

Chapter 9

Cross-Dressing Violence: Barebacking as Symbolic Drag

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I consist of an artificial bitterness,
Faithful to I don't know what idea.
Like a make-believe courtesan, I don
Majestic robes in which I exist
For the artificial presence of the king.

Yes, all I am and want are but dreams.

—Fernando Pessoa, *A Little Larger than the Entire Universe*:

Selected Poems

Anoint Me: The Forging of an Equation

If the majority of early barebacking scholarship has assumed it to be a subcultural practice, a homosexual question, or solely an epidemiological concern, we can say without great risk that, in considering the practice, Jacques Lacan would know to not only *listen* to the barebacking subject as a subject *tout court*, but would simultaneously refuse to take him at his word. To consider barebacking from a Lacanian perspective is to thus choose a certain

blindness where science sees tangible matter, epidemiologists see numbers, and queer theorists who tend to distance themselves from psychoanalysis see all sorts of things, except desire.

My intervention into barebacking utilizes the language of Lacanian psychoanalysis to speak of desire whilst borrowing from a queer theory that isn't so eager to change the world in the present conjecture such that it forgets to analyze the very libidinal geography that structures, and rigs, that world. As in philosopher Paul B. Preciado's theory of the self as *de rigueur* channel, container, and filter through which all else flows, my analysis highlights the analyst in(side) the contaminating scene of analysis as an active and sexually implicated participant.¹ This is an inevitable condition of the text if its author, and readers, are willing to pay the price of avowal, of speaking.

Due to the application of testosterone and the subsequent questions surrounding what kind of feminist he then becomes, or wants to be, Preciado speaks of accepting the changes in his own body as operating as "the mutation of an epoch." Through a pharmacological self-remixing of sorts, he recognizes and challenges, among others things, the regulatory model of Foucault's panopticon as it plays itself out upon women's contraceptive pillboxes, both in their design and their ominous effects. The pill, for Preciado, is formed out of the accumulated effects of a history of "social orthopedics" attempting to keep the subject from *growing sideways*.² The pill has replaced the control tower. A system of oral self-

Sections of this essay previously appeared in Diego Semerene, "Playing Dead: On Part-time Transvestism, Digital Semblance and Drag Feminism," *Revista Periódicus* 5, no. 1 (2016): 235–53. Used here by permission of the publisher.

¹ This includes the subject's desire to be "infiltrated, absorbed and completely occupied" by power. Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sexe, Drogue et Biopolitique* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2008), 162.

² Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 21, 159; my translation. While Kathryn Bond Stockton deploys her concept of sideways growth mostly as an effect of a particularly queer child's inability to grow according to the dicta provided by the normative moulds/modes of growing, I think of this non-vertical growth as signaling that which a heterosexist system stunts, to various

administration has replaced the whip. Its daily intake also reminds us of the new PrEP regimens, which eerily link gay men, trans people, and bio women³ in an invisible, symbolic kin-making coup. Gender, or womanhood anyway, is here exposed not as a genital matter, but as a question of pharmacology, toxicity, repetition, and juggling between invisible labour (the taking of the pill, contraceptive, or prophylaxis, as a private and anxious, if not shameful, affair) and the hyper-visible effects of that labour in (re-)structuring behaviour and practices.

In this manner, the assigning of gender is a precarious affair marred by anxiety precisely because it depends on so much maintenance. Gendering is never done, as it must be projected—again, and again, and again—by the iterations that will make it legible and coherent to the point of confluence. That is, that illusion of seamlessness through visual trickery whereby gender’s repetitions will be (mis)read as one single flow, and thus as a natural given.⁴ Making sure gender sticks is, from the beginning, a dangerous business, as it risks coming undone if the repetition of, for instance, sartorial, performative, or prophylactic practice comes to a halt.

If the pill has served as a fundamental tool to build and manage the modern bio woman—not so “bio” after all: Preciado speaks of *bio-drag*, or somatic-political transvestism—how has the condom been used to build and manage the figure of the *gay mans*

degrees, in the human subject more broadly. Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

³ My utilization of the term “bio woman/women” is derived from Preciado’s own usage of the term in his book, which I assume to mean “biologically constructed,” or women whose gender identity matches the sex that they were assigned at birth.

⁴ J.C. Flugel defines confluence in vestimentary terms, when “the mind fails to distinguish two things which under other circumstances are easily kept apart” and fuses them “into a unity.” Here, too, confluence is under the threat of dissolution, “failing to undergo the necessary steps of incorporation.” In the case that a garment is too large to seem like an extension of the self, for instance, or a particular fabric appears to have a will of its own, refusing “to become a part of an organic whole,” then the body will look troublesomely foreign instead. J.C. Flugel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1930), 36–7.

⁵ I utilize *gay man* in italics throughout this chapter to stress the fact that this is a symbolic figure, not necessarily a gay man proper. I italicize *straight man* for the same reason. If I do

in the late twentieth century, and then, been re-signified as fetish so pervasively in the early twenty-first century? If the pill has, as the story goes, given bio women sexual freedom, or its illusion, while also being vehicles for their subjection (of reproduction, sex, and gender identity), can we situate the condom similarly, “from ablation to reconstruction,” from a repressively sartorial repetition (something the *gay man* puts on) to a contra-sartorial one (something the *gay man* peels off)?⁶ Can the foregoing of the condom as an identity-making device—condoms as prerequisite for the *gay man*’s acting out *gay man*-ness—be the subject’s attempt to *rename* himself, and thus to excavate an otherwise un-grantable access to a symbolic system where his desire is recognizable, at best, as a desire for others like him, for *gay man*-ness? By this set of questions I mean to suggest that the fantasy that gay men desire one another (not the *straight man* of the Symbolic), which has achieved its epitome in relentless quests for *marriage equality*, may break down at the level of (sexual) practice through barebacking. Here, the *gay man*, who is supposed to desire another *gay man*, may resort to the uncloaking of a prophylaxis (and equalizing) cover that has worked to turn him into someone who desires others like him, as a way to refuse such an equation (the *gay man* desires the *gay man*). If fights for marriage equality and subscriptions to a “born this way” mentality support the presumption of this fictitious equality at the level of desire (the *gay man* desires the *gay man*), the gay man’s bodily practices may be saying otherwise. Bareback appears, in this logic, as a way for the body to rebel against such fictions of equality, a way for the body to articulate the unwelcome desire’s unwelcome truths into an equation that could say the awfully non-progressive, “*gay man* desires *straight man*.” In what follows, I shall explain why barebacking may amount to the bodily articulation—a horny speech act—

not do the same for “gay men,” it is because in those moments I am speaking of a group and, thus, the non-coincidence between the category and the individual should go without saying.
⁶ Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 164.

of such an equation, where the *gay man* attempts to forge access to the *straight man* of the Symbolic—that is, the phallus proper, and not its queer double.

For psychoanalyst Sol Aparicio, naming is an operation of the Father, a symbolic figure, as construed within psychoanalysis, structured around castration, frustration, and privation. Naming, as a process involving the production of different signifiers, produces holes: if X isn't Y, then we now have something—a hole—that separates X from Y. The name itself, then, comes out of a hole. The name is put in place of a hole, like the phallus, to cover up a perceived absence. A hole spits out the name. Although this line of thought may seem puzzling, we would do well to bask in the sheer power of the metaphor, which is rendered particularly canny by Aparicio's linking of the hole to the prohibition of incest when she says that a "hole is always needed for a knot to be possible."⁷ That is, the spatial absence that the hole represents can be a rather fecund one, spawning steady links (knots) and scripting subjects (naming): even if that fecundity is phantasmatic, as it is in the language of barebacking, where the *gay man* can be *bred*. The hole may even illustrate the hopeful gap between one iteration and the next, one of the most fertile arguments in Judith Butler's oeuvre, which we find in the economy of any repetition—the very gap that enables queer kinds of derailing, dissidence, and rogueness.

Does barebacking, then, led by the numbing repetitiveness of cruising—which ends up rendering inept every object that dares to interrupt its course—literalize an attempt to poke a hole in the Symbolic, a hole that may grant the *gay man* access to its many, even if fictitious, promises (of fertility, of reparation)? It seems that barebacking, in its irrational—that is, unconscious—insistence, works as a response to symbolic alienation. A response that is at once subversive and reactionary, as it cracks the Symbolic in order to claim It.

Barebacking, I am arguing, dramatizes the new—or newly *expressed* ("easy and

⁷ Sol Aparicio, "The Names of the Father and Fathers" (presentation at the Research Group of Clinical Formations of the Lacanian Field seminar, Paris, July 6, 2013).

undetectable”)—ability or demand for a borderlessness between the categories—*names*—that have historically inscribed the *gay man* into a botched equation where he is supposed to desire (an)other *gay man*.⁸ Social gains have been won through this equation, but subversive sexual practices that “defy the logic,” such as barebacking, point to a body that longs for something else altogether. If this *something else altogether* can’t be gained at the level of the flesh, it may be produced through a phantasmatic enactment of its presence. Namely, the all-powerful phallus, the *straight man*’s, irresistibly capable of wielding death and illness whilst never succumbing to either. Barebacking stages a relationship between bodies that makes this phallus, this phallus that isn’t mine and which, under “normal” conditions does not want me (or even see me), appear before me, flood me, destroy me, repair me, anoint me.

Against Movement: Under the Aegis of the Symptom

Preciado’s pharmacopornography may come in the micro-prosthesis of a pill, an app, or, for those left to wonder how to sexually inhabit/penetrate/contaminate/cum with the Symbolic, wrapping and yanking of the condom, which, in its unused state also resembles the regulatory circularity of the contraceptive pillbox, as well as the anal rim and the harmonious circularity of the symptom, whose movement buoys its stillness. The death drive, an often interpellated concept in analyzing so-called risky behaviour in general and in barebacking in particular, is not just a push toward (self-)destruction, but a soothingly rhythmic repetition (regular, circular, constant), the interruption of which represents death of an obnoxious and unaccounted-for kind: not the death courted, or even swallowed, through risk, but the unwanted death qua death that catches the subject off guard, dismantling any sense of mastery completely.

⁸ Preciado speaks of *pop control* and *pop microfascism*. Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 160, 162. My translation.

A close reading of the movement of images online—that is, within pharmacopornographic sexual economies—suggests that despite the widely available technology of *moving images*, the digital subject chooses the still image as a mode of self-representation. The pharmacological also cuts through such an economy, with pills that grant the body a sense of keeping up with the priapistic fantasy of an Other who is readily available, and a self who is always performing well enough not to be rejected by such an Other. Who hasn't been buzz-killed by the perfectly masculine still photograph of a potential hookup who subsequently dared to speak, to move, or to materialize before our eyes? Is it not precisely because movement operates through a collection of gestures through time (analog cinema is the perfect literalization of this) *making sprocket holes*, as the case may be, that it is deemed too risky of a technology for self-presentation? When images move, holes are formed, threatening the confluence that otherwise guarantees the aura of unity surrounding the object of desire. Disenchantment lurks where these lacunae emerge. Clinging to the safety of the still image, the Subject reveals, and exploits, its potential for seizing what the moving image leaks (its surplus beyond the Subject's control) in the same way the notion of the category contains, or maims, the excessive queerness of desire (its inherent perverseness).⁹ And, perhaps, in the way philosopher Gerhard Richter argued for the anti-fascist properties of the human face, with its too many muscles and

⁹ There has been a lot of debate around perversion as a proper *name* of a psychic structure in psychoanalysis (along with neurosis and psychosis) since we could say that desire writ large abides by a perverse structure, which I argue to be what makes desire itself *queer*—that is, unstable, excessive, and nebulous. Perversion as the very fabric and condition of desire is, Joan Copjec argues, a putatively universal non-coincidence between all subjects and their statements, the “democratic” opacity, anti-normativity and unverifiability of desire. Discussed in James Penny, *The World of Perversion: Psychoanalysis and The Impossible Absolute of Desire* (SUNY Press, 2006).

nuances, and which digital self-displays that use movement (for instance, video selfies) are wont to blur under the veil of filters: the truth of the face is revealed precisely when it does not remain what it is. It assumes its proper self most fully in the moment in which it is shifting toward something else, another face, another identity. This moment of the shift *is* the proper self of the face. The language of truth, as it is staged upon the scene of its face, is always already traversed by its other.¹⁰

No wonder, then, that within a new media cruising economy of pledged bodies (forever-announced digital visitors that either never arrive or appear dead upon arrival, as in, killed by disenchantment) we find the consistent withholding of the human face, even from the still images put forth in hookup apps such as Grindr. In the name of discretion, the faceless subject withholds not only his identity but that “shifting toward something else” that could expose the dissymmetry between phantasmatic representation and corporeal actuality.¹¹ The cruising Subject withholds the face while making desperate demands to see the face of the Other, creating a tension that delays the still images of bodies from becoming bodies in motion subjected to the unaccounted-for properties that human contact warrants. This kind of cruising taps into the lacuna between contacts, prolonging the nothingness between iterations in ways that recall the current duration of HIV’s own time of incubation, or its fantasy: forever. The tug-of-war maintains the stillness of the death drive, a sense of immobility fabricated through the regularity of rhythmic movement, and buys the Subject time before the shifts toward something else become inevitable, spoiling the image, halting the fantasy, and

¹⁰ Gerard Richard, “Benjamin’s Face: Defacing Fascism,” in *Walter Benjamin and the Corpus of Autobiography* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 109.

¹¹ It isn’t without irony that we can locate the facial menace of Richter’s “shifting toward something else” in Judith Butler’s lacuna between gender-making repetitions—a hopeful space pregnant with off-script possibilities for the Subject. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

disrupting the cruising. The demand for the face of the Other in digital cruising can only be compared, in frequency and intensity, to the demand for masculinity (in the Other), both of which are contingent on a vowed face and masculinity of the self—one becoming the presumed guarantor of the other. This is the face as the ultimate giveaway or seal of approval for a masculinity that seems to always be elsewhere—in the (*straight man*'s) Symbolic. If all faces were voluntarily on display, all addresses promptly brought forth, all availability clearly cited, and all sexual demands legitimately listed (and *read*), instead of the stillness through the rhythmic movement of the death drive, the cruising subject would find himself in a forlorn, and pre-emptive, paralysis.¹²

We could link the threat of the face, along with its accompanying body in motion, to the unsettling potential of what psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas calls “the sexual logic of intercourse.” Intercourse appears as a disruptive key figure in the three-year-old child’s sexual epiphany that, “apart from Jesus (or ‘the Holy Family’), the child did not enter existence through maternal immaculate conception.”¹³ Instead of being the centre of the universe, the child may actually just be “an after-effect of parental sexual passion sought after for its own sake.” The crux of such a narcissistic crisis represented by the notion of the “intercourse”—as opposed to some kind of divine alignment of the stars to produce His Majesty, the Baby—is the idea that the self may be rendered as mere fallout from an act that wasn’t meant to be productive, but merely conducive. The disruption is one that takes the child away from a desired outcome, or *raison d’être*, to assuming the existential position of a

¹² “The pervert walking in the real is always on the prowl . . .” He produces “an illusion of omniscience, as the world seems to constantly serve up exact objects of desire.” Christopher Bollas, *Hysteria* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 170.

¹³ Notice how the three-year-old’s sexual epiphany comes just after the child has her body cut up by language and meaning into organs and limbs, ridding her further of oneness with the (m)other.

barebacking accident. A movement from cooked-up fantasy to accidental rawness:

barebacking makes babies, barebacking is heterosexual, heterosexuality is barebacking.¹⁴

The difficulty in distinguishing movement from stillness has been the most basic precondition for the genesis of cinema. We can see a mirroring version of such confusion, and its exploitation, in what Tim Dean calls aimless cruising, when the Subject moves around in a physical space—without the aid of new media gadgets—seeking an effigy of (hetero-)masculinity that could only last convincingly as such in darkness and in stillness. When such cruising happens through the digital, the Subject's movement becomes even more calculated and exclusionary, Dean argues, but less literalized, as the body is lost to its avatar, a much more hermetic effigy.¹⁵

The digital condition involves a repetitive and traumatic loss of the body, or of a body, and with cruising, the infinite postponement of its resurrection. Digital cruising (re-)dramatizes the experiences of alienation that, according to Lacan, the child experiences even before she is born, as language describes the infant's place in the world prior to birth, "thus imposing a primordial split between culture and nature in the causality of being."¹⁶ After that, at age two, the child will suffer a second alienating experience, which Lacan refers to as a form of castration, as language crops the body into parts and organs through meaning, all potentially laden with symbolic investments inherited from the parents ("you have Uncle Joseph's nose," "Grandpa's legs," or "Auntie Joan's hot blood," et cetera).¹⁷ Digital cruising

¹⁴ Bollas, *Hysteria*, 169.

¹⁵ Dean uses the term "aimless cruising" to describe the democratic way of seeking the *objet a* that doesn't foreclose chance ("contact" is possible here), which "digital cruising" and its relationship to the privatization of desire (only "networking" is possible here) seems to foreclose. Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

¹⁶ Ellie Ragland, *Essays On the Pleasures of Death: From Freud to Lacan* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 118.

¹⁷ We can presume a tendency toward failure and alienation in such identificatory attempts when addressed to queer subjects who would likely be linked to relatives and attributes not coinciding with their queerness, or with what is queer about their authenticity. Which isn't to

lends itself to the inscription “on various parts of the body, naming or designating (i.e., cutting up) the body,” remaking an(other) Subject for an(other) Other.¹⁸

Digital technology isn't the first to architect the fleshy body assigned male at birth into some kind of phallic effigy. In the early history of men's suits, a certain fantasy of manhood was also cloaked on, as tailors built the illusion of a homogenously masculine body through the ingenious utilization of cloth, an astute sense of design, and by harkening back to muscular sculptures of Greek antiquity as blueprints for a universal set of male body proportions.¹⁹ But in digital cruising, it is the Subject himself that assembles the *trompe l'oeil*, to the beat of his own symptom. His reconstruction is meant to mobilize this alienating function, the carving of the body through meaning, for his own libidinal profit, based on the assumption of what the Other would like to see represented (phallic masculinity, whiteness, hairlessness, able-bodiedness), and what He would like to be kept off frame. Even if claims of masculinity and other kinds of *renaming* (through the development of hair/lessness and muscle) may be at odds with what these bodies actually want done to them. Whether on Grindr or in Craigslist's Casual Encounters section (where posts were short-lived and with significantly more room for descriptive writing and explication), limbs are cropped out of context and thereby gain a certain generality. As Subjects resort to canned notions of masculinity (decidedly masculine signs), a blankness is staged (when the face is finally put forth it is often a disaffected poker face): torsos, buttocks, and penises aim to seduce by being read as masculine/white/hairless/able-bodied enough. This allows the whoever-Other to project the whatever-fantasy that will make for a rejection less likely as possible.²⁰ A rejection is, in this context, a deadlier interruption than a deadly virus itself. It derails the

say that the identificatory attempts to link children to relatives when it comes to supposedly normative subjects are any less violent.

¹⁸ Ragland, *Essays On the Pleasures of Death*, 118.

¹⁹ Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress* (New York: Knopf, 1994).

²⁰ “The net of determinants was spread out far enough to catch the prey in any case.” Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. (Empire Books, 2012), 89.

clockwork circularity of the symptom that cloaks us with the illusion of a stable identity—a name—in the first place. After all, by the time the Subject is caught up in the regular circularity of digital cruising, an unconscious decision has already been made, and remade at every cruising iteration, about the deadliness of the virus that haunts and shapes psychic and digital economies alike. Its deadliness has been neutered, or at least harnessed, phantasmatically, through the dynamics of cruising itself: the repetition and the numbing *frisson* that it begets, provided the narrative isn't severed.

The fact that Lacan describes objects, or things in the world, as inscribed within a place of lack (a hole), serve as the symbolic backbone for the digital cruising subject's repetitive experience of finding nothing behind the image. Or, rather, finding something that always turns out to be lacking (masculinity), which helps explain the impression that digital cruising has become increasingly a solitary masturbatory end, not a means for sexual intercourse, as gay men seem more interested in demanding (more images, more masculinity) than risking a physical encounter, or even just movement: the demands remain rooted in still images in all of the phallic confluence that only a static effigy, or the phantasmatic acting out of such an effigy in barebacking, could successfully re-present continuously. While the figure of the pervert in psychoanalysis produces a carefully coded closed field to put his fantasy at play, one that involves a ready-made love without gambles or surprises, the hysteric gives his self as a malleable perfect gift to the Other, the master who can sculpt him as though he were clay. Psychoanalyst Néstor Braunstein calls it a "sacrificial offer," which the hysteric follows with acts of scolding, accusation, self-pity, and violent complaints that will only prove that the Other is deceitful, that the deceit is in the Other. Then the hysteric will move on to another Other, who may seem worthy of his sacrifice, and may finally bring him plenitude.²¹

²¹ Néstor Braunstein, *La Jouissance, Un Concept Lacanien* (Paris: Erès, 2005), 208. My translation.

It's easy to read the hysteric's strategy of the sacrificial offer in the dynamic of gay men's obsessive search for the perfectly masculine Other in cruising. This may in fact put gay men in a relationship of kinship with heterosexual men, who themselves—and just as desperately—look for legitimization of (their) masculinity in the masculine Other, albeit through less sexual—although certainly not less erotic—means. But for gay men in the digital cruising economy, the chorus is omnipresent in its drive to build a master out of the Other only to unveil his inability to *masterfully* occupy such a position. “No femmes,” “masculine only,” “masc 4 masc,” and their various versions can be said to form the very crux of this digital cruiser's demand and complaint—a demand whose purpose is perhaps rooted in the certainty of the complaint that follows it.²² An expression of an ideal immune of the femininity that taints, exposes, and mirrors lack, simultaneously stated with a horrific (paranoid?) dread of a femininity that lurks and risks surprising the self, and exposing the chasm between his diligently composed fantasy object and the objects that actually turn up. The demand for an airtight masculinity borrowed from the ready-made ideal of hetero-masculinity is interpellated as hysterically as the fear, or certitude, that such a figure is there to simply (cock)block the view of literalized lack: there where there is nothing.

If the lack (of spotless masculinity) is pre-emptively produced/projected in the Other in digital cruising, in a way that echoes the sleight of hand that very same subject performs vis-à-vis viral deathliness, this may displace the self's own (history of) inadequate masculinity. The fantasy of sameness, or equality, masculine for masculine, which is so prevalent in the demands of online personal ads, makes the fantasy of an ideal masculinity of the self (which it presumes to be what the Other desires, in hysteric fashion) contingent on the ideal masculinity of the Other. In a contract of fiction—*I believe you are It, if you believe*

²² Darian Leader reminds us that the neurotic is interested in collecting injustices, generating situations in which he is refused the breast. Leader, “Is Jouissance really such a great concept?” (Paper presented at the Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research public seminar, London, UK, November 3, 2018).

I am It too—it is as though the repetitiveness of such a game, and the expendability of the Other, the entertaining of the idea of an encounter or intercourse, provoked more pleasure because it doesn't need to ever stop. The self's strategy is to bank on the masculinity of the Other being a ruse before that ruse reveals itself as such, catching the Subject by surprise. The Subject would rather catch the Other red-handed than be caught off guard himself.²³

Following this logic, the alleged/presumed courting of death through barebacking risks the bearing of death as a pregnancy that will never deliver, thanks to pharmacological technology (the period of incubation perennially extended), in order to disarm death as a necessarily premature surprise. Once death isn't disavowed or kept at arm's length, but contained in the virus that is such an intimate variable in the Subject's everyday equation of desire—courted, swallowed, incorporated, and expelled a million times—death qua death is disdained as pre-emptively belated.

All Knotted Up: On Phantasm and Pharmacology

While the technologies of cruising have evolved to enable a compression of the chasm between *fort* and *da* to potential immediacy, it is rather significant that the Subject works to produce an infinite interval between the pushing and the pulling, and makes of this deferral the space and time of pleasure.²⁴ It is also worth noting that the extension of this spatio-temporal chasm (between encountering the image of the Other and witnessing its fleshy version), which seeks to maintain cruising as a voyage without a destination, has been

²³ It must be noted that this strategy mirrors that of heterosexual masculinity itself, which is perhaps more successful in its presumed confluence, but just as in need of keeping it up: through sports, laughter, language, clothes, tattooing, and rape culture writ large.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud famously described a game played by his grandson involving a cotton reel, which the little boy would repeatedly throw out of his crib, saying “gone!” and “there!” depending on when the makeshift toy was next to his body or far from it. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 14–17. Ragland highlights the vacillation between a sense of “being ‘there’ (*Da-Sein*)” and being “‘gone’ (*Fort-Sein*),” which is at the root of all human experience (or the experience of all humans), in her remarks on Lacan's concept of *jouissance*. Ragland, *Essays On the Pleasures of Death*, 98.

accompanied by health technologies' own extension between the contracting and the experiencing of HIV. This pharmacologically produced delay, too, becomes the time and space, and somatic condition, of pleasure as even the worst-case scenario for a not-yet-positive barebacking Subject wouldn't phantasmatically mean death, but its pharmacologically managed gestation. "In sexual intercourse the hysteric's sex object is internal only, and the sexual Other is engaged as a masturbation partner who shall screen carnal contents, which verge on guided imaginings," says Bollas.²⁵

For those who are already HIV-positive, or PrEP users, the chronic or ultimate and sacrificial *swallowing* of power only allows for cruising to happen even more smoothly, without the interruptions that anxiety begets, or the practical putting on of the condom itself. The phantasmatic termination of death qua death reaches its zenith. For some, having swallowed of the virus may function as a nano-technological connection to, if not the Father, then quite literally the state. In New York City, for instance, having full-blown AIDS can mean getting a roof over one's head, basic services, "and all this other stuff," perhaps in a way similar to some destitute men for whom prison at least guarantees a roof over one's head, food, sobriety, and masculine kinship.²⁶

The naturalized body of the normative subject is, of course, a fantasy body that, in its translation from idealized image to a body in practice, also becomes queer—not just because queerness is precisely the condition of desire (in all of its oceanic excess and instability), but because bodies move and "make holes." And as they do, both normative and queer bodies (in this logic of non-coincidence they are one and the same) expose the body *tout court* as mere image animated by whatever tools the Subject can (re-)signify it with. The digital cruising Subject, however, appropriates and reverses this botched translation, or trajectory, from

²⁵ Bollas, *Hysteria*, 166.

²⁶ Maral Noshad Sharifi, "The Men Who Want AIDS—And How It Improved Their Lives," *Out*, August 8, 2013, <http://www.out.com/news-opinion/2013/08/02/men-who-want-aids-bronx-new-york?page=0%2C0>.

idealized imagistic body to failed queer body-in-the-world vis-à-vis an inevitably heterosexual Symbolic logic. The dynamic now goes from an initially failed queer body, alienated from a symbolic system it desires but has no access to, unable to accede a normative mimicry (or confluence), repairing itself through the idealized imagistic body that the digital enables, or demands, and back to the body-fallen-short in the flesh (in the case that a fleshly body is produced at all). Since the digital cruiser seems to know, or dread, that the boy on the screen may be the product of a similar trajectory—a botched passing—enjoyment becomes more likely if the body of the Other remains a theoretical body ad infinitum. The best moment of love is thus no longer “when the boy leaves in the taxi,” as Foucault once had it, but when the boy remains there and never arrives.²⁷ That way a confrontation with lack (there where there is nothing) is avoided. Enjoyment is produced through its very deflection.²⁸

If the Other is so easily spoiled, such that it does not coincide with the phallic promises of its still and faceless image—its effigy—barebacking has emerged as a shortcut for fantasies of hermetic hetero-masculinity. There is, after all, something phallic about the Other who can, if not perfectly perform masculinity, at least annihilate it by the proxy of a virus. Barebacking may thus be not so much about the Subject’s own body, but rather the body of a phallic Other who dares to bareback and must therefore be impenetrable to the virus or, at the very least, rendered impossibly destructive through its harbouring. But even that phantasmatic solution can be disarmed by its own practice. The casting of actual straight men into the fantasy of the self would, then, seem to guarantee a more sustainable solution, which can be achieved by the cross-dressing of *gay man*’s body for sexual purposes. I here

²⁷ Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 297.

²⁸ The pervert knows something about “that where there is nothing,” he knows something of the female body’s enigmas. We may liken these enigmas to the vagina, but also the anus, as well as the symbolic “nothing.” Lucien Israël, *La Jouissance de L’Hystérique* (Paris: Éditions Arcanes, 1996), 98. My translation.

make the confluence between the cross-dressing *gay man* and trans not as a flippant provocation, but as the theoretical culmination of the argument I have thus developed—that is, the idea of *gay man*'s desire for *gay man* being an existential misnomer that could be solved through his/her renaming. Which, I argue, is precisely what *gay man* might do when s/he barebacks.

Cross-Dressing Violence: Barebacking as Symbolic Drag

As described elsewhere,²⁹ I recently caught myself posting online ads in which I impersonate a husband looking for a “bull” to come over and play with my wife (performed by myself) while “I,” the husband, am gone. Not only that. The bull is to borrow my wife in front of a webcam so that “I” can watch the act of cuckoldry remotely and record it. Since the wife will probably ask for the bull to wear a condom, the fantasy goes, I ask the bull to discreetly pull the condom off during sex, without her noticing it. It is true, a bull originally responds to an ad that said nothing about the cross-dressing condition of the wife, but also doesn't seem to mind when such details are revealed, in the third or fourth email exchanged between us. Such a bull must be hailed away from his original, and originally normative, trajectory, it seems, so he can still be contaminated by his original normative intentions when he comes over.

When the bull arrives I am lying in bed as if trapped in this lacuna between a man I know, and who only exists in my remote impersonation of him (the husband), and a man I don't (the bull). I lie there, like a little lamb, letting the men carry out their plan. I feign oblivion and obedience. I, the figurative woman, desire nothing. I lend my body to the desire of the men, which they negotiated among themselves, in my apparent/assumed absence and the insignificance of what I want.

²⁹ Semerene, “Playing Dead,” 235–53.

The bull's ignorance of the fact that, in reality, the one being tricked is himself seems to hollow him out, enhancing his size, his weight, his force. By contrast, I become increasingly helpless and smaller. I need to give him an opportunity to seal the deal and take the condom off without my knowing it. For the condom to count as being off, its usage needs to be derailed mid-act. Except that the bull is the one who doesn't know. Or does he . . . but still? At the moment he begins pulling off the condom and sticking his penis back inside me I turn around and ask where the condom is. I catch him red-handed. This is where my fantasy—co-scripted by the fact that at the time I am HIV-negative and not on PrEP—ends: with the disappearance of the condom, for which no one is willing to take responsibility.

In Lacan's famous play with the sound of Name-of-the-Father (*nom du père*) concept,³⁰ which fixes the Father's prohibitive function, he establishes that *les non-dupes errent*, or "those who do not let themselves be caught in the symbolic deception/fiction and continue to believe their eyes [,] are the ones who err most." *Les non-dupes errent* sounds, phonetically, like *le nom du père*, and it is most often translated along the lines of "the non-duped err." It can also be translated as "the non-duped wander (in circles)," or quite simply, "the non-duped cruise."³¹

Maud-Yeuse Thomas notes that for a regime that exerts control through the regulation of opposites (heterosexuality-homosexuality, *gay man–straight man*), the figure of the cross-dresser or the transvestite occupies the domain of the lie and of dupery: "the transvestite is the ultimate pariah, especially when he [*sic*] becomes undetectable." Thomas also associates the transvestite with the figure of the *flâneur*—that is, the wandering around (in circles) of the non-duped, which Dean links to the analog gay cruising subject, and the "sex-club patron" in

³⁰ The Name-of-the-Father has to do with the restraints and laws that control desire with the help of the Symbolic.

³¹ Slavoj Žižek, "With or Without Passion? What's Wrong With Fundamentalism—Part I," <http://www.lacan.com/zizpassion.htm>. Previous online citations haven't included access dates. I'm removing this for consistency.

particular, “who readily loses himself in a stream of bodies and whose individuality thus consists in the disappearance of individuality.”³² Dean speaks here of a general “cruising ethos” that “conduces to this impersonalizing effect.”³³

The jump from gayness to T-girlhood (cross-dressing subjects assigned male at birth are largely referred to and refer to themselves as “T-girls” online) makes visible, even audible (“Hi hunny,” “How are you babe?”), the strategy of sweetness and chivalry *straight man* uses to dress the hole-making violence (can we speak of a transmaterial barebacking that requires no flesh?) of the heterosexual sex act in some kind of love scene.³⁴ Whilst the gay sex scene is often one of constraint and absence of chivalry in order to avoid any of the subjects being tainted as the more feminine object out of the two, the heterosexual sex scene forged here involves a kind of swindling, a drag of interests of another kind. As a T-girl, these men, unlike gay men, are quick to offer me things—a drink, a ride, cash, the best moment of my life, sperm, and even face pictures.

Their attempts at conveying sweetness and selflessness aim to reduce the feminine object lying before them to as weakened a state as possible in order to potentialize whatever-it-is-that-they-do as sufficiently phallus-like. They err on the side of a hollow politeness that reiterates my role as literalized object and theirs as active agents, a position they hide behind a chivalry that, in the end, is its opposite. My consent will always be partial when compared to the pleasure they are sure to derive from it. And it is always a “they,” either because my cuckold husband is involved or in the slew of verifications that certain hook-up sites, such as Fabswingers in the United Kingdom or Wyyld in France, allow for: heterosexually-identified men singing the praises of a T-girl’s ass or blowjob skills, essentially pitching her

³² Maud-Yeuse Thomas, “Éthnologie du Travesti(ssement),” *Miroir/Miroirs* 2, no. 1 (2014): 55. My translation.

³³ Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 36.

³⁴ Thierry Schaffauser, “Drag Queen Feminism,” *Miroir/Miroirs* 2, no. 1 (2014): 91. My translation.

to fellow comrades. Their strategy seems to reiterate the masculinist fantasy that the feminine position is one that is ultimately not that pleasurable (the woman is expected to resign herself and her self to man's pleasure if he is sneaky enough to apparently fool her), and it is particularly evident when discussing if a condom will be used or not.

The majority of heterosexually-identified men I meet online delegate that decision to the T-girl, as if only my body were vulnerable to disease. They tend to either claim it makes no difference for them or avow preferring one way or another (usually without it) but that they would be happy to do whatever as long as I (partially) consent to the sex act: "I don't care if I use one"; "I'll leave it up to you how rough you want it"; "I'm into rough sex, follow her rules of course"; "it is always up to the woman if she wants it bare or condoms"; "No rules here I follow yours!!"; "I'll satisfy your needs and desires"; "Condom or bare up to you but I do want to creampie that pussy all nite then cuddle up." Freud describes tenderness as a way of managing hostility, and he relates such a strategy to the relationship between mother and child, and married couples. In both cases, dressing violence with sweetness reveals the veneration of the person in the position of power, "their very deification" to be "opposed in the unconscious by an intense hostile tendency, so that, as we had expected, the situation of an ambivalent feeling is here realized."³⁵

The adherence to violence is sometimes done through overt speech or through association to certain subcultures whose sartorial signs and other associations (S&M, leather, uniforms, gangbangs, slings) articulate the desire for violence so that the subject doesn't have to. In fact, the admission may even be welcome in that it mimics a supposedly masculine interest in aggression. Violence, that which touches the unprotected, is exposed as the guarantor that heterosexuality has taken place. The men replying to my online ads seeking to cast a bull to have sex with a wife, who turns out to be a T-girl, often utilize violent language

³⁵ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 46

as a way to convince the supposed husband that they should be chosen for the job: “would def take [her] Down”; “have a black belt in eating pussy”; “beat that pussy up in every way possible”; “experienced Dom here to ruin her. . .”; “I will damage that white pussy”; “I’ll put [her] in [her] place because I make the rules since I’ve got the Dick”; and “You could not handle what I have.”³⁶

Barebacking in a *gay man–gay man* arrangement appears, then, as the guarantor of heterosexual violence (violence as heterosexual) for those who cannot enjoy the violence of heterosexuality proper.³⁷ A virus could indeed ravage the body despite the quality of the phallic performance by the top, or “active” sexual partner. A lethal virus is naturally priapic. If the phallus fails, as it is wont to do once it’s forced to perform, the failure of an undetectable virus to damage the body in the feminine position will never be found out, for even its alleged/apparent successful wrecking won’t show its signs but in the future, if at all.

This fantasy of violence pays respect to a fantasy that nature will take its course; the achievement of the Other’s performance (of masculinity) isn’t even needed when in the end, biology will take care of it. If there is a desire for shattering in bareback-aimed cruising it is primarily a desire for the fantasized invincibility of the phallus to be made evident by not being attestable. By the time the subject knows if transmission has taken place, she will never be able to match the virus to the culprit. She alone will bear the effects of the anonymous act. Like a mother; the virus and the phallus, like gender: copies for which there are no originals.

AEBttmBoi from barebackrt.com, for instance, writes on his profile that “BB [barebacking] is natural and i always BB now, Cock belongs in ass bare!” He then expresses

³⁶ In Take1WildRide’s profile on TSdating.com, he describes himself as a sucker for “passable young gorgeous girls” and feels compelled to explain the driving force behind his search in this way: “it’s not so much your parts of body type as much your face [*sic*] I need a chick to release all this pent up aggression & rage.” See <http://www.tsdating.com/members/Take1WildRide/>.

³⁷ In my T-girl fantasy of cuckoldry I double down on guaranteeing heterosexual violence by managing to hail *straight man* into the scene and scripting it so that he threatens barebacking violence, so that barebacking is enacted—even if promptly aborted—as a threat.

his desire to “exploit” his “hole & throat by having it stretched, fucked, RAPED, & seeded (preferably by a group of UNCUT guys!).” His ultimate fantasy is a recurrent one in many barebacking accounts: “to be gangraped & breded [*sic*] by enough guys to have my boicunt & mouth leaking nut. Use & verbally degrade this worthless CumSlut // Latinos a plus /.” We can see signs of aggression the user associates with an impotence to guarantee the violence that the fantasy demands. A rape is desired not only by one, but by a group of men, potentialized by fantasies of virility attached to their race, the verbal reassurance that one is being degraded, and the visual confirmation of wreckage, as sperm flows out of his orifices like an ejaculating hemorrhage (“my boicunt & mouth leaking nut”).³⁸ Ironically, the excreting of the sperm, often associated with breeding fantasies, functions as liquid evidence of the absence of breeding. The sperm has leaked out, not gone inside some kind of phantasmic womb. In this context, the excreted sperm gains what Arnaud Alessandrin describes as “the double movement” of vomiting in its queer “incapacity to swallow and incapacity to digest.”³⁹

Monique Schneider speaks of the belittlement of the desired object as a condition to make its approach possible. We can see this belittlement in classic hetero-sexist masculinity, in which the reducing of the feminine object is a *sine qua non* (played up in porn, but stirring the sexual practice of everyday life): “a disdainful attitude constitutes a necessary subterfuge for the temptation to love, whether it is addressed to art or women, making oneself protected against the risk of losing . . .”⁴⁰

³⁸ See <https://www.barebackrt.com/members/view.php?id=273460>.

³⁹ Arnayd Alessandrin, “Les Fluides Comme Médiateurs Du Dégoût: L’Exemple des Corps Trans,” in *Miroir/Miroirs* 7, no. 2 (2016): 23. My translation.

⁴⁰ Monique Schneider, “Freud et Le Combat Avec L’Artiste,” in *L’Artiste et Le Psychanalyste*, ed. Joyce McDougall (Paris: PUF, 2008), 52, 53; my translation. Sylvia Payne sees the need to be pregnant in terms of the need to “have control over a feared object.” B. Lerner, R. Raskin, and E.B. Davis, “On The Need To Be Pregnant,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 48 (1967): 288–97.

This belittlement apparatus creates a psychosomatic relationship between the symbolic violence of heterosexuality itself and the literal violence of a viral annihilation of the body. Barebacking can work as an underwriter for exacting difference through the latent/phantasmatic/imagistic violence of infection. This is true for subjects under the threat of sameness (the ruse of *gay man–gay man* equality in the equation of desire), in which a difference must be found beyond ready-made genital difference, as in gay subjectivity more evidently, but not exclusively. Barebacking is fantasy material for heterosexuality as well. Even genitally locatable difference is always already under threat, as it is contingent on the fragility of repetition (of gender difference) and centred around the ever elusive phallus (the original *there where there is nothing*).

If the penis fails to mimic the invincibility of the phallus as if both were one, and we can bet that it will, we can at least count on the potential transferring of the virus as the “trick” that the active partner (man) harbours under his sleeve. Curiously, man’s promise of the great phallus and delivering the mere penis mirrors the T-girl’s own game of presenting seeming feminine lack and its accoutrements while hiding the penis, except that man knows the penis is there, and it is hers, which makes its revelation foreseeable and yearned. Horror, as such, is pre-emptively averted.

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