Negative: Using Performative Interventions to Explore HIV-Negativity

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In fall 2004, I took a graduate course called “Performance and Social Activism” at Arizona State University. As a class, we considered various approaches to scholarship, activism, and performance, noting the ways in which the social worlds overlap. Several times throughout the semester, we were given opportunities to workshop short performances of activism. The workshops provided an opportunity for me to perform, gain feedback, and revise fictive monologues that I had been working on throughout the semester. At the end of the semester, we were asked to present a final project that used performance to highlight a particular activist agenda. I chose to focus on significations of HIV-negativity, because I wanted to acknowledge my HIV-related fears and work through them in a self-reflexive manner. For the final project, I wrote and performed Negative, a short performance piece comprising three HIV-negative–related monologues. Each of the three monologues challenges the idea that HIV-negativity is necessarily a positive or affirming experience. The title flips the connotation of “negative” back to a condition of attitudinal negativity. Later that year, I performed a full-length version of Negative in Arizona State University’s Empty Space Theater. The audience for this performance was composed of people who were in the class, along with some of their friends. In the following pages, I critically consider the activist potential of the monologues. Before doing so, it is important to contextualize the roles of performance, theory, and activism in HIV-related scholarship.

The Activist Potential of a “Performative Intervention”

In his book Acts of Intervention, David Román intimates that our culture’s woefully partial knowledge of “being negative” contributes to increasing seroconversion rates (233), and, conversely, an outright rejection of sex by individuals who fear contracting HIV (243). Although fewer people are dying of AIDS-opportunistic infections, HIV and AIDS diagnoses are substantially increasing (Krisberg 6; Sanchez A3). Rising seroconversion rates indicate that current HIV-prevention tactics are not as effective as they ought to be. New ways of framing and talking about the virus are therefore needed to complement existing efforts to contain its spread. In this essay, I, an HIV-negative performance artist and academic activist, chronicle my attempt to intervene against popular AIDS myths by exploring HIV-negativity. “Interventions” are performances that add to, contradict, and / or renegotiate how HIV and AIDS are articulated in US American culture, with the intent of calling dominant ideologies into question (Román 43). My mode of intervention involves the use of creative writing and solo performance. I chronicle the successes and failures of my intervention in
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the form of this academic essay because such documentation illuminates the often thorny ground of performance work. Ultimately, I question how narrative and creative writing might be used to flesh out HIV-negativity, providing multiple opportunities for audience insight and identification.

In this essay, I examine how a variety of discourses affects identity formation; I also look at the ways in which performance contributes to, challenges, and sometimes reifies popular discursive handlings of HIV-negative people. To accomplish these tasks, I borrow from and modify Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler explains that “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (2). As does gender, serostatus can be framed as a key identity marker that depends on an iterative chain to constitute itself. Using performance to establish an HIV-negative identificatory continuum—in terms of topics that specifically relate to HIV-negative cultural members—performatively intervenes in discursive handlings of HIV that tend to ignore people who are affected by AIDS but who are not necessarily infected.

By employing the term “performative intervention,” I am advocating for a mode of performance that is explicitly activist / interventionist, tactically employed, and capable of challenging monolithic and oppressive conceptions of complex social phenomena. While some could argue that every performative utterance presupposes a response from its witnesses, the type of intervention that I imagine occurs when the terms “performatively” and “intervention” are brought together to suggest a specific type of reaction—one that triggers an activist-minded performance. I developed the concept by stretching Butler’s gender performativity to include a broader range of identifications, then fusing it with Román’s understanding of cultural interventions. The performative aspect of the intervention calls our attention to how popular discourses constrain and enable senses of identity; the possibility implied in an intervention means that discourse is not entirely deterministic in our constructions of identity. Put differently, performative interventions point to how different realities are dependent on different discursive chains; cultural critics also consider ways in which new models of iteration can lead to emancipatory gains. In this project, performative interventions are utilized to challenge misrepresentations and under-representations of HIV-negative people.

Putting “performatively” and “intervention” together is provocative, because combining the terms provides a vernacular from which performance scholars can better articulate the intersections of and interactions between performativity, performance, and activism. Butler implies connections between the three concepts in *Gender Trouble* when she considers the potential of drag to highlight the constructedness of gender. Other scholars have elaborated on the relationship; E. Patrick Johnson, for example, argues that, while performativity and performance should not be conflated, the two interpretive frames can be brought together to form a relationship that is dialogical and dialectical. Symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner advances the notion of “performative reflexivity,” in which performances

. . . . are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture or even of changing culture but may themselves be active agencies of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative
actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting “designs for living.” (24)

Performance, then, can intervene on the citational process and articulate new possibilities for identification.

Before detailing the work I did with Negative, I will briefly consider a few performance exemplars that use scholarship and theory to consider the power of performance as a mode of cultural intervention. The texts I mention here are exemplary because they each approach creative writing, performance, and HIV in ways that inspire my own work.

Some creative writers pull directly from popular discourses to create their texts. Peter Poher interweaves excerpts from AIDS narratives found in the Austin Chronicle, statistics from the Centers for Disease Control, and stories from PWA Newsline to build a performance intertext. The script, temporally organized and geographically situated in Texas, combines date-related facts with personal narratives of men from Texas who are being redefined by a virus that is just beginning to negotiate its meaning. For example, after Poher cites that in 1989 Texas “now has [the] fifth highest number of AIDS cases nationally,” he cuts to the narrative of a man who claims that being black, heterosexual, and infected has caused many clinicians to treat him as a medical anomaly (75). By interweaving the texts, Poher encourages audiences to read between the proverbial lines. In 1989, could AIDS cases be increasing exponentially in Texas because people in the state believe that homosexuality is a necessary condition for virus contraction? Poher’s numerous cuts from affecting AIDS narratives to detached and unapologetic headlines about the syndrome suggest that the answer to this question is a resonant and sobering “yes.” Unfortunately, the rhetorical links between gay sexuality and virus contraction have not changed much in the last decade and a half. Inspired by Poher’s work, I aim to explore the ways that younger people are coaxed into a false sense of security by popular discourses that construct HIV as a manageable disease and a waning threat. More importantly, how do (mis-)constructions of the virus impact communicative exchanges regarding sexual practices and mating rituals?

Literary genre-blurring and -juxtaposing, commonly used as creative writing devices, are also excellently deployed in Christie Logan, Lesa Lockford, and Marc Rich’s “Process and Practice.” This work combines responses from an open-ended HIV questionnaire, disseminated to one hundred thirty students at California State University, Northridge, with dramatic dialogue and poetry. The performative text lushly considers the possibility of feeling sexy in an age in which sexual practices are influenced by safety technology. Can sex still be fun with latex? The word-play used by the academicians implies that sexiness does not have to be sacrificed to safety. In one of their more poetic moments, the authors exclaim:

condoms!
flavored
colored
ribbed
AND glow in the dark!
Lollipop condoms
Full body condoms
And Extra Extra Large Condoms (90)
Unlike Pober’s piece, “Process and Practice” plays with the often-glum signification of HIV prevention by mining its lighter and more whimsical possibilities. However, the authors fail to interrogate the darker side of sexual safety. Has our culture’s investment in HIV-negativity, for example, resulted in the “end of pleasure” (Morrison)? If so, what does the “end of pleasure” look and sound like? Would we recognize it in the communicative behaviors of our neighbors? Would we recognize it in ourselves?

While Logan, Lockford, and Rich employ multiple personae to flesh out the impact of the pandemic on the heterosexual community, Scott Dillard uses personal narrative to help establish identifiable roles for gay men in the time of AIDS. For Dillard, performance pieces—particularly those provided by Tim Miller and Larry Kramer—are well suited to discussions about the body because the texts inspire readers to move from “intellectual to visceral” responses to the pandemic (80). Dillard opts to clearly separate his more traditionally academic (intellectual) and creative (visceral) voices into two distinct sections. In the latter portion of his article, he engages in a dramatic monologue that recounts the last moments he spent “breathing in” his lover before he died from an AIDS-opportunistic infection. While Dillard is HIV-positive, there are millions of HIV-negative individuals who lose friends and loved ones to the disease but who, for the most part, continue to be ignored by both dramatic and scientific texts—not that there is always a clear delineation between the two forms. Prompted to respond to this lack, I ask, “In what ways have HIV service organizations and popular media outlets neglected the HIV-negative population?”

Using Audience Feedback to Analyze “Negative”

This essay details a few ways that I have used performance to intervene in comprehensions of HIV-negativity. The first and third monologues (“Butch” and “Lenny”) were each performed for an audience only once. The second monologue (“Mary”) has been performed three times for three separate audiences. After each performance, audience members were invited to participate in a postshow talkback and online discussion forum; I refer to data gathered in this way as “direct audience feedback” (DAF). Nine months after the final production, I also asked audience members to provide additional thoughts about the performance; I explained to each of them that delayed responses or “performance residue” allows me to see what “sticks” several months after a production has been completed.

Postshow discussions contribute to the activist potential of the project by providing a space for audience members to articulate their responses to the production and relative frustrations regarding HIV-negativity. Janna Goodwin reminds us that a productive postshow “interrogates conflict and complacency, promotes social reflection, and stimulates action through dialogue” (317). Through DAF and performance residue, audience members help to unpack the significance of the intervention. In this regard, they become more active participants in the performative process; they are asked to (re)consider the discourses that surround them and, through the performance narratives, locate themselves on various planes of identification.
Becoming Butch

I begin my creative study by investigating the ways in which younger men in the gay community have been led by popular discourses to believe that HIV is no longer topical in their lives. In 2002, for example, Bill Clinton argued in the New York Times that an HIV+ diagnosis in our country is treatable, suggesting that seropositive individuals could now live healthy lives (9). Ads for HIV medications in magazines that target gay men even glamorize the virus. One ad features scantily-clad buff young studs—presumably HIV+—playing beach volleyball and surrounded by a group of equally attractive homosexual men. The weakening image of the pandemic has lulled the public into a false sense of security. Gay men across the country are contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases at rates not seen in more than a decade (Sanchez A3). I therefore question how national discourses affect communicative practices among gay men, particularly how the discursive misconstructions of the disease influence their sexual practices.

In an effort to investigate how sexual practices are influenced by discourse, I use a character named Butch. Butch is an amalgam of fact and fiction. His monologue opens in silence as he sets up a video recorder and prepares to film an audition tape for John Cameron Mitchell’s The Sex Film Project. Hot on the heels of his wildly successful play and movie, Hedwig and the Angry Inch, Mitchell’s new project looks for actors who are willing to have gay sex on camera. As Butch’s monologue progresses, the audience is given a brief glimpse into the sordid worlds of drug use, indiscriminate sex, and both “circuit” and “Roulette” parties. In many ways, Butch is neoqueer. He shows us what can happen when brash celebrations of sexuality and glorifications of drug use—indispensable elements of the 1990s queer movement—lose their activist, AIDS-conscious backbone.

Butch is a composite character. There is an autobiographical impulse in his tale. While my escapades are hardly as colorful as Butch’s, I have attended twelve circuit parties, gay events held in different cities around the world. Each month, thousands of gay men travel the circuit. Most of the men meet up to dance in rented venues; many of them also experiment with drugs and sex at the gatherings. I used ethnographic headnotes, or “focused memories of specific events” (Lindlof & Taylor 159), to help create Butch and his story. While not as conventional as a typical fieldnote, headnotes can be an invaluable source of data, as they allow researchers to pull from past experiences to inform current projects. I relied on headnotes to creatively re-render familiar archetypes that I have been exposed to at circuit parties. My use of the term “archetype” here is deliberate, because the parties emphasize the import of fantasy, role playing, and caricatured personae. One need only look at the various themes of circuit parties to recognize the significance of fantasy. Party names include “Perfect Day,” “Gay Days” at Disney World, and the “White Party,” which is, not surprisingly, primarily attended by white men.

When creating Butch, I also looked to Gregory Freeman’s article in the January 2003 issue of Rolling Stone that chronicles the bug chasing phenomenon. “Bug chasing” refers to groups of gay men who actively seek HIV transmission. Many of the men meet at a Roulette party, a gathering of roughly ten men, nine HIV- “bug chasers” and one HIV+ “bullet” or “gift giver.” Bug chasers engage in unsafe intercourse with as many men at the party as possible, thereby
increasing their chances to receive the “bug” (Hill 4). At many of the parties, bug chasers and gift givers have adopted the 1970s system of communicating preferences for specific sex acts by donning color-coded armbands. For example, a dark-blue handkerchief signifies anal sex; wearing a bandana with white dots represents a desire for the intake of semen. Freeman includes excerpts from two informant interviews that the journalist conducted in preparation for the article. I also spoke with Frank (a pseudonym), one of the bug chasers mentioned in Freeman’s essay. For over a year, I read Frank’s online journal that reflects upon his life as a bug chaser, his eventual contraction of HIV, and his current regret at having seroconverted. I used the information to help craft the following character. While Butch is not an exact dramatic rendering of Frank, he is an exercise in hypothetical thought, inspired by research and grounded in data:

**BUTCH:** Hi, my name is Butch.

*Butch snorts a laugh that is more inhaled than exhale.*

Do you love it? I pump gas at the gay Exxon in the Montrose area of Houston. At our Exxon, you can get your ‘X’ on!

John Cameron Mitchell, I want to be a part of the *Sex Film Project* so bad because I loved *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* more than ten inch cocks. J.C.M., you need actors who will have sex on camera; I am an actor who will have sex on camera. I will spread my legs and be like, “Boys, mangia! Mangia! Mangia!”

John Cameron, before I pumped gas, I worked at J. Crew. A couple of years ago, my entire life was J. Crew. I only hung out with hung gay men who worked at my store; we called ourselves the J. Crew crew. We were really into the circuit party and drug scenes. I don’t know if that will be a problem for the movie.

John Cameron Mitchell, I am *good* at sex. I have it all the time. Mangia! Mangia! Mangia! It says here that I’m supposed to tell you about the craziest sexual experience that I’ve ever had. I don’t know if you’ve heard of Roulette parties before, but, last year, my friend J/me took me to one. J/me was a freaky deaky trip. Get this, he spelled his name with a capital “J,” a slash mark, and then a lower case “M” and “E,” as in “me.” Get it? Like, “J *(Butch makes a ‘J’ shape with his fingers and then motions toward himself’)* me.”

Anyway, a Roulette gathering is a bare-backing sex party where you go in and have sex with as many men as you can. You’re supposed to wear different color handkerchiefs to show other people what your bag is. For instance, if you want a guy to cum inside you, you wear a blue bandana with white paisleys on it. If you want a guy to, like, spray all over your face—well, I don’t know what color you wear for that, so I just asked for it.

J/me was really into the Roulette scene. One night, we were having a boring ass time at this lame-o gay bar and J/me asked me if I’d be interested in going with him to a party. Now, you have to understand, I’m from Tucson, so when I hear the word “party,” I’m thinking somebody’s parents have gone out of town and there’s going to be Twister, Madonna, and Jello shots. Well, this wasn’t one of those parties.

When we got to room 121 at the Motel 6, I knew something was up right away. J/me knocked on the door; he had to give a password to get in. The password was “phoenix,” like the bird, not the city. So, this really hot older guy opened the door and asked us if we were “bug chasers” or “gift
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Givers.” Now, you know when you don’t know what the hell somebody is talking about but you play it off like you do. Well, when the guy asked me if I was a “bug chaser” or a “gift giver,” I thought, “Shit, I didn’t bring a gift. I mean, if somebody had told me, I could have lifted something from the store. If I didn’t bring a gift, I must be a ‘bug chaser.’”

The party was really creepy. Some of the guys were way-hot, but some of the guys were way-not. I sat in the corner until the host of the party asked if I wanted to play around. Well, he tells me to sniff some poppers, which, hello, okay. Before I know it, I’m going down on him while another guy is doing me from behind. I didn’t even see what the other guy looked like. After about ten minutes of doing that, the poppers started making me feel really sick. I totally threw up all over the place, but I was so fucked up that I convinced myself that I was really into it. Eew! The guys didn’t mind. Both of them gave me a facial and I was on my way.

John Cameron Mitchell, I love sex, because I love the feeling of a man cumming inside of me—filling me with his love, filling me with his life.

After performing this monologue, I was shocked that the audience refused to laugh at some of the jokes I made as Butch. When people did laugh, they tended to giggle at lines that lacked sexual innuendo, like “The password was ‘phoenix,’ like the bird, not the city.” Analyzing audience response helps to explain some of the disconnect. At the talkback, a straight white woman in her late forties suggested that she did not “identify” with the character or his situation. On the digital forums, a gay audience member in his early forties provided additional DAF that helps explain why some people may have had a difficult time identifying with Butch. He writes, “For catharsis to function, the audience must be socially and culturally involved. If there is no identification, the narrative is empty because it lacks a shared discernment.”

Interestingly, identification with the character appears to be split along generational lines. Nine months after being introduced to the character, a thirty-one-year-old gay man who watched the performance told me that, given his relative likeness in age, Butch’s “self-destructive impulse” proved to be resonant. A twenty-two-year-old straight woman in the audience also acknowledged Butch’s recklessness but maintained that she, “... didn’t really fault him for his behavior, like ‘Oh, you should know better,’ because, in truth, I don’t think he did.” She went on to write, “I remember thinking, ‘What happened to this guy in his past that enables him to propel forth in a manner that makes him so able to put himself in danger?’ The fearlessness of youth sticks with me.” In a talkback, questions and comments like the ones proffered here can be situated in such a way that the performative aspects of discourse are brought to the fore. For example, an audience member asked me if Butch had been sexually abused as a child. This question echoes the “What happened to this guy in his past?” query that emerged salient in the performance residue I later accumulated. In the talkback, I encouraged audience members to spend more time thinking about the current context of our culture: What is currently cited in our discursive treatments of HIV as it relates to gay men? What are the performative implications of the citational process?

Butch lives in a world in which HIV is ideologically an “old man’s” disease, but materially a present threat and killer. He never mentions the pandemic; he probably has never given serious thought to its ramifications. The choice not to
mention HIV in the monologue was deliberate; many members of the audience found the choice intriguing. A straight white woman in her fifties “was especially interested in the overtones of absence and presence. Never speaking the words HIV/AIDS was especially powerful, because the performance creates discourse about the subject without directly stating it.” Audience members are left to color in Butch’s HIV-ambiguity. Is he negative? Positive? Has he ever tested for HIV? HIV-ambiguity is a cultural problem. In the United States, one third of infected people do not know they are HIV+ (Christopher 41). In the “Butch” monologue, the absence of the virus performs an intervention on the performative construction of HIV in the US. One audience member suggested that the character provides a “Cassandra-like voice to persuade people to reckon not only with the plague of HIV/AIDS, but, as importantly, with the country’s institutional bigotry toward homosexuality.” Put differently, if young gay men are led by media and some governmental agencies to believe that HIV is not a serious threat, the discourse performs; the discourse is cited in the acts of queers who attend circuit and Roulette parties. Performance provides an opportunity to disrupt the performative and “reiterative practice” (Butler, Bodies 2) by calling attention to the ways that discourse lulls gay men, among others, into a false sense of security.

Perhaps the most important part of the performative intervention takes place at the talkback, where individuals come together and compare rhetorical constructions of HIV. Most audience members noted that the topics presented in Negative expanded their comprehensions of HIV as it relates to members of various subcultures. Along with introducing readers and audiences to a scary, thrill-seeking world, the Butch character contributes to a growing HIV-related vernacular. In his monologue, we hear words like “bug chasing” and “gift giving”—phenomena that can alter the signification of HIV-negativity for people who think the virus is no longer topical in their communities. Ultimately, to get people to talk about HIV again, it is important to get them to discuss it in new and often shocking ways. Even if bug chasing serves as a mere conversation-starter about the virus, the intervention is successful insofar as it motivates members of an overwhelmingly complacent public to talk about HIV and AIDS.

Mary, the “Virgin”

I created the next monologue to work through many of my sexual fears and prejudices. Like Butch, Mary is a composite character. She is part semiautobiography and part fictionalized interpretation of a formal and organized social movement that aims to persuade individuals to “reclaim” their virginity. To better acquaint myself with the virgin reclamation movement, I visited Reflower.com and the Society for the Recapture of Virginity (SRV) webpage. If I had not already heard about the movement, I would have assumed that the websites were tongue in cheek. SRV provides a laundry list of unverifiable and uncited “facts” about virginity, such as, “Hair loss is 45.6% less prevalent among male virgins than non-virgins” (10). For fairly obvious reasons, the irrationality of my own dilemma seemed well suited to a marriage with unintentionally humorous “facts” about virginity found on the websites I visited. In all, Mary is a conglomerate of personal narrative, controversial public policy, and educational program manifestos. Reflecting on the utility of HIV education, Corey writes, “The personal is the political is the educational. The triune is a paradigm from which all actions arise” (13). Mary is a compelling character because she
hysterically represents and reacts to a wide array of discourses, namely the
three to which Corey refers in his essay. In the following monologue, I attempt
to intervene against typical discursive depictions of HIV that breed a fear that I
know all too well.

My primary method of intervention is camp. Camp has a lengthy tradition
in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer theatres. It is a resitive
practice that appropriates artifacts (i.e., symbols, songs, etc.), turns them on
their heads, gives them new meaning, and infuses them with a queer under-
standing (Muñoz 128). While several scholars recognize camp’s transgressive
potential, others provide cautionary insight. For example, Andrew Britton warns
that camp often results in reductive, nonanalytic performances that do little to
change social relations (140). He specifically references drag performances: “camp
simply replaces the signs of ‘masculinity’ with a parody of the signs of ‘feminin-
ity’ and reinforces existing social definitions of both categories” (138). Depend-
ing on how it is actualized, camp, as a performance mode, can be framed as
apolitical, resistive, and / or conservative (Flinn 439). When camp is framed as
a transgressive practice, it tends to be linked to Judith Butler’s notion of gender
performativity insofar as it reveals the imitative structure of everyday embodi-
ments. My experience indicates that camp resists “either / or” patterns of thought
that tend to see the practice as either subversive or oppressive. The discussion
that follows Mary’s monologue demonstrates the utility of camp but also inter-
rogates its dangers.

MARY: Hi! My name is Virginia Mary Stephens Lockford-Cadwell, but, please,
call me Mary. I am so excited that the community center has called me in to
talk about how “Abstinence works!” I think that before I counsel y’all, I
should tell you a little bit about myself.

My husband and I moved to California from Texas. My husband works
at the Olive Garden; he was just promoted to General Manager at the Thou-
sand Oaks location—when you’re there, you’re family. Now, what I’m about
to tell you may seem shocking, but the other day I walked in on my hus-
band and caught him cheating on me with his own hand.

My husband and I have never had sex and we won’t have sex until I
feel the “calling.” It’s not a religious thing. “Calling” is when you know your
body is ready to have sex. Abstinence isn’t about denying what your body
wants. It’s about not caving into the thing you know your body thinks it
wants but doesn’t need in light of what your body does need but doesn’t
know it wants. Are you following me?

Now, in my younger years, I had a lot of sex. Five years ago, when I
turned thirty-three, I used sex as a tool to get things and I got my fair share
of “things.”

(Mary gestures toward her pelvis.)

Five years ago, I was in a yoga class doing an “upward-facing dog”
and I had a vicious case of crabs. Well, I went to itch my hoo-haw, lost
balance, and my doggie fell to the side. A woman named Piper helped me
into the locker room and I just starting crying. I asked her, “Have you ever
had crabs? They just won’t go away! I hate them! (Mary beats her pelvis.) I
hate you!”

Piper took me out to dinner that day and told me about the Virgin
Reclamation movement. On that summer’s eve, I reclaimed my virginity and
so can you.
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Did you know that the death rate among virgins is 300% lower than that among non-virgins [Society 6]? Did you know that virgins are 86.1% less likely to get into hazardous automobile accidents [Society 10]?

We need to teach our children that abstinence works. I mean, look at me. I am h-a-p-p-y!

Now, I’ve come close to sullying my reclaimed virginity. Last week, I was touch-up painting my white walls when a voice came from inside me and said, “Mary, baby—make.” It was the calling!

That night, Frank and I slipped into bed and the moment we got into bed it was like I could feel that terror alert rainbow Bush came up with was rising from yellow to orange.

As Frank mounted me, I thought about women in Africa—little virgin girls who natives have their ways with because they think having sex with an untouched blossom will cure their disease; I thought about the late nights Frank worked; I thought about the faint smell of perfume on his collar—not my scent. I thought about “What if?” and I thought about it in a number of ways. I saw myself at the doctor’s office. I saw myself sitting in a hospital bed in a room with a window that eats sunlight and belches the scent of rot. I saw contagion and filth—fruit dying on the vine. I saw Frank hovering over me and our white walls melting into his shoulders; the white paint from the walls, traveling through his body to enter me. I thought, “What if?” What if his love kills me? Why won’t the walls stay white? Why does the fruit rot?

Today, I am still a virgin, because I care about my safety. I am negative, negative, negative. One pose you will never see me strike at yoga is corpse.

Unlike the other two monologues, “Mary” was performed for three different audiences that varied in size and demographics. I first staged the monologue for my classmates within the confines of our weekly lecture. When performing the character, I put on a magenta wig that was tied back in a ponytail. I also utilized character sculptures to physically depict the conundrum of Mary’s sexuality. In the yoga sequence in which Mary talks about the “upward facing dog,” for example, I got on all fours, arched my back, and pointed my head toward the ceiling. The upward facing dog pose is reminiscent of stylized moves one would find in the Kama Sutra. Other than what is included in the text, the wig, character sculptures, and campy performance of southern femininity were the only signifiers I used to convey “female.”

After the first performance of “Mary,” a lively debate ensued in the class. The most vociferous opponent of the monologue rightfully worried that ethical problems regarding the representation of women are raised when a gay man appropriates a female persona to work through his own issues regarding sex, shame, and fear—especially when camp is utilized in the character’s construction. As he put it in the digital forum, “As a white man, to assume the voice of a female and utilize that voice to speak about your ideas of sex and raped victims in Africa—is the potential misogyny in this act not blatantly obvious?” The conversation about gender representation was an informative one. In my first performance of the monologue, I was, perhaps, too willing to over-construct Mary’s femininity. Inspired by the feedback, I came to see that the camp should focus more on the content of Mary’s argument. The week after my initial
performance of the monologue, I revised the script, finding opportunities to remove unnecessary jabs at Mary’s femininity. The “joke” became Mary’s excessive dedication to the revirginization cause.

For the second and third performances, I continued to wear a wig, but Mary’s characterization became more understated. When describing the scene at the gym, for example, Mary took her time to consider the power of reclaiming her virginity. In a monologue that is primarily fast-paced, I, as Mary, spent several moments in silence after Piper told the character about virgin reclamation. For her, the movement is not a joke; because of this, I no longer played it as one. In the second and third performances, I also made an effort to alter the mood of the monologue. When Mary describes the sexual encounter with her husband, the subtextual energy of the piece changes; in the subsequent performances, Mary, in turn, became more vulnerable and three-dimensional—a shift in mood that emerged salient in the audience feedback that I collected. When asked to provide performance residue, a female audience member remarked:

The inner monologue from Mary as she and her husband had sex for the first time is a moment I vividly remember. As she described the white from the walls liquefying and oozing through her husband, he transforms from a lover to a needle filled with disease—introducing the potentially diseased ejaculate into her body. This moment really marked a turn away from the campy and seemingly unjust fear of sex. It humanized the character, made her believable and identifiable.

This is not to say that my modifications of the monologue did not reify oppressive ideologies in other ways. Depending on an individual audience member’s standpoint, Mary’s obsessive avoidance of all sexual contact could be read as problematic. For some, Mary’s take on sex could be seen as a celebration of sexual abandon; for others, the campy performance could be read as a ridiculing of any attempt at encouraging safe sex. I mention these reactions, because they highlight the potential pitfalls of my intervention. If the performative intervention works, audience members locate Mary’s overhyped sense of fear, then consider the ways that her process of rationalization is influenced by panic-mongering discourses (i.e., “Abstinence works!”).

Given the data I collected from the audience, the monologue as a performative intervention is both a success and a failure. Most of the data suggest that people understood that camp was used to call attention to her fear. Some people in the audience even pointed out that HIV discourses do little to help people like Mary. One audience member explained, “Mary’s exaggerated fear of HIV infection is not something that is addressed in information about support groups or even covered in the media.” At the talkback, other people suggested that, for the monologue to promote critical thought, Mary’s references to the pandemic need to be made more explicit. As one woman in the talkback stated, “I think her monologue needs to better connect to the theme of AIDS. She talks about the horrors of child rape in Africa, but, for me, that didn’t get connected to the AIDS issue.” Given the range of reactions, a performative intervention’s efficacy can be conceptualized as a fractured picture or puzzle of activism and critical thought. Individual audience members collect different pieces of the puzzle; the talkback proffers an opportunity for people to put the pieces together.
Ragan Fox

Lenny’s Quilt Square

In “Breathing Darrell,” Dillard references the NAMES Project Quilt and its ability to publicly document the names of men and women who have died from AIDS-opportunistic infections (78). The author then memorializes his deceased partner through the use of personal narrative. Dillard says that the act is

\[\ldots [a] \text{ritual performance of grief that allows me to honor his life and our relationship. Like the Quilt, my performance seeks to make public a private relationship that has been devastated by AIDS. Each performance is an act of memory that ensures that he is not forgotten. (78)}\]

I would like to extend the quilt metaphor explicitly to include narrative and creative writing. Creative ventures à la performance can be conceptualized as a narrative quilt that continues a tradition of HIV/AIDS activism and community building. Quilts are often accompanied by a family mythology, stories that extend oral traditions and pay homage to the bloodline. While traveling the Underground Railroad, slaves even used quilts as a method of covert communication, helping them to survive treacherous and trying journeys. In so many ways, quilts depend on narrative. The narrative quilt, then, proves to be a fitting analogue for HIV/AIDS activism and public memory.

I was inspired to write the next monologue after conducting qualitative research with the Prime Timers, an organization that caters to the needs and affiliations of older gay men in the Phoenix area. In an interview with a man named Jacques (a pseudonym), I was moved to tears after he revealed that he had lost a son to the AIDS pandemic. Jacques explained:

My wife and I were not getting along. It wasn’t a good marriage and within a year or so my son came to us and said that he had AIDS. We were about to separate, but we never said a word. Just seeing your child dying in front of you and you can’t do anything.

“Here, take a sip of water.”

“No, I can’t drink it now.”

Or, “We’re going to make you a meal now.”

“I can’t eat it.”

Have you heard of the AIDS quilt in DC? My son’s quilt was there. The quilt is a way of presenting how many gay people were being affected by AIDS.

The following monologue is a creative reconstruction of Jacques’ story, or “quilt square,” if you will. As with most any theatrical narrative, the story has been altered to increase its ability to keep theatrical audiences entertained.

Does a story twice-told and twice-removed lose its claim to narrative truth? This is a question I have grappled with and a query for which I do not have the answer. Linda Park-Fuller tells us that even autobiographical narrative is inventive, a tale that “not only reveals the truth; it creates it” (“Performing” 27). Kristin Langellier more directly tackles issues of representation in AIDS narratives when she indicates that, “\ldots speaking for others is necessary for HIV/AIDS education, despite its difficulties and dangers” (189).

In the following monologue, I hope to encourage people to ask questions that are frequently glossed over or completely overlooked. For example, is there more that AIDS organizations can do to help HIV-negative community members
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who have lost loved ones to the pandemic? Should HIV/AIDS organizations exclusively focus their outreach on individuals who have become infected? Put in negative terms, are HIV-negative people neglected by AIDS outreach programs?

*Lenny, a seventy-six-year-old Jewish man, takes out a Dictaphone and audiotapes his monologue.*

**Lenny:** Hello, my name is Lenny. I’m seventy-six and last year I decided to come out of the closet. I am a homosexual. I was married for forty years. Rose, my ex-wife, is my only family. After our son died, she was all I had left. She’s got the Alzheimer’s. Hell is coming out to your ex-wife forty-three times.

In the summer of 1975, I was ready to get a divorce but our son, Mark, threw a wrench in my plans. Right about that time, Mark, my son, made his announcement, “Mom, Dad, I’m gay—pass the borscht.” Well, I couldn’t exactly leave Rose after that, so I stayed. Ten years after that, I was ready to leave again. That’s when we began to notice bruises on Mark. My wife and I aren’t dummies.

My son loved to sing disco songs. Funny, he never wanted to let go of the 70s. He had me bring in all his records. I think gay men love disco because it gives all us yutzes an opportunity to stop schlepping around and reflect. Alicia Bridges:

*You can love them all and when you’re through,*

*maybe that’ll make, hub, a man out of you.*

*I got to go where the people dance.*

*I want some action . . . I want to live!*

Mark, my son, loved to hate hearing me sing disco. He’d say, “Dad, enough. I’m dying and you’re not Gloria Gaynor.”

I said, “You’re not going to Gaynor earn my affection with such love.” Bad joke.

Oh, those were awful times. Everything had cooled over. The hospital was always so cold, but Mark would sweat like he was in a sauna. I remember those ice chips. Feeding him those ice chips. Rolling the ice chips into a rag and holding it on his head. Deep freeze, but all the ice in the world won’t make the sun go cold.

We also liked watching 70s movies together. With Mark, it was all about the 70s. His favorite movie was *Superman*. He loved that scene when Margot Kidder gets trapped under all that dirt and Christopher Reeve has to fly into outer space and fly around the Earth opposite its rotation so fast that time goes in reverse—you know, so he can save the woman he loves. He’d say to me, “Dad, if I could fly like Superman . . .” and I’d tell him, “Not even Superman can do that.” Funny, today, even Superman is dead. Who’d a thought?

It would get so cold in that hospital room and I’d think about that ice crystal palace Reeve would go to to talk to his elders. He’d rationalize with them and they’d take his powers away so that he could be with Lois Lane or give them back to him if he needed to save the world. Where was my count? Where was my son’s?

When the color of his skin turned and I knew, and believe me, you know, I sang Thelma Houston:

*Don’t leave me this way*
Ragan Fox

I can’t survive, I can’t stay alive
Without your love, no baby
Don’t leave me this way
Why him? Why not me? Why not you?
I hate the fact that I can love again, and, so, I never will. He should be
here and I should not be. I had sex with countless men. There is no justice
in the world. Look what happened to Superman.
You know when you get a chill and it stays with you for a few min-
utes. My few minutes have been frozen in time. Minutes have bled into
years. I feel like that ice man they found. Rose is gone, too, because flow-
ers don’t stay alive in a deep freeze. The pipes that run to and from my
heart have burst.
Why him? Why not me? Why not you?

In “Breathing Darrell,” Dillard calls for a useful mythology that proffers
meaningful roles for gay people (79). Although it is not unique to the gay com-
munity, the narrative quilt contributes to the mythology in important and heu-
ristic ways. First, the quilt provides a narrative blueprint that can help cultural
members make sense of their losses. Park-Fuller speaks to the importance of
what I call “narrative blueprints” when she argues that “without human behav-
ioral models, people encountering the disease do not know how to behave”
(“Narration” 62). Narrative serves a pedagogical function for people who do not
know how to act around an HIV+ loved one. Passing down narratives is tanta-
mount to teaching a neophyte how to quilt.

For many of the audience members, the monologue intervened against the
absence of HIV-related news in the media by reminding them that, despite med-
ICal advances, there are a number of people who continue to be affected by
AIDS-related deaths. The monologue proved to be particularly resonant for one
woman in the audience who, nine months after the production, provided the
following performance residue:

It seems like HIV-related issues have largely vanished from the media—at
least in the heterosexual world in which I live. It’s been years since I have
known anyone with HIV or [a person who has] died from AIDS. So, what
the monologue did was kept the topic out there. I mean, Lenny could be my
father, grandfather, or neighbor. The performance made me think about
how AIDS, while not the scourge it once was, is still relevant today.

Another audience member echoed her sentiments regarding how people con-
tinue to be affected by AIDS:

The older man’s loss of his son offered a different perspective. [Stories like
his are] often glossed over in an effort to report on the dropping or rising
deaths from the disease. The monologue made it easier for me to relate to
issues of HIV and AIDS as well as identify with persons affected [by the
epidemic].

Finally, Lenny’s story potentially begets other narratives. Robert Smith re-
fers to the snowballing of stories as the “Canterbury effect” (238). Acknowledg-
ing the import of similar narratives could better prepare HIV/AIDS organi-
sations and activists to counsel HIV-negative people of varying backgrounds who
are, most assuredly, affected by the disease and could benefit from identifying
with others in similar situations. Listening to the narratives of people affected by AIDS provides an opportunity to talk about HIV and AIDS without privileging the stories of HIV-positive people. Their stories live through quilts and narratives: not just memorials to the dead, their narratives also speak to the living. Like slave quilts, their tales hold the power to help individuals affected by AIDS navigate a devastating terrain of loss and echo a hope for the future.

An Act of Intervention

When evaluating how effective an intervention Negative is, it is important to consider the activist component of the project. Guided by David Schlossman’s categorizations of performance and activism, the production should be received as an “indirect exchange” in which an insider from the theatre world demonstrates an awareness of the activist community “independent of direct contact” (60). To this end, we might ask how the show intervenes in a national political discourse that helps to make HIV-negativity an “absent” topic (Park-Fuller, “Performing” 20). Of course, measuring the effectiveness of an intervention is tricky business. Schlossman discourages us from expecting to see “measurable, often revolutionary” results from a single performance (28). Instead, efficacy should be conceptualized as contingent on individual audience members; the performance, as he explains, is just one piece of a puzzle that contributes to a spectator’s larger understanding of a phenomenon (50).

Given the dearth of HIV-negative–related literature, evaluations of the exercise should specifically address whether or not the topics discussed in Negative have been adequately covered in previous HIV interventions. Given the data I have presented here, the performative intervention was successful insofar as it motivated several audience members to question how HIV is rhetorically constructed by the media; the performance also encouraged many people in the audience to consider how HIV continues to be culturally relevant. There are still several problems, including issues of gender representation and the ever-present danger of reifying some of the very cultural norms that I hope to call into question. But despite these problems, the performative intervention promotes important discussions about how HIV is articulated in the United States.

Talking about HIV is important business. I worry when I see more news reports on email viruses than about HIV. Ultimately, I fear that many communication and performance scholars, too, are beginning to see HIV/AIDS studies as passé and / or explored to their expectative satisfaction. When preparing for this essay, for example, I opened the index section of a two-part special issue of the Journal of Homosexuality that was re-released as a book titled Queer Theory and Communication: From Disciplining Queers to Queering the Discipline. Much to my chagrin, “AIDS” only had one listing in the index and “HIV” was not mentioned at all. In this article, I respond to the lack. By making these findings public, I hope to accomplish the following important tasks: First, documenting the problems I encountered when trying to conduct the intervention is a heuristically provocative exercise, because it demonstrates the ways that audience members can be turned into co-researchers when activist performances are examined through a more social scientific lens. Next, in my discussion of performative interventions, I aim to provide a more sophisticated language that connects performance, performativity, and activism. When applied to the current project, performance narratives about HIV and AIDS can be framed as activist endeavors that are worthy of public funding and community outreach.
Ragan Fox

Exploring HIV-negativity is a good way to reframe a virus that thrives on invisibility. The growing absence of HIV-related talk contributes to that invisibility, making everyone complicit in rising rates of seroconversion. Future studies in HIV-negativity should continue to extend an HIV-negative vernacular and look to how HIV impacts upon seronegative individuals. By framing the virus in new and innovative ways, the complacent will hopefully be inspired to consider how HIV-related issues affect their lives.

Ragan Fox is a PhD candidate in the Department of Human Communication at Arizona State University. He would like to thank Linda Park-Fuller, Jonathan Chambers, Ramón Rivera-Servera, and the reviewers for reading previous drafts of the essay. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the National Communication Association, Boston, 2005.

Notes

1. “Seroconversion” refers to the process by which HIV-negative individuals become HIV-positive.

2. The first performance of “Mary” took place in the class workshop; the second was staged at the Hugh Downs School’s annual “Cornucopia,” in which faculty members and graduate teaching associates performed for a crowd of roughly fifty undergraduate students.

3. In the interest of brevity, the monologues have been excerpted.

Works Cited


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