

# RAQUEL COHEN

---

## **Fucking with(in) Football**

### **Lil Nas X as an AIDS Activist**

#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines Lil Nas X's commentary on the AIDS epidemic through his music video for "THAT'S WHAT I WANT." Lil Nas X channels methods developed at the onset of this health crisis to refocus the cultural conversation around AIDS to the Black gay male community. This essay situates Lil Nas X's music video within the racial and sexual dynamics that tragically informed a poor institutional response to HIV/AIDS from the government. This project also studies the symbolism embedded into the video through Lil Nas X's aesthetic choices related to costuming and scenery. Both a historical and artistic lens frame an analysis of queering tropes traditionally associated with heterosexuality.

#### **KEYWORDS**

Lil Nas X; AIDS epidemic; Queerness; Condom usage; Racism in america; Men's health

#### **BIO**

Raquel Cohen graduated from Washington University in St. Louis with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology. Raquel also completed a concentrated minor in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Raquel's academic background coupled with her appreciation for popular culture culminated in writing a piece about Lil Nas X. Raquel is currently a Supportive Services Advocate for DC SAFE, an organization that empowers and assists survivors of domestic violence.



**En-Gender!**

Working Paper Series  
Volume 6  
Issue 2

ISSN: 2700-1415

Commentary by  
Ashley Brown

Editor: Ashley Brown  
Reviewers: Andrew Porter,  
Ashley Brown  
Layout and Publishing:  
Jessica A. Albrecht

To cite this article:

Cohen, Raquel: 'Fucking with(in) Football. Lil Nas X as an AIDS Activist', En-Gender! 6:2 (2023), 18-28.

## **Fucking with(in) Football**

### **Lil Nas X as an AIDS Activist**

---

*by Raquel Cohen*

Lil Nas X emerged as a popstar after his debut hit “Old Town Road” showcased his genre-bending talents. As both a rapper and singer, Lil Nas X blurs boundaries often delineated for artists. Likewise, Lil Nas X complicates stereotypes surrounding masculinity by incorporating his sexuality into his work. Lil Nas X has become a queer icon, writing songs about his love for men and producing music videos that showcase same-sex male intimacy. The video for his song “THAT’S WHAT I WANT” is powerful in demonstrating how Lil Nas X eroticizes and queers tropes associated with traditional heterosexual manhood, namely condoms and football gear, to raise awareness for HIV prevention among Black queer men. To this end, Lil Nas X uses his platform to not only destigmatize queerness, but also to highlight HIV prevention through safer sex. Alongside being a musician, the question remains: is Lil Nas X also a sexual health activist?

Historically, health in the United States has been stratified by race. The AIDS crisis is no different, with the institutional response by the American government exposing its indifference to the value of Black lives as the epidemic shifted from affecting predominantly white men to men of color – “the prevalence rates for African Americans is nearly eight times greater than for whites”<sup>1</sup>. Unequivocally, “the racial blackness of the US AIDS epidemic has been produced not by the behaviors of African Americans but by conditions of structured, racist domination”<sup>2</sup>. Scholar Adam Geary exposes how individual behaviors cannot explain the high rates of HIV found in Black communities in the United States; instead, one must look at how “Black people individually and collectively suffer kinds of increased malnutrition, concurrent infection, and overall

---

<sup>1</sup> Adam Geary, “Rethinking AIDS in Black America,” in *Anti-Black Racism and the AIDS Epidemic: State Intimacies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

immiseration that lend toward increased susceptibility to HIV infection”<sup>3</sup>. In other words, preexisting health conditions accelerate the speed and spread of viruses within (already) vulnerable communities<sup>4</sup>. By ignoring this social reality created by public health policies, the government in turn blames Black Americans for their “deviant” behaviors that contribute to HIV prevalence in their communities. In essence, “analyzing what people do [...] was and continues to be a way of *not* talking about or investigating the conditions under which people live and are made vulnerable to disease”<sup>5</sup>. Neither queerness nor Blackness are biological determinants that cause HIV infection, but the poorer quality of life imposed on these marginalized individuals reveals the real reason there are such high levels of AIDS in the United States. Consequently, this epidemic has uncovered foundational inequities that plague the nation.

Since the time of slavery, Black Americans have been mistreated and undertreated in regard to their health. Scientific racism has been embedded in health care as a weapon of white supremacy<sup>6</sup>, deeming Black lives disposable<sup>7</sup>. Treatments and interventions often prioritize reaching white communities first, leaving the rest of America to fend off disease without institutional support<sup>8</sup>. This historic dynamic initiated “the shifting demographics of the AIDS epidemic away from [...] white men to poorer communities of color”<sup>9</sup>. In terms of risk for HIV “in the United States of America, we’re talking to predominantly Black gay men”<sup>10</sup>. In fact,

of the approximately 1.2 million people in the United States living with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), nearly half (46%) are black as are nearly half of all people newly infected with HIV each year, even though African Americans account for only 12% of the total US population.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Brier and Matthew Wizinsky, “Worlds of Signification: Power and Subjectivity in Global AIDS Posters,” in *Up Against the Wall: Art, Activism and the AIDS Poster*, ed. Donald Albrecht and Jessica Lacher-Feldman (Rochester: RIT Press, 2021), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Zinzi D. Bailey et. al. “Structural racism and health inequities in the USA: evidence and interventions.” *Lancet* 389 (2017): 1454.

<sup>7</sup> Evelyn M. Hammonds and Susan M. Reverby, “Toward a Historically Informed Analysis of Racial Health Disparities Since 1619.” *American Journal of Public Health* 109, no. 10 (2019): 1348.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 1348-1349.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Escoffier, “The Invention of Safer Sex: Vernacular Knowledge, Gay Politics and HIV Prevention,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 43 (1998): 25.

<sup>10</sup> *Sex in an Epidemic*, directed by Jean Carlomusto (2010; New York: Outcast Films).

<sup>11</sup> Adam Geary, “Rethinking AIDS in Black America,” in *Anti-Black Racism and the AIDS Epidemic: State Intimacies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1.

It is clear that “H.I.V.-AIDS becomes the physical health marker of a range of other kinds of marginalization and injustice”<sup>12</sup>. Particularly, racism during the research process for testing antiretroviral drugs and the subsequent inaccessible distribution of this medication confined HIV from the larger gay community to one of its subsets: the Black gay male community. The prevalence of HIV in the United States is obscured and overshadowed as it is institutionally distanced from white citizens.

During the height of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, informational sex videos were distributed by community organizations so as to spread and center shared vernacular knowledge around the disease. Among the influential videos of this type, one released by the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) communicated to viewers that “in the face of this crisis, sex can remain fun, creative, satisfying, and safe”<sup>13</sup>. On screen, gay men are shown engaging in a range of sexual activities and asking for advice from their peers. One consistent reminder emphasized for the characters and audience is “don’t exchange body fluids. That means no sucking, no rimming, no fucking without a condom”<sup>14</sup>. This video about condoms and the importance of safer sex led some men to “make sure we had condoms in the living room, in the bedroom, in the kitchen, on the toilet [...] it was kind of to reinforce the idea that if [sex] was gonna happen, condoms were always readily available”<sup>15</sup>. The normalizing nature of this work was successful because it was entrenched in the experiences of the gay male community. Overall, “safe sex made promiscuity redundant as a target of hygienic strategies, promoting instead condoms, alternate sexual activities and explicit community education as effective measures”<sup>16</sup>. The safe sex framework resisted pathologizing homosexuality by focusing on AIDS itself, not male-to-male sex. The appeal of the condom-use campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s contributed to “many epidemiological studies show[ing] that gay men, at least those white gay men who were initially diagnosed with the disease and who constituted the dominant social group of the organized gay male community, effectively modified their sexual behavior”<sup>17</sup>. This observation fails to account for the practices of non-white gay men, which has drastic implications for their safety since Black men are currently most likely to contract HIV. Also, “according to the Centre for Disease Control (CDC, 2003), the number of gay men who reported not using condoms in combination with multiple anonymous partners rose from

---

<sup>12</sup> *Sex in an Epidemic*, directed by Jean Carlomusto (2010; New York: Outcast Films).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Kane Race, “The use of pleasure in harm reduction: Perspectives from the History of Sexuality,” *International Journal of Drug Policy* (2007): 5.

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey Escoffier, “The Invention of Safer Sex: Vernacular Knowledge, Gay Politics and HIV Prevention,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 43 (1998): 23.

24% to 45% between 1994 and 1999”<sup>18</sup>. This background, and the subsequent rise of this practice in the 2000s<sup>19</sup>, signals the importance of modern endorsements of condom use. However, public health measures often disregard the value of safer sex practices by positing abstinence as the ultimate method of controlling HIV and its “at-risk” populations – queer people and Black people. In many ways, “the disease has laid bare a complex set of structural inequalities that were always about relationships”<sup>20</sup>. The United States’ homophobia and racism, rooted in its colonial past and present, led to early governmental messaging about AIDS that faulted Africa for the disease. The continent was seen as the “place where AIDS began”<sup>21</sup> and flourished, with explanations concluding that the lack of public health infrastructure and poverty contributed to the epidemic<sup>22</sup>. Even though those same characteristics apply to the United States, this truth was obfuscated in order to scapegoat Black bodies. This cultural framework still exists today, with racist depictions of hypersexuality and sexual deviance associated with Black Americans.

While the United States ignores the spread of HIV throughout Black communities primarily, I would argue that Lil Nas X is drawing on historical methods of HIV intervention with his art. “THAT’S WHAT I WANT” relies on the tool of publicizing condom usage so as to educate and empower the gay male community. With his voice and status, Lil Nas X amplifies a message around safety by eroticizing condom use for Black gay men. The weight of Lil Nas X’s campaign grows when recognized alongside his own membership in this ostracized community. In this way, Lil Nas X aims to equip Black gay men with the knowledge they need to protect their health. Lil Nas X critically employs his fame to advocate for sexual safety among those that have historically been ignored within HIV health initiatives and condom use campaigns.

Instead of advancing abstinence, Lil Nas X normalizes condom usage as a step for men having sex with other men. By using a condom during sex, Lil Nas X creates a model for his fans to practice this behavior. Given this context, Lil Nas X can be seen continuing past trends within the queer community of safe sex advocacy. Rather than simply advertise condom usage for gay men in the video for “THAT’S WHAT I WANT,” Lil Nas X queers and eroticizes this straight symbol. Condoms are often seen as a sexual instrument confined to penetrative, heterosexual sex that are needed in order to prevent pregnancy. As it stands, “women are routinely charged with the

---

<sup>18</sup> Dave Holmes et. al, “Raw Sex as Limit Experience: A Foucauldian Analysis of Unsafe Anal Sex between Men,” *Social Theory & Health* 4 (2006): 323.

<sup>19</sup> Tim Dean, “Breeding Culture: Barebacking, Bugchasing, Giftgiving.” *Massachusetts Review* 49, no. 1-2 (2008): 80-94.

<sup>20</sup> Jennifer Brier and Matthew Wizinsky, “Worlds of Signification: Power and Subjectivity in Global AIDS Posters,” in *Up Against the Wall: Art, Activism and the AIDS Poster*, ed. Donald Albrecht and Jessica Lacher-Feldman (Rochester: RIT Press, 2021), 10.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

responsibility for protecting both their own health and that of their male sexual partners by insisting on the use of condoms”<sup>23</sup>. Since condoms are associated with mitigating the risk of fertilization and necessitate advocacy on the part of a woman, condoms have been isolated from the gay community. Lil Nas X shifts this lens by displaying the function of condoms within the act of male-to-male sex. Thus, Lil Nas X resists the heteronormative associations surrounding condoms by advocating for gay male health. This point of departure from mainstream discourses about sexuality is significant since Lil Nas X is expanding safer sex to include gay men. Further, Lil Nas X presents condoms as erotic and sensual. In the start of this music video, Lil Nas X and another football player are alone in a locker room together<sup>24</sup>. The two begin to kiss against a row of lockers and after a shot of their clothes strewn across the floor, the camera pans to a close-up of Lil Nas X ripping a condom wrapper open with his teeth<sup>25</sup>. While doing so, brand flashes as brightly as the silver packaging<sup>26</sup>. Durex takes center stage during this shot, subduing the silver grills Lil Nas X bears to the audience through this sexual stunt<sup>27</sup>. It is possible that this prominence is for publicity, but the product placement may also be intended to offer a realistic reference for those who will follow this message and use condoms. Immediately after this clip, the video shows the two men having sex in the locker room’s communal shower against a frosted pane<sup>28</sup>. Lil Nas X evokes the strategy of GMHC’s video by creating “a visually erotic tape, eroticizing condom use”<sup>29</sup>. This sexualization of condoms is purposeful because Lil Nas X appeals to dynamics of desire, rather than simply health. Instead of displaying condoms as an obstacle to sex, Lil Nas X actively demonstrates their coexistence with his own pleasure. Again, Lil Nas X utilizes a key principle that has defined the ongoing AIDS epidemic: “harm reduction [as] guided by an aversion to pathologization”<sup>30</sup>. Harm reduction is a practice invested in providing safe methods for those engaging in non-normative behaviors without moralizing the individuals themselves or their actions<sup>31</sup>. The efficacy of harm reduction strategies emerges from the recognition that “pleasure is not the antithesis of self-regulation and safety”<sup>32</sup>. As it stands, safer sex is pleasure-expansive by

---

<sup>23</sup> Alan Petersen and Deborah Lupton, “The ‘healthy’ citizen.” in *The New Public Health: Health and Self in the Age of Risk* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2000), 78.

<sup>24</sup> Lil Nas X, “Lil Nas X – THAT’S WHAT I WANT,” YouTube, September 16, 2021, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDYDRA5JPLE>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> *Sex in an Epidemic*, directed by Jean Carlomusto (2010; New York: Outcast Films).

<sup>30</sup> Kane Race, “The use of pleasure in harm reduction: Perspectives from the History of Sexuality,” *International Journal of Drug Policy* (2007): 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 5.

allowing people to discover more ways to embody and enact desire. In this scene, Lil Nas X exhibits condom use as a method for the gay community to reduce harm while simultaneously maintaining sexual activity. Lil Nas X therefore combats the view of condoms as beacons of heterosexuality while also depathologizing condom use within gay sex generally but, more significantly, within Black gay male sex in this video.

Lil Nas X also queers and eroticizes football in the music video for “THAT’S WHAT I WANT.” The pink football uniforms are the first subversion tactic, feminizing the normative masculine apparel. Additional subtext related to this color choice is apparent when situating the music video within AIDS discourses. ACT UP, a popular activist organization established in response to the lack of government action regarding AIDS, released many posters with the proclamation “Silence = Death”<sup>33</sup>. The symbol that most frequently accompanied this statement was a pink triangle, in reference to the marking of sexual minorities in Nazi concentration camps<sup>34</sup>. In repurposing this emblem decades later, ACT UP equates America’s inaction to genocide. The reclamation of “the pink triangle situates the statement ‘Silence = Death’ within a protest movement around homophobia, sexuality, and AIDS”<sup>35</sup>. Pink here holds multiple meanings and embodies the social commentary Lil Nas X is weaving into this music video. The sex between Lil Nas X and his teammate is another site from which the queering of football can be analyzed. The video for “THAT’S WHAT I WANT” can contextualize the belief that “homosexual identity, for example, is a systematic accident produced by the heterosexual machinery”<sup>36</sup>. Football, a hypermasculine sport, produces homoeroticism but denies its very existence. Sports transform locker rooms and fields into spaces within which men can grow intimate. Through sharing a passion and even a shower, men develop affection towards those with whom they inhabit close quarters. This vulnerability is accepted only to the extent that it denies any actual plausibility of romantic partnership between two male teammates. The very avenue to assert one’s masculinity becomes a way in which heterosexual desire is contested. Sports create a culture that encourages emotional and physical bonding with others of the same gender. This opportunity for homosocial connection is seldom found in other environments for men, which provides a unique backdrop for this music video. In queering this traditionally masculine enterprise of football, Lil Nas X dispels common notions about sexuality. When the two football players start kissing in the video, they use a helmet

---

<sup>33</sup> Jennifer Brier and Matthew Wizinsky, “Worlds of Signification: Power and Subjectivity in Global AIDS Posters,” in *Up Against the Wall: Art, Activism and the AIDS Poster*, ed. Donald Albrecht and Jessica Lacher-Feldman (Rochester: RIT Press, 2021), 21.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018): 28.

and their shoulder pads as affective technologies during their foreplay<sup>37</sup>. The concept of affective technologies is inspired by the theorist Paul B. Preciado to mean materials that enhance bodily reactions either through their deliberate design or their modified use, regardless of the product's intention. In this music video, the jersey and padding become places of pleasure from which to explore sexuality<sup>38</sup>. The straps hanging down from the pads can be used to restrain, lift, and pull someone else during a sexual encounter. Football gear, in the video for "THAT'S WHAT I WANT," is reconceptualized as a location of pleasure. Typically tools for heterosexual men, Lil Nas X reclaims sportswear for queer sexual bodies. When examining this scene, "it is necessary to think of politics (in this case the politics of sexuality and the body) with the instruments that the artistic imagination provides"<sup>39</sup>. Lil Nas X, then, reimagines sports gear as a queer sexual technology.

This project of queering extends past the realm of sexuality; the music video for "THAT'S WHAT I WANT" also exemplifies queering in a racial sense. In football, white masculinity is elevated as white players disproportionately occupy the position of quarterback, seen as the head and heart of the team. As a result, white masculinity constitutes both physical and intellectual prowess. This treatment of quarterbacks leads to a devaluation of the rest of the team, most of whom are Black men. Lil Nas X negates this status quo in "THAT'S WHAT I WANT" by showing that both Black male football players featured in the video possess immense agency and power. The men are strong when touching each other and thoughtful when deciding to use a condom; they too hold both physical and intellectual prowess. Lil Nas X broadens limited characterizations of Black men in football, thereby queering the racial lines of football teams. Moreover, Lil Nas X destigmatizes bottoming as a gay sexual practice for Black men. In the music video's sex scene, Lil Nas X bottoms by receiving anal sex from his male teammate. By doing so, Lil Nas X validates bottoming and situates it within Black masculinity. Lil Nas X's privilege as a world-recognized artist provides the possibility of depicting himself however he chooses – here, he does so in a way that disproves common assumptions about bottoms. For one, bottoms are feminized due to the heterosexual association of this position with women being penetrated by men. Bottoms are then considered submissive and powerless, characterizations that reflect sexism within the gay community. While gay men and bottoms are often described as weak, Lil Nas X counters this stereotype by merging masculinity with homosexuality through the arena of football. Additionally, Lil Nas X bottoming in the music video for "THAT'S WHAT I WANT" is significant in opposing colonial fantasies.

---

<sup>37</sup> Lil Nas X, "Lil Nas X – THAT'S WHAT I WANT," YouTube, September 16, 2021, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDYDRA5JPLE>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018): 16.



These fantasies are steeped in a racist, controlling white gaze that fetishizes Blackness and Brownness<sup>40</sup>. In this video, Lil Nas X bottoming with a Black top interrupts colonial fantasies imposed on Black male bodies by white people. All in all, the racial implications of using football to navigate sexuality are crucial here. Interestingly, a Black AIDS activist of the 1980s believed that

to get black men to talk about H.I.V., put a commercial on during the Super Bowl. There are a hundred commercials on about erectile dysfunction, put on one about why they got to use a condom. Make those kinds of general announcements across the board so it's not just gay men getting the information, it's all men getting the information.<sup>41</sup>

Lil Nas X could have employed any sport to challenge heteronormativity, but he chose football, a sport that is popular among and populated by many Black men. Furthermore, Lil Nas X could have selected any environment as the backdrop for the sex between these two players – and yet, it is the locker room. This cultural emblem of toxic masculinity is the very space in which transgression occurs, situating this act of resistance itself as a source of eroticism. The locker room has become a politically charged site in which overt sexism, homophobia, and transphobia are not only tolerated but encouraged. The term “locker room talk” itself is emblematic of the bigotry that often proliferates there. It is fascinating that this environment was deliberately chosen for this music video, suggesting that locker rooms can be explorative and expressive rather than oppressive. Lil Nas X couples transgressive gay sex with risk reduction in the form of condom use to illustrate the range of possibilities and subjectivities accessible to gay men.

Lil Nas X is redefining AIDS activism by responding to past racist medical interventions and current whitewashed narratives of an end to this health crisis in the United States. Instead of disappearing from this country, AIDS has narrowed in on subordinated segments of American society. The Black gay male population faces the most danger from this deadly disease. In this culturally sensitive and historically informed critique, Lil Nas X's music disrupts the delusional dialogue around the absence of AIDS. Through advocacy and education, Lil Nas X's legacy builds off the work sparked by the gay community in reaction to the spread of HIV in the 1980s. Musical productions by Lil Nas X deserve further exploration in queer studies, gender studies, and African American studies. Lil Nas X incorporates important social issues into his songs, provoking meaningful engagement for those who listen. Scholars should continue to analyze how Lil Nas X remixes the past, present, and future.

Ultimately, Lil Nas X's video for “THAT'S WHAT I WANT” queers and eroticizes the heterosexual, racialized setting of football. Through lyrics explicitly about attraction to a Black man

---

<sup>40</sup> Coco Fusco, “The Other History of Intercultural Performance,” *The Drama Review* 38, no. 1 (1994): 143-167.

<sup>41</sup> *Sex in an Epidemic*, directed by Jean Carlomusto (2010; New York: Outcast Films).

and football gear made pink, Lil Nas X places gayness within this sport. The sex between Lil Nas X and his teammate normalizes queerness for Black men, his target audience. Lil Nas X proves that Black gay men can have sex safely and sensually with condoms, which is crucial given the high rates of HIV among this subpopulation. To answer the question foregrounding this paper, Lil Nas X is an activist because he employs his platform to promote sexual health for the Black gay male community. Lil Nas X interrogates the sexual status quo for Black gay men through his music video. By drawing attention to safer sex practices available to gay men, Lil Nas X imagines a future where HIV no longer devastates his community. Radically, Lil Nas X not only envisions utopia in his video for “THAT’S WHAT I WANT,” he manifests it as reality.

### **Bibliography:**

Bailey, Zinzi D., Nancy Krieger, Madina Agénor, Jasmine Graves, Natalia Lios, and Mary T. Bassett. “Structural racism and health inequities in the USA: evidence and interventions.” *Lancet* 389 (2017): 1453-1463.

Brier, Jennifer and Matthew Wizinsky. “Worlds of Signification: Power and Subjectivity in Global AIDS Posters” In *Up Against the Wall: Art, Activism and the AIDS Poster*, edited by Carlomusto, Jean, dir. *Sex in an Epidemic*. 2010: New York: Outcast Films.

Donald Albrecht and Jessica Lacher-Feldman, 9-23. Rochester: RIT Press, 2021.

Dean, Tim. “Breeding Culture: Barebacking, Bugchasing, Giftgiving.” *Massachusetts Review* 49, no. 1-2 (2008): 80-94.

Escoffier, Jeffrey. “The Invention of Safer Sex: Vernacular Knowledge, Gay Politics and HIV Intervention.” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 43 (1998): 1-30.

Fusco, Coco. “The Other History of Intercultural Performance.” *The Drama Review* 38, no. 1 (1994): 143-167.

Geary, Adam. “Rethinking AIDS in Black America.” In *Anti-Black Racism and the AIDS Epidemic: State Intimacies*, 1-26. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Hammonds, Evelyn M. and Susan M. Reverby. “Toward a Historically Informed Analysis of Racial Health Disparities Since 1619.” *American Journal of Public Health* 109, no. 10 (2019): 1348-1349.

Holmes, Dave, Patrick O’Byrne, and Denise Gastaldo. “Raw Sex as Limit Experience: A Foucauldian Analysis of Unsafe Anal Sex between Men.” *Social Theory & Health* 4 (2006): 319-333.

## *En-Gender!*

Petersen, Alan and Deborah Lupton. "The 'healthy' citizen." In *The New Public Health: Health and Self in the Age of Risk*: 61-88. SAGE Publications Ltd, 2000.

Preciado, Paul B. *Countersexual Manifesto*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

Race, Kane. "The use of pleasure in harm reduction: Perspectives from the History of Sexuality." *International Journal of Drug Policy* (2007): 1-7.

X, Lil Nas. *Lil Nas X – THAT'S WHAT I WANT*. Performed by Lil Nas X. 2021. YouTube.

## Commentary

---

*by Ashley Brown*

This article explores how the rapper/singer/songwriter Lil Nas X can be considered an AIDS activist in his work, through an exploration of his music video ‘That’s what I want’. The author makes a compelling argument for Lil Nas X being considered a sexual health activist through his work and demonstrates how he highlights contemporary racial issues within his music videos.

The author begins by pointing out that healthcare in the United States is an inherently racialised issue, with black people being disproportionately affected by the AIDS crisis. They draw clear links between institutional racism and the effect of AIDS on black communities, where black men are more likely to contract AIDS and are less likely to be the target of effective safety messages about the disease. They then use examples from the ‘That’s what I want’ music video to detail how Lil Nas X draws links between previous campaigns around AIDS and sex-safety awareness to the modern AIDS crisis affecting men, whilst subverting masculine stereotypes surrounding American sport, specifically American football.

The paper is insightful and the argument is clear, with important contextual information given. As someone working on a very different period and background, this paper was accessible and easy to digest. The descriptions of the video were vivid and comprehensible, even if the reader has not watched the video. I think the paper raises interesting points around social activism on the part of musicians and how they convey this within their work. The author could have pushed this point further, by considering the part of social media in Lil Nas X’s activism and how his image – briefly mentioned in the introduction – plays a part in his popularity and ability to convey his message.

Overall, this was an engaging read and I hope the author considers writing more on this topic. A wider sample of videos could be considered, and it would be helpful to have more recent figures regarding how AIDS currently affects black men in the United States. The detail on how Lil Nas X subverts masculine tropes – such as portraying himself as a bottom whilst having sex or having American footballers dressed in pink – is really fascinating but again could have been expanded on a bit more. Regardless, this is a good introduction to the topic and worth reading.