Biohazards and the Queer Sexual Imagination

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This is a city easy to romanticize. It’s springtime in Montréal, my home of the last decade, and the streets of our city’s gay village are being prepped for another season of tourists, people watching, and revelry: two gloriously butch artists are constructing a mosaic square-by-square on the construction hoarding next to my café; I can hear the sound of hammers erecting the patio at Apollon across the street, a space in which I imagine myself spending a good deal of time. The café in which I sit is a well known local hangout; there is as much reading here as there is purposeful staring—queer choreography at its finest. The boy next to me is really cute.

My desire in these paragraphs, as and beyond a response to Joshua Schuster’s essay, is to dwell upon the symbols of recycling and biohazards as pictorial and metaphorical

Joshua Schuster

We need contact.

Samuel Delany

Alongside the dismal toll of death, what many of us lost is a culture of sexual possibility.

Douglas Crimp
demarcations of the queer sexual imagination. The biohazard in particular, I posit, not only governs the limits of queer sexual possibility but forever pushes those limits in continual extension—an extension not in the service of a well-trodden argument concerning identity, inclusion, and open-mindedness but instead pertaining in this essay to the importance of that extension as ontological process, in this case through the subcultural practices of barebacking, determined risk and, more radically, the purposeful transmission of HIV commonly known as breeding that the biohazard symbol has come to represent. While the jump between my rather innocent café and breeding may seem like a stretch, my purpose here is to demonstrate that these practices, contentious as they are, ultimately dictate the parameters of queer sexuality and what I’ll call the queer sexual imagination: barebacking, HIV, and the purposeful transmission of the virus are the radical others by which queer space and queer sex are known as such. I want to show that the increasing academic interest in such practices, beyond how barebacking relates to the normalization of HIV resultant from medical advances known as antiretrovirals, is a reaction to the shifting horizon of queer sex, a horizon shaping the contours of my café experience. My presence in this café, or more accurately the kind of environment that this café represents within queer culture, is conditioned by the possibility of barebacking subcultural participation.

II.

There exists, most certainly, an understandably large contingent of people of all sexual orientations who would, and are most welcome to, find my subject rather reprehensible. At the heels of a devastating epidemic—one that is ongoing, unending—it is hardly difficult to understand such a point of view. But it is undeniable that barebacking-as-subject (as opposed to barebacking-as-practice) has become increasingly investigated in both queer theoretical interventions and empirical social and scientific research: the former being most famously exemplified in Tim Dean's *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* and his subsequent essay, “Bareback Time” from which this present essay takes its cue. My goal here is not to romanticize or glorify the virus known as HIV and its eroticization, but instead to map the ways in which unencumbered and unsafe sexual practices impress upon, and are in turn impressed upon, the everyday lived experience of queer sexuality. Thus, in anticipation of resistance, and in an effort to pinpoint my topic with a greater exactitude, I'd like to forward three caveats before, as it were, delving in. First, the conditioned sexuality that I mobilize in this essay principally, but not exclusively, belongs to queer men—though “queer” can be taken in its variety of connotations beyond its limited “gay” and overly sanitized “men who have sex with men.” Let us not forget, though, that the discourse of sexual safety is not limited
to the presence of the phallus. Second, the lived experience of queer sexuality—café cruising and rather way beyond—differs enormously, including how the manifestation of that sexuality may be accessed and performed. Third, in rather a banal way, I want to press for a form of analysis free of judgement; as much as possible, I’m attempting to neither advocate for nor condemn the plethora of sexual desires, actions, and subcultures here considered—though I recognize that that may be easier said than done.

As I’ve mentioned, the biohazard symbol in queer culture has become the iconographic signification of barebacking, or the purposeful omission of condoms during penetrative sex. The term, originating from the equestrian act of riding a horse without a saddle (one of many glorious puns appropriate within queer lingo), has undergone a resurgence in queer culture in conversation and in practice, is no longer the taboo it once was at the apex of the AIDS crisis. In fact, “barebacking” is now an acceptable choice of preferred sexual activity listed on individual profiles in sex and dating sites, including Squirt.org, thereby signalling, for better or for worse, a newfound commonplace character of the term. As symbol, the biohazard has become co-opted in gay pornography, notably by Treasure Island Media, a leading production company of bareback videos, and pornstars including Ethan Wolfe, who has the symbol tattooed directly above his penis. In its more overt connotation, the biohazard symbol has come to signify “gift-giving,” often known as breeding, in which participants “give” or “pass” (or, more often than not, continuously re-enact such giving and passing) HIV from a seropositive top to a seronegative bottom. As such, in Wolfe’s case, the symbol’s traditional prophylactic connotation has been reversed to signify an intentional disavowal of safety. In Unlimited Intimacy, Dean emphasizes how breeding “represents a way to repeat the unrepeatable, to make seroconversion something you can practice. Bug chasing fosters an illusion that one is the master of, rather than completely subjected to, his erotic destiny” (53). Essentially, the biohazard represents, within queer iconography, the limits of “erotic destiny,” and, as such, comes to equally represent how the queer sexual imagination contains within it the possibility of controlling, dictating the parameters of, and surpassing those very limits.

In Schuster’s essay on the tensions between symbols of recycling and biohazards, he posits that the biohazard reminds us of the pains of embodiment and the risks that at every moment surround the exposed and vulnerable body that depends on maintaining the thin and semi-porous barrier between beings wanted and unwanted. Vigilance over the anti-corporeal, or that which cannot be incorporated into any bodily system, appears at the same time as a utopian hope for the continuous body, the effortless system, and the process of perpetual motion that would be the dream of an ecosystem
without loss or breakdown. We are caught between these marks compelled to mark everything as the anti-ecological and the endlessly ecological. (9)

I here gamble drawing too overt a parallel between ecological and sexual risk, barriers and the discourse of safe(r) sex, as well as the “anti-ecological” and HIV, but I’d like to argue that the tension through which Schuster understands the “anti-” to inform the “ecological,” including the ecological’s possibility of being ecological (ultimately manifested as the “dream” of purity, the “dream” of perpetuation) exists in comparable relation to how the queer sexual imagination is caught between sexual practices which place participants at risk of acquiring HIV—undeniably seen as “impure” in its stigmatization—or re-enacting its acquisition, and the discourses which foreclose the possibility of such practices. This essay considers what’s at stake in such foreclosure.

III.

As I’ve already alluded, the tension between my café experience and (the subcultural act termed) breeding naturally exists in concordance with the tensions inherent in discourses of safe(r) sex. Put succinctly, there is on the one hand a form of sexual freedom, or what Douglas Crimp has overtly termed promiscuity, through which queer cultural participation has defined itself and promoted as forms of responsible queer livelihood, and on the other, a discourse of sexual restraint, monogamy, and chastity harkening to the early 1980s at the onset of AIDS-related deaths. I must, though, emphasize from the beginning that the tension is not (solely) between safe and unsafe sex, but instead the positive and negative valences between which sex and sexuality are imagined within our collective queer culture—Crimp will ultimately demonstrate the possibility of a concomitance of sex-positivity and the promotion of safe(r) practices.

We might productively emphasize this tension through the words of playwright Larry Kramer and art scholar Crimp, two activists at notorious political odds despite their years of participating in relatively similar activist initiatives. Kramer, in The Normal Heart, his 1985 autobiographical play depicting the creation and early activities of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, has Ned, the character purported to represent Kramer himself, proclaim to the group’s other members: “Do you realize that you are talking about millions of men who have singled out promiscuity to be their principal political agenda, the one they’d die before abandoning?” (qtd. in Crimp 56). Kramer, through Ned, is here drawing a distinct parallel between queer sexual abandon and political irresponsibility—so much so that he has Emma, a doctor treating gay men, demand that Ned tell his friends (and, symbolically, queers everywhere) to stop having sex until the epidemic effectively concludes: “if having sex can kill you, doesn’t anybody with half a brain stop fucking?” (Kramer 27). (Moreover, it is not insignificant that
The Normal Heart has recently been restaged, this time on Broadway. These sentiments continue their ever present resonance vis-à-vis contemporary sexual practices.) Emma and Ned’s words ought to be compared to Crimp’s who, in the introduction to his collected essays on AIDS, contends that

responsibility may well follow from sex. This has obviously made sex terribly paradoxical for gay men during an epidemic of a sexually transmitted deadly disease syndrome. The paradox has meant that we’ve had to live with an especially heavy burden of conflict, with deep and enduring ambivalence. And we’ve had to discern and resist the easy answers that moralistic attitudes toward sex would provide to falsely resolve our conflict and ambivalence. (16)

In contrast to The Normal Heart, Crimp renders sex—that through which gay men have come to identify the richness of their lives—as responsible, a term usually hurled at queers dictating what they ought to be and, more often, what they are not. That members of the queer community heeding “moralistic attitudes toward sex” can only do so in bad faith bolsters Crimp’s overarching project in an essay entitled “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic” in which Crimp attempts to outline how safe sex requires sex to, well, happen. Promiscuity, as I will show, is for Crimp both an ethics through which queerness is defined but also, on a more practical level, an assertion that denying sex and sexuality leads us to performing sexual practices in unsafe, and unseen, ways. Put flatly, denial doesn’t work. At issue in relation to my discussion of barebacking, however, is neither an argument pertaining to health nor to an inward responsibility to the self or personal wellbeing; instead, Kramer and Crimp provide counterarguments on queer political participation, sexual culture, and what we might think of as relationality—the attitude and disposition of one queer body toward another. The opposition formulated here metonymically speaks to the greater tension between a form of queerness true to its sexually liberated origins versus a radical shift towards what opponents of the movement would term sexual negativity. We might say, though, that this sexual negativity deploys safe(r) sex to bolster its argument, as opposed to safe(r) sex leading to sexual negativity; that is, beyond its essential mandate of safety, the discourse of safe(r) sex is being deployed in the service of regulation, stigmatization, and normitivization. At stake between the two positions is the way in which queer sex is imagined—the way in which sex and sexuality have shaped the contours of queer life, the communal social imagination by which we measure ourselves to be and, dare I say, empower such being.

Peggy Phelan takes up the relationship between the discourse of safe(r) sex and queer corporeality, most specifically how such corporeality is enacted and performed over the course of AIDS in its specific instantiations (as in, artists who chart the course of their own illness) and in its global scale (as in, the course of the epidemic at the levels of community, nation, world). In Mourning Sex, Phelan writes
The possibilities opened up by the sexual revolution, we have been told, have been foreclosed by the onslaught of AIDS. This claim is both shockingly inaccurate and deeply true. The reasons for the foreclosure of those possibilities are many and AIDS is, among other things, a *tabula rasa* for the projections of multiple myths... As we go about making new sexual sexualities in the technologies and misprisions of “safe(r) sex” we also mourn the loss of the “liberation” (however phantasmatical) that stands behind this remaking. (5)

Integral to this passage is the manner in which Phelan frames AIDS as a remaking of the queer sexual imagination, a beginning anew of what “the sexual revolution” had previously sought to establish, and in large measures, had established. The “foreclosure of those possibilities” is both “deeply true” in that sexual practices *had to be* changed but “shockingly inaccurate” in that practices either continued to exist—a topic I’ll return to—or, more often, were adapted and transformed. Speaking in relation to Crimp’s hope for queer sexual practices, José Esteban Muñoz notes that “many gay men have managed to maintain the practices that Crimp lists, as they have been translated in the age of safer sex” (34). This translation has markedly shifted sexual possibility, and our—returning to Phelan—“making new sexual sexualities” carries with it the connotation of re-learning exactly what being queer means. David Gere echoes this sentiment, albeit in a highly gendered way, when he writes that “Our bodies, our gay bodies, our American male bodies, our 1980s and ’90s homosexual bodies, were made in their current forms, mapped by their current desires, through a set of practices we learned and then unlearned and then perhaps relearned” (259-260). It is my attempt, here, to show that the process of relearning is conditioned by the other we learn from.

Sex without the possibility of fluid transmission, Phelan writes in an earlier text, “is sex as only secret. Secret sex. The sex of secrets. Safe sex as the end of shared secrets? The fluid body converted into a solid, impervious to porosity: safe sex reversed the orderly chemistry of sexual exchange—from solid to fluid—and remains solid” (*Unmarked* 38). While “remains solid” is perhaps at odds with Gere’s “relearned,” I’d like to pause on how Phelan characterizes sex either prior to or beyond secrecy: fluid, porous, and in a sense open, leaky. I question, though, the extent to which we can be, or ever will be, “solid.” Have we achieved a rigidity and prudishness so stolid and unforgiving as to inhibit “shared secrets”? What are the conditions by which fluidity becomes possible once again? Or, alternatively, has the fluidity never really left us? How has fluidity—even if only in memory, if only beyond our individual sexual practices—shaped our sexual selves?

The issue, though, with safe(r) sex is best characterized by the increasing frequency by which the “(r)” is added to “safe”: safer not safest. Traditional “family values” would have it that safest denotes abstinence, though Crimp
and (most) queer activists would quickly respond that saying “no” is hardly a preventative measure, and, if political scandals have taught us anything, monogamy is best maintained in theory rather than practice. Thus, through AIDS, and in a significant act of community building, the gay liberation movement, in Crimp’s words, “made it possible to meet the epidemic’s most urgent requirement: the development of safe sex practices” (61). My point is twofold: that, first, these practices were developed in the service of an ethics of sexual promiscuity whereby promiscuity is, and can only be, understood through a positive valence, and second, that it was and continues to be invented and reinvented only in relation to the widest gamut of sexual possibility: both the queers to which Crimp points (more often than not working for AIDS service organizations such as the Gay Men’s Health Crisis) and those surrounding me as I type these words, needed then and need now to develop practices of safe(r) sex that maintain access to the wide range of sexualities and sexual possibilities that make us queer in the first place.

Before turning, once and for all, to my topic at hand, I’d like to emphasize Crimp’s deployment of (what Phelan called) fluidity as it relates to the adaptation of sexual practices after AIDS. “Our promiscuity,” writes Crimp taught us many things, not only about the pleasures of sex, but about the great multiplicity of those pleasures. It is that psychic preparation, that experimentation, that conscious work on our own sexualities that has allowed many of us to change our sexual behaviours . . . very quickly, and very dramatically. It is for this reason that [Kramer’s attitude] about the formulation of gay politics on the basis of our sexuality is so perversely distorted, why they insist that our promiscuity will destroy us when in fact it is our promiscuity that will save us. (63; original emphasis)

The hard truth is that the biohazard, I argue, as much as we justifiably rail against the transmission of a virus that haunts us still, is the radical other thought in concomitance with “the promiscuity that will save us.” Only by imagining the conditions of the biohazard, only by imagining a place for barebacking in the panoply of queer sexual possibility—even if that place is strictly one of personal fear and avoidance—does queer sexuality become imaginable, does queer sexuality come into being.

IV.

Generally speaking, the discourse of barebacking, for Dean, is part and parcel with the discourse of sexual promiscuity: “Barebacking epitomizes promiscuous sex: it mixes bodies and semen and blood without compunction. Barebacking is the next logical step in the enterprise of gay promiscuity” (Unlimited Intimacy 5). Again, that word: promiscuous. Again: promiscuity invoked parallel to an ethics of
queer sex, of queer meaning making. What is the “enterprise” of gay sexuality, and how might we identify both its logic and logical sequence? How can practices which defy the discourse of safety queers have been attempting to establish over the thirty some-odd years of an epidemic represent “the next logical step” in the course of queer sexuality? (Spoiler alert: this may be exactly the point.)

My goal, here, is to frame the practice of barebacking beyond the subcultural community itself, instead focusing on how such practices relate to, inform and in turn be informed by the ever-growing and ever-shifting totality I’ve called the queer sexual imagination; though, perhaps, that sense of (inward, contained) community must be noted: “unprotected sex had become the basis for a distinct subculture. After two decades of safe-sex education, erotic risk among gay men has become organized and deliberate, not just accidental” (ix). In Schuster’s essay, the proliferation of poisonous insecticides and other pollutants reminds us, “from the outset” of “a universal pollution that makes all life precarious life” (Schuster 11); in my own context, though I in no way am attempting to frame HIV as pollutant, the possibility of harbouring the virus, from the outset, makes all sex precarious sex. “Thanks to its construction as a taboo, something that officially remains impermissible under any circumstances,” Dean later writes, “unprotected anal sex among U.S. gay men has come to seem transgressive and thus amenable to fetishization, when it otherwise might be regarded as ordinary or simply ill advised” (Unlimited Intimacy 157).

That this “fantasy of risk” (Unlimited Intimacy 17) can be subject to fetishization in the first place is important: Dean understands its fetishization to exist as such only because of a vaguely defined set of sociocultural norms dictating the parameters of sexual acceptability. There are two ways we might frame this occurrence: first, as ultimately queer, so long as we understand queer to connote divergence from normative expectations, and thus formed in reaction to the codification of sexual possibility, and second, as that codification’s radical otherwise: what the sociocultural norm fears the most. As such, fantasizing risk both informs and is informed by more (socially and legally) legitimated sexualities. There is, however, a second characteristic: the subcultural practice of barebacking as understood by Dean carries with it, and importantly so, an ethics of sexual openness: an openness to sexual practice and an openness to sexual participants: “In bareback subculture, promiscuous sex thus entails a particular kind of fidelity” (Unlimited Intimacy 60). The “unlimited intimacy” in Dean’s title overtly refers to a deeply personal, deeply connected sexual practice, not unlike that which has been lost from the queer sexual revolution so lamented by Phelan, Gere, Crimp, and Muñoz.

My point is aporetic: any restriction as to how (and who, and where, and why) the contours of the queer sexual imagination may be mapped, as to how (and who, and where, and why) queer sexuality can and ought to be manifested with any sense of social legitimacy, on one hand, leads to the development and fetishization of sexual acts beyond that social
legitimacy’s determined bounds. Queers have found the cracks and fissures within such confinement, and have come to create new subcultures and practices within that space. That which falls beyond determined bounds, as I hope to have shown, is ultimately queer, thus these bounds are the conditions of possibility for queerness itself—that which queerness can react against, can transgress, and surmount. But on the other hand, this transgression is feared by the generations of queer men and women (with an emphasis on the now-plural generations) who have had, as Muñoz put it, to “translate” the parameters of their collective sexuality through and by which they have come to define themselves. HIV, for many gay men in particular, remains that which dictates who with and how sexual contact occurs. (We need only think of the proliferating problematic terminology of “poz,” “neg,” “clean” on the very sex sites that have included barebacking as a ‘clickable’ option of sexual preference.) Essentially, barebacking, breeding, and, more generally, HIV, have simultaneously become that which creates the alternative sexualities upon which queerness is predicated and become that which is feared and thus sexually constraining. This, in effect, is the tension through which barebacking constrains queer environments and our governing sexual imagination.

V.

I’m now in a café in New York’s West Village, and the spectre of my topic has haunted me for some weeks now. I have just finished talking about this paper to the (queer) man next to me; in fact, I can’t really seem to stop talking about it. (He, too, is really cute.) Like my café in Montréal, this is an environment oozing sexual possibility—which is not to say actual sex. The rolled up sleeves of the barista, the way the boy next to me maintains his posture, the gossip emanating from the corner all speak to a certain queer tenor. I like this place.

The sexual openness I took Dean as valuing in his analysis of barebacking, both in the form of open-mindedness and acceptance of the other, may also be located in Samuel Delany’s writings on New York’s famous cruising spots along Forty-Second street, an area (even more famously) decimated during the construction and expansion of Times Square in the mid-1990s. Delany’s operative premise in Times Square Red, Times Square Blue is that “there are as many different styles, intensities, and timbres to sex as there are people” (45), which he renders through descriptions of the area’s porn theatres, gay bars, and a cast of characters including hustlers, food vendors, and shoe shines. In fact, the sheer magnitude of “styles, intensities, and timbres” of both sex and people depicted in Delany’s work may prove the expansiveness by which I understand the queer sexual imagination to be as a vast understatement. Delany’s net is cast rather wide indeed.

Consider, though, the manner in which Delany understands the regulation of sexual acceptability—how and why certain acts are deemed appropriate over others. Prior to calling safe(r) sex “a notion that currently functions much the way the notion of ‘security’ and
‘conformity’ did in the fifties” (122)—and like my argument above, at issue isn’t the actual measures we’ve adopted as ostensibly “safe” but instead how that safety is articulated within and enforced at the level of our collective sexual imagination—Delany writes:

Starting in 1985 for the first time, in the name of “safer sex,” New York City began specifically to criminalize every individual sex act by name, from masturbation to vaginal intercourse, whether performed with a condom or not—a legal situation that has catastrophic ramifications we may not crawl out from under for a long, long time. This is a legal move that arguably puts gay liberation, for example, back to point notably before Stonewall—and doesn’t do much for heterosexual freedom either.

This is a rhetorical change that may well adhere to an extremely important discursive intervention in the legal contouring of social practices whose ramifications, depending on the development and the establishment of new social practices that promote communication between the classes (specifically sexual and sex-related), are hard to foresee in any detail. (120)

The legislation and criminalization here is a result of three intertwined phenomena: (1) the commercial desire (by the city, by the financial backers of Times Square) to push all “undesirable” sexual activity to the city’s waterfront, (2) the increasingly pervasive condemnation of that desire, and (3) the legal codification of sexual norms, often using the specter of AIDS as its method of justification. Interestingly, Delany draws a parallel between sexual regulation and “communication,” hindering what he, at the outset of his book, calls “contact.” Like Phelan, Delany understands the “sexual world” as being remade—and this in a manner which forecloses sexual possibility in favour of sexual proscription. Delany’s point is simple yet vastly underestimated and increasingly unheeded: constraining sexual practices, even those we might not agree with, is tantamount to constraining our relationality, the possibility of our being in community. Tom Roach mimics this sentiment in his recent book on AIDS, in which he writes that “anonymous sex . . . allows subjects to free themselves from the shackles of identity and relate to one another in ways that run counter to the modern demand for self-knowledge” (35). Roach’s and Delany’s is a call, rhetorically and in practice, for an openness to possibility and to each other, the products of which “are hard to foresee in any detail.”

What do we make of all this? Barebacking, as I’ve said, has shifted the parameters of what it means to be queer; barebacking has opened a space of tension between openness and acceptance, and responsibility, between (often radically) rejecting normative constraint and prevailing over an epidemic through which we’ve lost countless friends, lovers, and a generation of memories, between a new-found ethics of safety and the hard-won gains of sexual liberation. But it is undeniable that the
practices of barebacking and breeding, insofar as they continually demonstrate the queer sexual imagination as unconstrained and uncontainable, condition the possibility inherent in everyday queer lived experience—including, but not limited to, my café experiences. The purposeful looks, the allusion-filled conversations in this café are tinged, and even made brighter, by the sexual possibility that barebacking has come to represent; yet, at the same time, these conversations, these yearnings are contained through the anxiety and estrangement the acquisition of HIV imposes. The biohazard emblematizes the meeting point between our ultimate freedom and ultimate fear, between the ‘safety’ we’ve come to adopt and the (radical) openness to new sexualities and to each other upon which we’ve defined ourselves. Subversion and community, the making and unmaking of a sexual imagination beyond its conceivable limits.

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