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## Biopolitics' New Iteration: Gay Men, Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis and the Pharmaco-Pornographic Imagination

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# Biopolitics' new iteration: Gay men, Pre-exposure prophylaxis and the pharmaco-pornographic imagination

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**Abstract**

This article builds upon Paul Preciado's conceptualisation of pharmaco-pornographic power to understand the ongoing affects and effects of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) on queer men's sexual socialities and subjectivities. Drawing from a new-materialist epistemology, we analyze data from a sexual health pilot study in NYC to trace the techno-sexual health assemblages forming in queer life worlds. Our analysis suggests that these assemblages, entangling PrEP and other pharmacological substances, pornographic imaginaries together with mediatic technologies and public health rationalities, are creating paradoxical desires and practices of intimacy that are both normative and exceed rational health-actor logics and normative understandings of risk. These effects have population-level biopolitical implications.

**Keywords**

Biopolitics, HIV, desire, Gay men, Preexposure Prophylaxis

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## Introduction

In a highly cited discussion piece in *Sexualities*, Tim Dean (2015) observed tensions within gay cultural and activist circles around the use of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) as an emergent public health strategy to halt HIV transmission. Drawing from Queer theorist Preciado (2013) conceptualization of 'Pharmaco-Power' as biopower's newest iteration, Dean argued these tensions in the gay body politic revealed a deepening in biopolitical process of gay subjectification with radiating effects on gay men's sexual intimacies, cultures and socialities. Possibilities for community-level response to political organizing, as Dean noted, were also beginning to cohere more succinctly in-line with biomedical imaginaries at the expense of more communitarian responses to HIV risk. From the vantage point of writing this article from a large urban centre in North America in 2021, it could be argued that the initial rejection of PrEP amongst dissenting HIV community activists has all but dissipated. PrEP has been embraced by vast segments of gay men, in particularly the insured, the educated, and overall, the well-off since access to PrEP is mediated by the pharmaceutical marketplace (Mayer et al., 2020). Indeed, PrEP now circulates freely in gay sexual circuits; it expresses in the on-line exchanges of gay men's hook-up apps of choice, and in the intimacies enjoyed in off-line worlds (da Silva-Brandao and Ianni, 2020; Florencio, 2020; Rangel and Crath, 2021; Young et al., 2019). It has also been heralded as a biomedical salve for reclaiming sexual freedoms and ensuring gay reproductive futurities free from HIV. Rather than invalidating Dean's original observations, we argue that the widespread adoption of PrEP by public health apparatuses and gay community organizations (Hammack et al., 2019; Young et al., 2020) as a vital technology in the HIV prevention cycle, make his initial drive to understand the socio-cultural effects of PrEP on gay men's sexual socialities all the more poignant and necessary today. To this end, we ask, what new holds does biopower's latest iteration have on the social organization and production of gay men's sexual fantasies, subjectivities, normative understandings of risk and practices of intimacy?

In this article, we interrogate the 'biopolitical side-effects' (Dean, 2015:224) and affects of 'pharmaco-power' in the intimate lives of gay men. Building upon Dean (2015) exploratory thesis, we turn towards the theoretical work of Paul Preciado (2013, 2020), Nicholas Rose (2003) and Shaka McGlotten (2013) to examine the ways in which different assemblages of prescribed and illicit pharmacological technologies, public health discourses, communications technologies (such as hook-up apps) that facilitate online and offline sexual social networking possibilities and pornographic imaginaries, are inciting new formulations of gay men's sexual socialities and intimacies (McGlotten, 2013). We ground our explorations in research material generated from a New York City based pilot study. Read through a sociological, new materialist analytic (Crath et al., 2019; Lupton, 2019a and b; Fox and Aldred, 2017; Rangel and Crath, 2021), our research highlights the creative possibilities, tensions, and blockages that arise when fantasy, discourses, bodies and technologies entangle across different on-line and off-line sexual cultures. Our data also points to the different ways PrEP, in conjunction with other pharmaceutical and communications technologies, configures in the semiotics and emotions of risk-taking and in satisfying newly formulating articulations of gay men's

sexual intimacies and fantasies. We argue that these complex ‘techno-human assemblages’ (Lupton, 2019a) formulating in this new biopolitical era need to be considered analytically to better grasp PrEP as a discursive-material phenomenon that is creating differentiated responses to risk management, and gay men’s sexual cultures and socialities.

## **Biopolitical Imaginaries: from the molar to the molecular self**

At the turn of the 21st century, sociologist Nikolas Rose identified a new stage in the development of biopouvoir (biopower) – the increasing capacity and preoccupation of modern states to administer and foster the biological life and productive potentialities of its population (Rose, 2003). He opened that piece with the question: ‘How did we become neurochemical selves?’ (Rose, 2003: 46). With this question, Rose invited us to examine how citizens of advanced democratic societies started to think of mental and emotional health, such as sadness, the everyday worries of life, and children’s attentiveness, not only as medical problems such as depression, anxiety and attention disorders, but also as chemical imbalances of the brain, and as such, as amenable to pharmacological interventions. What he described was a profound transformation in Western societies – but not exclusively, (Rose, 2003: 47), prompting him to describe these emergent societal-level phenomena as ‘psychopharmacological societies’ (Rose, 2003: 46). For him, this transformation was not only the outcome of medico-scientific transformations, drawing from advances in molecular chemistry, genetics, brain imaging and so on, but the result of cultural and regulatory as well as economic imperatives. Together, they are generative of new ways of understanding responsabilised citizenship, but also demand for pharmaceutical products in the wake of increasing practices of self-care and health-monitoring, and in-line health communities. In his conclusions he states,

... these drugs are becoming central to the ways in which our conduct is determined to be problematic and governed, by others, and by ourselves to the continuous work of modulation of our capacities that is the life’s work of the contemporary biological citizen (Rose, 2003: 59).

The increasing pharmacologisation of health can be situated in the continuum of biopower (Rose, 2007; Abi-Rached and Rose, 2010). In its first iteration, as conceptualized by Foucault, biopower operated through the disciplinary mechanism of the panopticon via the school, the hospital and the prison (Butler, 1997). The body in mass of the population, and the body of the individual was its site of operation; the modern subject was made possible, or at least intelligible to itself and the state through the operations of biopower (Foucault, 1990). As Rose (2007) has argued, this was a biopower acting on the body at a molar scale – at the level of visible bodies and organs and body tissues. The current iteration of biopower continues at the molecular level, as deviances from ‘normalcy’ have become detectable to objects of surveillance at the cellular and genetic levels due to advances in molecular biology, neurochemistry, genetics, and digital imaging. Moreover, the 21st century subject is made responsible for managing what Rose describes

as ‘not disease but the almost infinitely expandable and malleable empire of risk’ (Rose, 2007: 87). Managing bodily precarity and landscapes of risk is made possible by the prospect of being able to know more about oneself – via diagnostic apparatuses at the level of genome, the increasing expectations and desire for safety via responsibilized citizenship, and the availability of an ever-expanding marketplace for molecular interventions shaped by accelerated consumption via digital platforms.

Preciado (2013)’s sharp analytical focus on desire provides further explanatory power as to how pharmaco-pornographic technologies ‘dissolve in’ or ‘inhabit’ the queer (political) body (Preciado, 2008, 109). For Preciado, biomolecular and mediatic/pornographic technologies (such as hook-up apps) work in a type of performative feedback-loop of production and consumption. What has become most desired in mainstream gay sexual circuits – what Preciado (2008) (p. 108) describes as the essential ‘life artefacts’ that gay men should possess to score, to be desired – hardened, muscled masculine bodies, sexual stamina, enduring erections, the capacity to engage in ‘raw sex’ [and party and play/] for example – are now being materialised through this techno apparatus of power relations. Chemical substances such as PrEP, Viagra, Testosterone and GHB are to quote Preciado, ‘the edible somatic-political programs for the manufacturing of subjectivity and its affects’ (112). Wanting it and desiring it now (Dean, 2015: 239) is at the service of industrial profit. It fuels the generation of pornographic and pharmaceutical production, just as it is shaped through it. Lust for certain types of bodies and intimacies is mediated via the ease of fast streaming of pornographic representations of gay sexual fantasies and the grids of hook-up apps that alert the geo-positioning of other desiring men. If pornographic imaginaries exert control through the provocation of desire that might or might not materialise in hook-ups or a quick masturbatory fix, they are also being naturalised at the level of the body. Desire, in other words, has become the central mechanism through which biopower asserts itself via the disciplinary practices of excitation, ingestion, and consumption. As Dean, drawing from Preciado, summarises, in this new era of pharmacopornographic biopolitics, ‘power works by prompting a libidinal investment that encourages us to feel our deepest satisfaction lies in embracing it. Far from imposed, it is desired’ (Dean, 2015: 235).

Important for our own work is queer of colour theorist McGlotten (2013) layered considerations of the virtual nature of contemporary queer intimacies in digital spaces. For McGlotten, the semiotics and materialities of digital platforms can be seen as an unfinished space, or in his words, an ‘assemblage of image, text, and facts emerges from a complex set of personal histories, dis-identifying and instrumental politics, and ambivalent structures of feeling’ (McGlotten, 2013: p. 61). These spaces are productive sites of intimacies that are simultaneously aspirational and anticipatorily sensed with a potential, or virtuality oriented toward a “not yet, a moreness that remains as much invitation as endless deferral” (62). It is the attention to the virtual functioning of feelings, including frustration, anxiety, hope and desire itself, that allows McGlotten to suggest a possible expansiveness of queer intimacies in excess of normative structurings of gay men’s subjectivities<sup>1</sup>. McGlotten’s analysis enriches the analytical power of biopower by recognizing the racialised and gendered specificity of structural relations and process that are informing of queer men of colour’s embodied experiences of risk in virtual worlds. It

also expands Preciado's analysis of the ways in which biopornographic technologies inhabit queer intimacies by drawing attention to the circulation and structuring capacities of feelings – as both a type of force that constricts movements and as spacious resource to wager queer activism and queer connectivity differently.

## Methodology

In tandem with recent biopolitical explorations of the complex inter-relationships between human and non-human bodies, technologies, and social practices and discourses, this article draws inspiration from new materialist and Actor Network Theoretical approaches in social science scholarship (Fox and Aldred, 2017; Author's own; Lupton, 2019a and b; Race, 2018) to investigate the affects and effects of PrEP in rapidly technologising gay life-worlds<sup>2</sup>. A new materialist lens challenged us to analyse communications and biomedical technologies not as static, passive objects, but as agentic entities that in their assemblage, are as much produced by as they are informing of human subjects, spaces, discourses, queer socialities and other non-human bodies. Attention in our analysis was paid to the complex ways in which techno-human assemblages – as complex entanglements of 'matter, language, and thought' (Lupton, 2019a) – were productive of socio-sexual and health phenomena and subjectivities. As Fox and Aldred (2017) succinctly note, as these contingent assemblages emerge, dissipate, and then re-constitute differently across time and space, they affect human capacities to "do, think and feel" (Fox and Aldred, 2017, 140). In our own research process, a new materialist analysis encouraged us to attend to our field data in a way that highlighted the discursive-material relations and affects that 'accrete around' (Fox and Aldred, 2017, 142) pharmacopornographic technology use.

For this article, we selected data generated in the second phase of a New York pilot study involving six hired field research-participants. Our research, conducted by two of this articles' three authors and a community artist (Crath et al., 2019), was exploratory, investigating the types of queer sexual practices and socialities, affects and discourses of risk emerging at the nexus of innovations in pharmacoprophylaxis (Crath et al., 2019; Race, 2018), socio-political forces, and innovations in communications technologies facilitating queer intimacies (McGlotten, 2013). Data was collected over a 1-year period, from the summer 2016 to the summer, 2017. Participants self-identified as 'gay' or 'queer', and were differentially racialised (4 participants identified as men of colour – two Latino, two Black – and two identified as White). All participants were frequent users of hook-up/dating technologies designed for queer men. The six men were hired for a 3-month period to keep weekly auto-field journals and participate in bi-weekly, 2-hour unstructured follow-up interviews. The diaries, together with the interviews, provided an opportunity for participants to reflexively narrate their social and sexually intimate connections or disconnections across different gay socialities and sexual cultures. We hone in on those areas of the transcripts which highlighted the relational dimensions of participant's use of technologies in facilitating intimacies in on-line and off-line worlds. This study was approved by (Smith College's) human ethics research committee. In keeping with a new materialist line of sociological inquiry (Fox and Aldred, 2017;

Lupton, 2019a), we analysed the flows of affects (what is affected, what affects culturally, sexually, psychologically, and physically) when different health and communications technologies, risk and prevention discourses, pornographic imaginaries, bodies, feelings, and relations of power entangle.

## Analysis and discussion

### *Pharmaco-pornographic enactments of desire: muscled bodies, digital sexual markets and fluid exchanges*

For our research participants, the combined effects of privatized healthcare choices – driven by an emphasis on the patient as consumer (Ayo, 2012) – and the biotechnologised possibilities for self-transformation offered by pharmaceutical industries entangle with pornographic imaginaries of raced masculinity and muscled hardness and deeply individualized histories of connecting and disconnecting in gay life worlds. (Preciado, 2013). Together, these differently assembled substances affects and imaginaries render them feeling better equipped to navigate the erotic capital hierarchies of on-line and off-line sexual cultures. For one participant, ‘D’, a white, middle age, economically secure gay man, the ingestion of Human Growth Hormone (HGH) for muscular development and PrEP to ‘fuck without fear’ of contracting HIV materialises his fantasies about bottoming raw with muscled ‘poz guys’ (personal correspondence, June 2016). Desire to hold ‘poz cum’ in his body motivates his cruising on hook-up apps and fuels his ingestion of substances. The temporalities of HIV and its relation to bodily aesthetics figure prominently in ‘D’s’ extracted vignette:

I just had a hard time seeing myself as sexually desirable and, so, that was like a lot of my twenties, until I finally started looking at – I gained weight in my thirties, which was in part because a doctor told me ‘You got to start gaining weight, you got to start eating.’ And he told me to start using DHEA, which was a supplement that would help build muscle mass and it really worked, I started using it when I was thirty or thirty-one and instantly gained ten pounds of muscle mass.

The transformation unchained by DHEA molecules – even if transient – allows D the possibility of materialising a muscled, buff body that, as he is all too aware, traffics more easily in the sexual marketplace of hook-up apps. His central profile pic which he shares with us features a torqued torso that is flexed and ripped. Just the right lighting maximises these bodily effects (personal correspondence, 2016). A long history of a fetishization of working-class masculinities (Brewer, 2018) in white gay male cultures entangles with his ingestion of growth hormones and his drive to embody marketplace desirability. Together they work to help him score in on-line worlds. ‘Gaining weight’ in terms of muscle mass also allows him to circumnavigate the temporality of HIV by materialising a body that presents as youthful and buffed. For this participant, these are signifiers of health and virility that stand in defiance of the affects of HIV metastasising in the body – a visual semiotics that references a pre-Antiretroviral era of HIV sciences in which the visual

effects of HIV induced wasting syndrome were drawn upon in gay cultural circuits to demarcate the well body from the afflicted body. His muscled, white body also signals a temporal and bodily distinction between a body cared for over time and a thin body produced by the excess of methamphetamine use. This theme of risk assessment at the level of appearance echoed throughout all of participants' field diaries and interviews. To be a less risky body in on-line worlds, or conversely, a body too risky to approach, highlights the ways in which the materialities of raced and classed hierarchies in the US (such as access to healthy food, health care, housing, HIV medications and other pharmacological substances) are mediating factors shaping gay men's virtual lives.

If HGH's biochemical mediations entangle with the temporalities of HIV, they also work to short-circuit the workings of time in social mediatic worlds. 'D's' biochemically induced youthful looking and muscled appearance permit an access to sexual circuits that not only imbricate youthfulness with sexual prowess, but on certain hook-up sites such as Bare Back Real Time (BBRT) favoured by this participant, work to position him as an eager bottom boy desirous of being topped by a muscle Daddy. What he wants, how he wants it, and how he gets it entangles. To be that boy, materially and semiotically, is as much constituted via the semiotics of bareback pornography produced by studios such as Treasure Island (Dean, 2015), as it is enabled by a pharmaceutical/medical apparatus at the service of literally manufacturing expressions of gay desire.

The pharmaceutical enhancement of erotic capital is furthered by the possibilities of biomedicine to alter the course of the HIV epidemic and to release gay men from fear of infection. Here, fantasy – to fuck raw – is unchained so that experimentation and pleasure-seeking take on new forms that are grounded in but may exceed the biomedically sanctioned logics of PrEP use. For 'D', the pharmacological materialities of PrEP and TasP enable him to realise carnal intimacies previously considered fringe, dangerous, and evidence of failed biological citizenship (Rose, 2007). In his words:

I am a hole to him. And that is, um, a triumphant fun, a fantasy, it's a fantasy I never got to live out in my youth. So, it's a fantasy. I never thought I'd get to do this, ever. So, even though it's been five years of being on PrEP, it still feels like a novelty that I have the freedom to take, you know, get taken by a man who's hot, who's HIV positive, who's used solely as a conduit by him and he just walks away. And I get a hold of his cum, afterwards, and I love that. I love that.

Technically, PrEP as a public health measure dictated by the CDC does not imply condom-less sex and the free exchange of bodily fluids that can carry HIV and a host of other virus and bacteria, as PrEP does not protect from other STIs (Lal et al., 2017). Still, the molecular shielding made possible by the regimented uptake of PrEP is productive of new erotogenic intimacies (McGlotten, 2013) that extend beyond the sign of AIDS. D's' fantasy – to embody a poz man's cum – drives his willingness to discipline himself to the regimens of PrEP use dictated by increasingly more sophisticated juridical-medico techniques of surveillance and control (Preciado, 2013). Pornographic imaginaries featuring bareback sex (Dean, 2015) entangle as well in his now realisable fantasy, as do the digital technologies of hook-up apps that facilitate this desire for exchange of bodily



fluids. The freedom to both take in a culturally laden bodily substance and to be taken in a sexual encounter generates a narrative and affective break from a time in which semen exchanges signified a potential chain of HIV risk, AIDS and premature death. And yet, it is only under the guise of a pharmaco-power logics that fucking raw whilst on PrEP can be translated as a ‘rational’ choice by a responsabilised health actor. These embodied acts of ‘freedom’ from fear, moralised practice and untethered pleasures that D so actively fantasises about and embraces assumes the pharmaco-power subject’s body as a blank slate on which biomedicine’s promises are freely realized: The materialities of PrEP use belies these assumptions. First, to be a PrEP’d body, to help break the chains of HIV transmission demands the folding of the sexual actor into increasingly intensified forms of biomedical surveillance from frequent HIV and STI screening, daily regimes of PrEP intake, etc., (Brisson and Nguyen, 2017). Moreover, the freedom to ‘be empowered’ in the way that D describes also hinges on whether one has access to health care coverage or the social, relational, and historically sedimented capital sufficient to sustain pharmacologised practices of self-care in ways that feel safe and manageable (Mayer et al., 2020). Responsibilised biosexual citizenship, in other words, and the sexual cultures that D inhabits, are the product of multiple actualizations of accumulated financial and social capital. And as McGlotten reminds us, they have attendant cultural affects – both racialized and eroticized – in the metropolitan gay sexual marketplace (McGlotten, 2013).

As the interview excerpt highlights, PrEP’s short-circuiting of the material ‘dangerousness’ of seminal fluids represents not just a bodily freedom from HIV risk, but a form of psycho-social liberation that allows the subject’s very body to become a molecularly enhanced site for expanded forms of intimacy and pleasure seeking. To be sure, under a strict regime of PrEP and TasP use, semen still has the potential to be a carrier of unknown biological risks in the form of STIs, but for this participant, the seriousness of this is akin to ‘getting a cold’ for which ‘there’s a medication’ (personal correspondence, June 2016). It could be also said that gay men’s semen along with its associated desires and histories of taboo, stigma and for some, gay brotherhood, still holds a semiotic charge as a dangerousness substance that rattles the rationalities of reproductive sex (Dean, 2015). PrEP not only has the potential to bracket the historically sedimented affects of HIV cultivated in the first wave of HIV in countries of the Global North. It also heralds a simultaneous present-futurity that is HIV neutral (Florencio, 2020; Rangel and Crath, 2021). In other words, anti-HIV molecules circulating through bloodstreams register at the molar scale of the gay body politic, materialising an anticipated release from AIDS phobic and homophobic pasts deemed unrealisable in a pre-PrEP era (or at least according to current bio-pharmacological imaginaries). Importantly, the virtual intimacies that PrEP forges are also felt as deeply personal and impactful (McGlotten, 2013).

(Truvada) comes to mean so much more than preventing HIV. It has come to mean that so many of us can reclaim our bodies. As gay and bisexual men – as bottoms – to reclaim our bodies – to be feeling good and empowered by the pleasure that we enjoy. Instead of constantly being shamed and told to be afraid of our own bodies and other people’s bodies. Which I don’t think is a very positive message to send to an entire generation for decades on end. It’s just not healthy.

D articulates the political implications of pharmaco-power. PrEP, for D and a number of other participants, far exceeds its technical-scientific role as an HIV prevention tool. It does so by facilitating a pharmacologically mediated passage from a previous state in which the bio-semiotic practices of responsible citizenship were entangled with the affects of loss and shame, to a novel arrangement positioning gay intimacies outside of the ever-expanding ‘empire of risk’ (Rose, 2007: p. 87). According to this form of biocitizenship that D heralds, the very choice to exercise PrEP mediated queer pleasures in the present, represents a type of security against imparting HIV risk to future generations. PrEP use, in other words, imprints on gay reproductive futures.

There are, we would argue, potential unspoken limitations to a gay futurity and livable present embraced by D and other gay men, who like D, inhabit privileged metropolitan gay lifeworlds. For those who are economically/racially vulnerable due to fractured health infrastructures and other systemic forms of inequalities (or indeed, perhaps even for those charged to support PrEP use in at risk communities), we question whether in the wake of discursive practices that link individualised understandings of queer empowerment and ‘freedom to be’, to PrEP use, incidents of sero-conversion (whether if one is ‘on PrEP’ or not) won’t necessarily carry a different yet equally potent moralising charge of irresponsibility and personal failure. In other words, detachments from health care systems carry potentially new forms of social and material risks and privileges than what were being articulated in a pre-PrEP past.

### *Pharmaco-power versus desire: unintended effects*

In offering its subjects control, PrEP also produces new relationships to the dangerousness associated with seminal fluids and the transgressive act of practicing condomless sex (Meunier et al., 2019). In a paradoxical way, it recharges fantasies not of known risks or known dangers – but the ‘hotness’ of the forbidden and taboo. In the words of another participant, M

M: ... at the same time, getting turned on by the uncontrollable. I think that that’s why, you know, it used to be that barebacking was such a big deal. Barebacking used to be such a big fucking deal. It was because you want it so badly and yet, you know, it’s, it’s unknowable, like, you know, at the time you couldn’t really know what someone’s status is per se. You know, you could, and I feel like I knew what my partner’s status was, but ultimately there was that little bit of the unknown that made it so sexy and dangerous, you know? Or dangerous and sexy.

M: And like, for me, as soon as PrEP came out, barebacking didn’t, it’s still like, a big part of my life and I enjoy it physically, but the, you know, the sexiness of it is not is not, the friction of the taboo is not there so much. Though it has kind of come back, I think, as guys start to battle it, like condom warriors and shit, you know?

As the risk of HIV transmission is removed via PrEP, condomless sex’s signification continues to operate in sexual fantasies and in tensions with the cultural imaginaries of

responsibilized citizenship. The reduction of the possibilities of HIV transmission represents a loss of the unpredictability of sex, and of the dangers of bodily fluids with their associated affects, which have structured queer men socio-sexual fields in the aftermath of the first wave of the AIDS epidemic. While M disciplines himself to the daily regimen of PrEP intake so that he remains 'safe', he simultaneously explores ways in which sexual encounters can regain that charge of unpredictability and transgression. Here, the delineation between danger, risk and pleasure appear to blur and exceed the biological risk of viral transmission and indeed PrEP discourse's normativising force (Møller and Leden, 2021). Queer intimacy, for M and other participants extends towards a 'not knowing' something about your partner and the possibility that they may affect you, change you, in unexpected ways. Thus, as 'the condom warriors' re-moralize condoms for sex, ignoring their warnings reinvigorates imaginaries of transgression that make barebacking sexy again, even when mediated by PrEP (cf. Mowlabocus, 2021).

This desire to materialise the erotic potentials of 'bio hazardous' sex in the presence of PrEP and TasP is evident in another participant C's recounting of a chemsex party that he had recently participated in.

As an added to the twist to the chemsex parties he normally throws, his invite mentioned that he was going to have two bottoms that wanted to be 'pozsed'. When I arrive, I see several men that had biohazard tattoos jerking themselves off and playing around with the other guys there. One of the two bottoms was present and passed out on the couch from dosing himself with too much GHB. Aside from the two bottoms that wanted to contract HIV, there was no other mention of HIV status or PrEP... Eventually, he asks me if I want to slam, to which I reply yes. I then administer slam for him, the second bottom, and myself I then get fucked by S a little more before sticking my dick inside the second bottom. He never asks if I am poz, and I never tell him that I am not.

C, proudly Latino and gay, is able to take advantage of state provisioning of PrEP for people living below a certain income threshold. The sexual event he describes here is part of a wider Manhattan based circuit of chemsex parties that fuel his sexual imagination. As articulations of the machinations of pharmaco-pornographic capitalism, they are open and dynamic gatherings that materialise across offline and online sexual worlds (Race, 2015). Different elements are brought into a co-constitutive relationship with one another to realise party attendees' anticipated desires and carnal pleasures. These include different pharmacological substances – PrEP whose effectivity as a prophylaxis works unseen at a molecular level, Chrystal Meth and gamma-Hydroxybutyric acid (GHB), Viagra and Cialis to maintain erections and counter the effects of other substances taken to enhance pleasure; needles, pipes and drinking fluids and other non-animate materials necessary for the embodying of illicit pharmaceuticals; the hardware and software of smart phones and wifi networks that facilitate the ongoing flow of participants into the scene, and create the materials conditions for the exchange of sexually explicit photos, videos and texts that fuel the fantasy of risk taking and 'pozing' eager bottoms (cf Møller, 2020; Race, 2018). Pornographic imaginaries produced by studios such as Treasure Island, Sketchy Sex and others that eroticise barebacking entangle as well (Dean, 2009).

This assemblage of bodies, drugs, discourses of risk and danger and digital communications technologies worked to elide the possibility that numerous party participants might in fact be adhering to safer-sex technologies via their privatised practices of PrEP or TasP use (this was indeed true at least for C) (Møller and Leden, 2021; Møller, 2020; Mowlabocus, 2021). Thus, despite the fact that technologies of risk mitigation might have been operating at molecular scales, what mattered for participants was that the fantasy of dangerousness, of ‘seeding’ was being performatively played out in the chem sex scene. Not knowing and refusal to disclose was part of what made the transgressive acts pleasurable.

## More than human

Consumers’ access to an ever-expanding repertoire of pharmacological and mediatic technologies for enhancing sexual pleasure that intersect with HIV Prevention discourses are generative of new assemblages of queer intimacies. As C’s retelling of his experience at the chemsex party suggests, there is a type of unpredictable messiness about currently lived intimacies that exceed biomedicalised and indeed homonormative understandings of sexual health, as matters of individual choice and empowerment, and the logics of rationalised risk management (Møller, 2020). In the lengthily discussion that follows from one of our participants E, virtual intimacies do not always materialise the bodies and fantasies that are promised by technological devices and pharmaceuticals. E identifies as black Dominican and Puerto Rican, is in his mid 30s, and is middle class.

I’m in a dark room with two hot, you know, guys that could – both of whom could be in a porn ...

... and they were both very handsome and so it was just like two porn [actors] – you know, I’m not thinking of porn starts in terms of like Falcon or something. So, they definitely weren’t Falcon dudes or anything like that, but they were a porn I would watch. So, like, good-looking sexy guys ... Yeah, definitely more along the lines of Macho Fucker or Latin, you know, a Latin porn site and, like, I was wearing a good jock, so I looked pretty good.

In this part of his account of the encounter, the intersection between sex apps, which connected him to these two men, and PrEP, not only enabled him to meet their request for condomless sex, but affected a materialisation of a fantasy that he longed for in off-line time. In this passage, he describes the scene in terms of pornographic production values. E’s obvious admiration of the bodies of the two men that fuck him hinge on their closeness to the aesthetics of pornography. However, he indicates that they are not Falcon guys – referring to Falcon Studios, one of the top 10 most popular gay pornography studios which features mostly depictions of masculine, highly sculpted white actors. Instead, he compares them to Macho Fuckers – a smaller niche studio that specializes in Black and Latino and ‘gangsta’ brand of bareback pornography. Elsewhere in our discussions, he talks about his experiences of racist injury while cruising for intimacy and specifically about the strategies he deploys to short-circuit white gay men’s racialized fantasies about

his Black body (McGlotten, 2013). However, in this scene, first orchestrated on-line, he anticipated a gangsta fantasy that would be played out in circuits of queer Black desire. He longs for this, a pornographic infused scene cast exclusively for Black and Brown men like himself beyond the reaches of a racialization of desire in the service of whiteness. The feelings associated with being treated as a racialized niche-object by two gangsta porn studs while simultaneously being positioned similarly by his two partners, to an extent organised what was to play out off-line. The scene actualised an aggressive sexual encounter he enjoys, but it also left him feeling deeply ambivalent, as he goes on to describe:

... And then, they're both fucking me and I was, like, going back and forth between them with no, like, no – being like 'ow', – but really kind of trying, struggling to keep up

I was not, like, ultimately, I come away from the apps feeling like, like, I don't want to – like feeling the same way about the app. Like, it delivers a something – like, it promises something that it doesn't really deliver. And even when you have this incredible sexual experience it's still mixed feelings.

What E describes is a type of semiotic-material fault-line between the excitement generated by pornographic fantasy, the potentiality promised by hook-up apps and what materialises in excess of what desire wants. His recollections of 'no, like no, being like ow' further highlight a type of affective and material disconnection between what his present sober somatic body would permit, his desire to embody macho-fucker porn, and the substance enhanced bodies of his sexual playmates. He describes it as follows

they had already taken, you know – smoked this massive blunt and gotten super high and did poppers – were doing poppers constantly and were drinking vodka and, you know, who knows what else they had done.

To clarify, the researcher asked:

Did that piece, so did those pieces, so, like the blunt, the poppers, the vodka, did that contribute to the sense of it as a pornographic experience?

He goes on:

E: Yeah, because they were in an altered state and I wasn't, you know? I didn't – I had like a red bull, you know? ... They were very altered state. They could probably – it seemed like they could probably fuck for hours...

E: ... they were both hard and with no kind of like – not even, like, a momentary lapse in ability to have a hard on and that's just not a thing, humans do.

While he suspected that he knew what pharmacological products his partners had consumed, their capacities to sustain hard-ons – while expected of actors in the mis-enscene of pornography, and which indeed turns him on when he watches these scenes – felt to his sober body in off-line time, un-human. E's desire is at once fueled as he looks on their bodies (akin to when he ingests porn via his computer monitor), but the gangsta fantasy dislocates at that moment when the materiality of his body entangles with the materiality of his sexual partners' pharmacologically produced un-humaness. Without the ingestion of substances (Amyl Nitrate, that is, Poppers to loosen the anal sphincter, Cialis to ensure an erection and Marijuana and alcohol to psychologically manage the intensity of fucking), he cannot realise the demands made of a/his body as imagined in on-line worlds. In other words, his desiring body – unprepped by pharmaceuticals but fueled by pornographic imaginaries and the promises anticipated in the on-line exchange – equivocated, leaving him feeling overwhelmed and disappointed.

## Conclusion

As a biomedical phenomenon, PrEP has the capacity to accomplish what is promised; it can arrest HIV transmission and with this, it can assist some gay men to expand their sexual circuits – as one of the subjects suggested – by offering their PrEP'd bodies as a bridge spanning across the risks and affects of the first wave of HIV/AIDS towards HIV free queer sexual worlds. As we highlighted in the discussion above, individuals' sexual fantasies and their materialisation in bodily practices, merge with aspirations of HIV-free futurities. In this iteration, PrEP can be understood as a scientifically grounded, responsibilised, moralised choice in the face of risk. It is also bio-capital in the production of an affective economy where PrEP's molecular effects in the body transform it into a conduit of community rebuilding across the sero-dive. PrEP and TasP, in other words, allow for the molecular becomings of bodies into HIV-neutralizing assemblages making possible the political and material actualization of socio-sexual fantasies in line with pharmaco-biopolitical citizenship.

Yet, as our analysis shows, the disciplinary practices of pharmacological uptake and the capacities to exercise sufficient socio-economic capital required for such social-molecular transformations seem to recede from view. They are the unsaid and taken for granted elements foundational to the infrastructures of queer socialities and intimacies emerging within the logics of pharmaco-power. As we showed in the second moment of our analysis, the psycho-emotional thrills of dangerousness and yearning for homo-normative transgression that fuel the fantasies of queer intimacies, may at times require a bracketing of a subject's biomedicalised technologies of self-care, thereby eliding the need for disclosure and clarifications in hookup conversations and encounters in online and offline sexual worlds. This also manifests in the strategic rejection of formalized biomedical recommendations – such as ignoring condoms to enhance protection against STIs – in order to feel the exhilaration of 'danger' and rawness. And yet, the invisibilised operations of PrEP and TasP at a molecular scale also afford subjects who have access to it, an ease of movement within the margins of proper biomedicalised sexual subjectivity. In this way, PrEP in its entanglements with pornographic imaginaries, takes on a black-

box-like quality; its presence in the mis-en-scene of materialised sexual fantasies of rawness can at times permit a transgression of homonormative, moralised codes (at least at the level of appearance) and it can entangle with a suit of other prescribed and illicit pharmaceutical technologies to satisfy libidinal investments for achieving porn-styled fucking. And yet, as E describes, there can be a felt sense of disappointment, and thus a quasi short-circuiting of biopower's affects, as an unmediated somatic body fails to achieve what pharaco-power together with digitalized erotic markets promise to fulfill.

Our analysis suggests that Paul Preciado's reconceptualization of desire as constitutive of biopolitics' new force is both useful and pertinent for scholars mapping the contours of queer intimacies in an era marked by the increasing technologisation of daily life. Their insights (Preciado, 2013, 2020) into the operations of pharmaco-pornographic power afford sexualities scholars deft analytical tools for investigating the ways in which fantasy and pleasure materialise and are made meaningful in queer men's contemporary socio-sexual circuits. And yet, as we have highlighted, there are intimacies and desires formulating that exceed biomedical and homonormative rationalities of what constitutes risk and livable futures, and indeed that rub against the grain of rational, moralising practices of a responsabilised health citizenship.

This line of analysis, we want to suggest, has population-level implications. The biomedical optimisms emerging in the aftermath of PrEP and more recently the development of COVID-19 vaccines are perhaps driven by fantasies of a disease-free futurity that is nevertheless profoundly unequitable (Beyrer et al., 2021). In the context of COVID-19, these fantasies have justified the mass quarantines and surveillance of entire global populations with catastrophic results for the poor in both the global south and the global north (Bargain and Aminjonov, 2021). Biopower's new iteration is fueled by desire as well, a desire for a utopian viral-free futurity, which under the state of emergency is materialized via mass financial transfers to global corporations for rapid bio-technological development and deployment enacted on the global population regardless of social factors. Thus, we must interrogate risk management discourses under the disciplinary powers of the emerging pharmaco-pornographic era. These powers herald a re-inscription of certain types of places of dwelling, the nuclear family, and the sero-negative molecularized body and the body politic (HIV-neg and COVID-19 negative, for example) as the ultimate safe spaces for the productive bio-socialities of digital bio-capitalism (Preciado, 2020). As such, privileged and wired home spaces, nuclear families, and bodies emerge as the central units of bio-value to be promoted and protected regardless of the cost (Preciado, 2020)

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## Notes

1. i.e., a responsabilised sexual-health citizen who always ‘plays sure’ as a NYC Department of Health and Hygiene advertisement suggests (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZU6nibG35s>), or a buff, ‘straight acting’ normatively classed, gendered and raced body that traffics easily in the market place of hook-up apps.
2. Our own writing, while not formally drawing upon Kane Race’s recent Foucauldian and Actor-Network inspired explorations of gay drug taking cultures and queer intimacies (cf [Race, 2018, 2015](#)), is certainly congruent with this line of thinking. In these texts, Kane suggests that the material and semiotics of current gay socialities from the pleasures of drug taking to emergent sexual practices are assembling through different human and non-human actants, including, bodies, recreational drugs, digital and bio technologies, health discourses and queer yearning for community/communalism.

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