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Profit, Porn, and Protease Inhibitors: Ronnie Burk's Radical Activism in "Post-AIDS" San Francisco

Victoria Carroll

- 1 In April 2000, San Francisco was rocked by a minor storm when a quasi-pornographic flyer was posted on the website of the controversial San Francisco-based chapter of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), a direct action group formed in New York City in the late 1980s to end the entrenched HIV/AIDS crisis. The crude flyer depicted the incumbent Executive Director of the San Francisco AIDS Foundation (SFAF), Pat Christen, in a rather compromising position: reposed upon a pile of \$100 bills, naked save for a bra sporting a Swastika decal, legs splayed and entangled with a copulating couple in the foreground, masturbating with a dildo inscribed with the letters AZT, the acronym for the first patented and most contentious HIV/AIDS treatment pharmaceutical (eventually) released by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 1987. The terse legend accompanying the caricature read: "It's Obscene. Some call it misogyny. We call it fucking your way to the top." In the ad hoc style of agitprop art, a medium favored by ACT UP/New York in particular, the flyer fashioned SFAF as a salacious brothel kowtowing to Christen, a smug whore (her grinning countenance, de-contextualized, transforms from benign smile to provocative smirk) prostituting herself to big pharmaceutical companies, cushioned by cash and "jacking off"--a fruitless act of self-gratification--while thousands of people in San Francisco live with and die of AIDS, or rather the medications marketed to alleviate AIDS. The challenge behind the flyer was palpable: what, when it comes to HIV/AIDS in twenty-first century America, *really* counts as obscenity?

Figure 1

Ronnie Burk, "Christen dildo flyer," posted on ACT UP/San Francisco website in April 2000. Image courtesy of Todd Swindell.

The proud creator of the image was soon unmasked as Surrealist poet and collage artist Ronnie Burk, already infamous in the city as a vociferous firebrand and dissentious HIV/AIDS activist affiliated with ACT UP/San Francisco, a "virulent mutation" (Farber, *SPIN* 122) of the ACT UP brand that ACT UP/New York co-founder Larry Kramer once described as a small, isolated cohort of "mentally deficient" hooligans who "should either be hospitalized or jailed" (qtd. in Shioya). Notorious, yet curiously neglected in existing scholarship, Burk emerged in the mid-1990s as a baffling, divisive, and utterly compelling figure. Chicano Movement crusader, beatnik Buddhist, HIV-positive AIDS dissident, and gay Mexican-American "hippie nomad" (Kanellos 166), Burk became known, and widely despised, as an "AIDS denier" (Nelson), one who questions the causal link between HIV and AIDS, while simultaneously corresponding with and befriending some of the most esteemed writers of the twentieth century: Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman, Diane di Prima, Charles Henri Ford, and Eileen Myles to name but a few¹ His double-edged reputation notwithstanding, neither his life nor his impressively vast creative oeuvre has engendered any sustained analysis; indeed, as Burk admitted in an unpublished 1994 interview, he was only ever known to "a peripheral underground cliquish group of initiated readers" (Hernandez-Ávila 28).

But the lack of critical buoyancy attending Burk's cultural production belies the buzz surrounding his involvement in HIV/AIDS activism and LGBT advocacy in San Francisco. The City by the Bay has a chequered queer history, lauded as North America's gay Mecca in the 1970s but unexpectedly rendered in the mid-1990s by an explosive "AIDS Civil War" (Cothran 12), with commentators and activists on all fronts

drawing battle lines around the promotion of new HIV/AIDS treatments, the professionalization and commodification of HIV/AIDS services, and the representation, memorialization, and homogenization of gay men in the "twilight of the epidemic" (Sullivan).² Burk, a key figure in this countermovement, skyrocketed to public attention on October 17 1996 when, merely two months after joining ACT UP/San Francisco, he stormed a forum of prospective City Supervisors chaired by Pat Christen, dubbed "Fat Cat Pat" by the collective on account of her generous salary of upwards of \$200,000 per annum. While stealth activists disguised as audience members detonated stink bombs, Burk, representing ACT UP affinity group Stop Hying Immunosuppressive Toxic Treatments (know by the prescient acronym SHITT), performed what he would later describe as "one of the most audacious and outrageous actions in the history of the AIDS movement" ("ACT UP/SF was right" n.p.). Breaking away from the group he advanced towards Christen and, to the disgust of the captivated audience and several photographers, showered her with twenty-five pounds of shit-laced cat litter.

Figure 2

ACT UP/San Francisco, "Dump Fat Cat Pat," activist flyer, created c. 1996. Image courtesy of Todd Swindell.

The "cat crap zap," as I have termed it, and the "Christen dildo flyer," as Burk wryly dubbed his most provocative creation, which would court controversy for years after it emerged, can be, must be, scrutinized in a number of ways. Undoubtedly the targeting of Christen and SFAF reflects a personal vendetta festering at the heart of Burk's activism in this period. Broke, destitute, and five years into a HIV-positive diagnosis, Burk had solicited the help of SFAF in the mid-1990s, only to be sent away with "a referral to a lice-infested, rat-crawling Cockroach Hotel and some food stamps" ("Tower of Babble" 6). Bristling at the injustice, he dedicated the next five years of his

rapidly waning life to disrupting and dismantling "AIDS Inc.," an epithet coined in the late 1980s to unmask HIV/AIDS as a multinational, billion dollar, celebrity-studded franchise, complete with "its own belief system, figureheads, logos, and even facial expressions--like a Walt Disney that markets pious morbidity instead of cheer" (Farber, "AIDS Inc."). To Burk, SFAF was the corrupt sentinel of AIDS Inc., self-servingly stimulating the profit margins of an insatiable pharmaceutical industry that sustains itself through the continued spread of HIV/AIDS. In a press release issued the day after the cat crap zap, ACT UP/San Francisco stated: SFAF "is paid by the pharmaceutical industry to whip up a feeding frenzy for dangerous, expensive pills that cure nothing but sluggish drug company profits" ("Antiretroviral Party Poopers!").

Burk's beliefs did not develop in a vacuum, however. The rise of the AIDS dissident movement in San Francisco not only gestures to the fractured political and medical landscape of the city at the start of the new millennium but to the homogeneity of HIV/AIDS discourse in North America. The narrative arc of the epidemic, as it relates to San Francisco's gay communities specifically, has conformed fairly rigidly to a consensus-based template: post-Stonewall gay liberation (typified by the rise of prominent gay activist and politician Harvey Milk, assassinated in 1978) was impeded by the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s, the community united and rallied, and the introduction of Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy (HAART) using protease inhibitors in the mid-1990s curtailed (or rather decentered) the epidemic. This problematic, entrenched teleology continues to resonate in contemporary reviews of this period, such as David Weissman's 2011 documentary film *We Were Here*, as well as existing scholarship.³

Yet a consideration of Burk's activism disrupts and contests this narrative arc, opening a window onto a significant yet neglected no man's land plaguing discussions of HIV/AIDS in the U.S. This period of discursive inertia stretches from the 11th International AIDS Conference held in Vancouver, Canada in July 1996, where the efficacy of HAART was officially announced, to the implementation of well-funded, publicity-generating international health policies such as the 2002 Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria--which resituated AIDS as a geopolitical disease linked with global development rather than "high risk" sexual behavior--and the 2003 President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), an ironic title insofar as PEPFAR was established over twenty years after AIDS actually became an emergency.⁴ Burk refocused the HIV/AIDS debate in San Francisco, in gay communities, in the demands of grassroots activists at a time when the establishment were looking away from America and towards Africa, when HIV/AIDS was symbolically transforming from a death sentence placed upon the heads of "deviants" to a chronic but manageable (and vastly lucrative) illness affecting those unable to procure expensive, life-extending drugs.

This article seeks to historicize the workings of HIV/AIDS activism and outreach in San Francisco after the introduction of protease inhibitors. Focusing on the build-up and fallout attending the rage-inducing, court case-engendering Christen dildo flyer, I argue that Burk was waging war against narratives of rejuvenation beginning to circulate in the "protease moment" (29) Eric Rofes's evocative if troublesome term for the "Post-AIDS" period when effective treatment purportedly ended the AIDS crisis, or rather AIDS-as-crisis response model, in epicenter gay male (sub)cultures across North America.⁵ Burk, I contend, was filtering concerns over the inertia of "Post-AIDS"

outreach through a larger framework of mediated, and thus often occluded, racial-national anxiety. Indeed his controversial antics point to another rupture contouring San Francisco in the mid-1990s, a schism that Horacio N. Roque Ramírez has described as a “specifically queer Latino and Latina renaissance in the making, with a new generation of artists, health workers, educators, and activists forging a varied culture and politics of visibility and identity” (“Memory and Mourning” 166).⁶ By analyzing and contextualizing the Christen caricature, and tracing it back to its roots in European political pornography, I assert that Burk utilized tropes of self-gratification to comment on the treatment of racial and sexual minorities after the introduction of protease inhibitors. Masturbation functions as an important conceptual socket in both his activism and poetry, for example, strategically deployed as a device that provokes connection and transmission between and across disparate discursive surfaces, a construct that *charges* something else: a move against the dominant nerve systems of powerful elites in “Post-AIDS” San Francisco that ostracize those not stimulated by the self-serving manipulations of AIDS Inc. Through close consideration of the Christen dildo flyer, I reveal the myriad ways that Burk stitched advances in the treatment of HIV/AIDS onto larger nebulous concerns over the patriotic flourishes of U.S. capitalism, pernicious colonization south of the U.S.-Mexico border, and the continued exploitation of America’s indigenous populations.

Fucking Pharmaceuticals

To understand the multivalent connotations attending the Christen dildo flyer it is important to understand its production and reception, and how it aligned with the beliefs fuelling ACT UP/San Francisco’s controversial actions in this period. On April 17 2000, leading HIV/AIDS treatment advocacy organization, Project Inform, hosted a public forum at the Baha’i Center in San Francisco’s Mission District to discuss the potential benefits of Structured Treatment Interruptions (STIs) for HIV/AIDS patients on the antiretroviral “drug cocktail,” mandated “drug holidays” that allow the body to renew. Disgusted by the hypocrisy of what they deemed to be a lukewarm gesture of acquisition to their staunch anti-pharmaceutical policy, ACT UP/San Francisco crashed the proceedings to general dismay. Wildly differing reports were circulated by advocates on both sides of the debacle and allegations of trespassing and assault, misinformation campaigns, and restrictions of free speech were rife. In what was described by the District Attorney as a “six minute riot” (ACT UP/San Francisco, “ACT/UP Cleared of Violence”) handfuls of Vitamin C pills were thrown, epithets were exchanged, a table was overturned, and copies of ACT UP/San Francisco’s activist newspaper *Magnus* were distributed to the awestruck audience. Misdemeanor charges were filed against several members of ACT UP, Burk included.

Only days after the zap, Burk retaliated by posting a series of provocative flyers on the ACT UP/San Francisco webpage, of which the Christen dildo flyer was deemed the most inflammatory. These flyers depicted well known HIV/AIDS treatment advocates, such as Christen, Larry Kramer, and Project Inform founder Martin Delaney, as maniacal shills, eagerly feeding off the new HIV/AIDS pharmaceuticals by, ironically, forcing them into the bodies of those with already beleaguered immune systems.

Figure 3

ACT UP/San Francisco, "Marty Sez: Take Your Pills!" activist flyer depicting Martin Delaney, founder of Project Inform, posted on ACT UP/San Francisco webpage, April 2000. Image courtesy of Todd Swindell.

Burk's retaliation aptly encapsulated ACT UP/San Francisco's larger anti-Big Pharma ethos. Not only did the collective question the consensus that AIDS is caused by HIV, they lamented the new bodily deformities (such as HAART-associated lipodystrophy) and mutant HIV strains that long-term use of HIV drugs seemed to promise, or at least portend.⁷ Six months after the Project Inform action, ACT UP/San Francisco frontman David Pasquarelli posted a satirical rundown-cum-frothy soap opera-like tirade depicting the events, and fallout, of that night on a website geared towards promoting AIDS dissidence. Entitled "Project Deform's Days of Our Lies," accompanied by a doctored cartoon of Disney's Quasimodo, squinting at a large skull and crossbones encrusted pill as a speech bubble protrudes from his twisted lips—"I've got a hunch AIDS drugs kill"—Pasquarelli weaves a hyperbolic narrative in which the Goliathesque forces of Project Inform (nicknamed Project Deform, dubbed the "corporate poisoner of gays") attempt to thwart a Davidian band of plucky activists to no avail (Pasquarelli). In two photographs accompanying his overblown account Pasquarelli and fellow ACT UP ringleader Michael Bellefountaine adopt patriotic poses: faces raised, eyes fixed reverently on some distant point. In the background palatial white buildings are drenched in sunlight as Old Glory billows in the breeze. In a decisive move Pasquarelli and Bellefountaine present ACT UP/San Francisco as unlikely superheroes locked in a battle to the death with "The AIDS Orthodoxy," those often HIV-negative personalities and the related services catering to the commodification of HIV/AIDS. "What does it mean to be a gay rights crusader in America in the millennial moment?" they seem to ask. Certainly no longer shrouded and closeted, swaddled by

mild-mannered alter egos and forced to endure the tepid outrage of mask-wearing jingoists.

It is in the context of this vivid repudiation of the HIV/AIDS consensus, painstakingly archived by the collective in this period, that one must analyze the Christen dildo flyer.⁸ Of particular significance is the caveat that Burk used to justify his choice of image: "Some call it misogyny. We call it fucking your way to the top." Whilst it is disappointing that Burk, an adversarial queer of color activist, names and shames Christen as an integral cog in the churning mechanics—or machinations—of AIDS Inc. by humiliating her as a *woman*, profiteering translated as autoeroticism, it is generative to consider the subtle nuances attending this dig. "Fucking your way to the top" infers not merely a sexual act but a blunder, a mistake, incompetence, as in "fucking up," and denotes a malicious act of betrayal, as in "fucking over." To Burk, Christen was more interested in forwarding her career than in advocating for people with HIV/AIDS in San Francisco. Writing for *Magnus*, Steven Keller delineates the crux of ACT UP/San Francisco's concern: professional HIV/AIDS treatment advocates, such as Christen and Delaney, have "carved a lucrative career out of the genocide of gay men" (6).

Autoeroticism—producing pleasure in isolation, gratifying the self—is key to unlocking the signifying import of the Christen dildo flyer and, by extension, these wider concerns. Although one could read the conflation of greed with masturbation as a drearily heteronormative remonstrance against the misdirection of (sexual) energy, which brands non-reproductive sex pointless, I contend that this flyer couches autoeroticism as more than just a narcissistic s(t)imulation, sex severed from its teleological function. It is significant that Christen, a heterosexual white mother, is witnessed forcing AZT into her vagina. She is not swallowing it but feeding it directly into her reproductive tract, a sacrosanct channel symbolizing heterosexuality, gender normativity, and cherished, sanctioned, and unimpeded fecundity. Watching a fertile white woman manipulate her reproductive organs with AZT is extraordinarily daring and powerful at this historical juncture; certainly the increased probability that administering AZT to pregnant HIV-positive women would result in child birth defects was one of the main concerns underlying Burk's AIDS activism. And the reality that these women would often be part of marginalized racial groups continued to rankle. Speaking at a forum on AIDS in Africa in 1999, Burk declared: "AZT continues to be used in the much hyped drug regimes of the last four years. It destroys bone marrow and it is known to cause birth defects. Yet this drug is being used for designated HIV+ pregnant women, the vast majority of whom are African-American and Latino women in the United States."⁹ As a figurehead for those living with HIV/AIDS in San Francisco, Christen should be more vigilant of what she brings inside "the body," her symbolic community, Burk implies, appropriating well-worn religious and moral rhetoric that seamlessly conflates masturbation with bodily decline, corruption, and even death. The distinction is that her body is not made impure by her sexual permissiveness, but rather by the object of her lust. It is not sex that is making us sick, Burk insists, breaking with earlier morally inf(lect)ed concerns over the transmission of HIV, it is the marketing, commodification, and privileging of health. It has long been assumed that "masturbation" stems from the Latin word "manstuprare," meaning to defile oneself by hand, an etymology that this flyer plugs into and reimagines. In this context, what does autoerotism say about sexual difference, about the painful splicing of self and other? Here masturbation is deployed to comment on the dangerous limits of self-

gratification, when the self is understood as white, heterosexual, Western, privileged, wealthy, and healthy and the not-self is but an afterthought.

Presenting AZT as a dildo (rather than as a pill) is a particularly thought provoking move. In this scenario, AZT becomes fetishized as a perpetually robust phallic substitute (to conform to the most simplistic reading of the function of this particular object), relocating the penis and, by extension, patriarchy, inside Christen's person. Thus patriarchy is unmasked as an impotent prosthetic, manipulating and stimulating the internal organs of the body politic, bypassing clitoral—thus female centric—pleasure. Gayle Rubin's reading of fetishism can help to extend this analysis: "To me, fetishism raises all sorts of issues concerning shifts in the manufacture of objects, the historical and social specificities of control and skin and social etiquette, or ambiguously experienced body invasions and minutely graduated hierarchies" (79). Acquiescing to Rubin's definition, it is not difficult to position AZT as a fetishistic object in the millennial moment. Certainly its introduction in the late 1980s marked a shift in how emergency medications are manufactured and distributed—one immediately thinks of the private cartels that sprang up to sell experimental HIV/AIDS drugs (the subject matter of Jean Marc Vallée's 2013 multi-Academy Award winning biopic *The Dallas Buyers Club*). By 2000, when the Christen dildo flyer emerged, AZT was being used in conjunction with other antiretrovirals as well as in the manufacture of Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP), a preventative medical treatment that was, in ACT UP/San Francisco's opinion, scaring HIV-negative gay men into ingesting toxic chemicals, often unnecessarily.

Figure 4

ACT UP/San Francisco, "AZT: Want to be a PEPper too?" activist flyer posted on ACT UP/San Francisco webpage, April 2000. Image courtesy of Todd Swindell.

ACT UP/San Francisco fervently believed that AZT was inculcated in narratives of dubious penetration, seen as invading and destabilizing the body and engendering "graduated hierarchies" of susceptibility and drug adherence. This graduation is strikingly visible in the HIV treatment cascade model suggested by Dr Edward Gardner and his colleagues in 2011, and taken up as the founding model for the White House's HIV Care Continuum Initiative, implemented by the Obama administration in 2013. As the cascade model clearly reveals, inequalities and discrepancies of gender, race, class, and sexuality significantly dictate the successful testing for and diagnosis of HIV, access to adequate healthcare, and the possibility of viral suppression in the bloodstream. Christen's masturbatory hijinks, the flyer grimly connotes, *will* result in horrific deformities when carcinogenic medications are fetishized as precious scientific interventions in the torpid vista of capitalist self-gratification, when protease inhibitors are subject to huge mark-ups and circulate within a rigged, exclusionary health care system.

"Jacking Off" on Pity Pat's Plantation

The sexual connotations of the Christen dildo flyer are exaggerated and jarring (to the extent that Burk prematurely tackles accusations of misogyny head on). Yet the racial implications are harder to discern, not immediately highlighted as a vector contouring Burk's protest. But, as this article lays claim to, this image must be understood in relation to a larger framework of anxiety surrounding racial oppression in the Americas. Firstly, it is important to remember that Burk was not only a gay man with HIV/AIDS, he was an impoverished Latino artist manoeuvring West Coast HIV/AIDS services predominantly designed by, run by, and aimed at Anglo, English-speaking demographics signifying within stable models of gay identity and visibility.¹⁰ Secondly, there was a genuine fear that protease inhibitors would augment existing disparities in the city, especially those pertaining to race and class. In July 1996, immediately following the 11th International AIDS Conference, City Health Director Dr Sandra Hernandez sparked mass controversy when she suggested that Direct Observational Therapy (DOT)—a form of surveillance associated with the treatment of Tuberculosis—would be a viable means of pinpointing and monitoring "at risk" HIV-positive demographics (the homeless, drug users, and those with mental health issues) unlikely to comply with the new, highly regimented medication schedule. DOT was deemed impractical and criticised as a "fascist" breach of individual liberty that advocated the experimentation of new, potentially toxic drugs on the most vulnerable, or indeed dissident, members of society. On September 9, the *New York Native*, a newspaper known for its coverage of the American AIDS dissident movement, published an article by science reporter Neenyah Ostrom in which she labelled Hernandez "Dr Sandra Mengele" (a nod to the infamous Nazi doctor) and asked "Will San Francisco turn into Auschwitz II?" Meanwhile, ACT UP/San Francisco penned an angry letter to Hernandez calling for her immediate resignation, signing off: "History will remember that you... a Latina dyke, chose to use your position of power not to liberate gays and lesbians but to ensure a fresh supply of faggot meat for the pharmaceutical industry pyre" ("Letter to Dr Sandra Hernandez"). As the letter to Hernandez signifies, ACT UP/San Francisco routinely "outed" gay, lesbian, African-American and Latino/a HIV/AIDS prevention workers and policy makers as subservient stooges, colluding in the oppression and

destruction of racial and sexual minorities through the promotion and distribution of protease inhibitors. And SFAF was the focus of this chastisement. "It is not news that corruption is the rule in San Francisco," Burk raged in a May 2001 edition of the *San Francisco Bay Times*, "What is new are the Uncle Toms on Miss Pity Pat [Christen]'s plantation doing it all in the name of diversity" ("Miss Pity Pat's Plantation" n.p.).

Burk's repudiation of Christen's interactions with racial and ethnic minorities--she famously banned the use of Spanish in the SFAF headquarters, for example--colors the signifying import of the Christen dildo flyer. Not only is Christen depicted as a brazen whore indulging her voracious sexual (or rather monetary) appetite, she is situated as a proprietor presiding over her brothel: SFAF. The couple fucking in the foreground of the image attest to the racial disparities undergirding HIV/AIDS outreach in San Francisco: the "whore," clad in thigh-high suspenders and surreptitiously pawing her own vagina, reads as white, whilst her client--a person with HIV/AIDS seeking care--presents as decidedly not-white. Because Burk did not acquiesce to the HIV/AIDS consensus, believing instead that HIV was little more than a blank bullet in the bloodstream (he had been diagnosed with HIV in 1990 but had not developed symptoms at this stage), he fervently felt that San Francisco's HIV/AIDS policy makers were wielding the epidemic as a whip and the treatment as a seductive carrot, transforming people with HIV/AIDS (as well as those advocating for the use of new medications) into pathetic archetypes, forced to grovel at the feet of greedy, racist overlords.

It is clear to see that Burk tended to approach HIV/AIDS, and the subsequent responses of AIDS Inc., as a socially constructed malignancy that tapped into histories of racial, ethnic, and cultural oppression in the Americas. Burk made his position explicit in a 1994 open letter to peripheral Beat poet Ed Sanders:

Aside from the continued maltreatment of Native Peoples by the United States Government, we have the consequence of AIDS. Perhaps or perhaps not a biological weapon, the United States Government's response, or lack thereof, can be described as genocidal given the effects this disease has had on African, Latino, White, Gay, and Addicted people here in the United States. ("An Open Letter to Ed Sanders" 52)

- 18 These histories of exploitation, especially towards Native Americans (and Burk counted himself among this demographic, claiming Native American ancestry through his "Aztec Mother"¹¹), were never extraneous or tangential but vital, inescapable. From 1996 onwards Burk--often obliquely--tethered the pro-pharmaceutical policies of SFAF to larger concerns over the expansion of U.S. control in the Americas. On October 22 1996, only days after the cat crap zap, Burk sent a rambling, flagrantly vitriolic email to Christen, ominously titled "A Declaration of War." The email, which reignited controversy in the summer of 2000 when it was reproduced for the first time on the website *AIDS News Daily*, is a curious artefact, simultaneously a strident defense of his actions, a potted manifesto, and a promise and a threat to unceasingly undermine and dismantle the monopoly of San Francisco's gentrified HIV/AIDS industry:

After fifteen years of AIDS one can truly say that the shit has started to fly. As long as HIV-negative figureheads continue to make policy for the HIV-positive...

As long as doctors in the San Francisco city health care system continue to hard sell toxic chemotherapeutic drugs to the vulnerable and the frightened...

As long as I continue to walk down Market Street and witness the degrading circumstances homeless PWAs [People With AIDS] live with...

As long as moneyed hypocrites hold their noses crying, 'Foul! Toxoplasmosis!' while they step over the infirmed sleeping on the streets as they make their way to one more self-congratulatory gala...

I WILL NOT REST! (Burk, "A Declaration of War")

- 19 Whatever its tenor or reception, "A Declaration of War" crystallized Burk's self-appointed role as an unflagging agitator unafraid to sling the proverbial and literal muck. But "A Declaration of War" was not only an impassioned call to arms against the forces of AIDS Inc. It was a screed against the profiteering and exclusion made tenable by a specifically American brand of economic imperialism. In choosing this title, the connotations of which did not resonate with Burk's many detractors, he subtly gestures to the "Declaration of War" issued by the Mexican Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) on New Year's Eve 1993 to protest the recently ratified North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), implicating Christen and SFAF in far-reaching regimes of cultural and economic exploitation.¹² Just as the Zapatistas understood NAFTA as a "death sentence" placed on the heads of indigenous landholders no longer protected under article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, Burk interprets SFAF's pharmaceutical policies as murderous campaigns that would result in the extermination of PWAs conned into taking toxic drugs.

America's Autoerotic Manipulations

It is becoming clear that, for Burk, autoeroticism symbolized more than just SFAF's narcissistic stimulations of its own engorged channels of power and privilege; masturbation surfaces in his cultural production as a symbol of self-satisfying patriotism, systemic racism, and national malaise. In early 2001, as the Christen dildo flyer was still causing ripples of unease in San Francisco, Burk published "America" in Andrei Codrescu's Surrealist (anti)literary journal *Exquisite Corpse*. A minute study of Burk's inimitable style, this poem examines the U.S.'s toxic relationship with Mexico while clearly building upon the stark messages engendered by the Christen dildo flyer, personifying America as a retching narcissistic woman rabidly yearning for synthetic banalities, and once again deploying the trope of female masturbation:

She is expensive but has cheap tastes
 When she is not hallucinating clean water in a plastic bottle
 she is spending money on facelifts
 Bust implants and cancer-producing vaginal inserts
 keep her happy
 Choking on radium pills
 Craving diet cokes & fat-free potato chips
 Her fingers severing hands to do her shit work
 Dipped in the flesh of dead Indians cooked in Texas chilli sauce
 Florida becomes a small penis stuck between her sagging breasts
 The Andes form the topographies of her cellulite thighs
 What is Mexico? if not the armpit of her muff
 Masturbating to the droning sounds of atomic explosions
 Her plush existence held together with collateral damage. (99)

- 21 Throughout the poem Burk disdainfully traces the contours of the body of America. Her superficial facade belies an inner rot. Her mind is a vapid wasteland plagued by false delusions and placated by promises of clean water, pre-packaged and trotted out in plastic vessels (her very doppelgangers), no longer a right but a commodity.¹³ She suffocates on mass-produced cancer-causing capsules that promise health yet deliver harm, a portentous analogy in the era of ambivalent HIV/AIDS treatment advances. She desires deprivation, seeking nourishment only in the unsubstantial and the tasteless. Burk deploys alliteration--choking, craving--to suggest the homogeneity of her suffering (despite the discrepancy of symptoms), the malignant late-capitalist root. South America is transformed into legs supporting the weight of the U.S., mobilized as her imperfect roots, pitted by ragged peaks of cellulite, the organic ridges formed by alterations to the connective tissue. Once the Americas were one, Burk scoffs, now they have been permanently branded with the ugly scars of (de)territorialization.

Continuing his inspection of her form, Burk moves to her fingers, the delicate digits that violently and senselessly sever the hand, their supportive and essential *foundation*. While "fingers" retain a hint of aloof covetousness and spidery manipulation (fingers are, after all, literally positioned as the upper echelons: grasping, dextrous extremities), hands connote collective capability, hard work, and resourcefulness. Fingers may perform as individual implements; hands must always encompass, and pander to, the whole. Here "hands" are manoeuvred as a synecdoche signifying an elided, exploited labor force, the "hired hand," an intrinsic part of a manual workforce employed to do America's "shit work" yet deliberately dismembered from the body(politic) as a whole. It is not difficult to read this as a comment on the U.S.'s tempestuous relationship with Mexico and with its own indigenous populations. This becomes more palpable in the following stanza in which America becomes coated, strengthened, galvanized, by the very flesh of exterminated Indians. In a dark analogy, America boasts a legacy smothered (and ultimately occluded) by spicy claims of and to cultural authenticity. In this scenario the Indian becomes diluted, mutating into the generic Latino/a, raised on emitted narratives and batches of synthetic chilli sauce. In another of his poems, "Corpses," Burk unambiguously aligns himself with the symbol of the culled Indian ancestor: "Once upon a time / I was an Indian / Hunched over / Carrying a bundle of sticks / Down a mountain / Dried sperm / Roasted flesh / That's all I remember" (42). Billed as a twisted fairy tale, this quasi-memory collapses the rise and fall of a people into a sparse narrative spanning the dried sperm of conception and the roasted flesh of extermination. The rest is swamped by cultural amnesia.

In the final searing vignette, the jutting expanse of Florida, the first part of continental America to be claimed by European colonizers, becomes monumentalized as a phallus, the very symbol of patriarchal might. Florida, the colonial "root" of America, dips below the arbitrary borderline, a malignant offshoot contoured by exploitation, threatening imminent penetration. If Florida is the thrusting appendage of America, Burk asserts, Mexico is "the armpit of her muff." The suggestiveness of the word "muff" resonates, indexing an item of clothing worn for warmth or to hold one's possessions, a clumsy mistake or bungling performance, and a slang term for the vagina. Mexico becomes a hodgepodge of signification here: a foil enhancing and insulating the U.S.; a resource at the behest of its lazy neighbor, holding America's *possessions*, an indentured and cheap labor force; the sweaty underside of the U.S.; a

dark fecund orifice, spewing out progeny; a gaping hole; a vulnerable fissure, waiting (even willing?) to be penetrated.

Despite her obvious might, America is presented as a lazy, pleasure-seeking liability in this jarring tableau. Gorged, but never satiated, she just lies back and masturbates while the atomic weapons that are meant to protect her spell her inevitable demise. In this pre-9/11 moment this imagery is eerily prescient. America is not being fucked. America is fucking itself. And, more importantly for Burk, America is fucking (over) those interpellated as other(s), those not stimulated by the autoerotic stroking of the internal organs of power. Female masturbation saturates Burk's output at the beginning of the twenty-first century, becoming the palimpsest upon which layered narratives of exploitation bleed into and obscure each other. Through the trope of masturbation, Burk tethers the actions of SFAF to the nationalist agendas fuelling America's exploitative history (slavery, the extermination of Native Americans, NAFTA) and engendering its supremacy in global politics.

Subpoena in the Name of the Queen

American nationalism is unequivocally at the heart of the Christen dildo flyer. Yet this claim can only be expounded through detailed consideration of the genealogy of this image. The precursor of Burk's controversial image was brought to public attention in a 2001 court case filed against members of ACT UP/San Francisco. Towards the end of 2000, ACT UP/San Francisco placed themselves once again at the centre of a new controversy. On October 14 2000, readers of the *Bay Area Reporter* (BAR), the nation's oldest weekly newspaper aimed specifically at LGBT communities, were confronted with a rather inflammatory question posed by SFAF: "HIV Infections Double. Who Gives a Fuck?" On first glance, however, this was not a question at all, for the question mark was left dangling, curiously severed and bracketed from--thus parenthetical to--the text it should serve and contour. Devoid of punctuation the headline became disturbingly hostile towards its intended audience, suggesting unquestioned, thus unquestioned, continuity between the rise in the transmission of HIV and the (in)actions of gay men. Furthermore, a colloquial ejaculation of insouciance--"giving a fuck"--was tactically manoeuvred to enforce a thinly veiled accusation: HIV infections have doubled in those gay male demographics that continue to fuck without compunction. As gay activist Michael Petrelis sarcastically mused over a decade later: "Great way to start a conversation about one's health. Accuse the target audience of not caring and curse at them."

Figure 5

San Francisco AIDS Foundation, "HIV Infections Double. Who Gives a Fuck?" advert appearing in *Bay Area Reporter*, October 14, 2000, 15.

Readers were in no way placated by the accompanying slew of minute letters languishing beneath the oversized, attention-grabbing headline: "There's been a lot of talk in the press about the number of new infections. But that's almost beside the point. Because a number of surveys all say the same thing: a lot of guys are fucking a lot more often in situations where HIV transmission can take place" (San Francisco AIDS Foundation 15). The advert's flippant sidestepping of relevant data (the reason for the advert, the increase in HIV transmission, is almost irrelevant, the reader is assured) seemed to entrench the unsettling knee-jerk assumption that a rise in HIV infection, despite the introduction of HAART, must mean that gay guys were not only fucking *more* (although the virus can be passed on through a single sexual encounter) but in situations geared towards the continued spread of HIV. The article was indicative of "protease moment" fears concerning the slackening of safe sex practices and the rise of sex acts deemed reckless, even pathological, such as barebacking, a term for unprotected anal intercourse that appeared in gay male vernacular in 1997.¹⁴

Less than ten days after the advert appeared, Burk walked into the Sixth Street offices of SFAF brandishing a copy of the *BAR* and demanding to speak to someone about the advert. A scuffle ensued, fellow ACT UPer Todd Swindell was pushed to the ground by a security guard, and Burk was escorted from the premises (incredulous smile intact) and taken to jail accused of trespassing and harassment. The court case resulting from this debacle marked the end of Burk's involvement with ACT UP. Demoralized and angry, he departed San Francisco when testimony concluded:

Never in my life did I think when I moved [to San Francisco] in 1990 that I would leave... with a lynch mob at my door lighting fires, dragged through court and cross examined for wearing an anarchist logo on a t-shirt, questioned over my allegiance to [Mexican revolutionary] Pancho Villa, my art deemed dangerous and threatening. ("Burk Proclaims End")

28 The art in question included, perhaps inevitably, the Christen dildo flyer, admitted into evidence and poured over by the prosecution as proof of Burk's harassment of SFAF staff. However, the court case also brought new information to light, information pertaining to the genealogy of this particular image. Taking the stand Burk diffidently asserted that the flyer was meant as a derivative "caricature and an act of political satire" rather than as a direct attack on Christen, a spoof of an image that had appeared in Europe in the late 1980s of Queen Juliana of the Netherlands, originally concocted "to protest the greed of western Europe's relationship with the Pentagon in the promotion of weapons" ("Court Transcript"). True to the conventions of agitprop art, and his own Surrealist ethics (he was aligned with the Chicago Surrealist Group in the 1970s and particularly dedicated to using surrealism as a weapon with which to dismantle racial prejudice¹⁵), Burk favored appropriation over erroneous claims of authenticity. By recycling images and forcing them into unexpected configurations, he uncovered connections between his own circumstances and earlier events and conditions, forging surprising transnational and transhistorical collaborations and contaminations. The originality of the Christen flyer was certainly of great importance to the prosecuting attorney, Kathleen Fisher, directly proffered during her cross examination of Burk to gauge the violent intent behind the production of the image: "You *recreated* [this flyer] or you *created* [it]?" (qtd. in Burk, "Court Transcript": emphasis is mine).

However, in a court transcript that runs the gauntlet of laughable ineptitudes, infuriating slip ups, and embarrassing misunderstandings (the drawn-out miscommunication surrounding the labeling of exhibits and confusion over publication dates is certainly slapstick at its most pathetic), Burk's testimony is also somewhat off base. The images that served as the inspiration for his searing visual polemic actually date back to 1978 and did not originally appear in the pages of *Exquisite Corpse*, as Burk insists, but in the streets of the Dutch capital, Amsterdam. Although Burk does not explicitly name the source (and there is no evidence to suggest that he was even aware of the source) the collage derives from a drawing created by a small Dutch artist collective known as the Amsterdam Palette Union, a "mad-hater gang of political pornographers" (Woods, "Loose Change")¹⁶ formed in the late 1970s whose forte was provocative erotic satire. Their targets were the Dutch establishment and their highly inflammatory images had already faced strident censorship in the Netherlands. In the summer of 1978 Amsterdam-based American writer Eddie Woods, editor of alternative publication *Ins & Outs Magazine*, published a profile of the Palette Union and reproduced some of their most inflammatory satirical drawings, an act that earned him a night in jail.¹⁷ Through their publication in *Ins & Outs* the images were exposed to a larger national and international audience; the issue quickly sold out in the Netherlands, Britain, and the U.S.

Two of these controversial drawings served as the inspiration for the Christen dildo flyer. In the first image an aged Queen Juliana presents on all fours as a large black animal, either a dog or a bear, wearing a collar monogrammed with the acronym for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), mounts her from behind. In the foreground her consort, Prince Bernhard, smiles jovially, oblivious to (or merely dismissive of) the bestiality occurring directly behind him. In the background three rockets point skywards, cocked and ready to disarm.

Figure 6

Amsterdam Palette Union, image of Queen Juliana of the Netherlands. Image reproduced in *Ins & Outs Magazine*, Issue 3 (1978), p. 11. Image courtesy of Eddie Woods.

The visuals are brash but the connotations are ambiguous. Is Queen Juliana eagerly participating in the acquisition of arms, bent over and brazenly enticing the thrusting might of the North Atlantic Alliance? Is she little more than a panting supplicant, looking away as her borders are penetrated by a rigid and engorged militarist threat? Is she the target of a systemised rape by a more powerful, or controlling, NATO “member”? Whatever her role, this image is disturbing, not least of all because it performs a normative conflation of territory with passive, eminently corruptible womanhood, while presenting penetration of the nation-state as an extension of (active, erect) phallic power, or as a collusion between the aggression of U.S. penile-shaped missiles, NATO, and the apathy of her countrymen, in this case the Queen’s husband, her “protector” as well as her protectorate. The female body (like the construction of nationalism) becomes little more than a conduit for patriarchal, capitalist power. Certainly Burk viewed globalization and empire building as phallic valences; speaking as part of a panel on Chicano/a writing at the OutWrite ‘91 National Lesbian and Gay Writers Conference in San Francisco, Burk commented that the first Gulf War raging at the time was “a dick thing” (Burk qtd. in Yarbo-Bejarano 94), the inference being that all acts of government lead violence are an extension of power dynamics crafted in the shadow of misogyny and phallocentrism.

Burk may have cited this image as his inspiration in court, but the actual graphics he appropriated were pilfered from the accompanying image, “Subpoena in the Name of the Queen,” in which a near naked Queen Juliana masturbates with a dildo, cosseted by a bountiful bower of Dutch Guelder.

Figure 7

Amsterdam Palette Union, "Subpoena in the Name of the Queen," *Ins & Outs Magazine*, Issue 3 (1978), p 11. Image courtesy of Eddie Woods.

This image in particular taps into the ambivalent political culture of the Netherlands at the end of the 1970s. The pornographic drawings created by the Amsterdam Palette Union, circulated in the city via activist sticker campaigns, formed part of a nationwide peace movement that came to be known as "Hollanditis." This neologism—coined in America in 1981—was wielded by commentators in the U.S. to belittle the famously liberal Netherlands as little more than a lackadaisical pacifist cesspool, a pejorative snub that was then reclaimed by left-wing critics in Europe to deride U.S.-style nationalist-militarism, branding American cultural and economic imperialism as a highly contagious disease. As William Levy notes in a survey of European political pornography, this pornographic caricature "mocks the legitimacy of the source of monarchic authority based on money, power and shady connections. The ontology of money is shown here to be sexual, a function of orgasm" (40). These "shady connections" were well known both in Holland and worldwide; by 1978 Prince Bernhard was embroiled in a very public scandal, accused of accepting bribes amounting to over \$1 million from Lockheed, a U.S. aerospace company seeking a monopoly in Western Europe.¹⁸

As is clear, the U.S.'s complex history of championing nationalist and imperialist agendas at home and abroad contoured Burk's entire response to AIDS Inc. The Christen dildo flyer imbibes the signifying potential of the original, positioning Christen as a willing receptacle of nationalist agendas rather than an advocate for people with HIV/AIDS in San Francisco. For Burk, the AIDS epidemic was a political platform, co-opted by powerful elites advancing their own agendas at the expense of those directly affected. Like a hereditary monarch, straight, white, HIV-negative

Christen had a shaky mandate to advocate for the interests of her "subjects," those subjected to the effects of the epidemic. Like Queen Juliana, Christen had been seduced by the almighty dollar, opening up her body for the insertion of a pleasure giving prosthetic of capitalist power (new pharmaceuticals that derived their very legitimacy from the unceasing continuation of HIV transmission).

Departing the Crank-Driven Facsimile

In the summer of 2001, just two years before his death, Burk left San Francisco for New York. In a letter published in *Exquisite Corpse* he explained his reasons for leaving:

SCOUNDREL TIME! That is the phrase that came to me as I looked out the window and watched the 2001 Candle Light Vigil go by. It was as if we were all frozen inside some block of ice called AIDS. All of us gripped by a catastrophe that happened twenty years ago [but that] is no longer happening. Why should I be forced to mourn those gone fifteen years ago? Why must we re-enact this morbid minstrel show every year and be burdened by something that no longer weighs us down as it did then? Thanks to AIDS, San Francisco has been changed into an uptight, sex-repressed, crank-driven facsimile of what it once was, a haven for artists and poets, a place for gay men and women to come and find tolerance. ("Burk Proclaims End")

- 36 As Burk's letter indicates, San Francisco in the twenty-first century was little more than an anaemic reproduction of what it had been. The AIDS dissident movement was dying down in the city, eroded by larger concerns over citywide gentrification, skyrocketing rents, and the monopoly of the dot-com generation. "This was the new San Francisco," transgender author and non-assimilationist gay activist Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore asserts: "Drunk yuppies crowded the sidewalks in front of posh bars in the neighborhoods they used to make jokes about, while Hummers sped down side streets in search of parking" (128). LGBT activism was also being contoured by more conservative "homonormative" agendas (a term coined by Lisa Duggan in 2003), such as the fight for marriage equality and the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." In his parting shot Burk calls upon specters of racial fetishism in the U.S., denouncing modern queers as mask-wearing imitations, acquiescing to pre-(AIDS) Civil War commodification of their own (purportedly authentic) culture, performing in endless skits of ritualistic, self-indulgent mourning.¹⁹

This article tracks just some of Ronnie Burk's controversial cultural production responding to the post-protease inhibitor landscape of HIV/AIDS outreach in San Francisco. Undoubtedly divisive, Burk points to the shifting role of grassroots protest after the introduction of new medications, to the battle lines bifurcating LGBT interests in the millennial moment, to the oblique racial vectors contouring his most contentious and censored creations. Through the trope of female masturbation, Burk questioned the monopoly of gentrified HIV/AIDS organizations in the city, organizations intent on lubricating the official channels of power and influence, often to the detriment of those living with HIV/AIDS. Through the trope of female masturbation, he scrutinized "Post-AIDS" inertia through the often disfiguring lens of early twenty-first century racial-national anxiety. Notorious yet neglected, reviled but revered, Ronnie Burk redefined what it meant to be an HIV/AIDS activist in twenty-first century America. And while

the mainstream press and prominent members of San Francisco's LGBT and HIV/AIDS communities denounced Burk as an irresponsible and misguided threat, he emerged in early twenty-first century Latino/a cultural production as a witty, passionate street activist, loyal friend and electric poet, thumbing his nose at the pallid conformity and exploitative agendas of heteronormative Anglo-America.²⁰

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NOTES

1. Burk was born April 1 1955 in Sinton, Texas. As a young man he participated in Chicano grassroots movements for social change as part of the Texas based Raza Unida party, pioneered by his cousin Guadalupe Youngblood. Starting in 1976 Burk studied Buddhist philosophy and literature at the fledgling Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado under the tutelage of Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman. In the 1970s he was also part of the Chicago Surrealist Group founded by Franklin Rosemont. In 1979 he moved to the Lower East Side of Manhattan and organised poetry readings at The Nuyorican Poets Café and the St Mark's Poetry Project. In 1990, following his HIV-positive diagnosis, Burk relocated to San Francisco.

Letters from Burk are included as part of the Allen Ginsberg Papers (1937-1994) held at Stanford University; the Charles Henri Ford Papers (1906-1989) at The Getty Center in Los Angeles and (1928-1981) at The University of Texas at Austin; the Anne Waldman Papers (1945-2002) at the University of Michigan; the Diane di Prima Papers (1934-1990) held at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center at the University of Connecticut, the University of Louisville, and (1955-2007) The Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina.

2. Phillip Brian Harper has criticised Sullivan's article as an ineffectual response aimed exclusively at white male communities with the ability to procure expensive drugs, a response that does not deny the reality that many racial minorities will still contract the disease and die but does dismiss the significance of these deaths (Harper 89-120).

3. For more on the development of LGBT identities in San Francisco, as well as the effects of HIV/AIDS on the city see Shepard, Armstrong, Cochrane, and Sides.

4. PEPFAR was lauded as a "work of mercy beyond all current international efforts to help the people of Africa" by President George W. Bush in his 2003 State of the Union address.

5. For a repudiation of this teleology see Román.

6. Also see *Viva 16!*, a 1994 documentary film created by Valentín Aguirre and Augie Robles that chronicles queer Latino life on 16th Street in the Mission and the patrons of the bar *Este Noche*.

7. In the summer of 2000—as the Christen dildo flyer was still making waves in San Francisco—over 5,000 physicians, scientists, and professionals signed the Durban Declaration, a document reconfirming HIV as the cause of AIDS. The signing of this document represented a stand against the institutionalised "AIDS denialism" of South African President Thabo Mbeki.

8. This article makes use of an uncollated, unpublished archive of transcripts, letters, editorials, press releases, emails, newspaper articles, and flyers collected by various members of ACT UP/San Francisco. This private archive has been made available to me by Todd Swindell, the last surviving core member of the collective. I would like to sincerely thank Todd for his dedication to this project. His feedback and knowledge have been invaluable and very much appreciated.

9. This is taken from a speech Burk presented in 1999 at a forum on AIDS in Africa co-sponsored by ACT UP/San Francisco and Uhuru: The African People's Education and Defense Fund. Transcribed by Todd Swindell.

10. For more on the white-enhancing policies of SFAF see Brier, 45-77. In "Gay Latino Cultural Citizenship: Predicaments of Identity and Visibility in San Francisco in the 1990s" Roque Ramírez argues that even the slender range of safe-sex campaigns designed for Latino men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM) by SFAF in this period advocated silence and invisibility rather than a reframing of identity or greater transparency.

11. In 2003, following Burk's death, American poet and photographer Ira Cohen penned a surreal poem of dedication (published in issue 8 of the small literary magazine *Big Bridge*) titled "To Ronnie Burk and his Aztec Mother." The dedication included a candid shot of Burk holding an Aztec-style mask. An impromptu gesture of respect, the photograph connoted Cohen's well known *Bandaged Poets* series, a collection of atmospheric black-and-white photographs depicting Beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Brion Gysin, Michael McClure, and Herbert Huncke wearing or holding papier-mâché masks of their own (or sometimes each others) faces. But the photograph of Burk in no way resembles *Bandaged Poets*, which are impersonal and stylised, the stark sheen of the bone-white plaster looming ghostly pale in the grey gloom. In contrast, Burk poses to camera, natural and unassuming, almost angelic in a white vest and shirt ensemble, smiling enigmatically. No white plaster covers his brown face; instead, in one jauntily cocked hand he holds an Aztec-style, malevolently toothy, beige mask. Rather than being covered up he stands exposed, rather than being whitewashed he pops in full-colour, proudly connected to his wounded Indian heritage.

12. For more on Burk's reaction to NAFTA see Burk, "Que Viva México."

13. Water is a recurring symbol in Burk's poetry and directly indexes his anxieties over HIV/AIDS and consumerism. 'Elegy,' written in the mid-1980s as a response to the epidemic, is littered with bursts of half-heard and half-understood atrocities, conspicuously emphasises the pollution of the water supply: "dark age. I read you in the news /of each passing. / drought. plague. famine. / suicide. murder. assassination. / 'untimely death' the water polluted. / the food poisoned. / the gene pool contaminated" (Burk, "Elegy" 33-34). In this snippet, "the water polluted" dangles on the page, separated and highlighted. The euphemistically rendered "untimely death" of people with HIV/AIDS is likened to the effects of drought, plague, and famine, socio-environmental disasters not typically associated with the globalised, prosperous West.

14. In 1997 gay conservative commentator Michelangelo Signorile published an article in *Out* titled "Bareback and Reckless." This acted as a companion piece to his 1995 *New York Times* article "HIV Positive and Careless." It seems that, for Signorile at least, the advent of HAART in 1996 transformed gay male sexual behaviour from (understandably) careless to (pathologically) reckless, from innocent to guilty in two years.

15. See Burk, "Racist Clichés in the U.S.A."

16. The Amsterdam Palette Union included Aat Veldhoen, David Veldhoen, Aart Clerkx, Bert Griepink, and Rik Timmers. For a more in-depth discussion of The Amsterdam Palette Union in this period see Woods, "Amsterdam: A Brief History of Ins and Outs Press." I would like to thank Eddie Woods for his help with this project. I first contacted Woods in June 2014. I had been trying to trace and acquire the original graphics for Ronnie's reimagining, which was proving a laborious task. Eddie kindly sent me the original images and put me in touch with Todd Swindell.

17. Although it is unclear whether Burk would have been a regular reader of *Ins & Outs* it is almost certain that he would have been aware of it. He even had close connections to Woods through the poets Harold Norse and Ira Cohen.

18. The inclusion of Nazi insignia is also easily explained: German-born Prince Bernhard had been a member of the Nazi party until 1934 and the Queen's son-in-law, Claus van Amsberg, was part of the Hitler Youth.

19. Burk often chose to engage in alternative acts of memorialisation in order to protest organised performances of collective mourning. On November 4 1996 Burk visited the newly opened AIDS Memorial Grove located in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. Armed with paraphernalia associated with Día de los Muertos, the Mexican day of remembrance for the dead, Burk cloaked the national monument in black cloth and staked paper skulls resembling Aztec glyphs and death certificates condemning the promotion of experimental pharmaceuticals into the ground. In an act of reappropriation, he transformed the AIDS memorial, renaming it the "AZT Grove"—a gesture of grief for those dead from drug toxicity and experimental drug trials—and aligning his fight against HIV/AIDS treatments with his own, often negated, Mexican heritage.

20. Burk is included as a character in Culture Clash's 2001 play *Mission Magic Mystery Tour*, a witty exploration of Latino/a life in San Francisco's rapidly gentrifying Mission District. Prominent Chicana feminist Cherríe Moraga pinpoints Burk as vital member of a deceased generation of gay men she loved and mourns (Moraga 65). Finally, Chicana poet Lorna Dee Cervantes started a blog as a response to Burk's death in 2003. In 2008 she crafted a poem of dedication, "Angels and Saints," to mark five years since his passing.

ABSTRACTS

In early 2000 gay Latino poet Ronnie Burk courted controversy when he posted a quasi-pornographic activist flyer depicting the Executive Director of the San Francisco AIDS Foundation masturbating with a dildo inscribed with AZT on the website of the controversial San Francisco-based offshoot of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. A demonstration against the commodification of HIV/AIDS and its newly emerging treatments, the image indexed the shifting responses to the epidemic in San Francisco at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This article considers the build-up and fallout attending this controversy, offering close readings of Burk's flyer and tracing the image back to its roots in European political pornography, breaking with consensus-based HIV/AIDS discourse that curtails the narration of the epidemic in 1996, the year that the efficacy of Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy using protease inhibitors was confirmed.

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