

Army of Pleasure:
Viral Sex and New Ways of Being Together

by

Pedro Ventura

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"The purpose of life has been lost because paradise has been lost, and paradise has been lost because pleasure has been condemned. But pleasure – persecuted, execrated, condemned, fleeced, and almost erased from the world still had its armies...Therefore, before us lies a sacred task: To create the army of pleasure...that is a divine mission because it exalts the human" – Reinaldo Arenas, *El Color del Verano*¹.

In 2003 the *Rolling Stone* ran an article written by Gregory A. Freeman entitled "In Search of Death," in which the author attempts to examine and assess an emerging subculture within the gay community of men who actively seek out the deadly retrovirus known as HIV. These HIV seeking men, known as bugchasers, operate within the barebacking community of gay men who actively practice unsafe sex. According to the article, this emerging phenomenon, appearing in an era years after the initial outbreak of the AIDS endemic in America, poses a threat to governmental and institutional policies committed to help avert the spread of HIV. It should also be added that in an era filled with copious journalistic coverage of the gay community's plight for equality in the arena of marriage, bugchasing also poses a hindrance to the mainstream gay community's efforts of representing normative images of homosexuality.

Bugchasing and barebacking can be best understood as the sexual practices and identities of a sexual minority group within the gay community. In addition to cities with

¹ Reinaldo Arenas, *El Color del Verano* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1991) 388, translation by Pedro Ventura 2010.

Reinaldo Arenas was an exiled Cuban poet who wrote extensively on his sexuality. After leaving to the United States in the Mariel boatlift of 1980, Arenas contracted HIV and died of AIDS in 1990. The above quote is from his work *El Color del Verano* (The Color of Summer) where the narrator protests that the AIDS epidemic has posed a hindrance to the homosexual project of creating an "army of pleasure."

significant gay populations, the Internet has allowed for the creation of virtual spaces where members of these communities can interact with one another. Barebacking is intentional unprotected anal penetration between two or more men. Bugchasing, in its more clinical definition, is the active quest of HIV infection by gay men who bareback. However, “the nomenclature generated in bareback subculture employs a more colorful vernacular.”² Unlike the characterization of HIV in the *Rolling Stone*, within the barebacking community, infection with the virus is seen more as the key into a world of uninhibited pleasure and less as a death sentence.

Note that for the purpose of this paper, “gay community” or “gay sexuality” specifically refers to gay and/or bisexual *men*. Although bugchasing has been debunked by critics and gay rights advocates as nothing more than a myth, the few who do engage in such type of behavior, or the mere notion of it, allow us to take a critical look at the construction of gay sexuality in a post-AIDS epidemic space. Specifically, institutional programs directed to curb promiscuity within gay culture affected the ways in which gay rights activists defined their identity as one moving away from sexual free-play. Hence, the movement for marriage equality and normative, (un)queer if I may, depictions of gay bodies. “The queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form.”³

The Queer and Politics

² Tim Dean, Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 48.

³ Lee Edelman, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 3.

Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* offers possible insight into the function of bug chasing as a negation of politics' and civilization's necessity of futurity. Heavily influenced by the work of Jacques Lacan, Edelman seeks to probe the role of futurism within politics and the structures of our social world. The figure of the Child is to serve as a point of departure from which the ethical value of the queer can be analyzed. "The ups and downs of political fortune may measure the social order's pulse, but *queerness*, by contrast, figures, out and beyond political symptoms, the place of the social order's death drive."⁴

Lee Edelman beautifully demonstrates the ways in which the notion of the universal Child is of utmost importance to fulfill the fantasy of futurity which modernity necessitates. For Edelman, the queer has come to represent an oppositional front against modernity's politics of affirming the social structures and order it attempts to create and its insistence that the political body must survive and transcend us as subjects. The queer is an articulation of the death drive which exists sublimated throughout the social world. For example, contemporary gay politics do not represent a true queering of politics for it seeks to integrate "queer" individuals within the larger systems of signification that does violence unto us. Instead, "the queer insists that politics is always a politics of the signifier, or even what Lacan will often refer to as 'the letter.'"⁵ The horrible mark that modernity has imprinted upon humanity has been its ability to subtract from us true experience. Edelman postulates that what the queer represents is a move towards "Lacan's characterization of what he calls the 'truth,' where truth does not assure happiness...Instead, it names only the insistent particularity of the subject, impossible

⁴ Edelman 3.

⁵Edelman. 6.

fully to articulate and ‘tending towards the real’⁶ beyond experience of pleasure or pain, to be found within every human being, without being universal.

The death drive, so crucial to Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic literature, is not to be solely equated necessarily with the queer “politics” that Edelman demands, for the death drive also exists as a consequence of signification and Symbolic order. Instead, Lacan argues that the death drive represents “the excess embedded within the Symbolic through the loss, the Real loss, that the advent of the signifier effects.”⁷ The death drive is a surplus, which cannot be articulated, that attempts to mend the excessive lack within Symbolic order known as *desire*, but is simultaneously a result of the Symbolic. There is a lack because we are always trying to close the gap between experiencing our truth and the alienation of becoming signified within an order that intends to call us into meaning by “seeming to call us to ourselves.” Politics is an illustration of the collective performance of the “subject’s attempt [and, thus, desire] to establish the conditions for this impossible consolidation by identifying with something *outside* itself in order to enter the presence, deferred perpetually, *of* itself.”⁸

Politics is always trying to catch up with this unattainable experience of consolidating the subject with its signification by an Other. This unfeasible occurrence is projected forwards as the future, taking for granted that the experience does not actually exist, but is instead an Imaginary past. “The future, to which it persistently appeals, marks the impossible place of an Imaginary past exempt from the deferrals intrinsic to the operation of the signifying chain and

⁶ Edelman. 5.

⁷ Edelman 9.

⁸ Edelman 8.

projected ahead as the site at which being and meaning are joined as One.”⁹ Queer negativity’s purpose is to challenge the social, which is the created fantasmic reality of the Signifier. It resists the subject’s “always-to-be-realized identity,” posited within the figure of the “Child imagined as enjoying unmediated access to Imaginary wholeness.”¹⁰

Homosexuality and Futurity

“Homosexuality is thought as a threat to the logic of thought itself insofar as it figures the availability of an unthinkable *jouissance* that would put an end to fantasy – and with it, to futurity – by reducing the assurance of meaning in fantasy’s promise of continuity to the meaningless circulation and repetitions of the drive.”¹¹ Homosexuality challenges the assumption that *jouissance* leads to reproduction, in similar ways that sexual liberation has extracted reproduction from the sexual act as stated before.

Undoubtedly reflecting on Lacan’s theory of the mirror-stage, Dean declares that sexuality and the experience of self-shattering, *jouissance* operate in friction with self-recognition, temporarily displacing the assurance of bodily boundaries. *Jouissance* allows for the loss of self-recognition that pushes the limits of subjectivity, while always remaining in opposition *to* self-recognition. Could it be that those participating within barebacking subculture, since it is compulsive (“take as many loads as you can”) in its nature, might try to attain the infinity of being experienced before the Ego recognition of the self? Or could it also be figured as a means of reproducing the virus and assuring its futurity once the HIV positive man has fallen victim to death.

⁹ Edelman 10.

¹⁰ Edelman 10.

¹¹ Edelman, 39.

Sexual Practice as Identity

There are varying academic opinions accounting for the practices of barebackers and bugchasers. A popular perspective on bugchasers and barebackers explains the phenomenon as an internalization of a social stigma that has equated gay identity with the AIDS virus. At times, "the stigmatized individual tends to hold the same beliefs about [their] identity that [normals] do."¹² However, it is of utmost importance to look at the ways in which representations of gay sexuality and governmental policy towards AIDS and HIV treatment and awareness have shaped the sexual self within the gay community.

The AIDS epidemic ravaged the gay community during the endemic's initial years, accounting for initiatives by the State and independent institutions to promote safe-sex among gay men that would minimize the risk of transmission of HIV. Precisely because of the aforementioned initiatives to repress sexual promiscuity within urban gay populations, the move by barebackers to engage in unprotected sex has been deemed as a form of political resistance. Bugchasing as a practice and identity warrants even more shock because it accounts for the desire of seroconversion; as a practice it begs for the transmission of the virus from an HIV positive individual to an uninfected individual. "Barebackers attest that the pleasure and satisfaction achieved through unprotected sex and cum swapping is both life transforming and absolutely worth it."¹³ Once inoculated with the virus, the bugchaser presumably no longer lives in a state of fear and anxiety.

¹² Erving Goffman, Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identities (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1963) 7.

¹³ Dean, 87.

The discomfort and distress within not only mainstream American society, but also mainstream gay communities, surrounding the figure of the bug chaser arises from his role as a truly queer subject. The barebacker, particularly the bug chaser, has denounced efforts by mainstream gay culture and the state to include the homosexual within the social order in favor of embracing an outlaw status. "Barebackers are not looking to have their relationships legally recognized. They are happy to consider themselves outlaws, claiming only the right to fuck whom and how they wish."¹⁴ Lee Edelman's query into the centrality of the figural Child within social structure and politics will account for the ways in which the queer subject's renouncement of futurity represents an opposition to politics' preoccupation with affirming structures.

It is important to remember that while discussing such issues we are doing violence unto gay sexuality as a means of understanding it as Other, as presented by the ethical turn coined by Derrida, but that this action is better than inaction. Tim Dean illustrates the inadequacy of politics of identification when attempting to comprehend the implications of bugchasing and barebacking. Politics of identification requires "a diminishment of otherness. Thus in contradistinction to the politics of identification, we have the ethics of alterity."¹⁵

Sexuality and Kinship

Using John D'Emilio's essay *Capitalism and Gay Identity*, we can trace a history of how the rise of capitalism and the modern state shifted the significance of the family from a unit necessary for economic survival of human beings to the place of the subject's interpersonal human relationships. While the state during the rise of capitalism required the inclusion of

¹⁴ Dean 9.

¹⁵ Dean 25.

individuals in an economically productive project, it needed to justify the alienation experienced by the wage earner from his own work and productivity. To do this, capitalism conceptualized the home and the family as the space designated for intimate relationships, where subjects could experience and project their humanity, since industrial production presumably destroys the relationship between productivity and humanity:

The family took on a new significance as an affective unit, an institution that produced not goods but emotional satisfaction. By the 1920s among the white middle class, the ideology surrounding the family described it as a means through which men and women formed satisfying mutually enhancing relationships and created an environment that nurtured children.¹⁶

Paradoxically, while capitalism exalted the family, it also allowed for the decentering of the family unit as means of sustenance and thus allowed for individuals to reconfigure themselves in society outside of the family. "As wage labor spread and the production became socialized, then, it became possible to release sexuality from the 'imperative' to procreate...capitalism has created conditions that allow some men and women to organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex."¹⁷

Arguably, the different networks of gay men and women that sprung out in large industrial urban centers became the site where interpersonal intimate relationships were forged, as opposed to the home. The gay liberation movement in a sense was an affirmation of the legitimacy of these different networks and the individuals who compromised these communities. The common thread that tied these different men and women was their desire for their same-sex peers and their ability to build lives in communities of similar individuals. The creation of

¹⁶ John D'Emilio. "Capitalism and Gay Identity" in Power of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality ed. By Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, & Sharan Thompson, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983). 103.

¹⁷ D'Emilio 104.

homosexual identity politics was possible precisely because homosexual men [and women] aligned with one another on the basis of their sexual behavior. Like early urban enclaves of homosexuals, barebacking communities operate as spaces in which individuals build bonds with another.

There is societal and political investment in the idea of futurism and children. Futurism attempts to deal with the gap experienced through Signification by positing hope in children, for they will be markers of our existence once we are no longer present. The contemporary gay rights movement is heavily invested in extending the institution of marriage to same-sex couples because it will legitimate their relationships in the heteronormative world in which we live. A large part of this move is to allow for gay individuals to participate within what we know to be “the family” and their right to raise children. This is not a particular *queer* politics because it strives for the inclusion of individuals with alternative sexualities within the institution marriage, lauding a historically heterosexual institution.

Biopolitics, Homosexuality, and Disease

Biopolitics is the art of governance of populations through biopower. Foucault traces the shift of governance of anatomo-politics, focused around the individual body, in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century to the use of a new technology of power: biopower. “So after a first seizure over the body in an individualizing mode, we have a second seizure of power that is not individualizing but, if you like, massifying, that is directed not at man-as-body but at man-as-species.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France (New York: Picador, 1997) 243.

Giorgio Agamben, expounding on Michel Foucault's work, states that "at the threshold of the modern era, natural life begins to be included into mechanisms and calculations of State power, and politics turns into *biopolitics*."¹⁹ The creation of population through the mechanisms of biopower necessitated the seizure on the life of the individual in order to control man-as-species. Biopolitics thus has come to be the politics of life and death. "The entry of *zoē* into the sphere of the *polis* – the politicization of bare life as such – constitutes the decisive event of modernity and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought."²⁰ The productive mechanisms of biopolitics, intent on life-creating processes, paradoxically create zones of exclusion where bare life resides; the very creation of life in turn creates zones of wastage outside the political where bare life resides.

Imperative in biopower's regulatory functions is knowledge: knowledge of the scientific, medical, economic, and political. Biopolitics functions to address biological and political issues within the population of the state that could potentially diminish the robustness of the State. Mechanisms that calculate numerical data and create forecasts and statistical estimates to address potential trouble within the population help crystallize political power into biopower, because power is no longer devoted to disciplining the individual body, instead it seeks to control populations and assure security.

In a word, security mechanisms have to be installed around the random element inherent in a population of living beings so as to optimize a state of life... It is therefore not a matter of taking the individual at the level of individuality but, on the contrary, of using overall mechanisms and acting in such a way as to achieve overall states of equilibration or regularity; it is in a

¹⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Sovereign Power and Bare Life* in Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classical Readings ed. by Charles Lemert, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2010) 675.

²⁰ Agamben 676.

word, a matter of taking control of life and the biological processes of man-as-species and of ensuring that they are not disciplined, but regularized.²¹

If biopolitics, which emerges from the new right of power to control populations, functions in order to control “man-as-species,” State response to endemics like HIV/AIDS fit adequately with power’s ability to control both population and disease. What we see at the very beginning of the AIDS epidemic is the States’ disinterest in normalizing the disease and the populations affected by HIV/AIDS (homosexual urban enclaves that emerged out of gay liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s, and IV drug users who were more commonly poor people and people of color). The efforts made by the State through institutions of medicine, engaged in maintaining public “health” and normalizing knowledge, to understand the endemic were almost non-existent so long as the disease was thought of as pertaining only to the homosexual as individual and the homosexual population.

For mainstream society, the emergence of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s as a sort of rare cancer affecting gay men, originally envisioned as a form of Kaposi's sarcoma, allowed for the crystallization of gay [anal] sex as a zone of death eroticization. In 1982, what we know today as acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) was donned by the medical sector as gay-related immune deficiency (GRID). For much of the 1980s, the AIDS epidemic was seen as a plague specific to gay men, and later towards IV drug users, both reprehensible identities according to mainstream society. It was therefore easy to stigmatize gay men as a result of the high incidence of HIV infections and AIDS-related deaths within their population.

²¹ Foucault 247.

Pat Buchanan, a notable rightwing politician said that AIDS was a response to homosexuals having “declared war upon nature, and now nature is exacting an awful retribution.”²²

“Medicine is a power-knowledge that can be applied to both the body and the population, both the organism and biological processes, and it will therefore have both disciplinary effects and regulatory effects.”²³ During the early years of the epidemic, whatever steps were made to care for individuals afflicted with the disease were taken by AIDS activists as private actors. Governmental institutions of medicine were marginally involved with any type of AIDS related work. Within those first years of the outbreak, the state failed to act within its disciplinary and regulatory domains in terms of the individual gay body and the gay population.

In the summer of 1990, the U.S. Congress, under the Bush administration, enacted the Ryan White Care Act. “For the first time ever, [Congress] provided money to help people who were bound together not by age or income or disability but by a virus.”²⁴ The act was only enacted after Ryan White, a hemophiliac from Indiana who had contracted the virus after receiving contaminated blood due to a medical procedure, died after five years of struggling with the disease. Security mechanisms in regards to the AIDS epidemic intervened only at a time when it was essential to “optimize a state of life.”²⁵ The urgency by which the State was propelled to take major action occurred only when pressure by citizens and certain policy

²² Elizabeth A. Armstrong, Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950-1994 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) 157.

²³ Foucault 252.

²⁴ Patricia D. Siplon, AIDS and the Policy Struggle in the United States (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002) 93.

²⁵ Foucault 246.

makers forced conversations about the true effects of AIDS and HIV as being something that not only affected a homosexual population, but that ultimately made an impact on the larger society as well.

For early AIDS activists, reducing the rate of infection was the first priority due to the speed at which HIV positive men were dying of AIDS-related cause. The homosexual community questioned the rhetoric of prevention activists because of the implications that it had on the lifestyles of those living within gay urban enclaves. "Prevention of HIV transmission is based on the concept of behavior modification – that is, on convincing people not to engage in behaviors that enable HIV to be transmitted."²⁶ Understandably, many gay men saw this enacting of policy as a means to quell their sexual behavior; a very dangerous step for a community whose collective identity revolves around sexual practices to take. "Initial reports suggesting that there might be something harmful about aspects of the lifestyle of urban gay men seemed merely another round of panicked, irrational responses of homophobic heterosexuals who wanted to scare gay men away from sex."²⁷

After initial attempts by early gay activists to encourage gay men to restrain their sexual desires and renounce promiscuity, efforts by dominant culture and the State to control sexuality became imperative. Biopower moves away from a solely disciplining technology of power, addressed at the individual, and incorporates to these disciplining technique regulatory mechanisms that address the needs of the population, man-as-species. "Sexuality exists at the point where body and population meet. And so it is a matter for discipline, but also for

²⁶ Siplon 68.

²⁷ Armstrong 158.

regularization.”²⁸ Sexuality cannot be untied from AIDS, because sexual contact is the disease’s main site of transmission. Gay rights activists, especially after the AIDS epidemic which generated backlash towards gay men because of their sexual practices, sought to normalize gay identity and shied away from putting emphasis on the sexual.

Barebacking’s Threat to Biopolitics

Barebacking has been viewed as an act of sexual liberation as well as resistance to the modern states’ interest in controlling the *bios* of its population. Gregory Tomso asserts that if the state’s biopolitical purpose is to cultivate life “for the sake of strengthening the state and sustaining its economic well-being, viral sex presents an immediate challenge to those aims.”²⁹ The rise of identity politics during the late 1960s and early 1970s called forth the creation of productive identities. The emergence of identity politics highlighted marginalized people’s yearning to have a productive identity, their desire to be included into the biopolitical self under the state’s sovereignty. In this sense, the gay liberation movement can be seen as a call by homosexual men for the state and homosexual to engage with one another in a politics of life. Viral sex, according to Tomso, represents a politics of death. The concern that bugchasers and barebackers bring to society and the state is that they have been ceased to be viewed as productive life, the very aims and goals of the gay rights movement during the 1970s, and after seroconversion seem to have entered into a zone of exclusion, a social death that is outside of the state’s control.

²⁸ Foucault 251.

²⁹ Gregory Tomso, “Viral Sex and the Politics of Life” in *South Atlantic Quarterly* (107:2 Spring 2008) 277.

I would argue that bugchasing and barebacking communities are generators of new forms of life, especially new forms of relationality for homosexuals. "Among beings who would always be enacted, who would always be this or that thing, this or that identity, and who would have entirely exhausted their power in these things and identities – among such beings there could not be any community but only coincidences and factual partitions."³⁰ Barebackers are bound together by viral transmission and they acquire power over their lives and subjectivities through the disease which they have in common. For bug chasers, human immunodeficiency virus, the "bug," as a term of infectious craze, is "not only a vital component of gay sexual hipness, the bug – by analogy with the insects that toads eat – is also a source of nourishment... HIV thus is pictured as a source of life rather than death."³¹

Moral Panic of Barebacking

Finding academic literature on the topic of bugchasing proved hard to come across. Towards the end of my research I found Tim Dean's recently published book *Unlimited Intimacy*. In the dominant cultural and political institutions, barebacking and bugchasing are seen as immoral because it renounces the commonly held belief that we are to avoid disease and (re)centers male-on-male penetration as the site for queer subjectivity.

Dean argues that "the pursuit of health was the individual's moral responsibility"³² in the discourse surrounding medicine and immunology at the turn of the century, and demonstrates the State's investment in promulgating this philosophy regarding, not only the

³⁰ Giorgio Agamben, Means Without End: Notes on Politics(Theory out of Bounds) (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 2000) 9.

³¹ Dean, 49.

³² Dean, 61.

social body, but the individual body as well. Aside from being morally reprehensible due to the frivolity with which bugchasing and barebacking consider health, the practice also reinstates male-on-male penetration as the site of desire. Gay sex is a site of death because of the (un)productivity of its nature. The anus expresses negativity in gay sexual intercourse because it allows for *jouissance* without procreation; it allows for a self-shattering without the creation of new life.

Using Jean Baudrillard's grievance over the ways in which sexual liberation has extracted procreation from sex, through contraception and artificial insemination, Edelman explains the anxiety tied surrounding the notion of heterosexual sex without reproduction:

What can the lament for the putative loss of the sexual function mean, therefore, if not its very opposite: that heterosexuality, stripped of its ancient reproductive alibi, must assume at last the despiritualized burden of its status *as sexual function*...that in the face of what Baudrillard calls 'automatic' or 'biotechnological' modes of reproduction, it must recognize the 'extraneous' element in sex that is never extraneous *to* sex and that marks it as a 'useless function,' as a meaningless and unrecuperable expense, or even, as Jacques Derrida has written with regard to *difference*, 'as expenditure without reserve, as the irreparable loss of presence, the irreversible usage of energy, that is, as the death instinct.'³³

When extended to bugchasing, the ultimate goal of which is to, again, encompass within the body a virus that has now escorted millions to their graves, the self-shattering experienced through sex in turn creates an identity that is commonly equated with death. Historically, prior to the emergence of the AIDS epidemic and the mainstreaming of a gay identity, homosexuality has always been represented as irrational for it embraces the sensation experimented through the loss of corporeal and psychic integrity derived from sex, especially in the case of bug chaser who welcomes the experience of self-shattering by having another man

³³ Edelman, 64.

and a foreign viral microbe enter into his body. Dominant culture sees an abandonment of morality in bugchasing and barebacking in exchange for infinite pleasure.

The Gift that is (Not) a Gift

Bugchasing as a sexual practice is heavily taxed with a language of a gift-economy. There are the gift-givers, those who are HIV positive and want to give the “gift” or infection, and those who are gift-seekers, who want to receive the gift. Many times this gift exchange occurs at conversion parties, where numerous gift-givers converge with bugchasers in order to provide them with the opportunity of seroconversion.

In Jacques Derrida's *Given Time*, the notion of gift and gift-giving is examined through its function within an economy. The circle represents what must be at the center of any problematic of *oikonomia*; wherever there is a circular exchange, there is always a return to the origin, *oikos*, a return to the point of departure.³⁴ Derrida renounces the idea of unrelated exteriority of the gift with the circle. The gift only exists within language. For Marcel Mauss, the gift, with all of its binding forces, is shattered by market forces. These market forces, the exchange relationships of a gift economy, create social bonds between gift-givers and gift-receivers.³⁵

The same question about the nature of the gift must be applied to the practice of bugchasing and gift-giving that transpires at conversion parties. The social bonds created through seroconversion and barebacking communities are analogous to the claims made by Mauss. The “gift” of HIV infected semen exists outside the circle which Derrida speaks of. Because inoculation with HIV is still irreversible, HIV transmission is a gift that is an unbinding

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: U Chicago Press , 1994) 7.

³⁵ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*(New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2000)

gift. It does so because the gift-giver's endowment to the bugchaser cannot be reciprocated. "That which is given without expectation of recompense tends to be regarded as ethically exemplary."³⁶ Paradoxically, the subcultural gift of seroconversion appears to fulfill the criterion for ethical exemplarity insofar as it cannot be returned to the donor

However, Dean also asserts that "barebacking thus may be considered a strategy for taking sexuality beyond dyadic relations into the social. It enlarges the horizon of potential intimacy."³⁷ Although the gift-giver may not receive reciprocation that is tantamount to the gift of the virus, is there not a form reimbursement in the form of fulfilling fantasies associated with gift giving? Dean himself states, when discussing an account in Louise Hogwarth's documentary *The Gift*, that a gift-giver's proposition to inseminate a bugchaser "confirms the erotic power of giving."³⁸ This power that can be experienced by the gift-giver can be derived from the acknowledgement of his responsibility as a barebacker of creating community and optimizing social bonds.

For Foucault, "homosexuality is a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities."³⁹ Sadly, the same disease that put an end to his life also posed a hindrance to the very project he called homosexuals to undertake. AIDS deterred homosexuals from the sexual free-play that could have very well created new modes of being together. Instead, most homosexuals find solace in "the hope that we will be allowed to fully participate in the old ways

³⁶ Dean, 79.

³⁷ Dean, 79.

³⁸ Dean, 83.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life" in Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth (Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol. 1) by Paul Rainbow (New York: The New Press, 1997) 138.

of being and of coming together"⁴⁰ through marriage, for example. The emergence of barebacking culture in the 1990s, over a decade after the initial outbreak of the AIDS endemic, could come to represent new ways of relating to one another.

Stigmatization of Barebackers

The "motives" behind what drives bug chasers to want to acquire the HIV virus is not one, there might be few or many, but one alone it cannot be. Whatever the motive, there is always a rhetoric of resistance in barebacking communities and the accounts of bugchasers. "That which can be told about an individual's social identity at all times during his daily round and by all persons he encounters therein will be of great importance to him."⁴¹

For some gay men, tattooing the biohazard symbol on their bodies has become a means of displaying their HIV positive status. There are many perceived implications of a gay man's moral character when his seropositivity is posited towards the external world. For many, the assumption is made that the individual has partaken in "high-risk" behavior, usually unprotected sex with multiple partners. Dan Savage, a gay columnist wrote in January of 2003, that "being a huge fucking slut – as popular as that might make you – has physical and emotional consequences."⁴² To a certain extent, bugchasers who acquire the virus and embrace their HIV positive status are resisters. In actively seeking out HIV the bug chaser renounces the popular rhetoric that if the gay man does not defer his erotic desires he will fall victim to death. "Bug chasing fosters an illusion that one is the master of, rather than

⁴⁰ Leo Bersani *Is the Rectum A Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) 86.

⁴¹ Goffman, 46.

⁴² Dan Savage, *Savage Love*. "Bug Chasers." 1/30/2003. [Online] <http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/SavageLove?oid=13241>

completely subjected to, his erotic destiny."⁴³ Once the HIV virus is actively taken on, the HIV positive man within the barebacking community has the potential for "unlimited intimacy," forming relationships with those like him.

Barebacking communities negate mainstream beliefs about kinship and family, and are directly opposed to movements seeking to legalize gay marriage. Bugchasers are seeking admittance into a subculture community that is truly queer in the sense that it embraces promiscuity and seeks to imagine what Foucault would call "new ways of being". They are seeking initiation into a community that renounces the attempts by the State to control their sexuality and confines them to live in a state of fear regarding their sexual practices.

"Barebackers are saying, in effect, that it seems more unhealthy to live in a state of permanent terror than to live a life that treats HIV as a sort of occupational hazard."⁴⁴ The gay mainstream seeks to be recognized by the state as legitimate citizens, regardless of their sexual orientation(s). "Rather than state recognition, barebackers crave witness who may become coconspirators in their enterprise of deregulating intimacy."⁴⁵

The Self-Destructiveness of Gay Life

Representations of gay lifestyles within contemporary society highlight the assumed self-destructiveness and sexual compulsiveness of homosexuals. Gay men are depicted as being hedonistic; engaging in sex with multiple partners, staying out until the sun comes up, consuming drugs such as cocaine and crystal meth. Because of practices such as these, gay

⁴³ Dean, 53.

⁴⁴ Dean, 55.

⁴⁵ Dean, 96.

men have been pinned as being “high risk,” in terms of the probability that they might become infected with HIV.

Examining cultural productions of homosexuals and their lifestyles within popular culture demonstrates the ways in which gay sexual identity has come to represent what Freud posed as our innate death instinct in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Within popular imagination, gay male sexuality has been given the characteristics of *Thanatos*, the death drive, as opposed to *Eros*, the sexual life pursuing drive residing within all of us. The prevalent depiction of homosexual sexuality has historically been one which places homosexual sexual intercourse as being a site of death due to, unlike heterosexual sexuality, its inability to produce life. Thus the homosexual man has been pathologized as possessing the attributes of being compulsive, aggressive, and both destructive and self-destructive. One can see here how these culturally accepted representations of gay sexuality made it acceptable for right wingers during the 1980s to equate the AIDS endemic with gays. Gay men were literally dying because of their sexual practices.

But how have these notions regarding gay sexuality transpired through the years to still hold true within contemporary notions of gay identity? Much of the body of work regarding AIDS and HIV within the past years has focused on the idea of prevention and sex-education as a means of holding individuals accountable for their actions, especially when it comes to the territory of engaging in sexual activity;

health education and safer-sex advocacy sought to advertise risk without wiping out choice ... this means the elaboration of sexual etiquette in which the individual actors could attempt not so much to eliminate all risk of coming in contact with HIV, but rather to seek to balance between risk and trust in sexual contact. ⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Weeks *Invented Moralities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) 137.

Attempts made by what Foucault would call disciplinary and regulatory institutions, functioning as the nexus between discipline and power, failed to attain their main goals precisely because subjective power was given to the individual in order to decide what he constitutes as "safer sex" practices. Meanwhile, it is the individual who possess the means by which to disseminate the endemic disease through practices that put others at risk of infection, and the individual at risk of accelerating his own death.

Cultural Anxiety and Anal Penetration

Crucial in the examination of barebacking and bugchasing is the importance of the different cultural anxieties that arise from the notion of male anal penetration. In his essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" Leo Bersani raises the question of whether when analyzing preventive steps to hinder the spread of HIV and AIDS, the question of promiscuity is ever really problem at hand. As noted above, gay men have historically been represented as sexually insatiable in popular cultural discourse. Are gay men, as a whole, really that much more promiscuous and polyamorous than their heterosexual counterparts? Perhaps, but even if one affirms this copious generalization, one must acknowledge that great social anxiety arises at the thought of male on male anal penetration.

In the discourse of "safer sex" and HIV prevention, the bottom, that is, the man who will be getting fucked, anally penetrated, must always take extra precaution because his anus represents a zone of high risk for infection. In popular discourse about gay sex, bottoms engaging in unprotected sex are almost always rendered suicidal for putting themselves at such risk because of the accepted notion that if they have sex with an HIV positive person they will acquire the virus. Although it is true that the anus is a site of high risk for infection, the

probability that someone will acquire the virus through the anus, even if they have sex with an HIV positive person is anywhere from .5% to 30%, depending on the number of cells with the retrovirus in the semen of the penetrator, the stage of his HIV infection of the penetrator, and the amount of semen excreted by the giver.⁴⁷

"To be penetrated is to abdicate power."⁴⁸ In the sexual development of the Self in our patriarchal Western society, the male's sexuality is constructed against his subjectivity against the objectivity of the Other, the female. It is through his relationship with the penis that male subject can thus objectify the other. His power to penetrate renders him the subject in an objective world that is at his disposition. Therefore, being able to fuck is what renders man powerful over the objective world. What happens, however, when one relinquishes that power and allows oneself to be fucked? Not only is male sexuality threatened by the idea of anal penetration, but so is the very idea of heteronormative sex as the only means of pleasure seeking.

Bugchasers, in the discourse of the barebacking and bugchasing community, are almost always predominantly bottoms. Barebacking is a culture of breeding the semen of gift-givers who are HIV positive. The tearing of anal tissue that occurs during penetration heightens the probability that infected semen will enter into the body. Accessed through the website bugshare.net, a story by a user on how he became HIV positive depicts the rhetoric used within barebacking communities. The user, who had participated in a form of "Russian

⁴⁷ Gregory Tomso, "Bug Chasing, Barebacking, and the Risk of Care" in *Literature and Medicine* 23.1. John Hopkins University Press, 88-111 (2004). [Online]
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/literature_and_medicine/v023/23.1tomso.html

⁴⁸ Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?* in *Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* ed. by Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996) 212.

roulette” by assuming the position of the bottom at various sex parties, makes contact with an HIV positive top. When the bottom tells the top that he is still HIV negative, the top replies in the following manner: “My viral load is at 120,000 copies, which take quite easily in some fertile soil. I like your sense of adventure and would like to show you what your asshole is meant for.”⁴⁹

By belonging to an identity group that has become a sexualized community, gay men who opt to practice “unsafe” sex, have measured the risks and are willing to take a chance in order to belong to a community of individuals who have fetishized unprotected sex. The concern however, should be for the individuals who, through a lapse of judgment make a decision that they afterwards regret. However, there are those individuals who also decide to take the decision to “convert” knowing that with the improvement of protease inhibitors and treatment, they will be able to continue living for a long time, however painful, with HIV. “The introduction of highly active antiretroviral therapies and the emergence of a class of long-term ‘nonprogressors’ (those whose HIV infection shows no signs of developing into AIDS after more than a decade,” illustrate two conditions that enable barebacking culture.⁵⁰

Creating Order

The modern neoliberal state, the height of Western civilization, is highly invested in ensuring the control and order of its citizens. Large part, if not all, of the process by which we have reached today’s modern world system was possible by bringing order and structure to individuals operating in pre-modern or “primitive” ways.

⁴⁹ From <http://bugshare.net/cgi-bin/discus/board-auth.cgi?lm=1264198956&file=/2063/2353.html> (accessed February 2010)

⁵⁰ Dean, 52.

Leo Bersani in *Culture of Redemption* warns against the compensatory nature of Western culture. Using Freud's psychoanalytic works on notions of narcissism and sublimation as a point of departure, Bersani attributes much of the underlying ethos of our society to a mode of repressing the Self's inherent masochist desires. For the infant child, pleasure is gained through the decentering of the Self that occurs through a self-shattering of the ego contingent on auto-eroticism. "It is as if the inherently solipsistic nature of sexuality ... allowed for a development of autoeroticism in which the source of pleasure and, consequently, the object of desire became the very experience of *ébranlement* or self-shattering."⁵¹

The shattering effects of such an experience allow for a reintegration of the infant child's consciousness and therefore Self. Through a pleasuring of the Self, we gain awareness of our auto-erotic tendencies and we come to know ourselves as the true objects of desire, for we are vested in making ourselves feel good through self-shattering experiences. True pleasure follows from the relinquishment of power; from the abandonment of an integrated unity that functions in the form of pleasurable experiences. *Jouissance* in sexuality is "a defeat of power, a giving up, on the part of an otherwise hyperbolically self-affirming and phallogentrically constituted ego, of its project of mastery."⁵²

But the very experience of self-shattering that occurs calls forth the ego's responsibility to function as a self-preserving entity. Through the realization that certain original pleasure inducing aims become reprehensible, repeating "the activity of an eroticized consciousness becomes a new sexual aim, one that replaces the aim of repeating certain specific activities."⁵³

⁵¹ Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 37.

⁵² Bersani. *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* 109.

⁵³ Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* 37.

It is here where Bersani's main argument gets made: the object and social world is just a materialized conception of sexual sublimations. Bodily intensities get diffused throughout the world, one in which the acceptable limits of desire are only those channeled into "civilized" forms.

In Foucault's biopolitical state, the sovereign's realization of the productive potentiality of its citizens urges him to regulate and discipline the political body in order to maximize on productivity in a manner that nurtures and enhances life, and consequently builds up the strength of a nation. Through the medicalization of populations during the rise of the new biopolitical state, there has historically been "the intensification of an ideological claim on life that links the sustenance of life to the health and strength of a nation."⁵⁴

Bersani's critique of Western culture's redemptive qualities parallels Foucault's theory on the function of biopower in the biopolitical state. Foucault's assertion that biopower is not a hierarchical structure, but one that permeates through the functions of various organs that ensure the life of the biopolitical state is arguably comparable to Bersani's notion that bodily libidinal impulses are diffused throughout the social world, and sublimation functions to ensure that these sexual impulses be used for helpful purposes in terms of civilization. For the sovereign to integrate its citizens and maintain the collective unity of the population, it employs security measures that attempt to resist threats to the life of its subjects. The self-shattering of the infant child through pleasure may be sublimated throughout the social world as long as it is productive and life affirming, the aim of biopower; any practices of overt self-destruction and decentering of Self is reprimanded, especially when they pose a threat to the life of subjects, because this very life, *naked life*, is the sphere of sovereign control. The formation of

⁵⁴ Tomso, "Viral Sex and the Politics of Life" 278.

homosexuality as a medical term in the 19th century exemplifies the state's preoccupation with life production. Men engaging in sex with other men were to be integrated into society under medical terms that rendered their behavior as deviant because their sexual practices were representative of the erotic death experienced in self-shattering. Male subjectivity was violated through male to male penetration. The man being penetrated relinquishes his power, affirming the masochist nature of *énbranlement*. There is no disavowal, which Bersani would argue is what constitutes a large part of the modern social world.

Politics of Pleasure

Since the "normalization" of the HIV virus, as stated before, one of the biggest steps taken in order to preserve the life of gay men, whose identity is predicated on their sexual attraction to other men, has been the creation of medication that lengthens the lives of HIV positive individuals and inhibits the development of AIDS. One could now live with the virus for lengths of times unimaginable even fifteen years ago. Being HIV positive is no longer a death sentence, but a chronic condition. The work of AIDS activists and medical institutions has been to contain the spread of the virus and educate individuals to act responsibly when it comes to their sexual lives.

If responsibility is "strictly speaking the ability to respond," what has been the responsibility of homosexual men since the emergence of the AIDS epidemic? The responsibility of gay men has been to actively engage in safer-sex practices due to the fact that they belong to a population that has been demarcated as being "high-risk" for infection. The rational response from men engaging in sexual intercourse with other men, according to AIDS activists, health institutions, and governmental regulatory organizations, to not only wear condoms, but also reduce the number of individuals that one has sexual encounters with.

Bugchasers and barebackers are depicted as being irresponsible, not only because of the triviality with which they treat the implications of being HIV positive, but because of the health threat that they pose to the rest of the population. For better or worse, with the rise of HIV infection amongst gay men in the United States during the early 1980s and 1990s, healthcare institutions have attacked, however unintentionally, the very notion of engaging in gay sexual intercourse. Even organizations like the Gay Men's Health Crisis, reinforces the spread of HIV and AIDS as an endemic pertaining to gay men ("HIV/AIDS is the crisis of gay men").

Engaging in unprotected sex for barebackers allows for the creation of spaces in which the States' attempts to assert control over their sexuality as homosexual men is rendered futile. As evidenced in Louise Hogarth's documentary on the culture of barebacking and bugchasing, *The Gift*, individuals within barebacking communities, including bugchasers, hold seroconversion as the key that opens a door into a world of uninhibited sexual *jouissance* unattached from the state's efforts to debilitate homosexuality by encouraging monogamy and safer sex practices.

Presently, contracting HIV is not necessarily a death sentence. Medication is available to prolong life, and even for those who resists to medication, they can still manage to live well beyond what one might expect. Very few, if any at all, homosexual men that engage in unsafe sex do it in order to bring upon themselves some kind of death sentence. Bugchasers seek infection in order to enter the sexually uninhibited world of barebacking communities. If bugchasing and barebacking represent a politics, it is a politics of pleasure; a politics that embraces the self-shattering experienced in autoeroticism that thus gives forth new forms of life. Particularly for the bugchaser, being a bottom presents him with an opportunity to

experience penetration and inculcation with a disease that attacks life, but does not necessarily kill it.

Bugchasing and barebacking do not encompass the position of disavowing masochism so prevalent within our social world. To infect oneself with HIV is to, however perverse, shatter yourself by allowing another man and a disease to enter inside of you, without trying to repress or reject the pleasure of fucking that you bring unto yourself. It might be one of the true representation of queer identity, renouncing the State, the signifying order, and dominant culture.

Conclusion

In 1981 Michel Foucault made a call to action for homosexuals three years before dying of the very same disease central to barebacking communities. Instead of engaging in a politics that urged the inclusion of the homosexual into old ways of “being and becoming together”, Foucault advised young homosexuals to imagine new ways of being with one another. Foucault saw the figure of the homosexual as one who should ask himself the implications of relationality based on desire instead of attempting to find some inherent “truth” about one’s sex. The homosexual should “use one’s sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships. And, no doubt, that’s the real reason why homosexuality is not a form of desire but something desirable. Therefore, we have to work at becoming homosexuals and not to be obstinate in recognizing that we are.”⁵⁵ Current barebacking communities and its constituents are representations of innovative networks of relating to one another.

The end of bugchasing is to enter a realm of uninhibited access to *jouissance*, using as its means practices deemed as irrational and dangerous for the State for its implications on

⁵⁵ Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life” 136.

the health of communities, particularly the health of gay men. Bugchasers render futile attempts by the State to impede the transmission of HIV. By actively welcoming the “bug” into their bodies, their practices are considered to be hazardous for the health of the community. Thus, when the State engages its biopolitical call to health, it is met with the bug chaser’s challenge to the State.

Living with a microscopic entity, particularly human immunodeficiency virus “has become the source of not only new subjective identities but also intersubjectivity and social life.”⁵⁶ Barebackers, as homosexuals uninterested in the prospects of participating in pre-established institutions of relationality, have appropriated viral transmission as a means of promulgating memory-form and interdependability. They have based their lives – life itself – on the deadly risks of an invisible virus.

The HIV virus functions as a tangible bond that connects barebackers to one another. As homosexuals they have subverted State initiatives to impose biopolitics into the realm of the sexual. As “sick bodies” they have reappropriated the implications of what it means to live with a chronic illness. Barebackers have created a community composed by a micro-politics of a deadly “bug” as the locus of resistance to State imperatives. The State functions as a point of articulation of power, with the functions of biopower creating a biopolitics that carries at its crux control over life and death.

“Drawing of naked life [that] the sovereign used to be able to exact from the forms of life is now massively and daily exacted by the pseudoscientific representations of the body, illness, and health.”⁵⁷ Agamben asserts that a political life, “a life directed toward the idea of

⁵⁶ Dean, 95.

⁵⁷ Agamben, Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics 7.

happiness and cohesive with a form-of-life"⁵⁸ is only possible through a reclaiming of the naked life that the sovereign usurps from the human-subject. The habits of barebackers and bugchasers illustrate a reclaiming of biological life; viral sex renounces the State's secularization of life.

⁵⁸ Agamben, Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics 7

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