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Strange Intimacies: On Neoliberalism and Risky Sex Between Men

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Abstract: Approaching risky sex between men through pathologizing models produces inadequate understandings of these practices. Instead, this paper analyzes unsafe sex between men through a dual approach— affective and political— asking 1) What kinds of bonds and bodily (in)capacities are forged by these practices, and 2) Decades into the HIV/AIDS pandemic, how can the forms of agency and moral reasoning they deploy be understood within the neoliberal present? The paper argues that unsafe sex is a form of negotiating and dwelling with precarity according to market-based models of risk management and distribution.

Keywords: affectivity, agency, barebacking, health, HIV/AIDS, limits, limitlessness, market rationality, neoliberalism, risk

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Strange Intimacies: On Neoliberalism and Risky Sex between Men

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I.

Nearly four decades into the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the corresponding development of safer sex and risk reduction protocols, many find it unfathomable that gay men continue to chance viral transmission by engaging in unprotected sex. How is this sexual risk-taking to be understood? Seeking an etiology for the abandonment of condoms by some men who have sex with men, some approaches suggest that individual and collective psychological pathology must be at work; perhaps, these perspectives suggest, gay men have internalized so much shame that sex can only appear as an opportunity to annihilate the self. 'In order to explain why some small proportion of gay men continue to take risks in their sexual practices,' theorist David Halperin writes, 'both scientists and journalists have to reckon with gay men's motivations for risk-taking, which in turn means that they have to address the issue of gay male subjectivity, what gay men want.'¹These speculations, Halperin argues, attempt to probe the hearts and psyches of gay men, wondering 'why do they behave so badly, so irrationally, so self-destructively? What is wrong with them? What determines the affective structure of their feelings and impulses?' and producing what Halperin names 'subjectivities of risk'. This tendency to localize erotic risk as the perverse property of certain populations precludes any

¹ David M. Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?: An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007), pp. 23-24 (p. 30).

inquiry into how it saturates sex more generally. A kind of containment strategy, it reduces the relation between danger and desire to categories of epidemiological risk groups. In so doing, it privatizes sexual risk-taking between men and forecloses any attempt to examine the connections between unprotected anal sex (or 'barebacking') and HIV transmission within their precarious political and economic contexts.

Perhaps, as Tim Dean proposes, barebacking demands a more promiscuous approach. In his recent book on bareback subculture, Dean suggests that 'permitting promiscuity to affect all forms of attention, all those moments when our regard approaches and touches something else' allows for richer analysis of this promiscuous practice that 'mixes bodies and semen and blood without compunction'.² What might thinking promiscuously about risky sex entail?

Taking up Dean's axiom that the 'refusal to pathologize desire amplifies thought,' (p. 29) I explore the bareback phenomenon's eroticization of 'no limits'³ in light of both the affective relations it creates and the economically-informed models of moral personhood it draws upon. So, the question here is dual: 1) What kinds of bonds and bodily (in)capacities are forged by these practices of 'impersonal intimacy'?⁴ and 2) decades into the HIV/AIDS pandemic, how can the forms of agency and moral reasoning barebackers take up or let slide be understood with regards to their elaboration within the discursive framework of neoliberalism?

Neoliberalism, here, is problematic shorthand. It is meant to mark several vectors of force at once: an economic doctrine of globalized free markets, increasing privatization, and the state's

² Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p.5. All further references to this edition will be included parenthetically in the text.

³ Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*, p. 46.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 47.

role in securing this set-up; a theory of the rationality and scope of government in relation to the market; and the ever-dilating present moment in which these techniques work. As Aihwa Ong writes in *Neoliberalism as Exception*:

Neoliberalism is often discussed as an economic doctrine with a negative relation to state power, a market ideology that seeks to limit the scope and activity of governing. But neoliberalism can also be conceptualized as a new relationship between government and knowledge through which governing activities are recast as nonpolitical and nonideological problems that need technical solutions. *Indeed, neoliberalism considered as a technology of government is a profoundly active way of rationalizing governing and self-governing in order to 'optimize.'*⁵

By situating barebacking tight up against this technology of governing, I mean to inquire into its relation to more diffuse practical understandings of risk, self-optimization or attrition, and limitlessness within what could (optimistically?) be called 'late capitalism' or, flipping the tense and emphasis, simply 'neoliberalism.' As Michel Foucault argues in his 1978-79 lectures published as *The Birth of Biopolitics*, this neoliberal technology of government takes as its subject *homo oeconomicus*, economic man. This economic subject is geared toward his or her own maximization, and this maximization of self-interest is understood to be in the interest of society as a whole. 'The stake in all neoliberal analyses,' Foucault writes, 'is the replacement every time of *homo oeconomicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo oeconomicus* as

⁵ Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 3. Emphasis added.

entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer.’⁶

In other words, the neoliberal subject produces himself as human capital, to be maximized through a series of investments (such as rearing, education, medical care, etc.) that serve his individual interests.

On the one hand, barebacking would seem to be a glitch or bug in this model of self-entrepreneurship and exponential increase of one’s own human capital, abandoning as it does what Foucault elsewhere names ‘the imperative of health’⁷ and seeking sexual pleasure to one’s possible physical detriment. On the other hand, with its valorization of limitlessness with regards to sexual practices and bodily capacities, it marks a curious or queer twist to the neoliberal imperative of endless flexibility and adaptability to the demands of increasingly precarious life circumstances. It is this tension I wish to bring to bear on my affective inquiry into barebacking, situating the forms of bodily inhabitation, kinship, and ethical postures it invokes with reference to their inflection through neoliberal logics of health, selfhood, and moral agency. As Lauren Berlant argues:

contemporary historical experience [...] is simultaneously at an extreme and in a zone of ordinariness, where life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable, and where it is hard to distinguish modes of incoherence, distractedness, and habituation

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978-1979*, trans. by Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008), p. 226.

⁷ Michel Foucault, 'The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century,' in *Essential Works of Foucault, vol 3: Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. by Robert Hurley, et al. (New York: New Press, 2000), p. 94. Cited in Dean, p. 61.

from deliberate and deliberative activity, as they are all involved in the reproduction of predictable life.⁸

This seeping of crisis into the tempo of the ordinary, the folding of the extreme into the everyday, seems crucial to thinking about barebacking practices of sexual 'limitlessness' situated at the limit of normative conceptions of acceptable sexual risk and responsibility. Inspired by Berlant's understanding of 'the ordinary as an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on,'⁹ in what follows I examine barebacking at this aporetic limit, exploring its modes of affectivity and agency with reference to the neoliberal contexts of its elaboration.

II.

First it is necessary to define the terms of my inquiry. What counts as barebacking, and what sense does it make to refer to this sexual practice, as Dean does, as constitutive of a subculture? If barebacking is defined simply as condomless penetrative sex, then, as Dean points out, few sexually active people can claim uncontaminated distance from the practice.¹⁰ A more precise definition of barebacking might be 'the principled rejection of condoms during high risk sex.'¹¹ This has the benefit of underlining barebacking's status as a pre-meditated, specific erotic preference rather than a casual slip-up or omission to which little erotic power is

⁸ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 96.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Foucault, 'The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century', p. 27.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 1.

ascribed. Definitions get slippery here, though: condomless risk reduction techniques like serosorting (where people have unprotected sex only with those of the same HIV status) or strategic positioning (where insertive and receptive sexual positions are taken on the basis of HIV status in order to minimize the risk of transmission) might look a lot like barebacking despite their intended status as safer sex strategies.¹² It seems safe to say that barebacking exists along some sort of continuum of unprotected sex, with risk reduction techniques at one end, indifference to HIV transmission in the middle, and the active eroticization of viral transmission at the other.¹³ Barebacking, then, manifests permeability on a number of levels. It eroticizes unmediated contact between organs and orifices, but also its very definitional status keeps it from being quarantined as the perverse practice of a pathological few.¹⁴

While unprotected sex circulates widely, barebacking per se has been elaborated as a gay sexual subculture emphasizing casual, anonymous, and group sex without condoms. 'Like any culture, this one has its own language, rituals, etiquette, institutions, iconography,' Dean insists. 'Purposeful unprotected sex among gay men has become very complex and highly meaningful behavior' (p. x). A great deal of the subculture's rhetoric and iconography eroticizes the risk of viral exchange, even though seroconversion is not the intent or outcome of all bareback encounters. This 'fantasy of risk' (p. 17) is present in different forms when HIV transmission is not intended versus when it is actively sought.

¹² See Halperin for an extended discussion of the efficacy of these risk reduction strategies and their relationship to other forms of condomless sex. He argues that, 'Although there does appear to have been an increase in condomless sex among men who have sex with men, it does not follow that there has been an increase in *deliberate* risk-taking [...] Rather, what we may be witnessing is a change in the definition and concrete manifestations of safe sex [...]' Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*, p. 21.

¹³ cf. Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, pp. 15-17.

¹⁴ cf. Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, p. 11.

In scenarios where viral transmission is actively sought and eroticized, sexualized risk is articulated in reproductive terms: infected semen is 'seed,' one is inseminated or 'bred' with the virus.¹⁵ Other kinds of bareback sex also eroticize semen as the means of a fructifying fluid exchange; I will explore this animating fantasy of reproduction and kinship later. For now, let it suffice to say that bareback subculture has developed an entire icono/pornographic argot of its fantasies, desires and erotic investments. It is also producing particular modes of life. 'Barebackers are breeding a culture,' Dean proposes, 'a distinct way of life, by voluntarily sharing viruses; they are engaging in relational experiments by way of unregulated biological experiments with pathogenic microbes' (p. 93). There is more at work here than mere hedonism. Or, better, barebacking shows hedonism at work: the seemingly-extreme pursuit of specific pleasures and bodily connections produces an ethos, a particular form of self-fashioning and relation to otherness.

It might seem absurd or even offensive to argue that risky sex is a place of ethics, not just an arena for moralizing. It is easy to rush to condemnation and pathologization on the questionable assumption that, as David Halperin puts it, 'no sane person would ever put his life at risk for sexual pleasure.'¹⁶ Yet this is clearly an ethical space where men are figuring out not just economies of sexual pleasure but also elaborating approaches to health, finitude and livable life in the face of an epidemic. Framing bareback sex in this way shifts the analysis away

¹⁵ cf. Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, p. 85, where he writes that, 'Bug chasing [seeking HIV infection], cum swapping, and gift giving [transmitting HIV] may be considered alternatives to gay marriage not because the former involve promiscuity instead of monogamy but because HIV makes the exchange of bodily fluids somewhat akin to the exchange of wedding rings [...] It has not escaped barebackers' notice that a better analogy than marriage for viral exchange is that of conceiving and bearing children.'

¹⁶ Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*, p. 11.

from the concerned if horrified etiological question of 'why' and towards an inquiry as to *what* is embodied or evinced in the practice. Why move away from the etiological? It may be a bad faith approach; Halperin suggests that psychological explanations of gay sexual risk-taking tend to take sexual deviance as somehow determinative of 'the affective structure of [gay men's] feelings and impulses.'¹⁷ An emphasis on the fantasies, desires and judgments at work in barebacking, on the other hand, does not seek to define gay subjectivity on the basis of sexual risk; it probes sexual practices rather than psyches.

Barebacking is a multidimensional practice, Dean argues, and no single explanation is sufficient to account for it. Instead, Dean proposes considering a cluster of 'contradictory determinants': the constitution of risk and endurance as proof of masculinity; the recoding of HIV pathogens as desirable; a decreased fear of HIV and increased skepticism as to whether HIV causes AIDS; purposeful seroconversion in lieu of dwelling with the looming possibility of infection; and, the one that interests Dean most, 'the attempt to use viral exchange to create kinship networks' (p. 51). These factors reveal something about the emerging logic of barebacking subculture without specifying a psychic structure unique to its participants.

Furthermore, this bundle of rationales and reasons clearly situates barebacking as a response to the ongoing HIV/AIDS pandemic in contexts where HIV/AIDS often seems like less of an eradicable crisis than a permanent feature of everyday life.¹⁸ If, as Berlant argues,

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁸ It is important to note the very different contexts in which the AIDS pandemic saturates everyday life. Arguing that there barebacking is quintessentially North American despite its dissemination elsewhere, Dean notes that 'although it is certainly the case that AIDS is a global pandemic, it would not be correct to characterize bareback subculture as a globalized subculture [...] The AIDS pandemic comprises many microepidemics with different histories, transmission routes, demographics, and viral subtypes. Even as globalization and geographic mobility

everyday life is a kind of impasse delimited by ongoing crisis understood as ordinary, then barebacking might be approached as a practice of adjustment or acclimation to these pressures. Berlant's conception of the 'crisis ordinary' attempts to trace the ways in which contemporary capitalism *disorganizes* life such that 'the ordinary becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectation whose sheer volume so threatens what it has meant to 'have a life' that adjustment seems like an accomplishment'.¹⁹ Without understanding neoliberal capitalism as a homogenizing, causal system that simply stamps out subjects and effects, Berlant's analysis allows for a situated inquiry into 'specific modes of sensual activity toward and beyond survival [within a] historical sensorium that's busy making sense of and staying attached to whatever there is to work with, for life'.²⁰ This is a particularly useful approach for considering barebacking within the temporal rhythms and material pressures of neoliberalism, because it situates barebacking not in terms of purported psychological pathologies, but rather with reference to what Berlant names 'patterns of adjustment'²¹ to increasingly pressing and precarious conditions. These patterns of adjustment are modes by which subjects get on with living within quotidian crisis.

As Berlant's analysis suggests, neoliberalism is marked by this defining imperative of flexibility. In a destabilizing context of sweeping privatization, globalized corporate capital, and a contingent, contractual workforce, neoliberalism produces a kind of 'feedback loop, with its

enabled the emergence of a worldwide pandemic, HIV disease has such vastly different cultural contexts and meanings [...] Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, p.44.

¹⁹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p.3.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 9. Berlant is careful - and, I think, correct - to invoke neoliberalism as a heuristic, rather than 'a world-homogenizing system whose forces are played out to the same effect, or affect, everywhere.'

²¹ *ibid.*

efficiency at distributing and shaping the experience of insecurity throughout the class structure and across the globe'.²² So insecurity and precariousness come to be inhabited as an ever-abiding crisis of the ordinary, to riff on Berlant's terms. As philosopher Catherine Malabou argues in her book on neural plasticity and neoliberalism:

We have understood that to survive today means to be connected to a network, to be capable of modulating one's efficiency. We know very well that every loss of suppleness means rejection, pure and simple [...] We know already that individuals construct their lives as works, that it is each individual's responsibility to know what he should do with himself, and that for this he ought not be rigid.²³

This passage brilliantly crystallizes the neoliberal logics that I want to argue play out, in insidious and at times contradictory manners, within barebacking. Malabou's take on the neoliberal imperative of flexibility emphasizes the necessity of shifting, multiple, and contingent connections within fairly ephemeral networks. Suppleness, here, is equated with an ability to keep on keeping on. Foucault's *homo oeconomicus* rears his head as a subject who takes his own life as his work, a project of maximization whose actualization can afford no old-fashioned or inflexible forms of attachment. In exploring barebacking's relations to this rhetoric, I will first outline some ways in which its animating conceptions of risk calculation and management fall in line with dominant market-based reasoning. For this task, I draw heavily from sociologist Barry D. Adam's 'Constructing the Neoliberal Sexual Actor: Responsibility and Care of the Self in

²² *ibid.*, p. 193.

²³ Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* trans. by Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 10.

the Discourse of Barebackers.' Next I turn to consider the ways in which barebacking enacts a more ambiguous relation to models of agency founded in sovereign volition and calculative reason. For this portion of my inquiry, I will again turn to Berlant, engaging with her conception of lateral agency as a means by which subjects orient themselves quasi-willfully toward pleasures that do not coincide with or add up to agential potency or future health. With this groundwork in place, in closing I move to consider the forms of affectivity circulating within barebacking with reference to the neoliberal production of the ordinary as a crisis best borne through infinite flexibility.

III.

In his study of the moral discourses deployed by men engaged in barebacking subculture in Toronto, Barry Adam argues that barebacking is not as aberrant or out-of-step with common forms of moral reasoning as it may initially appear. While, as we will see, barebacking both complicates and elides any clear-cut understandings of rational decision-making with regards to the risk-saturated realm of sex, there are nevertheless forms of reasoning at play as men work out distributions of risk and responsibility that strike them as acceptable. Adam's central thesis is that the ways in which barebackers analyze sexual risk and responsibility is actually quite consistent with contemporary economic discourses and their attendant conceptions of moral personhood. 'For the subset of men who have left safe sex behind,' he writes, "'raw' or bareback sex is justifiable through a rhetoric of individualism, personal responsibility,

consenting adults, and contractual interaction.²⁴ The decision to have sex without a condom is understood as a personal choice, entered into with sufficient knowledge of the risks of HIV transmission.

Adam's study outlines some ways in which informed consent operates, tacitly or otherwise, in such encounters. Sometimes there is explicit and mutual disclosure of HIV status, but often there is more complicated calculation at work. For example, an HIV-positive man moving in a primarily HIV-positive milieu may assume that any partner who does not insist on condom use is positive as well; an HIV-negative man, in turn, may assume that the burden of disclosure and latex rests on a positive partner, such that any partner who does not insist on a condom or verbally disclose positive status may be assumed to be negative.²⁵ As this example suggests, notions of personal responsibility are paramount. Perhaps paradoxically, this can often shift the onus of risk-reduction onto the other rather than oneself. A partner's willingness to go on signals tacit consent to whatever the serostatus-situation may be. This kind of accounting assumes sexual subjects' sovereign ability to make choices based on informed consent.

As Adam argues, this model of moral decision-making is deeply informed by neoliberal conceptions of the economic subject:

In many ways, these accounts for unsafe sex participate in the moral reasoning widely propagated by government and business today that constructs everyone as a self-

²⁴ Barry D. Adam, 'Constructing the Neoliberal Sexual Actor: Responsibility and Care of the Self in the Discourse of Barebackers', *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 7:4 (2005), 333-346 (p. 339).

²⁵ cf. *ibid.*, pp.339-340.

interested individual who must take responsibility for himself in a marketplace of risks. It is perhaps also a particularly masculine discourse in its evocation of the norms of competitive individualism.²⁶

Drawing from Foucault's analysis of neoliberal governmental rationality and its constitution of subjects as subjects of economic interests, this neoliberal model of risk and responsibility takes subjects as rational bundles of interests, who pursue and satisfy these interests through volitional calculation. This model is deeply invested, Foucault writes, in 'the rationality of individuals insofar as they employ a certain number of means, and employ them as they wish, in order to satisfy these interests'.²⁷ While the barebacker is clearly not quite 'the subject of interests' invoked by Foucault, whose intensifying pursuit of self-interest purportedly benefits the interests of the market,²⁸ barebacking nevertheless draws upon neoliberal conceptions of the centrality and utility of self-interest in moral calculus. Certainly Adam's study demonstrates that barebacking exhibits a kind of rationality whereby men 'employ a certain number of means, and employ them as they wish, in order to satisfy these interests.' Furthermore, the practice is inflected by economic understandings of what self-responsibility looks like in a world understood as 'a marketplace of risks.' As Adam is careful to point out, this does not mean that rhetorics of rational choice, responsibility, and risk at play in barebacking are simply determined by neoliberal coordinates. 'While neoliberal, responsabilizing discourse is now a ready-at-hand - even predominant - rhetoric circulating in advanced, industrial societies [...]

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 340.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 312.

²⁸ *cf. ibid.*, p. 276.

that is available for making sense of and formulating choice-making projects in everyday life, nevertheless it does not capture the totality of these projects.¹²⁹ Adam writes:

In that sense, neoliberal discourse is not totalizing nor does it capture the subjectivity of these men in a fundamental way, but among some men it has become a *modus vivendi*, and a leading resource for organizing relations with other men.³⁰

This approach helps frame inquiries into the ambiguous cognitive spaces of risky sex. Adam's piece emphasizes the models of individual responsibility and choice-making at work in barebacking subcultures, but it does not directly engage with more muddled judgments that are provoked or suspended in the practice. When risk registers instantaneously as both a thrill and a threat, is it entered into with full intention or rather an excessive impulse that surpasses measured thought? As Halperin asks, 'Do the terms *intentional* and *unintentional* exhaust the range of possible explanations?'³¹ Often, the figure of the barebacker is positioned as the antithesis of the calculating subject propelled by rational self-interest. The notion that a gay man would purposefully engage in unprotected penetrative sex outside the bounds of monogamy seems to fly in the face of 'the notion that people, once they truly understand what is in their own best interests, always act rationally in order to maximize them - on the basis of an accurate, long-term calculation of the likely costs and benefits of their behavior.'³² The barebacker figures as a foil to an imaginary sexual subject who harnesses will and knowledge in every encounter; the assumption here is that the barebacker abandons kinds of cognition along

²⁹ Adam, 'Constructing the Neoliberal Sexual Actor,' p. 345.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*, p. 61.

³² Ibid., p. 24.

with condoms. The open question still hangs: to what extent are sexual decisions of all stripes subject to rigorous agential control? Halperin is right to wonder: 'Why should we suppose that sex, of all things, would be the sphere in which people could be depended on to act in a *more* rational or calculating fashion than they typically do?'³³

IV.

Indeed, the question of risky sex demands a reconsideration of the kinds of agency imagined to be at work in the practice. In her 'Slow Death: Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency,' Lauren Berlant analyzes 'spreading-out activities like sex or eating, oriented toward pleasure or self-abeyance, that do not occupy time, decision, or consequentiality in anything like the registers of autonomous self-assertion'.³⁴ Part of her nuanced analysis consists in disrupting the ways in which appetitive desires are taken as indicative of successful self-control and self-fashioning, and therefore become overly meaningful. Berlant claims that the fiction of self-sovereignty endows 'unconscious and explicit desires' with 'an inflated ego deploying and manifesting power'.³⁵ Bodily pleasures, she insists, are not always or only in the service of a life project. Instead, they might disrupt that trajectory, as 'sites of episodic intermission from personality, of inhabiting agency differently in small vacations from the will itself [...] These pleasures can be

³³ *ibid.*, p. 25.

³⁴ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 98.

³⁵ *ibid.*

seen as interrupting the liberal and capitalist subject called to consciousness, intentionality and effective will'.³⁶

Following Berlant, it seems that the pursuit of pleasure disrupts intentionality as much as it extends or embodies it. This analysis unsettles any easy opposition between the rational and the pathological, and in so doing draws closer to the particular textures and tempos of sexual risk-taking. Halperin is attentive to the ways in which condomless sex can become 'a cumulative habit without a specific accompanying consciousness, an unreflective tendency, a gradual or occasional letting-go of meaning, agency, will, or cognition'.³⁷ In an article written for the *Village Voice* in 1995, Michael Warner recounts the cognitive texture of one of his own unsafe encounters, writing that, 'The odds occurred to me at the time, in a kind of instant calculus that was not even recognizable as thinking, much less as making a decision. The quality of consciousness was more like impulse shoplifting.'³⁸ Scared by his own transgression of safer-sex protocols, Warner nevertheless engaged in bareback sex again. Examining his own motivations and calculations of risk, Warner entertained a number of possibilities as to why the other man had wanted to have sex without a condom. 'These other possibilities,' he writes, 'preserved the level of uncertainty I wanted in order to take a risk; I dwelt on them just long enough to think that I didn't know what I thought I knew I was doing.'³⁹ A quality of suspension seems to animate the cognitive spaces of risky sex: suspension of forward-thrusting agency and

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 116.

³⁷ Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*, p. 29.

³⁸ Michael Warner, 'Unsafe: Why Gay Men Are Having Risky Sex.' *Village Voice*, January 31, 1995. Reprinted in Halperin, p. 159.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 164.

certain temporal modes of self-crafting. Transgressive pleasure, the explicit mixture of Eros and danger, temporarily blots out those considerations. As Halperin suggests:

Unsafe sex [...] is a way of living at the edges of cognition. It is also a kind of speculative ethical experiment, a means of playing with time that consists in putting your life at risk in the moment, in ways that may not make sense to you then and there, but that allow you to discover, retrospectively, what exactly matters to you, and why.⁴⁰

To the extent that barebacking subculture ritualizes the practice of condomless sex by making it no mere accidental indulgence but the very meat of sexual life, it enacts a willful repetition of this arational relation to intentionality and risk.

Barebacking seeks to dilate the qualitative intensity of risk and enter it again and again, in a practice that extends rather than deadens the thrill. In the logic of barebacking, latex constitutes a barrier to this sensation, and not solely in a physical sense. 'Barebackers' abandonment of condoms is motivated not only by a lust for enhanced physical sensation,' Dean argues, 'but also by a desire for certain emotional sensations, particularly the symbolic significance attached to experiences of vulnerability or risk' (p. 45). By eroticizing 'raw' sex and fluid exchange, barebacking literalizes the body's vulnerability, porosity and capacity for connection. It therefore demands an attention to affectivity. By affectivity, I mean the links between bodies and the shifts in their respective abilities to affect or be affected under particular relations. Drawing from the philosophy of Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari insist that, 'We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do.' Affects— that is, the

⁴⁰ Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*, p. 47.

changes in a body's power to act or be acted on in a given relation— are therefore key to analyzing the body's potential through a consideration of 'how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body'.⁴¹

V.

What kind of affectivity is at play in barebacking? Barebacking subculture organizes desire around bodily mixing; Dean states that the defining criteria for 'membership' in the subculture are simply 'one's willingness to embrace risk, to give and to take semen' (p. 41). Barebacking hinges on openness to risk, unmediated receptivity to the fluids and skin and potential pathogens of other bodies. It revels in the surpassing of limits: the boundaries between bodies, the borders of bodily coherence, the limits circumscribing what one can or will 'take,' endure, do sexually. Dean points out that the personal-ads claim of 'no limits!' can also be taken as a barebacking motto:

'No Limits!' means that a man takes pride in his readiness to try any erotic activity or position, that the protective limit of latex is unnecessary or unwelcome, that the numerical limit of a single partner has been dissolved by the polymorphous pleasures of group sex, and that the limits of corporeal integrity exist only to be transgressed. (p. 44)

⁴¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 257.

Barebacking enshrines the dissolution of limits as key to opening into not just more intense sensation but also, in a sense, more authentic relations between men's bodies. The subculture suggests that condomless sex is more no-nonsense and therefore more macho than safer sex; it flips dominant logic on its back to position intense sexual receptivity as proof of masculine power and endurance. It goes further, positing unprotected sex between men as productive of new kinds of social bonds and forms of intimacy untethered from personal knowledge of the other.⁴² 'No limits' is an ethical claim, in other words. I would like to focus on how this affective mode of limitlessness a) saturates conceptions of health and finitude and b) elaborates a model of kinship through viral transmission. In so doing, I hope to underline barebacking's ambiguous relationship to neoliberal imperatives of optimization. I suggest that even as barebacking bucks the moral imperative of health, it enshrines a limitless flexibility by which subjects are able to take and bear it all. By using HIV microbes to establish kinship networks, barebacking subculture operates as a kind of 'pattern of adjustment' through which gay men adapt to the endemic crisis of HIV/AIDS, illustrating how subjects in this neoliberal moment 'maintain their binding to modes of life that threaten their well-being'.⁴³

VI.

The decision to organize one's erotic life around sexual risk-taking and limitlessness implies a leave-taking from mainstream norms of bodily integrity and the correct relationship between health and the pursuit of sexual pleasure. This elaboration of a non-normative conception of

⁴²cf. Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, p. 47.

⁴³ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 16.

pleasure-seeking and health is not just individual but collective, as evidenced by the fact that an entire subculture has developed around these practices. Dean argues that, since barebacking subculture is defined by its pursuit of pleasure, this pursuit is no longer solely individualistic. Indeed, he claims, 'bareback subculture functions as a collectivity by virtue of its members refusing to renounce pleasure' (p. 60). The implication here is that barebackers reject the moral imperative to renounce particular sexual practices in the name of health and longevity. 'Fidelity to the subcultural ideal of erotic pleasure,' Dean proposes, 'necessitates betrayal [...] of a distinctly medicalized understanding of what counts as health' (p. 60).

What characterizes this mainstream, medical notion of health? Its specificity lies not just in its ideal image of a body free of chronic or debilitating illness, but in its *moralization* of the project of health. The self is not just defended but crafted by the aspiration to healthiness. Modern biomedical discourses of health, as Donna Haraway argues, constitute disease as 'a subspecies of information malfunction or communications pathology [...] a process of misrecognition or transgression of the boundaries of a strategic assemblage called 'self''.⁴⁴ One has a duty to prevent these communications pathologies or communicable pathologies to the best of one's ability; this duty is moral to the extent that one's own behaviours either insulate or expose one's body to disease. Foucault named it the 'imperative of health' by which subjects become accountable for a normative standard of healthy corporeal functioning.⁴⁵ This moral imperative arises from an epidemiological model of risk management that conceptualizes

⁴⁴ Donna Haraway, 'The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Constitutions of Self in Immune System Discourse,' in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 212.

⁴⁵ Foucault, 'The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century.' Cited in Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, p. 61.

health as 'a calculus of risk' (p. 61). This calculus of risk implies that while some risks are acceptable, normal, perhaps even unavoidable, to expose oneself purposefully to other risks is unacceptable and morally suspect. Barebacking embraces risks considered beyond the pale for certain populations, and thus constitutes a refusal to cultivate health on these terms.

By engaging in sexual practices with a high likelihood of viral transmission, barebackers reject the imperative to purify sex of risks to one's well-being and longevity. One determinant Dean identifies for participation in the subculture is some men's belief that seroconverting intentionally - that is, purposefully contracting HIV - relieves them of the terror and suspense of living with the ever-looming threat of contracting the virus. 'Paradoxically,' Dean writes, 'bareback subculture institutionalizes risk as a permanent condition of existence, embracing and eroticizing it, while promulgating the idea that seroconversion renders moot one particular risk' (p. 69). Barebacking contests notions of acceptable risk even as it manages risk through complex logics of desirability and abatement.

In contrast to the biopolitical imperative to cultivate health and longevity, barebacking slides close up against the limit of death. Current discourses that describe health in terms of optimum functioning and the vigilant management of risks to one's life produce death as a sign of medical or moral failure.⁴⁶ Without wishing to valorize the practice of barebacking, I follow Dean in arguing that it constitutes an attempt to learn to live with mortality. Risking or even pursuing seroconversion, barebackers:

⁴⁶ cf. Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, p. 65.

embrace the human finitude that modern life, especially modern medicine, has become expert in disavowing [...] barebackers are taking on the fundamental limit of death that defines us all; they are fucking without limits precisely because they don't want to live forever. (p. 66)

Yet this engagement with finitude is also wrapped up with futurity. Bug chasers (barebackers who want to become HIV-positive or engage in sex animated by the fantasy of seroconversion regardless of their actual HIV status) and gift givers (men who 'on the model of sperm donors [...] consensually inseminate other men with HIV' (p. 70)) interact with the virus in terms of kinship and reproduction. The language of bareback fantasy is instructive: HIV becomes a desirable 'bug' or 'gift,' transmitting the virus is an act of 'insemination,' bug chasers want to be 'bred' with another man's infected semen. 'With the virus coded as a gift,' Dean relates, 'seroconversion can be understood as successful insemination' (p. 86).

Having reconfigured HIV as something desirable, barebackers then recode it as a substance whose exchange establishes kin relations. HIV becomes an object exchanged between men, a substance that provides the basis for kinship. Dean proposes that barebackers' experiments with viral-based kinship are related, so to speak, to lesbian and gay experiments with alternative families. '[B]arebackers' creation of consanguineous communities through viral exchange represents a less immediately recognizable kinship experiment that emerged from the same context,' he argues. They both illustrate the 'various ways that people could become related to each other by blood without involving heterosexuality' (p. 90). Dean maps out an elaborate system of viral kin relations: Men become brothers 'in the 'bug brotherhood' through viral transmission, at the same time that the gift giver occupies a parental role as the man who

'fathered' the virus (p. 62). This is kinship made strange not only by its viral determinant but by its muddling of basic relational categories. Pushing Dean's analysis further, I wonder whether this viral kinship carries its porn-talk fantasy through into filial relations of care, since this kinship is predicated on engaging the other as an intimate stranger.

Certainly the conceptualization of the HIV virus as a basis for kinship rests on a peculiar affectivity, where porous bodies are inhabited by something not quite alive (the HIV virus) which nevertheless passes between bodies as a living agent, transmuting the relations between these bodies and transforming the body's relation to itself via the immune system. Dean argues that it is the biological status of viruses - the fact that they are not living microorganisms - that 'enables them to be imagined not only as the offspring of a human mating but also as the bearers of an imperishable connection' (p. 88). This connection is not just between the men who exchanged the virus, but in some sense all those through whom it has passed:

The virus itself permits unlimited intimacy, in the sense that it traces the persistence of multiple bodily contacts in the present moment. Thus the virus may be considered a particular form of memory, one that offers an effective way of maintaining certain relations with the dead (p. 88).

It establishes consanguinity between men who may have never known one another, just as it establishes kinship between men who only 'know' one another as casual sexual partners. I put 'know' under erasure to mark the status of this intimacy, an intimacy that is concerned with shared durations of sexual intensity and sensation rather than more putatively respectable knowledge of the other. Indeed, as Dean argues, casual or anonymous sex is not so much a defence mechanism against interpersonal intimacy as it is an opening into a different kind of

intimacy, characterized by 'a profound exposure to the other and thus an experience of vulnerability and trust with complete strangers' (p. 174).

VII.

These tenuous forms of kinship and impersonal intimacies between strangers, I suggest, constitute modes of adjustment and adaptation to the endemic risk that saturates sex decades into the HIV/AIDS pandemic; they are ways of handling, eroticizing, and managing or failing to manage this exposure. Rather than a solely individual, pathological perversion or an uncomplicated death-wish, barebacking might be better broached as a practice invested in forms of relationality that allow its practitioners to keep on keeping on, even as this keeping on threatens to foreclose certain horizons of lifespan or health.

Steeped in a rhetoric of limitlessness, barebacking codes bodies in terms of their ability to take, bear, or transmit sensations, fluids, and pathogens beyond the bounds delimited by the risk-management practices of safer sex. This corporeal openness parallels barebacking's affective orientation toward flexibility, its ability to elaborate networks of sexual affiliation and viral kinship within an epidemic. As I have attempted to show, these practices bear a curious relationship to the neoliberal context of their development. By bucking the imperative of health and self-preservation, barebacking seems a perverse refusal of the rhetoric of self-maximization and rational, calculative self-interest that drive the neoliberal subject of *homo oeconomicus*. At the same time, however, its operative models of informed consent and personal flexibility are deeply inflected by dominant forms of market-based reasoning. It is in fact this very tension that situates barebacking well within the neoliberal present, where carrying on with the

business of living necessitates resourceful adaptation to the ever-dilating precariousness of the ordinary.

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