

SEXUAL HEALING

Gay men may not like what they read in Gabriel Rotello's Sexual Ecology, but read it they should

by Bob Roehr

Gabriel Rotello has written an important, though seriously flawed, book. In the superb first half he dons the hat of journalist to explore the epidemiological principles of infectious diseases. With his lucid explanation of levels of infection, rates of transmission, "core groups" and "bridges" into a broader population, Rotello vividly paints the equation of how HIV is spread and sustained.

Books

He focuses primarily upon core groups, those self-sustaining clusters within the gay-male and injection-drug-user populations where HIV truly has reached epidemic proportions. And he shows why the virus has not spread significantly within the broader society: A key factor is that most people in the United States have sex only with a limited number of partners and within very limited circles, or "islands," of their socio-economic peers. There is little bridging between these groups, hence the virus is contained.

Rotello takes on the "liberationist" philosophy, lambasting what he calls the cult of promiscuity, which he says has become a central tenet of

formal and longer lasting than ever before.

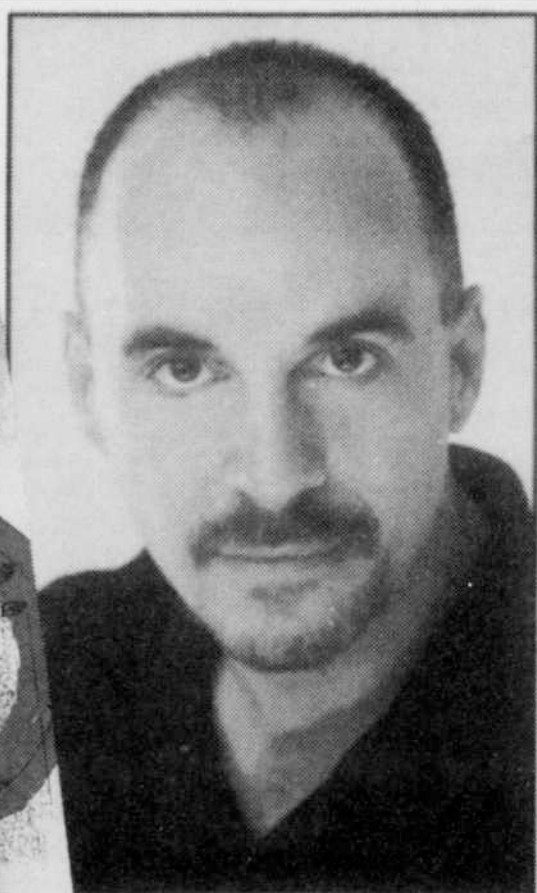
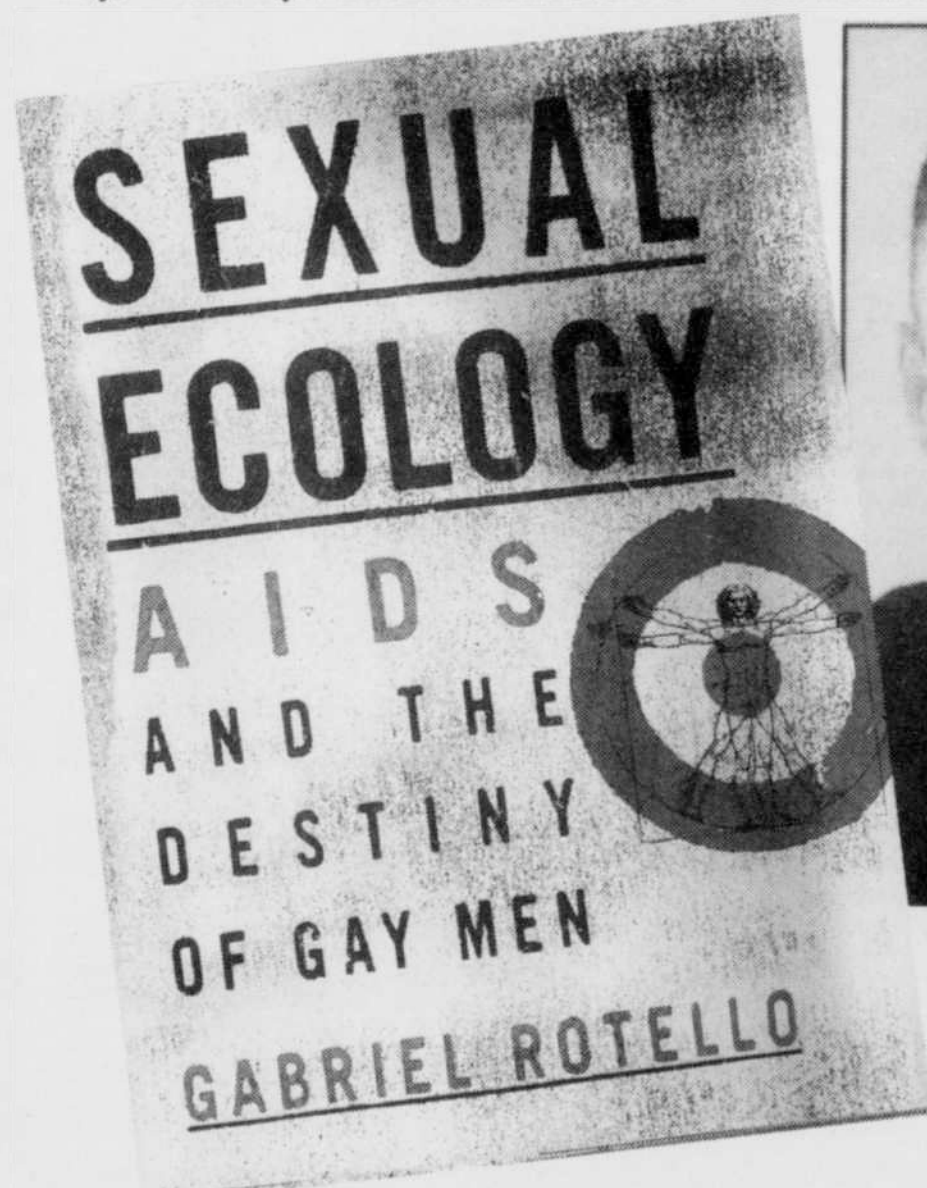
Rotello faults the gay community for having adopted "the condom code" as the absolute least it could have done in the face of the epidemic. He maintains that relying solely upon blocking transmission will fail. We must also preach limiting both the number of partners and the type of sex, he says, in order to provide a margin of error sufficient to contain the epidemic.

Thus he is a vocal advocate of closing bathhouses. He assumes those clients will have less sex, and less anal sex, if the tubs are shuttered, and that that will reduce the spread of HIV. This argument lacks the scientific rigor evidenced in earlier sections. If in fact most habitués of bathhouses are already HIV-positive, and they are having sex with other people who are positive, then there is no spread of HIV regardless of the number of partners or the degree of safety achieved.

Rotello wants to turn gay male culture away from anal sex and toward monogamy. He asserts a parallel with changing societal patterns in family planning, and says it can be a model for changing gay norms.

The principle flaw in making this comparison is a weakness in identifying a sense of "gay culture."

The situation with gay men is that there is little consensus on what it means to be gay, nor are there institutional structures to reinforce good



Gabriel Rotello

PHOTO BY MICHAEL WAKEFIELD

what it means to be a gay male. He quietly asserts that two changes in sexual patterns from pre- to post-Stonewall helped to create an environment in which HIV could flourish within the gay community. One is that anal sex grew from a rarity to a central feature of gay identity; the other is a dramatic rise in men having multiple partners. He says this is a gay lifestyle "unique in history."

This is where Rotello's arguments begin to falter: While there is a certain logical plausibility to his thesis, there is no hard data to back it up. There is little valid survey research on anal sex among gay men today, and even less from the pre-Stonewall days he uses as his baseline. Historian Martin Duberman, writing in the *Nation*, draws on his own experience and that of his age peers to question Rotello's assertions about gay sex in the 1950s. There is also anecdotal evidence to suggest that gay relationships are currently more

deeds and extract penalties. And, as Rotello has pointed out, many of the strongest forces in gay life are based on the very ideas he is attacking and thus are not likely allies in this plan.

Still, *Sexual Ecology* is must reading for anyone who hopes to understand this epidemic, the problems of containing it and hopes for eradicating it. Rotello's arguments and his writing slip badly when he switches from explaining science to advocating social policy. But while his prescriptions may seem unconvincing, in raising them he stimulates discussion that will in the end prove beneficial in grappling with the challenges HIV poses for the gay male community.

Sexual Ecology: AIDS and the Destiny of Gay Men by Gabriel Rotello. Dutton, 1997; \$24.95 cloth.

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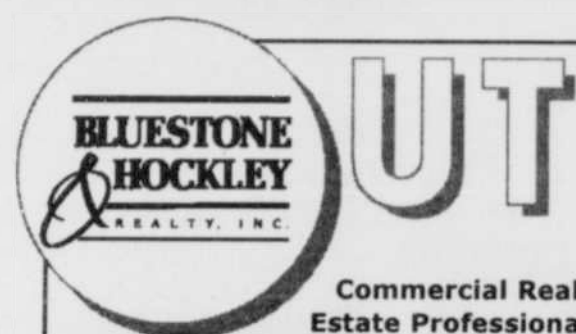
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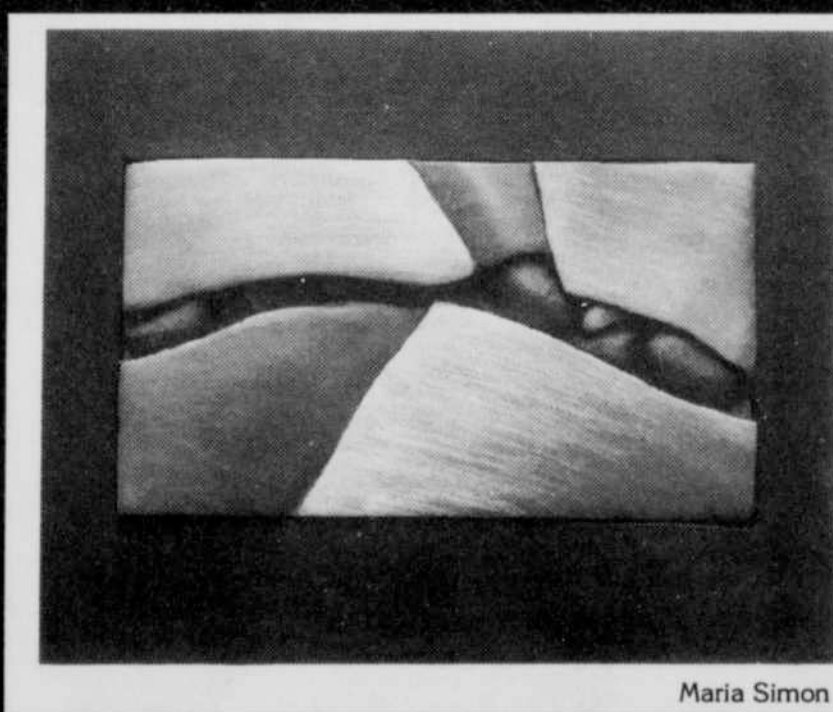
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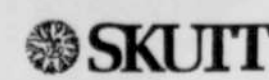
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