frankel and Siang 1999:7; AOIR 2001:9-10). In Canada, although they make no mention of the Web specifically, the "naturalistic observation" provisions of the Tri-Council Policy (2001:31-32) statement on ethical conduct for research involving humans cover data gathered in the public domain not traceable to subjects and absolve researchers of the need

²³ For example neither the ethical guidelines for the University of Toronto or Dalhousie University specifically mention Web research.

²⁴ Many ethical guidelines make this determination regarding Web research based on provisions governing research into the public domain rather than the Web specifically. However, the United States Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45, Part 46, Protection of Human Subjects, Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Health, Office of Protection From Research Risks, does make specific mention of the Web. The Code stresses that in order to be considered non-human subject research, Web researchers must ensure that when using publicly available records, they ensure 1) data cannot be linked to human subjects and 2) the research does not entail interaction with human subjects (Walther 2002:2).

to gain subject consent.²⁵ However, the fact that I was engaged in non-human subject research and did not require ethical approval does not absolve me from behaving ethically. While there exists broad acceptance of this view, there is no agreement as to how to proceed ethically.

The ethical imperatives to which any enquiry into the Web as a social phenomenon should adhere, in spirit, differ little from those governing ethical research done offline. They are founded upon the same insistence that as researchers we do no harm. To a great degree the measures we currently take to ensure the propriety of research involving human subjects emerged as part of the world's response to atrocities committed during World War II. The disclosure at the Nuremberg trials of non-consensual experiments performed on human beings by the Nazis moved the Nuremberg War Crime Tribunal to draft the Nuremberg Code in 1947. In the post-war era, the Code would become the prototype for ethical guidelines covering medical research involving human subjects. Over time, the limited utility of the Code for non-medical research became clear; for example, its utility for research into social relations, given the Code's emphasis on protecting human subjects from harms resulting from medical procedures. As a result, in 1978, the Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical Behavioural Research in the United States established additional non-medical research guidelines, the so-called Belmont Principles. Emphasizing,

²⁵ The Tri-Council statement describes the ethical policy position for the Medical Research Council (MRC), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada. My interpretation of its naturalistic observation provisions for research is that it would consider that research into publicly accessible newsgroups does not require ethical approval as newsgroups are in the public domain. "REB [research ethics board] review is normally required for research involving naturalistic observation. However research involving observation of participants in, for example political rallies, demonstrations or public meetings, should not require REB review since it can be expected that the participants are seeking public visibility." The statement goes on to caution that in public, persons do not expect to be under observation that raises privacy concerns, particularly if they can be identified, but "naturalistic observation that does not allow for the identification of the subjects, and that behaviour is not staged, should normally be regarded as of minimal risk" (Tri-Council 2000:31-32).

in addition to the need to protect subjects from physical harm, that researchers show 'respect for persons,' the Principles stressed researchers consider people autonomous agents and required that they acknowledge that persons of diminished capacity need special protection (Jones 1994:30-31).²⁶ I would add, that given the troubling nature of some behaviours, such as the desire to exchange HIV, the emphasis on respect for persons is critical if researchers are to refrain from dehumanizing the very subjects whose behaviours they study, particularly when those behaviours disturb the researcher's own sense of morality or good conduct.

The legacy of the Nuremberg Code and the Belmont Principles has been that to proceed ethically researchers must ensure they adhere to principles of autonomy, beneficence and justice. To protect the autonomy of subjects, participants must be fully apprised of any benefits or risks entailed in the research in order that they can give free and informed consent. Beneficence enjoins the researcher to maximize any benefits while reducing harms or risks to subjects. To ensure justice for subjects is to distribute the benefits or burdens of the research equally (Frankel and Siang 1999:3). Jones (1994:31), however, believes that to adhere to these three principles allies researchers with protections more in keeping with medical or therapeutic research than those necessitated by social science research, particularly Web research. Research not involving interaction with human subjects, such as that into how people navigate the Web, the characteristics of web messaging, etc., does not put subjects at physical risk or in a position to benefit physically. Thus Jones (1994:30) asks why it is necessary for such research to adhere to guidelines emphasizing protecting subjects from physical harm.

²⁶ Those with a diminished decision-making capacity, namely children or the mentally disabled, need special protection and are generally excluded from consenting to participate in research.

While it is true that Web research does not present the same potential for physical risks or benefits as offline research, it is not risk free. The Web as a technology and a forum for social interaction makes for a unique research environment, one not fully considered by ethical guidelines. For potential subjects, Web research differs significantly from traditional human subject research, as there are greater risks to their privacy. Researchers in turn face greater difficulties in securing informed consent and challenges in ascertaining subject identity. In addition, the Web presents to the researcher a number of unique research areas, such as the use of email, newsgroups and chat rooms, for which no definitive ethical approach has been established (AOIR 2001:7-8).²⁷ The unique risks and challenges facing Web researchers are a function of how individuals and groups use the Web. For example, at their place of work people often engage in personal correspondence using their employer's email, readily disclosing personal information. They are often unaware that such email can be stored indefinitely on the employer's data server and can be retrieved by that employer. Were a person to complete an on-line, confidential questionnaire as part of a research project using an employer's computers, a record of that questionnaire could potentially remain within their data files long after it was sent in confidence to the researcher. Because of the unique nature of the Web, the researcher is forced to reconsider commonly held notions of community, public and private, identity, and consent, in deciding how to (and to what degree we must) protect research subjects.

²⁷ As a general guideline, the Ethics Committee of the Association of Web Researchers states researchers have a moral obligation "to respect and protect human beings as autonomous agents and thereby to protect human dignity" (AOIR 2001:6). Researchers are obligated to 1) do no harm, 2) protect the anonymity of subjects, 3) protect the confidentiality of all data tied to subjects, and 4) obtain informed consent of subjects where required.

Community

Rheingold (1993:39 in Fernback 1997:40-41) defines Web community as 'virtual,' as those "social aggregations that emerge from the Web when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace." In common parlance however, people do not describe their Web communities as virtual, but as being 'on the Web,' in which they 'live on the net,' revealing the degree to which people believe Web communities exist somewhere, at some place on the Web. Traditionally, our sense of community was tied to a place and by inhabiting it, this sense of place informed our identity (Jones 1997:15-16). While community and daily life are experienced at a fixed location within a definable community or neighbourhood, Web communities disturb this experience, providing to us no sense of place, no landmarks to define where exactly we are. People may speak of 'living on the net' but would be hard pressed to locate exactly they live. The Web allows on-line users to establish community with people from across the globe, erasing their sense of how geography traditionally situated social life (Fernback 1997:38). The population of these 'placeless communities' fluctuates minute by minute as Web users log on and off, reducing our ability to determine who lives in our community. And if one of the great promises of Web research is its capacity to provide easy access to populations spread over vast geographic areas, being able to locate subjects firmly geographically is difficult (Frankel and Siang 1999:4). Based on my review of newsgroup member profiles and newsgroup names, Gift-giving appears to be concentrated in the American Midwest and South.²⁸ Perhaps this is the case, but it is equally possible that members have simply registered as living in those areas in order to meet the

²⁸ I say 'appears' because the reliability of the information provided by group members is unclear.

membership demands of newsgroup moderators. And it would be wrong for me to think of the newsgroup as an electronic notice board, as existing within a particular geography.

Spread apart as they are potentially, yet readily accessed by the Web researcher, populations of Web users are generally considered quite diverse, creating a rich public forum. Frankel and Siang (1999:4) caution, however, that, while the Web provides easy access to apparently diverse populations, confirming their actual makeup as to gender, ethnicity, geographic location, etc., is far more difficult than it is with face to face research; therefore the potential for sampling bias is high.²⁹ Even when regarded as a forum with a potential for diversity, the range of people who comprise the public using the Web is believed to differ quite sharply from that which made up the public sphere in the past. Fraser, (1990 in Fernback 1997:37-38), suggests that at one time the public sphere was almost completely dominated by the propertied classes of men, while the contemporary Web is home to various 'counterpublics' comprised of gays, feminists, labour organizations, etc., making use of the Web as a result of their past exclusion from the public sphere.³⁰ Due to this greater diversity, Fraser (1990 in Fernback 1997:38) concluded "cyberspace is essentially a reconceived public sphere for social, political, economic, and cultural interaction." With a similarly positive perspective Jones (1997), drawing on the work of Schuler (1996), noted that in the past the composition of communities was the result of our adhering to principles of exclusivity, inflexibility and

²⁹ There is also a recognizable racial and economic divide among Web users in the United States, see: "Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide. Report to the US Department of Commerce National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1999." Statistics Canada reported in 2001, that while 49% of Canadian households had one member regularly using the Web, when broken down by income level, this number changes to 87% for the one quarter of households with the highest income, and 32% for the one quarter of households with the lowest income (Statistics Canada 2002).

³⁰ In discussing this point, Fraser (1990 in Fernback 1997:38), is critiquing Habermas' concept of how rational public opinion and policy were developed based on debates held within a public sphere of competing ideas. That in the past the (European) public sphere was a limited forum for debate largely restricted to propertied, bourgeois men, thereby excluding women and non-propertied classes is a restriction challenged by the Web.

isolation. The Web, in contrast, provides us with the opportunity to create “a new community... fashioned from the remnants of the old” (Jones 1997:10). The sheer diversity of the populations using the Web would appear to challenge traditional notions of community based as they were on a civil society living within a bounded geography, comprised of an apparently uniform population that tended to downplay difference among members (Fernback 1997:39; Jones 1997:25).

Perhaps we can take as evidence of this new community the way in which, on the Web, people speak with total strangers: something not readily done in the physical world. The fact that visual cues which might prevent strangers from interacting in public, such as those that reveal gender, ethnicity, economic status, age and lifestyle, unseen or disguised on-line, may fuel this greater willingness to talk (Wellman and Gulia 1999:176). This latter point may be particularly important for gay men using the Web, who may be drawn to it as a result of their feeling isolated by the growing emphasis on physical attractiveness within the off-line gay community.³¹ But for those seeking the Gift, a behaviour not supported within the general gay community, the Web readily connects those who might otherwise never meet.

Within these less traditional communities behaviour departs from tradition in other ways as well. Wellman and Gulia (1999:175-177) note among Web community members a greater willingness to assist one another, and a strong sense of connection to fellow members, most of whom will never meet offline. Assistance takes the form of members sharing programs or code, information on good web sites, technical expertise, etc. Given the geographic distance separating them, the willingness to assist is unusual in that distance can undermine

³¹ Then again the advent of digital cameras and web cams means that even on the Web one must be able to reveal one's self, thus the Web may yet become as body-focused as any gay bar or bathhouse.

motivations to do so. Wellman and Gulia suggest the reciprocal supportiveness found on the Web is a means of expressing identity, bolstering one's on-line sense of self esteem (by being seen to be helpful), and of creating a sense of on-line 'citizenship' that solidifies group cohesion.³² The on-line contributions of members are considered critical to the success of a community in that whatever the goal, participants must actively contribute (Kollock and Smith 1996:178). At Gift-giver newsgroups this participatory spirit is seen in the sharing of information on related web sties, warnings about possible shutdowns and, of course, the Gift itself.

Schuler (1996 in Jones 1997:10) found Web populations have a higher sense of shared purpose and a focus on meeting common goals. Yet while Web members may share a set of concerns about, for example, issues of censorship or limitations on Web use, Fernback (1997:46) cautions that what appear to be a set of shared, even egalitarian views relate almost exclusively to Web use and accessibility and do not extend to a critique of web site content. In addition, this shared sense of purpose, reciprocity and action can work to exclude anything outside the paradigm, making communities insular, closed, and isolated from other communities from which they might benefit. In the hundreds of messages I reviewed, I came across only one negative voice: "Just think twice before you get the gift. It's expensive and it hurts. I hope I don't offend anybody with this posting." (Member, H.P.G.B., Dec., 2001). The lack of contrary voices reflects the work of newsgroup moderators who block contrary or negative postings critical of Gift-giving or Bug-chasing, who advise all potential members, "no preaching, spamming, flaming lurking permitted. All violators will be banned"

³² I would suggest the use of the word 'citizenship' is problematic. Its use reflects a conception of the Web as a place, in that we typically conceive of citizens as people living within a particular geographically bounded country, which as a legal, judicial entity grants them certain rights.

(Moderator, D.F.W.R.G.C, Jan. 4th, 2000).³³ Web communities that are focused only on shared interests risk becoming purely conceptual, losing their ability to move beyond talking, thereby manifesting a sense of community through talking about doing, rather than doing. By founding a sense of community solely on a set of shared self-interests communities become “places where history and hope are forgotten and community means only the gathering of the similar, and community degenerates into lifestyle enclave” (Fernback 1997:40-41).

Public / Private

For the researcher, the Web offers a wealth of readily accessible public data sources that are so accessible that we too easily assume ‘accessible in public’ indicates ‘for use by the public.’ Yet proceeding ethically depends on determining the public and/or private-ness of data. These boundaries are blurred not just for researchers, as Web users too generally fail to grasp the degree to which their private communications are public. By posting messages to public web sites from the privacy of their home or office, users experience a false sense of security, failing to understand how public their private messages really are (King 1996:124, Polancic 1996:146). Participants in publicly accessible newsgroups generally believe that only members of that newsgroup will have access to, or indeed read, their messages (Walther 2002:2).³⁴

³³ “Lurking is not having a visible profile posted at [web host name removed] with required information” (Moderator D.F.W.G.C., Jan. 4th, 2000). To gain access I had to establish a profile but did so with the minimum information required, namely my age, sex and location. Some newsgroups would consider me lurking because of my not interacting with members, yet I never found any newsgroup followed through with warnings that lurkers would be banned. This placed me as a researcher in an awkward position ethically, in that I was breaking a group rule, but I balanced this against the concern that revealing my presence would negatively impact group’s behaviour. I took solace in Jones (1997) who likened lurking to a “near stasis condition,” a form of activity parallel to reading. To lurk is to be “no more part of the social than is a wallflower,” meaning my impact on newsgroup society was negligible (1997:13).

³⁴ Walthers (2002:2) considered newsgroups to be so ‘public,’ that with reference to the United States Code of Federal Regulations on the Protection of Human Subjects, he likened the study of on-line Web archives to the

The use of public/private categories may only serve to confuse matters for researchers as Web users access the Web in public places to engage in private speech, often of deeply private matters. Waskul and Douglas (1996:132-133) caution that the publicness of the Web interaction does not preclude the emergence of private interactions, thus “researchers do not have the right to redefine the context [private statements made in public] of the research situation to meet their own vested interests and aims.” Jones (1994:33) suggests public/private categories should be applied only metaphorically to the Web, as a way of deciding what can be recorded with or without consent, but they cannot be applied uncritically. If public/private categories are rigidly applied, researchers would be precluded from studying many “experimental groups” via the Web. I concur with this statement but I am not in total agreement with those who suggest that, were it not for the Web, as an experimental group Gift-givers could not connect with Bug-chasers. While the Web is a vehicle facilitating communications about this it is not only one, for example it has been my experience that on gay men’s phone-sex lines, one can readily find HIV negative gay men looking for HIV positive gay men.

In an effort to move beyond these distinctions, the Web environment could be reconceived as a hybrid of the public and private. Because of its capability to facilitate one-on-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communications simultaneously, the Web does not readily fit regulatory models based on a public/private dichotomy (Fernback 1997:50).³⁵ This diversity of communication possibilities lead Waskul and Douglas (1996:131-132), to describe Web

study of old newspapers. Given that the Web is essentially a mechanism for the retrieval, storage and transmission of data he concluded, any expectation of privacy was “extremely misplaced.”

³⁵ As a standard feature of on-line chat rooms, participants can communicate ‘publicly,’ sending messages to the whole group, or ‘privately,’ exchanging messages with an individual. That many web services, such as AOL, regularly monitor discussions even in private chat rooms challenges these categories (Jones 1994:32).

communication as being both ‘publicly-private’ and ‘privately-public.’ Traditionally, public/private spheres were conceived as separate physical spaces. The application of public/private boundaries to the Web thus works only if we think it too is a bounded, physical place. Given that the Web is not a physical place and that on it private interactions occur publicly, Waskul and Douglas (1996:132) concluded public/private dichotomies alone cannot be the basis for sound ethical Web research decisions.

Yet, however flawed public/private distinctions may be when applied to the Web, ethical guidelines for research consistently state that making just such distinctions is critical to decisions as to whether or not subjects need to consent to research. If it is determined that subjects interactions, or in this case messages, exist in the public domain, this fact is sufficient to exempt researchers from gaining subject consent. According to the United States Code of Federal Regulations, behaviour in public settings is afforded no protection from recording for research, as long as subjects cannot be identified, as only communications inside personal space are protected (Walther 2002:2). Analyzing publicly available records too can be undertaken without the consent of the subjects (Eysenbach and Till 2001:1104, Frankel and Siang 1999:7). The Association of Web Researchers (2001:10) takes the position that the need for informed consent can be waived as long as observations made in public cannot be linked back to participants and revealing that research is occurring by gaining subject’s consent would affect the behaviours to be studied.³⁶ On this latter point, King (1996:120) strongly cautions researchers not to disrupt behaviour, noting that, “requesting permission of the group to conduct a study based on messages that group generates is often a gross disruption of the very processes of interest to social scientists.” In

³⁶ AOIR (2001:10) further specifies that gaining consent can be waived if, 1) users are using pseudonyms, 2) users can choose between public/private message functions, and 3) users are not put at risk by the research.

my research, I strongly believed requesting permission would limit my access. Based on my experience of working in AIDS prevention with gay and bisexual men, I sense a general weariness of their being the objects of study. And given the propensity of newsgroup moderators to delete or never post contrary view points, I believed revealing myself would result in my membership being cancelled.

Based on the above, a researcher could well conclude that whole sections of the Web are open to being researched without the consent of those studied. Yet persons using the Web have an expectation of privacy, perceiving what are for all intents and purposes 'public' communications to be 'private.' Therefore, "when subjects believe they are in a private setting, the ethical dilemmas of a researcher surreptitiously gathering data cannot be ignored" (King 1996:12). While it can be justified that researchers not acquire the consent of subjects, researchers need to acknowledge that as autonomous agents simply going about their daily lives, people have no reason to expect they are objects of study.³⁷ Because alerting research subjects as to the existence of research risks changing behaviour and causing disruption, the researcher is left in the ethically justified but uncomfortable position of proceeding through deception. Researching by deception, either by intentionally misinforming or failing to disclose to subjects, is ethically justified only if there are 1) benefits to the research, 2) no alternative methods, and 3) the risks to subjects are minimal (Frankel and Siang 1999:9, King 1996:122).³⁸ But in King's (1996:120) view, the analysis of newsgroup postings without the consent of the members does not involve the deception of

³⁷ Frankel and Siang (1999:7), in their report on a workshop on the ethical and legal aspects of human subjects research for American Association for the Advancement of Science, stated not all agreed with this. Some believed it was up to Web users to filter out what they considered private, while others believed researchers had to acknowledge the privacy expectations of Web users.

³⁸ Frankel and Siang, (1999:9) stress a fourth condition, namely that subjects be de-briefed at the conclusion of the research process, but they note the difficulty in doing so given the ebb and flow of Web group membership.

subjects— but does involve a lack of consent. Given that this enquiry proceeded neither with the consent of newsgroup moderators or members nor their awareness of the research, I believe it inappropriate to refer to them as either ‘participants’ or ‘subjects’ in that they did not choose to be the former or are unaware of being the latter. Thus I use the terms ‘newsgroup moderator’ or ‘member.’

Identity and Anonymity

Ethical guidelines that allow researchers to waive consent rules consistently stress that in presenting their research the identity or location of subjects must be kept private (AOIR 2001:6-7; Eysenbach and Till 2001:1104; Jones 1994:33; King 1996:120; Polancic 1996:145; Walther 2002:2; Waskul and Douglas 1996:134). By rendering data untraceable, subject anonymity is protected and subjects are shielded, for example, from any psychological harm that might result from their being identified. Technologically, however, the Web makes any guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity suspect, as data are invariably archived or stored in information caches, often without either subject or researcher being aware of this. Coupled with the fact that virtually anything posted or transmitted to the Web remains there months or even years even after deletion, protection of confidentiality and privacy is difficult (Frankel and Siang 1999:5-6). Therefore, researchers must come to grips with how the Web actually works in order to establish methods to ensure confidentiality (Polancic 1996:145).

For some, the fact that Web users disguise their identities through pseudonyms is sufficient privacy protection and, therefore, researchers have commonly included the pseudonyms of subjects in published texts. It has been argued that, as the ‘public face’ of Web users, pseudonyms are important indicators of users’ subject interests, styles, and personalities and

to change or hide them obscures the meaning of on-line interaction (AOIR 2001:10).³⁹ Waskul and Douglas (1996:134) counter that pseudonyms reflect more than a simple desire to hide one's identity but are also a conscious choice about the presentation of a 'virtual social identity.' Pseudonyms shield users from unwanted interactions with other participants and allow a variety of identities to emerge on-line.⁴⁰ Similarly, Frankel and Siang (1999:5-6), in noting how researchers have traditionally considered pseudonyms to be false identities and have therefore published them, cautioned that people invest in their pseudonyms on-line just as they do their identities offline. Therefore, identifying a pseudonym for example by, attributing a quote to it, could generate a backlash from the on-line community. If, as Jones (1994:33) suggests, part of the liberating experience the Web offers to people is the opportunity to reveal "both less and more of themselves... to control— to an extent which is itself frequently illusionary— what and how much is revealed and/or held back," then as researchers we should not interfere with this.

The use of pseudonyms to hide or reconfigure identity, or a person's altering of their physical description, for example by changing their gender, highlights the fluidity of identity, and indeed of the body itself, when represented on the Web. For Capurro and Pingel (2002:2), this raises fundamental questions about what actually is the proper object of study for researchers. In research, should we protect the physical body and in, addition, its digital representation? Capurro and Pingel argue yes, the digital body and identity are to be protected from harm by unwanted identification because of the degree to which users invest

³⁹ Not all members at the AOIR ethics workshop agreed with this position stressing the pseudonyms must always be hidden or changed to protect identity (AOIR 2001:10).

⁴⁰ Waskul and Douglas (1996:134) liken the construction and maintenance of on-line anonymity to a 'performance' based on users on-line perceptions and context that emerges as a variable element in their interactions with people and the social world on-line.

emotionally in them. They caution researchers to remember how any “analysis may infringe upon the bodily or digital existential projects of other people” (2002:4), highlighting the need for measures that protect subject’s physical and virtual selves.

In deciding what groups can be considered public, and therefore open to study without consent, Web researchers must also take into account issues of accessibility. The degree to which an on-line web site or newsgroup is accessible to the public is a good indicator of the degree to which members expect their communications to be private. While some on-line publications, such as newsgroups, have been regarded as analogous to newspapers based on their public availability, Eysenbach and Till (2001:1104) stated newsgroup users do not expect their messages to have the same level of public visibility. Researchers can acknowledge this by taking into account whether, 1) a membership is required to join the site, 2) the number of real or assumed members, and 3) the perceptions of privacy held by members, in order to assess how accessible a web forum is. King (1996:126) suggests Web communities exist along a continuum of privacy. Publicly accessible, unmoderated newsgroups appear at one end, while a private email forum with an undisclosed subscriber-only web address appears at the other. Even if newsgroup members naively believe that only those who sincerely respect, understand, and support their group read messages, King stresses researchers must acknowledge these beliefs.

Based on a consideration of the ethical guidelines discussed above, I concluded that the privacy expectations of newsgroup members were high based on three factors. First, due to the content of their messages, the expressed desire to transmit or contract a viral infection in contravention of public health statutes. Second, most groups were moderated, which I took

as an indication of a general desire to limit access and to sustain expectations of privacy. Third, members had to register, giving their name and age, indicating how they wanted to read messages. Therefore, in working to ensure their privacy in this way, I concluded, based on the work of Waskul and Douglas, (1996:137) newsgroups represented groups of people coming together around sensitive topics and as such were best considered 'select-closed groups,' highly fragile and susceptible to damage.⁴¹

While it could be argued that having to register in order to gain access to the newsgroups indicated the groups were not public, I disagree. The registration guidelines were not established by the newsgroups, but by the web-based provider. The registration process is the same for all newsgroups, of which there are thousands, no matter their content, save for the stipulation by the web-host that only those over 18 can join adult-content groups.⁴² Even with this requirement, no proof is demanded by the web-host or group moderator, meaning any person can join any group, no matter their age. The primary function of the web-host's registration system is to ensure newsgroup members sign up for its free email service, without which it is not possible to join a group. Therefore, the key barrier to joining any newsgroup is a person's willingness to sign up for free email. Based on the limited and unenforceable rules governing access and given that this access is granted primarily as a result of agreeing to accept the web-host's email services, I concluded I was joining publicly

⁴¹ The revelation of the existence of a number of Gift-giver and Bug-chaser web sites in the popular press has led to web-hosts deleting them. In the Rolling Stone article, Freeman (2003:4) reported a web-host stating "the company confirms that the company shuts down such sites when it receives notice that the subscribers are promoting HIV infection or any other kind of harm to one another, but the company doesn't go looking for bug chasers in its thousands of discussion groups, most established by subscribers themselves." Sensing their vulnerability some Gift-giver groups have duplicated their databases onto secondary Web platforms.

⁴² The web-host and not moderators define 'adult content,' but the moderator is asked to indicate if the content is adult without having to demonstrate this in fact. Newsgroup moderators often place conditions on who may join for example, by insisting new members contribute something to the group within a set time. It has been my experience that these conditions are rarely enforced.

accessible newsgroups. Based on this reasoning, I did not join web sites with similar content that required I purchase a registration, as I considered a paid registration a means of establishing an effective method of deciding who could join and a clear indication of the level of privacy sought by members. Therefore, I considered such sites off-limits to study without my first gaining the consent of subjects and prior ethical approval.⁴³

While considering the privacy expectations of newsgroup members to be high, I concluded, based on a review of the ethical guidelines discussed here, that Gift-giver and Bug-Chaser newsgroups were in the public domain. However, given their privacy expectations, and to meet fully with the conditions under which the consent provisions could be waived, neither newsgroup nor member names/pseudonyms are disclosed.⁴⁴ Thus, this research met the necessary conditions for my not requiring the consent of newsgroup members and could therefore proceed ethically.

Methodology

The research presented here enhances and expands on work first begun as part of my MA graduate course work. That research was my first attempt to draw parallels between Gift-giver narratives and theories of *gift* exchange. Here I attempt to strengthen these parallels and focus my engagement, with an application of *gift* theory. Whereas the initial paper attempted to illustrate broadly the degree to which Gift-giving and Bug-chasing reflected aspects of *gift* exchange, this enquiry stresses the social role *gift* exchange plays in bonding people together, impacting their sense of self and social role by highlighting the communicative capacity of

⁴³ At Bareback Jacks web site, I could have accessed Gift-giver and Bug-chaser companion ads, messages and information on 'don't ask, don't tell' and 'Russian roulette' parties had I purchased a membership.

⁴⁴ Using a web based search engine, a sample of member email addresses and messages was searched to see if either the newsgroup location or member could be traced. None of these searches resulted in any access.

gift exchange. In particular I wish to stress the capacity of the Gift to transform recipients and donors.

For empirical data I relied exclusively on messages posted to newsgroups whose general focus was on Gift-giving and Bug-chasing. In an effort to limit the sample, I did not work with messages from other newsgroups such as those focused primarily on barebacking but also accepted Gift-giving messages.⁴⁵ Messages were downloaded from 17 different newsgroups in two stages, approximately one month apart. However the time period covered by the messages themselves spans a period from September 1998 until February 2003. In practical terms, while some groups have a great deal of activity, others have few messages posted regularly. Due, I assume, to its limited storage capacity, the web-based host will delete high traffic newsgroup messages going back several years, eliminating hundreds, even thousands of messages.⁴⁶ The deletion of messages posted since a group's founding leaving for example, only messages from the past year, represents a huge loss for researchers.

The web-platform of each newsgroup is the same, including a 'search' function that allowed me to search messages for specific Gift-related language. Messages located in this way were reviewed and copied for later analysis. Given that many people belong to several Gift-giver groups to which they post the same message, the number of duplicate messages was enormous. Once duplicates were eliminated, I selected from this pool of 281 messages those that highlighted the giving and receiving of HIV as a Gift. A close review of these messages

⁴⁵ Not all bareback newsgroups take a position on Gift-giving but a few clearly state that this is not the purpose of the group, and they will delete any such message. Most bareback newsgroups however, stress that members should know the risks of condomless sex with partners whose HIV status is unknown.

⁴⁶ Should the web-based host take offence to a newsgroup it will, without warning, delete it. In early 2001 the web-based host deleted, over a period of months, hundreds of newsgroups. As one moderator reported, "[Web host name removed] seems to be cutting watersports, teen anything, cum anything groups. I'm sure barebacking won't be far behind" (Moderator, H.P.B., Apr., 19th, 2001).

revealed a limited number of meanings and descriptions for the Gift were in use, for example the Gift as poison, Bug or Brotherhood, and based on these, I established the categories for a typology. Given that most members made use of several meanings within their messages, I categorized each according to that meaning which appeared to be emphasized. There were descriptions of the Gift that did not fit into the typology but given that these appeared infrequently or were posted by a small number of members, I choose not to include these, for example, messages in which the Gift was linked to Satanism: “am looking to take LORD SATAN's seed to further spread the gift” (Member, B.G.B., Jan. 25th, 2003). Messages were then divided into two main categories, 1) those related to group issues and 2) those related to Gift-giving. The first group contained messages relating to web-host shut downs, reactions to Gift-giver articles in the media (because of the timing of my data collection, reactions to the *Rolling Stone* article generated dozens of messages), messages from the moderator, Gift-giver rationales, AIDS politics, etc. The second, and larger group, of 281 messages was categorized based on the different meanings attributed to the Gift and its exchange.

As I noted earlier, I have chosen to address Gift-giver messages as they appear, as reports of Gift-giver and Bug-chaser experiences of giving and receiving the Gift. I believe newsgroup messages, taken as a whole, form a narrative of the Gift speaking to the desire for a particular relationship with HIV/AIDS. In establishing their narrative of the Gift, newsgroup members draw on and challenge existing narratives related to gay men, HIV/AIDS and Illness.

Jones (1997:15-16) has described the Web not as a 'cyberspace' but rather as a 'discontinuous narrative space.' Within the imagined and imaginary space that is the Web, Jones suggests we interact with others in a discursive fashion, establishing with others via typed messages an identity that emerges out of our on-line narratives.⁴⁷ Our on-line narratives and by extension our on-line identities, do not exist in the virtual world isolated from the physical realm. Web communications are influenced by multiple external influences. These external contexts both influence and provide to participants the off-line social meanings and practices necessary for the coherent communications we engage in on-line. Therefore, we must always consider on-line communication as embedded in, rather than isolated from, the local, regional, national and international cultures of participants (Baym 1995:141). In this way I have considered how Gift-givers and Bug-chasers in their messages reveal an ontological narrative that must be situated within the larger context of North American views on gay men, HIV/AIDS and Illness. Based on the work of Somers (1997:85-87) I believe we can consider the narratives of Gift-giving and Bug-chasing as fitting into the four kinds of narrativity:

- 1) Ontological Narratives: these are the stories that individuals use to make sense of their lives and to act within them, expressing their sense of being. Such narratives define who we are, what we do and how we locate or position ourselves within the social world. The ontological narrative of Gift-givers describes their sense of identity, their capacity to give as a feature for example, of their high viral load, and their role within the newsgroup, namely one that is Gifted and wants to Give.
- 2) Public, Cultural, and Institutional Narratives: these are the public and cultural narratives that flow through our lives, informing our sense of family, work and

⁴⁷ Drawing on the work of Anderson (1983) and his concept of 'imagined communities,' Jones, (1997:15-16) suggests participant's work to maintain and reproduce narratives that create theses imagined communities.

community. This is the sphere in which the public narratives about gay men and HIV/AIDS dominate, informing our sense of HIV/AIDS. Such narratives are constantly adapted and updated by, for example, HIV treatment news suggesting that while HIV is still to be avoided, it may now be effectively treated. Gift-giver narratives can be discussed in terms of how they challenge this narrative by presenting HIV as something to be sought rather than avoided.

- 3) Conceptual, Analytical and Sociological Narrativity: For a social researcher these would be those concepts and explanations that she/he constructs in order to draw links between historical and contemporary theories of *gift*-exchange as a social phenomenon and exchanges of HIV the Gift.
- 4) Metanarrativity: these are the master narratives in which we are embedded as contemporary actors, which inform our thinking about concepts like Sexuality, the West, Industrialization, and Illness.⁴⁸ Within this latter narrative, HIV/AIDS is situated and responded to in the way we might respond to any illness in North America. That North Americans came to respond to HIV/AIDS as an illness in particular ways, informed the creation of public, cultural and institutional narratives specific to it. Gift-giver narratives, related as they are to narratives of illness generally and HIV/AIDS specifically, exist in a dynamic relationship with these.

Based on Somers' work, I suggest Gift-giver messages reveal an ontological narrative of the Gift, informed by existing narratives about gay men, HIV/AIDS and Illness. To consider the Gift as a *gift*, we turn now to the theoretical literature of *gift* exchange on which I relied for my conceptual narrative in answering the question, why Gift?

⁴⁸ When I suggested Frankel and Siang's notion of a 'technological frontier' evoked the image of a largely empty, unexplored landscape, I drew on metanarratives concerning the settling of 'the West' in North America.

Chapter Three - *Review of the Literature on Gift Exchange*

“Moreover, with gifts that are agents of change, it is only when the gift has worked in us, only when we have come up to its level, as it were, that we can give it away again.”

Lewis Hyde (1979:47)

In speaking of how *gifts* ‘worked in us,’ Lewis Hyde was referring to a transformation initiated by *gifts*. This change was the result of the ‘labour of gratitude’ undertaken when we receive a *gift*. Only by doing this ‘labour’ are we then able to reciprocate the donor’s gesture, a transformation “not accomplished until we have the power to give the *gift* on our own terms” (1979:47).⁴⁹ In his emphasis on the power of *gifts* to enact a transformation in recipients, Hyde’s reading of *gift* exchange is not unique, as other anthropologists and sociologists have noted that particular *gift* and exchange situations effect change. But Hyde’s portrayal of *gifts* as having the power to transform is unique in his conceptualizing of how recipients are internally affected, to generate within themselves the capacity to give. Seen from Hyde’s perspective, conceiving of a virus as a *gift*, one that upon receipt internally changed recipients, generating within them the capacity to be able to give (the Gift) in return was compelling. However, I suggest the transformative capacity of *gifts* that Hyde and a few others note is true of *gifts* generally. The communication of a *gift* from donor to recipient enables this process to begin. While *gift* exchange plays a role in strengthening and enacting social bonds among social actors, it also acts as a method of communication. By linking these two capacities together, I conclude Gift exchange can be considered as a form of transformative communication. Without the communication of the Gift there can be no

⁴⁹ Highlighting their spiritual power, Hyde (1979:47-51) believed *gifts* ‘moved’ the soul to begin the ‘labour of gratitude,’ completed when the recipient could give in return.

transformation, and without this transformation there can be no Gift.

Any review of the anthropological and sociological literature on *gift* exchange would be remiss in not starting with work of Marcel Mauss. His publication in 1924 of *Essai sur le don* (“The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies”) was a pivotal event, establishing a way of seeing *gift* exchange still important today.⁵⁰ Since he was a student of Emile Durkheim, Mauss’s work was considered ‘Durkheimian in nature’ in that it emphasized consensual and collaborative social relations as products of the constituent elements of social life, such as religion, economics, and the law (Douglas 1992:159-162, Frow 1997:109; Kosalka 1999:3; Richman 192:36-39). Like Durkheim, Mauss (1967:78-79) drew on empirical observation to delve into social realities, to see “not merely ideas and rules, but also men and groups in their behaviours... submerged in their environments,” because the goal of sociology was to observe and understand a group’s behaviour as a whole. For Mauss, (1967:1) if society’s constituent elements comprised a whole social system, exchange was therefore a ‘total social phenomena,’ one that “contains all the threads of which the social fabric is composed.”⁵¹ In total social phenomena, “all kinds of institutions find simultaneous expression: religious, legal, moral, and economic.” As a result, it was impossible to understand the meaning of *gift* exchange based on the study of one aspect of

⁵⁰ *The Gift*, “despite its title, the author never tells us what a *gift* is... he never gives a definition” (Tearst 1998:97). According to Mauss it was inappropriate in the study of archaic forms of social life to see *gift* giving and exchanges as different. Never doing fieldwork for his study of the “system of economic prestations [exchange]” with “what we might call archaic societies,” Mauss (1969:1) relied on the data of others, looking for linguistic clues of the *gift*, a hybrid notion “that refers to a variety of functions in language” not encompassed by a single word (Richman 1982:9). As Mauss (1967:30-31) states, “Holmes makes the acute observation that the Toaripi and Namau languages... have only a single word to cover buy and sell, borrow and lend.” In acknowledging that *gift* was an elusive concept, Mauss (1967:70) said “our terms ‘present’ and *gift* do not have precise meanings, but we could find no others.” Derrida criticized Mauss for identifying linguistically, *gifts* existing from one culture to the next without having the conceptual basis for doing so (Kosalka 1999:6).

⁵¹ Here Mauss gave as an example of a ‘total social phenomenon,’ the Haida potlatch ceremony which was a ‘total system of giving,’ in that the giving of *gifts* is part of a system of reciprocity impacting the honour of giver and receiver. “It is a total system in that every item of status or of spiritual or material possession is implicated for everyone in the whole community” (Douglas 1992:155).

society or, for example through studying *gifts* solely based on their economic role (Hyde 1979:15). Similarly, I suggest that we cannot understand Gift-giving without considering other perspectives, such as those of barebackers and researchers examining this behaviour. That Mauss urged anthropologists to consider ‘whole social systems’ is considered his greatest legacy because, according to Douglas (1992:163), “before we had *The Gift*’s message unfolded for us, we anthropologists, if we thought of the economy at all, treated it as a separate aspect of society, and kinship as separate again, and religion as a final chapter at the end.”

Mauss illuminated specific aspects of exchange as a social phenomenon by describing how exchange bound people to one another in a network of obligations, specifically the obligations to give, receive and reciprocate *gifts*. While later theorists would consider these obligations as binding on individuals and groups, for Mauss (1967:3) it was “groups, and not individuals which carry on exchange, make contracts, and are bound by obligations.” In describing exchanges of goods during potlatch ceremonies, Mauss (1967:4) noted that through these exchanges “the whole clan, through the intermediary of its chief, makes contracts involving all its members.” Such exchanges were made on behalf of the whole group by “moral persons” occupying status positions in order to strengthen bonds and draw people together, thereby maintaining social relations for the whole group (Parry 1986:456). For Mauss, equilibrium was the goal (Richman 1982:16) and latter theorists saw in Mauss’s understanding of exchange a theory of social solidarity, in that “a *gift* that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction” (Douglas 1992:155).⁵² Because of their primary role in

⁵² Douglas (1992:155) makes this observation in her essay outlining how there is no such thing as a ‘free gift’ because a free *gift* involved no expectation that the recipient would make a reciprocal *gift* and therefore social ties were not enhanced. On the existence of the ‘free gift’ Parry (1986:458) stated that “while Mauss is generally

enhancing social bonds, even exchanges that appeared to be acts of generosity done voluntarily were the fulfillment of social obligations and not made out of self-interest (Mauss 1967:1-2).⁵³ Later theorists concurred, suggesting *gifts* given in a spirit of altruism were made in expectation of social benefits (Cheal 1988:7-8).

So serious was the failure to fulfill one's social obligation to give, exchange with others, that it was considered akin to a social declaration of war or refusing an offer of friendship (Mauss 1967:10-11). Therefore, one gave or received because one was essentially forced to. During potlatch ceremonies, tribal chiefs were compelled to give away to guests huge amounts of material wealth in order to maintain authority and power and to demonstrate their favoured status among the gods. By refusing to accept a *gift* a guest revealed their fear of not being able to repay the generosity of the chief. Therefore, failing to "give or receive, like a failure to make return *gifts*, means a loss dignity" (1967:37-40). Mauss was not alone in emphasizing the obligation to give, receive, and reciprocate as Titmuss (1997:125) concluded, "in all that Mauss, Lévis-Strauss, Homans, Schwartz and others have written on *gift*-exchange, there emerges a vivid sense of the immense persuasiveness of the social obligation—the group compulsions—to give and to repay, and the strength of the supporting sanctions: dishonour, shame and guilt." Of primary interest to Mauss (1967:1) however, was why *gifts* had to be reciprocated: "In primitive or archaic types of society what is the principle whereby the *gift*

represented as telling us how in fact the *gift* is never free, what I think he is really telling us is how we have acquired a theory that it should be."

⁵³ Considering 'self interest' an element of exchange in archaic societies, Mauss departed from Durkheim. As Douglas (1992:162) states, "Mauss manages to incorporate individuals acting in their own interests, even in the kinds of societies in which Durkheim had thought that there was no scope for individual self-interest."

received has to be repaid? What force is there in the thing given which compels the recipient to make a return?"⁵⁴

Among the Maori according to Mauss, the need, indeed the compulsion, to reciprocate was a function of the spiritual power of *hau*.⁵⁵ The *hau* was the "spirit of the thing given," a piece of the soul of the donor inhabiting their personal property or *taonga*, which traveled with it when given away.⁵⁶ *Taonga* and all strictly personal possessions contained *hau*, compelling recipients to return *taonga* to its owner. *Taonga* imbued with *hau* was considered capable of destroying recipients, having the power to do so according to the laws and obligations governing its exchange if recipients failed to give a reciprocal *gift*. If the initial recipient gave the *taonga* to a third party, its *hau* forced that party to return it to the original owner. As things imbued with *hau*, the social bonds created by the exchange of *taonga* were considered bonds between persons. As objects containing spiritual essence, *taonga* were considered in effect—persons. Mauss concluded, therefore, to give something, was to give away a part of oneself and to receive was to receive a portion of someone's spiritual essence.⁵⁷ Possessing the *taonga* of another person was considered dangerous due to its spiritual force. In order to

⁵⁴ By focusing on the question of a force at work in society, Mauss was influenced by one of Durkheim's concerns, "what one might call the 'compulsions that order the social.'" "Through this concept he [Durkheim] approaches the givenness or force of a particular world view, the brute fact that certain things are thus and not otherwise" (Jenkins 1998:86-87).

⁵⁵ "The word *hau*, like the Latin *spiritus*, means both wind and soul. More precisely *hau* is the spirit and power of inanimate and vegetable things" (Mauss 1967:86).

⁵⁶ Some anthropologists accused Mauss of not understanding the nature of *taonga*, believing he regarded all property was imbued with *hau*. Weiner (1992:46-47) however defends Mauss noting he specifically stated that only property considered *taonga* was "strongly linked to the person, the clan... [*taonga was*] the vehicle for its mana, its magical, religious and spiritual force." In addition, Mauss understood correctly that *taonga* imbued with *hau* though circulating among people, was still expected to be returned (Weiner 1992:46-47).

⁵⁷ Parry (1986:459-461) found in Mauss's study of *gifts* in India, descriptions of other *gifts* that embodied persons. A *dana gift* embodied the sins of the donor, transferring them to recipients. However, while *taonga* as *gifts* imbued with *hau* were expected (as inalienable property) to be returned, *dana* as *gifts* imbued with sin, were expected (as alienable property) to never return. Douglas (1992:157-158) found Mauss's early work on sacrifice in India, influential on his later *gift* work, being the source for the concept "of a morally sanctioned *gift* cycle upholding the social cycle."

address this danger, it was necessary that the *hau* returned “to the place of its birth, to its sanctuary of forest and clan and to its owner,” by returning *taonga* to its original owner (Mauss 1967:9, 8-12). In researching the Gift of HIV, I found that the description of objects containing something derived from another person that would in turn remain within each subsequent recipient was remarkably reminiscent of the communicable nature of viruses.

For Mauss, the *hau* explained the ‘enigma of the gift,’ answering the question of why reciprocation was so important. Weiner (1992:45) suggests this was “the key to the whole problem, enabling him to demonstrate... the intimate relation between persons and things is the energizing force making obligatory, acts of giving, receiving, and returning.” The concept of *hau* revealed it was the spiritual nature of *gifts* and not property rights that compelled the making of return of *gifts* (Godelier 1999:55). *Taonga* and *hau* manifested for Mauss (1967:11) a pattern of symmetrical and reciprocal rights based on spiritual bonds between things that were “to some extent parts of persons, and persons and groups that behave in some measure as if they were things.”

Mauss’s interpretation of *hau* has been controversial since the publication of “The Gift” in 1924. Lévi-Strauss (1997:55-56) criticized Mauss for extrapolating from the Maori example a spiritual concept that he then applied to other peoples.⁵⁸ Here Lévi-Strauss faulted Mauss for not “recognizing that the *hau* is merely the Maori point of view and could never illuminate the universal structure underlying the acts of giving and receiving” (Weiner 1992:46), accusing Mauss of being ‘mystified’ by an indigenous system, saying “the fact that Maori

⁵⁸ For a critique of how Mauss applied from a limited number of sources, the concept of *hau* to different, sometimes not irrelevant cases, such as the potlatch, see Racine (1991). The Obligation to Reciprocate Gifts and the Spirit of the Item Given: From Marcel Mauss to Rene Maunier, in *Diogenes*, 154, 171-196.

sages were the first people to pose certain problems [need to return *gifts*] and to resolve them in an infinitely interesting but strikingly unsatisfactory manner does not oblige us to bow to their interpretation” (1992:46). In contrast to Mauss, Lévi-Strauss believed social relations were determined by the structure and praxis of rules governing kinship. It was therefore not a magical force emanating from objects that spiritually bound people together but the rules of a ‘symbolic order’ regulating the social obligations to give.⁵⁹ Derrida (1992:12-14) speculated that Mauss’s insistence on reciprocal obligations created a paradox, making *gifts* ‘impossible.’ If what one received was truly a *gift* “there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-*gift*, or debt.”⁶⁰

Subsequent theorists studying Mauss’s interpretation of *hau* were less critical, clarifying his original findings but not rejecting his interpretations.⁶¹ Of particular interest to me were those interpretations of the *hau* that saw a generative capacity in it, which the Gift of HIV must have to fulfill its transformative potential. Frow (1997:111-112) noted that Sahlins, in “Stone Age Economics” (1974), saw the concept of *hau* as similar to that of a ‘yield,’ something with a fertile or generative capacity in that “if the second *gift* is the *hau* of the first, then the *hau* of a good [*gift*] is its yield.” Here we could think of the yield of the *hau* as being the strengthening of social bonds.⁶² Godbout (1998:133) described the *hau* as something

⁵⁹ Richman (1982:11) adds, based on Georges Bataille’s interpretation of *The Gift*, that Mauss was confusing the ‘person-*gift*, subject-object’ relationship when he described an economy wherein objects had a personality and that these personalities were somehow ‘owned’ by the clan.

⁶⁰ Derrida concluded a *gift* demanding a return was an economic exchange based on circulation, calculation, etc., thus a *gift* existed only “on the condition that circulation has been interrupted” (Jenkins 1998:84).

⁶¹ For example Godbout (1998:131-132), suggested that sorcery, “unleashing potential evil” would result if people did not make reciprocal *gifts*, thereby interrupting the ‘flow of generosity.’ So it was more correct to understand the *hau* not as something feared because of what it might do, but because of the potential damage done to social ties if it was not returned. Parry (1986:464) noted Firth concluded the *hau* was not a purposive entity; nor was the *hau* of things the same as the *hau* of a person. Of concern was the threat posed by witchcraft and/or the negative economic and social costs that would result if one failed to fulfill reciprocal obligations.

⁶² Parry (1986:465) disagrees with Sahlins’s concept of *hau* as ‘yield,’ but agrees that it was something productive, ‘nourished by exchange,’ and weakened by anything impeding exchange.

productive, with a fertile capacity to be managed, as in how Maori priests placed *gifts* of *taonga* in the forest to persuade the forest to ‘produce’ birds, revealing a spiritual act resulting in a material return. The conceptualizations of *gifts* having a fertile or productive aspect are particularly striking given my consideration of the exchange of HIV as a Gift. As living organisms, viruses like HIV have but one function—reproduction. As we will see in the subsequent chapter, new members of the POZ Brotherhood can only be created through communicating the Gift, which ‘persuades’ the body (harnessing its cells) to (reproduce) make more Gifts, transforming group members into Brothers.

However one interprets the *hau*, it highlights the capacity of *gifts* to affect social actors and relations. For Mauss the primary role of exchange was to draw people together and to reaffirm their connections, driven by the *hau* to fulfill their reciprocal obligations. In Mauss’s work we see how social relations were transformed via the communication of *gifts*, whether through the enhancement of social ties, the indebting of one person to another or the bringing of dishonour upon those failing to reciprocate. As we now move to examine the work of contemporary theorists, we will again see how the communication of *gifts* transforms social actors and their relations.

Gifts Versus Commodities

The items of exchange that Mauss (1967:70) studied were not utilitarian commodities in that he found something “other than utility which makes goods circulate.”⁶³ These exchanges

⁶³ *The Gift* had a philosophical agenda for Mauss, to challenge the influence of economic utilitarianism and rationalism and those anthropologists who described *gift* exchange as a form of rational economic exchange (Douglas 1992:155, 159-160; Kosalka 1999:3; Richman 1982:37). For Mauss exchange could not be explained with reference to models of economic necessity and universality as *gifts* were exchanged to meet different aims. “We have repeatedly pointed out how this economy of *gift* exchange fails to conform to the principles of so-called natural economy or utilitarianism” (Mauss 1967:69). In exchanges Mauss believed, “we have discovered one of the bases of social life; and thus we may draw conclusions of a moral nature about some of the

could not be considered equal to the kinds of prosaic sales, purchases and contracts made within Mauss's (1967:74) culture which he believed represented the "victory of rationalism and mercantilism" that had turned man into an economic animal, a fate yet to befall the peoples he studied. That these non-utilitarian exchanges were not made according to rational economic models of necessity enabled Mauss to contrast them with the purely utilitarian exchanges of '*homo oeconomicus*' (Kosalka 1999:3) made by his culture. Previous to the emergence of *homo oeconomicus*, Mauss believed exchanges were made for both rational and generous reasons as an expression of pleasure at publicly giving (Richman 1982:31). For Mauss, *gift* exchange differed from commodity exchange because of the social aspects of *gifts*, and subsequent theorists would continue to differentiate between *gifts* and commodities by virtue of the former social role.

Hyde (1979:14) saw property having an 'erotic' (derived from *eros*) capacity, and exchanges of property were thus a means of drawing people together. Gift exchanges involving items with an erotic capacity differed sharply from exchanges made within the market place that were driven by logic (derived from *logos*) which tended to differentiate and particularize people, drawing them apart rather than together. Frow (1997:125 after Gregory 1982), regarded *gift* exchanges as "effective mediators and generators, of social bonds." Because of this capacity, Gregory concluded, that while people assumed the social form of objects during exchanges made in a commodity economy, objects assumed the social form of persons in exchanges made as part of a gift economy. Thus the primary goal of exchanges within a commodity economy was the production of things, while exchanges made as part of a *gift* economy

problems confronting us in our present economic crisis" (1967:2). Richman (1982:15) noted, "Mauss's partisan goal here is to emphasize the moral imperatives that sustain *gift*-giving even within modern mores."

resulted in the production of people and social ties.⁶⁴ So important were the bonds created through *gift* exchanges that Godbout (1998:173) suggested we consider bonds as having a particular value, namely a bond-value. This would be in addition to the two values recognized by classical economics: exchange value and use value. Bond-value would be the value ascribed to any object, service, or act based on its capacity to express, facilitate, and/or foster social ties.⁶⁵ The interrelationship between *gifts* and social bonds is also highlighted because, while commodities can be alienated from their producers, *gifts* cannot. As forms of 'inalienable property,' *gifts* remain tied to the donor in that they are always remembered as having come that person, which is emblematic of their identity and of the work done in choosing the *gift* (Bell 1991:156). Perhaps due to the inalienable nature of *gifts*, Gift-givers speak of wanting to know who gave them the Gift, expressing ongoing gratitude and telling others who gave them the Gift. As expressions of their personality and social identity, donors fervently hope *gifts* will be permanently identified with them in the eyes of the recipient. Because of this link, a specific donor's *gift* is described as irreplaceable "even when a physically identical replacement is available on the open market," because even an identical object cannot fully represent that first *gift* (Fennell 2002:91).⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Frow (1997:125) noted similarities between Gregory's (1982) consideration of *gifts* as producing people via the generation of social bonds and Mauss's (1967:11) observation that in giving and receiving we see a "pattern of spiritual bonds between things which are to some extent persons, and persons and groups that behave in some measure as if they were things."

⁶⁵ Godbout (1998:173) drew this conclusion because bond-value could not be equated to exchange-value which represented relationships of exchange based on money or its equivalent. Nor was bond-value accounted for by use-value, predicated on the material use of things and their function. Bond-value as an expression of socially-valued benefits, could not be quantified by money or utility.

⁶⁶ Bell (1991), Fennell (2002), and Weiner (1992) all speak to some degree of how some *gifts* and property are inalienable. Weiner in her work *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping While Giving* draws on the work of Mauss and others to chart the existence of some forms of property that even when given away, remain linked to the original owners. For example, family heirlooms are 'given' by one generation to the next but never really 'given away.' As a result of their lineage and constantly being imbued with social meaning and symbolism, this kind of inalienable property is a uniquely powerful form of objectified social relations.

While *gifts* and commodities differ, they are not mutually exclusive, in that we commonly purchase commodities for exchange as *gifts*, but there is no commodity or indeed any object having an essential quality designating it as *gift*. Therefore, prior to their being identified as such, objects as *gifts* do not exist in a separate category of things (Frow 1997:124). Any commodity, object, service or experience, whether tangible or intangible, can be transformed into a *gift* through the social interaction of giving (Sherry 1983:160) and on this point I suggest Gift-givers would concur. It is through the act of giving that an object becomes a *gift* and once socially recognized as such the former commodity (or bodily fluid), now *gift*, becomes something altogether different in the eyes of donor and recipient (Cheal 1987:158-159). “Once it has been given— and because of this— it is THIS object and not another, the *gift* is unique, specified by the people exchanging it and the unique moment of exchange” (Carrier 1995:151).⁶⁷

Through its presentation and exchange, a *gift* becomes layered (Fennell 2002:86) in the personal meanings attributed to it by donor and recipient. The attribution of meaning is a process engaged in by donor and recipient for whom the *gifts* meaning is unique and in some ways fixed. The attribution of meaning serves essentially to de-commodify the object, moving it out of the economic and into the social realm (Fennell 2002:86). However, this does not mean that commodities carry no meaning or that no meaning can be attributed to them. In contrast, the meaning of any particular commodity is in a constant state of flux, influenced as it is by the culturally constituted worlds of its production and presentation as a commodity, and its acceptance by the individual consumer, for whom it represents an

⁶⁷ Carrier here is quoting the work of Baudrillard (1981).

expression of self (McCracken 1988:71-72).⁶⁸ However the layers of meaning applied to *gifts* were for Fennell (2002:86) both literal and symbolic, as the former commodity, by being physically wrapped in *gift* paper, signified that what lies beneath— is a *gift*. By temporarily hiding the object from view we heighten expectation, asking “I wonder what’s inside?” This also allows both parties to focus exclusively, albeit briefly, on the act of giving (Cheal 1987:159). In contrast when Gift-givers present the Gift it is never wrapped, challenging HIV prevention campaigns that urge gay men to ‘wrap it up.’ However Bug-chasers can still be said to enjoy a sense of expectation in that even unwrapped, the Gift cannot be seen and its particular qualities are unknown.

Having been removed from the commodity realm both physically and symbolically, *gifts* are exchanged with in a ‘*gift* economy’ that Cheal (1987:19) described as being “transactions within a moral economy, which makes possible the extended reproduction of social relations.” In contrast to exchanges made within a commodity economy, the *gift* economy is situated within a ‘moral economy’ where exchanges are valued for their ability to strengthen social ties and the construction of ‘small social worlds,’ rather for their capacity to distribute wealth or resources. As part of a moral economy, *gift* exchanges can be understood as those that are socially desirable (moral) and that establish normative obligations for people (Cheal 1987:4-5,14-16). As part of a moral economy *gifts* are valued differently from commodities and by a different standard. Because of their having a ‘symbolic value,’ Bourdieu (1997:233) situated *gifts* as part of the ‘economy of symbolic goods,’ where, as within any economy there exists a ‘system of objective probabilities’ for profit. Therefore, the value of *gifts* fluctuates

⁶⁸ McCracken (1988:72) suggests these three areas contribute to and continually effect the meaning of a commodity, but commodities have two moments of transfer: world-to-good and good-to-individual. Gifts I would suggest represent a third movement, namely movement of the culturally constructed ‘good’ of HIV – to Gift.

based on how its symbolic value is negotiated by donor and recipient. Similarly, Cheal (1987:158) concluded that once signified as a *gift*, an object's value was purely conventional and contextual, with the result that (in terms of value) it is "the thought that counts."

As a former commodity, a *gift* may regain its exchange value by being recommodified. However, once classified as a *gift*, its value is determined not by external factors such as scarcity or price,⁶⁹ which determine commodity values, but by the 'symbolic value' attributed to it by donor and receiver. These 'symbolic values' are also determined by conventions that determine what are appropriate *gifts*. For example, wedding guests may give household appliances such as toasters, but should not give more personal *gifts* such as lingerie. By extension, when making a reciprocal *gift*, the return *gift*, while possibly having a greater or lesser exchange value, must have a symbolic value comparable to the *gift* it reciprocated (Belk and Coon 1993:395-396). If removed from the bounds of the donor/recipient relationship, the symbolic value of a *gift* is lessened, while its exchange value may increase, stay the same or decrease. On the issue of value, Hyde (1979:60-61) concluded *gifts* did not have a 'value' like commodities, rather *gifts* had a 'worth.' Whereas value could be determined by the comparison of one object to another, Hyde believed worth was incalculable. This emphasized how *gifts* and commodities are different things. While commodities can and do become *gifts*, a *gift* is not easily transformed into a commodity valued for its exchange, use, and the symbolic value (akin to Godbout's bond-value) it had as a *gift*. Once put up for sale, a *gift* is stripped of its social significance as a *gift* and its symbolic value is lessened as it reverts back to being a commodity. A former *gift* may have a particular exchange value based on its

⁶⁹ Marx would pointedly disagree with the view that the value of a commodity is determined by scarcity or price concluding that, "that which determines the magnitude of the value of any article is the amount of labour socially necessary, or the labour-time socially necessary for its production" (Engels 1967:39).

having historical significance or within a culture that celebrates celebrity it may grow in value, as did Elizabeth Taylor's diamond collection, but it no longer is a *gift*.⁷⁰

Communicating Through Gifts

Giving, receiving and reciprocating *gifts* are regarded as a form of communication. While Mauss did not stress their communicative aspect, instead emphasizing the rules governing exchange and the meanings generated, Lévi-Strauss concluded exchange occurred according to the laws of a 'symbolic order,' where *gifts* acted to signify and communicate cultural meanings. Through the circulation of goods, Lévi-Strauss believed people kept lines of communication open, preventing people from wanting to "keep to oneself" (Richman 1982:30).⁷¹ For O'Neil (2000:4), "*gift* giving like all communication, is a material/subjective practice whose sense is funded by the symbolic/objective necessity of the social reproduction of kinship and political alliances." Several theorists have found that as carriers of meaning, by exchanging objects people generate a system of meanings, used to shape and construct cultural realities, thereby enhancing social ties. In this way, the act of exchange becomes a rhetorical gesture made as part of social communication (Shieffelin 1980:502-503).⁷² The transformation of any object into something imbued with deeply symbolic, personal, or even sacred meaning removes the object from the realm of shared cultural meanings, to one governed by the unique, idiosyncratic meanings attributed to the *gift* by donor and recipient. For example, the ubiquitous toaster given as a wedding *gift*, while

⁷⁰ As an economic strategy for increasing wealth, the conversion of money into *gift*-objects is considered impractical. Fennell (2002:85) suggests that cash—a liquid commodity—once converted into a *gift*—an illiquid object—is of limited resale value, in that any symbolic value it accrued is lost when it is turned back into a commodity, if it is possible to resell at all. Whatever symbolic value it had between *gift* donor and recipient diminishes once the former *gift* is sold as a commodity.

⁷¹ "Keep to oneself" has a dual meaning in that people were to exchange goods so they did not materially keep to themselves, and to exchange goods so that they did not socially keep to themselves.

⁷² Through a meta-analysis of the work of Ernst (1979), Kapferer (1976), Rubel and Rosman (1978), Wagner (1969), Schieffelin (1980:515) concluded all had stressed the role exchange played in generating a system of meanings used to shape and construct cultural realities.

remaining for all intents and purposes a toaster, as a *gift* symbolizes the donor's best wishes for the new couple. Once given as a *gift*, even an item as prosaic as a toaster is regarded by donor and recipient as emblematic of their close, intimate relationship (Ruth & Otnes 1999:390).⁷³ Gift-givers and Bug-chasers, in exchanging HIV, are for all intents and purposes involved in exchanging a virus, but when given as a Gift, it symbolizes how their relationships differ from those commonly found between gay men and HIV.

Cheal (1996:88-89, 92) concluded that, while in the past we exchanged goods and *gifts* to help meet material needs or distribute resources, this was no longer the case. As a result, *gift* exchanges function as 'ritual communication,' playing a vital role in the construction of 'intersubjective worlds' for social actors.⁷⁴ As symbolic reflections of donor characteristics and their feelings for the recipient, *gifts* communicate non-verbally. *Gift* exchange acts as a "language that employs objects instead of words as its lexical elements,"⁷⁵ such that instead of exchanging words, parties exchange objects to express feelings (Caplow 1984:1320).⁷⁶

⁷³ Bataille concluded that a common feature of all objects of exchange was their capacity to open up "communication with the realm of intimacy" (Richman 1982:20).

⁷⁴ Maschio (1994:96, 84) described *gifts* exchanged within Melanesian society over a life time as a means whereby individuals formed/reformed identities. Linking *gifts* to changes in their sense of self, Melanesians created a "narrative of the *gift*" where *gifts* act as a metaphor in the "rhetoric of identity formation."

⁷⁵ In a reversal of this paradigm I suggest Gift-givers and Bug-chasers seeking to exchange HIV employ words instead of objects, in a virtual, net-based exchange.

⁷⁶ Caplow (1984:1317-1320) made the analogy between *gift* giving and language in a study of why people understood implicitly the rules of *gift* giving, concluding this was a form of 'rule enforcement without visible means' (1984:1320). For Caplow the 'language of prestation' (giving) like any verbal language was learned by social actors early in life and thus hard to forget. Like linguistic rules followed without visible means, *gift* rules when followed properly were self-reinforcing. Godbout (1998:562-563) was critical of this view for failing to explain why donors reluctantly acknowledge the existence of rules, while language speakers readily do so. Perhaps the adherence by *gift* givers to a set of unwritten rules can be considered a form of *habitus*. Conceptualized by Bourdieu (1990:101-103), *habitus* is akin to the outcome of teaching a skill. For example, hockey players are taught in discrete steps the various components of the game, such as skating, handling the stick, etc. which form the 'whole' of hockey. When teaching is complete, players play the game without reference to its component parts, losing any awareness of the small parts making up the whole. Bourdieu believed *habitus* provided an economical account of the exchanges of gifts, as the outcome of a set of choices made by actors not necessarily consciously aware of or willing to admit that rules or principles govern behaviour. Like any language a *habitus* of *gift*/countergift is inculcated in social actors early on. Adherence to the proper behaviours is demanded and reinforced, such that it becomes inscribed into bodily postures and

Fennell (2002:86) likened *gift*-communication to a form of “empathetic dialogue” where parties choose what to give by putting themselves in the recipient’s shoes. When the *gift* succeeds, the material object [*gift*] stands as a place marker for the empathetic dialogue that accompanied it” (2002:94-94).⁷⁷ However as a form of communication, a language, *gifts* have limited capacity. While as tangible objects, *gifts* are a powerful communication tool, they can carry only a limited range of messages (Cheal 1987:154). Communicating through *gifts* can be inefficient as the message the donor hopes to convey can be missed or misinterpreted by the recipient. Cheal (1987:161) asked how a donor could ensure their message was heard, in a commodity rich society in which a recipient can potentially receive many *gifts* from many donors. To cut through this “commodity noise,” Cheal found donors gave multiple *gifts* or unique *gifts* to strengthen their message and ensure it is heard. Ruth (1996:199) suggests the message carried by the *gift* is ‘encoded’ onto it by the donor and must be ‘de-coded’ by the recipient, greatly increasing the potential for misunderstandings. One way of mitigating these decoding errors is to exchange greeting cards as *gifts*, thereby allowing the card’s text to clearly state one’s message.

As with any form of dialogue there are infinite possibilities for misunderstanding (Fennell 2002:96-97). While actors may work to ensure their messages are understood by finding the ‘perfect *gift*’ and seeing that theirs is regarded as a generous act, Bourdieu (1997:233) concluded that donors consistently expect receivers to react to their *gift* as an act of generosity, “because all the other agents... expect things to be so.” Gift exchanges are

gestures, making actors practically unaware of giving rules, calculations or principles, except when those rules are broken. In giving we see not the conscious intentions or calculations of individual actors but a ‘disposition of the *habitus*’ (1997:233).

⁷⁷ Ruth and Otnes (1999:390-391) also considered empathy to be a key component of giving, as donors generally attempt to see inside the recipient to discern what they really want.

understood by social actors as 'irreversible,' because no reciprocation is expected; 'unforced' in that they are not coerced; and 'disinterested' in that the donor expects no benefit. But according to Bourdieu (1990:109-110), giving is in fact 'reversible' in that reciprocation is expected; 'forced' because we must give; and 'self-interested' as donors do benefit.⁷⁸ We deliberately ignore these considerations to maintain the fiction that *gifts* are sincere, generous, and unrestrained, thereby engaging in a deliberate "collectively produced, sustained and maintained 'misrecognition'⁷⁹ of the objective truth" of *gift* giving. While Bourdieu (1997:232) suggests this is a collective deception, it represents self-deceptions made by individuals or the "lie told to oneself." Thus giving a *gift* is "one of those social acts whose social logic cannot become common knowledge" or else we risk revealing the 'means' behind 'rule enforcement without visible means.'

Transformation Through Gifts

Giving and receiving gifts transform the existing condition of both donor and recipient, first and foremost in that giving makes recipients morally inferior to donors by indebting the former to the latter (Schwartz 1967:76-77; Titmuss 1997:276).⁸⁰ Giving has the

⁷⁸ Godbout (1998:183-185) suggests *gifts* are disinterested, in that reciprocation does not demand that something of equal equivalence be given, as in mercantile exchange.

⁷⁹ Time passing between our receiving a *gift* and making a reciprocal gesture was for Bourdieu (1990:105-107), essential to our misrecognition. To immediately make a return *gift* worked to undermine our denial of the truth of giving—that no reciprocation was expected. The period of time between giving/giving back allows us to deliberately (misrecognize) our collective self-deception. Reciprocating quickly suggests the first *gift* was given in expectation of reciprocation and reveals an eagerness to be free of debt, when we are not supposed to expect reciprocation or fear indebtedness. While at first glance Bourdieu's misrecognition concept would not apply to an occasion such as Christmas when *gifts* are immediately exchanged with no time in between, I suggest it does. Only donors can know ahead of time to whom they are giving and not from whom they will receive. Therefore any *gift* they receive immediately after giving is not necessarily recognized as being received in repayment for the *gift* they just gave, hence their constant exclamations of surprise at having received a *gift* at all. Some time must pass to ensure both parties experience a sense of expectation or uncertainty as to the 'real' outcome of exchange. Time was considered by Derrida, (1992:40-41) as critical to the *gifts* existence, and was the one thing it provided: 'the *gift* of time.' "The difference between a gift and every operation of pure and simple exchange is that the *gift* gives time." Because the *gift* cannot be reciprocated right away, "there must be waiting—without forgetting" (1992:41).

⁸⁰ Schwartz (1967:77) here is discussing the work of George Simmel who saw in every *gift* exchange a donor's moral dominance over the recipient, who then made return *gifts* because of "moral coercion."

uncharacteristic result of increasing the social distance between parties as one person becomes indebted to the other, while simultaneously (and more characteristically) decreasing the social distance between people as a donor shares with the recipient (Godelier 1999:12).⁸¹ Perhaps in recognition of the discomfort of being 'in debt,' Emerson (1997:26) regarded *gifts* as conflicting with what he considered a wish that we "be self sustained" and thus we dislike seeing our independence challenged by *gifts*. Because of this, Emerson suggested "we do not quite forgive the giver" and that "the hand that feeds us is in some danger of being bitten."⁸² In contrast to Bourdieu, Emerson was refusing to misrecognize the truth, to lie to himself, admitting the effect of *gifts*, the transformation they enact, namely the recipient becoming indebted to the donor. Perhaps here Emerson is cautioning us that not all the bonds created through *gifts* are welcome, some will chafe.

Giving

Through *gifts* we give away a portion of ourselves, whether as a part of our spirit (as in the *hau*) or an objectified form of our identity. For Emerson (1997:26) the *gift* was "a portion of myself... Therefore the poet brings his poem; the shepherd his lamb; the farmer, corn..." with the result that the every *gift* a "man's biography is conveyed." When given, a *gift* contains "a part of the self, somehow attached, assimilated to or set apart from the self" because objects serve as depositories of meaning and identity, used by people as a means of identifying themselves (Carrier 1995:24-25).⁸³ Schwartz (1996:69-70) noted *gift* giving is self-defining, as in the way men confirm their masculine identity by giving away cigars at the

⁸¹ Godelier (1999:12) refers to this as the "two fold relationship" of the *gift* in that two opposite movements (decrease/increase of social distance) appear in the single act of giving.

⁸² The debt is not absolute in that our obligations to repay are contingent upon the value of the benefit (*gift*). Therefore the debt paid must be proportional to the benefit bestowed (Gouldner 1960:171). One instance when the debt to be repaid appears to be out of proportion to the benefit bestowed is organ donation where recipients commonly feel the debt to donors can never be repaid (Fox and Swazey 1974:26).

⁸³ As a result *gifts* are considered 'inalienable' forever linked back to the original donor but not so strongly linked that the donor has a right to reclaim them (Carrier 1995:24).

birth of children. By linking our identity to the *gifts* we give, donors reveal a desire for recipients to identify the *gift* with us (Fennell 2002:91). This can be a particularly powerful gesture when the *gift* is a so-called 'last gift,' given as part of a last will and testament, representing the donor giving themselves away for the last time, through a "last extension of self" (Stevenson and Kates 1999:114).⁸⁴ Then again donors can be uneasy as to how strongly their gift is identified with them and how much of themselves they give away, fearing recipients will "think that I feel like there is a lot of commitment when there isn't" (Belk and Coon 1993:404). However, before we can give we must work to gain the capacity to do so, such that "we husband our *gifts* when we cannot do without them, or when they are not fully formed" (Hyde 1979:49). We husband our *gift* giving potential, after the receipt of a *gift* through the "labour of gratitude" which has the effect that we become more like the *gift*, a transformation "not accomplished until we have the power to give" (1979:47). Therefore before we can give we have to open ourselves to the transformation wrought by our having fully received.

As a realization of our full capacity to give, the act of giving has been frequently linked to forms of sacrifice. Gifts can be "retained as a symbol of sacrifice" made by the donor who took of their time and resources to give (Derrida 1992:23).⁸⁵ Brown (1959 in Schwartz 1967:11) regarded giving as self-sacrificial in that donors give out of a sense of guilt. While Schwartz disagreed that giving was "nothing but an expression of guilt" he did agree social bonds were strengthened through sacrificial *gifts*. But when spoken of as a 'sacrifice,' giving

⁸⁴ This can take on quite literal connotations for the families who donate a deceased loved one's organs, and then speak of that person "living on, through someone else" (Fox and Swazey 1974:28).

⁸⁵ Emerson (1997:26) perhaps was revealing the degree to which in his time (1882-1939) *gifts* were often still made by the donor when he says, "the only gift is a portion of myself. Thou must bleed for me." Thus the farmer through his own labour, (blood, sweat and tears) produces the *gift* of corn, giving away only a portion of what he produces, thereby limiting the degree to which he sacrifices and thereby indebts, himself.

is generally meant to have graver implications referring to human sacrifice considered the prototype 'par excellence' of giving. Based on the work of Bataille, those to be sacrificed, such as those captured in war, became the symbolic representatives for whole peoples. Thus an immensely strong symbolic tie was formed between those who were the victims and those for whom they substituted (Kosalka 1999:2). Such sacrifices may have a particularly feminine aspect in that, while women were rarely involved in performing rites of sacrifice historically, they were often involved as the sacrificial victims (Joy 1999:321-22).⁸⁶

Receiving

By indebting us to donors, *gifts* 'take from us' socially, materially and spiritually but they simultaneously 'give to us' socially, materially and spiritually. Gifts act to bind us to each other, in ways that are social, spiritual and psychological, illustrating the 'erotic' nature of property (Hyde 1979:57). They may signal to the recipient that the donor wants to elevate the relationship, increasing the level of commitment and shared meaning (Belk and Coon 1993:404; Ruth & Otnes 1999:388). As invitations to partnership, *gifts* confirm the donor's participation in their social life, making *gifts* "tangible expressions of social relationships" (Hyde 1979:69; Sherry 1983:158). Even when the *gifts* we receive are immaterial, so-called 'perfect *gifts*,' expressions of love (Carrier 1995:150), the general logic of giving holds—recipients are linked to others through the contributions of others (Maschio 1994:88). However *gifts* generally have a material form, such as so-called 'self *gifts*' that we give ourselves as a method of self-communication, to promote our self esteem or appearance (Shihti Yu 2000:413). Gifts given by others are capable of directly assisting us in reaching a

⁸⁶ Joy (1999:322), in considering Bataille's views on *The Gift*, found his interpretations suggestive of a belief that 'unconstrained largesse' as characteristic of women, thus "to give is the fundamental feminine attitude."

goal or completing a project (Cheal 1987:14-19).⁸⁷ In addition to exchanges between individuals, *gifts* can impact whole groups in that the “forms and functions of giving embody moral, social, psychological religious, legal and aesthetic ideas,” and “they may reflect, sustain, strengthen or loosen cultural bonds of the group, large or small” (Titmuss 1997:124). Through the exchange of *gifts* of knowledge, materials, cultural codes and social rules, people are able to construct networks that link them together and ensure their cooperative future as a group (Cheal 1988:86-87; Cheal 1996:86; Carrier 1995:36; Godbout 1998:146; Schwartz 1996:72).⁸⁸

Whether what we receive is immaterial or material, *gifts* act to confer upon us a social identity or role. Even when giving to our selves, we confirm our self-identity and self-uniqueness (Rucker, Freitas and Huidor 1996:51; Shihti Yu 2000:413)⁸⁹ Gifts assist us in creating a self-identity; helping ‘create us’ (Maschio 1994:96). We are constituted as subjects through the action of receiving a *gift* (Derrida 1992:11-12). While we are supposed to enjoy ‘getting just what we want,’ it may be disquieting to know how well the donor “should read my heart, and see that I love his commodity, and not him” (Emerson 1997:26). By giving, donors impose on us their own conception of our identity, one that they may be consciously trying to shape, as in how parents give children gender-differentiated toys, to convey gender

⁸⁷ For Cheal *gifts* as part of the ‘moral economy’ generated normative obligations directing people to each other in fulfilling a goal. Bourdieu expressed a similar view, regarding *gifts* as a form of ‘capital’ in which individuals invested in order to carry out projects (Cheal 1988:20-21). Gouldner (1960:171) expressed a similarly ‘moral’ view, suggesting the ‘norm of reciprocity’ encouraged people to 1) help those who had helped them and 2) to not injure those that had helped them.

⁸⁸ Here Cheal (1988:86-87) is drawing on the work of Fortes (1969) who believed that social systems had two ways of reproducing themselves, through the reproduction of human capital by the passing on knowledge and skills, and the reproduction of social capital, by the passing on cultural codes and social rules.

⁸⁹ Rucker, Freitas and Huidor (1996:47-51) concluded that homosexuals provided themselves with more or better self-*gifts* than heterosexuals, as compensation “for lack of support from others when the surrounding environment is impersonal or hostile.”

expectations (Schwartz 1996:69-70; Sherry 1983:159). By rejecting a *gift* we reject the identity or perceptions conveyed by the donor (Schwartz 1996:71-72).

And we may well wish to refuse *gifts* designed specifically to harm, denigrate, control or dominate us. So-called 'denigration or contamination *gifts*,' are *gifts* such as exploding cigars or the apple given to a teacher by a student, who unbeknownst to them— spat on it. The donor takes pleasure in seeing the recipient hurt, humiliated or contaminated (Schwartz 1996:73-77). Another example is found in Shakespeare's (1984:188) *Titus Andronicus*, Act 5, Scene 3, where the Queen of the Goths asks Titus where her sons could be found, and he replies, "Why there they are, both baked in this pie / Whereof their mother daintily hath fed / Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred."⁹⁰ Given the risks posed by *gifts*, whether through indebtedness, the imposition of an unwanted identity or indeed poison, we are cautioned to "receive and reject *gifts* strategically (Sherry 1983:159)."⁹¹

Reciprocity

Yet a duty to reciprocate is paramount as we are moved "by a mysterious force, the thing [*gift*] itself demands give and restitution" (Derrida (1992:40). For Mauss, the force exerted by a fragment of the soul of the donor, the *hau*, demanded return *gifts* lest the recipient be put under its 'spell' (Racine 1991:87).⁹² Later theorists concluded the compulsion to make return *gifts* was not spiritual in nature, as people gave not because they feared a spiritual entity but in

⁹⁰ Perhaps as a warning of the potential dangers Mauss (1967:62) noted the word '*gifts*' had a double meaning in ancient German, "as *gift* and poison." Poison was 'das *gift*,' and to poison, was '*vergiften*' (LEO 2002:1).

⁹¹ Hyde (1979:70-73) notes that those whose objectivity, such as judges, might be impacted (out of a sense of debt) by receipt of a *gift*, must refuse them. Likewise *gifts* are to be refused if they pose subsequently too great a connection to the donor, as in "gifts from evil people must be refused lest we be bound to evil."

⁹² Challenging Mauss's 'obligation to reciprocate,' Testart (1998) suggests this is not true of all social situations, such as giving money to a panhandler, from whom nothing is expected in return. Testart makes a number of subtle distinctions regarding the sanctions resulting from not reciprocating finding some actually diminish the need or motivation to reciprocate. Other theorists such as Hyde would disagree, seeing in the gratitude of the panhandler, reciprocation.

order to avoid the “sanctions: dishonour, shame and guilt” (Titmuss 1997:125) that resulted from not reciprocating. There is, however, agreement that receiving moves people to give in return. For Hyde (1979:47,51), this ‘movement’ marked a transformation incomplete until we were able to give in return. Whether we give out of a fear of spiritual or social sanction, exchange is considered fundamental to ‘social cohesion,’ a form of “generosity that is absent from other more contractual forms of social solidarity” (Frow 1997:104). Thus the reciprocity demanded in *gift* exchange is by and large considered altruistic or non-exploitative. Fulfilling our obligations to return has been likened to ‘investing in relationships,’ a form of “reciprocal investment” that allows parties to continue their ongoing relational communication (Fennell 2002:96-97).⁹³ Perhaps it is in recognition of these ‘investments’ that it is said, “if friends make *gifts*, *gifts* make friends” (Sahlins 1996:26).⁹⁴

Reciprocity, was considered by Gouldner (1960) so fundamental to social life that he considered it a social norm.⁹⁵ This “norm of reciprocity” was “a concrete and special mechanism involved in the maintenance of any stable social system”(1960:174). Rather than reciprocate out of a sense of gratitude (as Hyde suggests) people do so as a result of their internalizing this specific norm. Social systems are dependent on the “mutually contingent exchange of gratifications,” manifested by reciprocal exchanges. Three variable forms of reciprocity were outlined by Sahlins (1996:31-32), ‘generalized,’ as in provisions of assistance, sharing, hospitality, etc.; ‘balanced’ as in simultaneous, equal-in-value exchanges, like those

⁹³ Here Fennell (2002:96-97) drew on the work of Camerer (1988), arguing that ‘reciprocal investments’ via reciprocal *gifts* allowed for the ongoing empathetic dialogue between parties.

⁹⁴ In this way *gift* exchanges have an instrumental function, as the material flow of *gifts* initiates and gives foundation to social relations (Sahlins 1996:26).

⁹⁵ The function of a social norm is two fold, it stabilized group functioning and as a ‘starting mechanism’ initiated social interactions (Gouldner 1960:176-77).

made at Christmas,⁹⁶ and ‘negative,’ where we seek something for nothing or less than the value of the *gift*, as in the case of theft, seizure, etc. As a critical social norm, Gouldner (1960:171) ultimately concluded, the ‘norm of reciprocity’ was “no less universal and important an element of culture than the incest taboo, although similarly its concrete formulations may vary with time and place.” Yet some were critical of Gouldner’s universal norm perspective, pointing out reciprocation was not always needed, as in how we may refuse to reciprocate *gifts* that arrive as insults or from an ungrateful person (Bourdieu 1990:98) or *gifts* that we cannot adequately repay such as organ donations (Fox and Swazey 1974:26).⁹⁷ Those with the social status of “subordinates” in relation to donors, are either permanently, as in the case of postal carriers or newspaper deliverers, or temporarily, as in the case of the very young, ill or elderly, exempted from the duty to reciprocate *gifts* given them (Gouldner 1960:166, Sherry 1983:160).⁹⁸ Titmuss (1997:279) concluded ‘blood donations’ as ‘social *gifts*,’ carried no explicit/implicit right of return as these *gift* relationships did not carry the obligations imposed by family or kinship bonds. For Hyde (1979:68-70) any *gift* that failed to move us, to motivate us to reciprocate was a ‘false gift,’ because through its failure to move us, “the promise or the fact of transformation” went unfulfilled.

⁹⁶ Bell (1991:158) concluded the need for ‘balanced reciprocity’ was a quality seen in commodity and *gift* exchanges, due to the fact that each party had to experience the exchange as the receipt of equivalences however defined.

⁹⁷ Fox and Swazey (1974:26) reported organ donation recipients found it difficult to repay adequately, existing in a continuing creditor-debtor relationship, ‘keeping recipients in a state of “ambivalent dependency.”’

⁹⁸ Here Sherry (1983:160) drew on the work of Harris (1972) who found those of lower social status or relatively subservient to the donor, were generally exempted from reciprocating. Gouldner (1960:166) concluded that in order to prevent exploitation, reciprocity obligations imposed a level of reciprocity contingent on the status of participants. Komter (1996:19) reviewing the social impact of the inability to give or reciprocate *gifts*, in a study of the elderly and unemployed in the Netherlands, concluding those who because of social and material conditions are unable to give “to other people... one seems to receive in proportion very little.”

In seeking to understand the transformation 'promised' by the Gift I will bring together in the next chapter the communications of Gift-givers and Bug-chasers and some of the perspectives on *gift* exchange presented here. While the 'fact of transformation' they seek seems obvious, namely the changing of their HIV status from negative to positive, the promise of the Gift is much greater. Communicating the Gift, like the giving of any *gift*, transmits a wealth of information enabling the transformation of one's identity, role, social group and future.

Chapter Four – *Giving The Gift*

“I’d like to get to know my gift-giver...especially since he’s ushering me into a new life.”
Member, G.E.B, Oct. 9th, 2000

Many *gift*-giving occasions demarcate our moving into a new stage of our lives. Birthday *gifts* honour our maturation as individuals while wedding *gifts* celebrate our capacity for committing to another. Graduation *gifts* mark our entry into the world of work while retirement *gifts*⁹⁹ highlight our departure from it. In each case *gifts* communicate to us symbolically and often materially, that we are passing through a ‘status passage’¹⁰⁰ affecting our identity and social relations (Glaser and Strauss 1971:2). And so it is with the Gift of HIV. Upon receiving the Gift one moves into a new stage of being, undergoing a symbolic and material transformation that affects the recipient’s sense of self and social relations. The Gift changes a recipient’s identity, moving men from ‘neg to poz’ (HIV negative to HIV positive) and could affect their role within the social group, in that a Bug-chaser upon receipt of the Gift may choose to become a Gift-giver. Exchanging the Gift creates and strengthens social ties among newsgroup members, and fulfills shared group objectives, such as expanding the POZ Brotherhood. Due to its material impact on the body as the Gift changes it at the cellular level, the Gift of HIV is unusual, as few *gifts* transform the body, so directly. In this respect the Gift has few parallels except perhaps for the receipt of organs, blood or sperm.¹⁰¹ In this chapter we consider the transformations enacted by the Gift

⁹⁹ Schwartz (1997:75) concluded that the giving of retirement *gifts* was ‘giving as an unfriendly act.’ The ubiquitous gold watch given as a symbol of achievement, becomes a ‘gilded pink slip.’ Giving *gifts* of travel, the donor subtly expresses the desire that the recipient go away—and not come back.

¹⁰⁰ Glaser and Strauss (1971:2) describe status passages as those occasions where people experience moving from one part of a social structure to another, or a loss or gain of their privilege, influence or power and changes to their identity and behaviours.

¹⁰¹ The receipt of organs, blood or sperm is often likened to receiving a *gift*. Organs and blood are described as ‘the *gift* of life’ or ‘giving a new lease on life,’ while children are considered the ‘greatest *gift* of all.’ With the

through an examination of newsgroup communications. We should keep in mind that while newsgroup messages illuminate how members conceive of the Gift, desire it and describe its receipt, we have only their words as evidence of their actions and intent. Newsgroup members describe materially receiving the Gift in ways that coincide with my understanding of the communicability and effect of HIV, but confirming its actual transmission is impossible. However, by examining how communicating through Gift exchange transforms members' social selves and relations, we can assess what is accomplished by thinking of HIV as the Gift, reaffirming that as with any *gift*, it really is the thought that counts.

The Thought Behind the Gift

Newsgroup messages describe what it means to give and receive the Gift. That newsgroup members attribute to the Gift a variety of meanings is readily apparent. This set of meanings stands in contrast with those dominant public, institutional and metanarratives that greatly inform our relationship with HIV as a communicable virus and AIDS as bodily state. When imbued with the particular meanings assigned to it by group members, HIV as the Gift is distanced from these narratives, from the broader realm of shared cultural meaning and shared ways of thinking about HIV and drawn into the idiosyncratic realm of Gift-givers.¹⁰² Within this realm, communications about HIV the Gift form an alternate narrative, the ontological narrative of Gift-giving and Bug-chasing. Through its descriptions of HIV the

advent of reproductive technologies, sperm is now exchanged as a commodity. Yet Tober (2001:142) points out that sperm, even sold as a commodity, "women typically perceive this exchange as a type of gifting," and express a deep sense of gratitude to a man whom they will never meet because of his having given them "something they consider quite precious." See Gerrand's 1994, The Notion of Gift-Giving and Organ Donation, for a critique of the linking of organ donations with gift where which concludes "formalized gift giving has very little in common with organ donation" (1994:136).

¹⁰² For Ruth and Otnes (1999:390) transforming an object into a *gift* by imbuing it with symbolic, personal or sacred meaning removes the object from the realm of shared cultural meanings, to one governed by the unique, idiosyncratic meanings attributed to the *gift* by donor and recipient.

Gift as something to be desired rather than avoided, the ill body as erotic and HIV as engendering a sense of belonging rather than isolation, the Gift-giving narrative is unique.

The Typology of the Gift

By categorizing the numerous meanings assigned to the Gift it was possible to establish a typology of the Gift into which a majority of newsgroup messages could be inserted. Based on a sample of 281 messages only three were sufficiently different as not to fit these categories. These included two messages related to women giving or receiving the Gift and one message that referred to the Gift as a 'donation.'¹⁰³ A review of messages revealed a set of commonly presented meanings and descriptions for the Gift and based on these I established categories comprising the typology of the Gift. Given that most messages contained several meanings, they were categorized according to that meaning which the member seemed to emphasize. Other types of descriptions appeared but infrequently or were used only by an individual or a few members, such as those linking the Gift and Satan: "I heartily inseminate the bug-virginal assess of the willing as sacrifices to the DARK ONE" (Member, G.E.B., Mar. 23rd, 2000). There were a few messages in which the Gift was presented as having a singular meaning, but the majority attributed to the Gift several meanings.

The Gift of the Gift

"I hope to be meated by y'all who are willing to share your gift with me. I am SO READY FOR THE GIFT... !!!" (Member, G.E.B., June 20th, 2000)¹⁰⁴

"I beg for the Gift only GiftGivers can share." (Member, T.P.S., Feb., 7th, 1999)

Described as a *gift*, members signal the Gift is something special, a thing exchanged as an expression of strong feeling, drawing on general narratives of *gift* giving where objects are

¹⁰³ One newsgroup member asked for "suggestions about how I could get the gift from a FEMALE," (Member, B.B.M4M4, Jun. 4th, 2002) while another described his girlfriend as "a confirmed bug chasers" and asked for "a gift giver who is willing to 'knock her up,'" (Member, B.B.M4M, Jan. 6th, 2003).

¹⁰⁴ Messages are presented as they appeared, complete with emphasis and spelling variations.

exchanged as an expression of feeling and connection. Messages where the Gift is described solely as the Gift are relatively rare. Much more common are those messages where, in addition to being described as the Gift, references are made to it as having particular attributes, capacities or uses.

The Gift of the Bug

“This is the true story about how I finally caught the bug I have been chasing... I had heard [location removed] was a good place to chase the bug...” (Member, B.G.B., Jan. 15th, 2003)

“I’m currently hiv neg, but I’m really turned on by having the bug.” (Member, H.P.G.B., Apr. 1st, 1999)

As a metaphor, the Gift described as the Bug can be situated within older North American meta-narratives where illness is commonly spoken of as resulting from a person ‘catching a bug’ and friends warn each other about the ‘bug that’s going around.’ Currently these narratives are being updated as North Americans are warned by the medical community that the over use of antibiotics has resulted in the creation of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, so-called ‘super bugs.’ Within the newsgroup, members tend to establish an identity as either a Gift-giver or Bug-chaser. Those posting messages make reference to the Gift as Gift or Bug interchangeably, no matter their identity.

The Gift of Disease

“... POZ dud seeking other mutual Giftgiving fuckbuddies who are POZ and symptomatic of have AIDS for mutual sharing of it ALL.” (Member, G.E.B., Feb. 14th, 2001)

“I get really turned on by the thought of having an STD party. Gono, herpes, syph, sores, hiv, aids, blisters, pus, drip... Feel the burning in your cock and ass you cum or get filled.” (Member, B.G.B., Apr. 23rd, 2001)

“... prefer thin guys (thinner the better) and if you have AIDS you go to the front of the line...” (Member, B.B.M4M, Jan. 7th, 2003)

Like those messages describing the Gift as the Bug, I situated messages that describe the Gift as the receipt of AIDS, disease or other STDs, within meta-narratives of illness and, in particular narratives pertaining to AIDS and sexually transmitted disease. These types of messages are a recent phenomenon, not appearing at newsgroups prior to 1999, the majority not until 2001 and later. Both the Gift as the Bug and as Disease conflict with HIV/AIDS narratives in two ways. First, they differ by expressing the desire to receive rather than avoid illness. Second, by offering or requesting AIDS or disease, they express the view that illness is desirable, thereby valorizing and celebrating it. Potential Gift-givers with 'full blown AIDS' are often described as being highly erotic and powerful Givers. Newsgroup members post descriptions of sexual encounters with HIV positive men who have visible signs of wasting (dramatic weight loss) or lesions (Kaposi Sarcoma), describing these as especially sexually charged. Conceptually, the eroticisation of disease has historical precedents, for example, the romanticizing of dying of tuberculosis.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, the desire to see oneself degraded or debased is a common feature of dominance and submission sexual fantasies, but I can think of few parallels for finding in the symptoms of disease, the discharges of the ill body, an erotic potential. Perhaps we can draw links between Bug-chasers' erotising of the ill body's discharges and those in the past who found spiritual awakening for example, by ingesting the bodily discharges of lepers as Saint Catherine of Siena did.¹⁰⁶ Messages that describe receiving the Gift as the immediate receipt of AIDS or as a way of beginning a process that inevitably results in AIDS, conflicts with AIDS narratives. While health

¹⁰⁵ The eroticising of illness was seen in the 19th century, as elite members of society thought it beautiful to be feverish, dying the erotically charged death of tuberculosis. For Europe's elites "it was fashionable to be pale and drained" (Sontag 1977:28-35). However it must be pointed out that for elites able to 'take the cure' by say moving to a warmer climate, death by tuberculosis was not 'romantic' for the less fortunate.

¹⁰⁶ In Medieval Europe the general populace greatly feared those with leprosy. As an act of spiritual humility and caring, many female saints like Saint Catherine cared for lepers by "licking away the puss in their wounds then eating the scabs" (Wheeler 2003:1).

educators have long stressed it is not possible to 'catch AIDS,' Gift-giver messages suggest otherwise. As a syndrome comprising a variety of health conditions resulting from long term HIV infection, AIDS is not transmittable nor strictly speaking a disease.

The Gift of Poz

"30 y.o. HIV Neg Boy looking for HIV POZ men who want to initiate me into the POZ life." (Member, H.P.G.B., Apr. 1st, 1999)

"My First Poz Load... I want more poz loads in my ass. (Member, B.B.M4M, Feb. 7th, 2001)

The Poz Gift can be requested or offered as something that is essentially 'poz' or as something with the capacity to 'poz'. Metaphors that describe the Gift as 'pozzing' reveal its capacity to change the recipient from 'neg to poz.' This draws on the narrative of HIV testing regimes wherein blood is tested for HIV to determine if a person is HIV negative (free of virus) or HIV positive (has virus). With the advent of HIV testing in the early 1990s, gay men in North America commonly came to refer to themselves as being negative or positive.¹⁰⁷

The Gift of Charging

"sub bottom in [location removed] wants the *gift*. I've waited a long time cum fill my ass with your charge." (Member, B.B.M4M, Nov. 9th, 2000)

"Dad wants to be recharged." (Member, B.G.B., Dec. 24th, 2001)

As a metaphor, the Gift as something 'charged' or as having the capacity to 'charge' recipients also draws on HIV testing narratives. That HIV testing results in people having a negative or positive status lends itself well to describing the Gift metaphorically as electrical

¹⁰⁷ The HIV test provided to gay and bisexual men knowledge about a potential health risk which in turn could motivate behavioural changes. Kenen (1996:1546) describes the acquisition of such health knowledge as the 'gift of knowing.' Considering how technologies such as genetic testing are providing to people, knowledge about their potential risks for illness generally prior to the appearance of symptoms, Kenen noted people, "may either embrace the gift of knowing or greet it with ambivalence or outright rejection."

in nature or effect. ‘Charged’ Gifts are offered that have a ‘high voltage,’ while Gifts that ‘re-charge’ or ‘keep the voltage up’ in recipients are sought. Perhaps we can consider this as similar to other cultural metaphors describing life resulting from the ‘spark of life’ or indeed Frankenstein’s creation being brought to life—by electricity. As an extension of the electrical metaphor, the Gift is described as ‘hot,’ ‘radioactive’ or ‘nuclear.’ This may also reflect that the bodily fluid in which the Gift is transmitted, namely male ejaculate, is, like the body, warm.¹⁰⁸ However, whereas HIV testing narratives describe testing negative as being a positive event, and being positive a negative development, Gift narratives invert this, suggesting becoming positive—is positive.

The Gift as Toxin, Poison or Death

“... you need to dump a few toxic loads in my hungry and greedy holes.” (Member, B.B.M4M, Dec. 20th 2002)

“Hot young men looking to get their poison seed from a daddy who’s already getting pretty sick...” (Member, G.E.B., Dec. 8th, 1999)

“How eager and able are you (be honest) to pump your death seed (*gift* giver) into a willing ass?” (Member, E.B.P., [Date Unavailable Due to Group Deletion])¹⁰⁹

All three of these metaphors reflect HIV/AIDS narratives wherein HIV is a dangerous infection and, for most people, AIDS is a fatal illness, a narrative that Gift-givers and Bug-chasers challenge by welcoming these dangers. However, given the progress in treating HIV, treatments that can mitigate or prevent for long periods the onset of opportunistic infections that define AIDS, the prognosis for those with HIV has greatly improved. As a result, I

¹⁰⁸ In gay male erotica ejaculate, described as cum, jizz, spunk, spooge, etc. is consistently described as hot. This may reflect the nature of bodily substances existing briefly outside the body in a warm state, but it may reflect links between notions of heat and life. That which is hot is vital and alive, whereas cold flesh is dead and lifeless. Then again heat can be dangerous. For example while those dying of consumption were described as beautifully feverish, they were also described as being consumed (burned) from within by TB fevers.

¹⁰⁹ Newsgroup moderators regularly poll members on issues and then post results, for example on the number of negs that have been successfully converted. The capacity to poll members is a feature of the newsgroup format.

would suggest descriptions of the Gift as inherently dangerous even deadly, are out of date, harkening back to the early days of the HIV pandemic. Until the advent of HIV anti-viral cocktails, it generally took 8 to 10 years for AIDS symptoms to appear after HIV infected the body. This period is now greatly extended. Messages describing the Gift as death present a conception of HIV that is less current. Perhaps the advent of treatments that have effectively prevented the onset of symptoms for many, such as the wasting which messages describe as erotic, has something to do with the recent appearance in messages of erotic descriptions of STDs. As HIV cocktails diminished the visible, erotic evidence of HIV infection, Gift-givers and Bug-chasers began to eroticise other visible signs of sexual illness.

The Gift of Conversion

“[Location removed] Gay White Poz Wannabe Need Conversion bad from a local Well Hung HiVL [high viral load] Gift Giver...” (Member, B.B.M4M, Nov. 5th, 2000)

“Looking for extended breeding weekend, want to be sure I convert.” (Member, B.B.G.B., May 22nd, 2002)

“This is how I got the bug... this guy fucked me a few times... and I ‘took’ within weeks.” (Member, G.E.B., Jun. 29th, 2001)

“... looking for guys who need some seed in their ass.” (Member, B.B.M4M, Jan. 9th, 2003)

Messages that describe receiving the Gift as an event which immediately converts recipients and/or one initiating a process of conversion, suggest conversion occurs on both a symbolic and material level. Symbolically, the Gift converts as soon as it is received from the Gift-giver, when the Bug-chaser receives ‘*gifted*’ ejaculate. On a material level however, messages suggest conversion takes time, thus receiving the Gift merely begins the process. This is reinforced by depictions of the Gift as a ‘seed’ as something that is ‘planted’ or needs to ‘take’ within the recipient’s body. Such metaphors describe the Gift as a thing that must be

allowed to grow or germinate.¹¹⁰ The Gift as something that causes a conversion or a developmental process is another variation on the language of HIV testing. As a response to HIV entering the body, the immune system generates antibodies. In order for the body to generate sufficient quantities of antibodies to register through HIV testing, a short period of time the so-called 'conversion period' must pass.¹¹¹

The Gift of Becoming a Giver

"... searching out other giftgivers to breed me with your poz seed so I too can begin breeding with charged loads." (Member, T.P.S., Oct. 21st, 2002)

"I have a real fetish for getting the bug and spreading it after I first get it." (Member, D.F.W.R.G.G.C., May 25th, 2001)

"I am seeking the *gift*... I have others that wants this daddy to give the gift also." (Member, B.G.B., Jul. 10th, 2001)

While the majority of newsgroup members seeking the Gift request it for its capacity to transform them, for example from neg to poz, some see the Gift as a means to an end, a way for the Bug-chaser to become the Gift-giver. Once confirmed, once they have gained the capacity to Give, the member can then take on a new much valorized, role within the group.

The Gift of Brotherhood

"Looking to become part of the brotherhood. Looking for any *gift*givers in the [location removed]." (Member, G.E.B., Jul. 10th, 2001)

"Been Poz for 18 months but am trying to add as many new bro's as possible so expect to hear from some Newly Tested Poz Soon!!!" (Member, B.G.B., Jan. 18th, 2002)

¹¹⁰ That the Gift is a thing to be grown over time, bears a striking similarity to Hyde's (1979:49) perspective on *gifts* and his suggestion that "once a gift has stirred within us, it is up to us to develop it... the reciprocal labour [done as part of] the maturation of talent." For Hyde *gifts* of art moved us to develop our own creative capacities until we can make reciprocal *gifts*.

¹¹¹ Given that time must pass before the Bug-chaser is transformed by the Gift into a Gift-giver, allowing them to make reciprocal *gifts*, perhaps Derrida's (1992:40-41) assertion that time is what *gifts* really provide is applicable here.

“If you know anyone that will help me get the *gift*... lets get together and make me part of the brotherhood of the GiftedBareBackers. Please help me be a part of the family.” (Member, G.E.B., Jul. 10th, 2001)

The Gift can be offered or requested as a means of making new ‘Brothers’ or initiating members into the ‘Brotherhood’ or ‘Poz Brotherhood.’ The Gift as a means whereby a person is initiated into a group stresses its capacity to bond members together and a means of unifying and expanding the group. Here we can make a distinction between the communicative capacity of the Gift to draw members together via a shared dialogue and its communicable capacity to link members together via viral infection. The Gift of Brotherhood reflects members’ desires to join a group with whom they share things in common, to ‘be a part of the family.’ Yet members do not suggest theirs is a Brotherhood that shares a common bond with the larger population of gay and bisexual men in North America living with HIV. Gift-giver newsgroups pointedly reject a sense of connection with other HIV positive men, who through magazines such as POZ learn strategies to ‘live positively with HIV.’¹¹² Drawn to a Brotherhood with a different take on living positively, newsgroup members are simultaneously united and isolated by the Brotherhood.

The Gift of Breeding

“looking for well poz tops who want to impregnate my neg hole. I’m gen [generally] submissive begging for tops to breed me big time.” (Member, B.B.M4M, Jan. 9th, 2001)

“Nice 7.5 cut cock but my main sex organ is my asscunt! Yeah this Slut is proud to state – I was born with an ass pussy instead of an asshole.” (Member, G.E.B., Jan. 21st, 2001)

“I’m ready and waiting to get KNOCKED-UP... NOW! Lean horny ass to breed.” (Member, G.E.B., Jun. 20th, 2000)

¹¹² POZ Magazine’s masthead states, “POZ was founded primarily to get information to HIV positive persons for whom it could extend or improve the quality of their lives.”

Descriptions of exchanges of the Gift as akin to reproduction take many forms. Givers describe themselves as engaged in 'breeding and seeding,' of 'knocking up, inseminating and making pregnant' recipients. Recipients describe 'wanting to be bred,' 'be impregnated' and offering themselves as 'breeding stations.' As a metaphor, I believe the Gift as reproduction is a reflection of the nature of the Gift and the method of its delivery. As a Gift with a material nature that must establish itself and then reproduce in the recipient, it has a fertile capacity. The manner of the Gift's delivery, an agent inserted into the recipient during intercourse (anal) and then left to develop, makes allusions to the process of reproduction readily understandable. Conceptualizing Gift-giving as reproduction is further reinforced by the roles adopted by those involved in it. Members insist that the Gift is always given by Gift-giver Tops to Bug-chaser Bottoms. Being 'Gifted' entails accepting the act of penetration. That within Gift-giver culture the Gift of HIV is given only via donors ejaculating inside recipients reinforces its reproductive aspect but contradicts how HIV is transmitted in that during unprotected anal sex, Tops and Bottoms are both capable of transmitting HIV.¹¹³

One additional way in which the reproductive form of Gift-giving is strengthened, is through the gendered way that Tops and Bottoms are described. Tops/Gift-givers typically describe/are described as masculine, dominant, vital, skilled and potent, while Bottoms/Bug-chasers describe/are described often as feminine, submissive, weak, whorish and dirty. Whereas Gift-givers are sexually powerful and predatory, Bug-chasers are sexually voracious and available. Gift-givers are invariably described as well hung and capable of

¹¹³ Tops are at less risk of contracting HIV than Bottoms, possibly even much less risk but they are still considered at high risk for HIV infection (Kull 2002:1). At the outset of the pandemic however, while gay men popularly believed Tops were at no risk, epidemiologists believed Tops and Bottoms shared an equal risk.

delivering multiple loads, while Bug-chasers are seen as feminine, by virtue of their having a pussy or a cherry.

“I’ve got rock-hard ass; mountainous, hairy pecs; and a cock that’s perpetually hard. Horny boys are drawn to me in nightclubs like moths to the fire... I fuck their brains out, slipping away at dawn know that three or four loads of my juice are marinating deep inside their succulent, throbbing pussies.” (Member, G.E.B., Mar. 23rd, 2000)

The language of feminization and debasement is strongest in those messages where a Bug-chaser is engaged in breeding or reproduction in that their role and physiology are described in misogynist terms.¹¹⁴

“... just be a super *gift* sharing fucker. Open to the experiences of sensuous... pussy breeding, and gentle rape scenes... .” (Member, H.P.G.B., Apr. 18th, 2001)

“My cunthole loves cock, cum, piss, can’t get enough of it pumped into me!... I love to work my cunt muscles sucking it out of a man’s cock!” (Member, G.E.G., Jan. 21st, 2001)

While the rigid gendered hierarchy governing how the Gift is given further reinforces its presentation as reproduction, this places Tops who wish to become Gift-givers in a difficult position, in that they must take the out of character role of being a Bottom.

“I have a friend... who wants to convert. Problem is, he’s a top. He’s tried to get it every way but the way that works, taking dirty loads up your ass.” (Member, G.E.B., Oct. 17th, 1999)

Perhaps as a result of the particular manner of the Gift’s delivery, that only Tops can give, many newsgroup members are sexually versatile, open to taking either role during sex and, by extension, open to giving and receiving the Gift.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ These kinds of gendered portrayals of male sexuality are not restricted to Gift-givers and Bug-chasers, as within urban gay culture younger gay men can be described as being ‘cherry’ or ‘boy pussy.’ Allusions to anal sex as a form of reproduction are common also, particularly in bareback porn films like those produced by Hot Desert Knights, in videos such as “Breeding Mike O’Neill” and “Breed Me” (Hot Desert Knights 2003:1).

¹¹⁵ For those unable to submit to being penetrated, Gift-givers will offer to exchange blood with Bug-chasers. Some newsgroups are focused solely on blood exchanges, so-called ‘gay blood sports,’ but these tend to be deleted by the web-based host.

"42 year old 5'11" 190lbs. POZ veretile shaved head dad... is seeking 18 to 22 year old cute... versetile neg boy tired of fucking with condoms..." (Member, H.P.G.B., Jan. 21st, 2002)

"Mostly top but willing to bottom for your *gift*. Will gladly flip back over to show my appreciation!" (Member, T.P.S., Oct. 21st, 2002)

"I gave my Gift to two happy bottoms and received a Gift from a hot top man" (Member, B.G.B., Dec. 28th, 2001)

The Gift to the Unawares

"He was a bottom, 20 years old, white, still even living at home, and neg ... and I assured him through a long process that I was as well." (Member, B.G.B., Jul. 17th, 2001)

"... carry my special brand of ventilated rubbers for those sensitive situations when the soon-to-be received of the *gift* was reluctant and insisted on 'protection'... and oil-based lube will affect the structural integrity of the rubber." (Member, B.G.B., Jan. 6th, 2003)

Newsgroup members frequently report on their efforts to give the Gift to those who are unaware they are receiving it, to the so-called unawares.¹¹⁶ Along with these reports are those messages describing this scenario as an exciting fantasy. After messages describing getting or fantasizing about receiving the Gift themselves, the next most discussed fantasy among newsgroup members is Giving to the unawares, often to married men. Here the Gift is given to a partner, typically through the Giver lying about their HIV status¹¹⁷ or their slipping off the condom or damaging it, so that it leaks or breaks during sex.

Communicating Through the Gift

By reviewing newsgroup messages it was possible to establish a typology of the Gift. While this served to illustrate the multiple meanings of the Gift it revealed that many were closely

¹¹⁶ Giving to the unawares is also described as an 'involuntary conversion.' Newsgroups "for the discussion of the resistance of hesitant recipients," (Moderator, I.C., Aug. 19th, 2002) featuring only 'unawares' content, have tended to be quickly deleted by the web-based host.

¹¹⁷ Through its "How Do You Know What You Know" campaign, the San Francisco AIDS Foundation attempted to challenge a number of assumptions gay men made about sexual partners. In print ads the Foundation challenged gay men who engaged in unsafe sex, asking them why they believed "tops who bareback must be negative" or "he'd tell me if he's positive" (Outreach 2001).

related, drawn from common sexual, HIV/AIDS and Illness narratives. Distilled from these narratives the meaning of the Gift is limited, being a mixed metaphor mobilized by newsgroup members. That there is a limit on what the Gift can mean highlights how similar to other *gifts* the Gift is. When exchanged as *gifts*, objects are capable only of communicating a limited amount of information between donor and recipient. The Gift, as with any *gift*, can only say so much.

While capable of communicating a limited message, tangible and material *gifts* are nonetheless considered powerful communication tools (Cheal 1987:161) here able to transform recipients symbolically and materially. Given the communicative limits of *gift* exchange, donors work to improve the chance of their *gift*'s message getting through. To communicate effectively with recipients, donors will give multiple or unique *gifts* (1987:161). Perhaps this explains the frequency with which Bug-chasers will ask Gift-givers to give the Gift many times or that they be Gifted by many donors. To facilitate the receiving of 'multiple gifts' Gift-givers or Bug-chasers will sometimes offer to organize pozzing or conversion parties which bring together several Bug-chasers and Gift-givers to engage in an "extended weekend of breeding" (Member, B.G.B., May 22nd, 2002).

"... just seeking hot horny POZ men to use my holes to unload as many highly charged loads as possible to ensure a successful conversion." (Member, G.E.B., Nov. 2nd, 2000)

"Seeking: 1 on 1 or groups of poz guys to load me up, ideal would be having guys pumping their charged cum into me." (Member, G.E.B., Mar. 23rd, 2000)

When giving a *gift*, a donor will take additional steps to ensure their *gift* is noticed and/or that their message gets through for example, by making the recipient more receptive by wrapping the *gift* in paper that appeals to them. Such steps work to highlight, the strength of the

donor's communication. In a similar way I suggest that by highlighting that theirs is a unique Gift, and they have a proven track record of breeding or conversion, Gift-givers emphasize their ability to communicate. By highlighting their high viral loads, their 'signal strength' (if you will) is emphasized.

"I'm a possessor and knowing spreader of a strain of Super Bug which is resistant to all meds." (Member, G.E.B., Mar. 23rd, 2000)

"Been poz for a years no meds, good viral load and have several confirmed conversions and have "stealth" bred many more." (Member, B.G.B., Jun. 4th, 2002)

Yet for all the strategizing by Bug-chasers to ensure they get the Gift, and all the posturing by Gift-givers to see that their Gift gets noticed, the communication they hope to receive and/or transmit often fails. Based on the number of messages posted by Bug-chasers attesting to their never receiving the Gift and the resulting frustration, communicating through Gifts is often ineffective. These failures to communicate are generally blamed on problems at the source, namely the capacity of Gift-givers to give. These failures tend to be attributed to the impact of anti-viral medications,¹¹⁸ and to the existence of Givers with weak versions of HIV. However some Bug-chasers suggest the fault is their resistance to the virus. In addition they express the ongoing concern that few 'serious *gift* givers' exist, those with no actual Gift to give.

"13 men have told me they were poz after fucking me but I have not conceived the *gift* yet, I think they were not telling the truth." (Member, T.P.S., Feb. 4th, 2001)

"Got my latest test results back last week - Neg! Was really fucking disappointed as really felt that last poz cum I had would have done the job (the guy had a really high viral load!)." (Member, B.B.M4M, Jun. 19th, 2001)

¹¹⁸ The impact of improved HIV anti-viral medications is a source of irritation for Gift-givers as these treatments dramatically lower the amount of HIV virus in bodily fluids, sometimes to undetectable levels (Waldholz 1996:1). But newsgroup members offer reassurance: "Know your craft. This means that keeping current on HIV research can pay off. Did anyone see the recent study that said that guys with undetectable viral loads still has infectious bugs in his cum?" (Member, L.G.A., [Date Unavailable Due to Group Deletion]).

“... looking for a few good men to try to infect me if you can. All other attempts have failed... body seems to handle small limited exposures, but never tried on a bigger scale.” (Member, T.P.S., Dec. 4th, 2002)

“Hell it’s hard enough finding a decent poz load to take here in [location removed] with everyone on meds.” (Member, L.G.A., [Date Unavailable Due to Group Deletion])

Based on these messages, it appears that the material communication of the Gift is not always successful. However, we can consider that the Gift is symbolically received, each time it is given as recipients speak immediately after anal sex, of having been ‘Gifted.’

“Hope you all had a *gifted* Christmas... this member is now one of the brotherhood.” (Member, B.G.B, Dec. 29th, 2001)

But while we can consider the Gift symbolically communicated every time, its material receipt must be confirmed. Messages reporting members are experiencing flu-like symptoms, the so-called ‘fuck flu,’¹¹⁹ namely, swollen glands and sweating, are taken as confirming the material receipt of the Gift.

“As for yesterday I started feeling bad, my glands are swollen, I think it finally took...” (Member, L.G.A., [Date Unavailable Due to Group Deletion])

In addition, newsgroup members will report results of HIV blood tests to confirm receiving (or not) the Gift. It is also anticipated that the ‘unawares’ will eventually have the receipt of the Gift materially confirmed.

“I just got my results back from the doctor and I’m officially POZ... I’m happy and liberated.” (Member, T.P.S., Jun. 22nd, 2000)

“Fucking a neg ass if a fantastic turn on. Would love to be a fly on the wall when he finds out he’s got it.” (Member, L.G.A., [Date Unavailable Due to Group Deletion])

¹¹⁹ The majority of people infected with HIV will experience flu-like symptoms in the weeks following infection as the immune system responds to HIV.

Transformation Through the Gift

The transformations brought about by the receipt of the Gift affect the body, identity and social relations. The most fundamental of these and that which is most sought after, is the change from neg to poz. Often this change in a person's HIV status, their transformation, is said to come after a long wait, signalling the start of a new life, a kind of literal— status passage.

“...Neg GWSM Bug chasers seeks a hot charged load...for a life changing experience.” (B.B.M4M, May 17th, 2001)

“... looking for tops/*gift*givers to finally knock me up. Craving the seed to change me forever...” (Member, B.G.B., Mar. 11th, 2001)

“[Location Removed] Gift Seeker wants Hot Hung Gifted Giver... fill me up with Juicy Toxic Cum to change my life.” (Member, D.F.W.R.G.G.C., Feb. 28th, 2001)

This transformation of one's HIV status can be described as something Spiritual:

“I had hoped this Wild Man's adventure would qualify me to enter into the hallowed gates of the Poz Brotherhood.” (Member, L.G.A., Mar. 22nd, 2002)

Sacrificial:

“YOU: 18 to 30yo, good-looking and hot to climb my poison pole and sacrifice yourself on its warmth.” (Member, G.E.B., Dec. 8th, 1999)

“... looking for someone to give me HIV gift. I want to make the ultimate experience.” (Member, B.B.M4M, May, 17th, 2001)

Or Freeing:

“seeking the “Gift”... I am seeking conversion... I want the Freedom...” (Member, B.G.B. Jun. 26th, 2001)

“... But in truth when I know I'm *gifting* I think of it more as a *gift* of Freedom.” (Member, B.G.B., Apr. 12th, 2001)

The freedom the Gift offers, appears primarily to be the freedom to have sex on one's own terms, free of anxiety, and to have sex that is natural, namely, sex without condoms; similar to the freedom sought by barebackers.

"I'm fuckin' aching to get popped in the ass with that 1st poz load... finally have the release I've been looking for... to be the fuckin' pig that I am." (Member, B.B.M4M, Sep. 2nd, 2001)

"... looking for HIV POZ men who want to initiate me into POZ life. I'm tired of the anxiety and want to 'charge' into my 31st year..." (Member, G.E.B., Oct. 15th, 1999)

"... condoms. They are not natural... To this end, condoms out and doing things that make me happy and strong in. Now I make a point to talk to others... about sexual freedom and the scare tactics of the AIDS industry." (Member, B.A., Jul. 20th, 2000)¹²⁰

Receipt of the Gift also can transform the identity or role of members. As we have already seen as an expression of identity, the gendered hierarchy and attributions of Tops (Gift-givers) and Bottoms (Bug-chasers) play a determining role in Gift-giver culture, assigning to each a masculine or feminine identity. Additional transformations of one's identity resulting from the effective communication of the Gift, namely the recipient coming to describe themselves as Gifted, pozzed, bugged, charged, given AIDS or impregnated, were evident in the typology of the Gift. In terms of how the Gift transforms one's role in the group, members suggest in particular that coming to identify as a Brother or a Gift-giver often confers upon them a duty to assist fellow members.

"I really do think of it as a brotherhood... I want to add as many to the brotherhood as possible... to serve my brothers." (Member, B.G.B., Mar. 10th, 2001)

¹²⁰ The belief that there is an 'AIDS Industry' comprised of pharmaceutical companies, condom and lubricant manufacturers benefiting from overstating the risks of HIV is commonly expressed. The belief that HIV is not dangerous and/or easily dealt and that a joint, government/industry conspiracy works to keep anti-microbial lubricants from reaching the market, thereby preventing safer bareback sex, is also expressed. That these two beliefs, that HIV is not dangerous and lubricants can protect people, contradict each other, does not appear to concern newsgroup members (Moderator, B.A., Jun. 16th, 2000).

“Poz *gift*giver... would love to give multiple *gifts* to someone in need.” (Member, B.H.B., Aug. 17th, 2001)

In terms of what this ‘need’ is, newsgroup messages reveal the most basic need the Gift fulfills is the desire to become HIV positive, preferably via Gift-giving. Messages that speak to why members desire this transformation are infrequent, but two rationales stand out. The first is that the Gift fulfills the desire to become part of the Brotherhood. The second is that by receiving the Gift members are able to control the how and when of HIV infection, which some believe will inevitably occur in any case.¹²¹

“I like to feel you pozcum shot in my neghole for a conversion. it happens sooner or later, so why not know when it happens.” (Member, B.B.M4M, Jan. 14th, 2002)

If not presented as an inevitable occurrence, then messages suggest that HIV infection is anticipated. As something that is generally expected to happen, there is a sense of an anxious waiting they want to end. Here we can think back to the notion of the Gift as ‘freeing,’ in the sense that it ends this waiting. In turn one gains a sense of having taken charge of one’s life.

“I want to get it over with so I don’t have to worry about it anymore...” (Member, G.E.G., Sep., 21st, 2000)

“POZ TOP, 59, good V.L.... looking to service a poz or neg Bottom in need of a special *gift*... For relief of you pent up stress and emotions and to give you what you want.” (Member, D.F.W.R.G.G.C., Oct. 11th, 2001)

“... I’ll finally have the release I’ve been looking for. I WANT THIS BAD... AND WANT IT TO HAPPEN THIS WAY.” (Member, B.B.M4M, Sep. 2nd, 2001)

¹²¹ That HIV infection is at some level expected, is regarded as the reason that upon testing positive gay men in the United States often feel a sense of relief, a reduction in their sense of anxiety and depression. “When HIV infection seems inevitable, many men desire comfort from contracting it now, thus eliminating anxiety about *when* (Odets 1995:14).

Those who were unable to control the how and when of HIV infection express regret over their receiving the Gift by accident or unknowingly.

“...as someone who got his by accident when he was young and dumb, I’ve got to say that real chasers are the ultimate... always like to serve them.” (Member, B.G.B., Apr. 12th, 2001)

“Got mine by accident and feel a little guilty about that— maybe more cheated since I guess I’d be a chaser is I was young and neg today.” (Member, B.G.B., Apr. 12th, 2001)

One final transformation made possible by the Gift is that begun in the unawares. Given to the unawares, the Gift transforms symbolically and (it is hoped) materially, without consent or knowledge. Messages about giving to the unawares are posted to the newsgroup as success or conversion stories. Members also post their personal conversion stories, detailing successes at becoming Gifted. Personal conversion narratives describe individuals receiving the Gift in settings or in a manner, strongly reminiscent of sexual scenarios typical of gay pornographic fiction and videos. As a result, personal conversion stories tend to have a fantastical quality, wherein Gift-givers are invariably portrayed as hyper masculine, exceptionally well hung and sexually potent.

“... thanks to Paul and Daddy Bruce with their 9+ inches... I especially want to thank Master Mike who set up the weekend with the 42 cumloads I got.” (Member, T.P.S., Jun. 22nd, 2000)

In such narratives, those receiving the Gift are often given it by groups of men. Such groups tend to be comprised of particular male archetypes, that are especially erotically charged for North American gay men, namely, groups of powerfully built Black men, sailors on leave, construction workers at the job site, etc. Conversion stories about giving to the unawares also tend to present scenarios in which only particular types of men are given the Gift. Typically the unawares are described as the sexually innocent or virginal, such as younger

guys, university straight boys, or the hyper masculine such as bikers, Dads or military men, and/or straight or married men.¹²²

“He’s an extremely gullible and innocent kid, and doesn’t even have a clue to ask about HIV status.” (Member, B.B.M4M, Jan. 26th, 2001)

“I got poz at 20 and for the past 11 years have been on a barebacking frenzy of fucking yng, unaware boys, dads, bears, and masc. MEN.” (Member G.E.B., Mar. 23rd, 2000)

Like personal conversion stories, these narratives present types of men commonly regarded as especially erotic within gay pornographic narratives. But unlike the scenarios of personal conversion, reports of giving to the unawares tend not to involve groups of men or the cliché sexual scenarios of porn. Rather than groups of Gift-givers enticing or overpowering a single man, these are stories of one-on-one sex. Thus, while they still tend to portray ‘stock characters’ from gay porn, they describe more plausible scenarios than are seen in most Gift-giver’s personal conversion stories. However there are occasional personal conversion stories that do not present fantastical sexual scenarios that involve two sexually ordinary men, presenting a more believable narrative.

If we consider the Gift to the unawares as a type of contamination *gift*, (Schwartz 1996:73-75)¹²³ given to denigrate or harm the recipient, and take into account the ‘types of men’ to whom it is given, stories of giving to the unawares have a vengeful tone, a kind of payback to

¹²² The seduction of straight men or the act of turning them onto gay sex, has long been a theme genre of gay male erotic fiction. I suggest here that their appearance in Gift-giving stories is a variation on that theme, wherein seducing the straight man here becomes infecting the straight man.

¹²³ Technically the Gift is not a true ‘contamination gift’ in that the ‘unaware’ recipient does not know they are receiving a *gift* at all. A true contamination gift is one that is recognized as a *gift* by donor and recipient, but only the donor is aware of its contaminated state. However, if we consider giving the Gift as the act of giving something contaminated with “unfriendly sentiment” (Schwartz 1996:73), then it adheres to the spirit of contamination gifts, given as part of a derogation ritual.

those who were perhaps unattainable or hurtful in the past. In such stories there is a settling of scores with the sexually and socially powerful.

“I really get into deception of trickin’ bottoms now, ever since I myself was tricked and filled with cum.” (Member, B.B.M4M, Jan. 29th, 2001)

“I found my way to a ‘neg only’ party a couple of nights ago... my cock jumped when the door opened, and I spied nine neg asses lined up to greet me.”¹²⁴ (Member, B.B.M4M, Dec. 7th, 2002)

“Last night I had a sweet conquest... Cute, young smooth, awesome ass, and tight little muscles. We hung out and I built up my trust with him, until he was comfortable enough with me to get fucked without a condom.” (Member, B.G.B., Jul. 17th, 2001)

In addition (and this is perhaps another expression of the level of misogynist feeling in some members), descriptions of the Gift given to the unaware married or straight man, often include an expression of delight as to how this will affect a wife or girlfriend.

“Anyone ever had any experiences where you filled a married bottom... and then sent him on his way, knowing he’d be fucking his wife...” (Member, B.B.M4M, Jan. 11th, 2001)

Discussing The Gift

However the Gift is described, whether as Gift or Bug, pozzing or pregnancy, Gift narratives express a desire to engage in a relationship with HIV because of the material effect it is perceived to have. A desire for such a relationship is completely anathema to the one fostered by HIV prevention educators in the 25 years since HIV first appeared. After first identifying the routes of HIV into the body and ways to prevent this, gay communities

¹²⁴ Newsgroups exist that organize events catering exclusively to HIV negative men who bareback or vice versa. At a ‘neg only party’ organized by a newsgroup, it is asked that all participants be HIV negative but no proof is demanded opening up the possibility that not all guests are telling the truth; “I found my way to a ‘neg only’ party a couple of nights ago...” (Member, B.B.M4M, Dec. 7th, 2002). While most newsgroups organizing parties for HIV positive barebackers, so-called ‘poz parties’ specifically declare, “this is NOT a conversion party and bug-chasers are NOT welcome” (Moderator, D.C.P.P., Jan. 23rd, 2001) at a neg party, organizers only caution participants to the potential of someone not knowing their current HIV status. For those excited by not knowing the HIV status of participants one can attend ‘don’t ask, don’t tell parties’ or ‘Russian roulette parties.’

and health authorities worked to enact a shift in the sexual culture of gay men (Patton 1990:42). But rather than engage in sexual relationships committed to avoiding HIV, Gift-givers and Bug-chasers envision relations that welcome it. In resisting the call to “Be Here for the Cure” (AIDS Impact 1994) or make “Choices for Life” (AIDS Vancouver 1995) newsgroup members openly resent the ‘cure,’ preferring to be here, for their ‘Brothers.’ In doing so they fail to participate in what is a ‘proper’ relationship with HIV/AIDS. Facing a specific health risk, based on the work of Kenen (1996:1454), I would suggest that because of the HIV pandemic, gay and bisexual men acquired an “at risk health status” and as such were “expected to adhere to socially approved at-risk health behaviour patterns and actions.” While persons considered ‘sick’ are expected to seek a doctor’s advice as to how to get better, those who are ‘at risk’ rely less on doctors in that “the individual is supposed to try to avoid becoming ill” (1996:1548).¹²⁵

Gift-giving and Bug-chasing challenge the cultural norm of safer sex prevention in favour of a cultural norm of HIV engagement over estrangement where HIV is desired, not denigrated. Based on Kristeva’s (1982:1) enquiry into the concept of the abject and the abjection of self, I would suggest that those who participate in Gift-giving and Bug-chasing newsgroups are engaged in a process of self abjection, in that their activities take them beyond what is generally considered the possible, tolerable or even thinkable limits of human behaviour. For possible parallels we could consider the self-debasement of medieval Saints in their quest for spiritual fulfillment, or as Butler (1993:3) offers, the salivating Dr. Hannibal

¹²⁵ Kenen (1996:1548) is drawing on Parson’s concept of the ‘sick role’ wherein those who are ‘sick’ are exempted from normal social tasks and not blamed for their illness, as long as think and act in a manner that demonstrates they wish to get better.

Lecter.¹²⁶ For Kristeva, the abject is that which disturbs our sense of order, something that fails to respect established borders, positions or rules which help to constitute the “proper social body” (Gosz 1994:19). Through their challenge to the new cultural norms of safer sex, Gift-givers disturb the sexual order of gay communities. Those engaged in self-abjection often have a relationship with those substances emitted or left behind by the body, which by their very nature are considered abject, such as semen, menstrual blood, vomit and feces. Having left the body, crossed its border if you will, these substances threaten the boundaries of other bodies, challenging our sense of where things ought ‘properly to be’ (Kristeva 1982:3-4). Douglas (1966:35-36) also highlighted how many cultures emphasize the establishment of boundaries and containment regimes for the dirty, diseased, and disruptive, as a means of establishing order and reaffirming the sense of where things properly ought to be. While dirt has no intrinsically disturbing quality, once placed within a specific context it “signals a site of possible danger to social and individual systems (Grosz 1994:192). In their commitment to absorbing into the body HIV positive ejaculate as ‘dirty cum,’ a fluid considered biohazardous, Bug-chasers ignore a fundamental safer sex rule: “cum on me, not in me,” posing a threat to individuals and society, by flouting a near absolute of HIV prevention dictating where ejaculate ought not to be.¹²⁷

In seeing in the diseased, the desirable and in a pathogen the promise of pregnancy, Gift-givers and Bug-chasers are abject, existing in an uncharted, previously unimagined territory.

¹²⁶ In considering Butler’s portrayal of Lecter as abject, other fictional figures came to mind, such as the urban and urbane killer in *American Psycho*. I found myself thinking about the sense of anxiety such portrayals elicit and how these might relate to the concerns over the appealing portrayal of bareback sex in porn and the enabling capacity of the Web to foster Gift-giving. That an act can be imagined would appear to be as feared as the act itself.

¹²⁷ Grosz (1994:192) notes that like Douglas who stressed the culturally mediated nature of bodily experience, thus the body sexual body never exists in a ‘raw’ form, Kristeva too links social and cultural readings of the body to the way it is experienced, in this case, by the abject.

In some ways they also inhabit an unliveable territory. Those who are abject are described as inhabiting unliveable and uninhabitable zones of social life, whose boundaries are defined by the abject subject (Butler 1993:3). Here I would remind the reader of how people speak of 'life on the web,' living lives on a frontier which resists all attempts to locate it or establish borders for it. Gift-givers and Bug-chasers as abject subjects, appear to have found a way to live through their newsgroups in an unliveable and, until now, indefinable territory through of their abject status.

Gift-giver newsgroups function as a forum for transgressive talk where things normally kept separate are brought together, turning our sense of order upside down. Perhaps the most fundamental way in which they do this is the bringing together of HIV positive and HIV negative men to have sex, without a barrier to keep them apart, namely, the condom. Some suggest that in the past Medieval fairs operated in a similar way. As locations of transgression, the Fair made it possible for people to experience for a brief time an inversion of the dominant culture by celebrating all that was considered low culturally, relegating high culture to a lower status position. Those attending the Fair were briefly "liberated from the normative demands," from those cultural scripts that normally governed their lives (Stallybrass and White 1986:18). At Gift-giver newsgroups, members too are liberated, in this case from the 'cultural script' of HIV prevention, revelling like barebackers in the freedom of condomless sex.

At the Fair, one could purchase woodcuts illustrating people liberated from normative demands and the alternate social relations that resulted. Stallybrass and White (1986:58) describe these alternate social relations as 'hybrids,' revealing new combinations of people.

As potential threats to the dominant social order, these hybrids were considered politically and socially dangerous. Here people saw the wife beating the husband, the old woman pursued by handsome young men and the King entertaining the Jester. Gift-giver newsgroups also depict new combinations of people, considered socially and sexually dangerous. Here we see men reproducing without women, the diseased body, the “guy with AIDS, KS [kaposi sarcoma], and wasting syndrome is SO extremely fucking hot” (Member, T.P.S., Aug. 11th, 2002) not despised but desired, and those with HIV from whom nobody wants anything sexually, being allowed to give. And we see people exchanging that which usually no one wants, least of all in a *gift*.

At the Fair, low culture won out over the high, thereby inverting the norms of the dominant social classes (Stallybrass and White 1986:16). Even the lowly pig was given pride of place as food and entertainment over the protests of the powerful who saw in its porcine nature all that was despised and dirty (1986:44-53). Again, Gift-giver newsgroups express an affinity with the Medieval fair, as they too celebrate all that is raw, filthy and dirty, by championing—piggy sex. In contrast to those gay men who, in their companion ads, describe themselves as ‘clean and healthy’ as a euphemism for their being into safer sex, newsgroup members proclaim their dirty, piggy and sick nature: “[Location removed] pig ready for breeding... sweat, ff [fist fucking] rough, nasty and RAW,” and “Please I am looking for several TOP PIGS to breed my pig ass...” (Member, B.G.B., May, 22nd, 2002). Perhaps this contrasting of clean/dirty explains why the unawares to whom the Gift is to be given, are often described as clean, as in “this boy was squeaky clean... and I just had to have him” (Member B.G.B., Jul. 17th, 2001). Similarly Bug-chasers ask for the Gift of ‘dirty seed,’ emphasizing that as those without the Gift are clean; “since I am fresh and clean, you need

to dump a few toxic loads... if you want to breed this fresh new man then leave a message” (Member, B.B.M4M, Dec. 20th, 2002). In this I suggest we see how dirty sex is associated with masculinity and risk, while clean sex is associated with femininity and safety, for example, Bug-chasers who have yet to receive the Gift who are therefore ‘clean,’ are described as ‘pussies.’ By linking the masculine and the ‘dirty,’ Gift-giver narratives invert cultural narratives wherein it is the bodily fluids of women— not men— that are considered dangerous. Yet, in these cultural narratives where a woman is categorized as either ‘clean’ or ‘unclean,’ it is the actions of men upon her body that transform her from clean to unclean whereby she “is in fact regarded as a kind of sponge or conduit for other men’s dirt” (Grosz (1994:196-197). Here we can see how gift-giver narratives act both to challenge and reinforce notions of the masculine/feminine and the clean/dirty.¹²⁸

In seeking out “one helluva masculine adventure” (Member B.H.B., Dec. 25th, 2002), and valorizing a hyper masculine, sexually potent and risk-loving sexual ethic, Gift-givers reveal an affinity with a pre-AIDS male sexuality now characterized as a dirty, dangerous, promiscuity (Patton 1996:106). The best exemplar of this pre-AIDS sexual ethic is found in the novels of John Rechy. In the novels “City of Night” (1963), “Numbers” (1967), and “The Sexual Outlaw: A Documentary” (1977), Rechy described a hyper masculine-identified gay promiscuity, emblematic of pre-AIDS America (Cove 2000:41). While HIV research has found many younger gay men feel denied as a result of their missing “how fabulous sex was in the 70’s... fucking around without condoms” (Diaz and Ayala 1999:289-290), many within

¹²⁸ Perhaps too by re-conceptualizing the rectum as a vagina (pussy), Gift-givers and Bug-chasers express deep-seated anxieties over the perceived ‘dirtiness’ of the rectum given its role in defecation, from which they seek to shield themselves. In terms of sexual etiquette it is common for a gay man who considers himself a considerate Bottom to ‘clean up’ before sex, namely by douching. In terms of HIV prevention, there is some concern that doing so removes from the rectum mucous and bacteria that are beneficial.

the gay community consider such “unconditional and unlimited promiscuity as the remnant of a best-forgotten age” (Barillas 1997:1), one largely responsible for the AIDS pandemic.

As places of social and cultural inversion, the Fair and its later manifestations, such as the carnival, were subversive and politically dangerous, challenging the established order, generating anxiety not unlike the concerns over how the Web may incite barebacking and Gift-giving. Others disagree, concluding that the revolutionary potential of Fairs was quite limited, readily repressed by authorities had they chosen to do so. Thus the Fairs had “no noticeable politically transformative effects” except in rare circumstances (Stallybrass and White 1986:14). Indeed, the Fair may have actually acted to sustain and reinforce dichotomies of high and low, by reinforcing the existence of them (1986:14). By merely inverting social norms rather than reconfiguring them, creating for example a middle culture, the Fair worked to reinforce that only high and low culture existed. Thus it has been suggested that the inversion of social norms may not have occurred as a form of opposition, but as a way of re-inscribing them (Humphrey 2000:69). And while it was true the Fair was a space in which the rich were pilloried and the powerful attacked, Fair goers also reaffirmed the existence of those with a social status lower than theirs, those traditionally seen as low, dirty and weak, namely women, Jews and other ‘outsiders.’ Thus, one set of low status people used the Fair as a forum to reverse their own status as abject subjects, establishing that people other than they were abject (Stallybrass and White 1986:19).

Through a transgressive forum, newsgroup members report back on their denigration of the powerful, typically through their giving to the unawares. But they also attack those traditionally seen as socially marginalized, namely women, through misogynist talk and

imagery, demonizing women's sexual role and reproductive capacity.¹²⁹ In this way, Gift-givers express an affinity with a pre-AIDS masculinity and sexuality, sharing with it the hatred of the feminine. In his discussion of Rechy's *Sexual Outlaw*, Cove (2000:43) describes Rechy's characters as having a 'crushed intimacy.' As hyper masculine leather men they rejected any hint of intimacy, which is linked to the feminine, by 'crushing' any attempt at intimate connection. That Rechy's characters were in fact desperate for connection and intimacy, is clearly seen in the revelation by one drunken leather man, "... this motorcycle drag – it doesn't mean shit to me. I'd wear a woman's silk nightie if it got me a lover... If he wants me to be a woman, I'll be the greatest lady since Du Barry... I – am – lonely" (Cove 2000:44). Perhaps in their championing of unsafe sex and the ultimate connection brought about—perhaps in spite of the restrictive Top/Bottom (masculine/feminine) roles— Gift-givers and Bug-chasers reveal a similar longing for connection— no matter the cost.

As we have seen, there are those who saw, first in barebacking and now in Gift-giving, men who threaten to return us to the 'bad old days' of pre-AIDS gay America. But I suggest the revolutionary endangering potential of newsgroups, like the Fairs before them, is limited. First, consider the timing of this threatened return to pre-AIDS sexuality, which did not apparently appear until the breakthroughs in HIV treatment were made. Second, consider the typology of the Gift. The Gift of Poz transforms people from negative to positive, behaving much as HIV does in the body. The Gift of the Bug draws on long standing illness narratives wherein we are told to 'avoid the flu bug.' The Gift of AIDS reflects a connection between HIV and AIDS first established in 1984, yet expresses the somewhat

¹²⁹ Odets (1995:190-191) suggests this hatred of the feminine is a function of deep-set anxieties about male penetration. Many cultures harbour a contempt for the feminine and the feminine position during sex, and by implication men taking the receptive role. Men who penetrate women and/or men, are disgusted by their partner, seeing them as the "weak, helpless, soiled receptacle of men's externalized semen" 1995:191).

dated perspective that if HIV is transmissible then AIDS is also. None of these Gift metaphors significantly threatens to challenge our understanding of HIV/AIDS.

If we consider those broader narratives about gay men that HIV helped to reinforce, namely, that all gay men are sexually promiscuous and open to dirty sexual practices, and by virtue of this, destined to get HIV, these too go unchallenged by Gift-giver (or barebacker) narratives. Instead they reinforce them. And while at first the idea of a Gift that somehow impregnates and initiates breeding without the aid of women sounds deeply transgressive, this too reinforces rather than challenges the view that males who are penetrated are sexually submissive and thus feminized (Odets 1995:190). Even if Gift-givers and Bug-chasers appear to reconceptualize sexuality by depicting hyper masculine Tops, breeding passive feminine Bottoms, they in fact ape rather than oppose that most common of sexual hierarchies and acts—heterosexual intercourse. However, by placing masculine Tops in the position of being the only persons able to give, Gift-giving challenges Bataille's suggestion that 'unconstrained largesse' was characteristic of women, thus "to give is the fundamental feminine attitude" (Joy 1999:322).

Perhaps in how they see in the Gift the potential for unity rather than isolation (a potential inherent in *gift* exchanges), through the POZ Brotherhood, Gift-giver narratives finally succeed in challenging HIV narratives wherein infection is seen as isolating (Odets 1995:102). But the Brotherhood could just as readily be taken as manifesting the belief that those with HIV, and indeed those who are gay, should best keep to themselves, separated from the whole in their own hospices and ghettos. While Gift-giving newsgroups generate much anxiety based on assumptions as to the power of the Web to facilitate exchanges of

the Gift, Gift-givers and Bug-chasers may actually find themselves isolated rather than enabled by the Web. According to Wellman and Gulia (1999:175-177), while Web community members have a strong sense of connection with other members, most will never meet offline. Here I would add that I have never read a single message where one newsgroup member refers to having actually met another member. This is not to say the Gift is not being exchanged, but potentially, not among newsgroup members.

In summary, I suggest we consider Cove's (2000:48-49) questioning of how much the revolutionary sexual outlaws of Rechy's novels actually threatened heterosexual norms. While they considered it a radical statement, "each time a man has sex with another on a street," this outlaw sexuality was "visible only to homosexuals and to the cops" in the dark alleys and parks where it occurred, out of sight and, for most, out of mind. In a way the radicalness of Gift-giving is similarly contained and constrained, organizing largely out of sight on the Web, where members speak only to each other, never really meeting, living in fear of when the 'cops,' (web-based hosts) effectively raid the place and shut it down.

The one way in which Gift-giver newsgroups do realize their transgressive potential and invert the dominant relationship gay men have with HIV is by bringing together those with HIV and those without, to engage not in acts of prevention but rather communication, by exchanging the Gift.

Why the Gift?

Transforming the Individual

Is there a *hau* to the Gift? Could we consider ejaculate, sperm, to be the personal property of the donor and HIV, as the ‘spirit of the thing given?’ As a force, a portion of a person’s spiritual essence that compels recipients to make reciprocal *gifts* or indeed to return back to the original owner the property given, the Gift does not have a *hau*. As a virus HIV can never be fully returned its original donor, who in fact never gives it completely away in the first place.¹³⁰ But the concept of the *hau* could be applicable to the Gift based on its impact on social relations, enhancing social ties through the need to make reciprocal *gifts* and linking people together. If the Gift does have a *hau*, perhaps this the reason that Bug-chasers often express a desire to give back directly to Givers, showing their appreciation and becoming Gift-givers themselves.¹³¹

“Mostly top but willing to bottom for your *gift*. Will gladly flip back over to show my appreciation?” “I will be happy to give you and your seed a glowing recommendation on the bug sites if you wish...” (Member, T.P.S., Oct. 21st, 2002)

Perhaps such gratitude is more akin to Hyde’s (1979:47) ‘labour of gratitude’ which moved recipients to give *gifts* in return once the *gift*’s transformation was completed, creating in recipients “the power to give the *gift*,” – necessary if Bug-chasers are to begin giving.

¹³⁰ Perhaps we can think of the Gift as inalienable property, similar to objects such as family heirlooms, which according to Weiner (1992) when given away to family members never leave the family proper, described as the ‘paradox of keeping while giving.’ Gift-givers never completely give away the Gift, retaining the capacity to give again. And given that the Gift will always retain some aspect of whoever first possessed it, in that as with all viruses, the nature of the Gift is impacted by virtue of its adapting to each successive immune system. In a sense like family heirlooms that become more valuable, imbued with meaning by each generation, the Gift also over time accrues greater value. Here we should remember how Gift-givers attest that theirs is a unique Gift, by for example, being exposed to HAARTs it now resists them, making it a valuable Gift.

¹³¹ That many of these reciprocal gestures are made immediately upon the symbolic receipt of the Gift, conflicts with our misrecognition of *gifts* wherein we allow time to pass before making a reciprocal *gift* to disguise the fact we are expected to do so (Bourdieu 1990:105-107, 1992:40-41). By doing so Bug-chasers show themselves to be too eager to discharge their debt, whose existence they are not supposed to be aware of in any case.

But the most apt application of the notion of the *hau* comes from its reconsideration as something indicative of fecundity (Frow 1997:111-112) and/or a productive yield (Godbout 1998:133). Presentations of the Gift as a seed that must take, a form of reproduction or something that converts, are descriptions of something that must develop, as a function of its generative capacity. Perhaps the generative nature of the Gift is its *hau*. This capacity, this '*hau*,' is essential if the material transformation the Gift promises, is to occur.

Transforming the Group

What does the Gift do? In the previous chapter we considered the difference between commodities and *gifts*, which were largely based on the role *gifts* played in social reproduction, bond enforcement and their different value. What makes the Gift clearly not a commodity is that as part of the *gift* economy, the goal of its exchange is the creation of social bonds and the production of people (Frow 1997:125), here the production of the Brotherhood and of Gift-givers. Based on its capacity to draw people socially and psychologically together in the Brotherhood for example, the Gift has an erotic nature and is a tangible expression of a desire for engagement with others (Hyde 1979:57, 69; Sherry 1983:158). As is the case with *gift* exchange generally, exchanging the Gift communicates knowledge, cultural codes and rules through which Gift-givers and Bug-chasers construct social networks and relations through its shared meanings (Carrier 1998:146, Cheal 1988:86-87, Godbout 1998:146, Schwartz 1996:72).

If the Gift is exchanged, thereby establishing new bonds and strengthening others, we can think of it as having a 'bond value' (Godbout 1998:173) based on its capacity to express, facilitate and foster social ties. Beyond this potential bond-value however, like all *gifts* the Gift's value is conventional and contextual (Cheal 1987:158), with a symbolic value

(Bourdieu 1997:233) understood only by those involved in the exchange. As a result of their capacity to strengthen bonds, Cheal (1987:14-15) considered *gifts* to be part of a larger moral economy comprised of transactions considered socially desirable, namely the strengthening of ties. Within this moral economy a set of normative obligations demands we give assistance to help each other carry out individual projects (Cheal 1988:16).¹³² From this perspective the Gift is a form of assistance offered by Gift-givers.

Why as a *gift*?

In the two sections above we considered some aspects of *gift* exchange reflected in exchanges of the Gift. Specifically, its generative capacity, while not directly forcing reciprocal Gifts, is critical in transforming recipients symbolically and materially from neg to poz, from Bug-chaser into Gift-giver, and from outsider to Brotherhood member. Whether giving or receiving the Gift we can see how it helps to create a self-identity (Maschio 1994:96) and constitutes members as social subjects (Derrida 1992:11-12). In addition, we explored the role its exchange played in establishing and strengthening social ties. But is it not possible to achieve all these goals, these effects, simply by having newsgroup members exchange HIV via barebacking? Why 'wrap it up' in all this *gift* talk? Because it is only through the Gift of HIV that newsgroup members get the *gift* they most desire— control over the meaning of HIV infection. By harnessing the communicative and transformative power of *gifts*, Gift-givers and Bug-chasers attempt to control the means and meaning of an event considered inescapable. By establishing a connection between Gift-givers and Bug-chasers, members reaffirm that it is not from strangers that we receive *gifts*.

¹³² Cheal (1988:20-21) noted that Bourdieu held a similar view in that *gifts* were a form of capital in which people invested in order to carry out their projects.

Anything, any object, service or experience, whether tangible or intangible, is transformed into a *gift* through the process of its exchange as a 'gift' (Sherry 1983:160). Once identified individually and socially as a *gift*, that object comes to mean something particular to the donor and recipient (Cheal 1987:158-159). Both the object and its exchange can now come to mean whatever the parties involved wish it to mean, inscribed by them with those personal meanings they wish it to carry and potentially no others (Fennell 2002:86). As a Gift, the meaning of HIV can be reworked, layered in whatever meaning Gift-givers and Bug-chasers see fit.

By exchanging the Gift, by communicating through it, members generate particular meanings through which they shape their reality and perspective (Shieffelin 1980:515) on HIV/AIDS. Given as a Gift, HIV comes to reflect donor characteristics and their feelings towards recipients, expressed through non-verbal communication (Caplow 1984:1320). Gift-givers attempt empathetically to communicate to Bug-chasers, by expressing that they know how much they want the Gift. Once received, the Gift comes to symbolize all the talk that accompanied it, concretizing the desire for HIV (Fennell 2002:86). But as we have seen, communicating in this way is both limited and difficult. The range of meaning a *gift* can convey is limited, as revealed in the typology of the Gift. What the Gift can mean symbolically and materially for those involved in its exchange is strikingly similar to the symbolic and material effects of HIV/AIDS described in HIV/AIDS narratives. But could the Gift mean something quite different? Why are the meanings Gift-givers and Bug-chasers ascribe to the Gift so similar to those found in HIV/AIDS narratives? Does it suggest a limited imagination? Or does it reveal a limited sphere of imagining?

Our cultural conceptions of HIV and our scientific knowledge of its behaviour, establish for us boundaries, setting limits on how removed from HIV/AIDS narratives, the Gift can be. So, yes, there is a limited sphere of imaging within which Gift-givers and Bug-chasers can work. But it is they who willing work within the limits placed on their imagining or rather re-imaging HIV. Their conception of the Gift of HIV as something remarkably similar to the virus that is HIV, does not represent a failure of imagination. Instead it represents their success at imagining what is for them— the perfect gift.

Chapter Five - Conclusion

“... promiscuity, like the priesthood, requires total commitment and sacrifice.”
John Rechy, *The Sexual Outlaw* (1997:32)

In the early years of the HIV pandemic the sexual ethic of John Rechy's novels was on the run, chased out of town by a posse of health officials, community leaders and individuals set on answering the question that most troubled them.¹³³ Why had AIDS happened? Why were so many ill, dying and already forgotten? With Larry Kramer attacking from the pages of the *New York Native* those, “apathetic gay men who continue to have ‘careless sex’ in the middle of an epidemic,” and Rev. Jerry Falwell, leader of the Moral Majority, declaring “AIDS was the judgement of God,” it was clear that some regarded a particular sexual ethic as being as responsible for the emerging pandemic as was HIV. But soon enough calmer heads prevailed somewhat, as effective prevention and later treatments arrived to challenge the idea that a sexual ethic alone could be responsible for so much death. Twenty-five years later, however, posses are once again being formed to deal with this generation's sexual outlaws. And just as before, I believe those sent to deal with the problem are poorly armed intellectually to deal with the bad guys. While we now understand in some way what motivated the sexual ethic of Rechy's outlaws, it took 25 years of HIV-inspired research to come to this understanding, which is ironic given the still commonly held belief that such sexual lawlessness caused AIDS in the first place. But just as before, I fear, we are asking

¹³³ In 1983 Dr. Mervyn Silverman, San Francisco's public health director, was attacked by the gay community for threatening to close gay bathhouses that failed to display warnings about promiscuous sex, while in New York the health commissioner was attacked by the gay community for not closing them (Glinn 2003:1). Early in the 1980s, many U.S. bathhouses were closed primarily in Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York. In Canada they stayed open, becoming venues for HIV prevention education. A recent study revealed Canada's approach may have been more effective. Interviews with gay men in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Chicago concluded that those who had unsafe sex did so whether at a bathhouse or not, meaning that bathhouses did not facilitate risk taking per se (Xtra West Staff 2003:1).

only the narrowest of questions. Of Gift-givers the media and a handful of researchers ask only why HIV? An equally fundamental question is why Gift?

This enquiry did not set out to answer what to many seems the most obvious question, namely why would someone want HIV? That was never my intent, as I was most intrigued not by the desire for HIV but for the desire for it as a *gift*. This was the most compelling aspect of Gift-giving culture. And as we have seen, little if any literature exists that addresses the issue of HIV. None that I was able to find addressed the relationship between *gift* giving and HIV. In some small way I believe I have contributed to this body of literature. If we hope to answer why HIV, I believe that in many ways the research into the difficulties of adopting safer sex in general and the phenomenon of barebacking in particular, have already provided most of what we need to know about why men resist or reject condoms.

This body of literature, while it speaks to engaging in practices known to be risky for HIV transmission, tells us little as to the desire for HIV so clearly expressed by Gift-givers. Here I believe their words, in messages posted at newsgroups, are our greatest resource in understanding the giving and receiving of HIV. While much of what they have to say is strongly reminiscent of what we know about barebacking, it does not explain the desire for HIV. By considering HIV as a *gift*, I believe we have learned more about the nature of this desire. By asking why the Gift, I set out to enquire into the desire to give and receive HIV, to know what was accomplished, what benefit resulted from seeing HIV as a *gift*.

As a *gift* HIV, that harbinger of the 'gay plague,' can be reshaped, reconfigured into something both familiar and fundamentally new. Rather than sit and wait, alone, frightened and abject, Gift-givers and Bug-chasers set out to address HIV head on: "I admit I am shy to take my death fuck, but fuck man, I need to feel more like a gay man" (Member, B.H.B., Dec., 31st, 2002). And as we watch in horrified fascination as their personal despair and desire, hurtle travel down the track towards a fatal crossing, perhaps we need to consider if as AIDS educators and citizens, we set this in motion. If there is one critical junction at which barebacking and Gift-giving meet, it is that point at which gay men ask: does it have to be this way?

Calling HIV a Gift enables those offering it and those accepting it, a way to control in a small way what it means to live in the age of AIDS. Rather than consider some gay men as having developed a fascination with abject forms for sex, I suggest they are experiencing an abject form of despair. A level of despair born out of an experience of HIV so isolating and nullifying, that it is abject, taking them beyond the scope of the possible. By doing so, they may appear nostalgic for a pre-AIDS sexuality, but I suggest this also grew out of a desperate search for a way out of the darkness of being alone.

In Rechy's novel "City of Night" (1963:59) the hustling narrator tells us how "unexpectedly at night you may come upon scenes of crushed intimacy along the dark twisting lanes. In the eery mottled lights of a distant lamp, a shadow lies on his stomach... another straddles him: ignoring the danger of detection in the last moments of exiled excitement." On the Web you also come across similar scenes, as Gift-givers and Bug-chasers meet for moments of exiled

excitement. So in need of a sense of connection, of control in the face of HIV, they meet to exchange not a virus but a *gift*. A Gift that is— the perfect gift for them.

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Appendix

Newsgroup	Members	Founded	Messages	Group Description
B.A.	1663	Jun. 2000	604	"A group for gay men who bareback, to oppose the condom dogma. Tired of being told you're bad because you have natural sex, the way you where born to? Think the safe "sex" campaigns smack just a little too much of the same fanatical dogma of the religious right?"
B.B.	54	Mar. 2002	22	"The B.B. is a group for active adult 18 yoa or older gay Extreme Barebackers."
B.B.M.4.M.	1009	Jul. 2000	1827	"Unlike the other guys, freedom of self-expression is tolerated here. Guys who love bareback raw sex and enjoy giving and receiving hot charged cum... Stories of conversions, bugchasing, and other sexual practices that have happened."
B.G.B.	451	Jan. 2001	706	"This is the International Brotherhood of the Gifted Barebacker and his Admirers. All members must be interested in Bareback No Condom Anal Sex with Hiv Poz males...purpose of our Group is to have meetings and Parties to formally welcum new members to the Brotherhood."
B.H.B.L.A.	286	Dec. 2002	349	"This group is for guys in [location removed] who are Poz and seek other Poz guys or Negs guys seeking Poz Brothers to make the conversion."
D.F.W.G.C.	175	Jan. 2001	237	"A place for Gay and Bi Gifted Bareback Riders and their Admirers to Meat... We're all Gifted or Admirers. If your a Top your into Breeding and if your a Bottom your into being Bred."
D.F.W.R.G.C	134	Jan. 2001	328	"The men you meat here are into High Risk Raw No Condom Anal Sex."
D.G.E.B.	421	Jan. 2001	351	"D.G.E.B., is a group of adult men over 21 years of age of any race or Hiv status into Gay Bare-backing, BDSM, Fisting, WS, Scat, Edge Play, Breath Control, Gift

				Giving, Bug Chasing and other extreme gay sex practices."
G.E.B.	2903	Sep. 1998	1096	"The bareback list for horny gay and bi men who like their sex extreme. Bugchasers and giftgivers can meet up here for steamy exchanges of sperm and cum impregnation. Share your stories of giving and getting, of seduction and of giving yourself over to The Bug."
H.P.G.	503	Feb.1999	2747	"... a list where gay men with HIV can talk with other gay men with HIV."
N.B.2002	287	Jul. 2002	237	"This is what used to be called L.G.A... no holds barred, uncensored place to discuss the choice to not use condoms & the hoped for results there from."
P.P.P.	190	Jul. 2002	171	"This group is for poz and neg guys to discuss what is on your mind especially what u like doing in dark areas, how you were converted or have converted others, and any wild times you have had."
P.P.P.	1313	Sep. 2001	445	"[Name Removed] POZ Party For the Gay/Bi HIV+ community. "The nations oldest POZ Only Party."
T.B.B.	1740	Jan. 1999	2443	"Gay Men into Raw Anal Action of Flesh in flesh! Top or bottom... pure and natural condomless connections. If you are of like mind, join and see what Cums of It!"
T.P.S.	1843	Jan. 1999	2278	"This is the list for TWISTED PIG SEX MEN... Extreme, Bareback, Fisting, Water Sports, F.F., WS, CBT [cock & ball torture], Kink, Torture, Bugbrothers, Giftgivers, Bugchasers, Xtremesex, Master, Slave, groups, Leather, Conversion parties, KINK, and those wanting the same."
T.R.G.C.	60	Aug. 2001	56	"This is a group for [location removed] Gift Givers and Chasers who really want to meat up and share it all with a friend."
T.W.R.	65	May 2001	27	[No Description]