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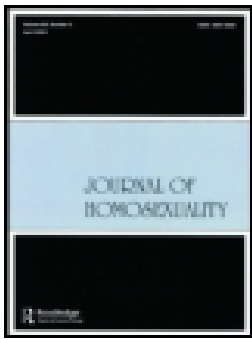
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Representational Resistance in Safer Sex Discourse

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Wear Your Hat: Representational Resistance in Safer Sex Discourse

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SUMMARY. Through an analysis of four posters used by the AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts, this article asks how representation can effectively promote safer sex practices. The images under investigation have different targeted groups—one is aimed at African-American men, one at Latinas, and two at gay men. Using a framework that connects definitions of sex in the respective communities with differences surrounding gender, race, and class, the imagery is unpacked in order to expose the effects of safer sex representation. This essay then argues that the degree to which ingrained definitions of sex are challenged constitutes a determining factor in the success or failure of safer sex representations.

More than a decade into the AIDS pandemic, the mass media still constructs the person with AIDS as the lone gay white male dying in a cold hospital room, an IV drug user isolated on the streets, or the *innocent* recipient of HIV-tainted blood. Such representations support the myth that immoral behavior is the genesis of this dis-

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ease, and as an extension of the myth, both conservative government officials and the religious right characterize safer sex as a thinly veiled effort by depraved perverts to promote not only promiscuity but also homosexuality. Hence, safer sex education is constructed as a threat to the moral fiber of the *general population*. Safer sex education should primarily be a public health issue; however, the discourse surrounding it transforms it into a political one as well. Safer sex education divulges that which has always been virtually unspoken in public and requires that we look at sexual practices and sexuality as discursive parts of identity.

If representation has a discursive function in and around hegemonic discourse, then the degree to which representation either affirms or denies this discourse is crucial. Given the mass media's construction of the "AIDS victim" as a pariah who is the tool through which sexual control and 'moral' behavior is mediated, safer sex education programs must resist such representations in order to reach their intended constituencies. That is to say that safer sex education must enact representational strategies that subvert hegemonic discourse and practices in order to effect changes in sexual attitudes and behavior.

The AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts has used many posters in their safer sex education campaigns, and I have chosen to focus on four that I found in public circulation during the early months of 1992. Through public dissemination, the AIDS Action Committee has created a space in which the interaction between poster and audience becomes an interpretive battleground and the ultimate site in which safer sex education will either succeed or fail.

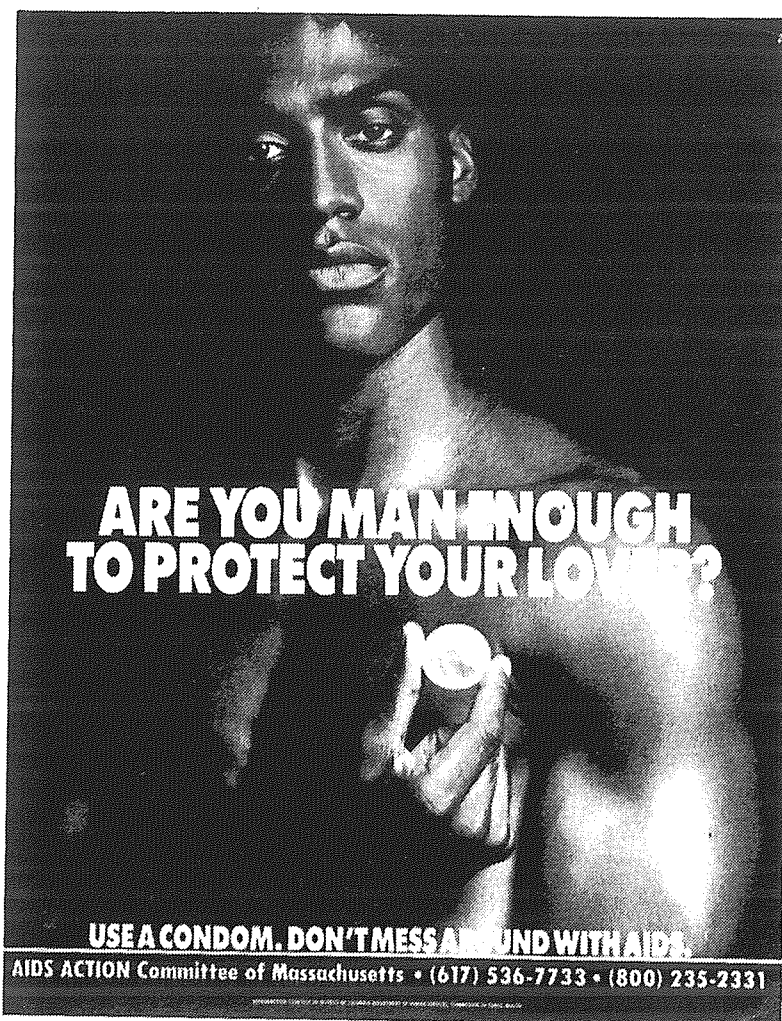
Safer sex education is currently available in video and pamphlet as well as poster form. I am interested in the photographic poster as a site of safer sex education as its message is immediate and authoritative. The poster's narrative strategy must function almost instantly and inscribe its message on the viewer as clearly as possible. Narrative strategies in video and pamphlets can function gradually, thus allowing more time for understanding. The fusion of photography and text is the representational device employed in these posters, and this gives them a direct connection to the 'real'—to lived experience. Christian Metz sees the differences between the social reception of film and photography as grounded in the perception of

the referent. While film is oriented toward an imaginary referent, photography is oriented toward the 'real.'¹ A 'real' referent gives the poster an authority unattainable in video. That is to say that narrative in film and video is grounded in telling of a story while narrative in photography is perceived as taken from lived experience.

The poster's public display is important as well. Safer sex videos and pamphlets can be viewed in private: the viewer can choose against operating the VCR or opening the pamphlet. In public, interaction between poster and audience is not necessarily that of choice. If it is seen, the viewer cannot turn away before interpretation has begun. Moreover, the safer sex poster pushes the private discourse of sex into the public domain. The viewer's interaction with this discourse becomes a public act. In a city renowned for its sexual conservatism, this is a critical point, for the public display of safer sex education posters in such a milieu transforms the very act of public display into an act of resistance against cultural and religious taboos surrounding sex.

I came across the first poster while riding on the subway (Figure 1). Although this poster was not produced by the AIDS Action Committee, they have appropriated it for their safer sex education campaign. It features a shirtless African-American male whose body is cropped just beneath his chest. He is holding a condom in his right hand. This man is highly masculinized—muscular, athletic, serious, and presumably sexually active. His masculinity is underscored by the emphasis placed on his bare, well-developed chest. He stares directly at the viewer, implicating her/him in a contest. The main text is burned into the image at his shoulders and reads, "Are you man enough to protect your lover?" The rest of the text, across the bottom of the poster, reads, "Use a Condom. Don't mess around with AIDS." It then gives the AIDS Action Committee's information hotline telephone numbers. The initiation of sexual activity has been coded as masculine in this image, and the protection of a 'lover' is the challenge put forth. This poster is aimed at young, urban, heterosexual African-American males as an attempt to change their sexual behavior through the suggestion that the act of protection, by the use of a condom, will make them 'real men.' However, the poster's message is convoluted, for it collides with

FIGURE 1. "Are you man enough to protect your lover?" Produced by the District of Columbia Department of Public Health. Reproduction permission granted to the AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts, Boston, 1991.



ingrained sexist behaviors rooted in the right of men (of any race) to have indiscriminate control over women's bodies.²

Considering the degree to which a man's control over a woman's body has been internalized in the heterosexual male psyche, it must be addressed in any representation of heterosexual sexuality. For many African-American men, such control is one of the few sites in which he can freely exhibit his masculinity. For centuries, Europeans have constructed an image of blacks rooted in intellectual and moral bankruptcy. In the nineteenth century scientists conflated this bankruptcy with myths concerning black physiognomy. Black men's penises as well as black women's labia were mythologized as being disproportionately larger than those of whites, thus becoming sites of sexual lasciviousness. The Blaxploitation movies of the 1970s, the black nudes of Robert Mapplethorpe, and episodes of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* highlighting interracial dating underscored the potency of black male sexuality. In the framework of this imagery, this poster is consistent in using the black male body as a site of heightened sexual prowess and, along with this imagery, shows that the European myth is alive and well today.

Moreover, many African-American men have internalized the myth of their sexual prowess as well. The movies of many young African-American male directors, particularly Spike Lee, position the indiscriminate sexual control of women's bodies as a mainstay in the construction of the 'real African-American man.' Lee's movie *School Daze* illustrates a rampant obsession with the role of sex as a crucial part of the construction of African-American masculinity through the virginity of Half-pint (played by Lee). In the film, Half-pint is berated for his virginity, which he steadfastly denies, and ultimately is 'deflowered' while his frat brothers listen outside the bedroom door. The women (and 'effeminate' men) in the film are routinely referred to as bitches and whores. The same labels are freely used in John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* as well. Man's control of woman lies not only in the sexual sphere but permeates much of established sexist dogma, resulting in the conflation of the sites of control, including the sexual, and the very construction of masculinity itself.

The poster's complicity with sexist discourse in the African-American community makes its narrative strategy problematic. The

question, "Are you man enough to protect your lover?" is a mixed message. While it appeals to African-American constructions of masculinity through its dominating rhetoric, that same rhetoric attempts to unhinge one of the basic parts of masculine construction—unrestrictive intercourse. The initiation of sex in our culture has habitually been coded as masculine, but it has been the woman's responsibility to take precautions. Although the poster attempts to displace this responsibility from women to men, its narrative strategy lacks the proper tools to successfully do so.

As the poster indeed is rooted in sexual practices, the practices themselves are left unquestioned. Its simplistic appeal to condom use reinforces the notion that penetration is the ultimate goal of the sexual encounter. Safer sex should be characterized as an activity rife with erotic possibilities.³ Unless the very definitions of sex in the lives of individuals are challenged, posters such as this stand little chance of effecting change in sexual behavior, and amount to nothing more than restrictions on sexual behavior.

If posters in the United States or Britain aimed at heterosexuals ignore the erotic possibilities of sex, then in pushing the condom, whom should they address? Does it make sense to target a heterosexual male population of any race if it views 'real sex' as unrestrictive penetration? This poster was originally produced by the District of Columbia Department of Public Health, which accounts for the simple advocating of condom use. But again, whom should such posters target? In regards to this poster, is it effective to play on the construction of heterosexual masculinity though the implied restriction of that which, for many, is the ultimate act of masculinity? Or should it have addressed the woman as a means of empowering her in a male dominated activity? This is problematic as well. Dooley Worth writes,

The dependence on male validation can be complicated by a shortage of males in many black communities . . . A shortage of black males can mean that "many black women have to take love on male terms," a situation that supports sexual exploitation of black women.⁴

She adds, "AIDS education that promotes 'safer sex' may threaten behavior patterns that black women link with their survival."⁵

While Worth's statement does not apply to all African-American women, it does show that the attempt to change sexual behavior through simply advocating condom use is inadequate. In order to effectively change behavior, it is vital to understand the significations of sex in a given community. In heterosexual safer sex education posters in the United States, this problem has not been sufficiently addressed. In a climate of sexual repression, it is not likely to happen under the governmental auspices. Communities need to find a radical way to explore sexualities as a means of understanding their constructions in order to effectively change behavior. This has been done in much safer sex education for gay men. In other communities, signification of safer sex can only be effective if it has the input of the respective community.

I was on the subway about a week after I first saw this poster and read, "Are you man enough to protect your lover?" Scrawled in black ink under the question was the response, "What about protecting yourself?" When protection has been addressed in all the other posters I have seen, it was always directed at protecting yourself *and* your sexual partner. In this specific poster, the omission of the self has disastrous implications. In not having to protect himself, is this man already infected? Even if the man *is* HIV-positive, he has to protect himself, for repeated exposure to the virus will certainly contribute to the deterioration of his health. The male (or female) viewer could decide that the represented man is HIV-positive, and since he could not possibly be (or may not know), he does not need to protect his lover; thus the message is negated.

The act of writing on the poster was a radical one, showing the power of representation and its connection to the construction of identity. The poster's text left a hole through which many meanings could be produced. Can the lover be either male or female? From my position, I see it as a female lover, but it does illustrate that the range of possible readings is out of control. Furthermore, the white type across the man's chest is reminiscent of the brandings that slaves would receive as punishment from their masters. Clarence Thomas might call it a high-tech lynching. As such, any possible trace of eroticism is blocked. In a culture where young African-American males are more likely either to go to jail or to die young than members of any other group, is this man's life not valuable

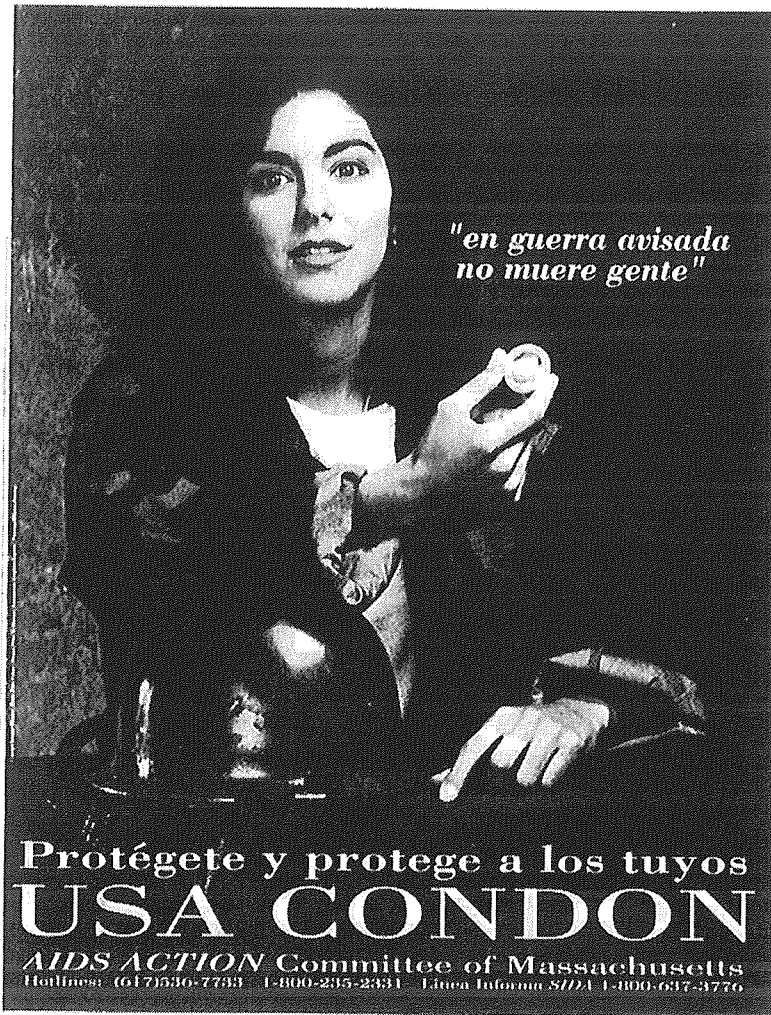
enough to protect? If AIDS doesn't get him, a bullet certainly will. The African-American male is ultimately represented as a threat to society, thus keeping racist domination intact. However, he is branded, thus keeping that threat at bay.

Another safer sex poster, also displayed in the subway, at AIDS service organizations, and community health centers features a Latina in combat gear holding a condom in her right hand (Figure 2). She looks directly at the viewer. The text beside her reads, "en guerra avisada no muere gente" ("Forewarned is forearmed"). This text, in italic type and quotation marks, combined with the woman's stare signifies that she is directly addressing the viewer and that she has an independent voice. The text across the bottom of the poster reads, "Protégete y protege a los tuyos: usa condom" ("Protect yourself and your loved ones: use a condom") and includes information hotline numbers in both Spanish and English.

This poster and "are you man enough" function similarly in that they attempt to change sexual behavior in unerotic ways; however, the similarities end there. This poster is aimed at convincing Latinas to use a condom through empowerment. The attempt to empower women in this context is difficult, given culturally determined roles pertaining to sex and gender in Latino communities and widely divergent rates of acculturation for Latinos.

According to Worth, *machismo* is involved in the exaggerated importance of masculinity, instilled in young boys as part of their socialization. Domination is part of the Latino's masculinity and an important factor in the development of *machismo*. *Marianismo* is the concept through which girls are raised to be subservient, implying inferiority and weakness.⁶ Catholicism is another issue that problematizes attempts to encourage condom use. The Catholic Church is adamantly opposed to the use of birth control, and its teachings promote male dominance.⁷ Ernesto de la Vega has noted that most Latinas are expected to fulfill a role described by Latina feminists as "bordering on the 'culturally schizophrenic': they have to be virginal, but seductive; fragile, but strong, privately wise but publicly humble."⁸ Taking these factors under consideration, simply telling a Latina that she has the power to insist on condom use for the protection of herself and her partner against HIV infection

FIGURE 2. "Protégete y protege a los tuyos." Produced by the AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts, Boston, 1991.



could possibly be futile, for such an action could put the Latina at odds with both her community and her church.

Furthermore, Latinas are bombarded not only by images and prescribed gender roles in their own communities, but by the dominant culture as well. Such an issue further complicates an already existent "cultural schizophrenia." De la Vega notes that much of Latino popular entertainment frequently constructs the Latina as the site that "frequently abounds with voluptuousness and sexually enticing [starlets]." ⁹ At the same time they are subject to the advertising media's construction of women (of all races) as sexual objects used to sell products ranging from cigarettes to undergarments.

This poster has to address the female role in sex very carefully, and it does so by stressing survival over sex, and the manner in which this is done is illuminating, for it serves to shed light on the connection between Latinas and sex roles; moreover, it addresses the connection between Latinas and the family. The poster indeed stresses the condom, and, for the Latina whose internalized sex role is passive, this is difficult. In taking the active role in negotiating condom use during sexual intercourse, the Latina is placed in direct conflict with the culturally determined roles of *machismo* and *marianismo*. Moreover such a role could put her at risk of physical or emotional abuse by her male partner.

This creates an interesting text, for in attempting to change sexual behavior in Latinas, the poster ties condom use to the "protection of yourself and your loved ones" ("Protégete y protege a los tuyos"). Sexual intercourse is attached not only to the two participants but also loved ones (family, friends, community, etc.); thus sexual intercourse, for the Latina, is inscribed with issues centering on caregiving, an important aspect of ingrained feminine roles in Latino communities. As de la Vega notes, Latinas often put the welfare of their families ahead of their own. ¹⁰ Although de la Vega's observation sheds knowledge on this aspect of the feminine role in Latino cultures, the poster, through saying "loved ones" as opposed to "family," creates a space in which multiple interpretations of family can be made. If Latinas are invariably cast as virgins until they are wed, then this poster, through the absence of a wedding band on the model's left hand, emphasizes the space for alternative families or loved ones. Moreover, the model's combat gear dis-

places her from the binary of the good woman/bad woman. As the combat gear displaces the Latina from the polarity of good and bad, it also signifies possible change in attitudes pertaining to established sexual roles and the place of sexuality in the construction of identity. Consequently, the use of a condom becomes a site of survival through the subversion of a deeply ingrained role.

In focusing on empowerment as a means of liberation and survival, this poster functions as a site of resistance to culturally determined norms in the Latina community. By connecting issues of the protection of loved ones to sexual intercourse, the poster radically alters the perception of established gender and sex roles by implicating them in, as Gayatri Spivak writes, *bricolage*. For Spivak, *bricolage* is the "re-constellation" of cultural items by wrenching them out of their assigned function, and this is a necessary part of "radical proto-deconstructive cultural practice."¹¹ Worth writes, "If they (women of color) are to be supported to undertake behavior changes, their "otherness" has to be diminished, and behavior changes must be linked to the attitudes and beliefs that support their concepts of cultural and economic survival."¹² By displacing the signification of the condom from a tool restricting male sexual pleasure to survival through the protection of loved ones, this poster is a first step towards the achievement of such a goal, for while it problematizes ingrained sexual roles, it affirms the importance of the Latina's role as it pertains to those around her.

While heterosexual AIDS education materials are aimed primarily at women thought to be at risk through sexual activity and/or IV drug use, gay AIDS education is primarily aimed at gay men and centers around changing sexual behavior through modifying sexual practices. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of this enterprise has been influencing gay men to change unsafe practices while simultaneously positing safer sex as erotic and satisfying. In a community that holds sexuality as its common ground, a goal of current safer sex education has been the attempt to celebrate gay male sexuality while teaching gay men to behave in ways that will reduce their risk of HIV infection. Given a society which has experienced a profound resurgence of conservatism in the past twelve years, the creation of safer sex education that celebrates sex and gay male

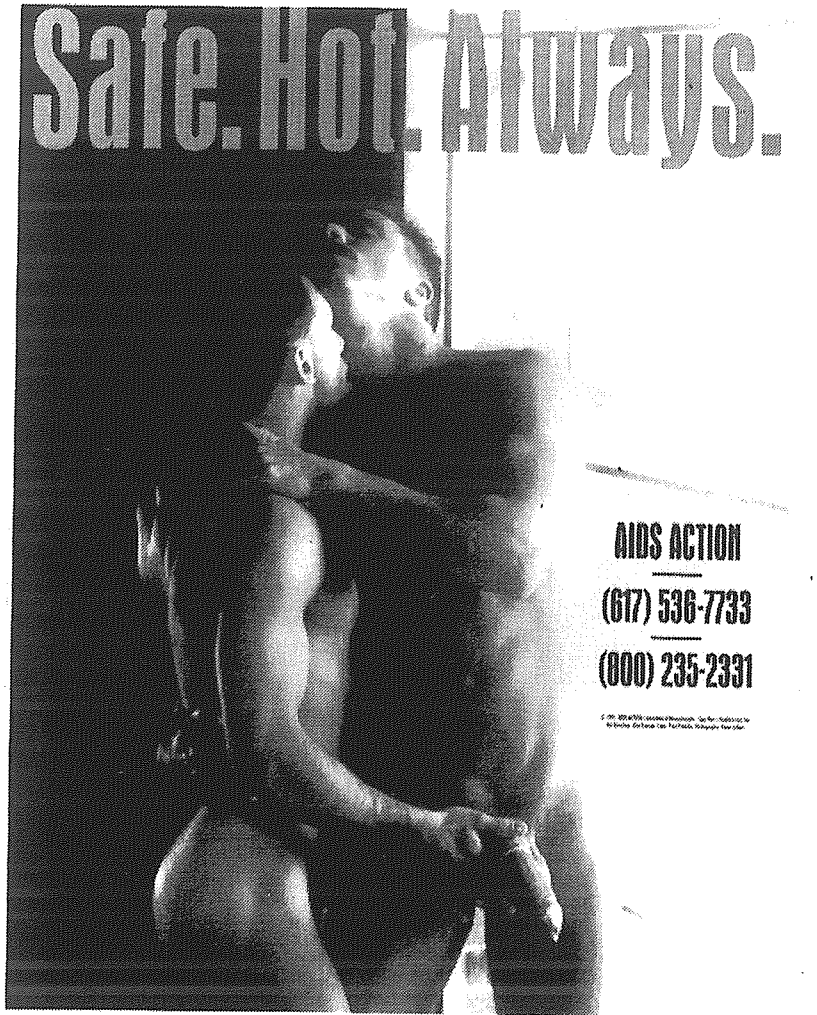
sexuality is not only a formidable task, but also a means of radical cultural resistance.

Early safer sex practice aimed at gay men stressed the reduction of sexual contacts and monogamy as effective means of lowering one's risk of HIV infection. These efforts were seen by many in gay communities as restrictive and judgmental. Cindy Patton writes that many gay communities, especially Boston, went into periods of sexual austerity in response to the AIDS crisis.¹³ Consequently, it became imperative to educate gay men that specific sexual acts were unsafe, not the sexual act itself.

I saw the following poster in a community health center in Boston. It is a photograph of two nude, nautalized, and highly masculine gay white males having sex (Figure 3). The place could be anywhere, as the background is simply a wall and window. The men are having sex next to the window. One of them is frontally exposed sporting an erect, condom-clad penis. The text across the top of the poster reads, "Safe. Hot. Always." AIDS Action information hotline telephone numbers are located to the right of the couple. The scene is derived from gay pornography and is erotically charged, and its attempt is to yield a positive depiction of gay male desire. As in pornographic video and magazines, the viewer is implicated as a voyeur. In such a framework, the poster is designed to tap into the 'vernacular' created by gay pornography. The ultimate goal is to inscribe safer sex into the pornographic modes of representation. If we, as gay men, have internalized a pornographic vernacular, then the inscription of safer sex onto this vocabulary can possibly normalize it as well.

Do we see the actors in pornography as objects of desire, or do we want to *be* them? As objects of desire, we want to be in the scene, not as a voyeur, but as a participant. Can we ever have them? Do we want them? Can we be them? The interpretation of the poster for those who look at it from these standpoints then becomes dependent on the viewer's relationship of himself (I am assuming a male viewer here) to either the object desired or the surrogate 'self'. That raises questions of his self-esteem vis-à-vis the body beautiful, translating into interpretations centering on whether he could ever participate in such a scenario. If he cannot participate, he will walk away, and the safer sex message will be lost.

FIGURE 3. "Safe. Hot. Always." Produced and exhibited by the AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts and Gay Men's Health Crisis, Inc., New York City, 1991.



If the viewer sees the models in the poster in terms of their roles in the sexual practices, then, the players become less important. The act, the interaction, and the condom-capped penis become the center of his interpretation. Scopophilia can then become action with a partner of his own choosing. In this scenario, the safer sex message takes precedence over the actors, and gives the poster a greater chance of succeeding in its goals.

Although the image is dependent on and informed by a pornographic vernacular, the pose is not the standard "bump and grind" image so prevalent in the medium. The pose suggests that much more is going on than sucking and fucking. The man on the left is about to kiss (or bite) the neck of his partner, alluding more to erotic possibilities than just a wild fuck fest. The positioning of a hand at the base of the other's penis further emphasizes eroticism and signifies the condom as part of the experience. The condom overtly signifies the safety of the encounter without restriction. The window next to the couple removes the encounter out of the private sphere. On one level, the window exposes fantasies surrounding exhibitionism. On another, it takes gay male sexuality out of the closet. By using these representational devices, the poster attempts both to celebrate gay male sexuality and to convince the viewer that the sexual act in itself does not lead to HIV infection. The poster also opens up interpretive options in sexual practice. The viewer cannot be certain that anal penetration will be the end result of the sexual encounter.

On one level, the poster directly confronts sexual conservatism and homophobia. On another, its attachment to pornography, signified by the indefinite space created by both the window and the orange-yellow light that bathes the couple, perpetuates the mythical desire to have, be had by, or to be one of the nautalized studs in the scene. While it attempts to affirm gay male sexuality, it reinscribes a pervasive gay male obsession with masculinity, thus producing a narrow space in which the viewer must position himself.

While the evocation of a pornographic vernacular can be a valuable tool in safer sex education aimed at gay men, it assumes that all gay men are comfortable with it. As such, the poster's success depends on the viewer's perception of pornography as an affirmation of sexual practice and sexuality. While it may be exciting for

some to be implicated as a voyeur in an indefinite space of sexual activity, others may find it disconcerting. If this is the case, these viewers will see this poster in the same way they see pornography. Hence, the poster, for them, becomes not an affirmation of gay male sexuality but a degradation of it.

Safe Company is a group sponsored by the AIDS Action Committee and is committed to reducing HIV infection through safer sex education. Its poster features a group of six gay white men (Figure 4). Four of them sexually engage the fifth, who has just opened his apartment door. The sixth, at the far right-hand side of the poster, is staring directly at the viewer and holds a tool box brimming with condoms, a jock strap, and other objects that can be invoked in safer sex practice. The expressions and positions of the figures stress both eroticism and play, fusing the two. The poster attempts to construct safer sex as communal: something that is enjoyable and fun. The staring figure implicates the viewer into the scene, not as a voyeur, but as a potential participant. The text across the top of the poster reads, "SAFE COMPANY. We're putting the sex back into safer sex." The group's telephone number is included as well.

In promoting safer sex in such a supportive manner, the poster attempts to change attitudes about safer sex practice and tries to persuade the viewer to call Safe Company for information. The poster's portrayal of safer sex is an attempt to affirm the identity of the gay male community. While the poster intends to represent these six men as if they are on the verge of some wild safer sex encounter, the narrative suggests many different social engagements, say a Tupperware party. The only parts of the poster that directly signify sex are the text, "We're putting the sex back into safer sex," and the 'toolbox' of 'toys'. In this framework, sex is strangely mapped onto that which would ordinarily be a non-sexual social engagement.

One of the goals of the poster is the displacement of safer sex from the typically "hot and horny" couple to the realm of socialized activity, thus expanding its possibilities. The allusion to socialized activity also signifies that there is peer support for safer sex practices. However, the poster's narrative strategy is ambiguous. While the poster attempts to normalize safer sex, its message is blurred. The position of the staring figure is curious as well. He is the only figure in the scene with a mustache, and it seems as though

FIGURE 4. "Safe Company." Produced by the AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts, Boston, 1989.



AIDS ACTION Committee, Safe Company: (617) 437-6200 x475.

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he is strangely out of place in this scenario. His presence can be interpreted as an allusion to the bearded clone of the 1970s, which, for many gay men, was the apex of sexual freedom. Combined with his possession of the toolbox, full of condoms, jock straps, and presumably other 'toys', the staring figure becomes the site of the poster that most directly addresses the possibility of sex in the tableau. The toolbox de-emphasizes the role of the condom in safer sex and suggests that there are other ways to enjoy it as well. This is no small detail, for the displacement of the condom serves to "de-heterosexualize" sex. Intercourse may or may not be implicated, but there are other options in sexual activity that are enjoyable and exciting as ends in themselves. In other words, the poster, through its linkage of the 1970s and safer sex, attempts to construct safer sex as sexual freedom. In this context, sexual freedom connotes not only the right to practice sex but also to redefine its meanings.

While Safe Company's poster functions as resistance through its sex-positive message, it supports an already established representation of the 'gay community.' The poster shows six 'straight acting and appearing,' gay white men in an apartment hallway, typically found in Boston's gentrified South End. The South End, while having residents of various races and classes, is perceived by many as "the middle-class, gay white male ghetto." The poster is also rife with class coding—the clothing of the figures, particularly the expensive watch worn by one of them. Taking these factors under consideration, the celebration of the poster's gay male sexuality becomes the celebration of gay, white, middle-class male sexuality, hence the poster's intended audience becomes gay, white, middle-class men. As such, gay men of color are rendered invisible. One could say the same thing of the "Safe. Hot. Always." poster, but there is a difference. Although "Safe. Hot. Always." reinforces ingrained ideas of the desirability of white masculine beauty, it implicates the viewer as voyeur, thus addressing the construction of sexual desire. Safe Company's poster implicates the viewer as a possible participant in the scene. Considering both class coding and the invisibility of gay men of color, the poster implicitly reads, "middle-class whites only," supporting Boston's prevailing race and class divisions. The "Safe. Hot. Always." poster is able to avoid direct class inscription through nudity and the absence of a

concrete background. One of the men has a tattoo, a possible working-class signifier, on his chest: his partner is classless. Nudity becomes a source of class leveling, thus enlarging a possible audience. While Safe Company attempts with educate all gay men, its poster's complicity with the 'Ken syndrome' sabotages such a goal. In order to effectively reach gay men of color and those who are not middle-class, it is critical that they be conscious of these differences in all of their efforts. Obviously, every poster will not reach everyone, but in the context of Safe Company's poster, a wider audience would have been relatively easy to reach through a change in background and class coding and the inclusion of gay men of color. People identify with imagery, and false homogeneity may fail to educate some of those who desperately need it.

The differences between heterosexual and gay male representations in the four posters are striking and raise questions concerning representation as opposed to self-representation. Reading the posters yields the difficulty in representation with respect to cultural, racial, class, and gender differences. How do you effectively educate an audience through representation while avoiding the pitfalls of stereotyping and false homogeneity? Should we always insist on self-representation? How does our position in society affect our view of others?

The AIDS Action Committee was formed by a group of gay white men in response to the AIDS epidemic in 1983 and their primary focus was on the most affected group at the time—gay white men. As the epidemic has changed, the faces of AIDS have changed as well. Now, the committee serves gay men and lesbians of all colors, and heterosexuals as well. While they are well equipped to work in the white gay male community, they are not as well equipped to work with women, IV drug users, or communities of color.

The gay education posters show resistance to marginalization, and the strength of resistance comes from the position of the producers. The posters were created for people in the margins by those in the same position. Operating in such a manner is powerful, for it leads to the questioning of ingrained roles and ideas concerning gay male sexuality. Through self representation, gay men are deconstructing heterosexist ideas of gay male sexuality, thus destabilizing the dominating structure's control of representation. In the context

of the two gay posters, safer sex is fun, erotic, and celebrated and deconstructs the idea of sex, particularly gay male sex, as a death wish. From the margin, the AIDS Action Committee is able to confront AIDS rhetoric disseminated by the dominant structure through showing that certain unprotected sexual practices are dangerous, not sex itself.¹⁴ As many AIDS activists point out, pushing condom use is not enough in safer sex education, and the gay posters are responding through their attention to sexual practices. The condom is part of these new significations, but not the only part. However, the two posters also show the need for gay men to look at our own stereotypes concerning our sexual desire and sexuality. While we may be resisting the heterosexist matrix, we are rendering many of our own invisible.

Unfortunately, the same is not true in the heterosexual posters. By attempting to change sexual behavior by insisting on condom use, there is the risk that such an attempt will fail, for in the minds of many heterosexual men, condoms are restrictive. Restricting behavior only pushes it underground. As in gay AIDS education, there must be dialogue about the conventions of sex in different cultures, and strict attention must be paid to divergent sexual attitudes. Appealing to an African-American's masculinity is not enough; furthermore, the manner in which the "Are you man enough to protect your lover?" negates itself by calling for the use of condoms, a characteristically unmasculine behavior, in a hyper-masculine site. It is almost impossible to change sexual behavior without knowledge of sexual roles and practices inherent in the targeted community. The most effective means of gaining such knowledge is working from a space that includes the involvement of people from those targeted communities.

Furthermore, there is a compelling need to understand that sexuality is inseparable from the rest of identity. The "Protégete y protege a los tuyos" poster succeeds in using representation to deconstruct and reconstruct Latino concepts concerning the relationship between established sex/gender roles and empowerment. In attaching sexuality to other parts of identity, the poster enables its viewer to think differently about identity and its construction. This deconstruction and reconstruction was enabled through dialogue between the poster's producers and Latinas and shows how this exchange

can have a positive effect in representation and the construction of identity. Ultimately, the poster becomes a site of resistance to the dominating structure. Continuing in such a vein will allow for the promotion of more imagery—posters, video, pamphlets, etc.—that will effectively teach people that safer sex is not restrictive, but saves lives.

NOTES

This essay is dedicated to Joseph Thompson, who died of illnesses associated with AIDS in September 1990. Norman Bryson read earlier versions of this essay, and the author wishes to thank him for his invaluable criticism and suggestions. The author is grateful also to Elizabeth Mansfield and Andrés Zervigon for their astute comments and encouragement.

1. Christian Metz, "Photography and Fetishism," in *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), 156.

2. For a discussion of sexism as it pertains to the control of women's bodies, see bell hooks, "Reflections on Race and Sex," in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 57-64.

3. Simon Watney, "Photography and AIDS," in *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, 185.

4. Dooley Worth, "Minority Women and AIDS: Culture, Race, and Gender," in Douglas A. Feldman, ed., *Culture and AIDS* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), 123.

5. *Ibid.*, 125.

6. *Ibid.*, 116.

7. *Ibid.*, 129. Worth cites a study by Carmen Medina ("Latino Culture and Sex Education," SIECUS Report, January/February 1987, vol. 15:3, 1) which states that "Approximately 85 percent of Latinos are nominally Catholic."

8. Ernesto de la Vega, "Considerations for Reaching the Latino Population," SIECUS Report, February/March 1990, vol. 18:3, 2.

9. *Ibid.*, 2.

10. *Ibid.*, 3.

11. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 170.

12. Dooley Worth, "Minority Women and AIDS: Culture, Race, and Gender," 127.

13. Cindy Patton, "Safe Sex and the Pornographic Vernacular," in *Bad Object-Choices*, ed., *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 33-34 (footnote no. 3).

14. Simon Watney, "Photography and AIDS," 184. Watney writes, "Unfortunately but revealingly the dominant AIDS agenda continues to imply that it is sex *as such* which is dangerous, rather than particular forms of unprotected sexual behavior, especially fucking."