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Handle with Care

The Biopolitics of Coronavirus-Prevention Guidelines

Eric Daffron



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Handle with Care

The Biopolitics of Coronavirus-Prevention Guidelines

Eric Daffron

[I]f the body is not a *thing*, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects.

— Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (2011: 46)

Politics is a fictional text in a book which is our own body.

— Paul B. Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of the Crossing* (2020: 221)

The biopolitical event, in fact, is always a queer event, a subversive process of subjectivization that, shattering ruling identities and norms, reveals the link between power and freedom, and thereby inaugurates an alternative production of subjectivity.

— Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (2009: 62-3)

Introduction

- 1 In early spring 2020, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene issued two sets of guidelines for reducing the risk of coronavirus infection. In addition to recommending handwashing and other precautions, the health department declared the following: “Do not touch your face unless you recently washed your hands” (qtd. in Herman 2020).¹ If New Yorkers could no longer touch their faces with impunity, they were compensated with license to touch another body part. Assuming that New Yorkers would not forego sex even during a pandemic, the health department offered “tips for how to enjoy sex” without transmitting COVID-19. On a continuum from best to worst choices, the department advised having sex with oneself, with someone in the same household, and with a limited number of other sex partners. “You are your safest

sex partner,” the department explained. “Masturbation will not spread COVID-19, especially if”—it was quick to add—“you wash your hands [...] with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before and after sex” (NYC Health 2020).

- 2 Those two self-touching recommendations might initially strike us as straightforward and pragmatic. However, if we examine those guidelines more closely, we will see that they invited New Yorkers to engage in a new relationship with their bodies. Notice, first of all, that, in their starkest formulation, the guidelines were organized around a binary opposition. New York City’s health department supplied one half of the binary: “Do not touch your face.” If we rewrite the other guideline in parallel terms, we have the other half: do touch your genitals. Expressed that way, the binary obviously gives the impression that the health department *prohibited* New Yorkers from touching one body part but *permitted* them to touch another.² In practice, however, the department could only *discourage* one form of self-touching while *promoting* the relative safety of another. Thus, rather than legislating personal hygiene, the recommendations depended on New Yorkers to make sound judgments for the sake of personal and public health.
- 3 Now note that, in the health department’s original formulation, each half of the binary was actually asymmetrical rather than oppositional. On the one hand, the department’s face-touching guideline was issued as a negative imperative (“Do not touch”) only to be followed by a caveat (“unless you recently washed your hands”). On the other hand, its masturbation advice was delivered not as a positive imperative (Do touch) but as a preference whose comparative safety could be enhanced (“especially if you wash your hands”). In other words, the guidelines identified *acceptable* circumstances under which to touch the face and *optimal* conditions under which to touch the genitals. In so doing, they called upon New Yorkers to make subtle adjustments to their hygiene.
- 4 Finally, observe that the binary reverses conventional wisdom. Prior to the pandemic, most New Yorkers probably never gave face touching a second thought. Yet, in the pandemic’s early days, not only health departments but also media outlets repeatedly advised individuals to refrain from touching their faces. A case in point is *The New York Times*, a local newspaper with a global audience.³ In March 2020, *The Times* published a number of articles on face touching and handwashing. For instance, the article “Stop Touching Your Face!” reported that we indulge in the “habit” at an “alarming” rate (Parker-Pope 2020). If that recommendation made a previously innocuous practice objectionable, the opposite was the case for the other recommendation, given its historic context. Just a few centuries ago, the body was described as a closed system of circulating fluids in delicate balance. Upsetting that balance, masturbators subjected their bodies to disease and, in the process, undermined society’s procreative goals (Preciado 2018: 82-5). Long since liberated from its association with illness, masturbation still remains a strangely furtive practice even to this day.⁴ Thus, when the guidelines cautioned against one form of self-touching but promoted the relative safeness of another, they prompted New Yorkers to revise their predispositions towards those two body parts.
- 5 Viewed from those three angles, New York City’s coronavirus-prevention measures come into greater focus. In reshaping residents’ relationship to their bodies, the measures arguably contributed to a new permutation of biopower. Although this essay attends exclusively to the biopolitical stakes of the department’s self-touching and handwashing guidelines, its insights apply more generally to the larger set of

worldwide public-health recommendations issued during the pandemic.⁵ After outlining the features of biopower at stake, this essay examines the injunction against touching in Sigmund Freud's theory of obsessional neurosis. Although Freud's account harks back to an earlier stage in biopower's history, it nevertheless provides a repertoire, albeit limited, of potential critical and creative responses to public-health guidelines. In search of responses that move beyond obsessional neurosis even as they recall some of its symptoms, this essay turns to the queer community: gay and bisexual men who incorporated and rewrote pandemic-era precautions in several pornographic videos. These productions reveal that, even during a public-health crisis, individuals challenged corporeal restrictions while inventing new ways to move and express their bodies.

Section 1: Biopower

- 6 To understand the biopolitics of public-health guidelines in New York and beyond, we must first delineate the specific characteristics of biopower at stake. Emerging as early as the seventeenth century, as Foucault recounts (1990: 139-40), biopower eventually comprised both the government of the body and the administration of the population. Following World War II, as several recent theorists have explained, discipline by external apparatuses such as prisons began to recede, though not disappear, as power reached beyond those structures in new "societies of control." In contemporary control societies such as ours, new corporeal and representational technologies, including genetic engineering and digital technology, dominate the biopolitical field as power pervades our bodies even down to our molecules (Hardt and Negri 2000: 22-4; Preciado 2013: 76-9; Rose 2007: 11-5, 223).⁶ As Nikolas Rose argues (2007: 3), contemporary "vital politics," or biopolitics, "is concerned with our growing capacities to control, manage, engineer, reshape, and modulate the very vital capacities of human beings as living creatures." Those capacities include sexuality. Indeed, since World War II, technologies such as mass-market pornography, hormone treatments, and Viagra have regulated sexual pleasure, modified gender, and enhanced erections, respectively (Preciado 2013: 25-36).
- 7 It takes little effort, in light of the previous account, to recognize New York's public-health recommendations as a manifestation of biopower. After all, the guidelines urged residents to care for specific body parts in order to reduce coronavirus transmission throughout the population. Still, faces, genitals, and hands reside at the molar rather than at the molecular level. Using those levels, Rose (2007: 11-5) distinguishes an enzyme from an arm, for example, and a genetic experiment from an exercise regime. While molar interventions characterized 19th-century biopolitics, now biopower typically aims at the molecular level (11-2). Such a scalar difference suggests that the department's recommendations harked back to an earlier manifestation of biopower. Nevertheless, we can recall instances in which small- and large-scale measures have worked in tandem. For example, when SARS broke out a couple of decades ago, the health community rushed to identify its molecular makeup while recommending quarantines, travel bans, and similar large-scale strategies (Rose 2007: 13). And, for all the small-scale technologies that characterize biopower today, "[a] sexuality always implies," Paul B. Preciado contends (2013: 46), "a precise governing of the mouth, hand, anus, vagina." One way that biopower regulates body parts is to divide them, their

features, and their actions along strict gender lines. For example, according to conventional gender codes, white heterosexual men are characterized, in part, by “dirty hands” (Preciado 2013: 121)—a code reactivated in a pandemic-era *New York Times* article entitled “Where Women Are ahead of Men: Hand Washing” (Krueger 2020).

- 8 If this meeting point of the molar and the molecular were not enough to qualify self-touching and handwashing as renewed biopolitical concerns, the fact that one’s hands could potentially transmit the coronavirus implicated them in molecular processes. After all, health departments around the world issued handwashing recommendations presumably because individuals never knew if they might touch something or someone infected with the virus. For that reason, individuals took charge of their health and, in so doing, strived to meet the expectations of “biological citizenship.” As Rose explains (2007: 25), “biological citizenship” “maximiz[es] [...] lifestyle, potential, health, and quality of life” while casting “negative judgements [...] toward those who will not [...] adopt an active, informed, positive, and prudent relation to the future.” Embracing that duty, many individuals in New York and beyond washed their hands and expected from others the same in return.

Section 2: Obsessional Neurosis

- 9 Although New Yorkers and others worldwide had been invited to renew their dedication to “biological citizenship,” they undoubtedly lived out that commitment in different ways. To explore potential responses to the body’s biopolitical regulation, we turn first to Sigmund Freud. This recourse to Freud would seem both promising and problematic. On the one hand, he provides one of the most extensive, culturally resonant discussions of touch. In *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* and *Totem and Taboo*, Freud (1989a: 48-9; 1989b: 35) claims that the obsessional neurotic’s quintessential symptom is the prohibition against touching. On the other hand, he is situated at a much earlier, pre-World War II moment in biopower’s history. According to Foucault (1990: 158-9), Freud’s theories of sexuality emerged at a pivotal moment in the history of biopower. Yet, even at that juncture, Freud harked back to an earlier invocation of the Law in an effort to distinguish his theory from racist eugenics (149-50). Although the Law still operates in 21st-century Western cultures, it cannot fully account for the other subtle, insidious ways in which biopower promotes and regulates knowledge about, pleasure from, and movement of particular body parts. That historical limitation notwithstanding, Freud can still assist our investigation into COVID-19 precautions. His account of obsessional neurosis enumerates several symptomatic acts, which are essentially ways to manage desire and prohibition. By following the curious logics of those symptoms, we can arrive at an inventory, however limited for our historical juncture, of potential ways of responding to coronavirus-prevention measures.
- 10 Let us begin with the prohibition against touching, the obsessional neurotic’s foundational symptom. That prohibition, which concerns touching objects as well as both self and others, typically derives from the childhood injunction against masturbation (Freud 1989a: 40-1, 48-9; 1989b: 35, 37). From the original site of the genitals, that prohibition can easily undergo displacement from one object or person to another until all things onto which the obsessional displaces that injunction become sources of potential contamination—“till,” that is, “the whole world lies under an

embargo of ‘impossibility’” (Freud 1989b: 35). Imagine a scenario in which the obsessional neurotic begins with a prohibition against touching the genitals and displaces that injunction onto the face. Thanks to that displacement, an otherwise innocent face-touching activity such as scratching would fall under interdiction. That displacement works because of longstanding cultural affinities between masturbating and scratching (Connor 2004: 236-40). Like masturbation, which was once associated with illness, scratching is often considered a symptom of disease (232). And just as masturbation impedes civilization’s procreative goals, scratching undermines civilized behavior. According to Steven Connor (2004: 231), in a passage strikingly analogous to the one from Preciado quoted above, “hygiene and health require [...] channelling the contacts between mouth, hand, anus, penis, vulva, scalp, feet, armpit.” While Connor attributes “[t]he regularization of these self-contacts” to “the codes of modern social politeness” (231), Preciado has taught us to recognize in that regulation biopower at work.

- 11 The hypothetical case outlined above obviously concerns the same two body parts as coronavirus-prevention measures. However, the example and the guidelines are nonetheless different. Rather than proscribing forms of self-touching, as we saw in obsessional neurosis, the guidelines promoted the comparative safety of masturbation over other sex practices while generally counselling against face touching. This difference underscores the point, conceded above, that Freud’s theory of obsessional neurosis and the health department’s guidelines stem from two different moments in biopower’s history. Whereas Freud’s account oscillated between instinct and taboo, the guidelines invited New Yorkers to calibrate their personal hygiene according to prudent and unwise choices as well as optimal and acceptable practices. Despite that historical divergence, we should not suspend our review of obsessional neurosis, for the obsessional neurotic’s often clever methods for circumventing prohibition can still inspire pandemic-era action.
- 12 All of those methods emerge from the ongoing tug-of-war between prohibition and desire in the obsessional neurotic’s psychical life. To illustrate, let us return to the classic example of childhood masturbation. Once a parent or some other authority prohibits genital touching, that injunction only represses the desire to touch without destroying it. As a result, neither prohibition nor desire goes away (Freud 1989b: 37-8). Certainly, that much is common sense. As one pandemic-era *New York Times* article reported, the more we are asked not to touch our faces with our hands, the more we want to do so (Parker-Pope 2020). The conflict between prohibition and desire can last only so long, however. Eventually, the obsessional neurotic must achieve some satisfaction.
- 13 One solution is, of course, transgression, and probably many individuals living during the coronavirus pandemic transgressed the recommendation against face touching. Yet outright transgression has limited value, as Freud (1989b: 39-45) suggests in comparing obsessional prohibitions to “primaeval” taboos. In cultures in which those taboos are operative, transgression threatens the social order and requires reparation in the form of a renouncement, such as a loss of freedom. Like individuals in those cultures, pandemic-era individuals could not risk transgressing face-touching and handwashing recommendations, not to mention social-distancing and mask-wearing protocols. To do so would have undermined their status as “biological citizens.” Even if they had been

willing to forego that status, they might have faced (not so) friendly reminders, dirty looks, and even fines—all actions designed to restrict bodily movement.

- 14 Obsessional neurotics have at their disposal subtler strategies than transgression. Some obsessives follow a prohibition only to undo it with a subsequent act, thereby effectively cancelling both actions. The second act comes dangerously close to, but usually stops short of, the original, prohibited desire (Freud 1989a: 37-8, 45-6). Other obsessives engage in ceremonials, which allow a prohibition to be suspended but not annulled. Unlike a cancellation, however, a ceremonial can come before or after a prohibited act as a precaution or an expiation, respectively (Freud 1989a: 37, 46; 1989b: 36-7). For instance, obsessional neurotics would likely wash their hands before touching their faces or after turning dirty doorknobs. In fact, as Freud explains (1989a: 20), obsessives usually take special pride in their diligent cleanliness. However, when circumstances prevent them from washing their hands, they often erupt in anxiety (75).
- 15 Finally, the obsessional neurotic seeks satisfaction in substitution. A substitution results from the obsessional's need for some "discharge"—a resonant word in a discussion about masturbation—to reduce the "tension" between instinct and prohibition. Reaching a "compromise" between those two forces, a substitution gives the repressed desire some fulfillment even as it betrays the obsessional's abiding guilt (Freud 1989a: 44; 1989b: 39). In some instances, as Freud explains (1989b: 39), "these obsessive acts fall more and more under the sway of the instinct and approach nearer and nearer to the activity which was originally prohibited." To illustrate, consider another version of the scenario above. While some obsessives might displace onto their faces the original prohibition against genital touching, other obsessives might scratch their faces as a substitute for that desire. For itching is, according to Connor (2004: 230), a "sometimes ecstatic sensation." "Precisely because the scratching of an itch is so consummate a pleasure," he explains, "it is in fact infinite, unfinishable. Once you begin to itch and scratch, there is no end to it" (236). If, given its orgasmic-like pleasure, face scratching too eventually falls under an injunction, obsessional neurotics would likely find another substitute. For example, they might follow the advice, offered in one *New York Times* article, to squeeze a stress ball (Gross 2020).
- 16 All in all, Freud's analysis of obsessional neurosis offers a rich but ultimately limited repertoire of potential responses to the biopolitical regulation of self-touching. Transgression overturns prohibition only to face new restrictions, while both cancellation and substitution arrive, albeit by different paths, just steps away from the prohibited desire. If "biological citizenship" was the goal, as it presumably was for many individuals living during the pandemic, cancellation and substitution, not to mention transgression, would undercut that status. To reinforce that standing, only a ceremonial such as handwashing would seem to offer some promise, as it temporarily satisfies the instinct before reinstalling the prohibition. However, like the other actions, a ceremonial remains caught in a cycle of desire and prohibition. That cycle, characteristic of an earlier moment in biopower's history, persists in the early 21st century but only as a residual element.⁷
- 17 Given those limitations, we are left with two sets of questions. First, what other responses to coronavirus-prevention measures existed in the early days of the pandemic? Those responses could potentially incorporate obsessional symptoms. After all, even if the interplay between instinct and prohibition is no longer a dominant

feature of our culture, obsessional themes have not disappeared. New York City's coronavirus-prevention guidelines are a case in point. Second, must all "biological citizens" come from the same mold? If, as Rose explains (2007: 40), the current biopolitical field has "opened up" our bodies "to experimentation and to contestation," we should anticipate responses that take "biological citizenship" in unanticipated directions. With both sets of questions in mind, the following section seeks fresh options for pandemic-era biopolitical practice. In so doing, it finally parts ways with Freud (1989a: 45-6), who uses the curious phrase "negative magic" to describe the obsessional neurotic's habit of cancelling an act of prohibition with another act. In contrast, this section gives priority to affirmation over repudiation: to expressions of corporeality that trouble public-health recommendations without disavowing them altogether.

Section 3: Critical and Creative Action

- 18 Paul B. Preciado provides us with the theoretical tools for imagining "positive magic" during the pandemic era. In *Testo Junkie*, Preciado (2013: 41) coins the term "orgasmic force" to refer to "the (real or virtual) strength of a body's (total) excitation." Everyone "possesses this masturbatory potentiality," this "power to produce molecular joy" (47). While biopower attempts to control "orgasmic force," no one and nothing, not even biopower, can ever completely contain or exhaust that bodily potential (41-50). As it evades biopower, "orgasmic force" takes shape as "practices of intentional self-experimentation" (363). In the process, it seizes the period's dominant "biocodes"—the "discursive," "visual," and other means of subject production—and turns them against "the somato-semiotic norm" (380, 364). As a result, "the technoliving body" becomes part of "a biopolitical archive," a collective resource for ongoing invention (395, 389). Only in turning the body into such a site of resistance can we create new "biopolitical fictions" as well as "new technologies of the production of subject" (352, 364).
- 19 Consider, for example, Preciado's discussion of gloves, foreskin rings, and other anti-masturbation apparatuses in *Countersexual Manifesto*. From the mid-19th to the early 20th century, manufacturers designed those apparatuses to prevent individuals from touching their genitals (2018: 85-8). Even today, gloves are recommended to individuals who cannot stop touching themselves. In fact, a recent *New York Times* article advised readers to wear gloves to remind themselves not to touch their faces (Parker-Pope 2020). This striking parallel between two eras, linked by way of gloves, demonstrates that these three body parts—genitals, hands, and face—have long commanded biopower's attention. Although technologies, both past and present, have sought to restrain "orgasmic force," any such technology can be "reappropriated by different bodies, reversed, and put to different uses, giving rise to other pleasures and other identity positions" (Preciado 2018: 88). As Preciado explains (2018: 88-9), foreskin rings, designed originally to prevent men from masturbating, have since been repurposed. By mid-20th century, gay men and male S&M practitioners pierced their foreskin with rings to achieve an enhancement of, rather than a deterrent to, erection and orgasm.
- 20 It is no accident that Preciado has turned to the queer community for theoretical and political inspiration. In fact, members of that community have long engaged in biopolitics. Starting in the late 1980s, as Preciado explains (2013: 335-41), numerous groups—from AIDS activists and gender theorists to sex-worker advocates and post-

porn artists—have mobilized against various forms of political and economic injustice as well as normative representations of gender and sexuality. A case in point is the art and activism of gay men, who were targeted by health and homophobic discourse in the earliest years of that period's public-health crisis. Writing about "gay male performative practices" in the early 1990s, David Román (1992: 208, 213) called for art that contested hegemonic depictions of male homosexuality, including the correlation found in mainstream theater between gay, on the one hand, and AIDS and death, on the other. Such an alternative aesthetic would ideally aspire to "produce a chaotic multiplicity of representations [...] that displace, by the very process of proliferation, the authority of a conservative ideology of sexual hegemony, AIDS myths, and aesthetic practices" (218).

- 21 Given that legacy from one public-health crisis, we should expect to find queer responses to the current one. In our search, we should be attentive to two features of any performative act. According to Judith Butler (1988: 521), "the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention." From that perspective, a pandemic-era performative act would potentially stage certain public-health precautions, which would in turn limit the terms of that performance. And yet, while one may be "*implicated* in the very relations of power [one] seeks to rival," as Butler (1993: 241) explains elsewhere, one is never "reducible to those dominant forms." Thus, resistance always emerges from "resources inevitably impure" (241). In that spirit, this essay now turns to a set of amateur pornographic videos produced by gay and bisexual men. Obviously, pandemic-era biopolitical resistance was not limited to gay and bisexual men. Nevertheless, their output offers a revealing case study for this investigation.
- 22 The import of pornography is, from the outset, conflicted. On the one hand, individuals who create and post pornographic videos are unwittingly subject to the very power that their activity might otherwise seem to resist. As Tim Dean argues (2014: 9), "To participate in [...] online porn [...] is to be constantly disclosing information about one's desire and thus to be working within the regulatory deployment of sexuality." On the other hand, the regulatory power to which pornographers submit cannot entirely subsume their productions. "By exposing the libidinal investments that a given regime prefers to keep out of sight," Dean explains, "porn archives may disrupt the dominant narrative, even as they also may consolidate the deployment of sexuality by tracking and molding their subjects' desires" (11). In undermining hegemonic fictions, pornography moves beyond gender and sexuality, narrowly construed. "Indeed," as Dean argues, "pornography offers evidence about a whole gamut of social issues and desires by showing us things that otherwise tend to remain imperceptible" (9).
- 23 The same can be said of videos posted to *Pornhub*, an online repository of pornographic videos uploaded by amateurs and professionals around the world. According to its published statistics, *Pornhub* enjoyed a surge in international visitors at the end of March 2020 with site traffic remaining high throughout the spring. During roughly the same period, also peaking in March, site visitors frequently searched for coronavirus porn. In fact, by the end of May, *Pornhub* had hosted over 1100 videos with coronavirus themes and over 9200 with quarantine themes ("Coronavirus Update—May 26" 2020). Although those themes were relevant to individuals around the world, New Yorkers were particularly well-positioned to partake of this new pornographic genre. In 2018, they headed the list of the site's heaviest visitors by city ("*Pornhub's* Top 20 Cities"

2019), and by March 2020, New York State residents were the second most likely users in the United States to search for coronavirus porn (“Coronavirus Insights” 2020). Regardless of their location, viewers were exposed to options for incorporating coronavirus-prevention measures into everyday practice.

- 24 Of the hundreds of relevant videos posted to *Pornhub*, four emerged as the most compelling examples for this essay in light of their performers’ identities as well as their themes and classification. In fact, the selected videos, three of which were posted in spring 2020, form a relatively unified subset. The videos’ amateur performers identified as males “Interested in” “Guys” or “Guys and Girls.” Three of the videos were categorized as “Gay” and titled and/or tagged with *covid* or a related term. All four videos featured handwashing or a substitute, while two staged masturbation. Obviously, both of those themes figured prominently in New York’s coronavirus-prevention guidelines. However, the following analysis makes no claim of influence—of guidelines on performers or of videos on viewers. Instead, it illustrates that these videos combined a worldwide health guideline (handwashing) with a common sex practice (masturbation) during a period when, regardless of the specific recommendations in effect locally, individuals had been invited to reconsider whom and what they touched under what conditions of cleanliness. Thus, while under any other circumstance a pornographic video featuring masturbation might be considered banal, during the pandemic’s early months, such a video acquired new meanings specifically for New Yorkers and generally for others worldwide, for whom cleaning and touching had become heightened concerns. The videos exposed those potential viewers to options for incorporating coronavirus-prevention measures into creative and critical practice.⁸
- 25 “Amateur POV Handwashing Demo HD 60FPS,” a video produced by BuddyBurbank, a man from Buffalo, staged the obsessional neurotic’s favorite ceremonial.⁹ Like similar videos posted to *Pornhub*, this one resembled pandemic-era handwashing demonstrations, popular in New York City and beyond (e.g., “How to Wash Your Hands” 2020). Over the course of this one-minute video, the performer turns on the faucet and reaches for the soap, then lathers and scrubs his hands, and finally turns off the faucet and dries his hands all while the screen reads “Scrub for at least 20 seconds!!!” On the face of it, this video conforms exactly to the period’s handwashing recommendations. Thus, it hardly serves as an example of political resistance.
- 26 If BuddyBurbank’s production adheres to handwashing protocols, Kinkyguy-20’s video reinterprets them.¹⁰ In “How to Wash Your Hands with Pee! Covid Disinfection !)” the performer, a man from Moscow, approaches a bathroom sink with his exposed penis, urinates into the sink, cups his hands to catch the urine, and, for approximately twenty seconds, washes his hands with it. While the video is not overtly erotic, the fact that it implicitly invokes the watersports practiced in some gay circles nevertheless sexualizes the video’s handwashing instructions. It would seem, at first glance, that those instructions invite viewers to dirty rather than to clean their hands. Such advice would undoubtedly upset the classic obsessional neurotic, who becomes anxious whenever he cannot properly clean his hands. However, Kinkyguy-20’s handwashing technique does not so much oppose conventional hygiene as it finds an alternative way to follow that standard. After all, the public-health guideline, in its colloquial rendition, simply stated “Wash your hands” without always specifying “with soap and water.” Showing

satisfaction with his unorthodox reinterpretation, the performer examines his hands at the end of the video and gives himself two thumbs up.

- 27 The next two videos under examination showcase the classic solo sex act. Consider, first of all, “Covid-19 Cumming Huge Load Lots of Lube Stroking My Big Cock Sensual,” a video posted by ethanmcnab, a man from California.¹¹ The performer begins this video by masturbating with each hand at turns, applying lubricant in the process. Approximately four minutes into the video, he puts a blue latex glove on his left hand, reapplies lubricant a few times, and continues to masturbate with his left hand until ejaculation. The video’s action sits uneasily with the period’s health guidelines. Since the video is our sole evidence, we do not know if the performer washes his hands before and after masturbating. We do know that he puts on a glove, but his glove use is ambiguous. If he wears the glove as a substitute for handwashing, as the video’s title might suggest, he does so too late and against the advice of major health organizations (e.g., “When to Wear Gloves” 2020). It is also possible, of course, that he wears the glove as a sexual enhancement. Either way, the performer parts ways with the obsessional neurotic. Typically, the latter performs a ceremonial such as handwashing before or after touching a forbidden object. Such a precaution or expiation permits a prohibition to be momentarily lifted without being permanently annulled. If the performer substitutes a glove for soap and water, he turns glove wearing and masturbating into two simultaneous rather than two successive gestures. Moreover, unlike the obsessional’s ceremonial, which compensates for transgression, the glove may intensify masturbation as much as it shields the performer from potential contamination.
- 28 We can further assess the significance of ethanmcnab’s departures from the obsessional norm by comparing his video to SylvanusXXX’s. Dated March 26, 2020, “Containment Days 10: Washing Cock” opens by explaining, in French and English on the screen, that the performer will create videos to occupy himself during France’s lockdown. After that explanation, the performer lathers his flaccid penis with soap, strokes his eventually erect penis, reapplies the soap a couple of times, and rinses his penis with water from the faucet. Afterwards he gently dries his penis with a towel. For this performer, washing (or a substitute) is not an action performed *before* and *after* masturbating (as separate acts performed successively) or *while* masturbating (as separate acts performed simultaneously). Instead, washing and masturbating are one and the same act—so much so that the viewer never knows for certain if the performer actually ejaculates. His semen, if any, seamlessly blends with the white lather. Thus, this performance takes to its logical conclusion Freud’s “law of neurotic illness”: the law according to which “obsessive acts [...] approach nearer and nearer to the activity which was originally prohibited” (1989b: 39). Here symptom and desire, at last, are one. It is true, of course, that, by washing his penis with his hands, the performer effectively washes his hands as well. Therefore, one could argue that, for all intents and purposes, the performer follows handwashing protocol. However, the video’s subtitle makes clear that handwashing, to whatever degree it occurs, is only incidental. The video’s true focus is, instead, the performer’s penis. Indeed, the performer reminds us, in caring for a body part that came under scrutiny during the pandemic, that it too deserves attention, the kind that a public-health recommendation can never dictate.

Conclusion

- 29 The *Pornhub* performers in the videos analyzed above proved that creation can come out of crisis. Despite coronavirus-prevention measures—or, perhaps, because of them—these men invented new and sometimes unexpected ways to express their bodies. Surely, they were not alone. Indeed, while this essay has focused exclusively on a particular subpopulation, we should turn to other instances of biopolitical action both inside and outside the queer community. That examination might point to possibilities for corporeal expression once the pandemic has passed. Perhaps handwashing, mask wearing, and social distancing will play roles in post-pandemic sex practices. And while this essay has also concentrated on specific guidelines, we should investigate others that have surfaced during the pandemic. For example, what forms of personal style have been afforded by mask wearing? Such an investigation might reveal the degree to which individuals living during the pandemic have balanced social responsibility and personal freedom, redefining “biological citizenship” while expressing their bodies critically and creatively. Wherever we turn for future lines of inquiry, we should expect discourses and practices to evolve—and even to evaporate—rapidly. Indeed, this project, started in the earliest months of the pandemic and completed a year later, has faced the ephemeral nature of cultural production many times. “Since porn is regarded as ephemera,” as Dean explains (2014: 11), “the conditions that facilitate its archivization remain so contingent [...] as to make its preservation seem miraculous.” His point could easily apply to other internet-based artefacts on which this study has drawn. Despite those challenges, we should nevertheless persist even in a post-pandemic world that will likely require our collective creativity and test our mutual resolve.
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NOTES

1. New York City's health department updated its webpages while I conducted my research on this essay. Hence my need here and at the end of the paragraph to cite the guidelines by way of

other sites, which continued to post earlier versions. While the first set of guidelines was not dated on the other site, circumstantial evidence suggests that it was issued early March, the same month that the second set was issued.

2. Here and in the next paragraph, I loosely adapt language that Foucault (2007: 5-6) uses to distinguish a “legal code,” which operates in terms of “the permitted” and “the prohibited,” from security, which gauges the “optimal” and the “acceptable.” *Security* is, for Foucault in this context, a close synonym of *biopower*. The guidelines under examination are, as I will soon assert, a manifestation of biopower.

3. Considering that *The Times* reported an increase in online readers during March 2020 to 240 million unduplicated individuals worldwide, its articles provide especially apt examples here and throughout this essay (Tracy 2020).

4. In “Manhandling the Body: A Foucauldian Approach” (2021), I discuss the history of masturbation, as recounted by Foucault, and paraphrase the same point from Foucault in the next section. “Manhandling the Body” uses Foucault’s concepts knowledge, power, and subjectivity as a lens through which to examine a masturbation-only, New York-based sex club as a site of resistance.

5. See, for example, the World Health Organization’s guidelines (“Coronavirus Disease [COVID-19] Advice for the Public” 2020), which encouraged handwashing and discouraged face touching.

6. Hardt and Negri, Preciado, and Rose derive the term “societies of control” from Deleuze (1992).

7. I borrow the term *residual* and, in the next paragraph, *dominant* from Williams (1990: 121-7), who distinguishes *residual* and *emergent* from *dominant* characteristics of a culture in a particular historical period.

8. Between conducting research for this essay and preparing it for publication, one of the originally selected videos was disabled probably by its performer while three others were marked by the site for verification. The latter action resulted from new measures that *Pornhub* implemented after a *New York Times* report alleged that some of the site’s videos featured minors and non-consenting adults (Kristof 2020). (See “Our Commitment to Trust and Safety” for the site’s new verification process.) Although I had no reason to believe that the original videos featured minors or non-consenting adults, I later substituted videos categorized as “Verified Amateurs” for the three videos pending verification. The disabled video, which I retained, was uploaded by SylvanusXXX, whose *Pornhub* profile now indicates that he has been verified. The subset is now less unified than, but still comparable to, the original one. Major deviations from the subset’s common features will be noted below. Here and below, the performers’ location and sexual orientation come from their *Pornhub* profiles unless otherwise noted; information about the videos’ tags, categories, and posting dates comes from the pages on which the videos were uploaded. *Pornhub* does not provide exact posting dates, so the ones given here are only approximate.

9. Although this video was neither tagged nor titled *covid* or a related term, its theme along with its spring 2020 posting arguably qualifies it as coronavirus porn. And although it was not posted to the gay category, the performer’s other videos on his profile page were posted to that category as of this writing.

10. Although posted in fall 2020, this video is virtually identical to a spring 2020 video originally chosen for this project.

11. The performer’s location comes from his Modelhub page, linked to his *Pornhub* profile.

ABSTRACTS

This essay examines two sets of coronavirus-prevention guidelines issued by New York City's health department in early spring 2020. The department advised residents not to touch their faces "unless" they had washed their hands but advised them to masturbate "especially if" they had washed their hands. Those recommendations reshaped New Yorkers' relationship to their bodies and, in so doing, contributed to a new permutation of biopower. Drawing on several theories of biopower, this essay's first section explains that the department's recommendations used large-scale biopolitical tactics with small-scale implications to encourage New Yorkers to meet the expectations of what Nikolas Rose has called "biological citizenship." Exploring potential responses to the body's biopolitical regulation, this essay's second section considers the prohibition against touching in Sigmund Freud's outdated but culturally resonant theory of obsessional neurosis. While obsessional neurosis may transgress, cancel, or achieve a compromise with that prohibition, only a ceremonial such as handwashing offers promise for responsible action. However, it, like the obsessional's other actions, operates in a cycle of desire and prohibition which cannot fully account for how biopower now promotes and regulates bodily knowledge and movement. In search of alternatives, this essay's final section turns to four coronavirus-themed pornographic videos produced by gay and bisexual men. These videos troubled public-health guidelines while providing potential viewers in New York and beyond with critical and creative options for pandemic-era action. In sum, these productions revealed that creation can come out of crisis.

Cet article examine deux séries de directives de prévention concernant le coronavirus émises par le Service de santé de la ville de New York au début du printemps 2020. Le service a conseillé aux habitants de ne pas se toucher le visage "à moins" de s'être lavé les mains, mais leur a conseillé de se masturber "surtout" s'ils se sont lavés les mains. Ces recommandations ont redéfini la relation des New-Yorkais avec leur corps et, ce faisant, ont contribué à une nouvelle mutation du biopouvoir. S'appuyant sur plusieurs théories du biopouvoir, la première section de cet article montre que les recommandations du service de santé ont fait appel à des tactiques biopolitiques à grande échelle avec des implications à petite échelle pour encourager les New-Yorkais à répondre aux attentes de ce que Nikolas Rose a appelé la "citoyenneté biologique". Explorant les réponses potentielles à la régulation biopolitique du corps, la deuxième section de cet article examine l'interdiction du toucher dans la théorie de la névrose obsessionnelle de Sigmund Freud, une théorie dépassée mais qui résonne dans la culture. Si la névrose obsessionnelle peut transgresser, supprimer ou parvenir à un compromis avec cette interdiction, seul un cérémonial tel que le lavage des mains offre la promesse d'une action responsable. Cependant, ce cérémonial, comme les autres actions de la névrose obsessionnelle, opère dans un cycle de désir et d'interdiction qui ne peut rendre pleinement compte de la manière dont le biopouvoir promeut et régule aujourd'hui la connaissance du corps et son mouvement. À la recherche d'alternatives, la dernière section de cet article se tourne vers quatre vidéos pornographiques sur le thème du coronavirus produites par des hommes gays ou bisexuels. Ces vidéos ont remis en question les directives de santé publique tout en offrant aux spectateurs potentiels de New York et d'ailleurs des options critiques et créatives pour agir à l'ère de la pandémie. En somme, ces productions ont révélé que la crise peut engendrer la créativité.

INDEX

Keywords: coronavirus, COVID-19, pandemic, New York City, touch, body, biopower, biopolitics, pornography, obsessional neurosis, masturbation

Mots-clés: coronavirus, COVID-19, pandémie, New York, toucher, corps, biopouvoir, biopolitique, pornographie, névrose obsessionnelle, masturbation

AUTHOR

ERIC DAFFRON

Eric Daffron, Professor of Literature at Ramapo College of New Jersey, has published widely on early British gothic literature and other topics. Currently, his work focuses on Michel Foucault and on sexuality and the body. He lives in New York City. Contact: edaffron [at] ramapo.edu