




5-2016

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Ojeda-Sague, Gabriel, "Plague Desires: A Re-Reading of HIV/AIDS Politics in Contemporary Gay Pornography" (2016).
Undergraduate Humanities Forum 2015-2016: Sex. 7.
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Abstract

This project will study the methods by which contemporary gay pornography has confronted and attempted to radically reconfigure the narratives, politics, and erotics of AIDS/HIV. Focusing especially on the film *Viral Loads* by Treasure Island Media and the controversy that surrounded its release, characterized by articles on the film from *VICE* and *Salon*, this project will argue for the ability of the film to produce a re-reading of major stigma against viral bodies and the condition of sickness within eroticism through the form of pornography and erotic spectatorship. This project will argue that the hyper-exposition of the viral gay male body in sexuality offers a healing mechanism against the fear, marginalization, and pathologization that come with stigma towards AIDS/HIV.

Disciplines

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Plague Desires: A Re-reading
of HIV/AIDS Politics in Contemporary Gay Pornography

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English Departmental Honors Thesis

“Reactionary psychiatry denounces the pervert as someone who refuses to be cured...”

—Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*

In April of 2014, *Salon* published an article titled “When HIV is a Turn-On,” and subtitled “A new gay porn film courts controversy by fetishizing positive performers, and hinting at the risk of transmission.” Most of the article is an interview with Blue Bailey, the lead actor of Treasure Island Media’s *Viral Loads*, in which the author, Tracy Clark-Flory, asks him what he thinks of Treasure Island Media’s history of bareback porn, or pornography that does not include condom use. The article begins:

There is a jar of white liquid. Written on the jar are the words, “POZ CUM.” The contents are poured directly into one of porn star Blue Bailey’s orifices — an orifice that is not his mouth.

This...is stoking controversy — even in the condom-eschewing straight porn industry — by fetishizing HIV and transmission risk.¹

Clark-Flory, opens her article by noting (and mocking) a specific scene at the center of *Viral Loads*. Like writers at *VICE* and industry news and gossip site *STR8UPGAYPORN*, she sees this scene as proof of the film’s “fetishization” and danger: at the center of *Viral Loads* (in a scene titled “Blue’s Man-worship Gangbang”) there is an orgy in which about 20 men take turns penetrating actor Blue Bailey. Some time into this scene, some of the other men bring out a jar labeled “POZ CUM,” which is said to contain over 200 loads of semen from HIV-positive men. The men put the entire contents of the jar into Bailey’s anus using a baster, while co-star Max-X licks at Bailey’s anus and consumes any semen that comes out. This scene, and specifically the jar, is virtually the only part of *Viral Loads* discussed or reported on, even though the film

¹ Tracy Clark-Flory, “When HIV is a Turn-On,” *Salon*, April 15, 2014.
http://www.salon.com/2014/04/15/when_hiv_is_a_turn_on/

contains nine different scenes and runs for over two hours. Because of the over-representation of this specific scene, it is fair to say that the image of this jar is resonant, strong, and shocking (for many), and acts as the symbolic core of the film. Indeed, in *VICE*'s article on the film and interview with director Paul Morris, the cover image for the story is a close-up of the jar being shown to some of the actors² involved (Figure 1).



Figure 1: VICE's chosen cover image for "A Porn Director Stirred Up Controversy by Making a Movie Centered Around HIV" by Toby McCasker, May 12, 2014. Originally captioned with "A still from Viral Loads"

² To refer to those having sex on camera in *Viral Loads*, I will be using the phrase "actor" or "star/co-star" (sometimes, "men"). Morris has written and spoken often about not using an abundance of "porn stars" or professionals in his films and his practice of "documentary" pornography (See Morris's paper "No Limits: Necessary Danger in Male Porn," 1998). Often, for men having sex in Treasure Island films, it is the first time they have ever been recorded having sex (and perhaps even the only time). However, my choice to consistently use the term "actor" is not based on their prior experience or on any level of realism or documentary practice the film may employ, but simply to delineate that the men on camera are in the hands of a professional studio and the video is a planned, purposeful piece of media.

The common argument against *Viral Loads* made by publications like *Salon* and *VICE* goes like this: *Viral Loads* represents and eroticizes purposeful exposure to HIV through “unsafe sex” (a euphemism for condomless or bareback sex), therefore portraying “unsafe sex” positively, which is not only dangerous for the actors involved, but will, inevitably, cause viewers to find “unsafe sex” erotic and seek it out. This is what I will be referring to as the “fetishization argument.” The fetishization argument is partly an extension of long-spanning arguments surrounding the relationship between pornography and action,³ but is also a product of the fear of infection from a highly-transmittable virus. In fact, this rhetoric treats pornography much like a virus itself, whose terrors will quickly spread through the public. It implies the making sick of the masses. But the sickness here has a fixed end: in a post on *STR8UPGAYPORN*, one writer (identified only as “Zach”) likens *Viral Loads* to a “snuff film.” And perhaps more explicitly, the first comment, from a user nicknamed “Cosmic,” reads “Why don’t they cut out the middle man and just film straight up corpse fucking?”⁴ We need to understand, before discussing this film at large, that the fetishization argument of media outlets like *Salon* and *VICE* not only posits that those who watch this movie will automatically recreate it in their lived sexual experience, but also that the act of HIV transmission is a killing act, and that the eroticization of HIV will lead to death. In the imaginary of the opposition to *Viral Loads*, both the viewer and the actor are referred to as lifeless: one an automatic reflection of his viewing habits, one a walking corpse.

³ The best summary of this history of debate comes in Frances Ferguson’s *Pornography, the Theory*. These debates could be seen as a product of major feminist advocacy from staunch anti-pornography advocates such as Andrea Dworkin.

⁴ Zach, “Treasure Island Media’s *Viral Loads* Features Jar of HIV-Positive Semen,” *STR8UPGAYPORN.com*, April 3, 2014, <http://str8upgayporn.com/treasure-islands-viral-loads-features-jar-of-hiv-positive-semen/>

Yet through the slew of controversy surrounding it, Paul Morris has stayed firm in his belief about what is portrayed in his film: “The number of men who have written to me asking to be the recipient of gallons of semen is virtually uncountable. These aren’t the incidental fantasies of a small fringe of outliers. These speak to the heart of the sexual imagination of most queer men.”⁵ To contest the fetishization argument, oppose its de-animating of the bodies of the involved pornographic actors, and the insistence that pornography results in mimetic action by its viewers, we need to understand and, specifically, *empathize*, with Morris’s claim here that this fantasy is not strange, new, or dangerous. If it is the case that the fantasy of being filled with semen, specifically HIV-positive semen, is indeed a fantasy that touches a sexual “heart” in gay men: why does it? Where is this heart located? Where does it come from? How does the fantasy translate into lived experience? And, most importantly, what purpose does the visualization of this fantasy serve? *Viral Loads* is another instance in a long line of films depicting purposeful seroconversion, what is usually simply called bareback porn. This lineage takes risk, death, and virus as its erotic material. *Viral Loads* plays in an “arena of invention that involves experiments in how to *do* things with viruses”⁶ and gives gay men new ways to visualize their living, their death, and the composition of their bodies.

In his *VICE* interview, Paul Morris says the following in response to interviewer Toby McCasker’s statement “you can see how [the jar scene] would upset some people”:

I find the most offensive reaction to what I’ve done is people saying that I clearly don’t understand the suffering and what was lost due to HIV. The vast majority of my acquaintances and friends and lovers died. It isn’t that I’m untouched. It’s that I’m so

⁵ Toby McCasker, “A Porn Director...” *VICE*, May 12, 2014 <http://www.vice.com/read/director-paul-morris-believes-hiv-should-be-part-of-gay-porn>

⁶ Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2009), 47. This lineage I am mentioning is also well accounted for in this book, which discusses the works of Paul Morris and other bareback pornography studios such as Dick Wadd Media.

deeply touched by it that I believe in the necessity of remembering what it is that they and I all explored—and not forgetting it. [...]

Years ago I stated that all gay men are HIV-positive. That is, every gay man alive today is defined as much by the viral load narrative as by any external homophobia. If you wonder at the meaning of a jar filled with poz loads being poured up the ass of a happy, intelligent, and more-than-willing young gay man, the primary meaning is that there is no reason or excuse for continuing to live in fear of a virus. [...]

We're at a point where it's altogether possible, given the simple strategies like PrEP, to render HIV a nonissue. And the gay world is panicking because too much money, too many institutions, too much of the gay mainstream has based itself on terror and fear and grief. It's a cultural identity crisis. [...]

The point is that this [film] was made for a community of men who understand what it means. [...]

Gay men in their 50s and older are addicted to the notion that sex equals death, and the culture has to live under the burden of terror. [...]

Gay men have completely lost the sense of who they are because they've been immersed in terror, because they've been living under a viral load for two generations.⁷

Morris identifies HIV/AIDS as an oppressive terror, as something smothering, immersive, and constant. He is not alone in this view of HIV/AIDS as a massive paralyzing apparatus for gay men, as AIDS activist and historian Simon Watney has said of the virus that "...whilst individuals are vulnerable to HIV infection, the entire reproductive machinery of gay subjectivity is also vulnerable to the ideological fall-out of the representational crisis triggered by the virus"⁸ This is what Morris means when he says that all gay men are HIV positive. The virus enables a type of melancholy or spleen that infects the minds of all gay men, the "burden of terror." HIV is carried by all gay men, even if they are not seropositive, because of the various ways HIV affects understandings of safety, sexuality, and community amongst gay men.

⁷ As I've noted before, my argument for *Viral Loads* will rely heavily on the issue of Paul Morris's intention, so I have given this long quote in full now so that it can be re-addressed at different times.

⁸ Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1996), 18

To be HIV positive is to live under a complex and tiered stigma. Erving Goffman identifies stigma as existing in three forms. Those are “abominations of the body,” “blemishes of individual character,” and “tribal stigma” (racial, national, religious, and other classifications of people).⁹ The stigma towards seropositive gay men can be seen as incorporating all three of these categories of stigma, because it is an infection of the body (the “abomination”) associated with “deviant” or promiscuous sexual behavior (the “blemishes”) conducted by a specific demographic category (the “tribe”). The legacy of the “burden of terror” controlling gay men, in Paul Morris’s view, is encapsulated in being a victim of this tripartite stigma. The constant sense of fear associated with the possibility of HIV/AIDS is the fear of being invaded, of watching your own body weaken, and of dying. The fear is far-reaching, but the fear does not only result in gay men having extremely regulated “safe” sex to avoid transmission, as a rational-actor approach might hope for. It also creates a different kind of organization: “after two decades of safe-sex education, erotic risk among gay men has become organized and deliberate, not just accidental.”¹⁰ To understand the mechanism by which *Viral Loads* conducts a re-evaluation and alleviation of HIV/AIDS stigma and fear, it is necessary to view the film as a fully intentional project. This applies to the desires of the actors (as Paul Morris says “Everyone who’s in one of our pieces is doing exactly what they most want to be doing”¹¹) and for Morris’s claims that the film and its jar scene have meaning, meaning that hints at a method for undoing the virus’s burden.

Accepting that premise, our most valuable tool for analysis will be a close reading of various sections of the film. Before discussing the jar and its pouring into Blue Bailey, I want to

⁹ Erving Goffman, *Stigma*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), 4

¹⁰ Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, ix

¹¹ McCasker, “A Porn Director...”

address the actions and visuals of what comes before it. The scene opens with a quick montage of later moments in the scene itself and then quickly switches to a panel that reads “one hour earlier.” During this montage, there is very limited dialogue, but the phrase “there you go” is repeated three different times by three different men. In fact, while the “one hour earlier” panel is on screen, there is a loud, prolonged echo of the words “there you go.” The echo is digitally created, giving it a haunting timbre and the sense that the syllables are coming from various places at once. The phrase itself keys the viewer to the fact that Blue Bailey is going to be given something during this scene. A gangbang scene itself, of course, is structured around the idea that one bottom is being ritualistically “given” sex by a group of men, but the phrase “there you go” also resonates with the form of viral transmission which is central to this scene. When the men in the scene say “there you go,” they are referring to their penises, their semen, and (more distantly or more implicitly) their virus and the possibility of infection.

The opening montage and the artificial echo are the first tools of implication of bodily fusion in the orgy. Continuing immediately after, as the scene opens “one hour earlier,” Blue Bailey is the sole actor introduced by name. The shot is of Blue Bailey kissing a co-star (Figure 2), but this dissolves into another shot of some of the men who will be having sex with him, with the phrase “man-worship” superimposed (Figure 3). Figure 3 shows the way the image of Bailey kissing lingers over the shot of the other men. Here we have another implication that these actors’ bodies are merging together. Since the other men in the room are named only by “man-worship,” we can understand them as auxiliary to the worship of Bailey. They are the tools to his “initiation,”¹² labeled as one total body. The fusion of these men is purposeful and has an express

¹² This term comes from the product description of this scene, found at <http://store.treasureislandmedia.com/VIRAL-LOADS.html>

political aim: Morris, at a talk at the 1998 World Pornography Conference, stated that under the practice of sexual risk “The everyday identity evanesces and the individual becomes an agent through which a darker and more fragile tradition is enabled to continue....what is at stake isn’t the survival of the individual, but the survival of the practices and patterns...of the subculture.”¹³ The fusion of these actors, visually and through the massing of their flesh during the orgy, allows the men not only to become one another, but to sublimate into expressions of an entire political demographic and political promise.



Figure 2: Still from Viral Loads. Introductory shot of star Blue Bailey. Bailey, being the bottom of the gangbang, is introduced as protagonist of the film.

¹³ Paul Morris, “No Limits: Necessary Danger in Male Porn”, transcript available at <http://www.queerrhetoric.com/?p=350>



Figure 3: Still from Viral Loads. Dissolve from Figure 2. Actors and crew members alike are shown in the screen as the vehicles of “man-worship.”



Figure 4: Still from Viral Loads. Two men penetrate Bailey from the anus and mouth, various men stand behind them. The shape of the room is mostly circular. Bailey is laying on a bed in the middle of the room instead of attached to any wall. The other actors, crew members, and cameras circle around him.

To return to Blue Bailey's introductory shot, it seems fundamental to Morris' claim that the meaning of *Viral Loads* is that "there is no reason or excuse for continuing to live in fear of a virus" that there be an audience who would receive this information from the film itself. This is a truism, but I mention it because for an audience to feel that the film can give them this knowledge, their own bodies must be implicated in the actions portrayed. Bailey's introduction is key to this dynamic because it stages him as a protagonist. The actions of the orgy are all centered around him, the other men move around him and take turns having sex with him, and even the space of the room stages him as the essential component to the scene (Figure 4). Bailey is the main body by which the viewer enters the scene. If what the viewer finds erotic is the fantasy of being given the virus, of being the center of sexual attention, then they may find it erotic to imagine themselves as Bailey, or to time their own masturbation with actions occurring to Bailey. If what the viewer finds erotic is to imagine themselves as one of the other men, as someone who could give a bottom the virus, they still enter the scene through the existence of Bailey as a receptacle. This condition is mobile: as Simon Watney notes "... it is important to remember that sexual identification on the part of gay men is always mobile, able to assume different roles and positions, which are always also power relations."¹⁴ The orgy produces a network of power relations between its different participants, which constantly shift and are reorganized as the orgy goes on: in the specific genre of a gangbang, the power is directional (back and forth between the bottom and series of tops) and selective (only some tops can be actively penetrating the bottom at a given time) and in pornography, the viewer selectively

¹⁴ Watney, *Policing Desire*, 73

fantasizes through the power relations of the portrayed orgy. In *Viral Loads*, Blue Bailey centers all these algorithms of power, self-identification, and virality (its transmission and its eroticization).

Instead of presuming that the viewer of the film will reproduce the actions they see in the video, as the fetishization argument proposes, Bailey's centrality and availability seems to point us to the idea that the viewer inhabits a complex process of insertion and identification (which could also include non-insertion and non-identification) with actions portrayed in this scene. The viewer is not just a mirror of what he watches, but actively interacts, challenges, and constructs the fantasy being produced in the film. Frances Ferguson has noted that "if the corrupting effect of pornography is imagined to be that you may recognize yourself in images of people doing things you have not done, then self-recognition is already detached from the notion of action,"¹⁵ or, in other words, that self-identification does not automatically lead to mimetic behavior. The process of embodying Bailey, or embodying someone giving pleasure to Bailey, has much more complex psychological ramifications than simply the desire to bareback. As Morris has stated, this film is not just a document of remembering the effects of the AIDS crisis, but is also a way for contemporary post-AIDS-crisis gay men to get over their fear of the possibility of viral transmission, to fight the feeling of being "immersed in terror."

Perhaps even more essential to the meaning of the work as identified by Morris is the jar that comes at the conclusion of the scene. The jar, formally, comes as answer to what Tim Dean has identified as the problem of the "money shot" in bareback pornography.¹⁶ Dean explains that hardcore pornography requires the explicit screening of orgasm, which causes most

¹⁵ Ferguson, Frances. *Pornography, the Theory: What Utilitarianism Did to Action* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2004), 46

¹⁶ Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, xii

pornographers to require their male performers to ejaculate outside of an orifice. But this conflicts with bareback pornography's commitment to internal ejaculation. This formal constraint is initially satisfied in *Viral Loads* by the use of subtitles denoting when an actor has orgasmed (Figure 5), but during a scene where multiple actors have multiple orgasms across long expanse of the scene, the scene still needed the kind of conclusive, final pleasure of the money shot of mainstream hardcore pornography. The jar, which concludes the scene, can be seen to replace this effect.



Figure 5: Still from Viral Loads. "Logan's third load" subtitled. The film compensates for its formal constraint of screening orgasm and desire for internal orgasm by subtitling when performers orgasm directly into Bailey's anus.

But as we have seen by the weighted coverage around the release of *Viral Loads*, the jar is a much louder symbol than a typical money shot. Something about the jar, full of “200 loads” of HIV-positive semen, makes a shocking imprint on both media and viewer alike and has been treated almost as a metonymic symbol for the film as a whole. We can probably assume that a jar of 200 loads of HIV-negative sperm would still be shocking in straight and gay porn alike, but HIV-positive semen works in a different register of meaning. “Semen containing HIV signifies much more than ordinary spunk; it is radioactive with meaning,”¹⁷ making HIV-positive semen a kind of contraband: from one point of view, poz cum is a weapon, and from another (for barebackers) it is a sign of community, a sign of union. Semen in the symbolic register of bareback community and value represents consanguinity, a “gift,” and even life. Understanding the use of the jar in this scene requires an understanding of this value system, while still keeping in mind the risk and fear that the “weaponized” image of poz cum summons. Poz cum has been transformed by the bareback community into something “positive” instead of something to be feared, but fear and risk still underlie these ideas of community and consanguinity and enchant poz cum with a complex architecture of meaning and desire.

Dean has identified the language by which barebackers identify HIV as a “gift” to be given, “whose donation creates consanguineous relations among subcultural members.”¹⁸ As in, to be given HIV is to be marked as part of a community, to have now the same blood as these other men:

As a putative object of exchange, [HIV] allows men to bond with each other; as a shared substance, it permits those bonds to be conceived in kinship terms, thereby materializing a sense of brotherhood. In view of HIV’s role as an object of exchange, we might say that cum swapping represents the form that homosocial bonding takes among gay men.¹⁹

¹⁷ Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 53

¹⁸ Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 51-52

¹⁹ Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 78

In these terms, then, “200 loads” also means 200 men and exposure to their semen means the possibility of communion and community with these 200 men. *Viral Loads*’s product description seems to reinforce this dynamic, saying “join in, buddy. You’ll never look back,”²⁰ as if bareback sex was an invitation into a different world, a different social sphere. With this in mind, the echoing “there you go” from the opening montage meets its inevitable center of meaning: the “gift” being given is the contents of the jar and, therefore, the possibility of “initiation” into community. The 200 men represented by their semen does not even include the 20 men that are already circling around Bailey, whose bodies fuse into one entity of “man-worship.” Dean notes that “the virus itself permits unlimited intimacy, in the sense that it traces the persistence of multiple prior bodily contacts in the present moment. Thus the virus may be considered a particular form of memory...”²¹ Lee Edelman has also mirrored this saying that in Morris’s pornography “cum [is] idealized within a heterogenerative framework as human essence, as spirit, as vitalizing seed.”²² If the lives, community, and memory of these 200 men are in fact represented by their semen, as Dean’s analysis and *Viral Loads*’s own description would let on, then Bailey’s being basted with the entire contents of the jar translates into the absorption of the community into Bailey’s body. Bailey’s absorption, and Max X’s eating of the semen from Bailey’s anus,²³ is a spectacle of community and of the control of the virus. Bailey’s anus is a

²⁰ Product description for *Viral Loads* found at <http://store.treasureislandmedia.com/VIRAL-LOADS.html>

²¹ Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 88

²² Lee Edelman, “Unbecoming: Pornography and the Queer Event,” in *Post/Porn/Theory: Queer Feminist Perspectives on the Politics of Porn Performance and Sex-work as Culture Production*, ed. by Tim Stütgen (Berlin: b books, 2009), 37

²³ Dean has also identified the language identifying HIV as food source and its similar symbolic importance. HIV-positive sperm is eaten, swapped between mouths, gargled, and felched (as Max X does in *Viral Loads*), therefore becoming “a source of nourishment. It is both glamorous and nutritious. HIV thus is pictured as a source of life rather than of death.” To eat sperm is to treat it as a life-giving material. Max X’s actions in this scene could be scene as supplementary to Bailey’s in both erotic action and symbolic register (*Unlimited Intimacy*, 49).

site of communion by a stigmatized community, an “arena of invention” that spectacularizes power over deadly material, where the “radioactive” meaning of viral transmission shines through.

I want to rest on this site of communion for a moment: Bailey’s anus. Edelman has written that Morris’s films “replace the value of the dick...with the heroic stupidity of the anus hungry to receive, to absorb, to secrete it....The asshole, as the locus of cultural taboo, as the place made to signify nothing but waste and the absence of value or meaning, displaces the phallus, in Morris’s work, as the privileged site of pornography.”²⁴ I find Edelman’s understanding of the new role for the penis extremely useful for understanding the way the other men in this scene work: cogs in a machine focused on Bailey’s pleasure, their penises simplified into representations of, or vessels for, the work they do, the cum they produce. But his understanding of the anus’s primary cultural taboo seems insufficient for understanding the potency of Bailey’s role in *Viral Loads*.

Instead, I would rather adopt Guy Hocquenghem’s understanding of the anus as “essentially private” and as the site of “the formation of a person.”²⁵ For most of heterosexual society, the anus is that which is not spoken of between people and its main, perhaps only, affective responses are disgust and humor (at least, before the sexualization of heterosexual anal play, influenced by hetero-hardcore pornographers in the last 40 years). Anal pleasure is one that is extremely personal, under Hocquenghem’s analysis. He says that to make the anus public, or “to reinvest the anus collectively and libidinally” would take “a proportional weakening of the great phallic signifier.”²⁶ This resonates with Edelman’s analysis of Morris’s work of cutting the

²⁴ Edelman, “Unbecoming,” 39

²⁵ Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire* (London: Allison and Busby Limited, 1978), 82.

²⁶ Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, 89

symbolic relevance of the penis. Bailey's anus and his anal pleasure is immensely public, necessarily so, as it takes (with "heroic stupidity") the cum of twenty men.

Judith Butler echoes Simon Watney's analysis that AIDS and the fear of contagion was coupled with a homophobic understanding of gayness as boundary-trespass or as contagious itself, when she writes that "sexual practices" amongst gay men that "open surfaces and orifices to erotic signification or close down others effectively reinscribe the boundaries of the body along new cultural lines."²⁷ Butler sees anal sex practices as deregulating heterosexual and patriarchal constructions of gendered exchange and, in so doing, reinscribing bodily possibilities and formations. To make the anus public, or even global, in the way that Bailey does, is not just to resist norms of gendered practice, but to reimagine what it is to be a body or to occupy a body. In the symbolic matrix of AIDS, then, we should see Bailey's sexual practice and performance as dealing intimately with what it means to be a sick or healthy body. The "initiation" of Bailey through anal practice allows him to be the vehicle for an argument about what gay bodies do and who they make sick. The anus, and the communion that occurs therein, is the heart of Morris's argument that there is "no need to live in fear of a virus." The jar holds something incredibly social and the anus is the receptacle for this communication. The process of basting the semen into Bailey's anus is not *just* meant to shock, though of course the shock of it is important to its essential grit and potency, but it is also a very sincere form of communication between various gay males in a room and in a community at large, saying that their lives and bodies have meaning beyond the discourses that impose boundaries on them. Additionally, it is exaggerated and grandiose. But I am not willing to separate the campy shock value of the symbol from its

²⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 179-181.

honesty as a discursive gesture. Perhaps in *Viral Loads* we have the best example of Leo Bersani's famous argument in "Is the Rectum a Grave?" that "it may, finally, be in the gay man's rectum that he demolishes his own perhaps otherwise uncontrollable identification with a murderous judgment against him."²⁸

I want to comment quickly on the issue of documentation, which for Tim Dean and Paul Morris is essential to the practice of bareback pornography. Tim Dean argues that for the bareback community, pornography is a form of witnessing, which he takes from Paul Morris's own statements on the necessity of recording all of people's erotic desires, no matter how uncommon. Though the practice of witnessing here is essential, the form of pornography allows for the representation of the sexual practices to become exaggerated and lifted into the realm of fantasy, as I have mentioned above in discussing the politics of the jar. Just because Morris calls himself documentarian does not mean we cannot read the jar as a symbol or as expressive of a political frame. That is to say also that Morris's claims of realism in his pornography need not be taken at face value when discussing a pornography as expressive and large-scale as *Viral Loads*. In fact, I'd characterize his pornography as riding a line between hyperrealism and surrealism. Take for instance his most famous film *Dawson's 20 Load Weekend*, where in a single weekend protagonist Dawson has repeated sex with 20 different men, or *Breeding Mike O'Neill*, where a dildo is made of semen frozen in a condom. It's true that these films correspond to the real erotic desires of their viewers, but to only refer to them as *documentary* reduces the way in which the viewer and critic can reflect on their complicated production and their inflated fantasies of bareback transmission. This is where I feel most in conflict with Dean's account of bareback

²⁸ Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* Vol 43 (1987): 222

pornography, where his embrace of Morris's term "documentary" creates a view of bareback pornography stars, like Blue Bailey, Dawson, Mike O'Neill, not as actors but *only* as natural participants.

So far, I have attempted to treat the eroticization of viral transmission in *Viral Loads* as something very literal and specific, embedded in emotional, psychological, and physical response to the possibility or reality of HIV/AIDS. But I want to turn now to think of the virus in its figurative and symbolic possibilities. The product description of *Viral Loads* leads most closely to a reading of the eroticization of HIV in the film as a metaphorical sheath for male queerness in its entirety. This is the description for the film as a whole:

Mansex is a virus, one that uses men as its host. Some try to resist it. Others embrace it as the source of life and meaning. We live to breed the sex-virus, to pass it on to every random anonymous dude we meet and fuck. It's how we reproduce, man.

We shoot viral loads every time. Our jizz ain't for making babies. Our sex spreads like wildfire, squirting out of one man's dick, shooting deep inside another, then another and another.

Join in, buddy. You'll never look back.²⁹

I'm almost flummoxed by how perfectly the sentence starting with "our sex spreads..." mimics Guy Hocquenghem's statement on "homosexual 'scattering,'" where he calls multiple sex partners common amongst gay men "a system in action, the system in which polyvocal desire is plugged in on a non-exclusive basis...[where] everything is possible at any moment: organs look for each other and plug in...." Both of these positive views on homosexual polyamory view it as an efficient sexual system based on movement and mobile connectivity. The product

²⁹ Product description for *Viral Loads* found at <http://store.treasureislandmedia.com/VIRAL-LOADS.html>

description³⁰ sources the foundation of its central metaphor from the fact that a contagion works in the same way, moving between people rapidly and silently. In the phrase “deep inside another, then another, then another,” one feels the familiar ring of both epidemic infection and the way bodies in orgy mass and stack onto one another.

“Mansex” eschews the stable identity politics of “gayness” or “gay sex” and gives the sexual culture between men a much more gritty, promiscuous, and explicit atmosphere. The only stable identity category in mansex is maleness (and more explicitly, cis maleness, since the product description takes the “dick” and semen as mansex’s primary tools of transference), which serves to properly frame the use of reproductive terminology that follows as something challenging, metaphorical, or even impossible. This is reinforced by the end of the phrase “it’s how we reproduce, man,” which though wearing the costume of West Coast cool, also restates that the speaker, the listener, and the portrayed are all men.

Tim Dean says that barebacking imagines breeding “without women,”³¹ which is true, but it is also essential to say that barebacking imagines reproducing without a baby, without a child (“our jizz ain’t for making babies”). Or, that something more potent, more infective, or more radioactive replaces the child as its product. The product description for *Viral Loads* views the child of mansex as more mansex: cum enters a body, but instead of staying, it moves again to “another, then another.” The central metaphorical use of the virus is explaining this phenomenon of the reproduction that comes from bodies whose sex isn’t single-partnered and doesn’t produce children. Dean has previously said of the reproductive language that persists in barebacking

³⁰ It is difficult to say if the product descriptions were written by Paul Morris. Therefore, in describing the interpretive content of the description, I only be referring to it as “the product description” instead of attributing it to Morris himself.

³¹ Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 6

subculture that “gay men have discovered that, on the basis of viral transmission, they can form relations and networks understood in terms of kinship—networks that represent an alternative to, even as they often resemble, normative heterosexual kinship.”³² He says “seroconversion can feel like getting pregnant”³³ and notes the frequency of sexual terms that echo reproductive processes such as “breed,” “knock up,” or “seed.” This positive language of making new life stands in stark contrast to the typical terms of death and illness that are often applied to HIV transmission. The reproductive terms that accompany bareback sex prove that barebackers perform transformations on the virus they host or risk, but it also shows that in an economy of death and illness, new forms of imagining life and the future manifest. Both literally and metaphorically, the transfer of the “virus” (whether it is HIV or mansex or gayness) is engineered into the creation of a queer political futurity. The “wildfire” of gay sex spreads and corrupts the bodies of men and the social structures that define these bodies.

My definition of “political futurity” comes from Lee Edelman’s *No Future*, where he defines the creation of political futurity as the act of “*affirm*[ing] a social order, defining various strategies aimed at actualizing social reality and transmitting it into the future.”³⁴ Or in other words, your own political futurity is the degree to which you see your preferred social order, social reality, and the set of signifiers of your intention existing in the future. In *No Future*, Edelman’s central argument is that the image of the child, innocent and in need of protection, has been consistently and constantly mobilized as a symbol in support of the political futurity of hegemonic heterosexual order. “Think of the children!” becomes, for Edelman, a weaponized rhetorical strategy in which heterosexualism and hegemonic conservatism throws itself into the

³² Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, x

³³ Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 88

³⁴ Lee Edelman, *No Future* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2004)

future. In this semiotic register, queerness is positioned against the child—narcissistic, antisocial, and non-reproductive, a culture of death. For Edelman, the usefulness of queerness lies in its non-reproductivity. By being non-reproductive, queerness rejects the future, embraces death as political possibility, and rejects the hegemonic order of the child. In perhaps the most widely-read critique of Edelman’s argument, Jose Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia* argues instead that queer people actually constantly imagine themselves in the future and create their own sense of political futurity through different formulations of utopia.³⁵ For understanding the way in which *Viral Loads* (and the orgy as a form) constructs a queer future, it is most helpful to think of both these arguments as simultaneously true.

Simultaneously, *Viral Loads* does not include children, but does include reproduction. Simultaneously, *Viral Loads* flirts with death while creating new life. In Dean’s analysis of Morris’s films, he seems to predict this merging of Muñoz and Edelman when saying “...Morris understands viral transmission as a regrettable byproduct of cultural transmission. The life of the culture depends on the death of its members, or, more precisely, the culture can be perpetuated only by certain members risking their lives.”³⁶ I’m sure that, for many, this seems a cruel ideology. But it is perhaps more radical and useful to view it not as a sacrificial method, but as a grieving method, one that claims that there is no need to live in fear of a virus, because the virus makes gay community consanguineous and continuable. *Viral Loads* imagines “no future” and “the future” as being one in the same position.

The child, under heterosexual semiotics, is usurped by seropositive semen as a vessel for futurity and the pushing of a queer social order into the future. In dialogue with porn and media

³⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (New York: New York University Press, 2009)

³⁶ Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 58

theorist Susanna Paasonen, Morris has said that “the information that’s transmitted through queer sex involves the creation of the self, but not in a way that’s chemically or molecularly genetic.... Queers replicate through social, sexual, and creative promiscuity. We don’t reproduce, we replicate.”³⁷ This helps us understand why the jar is necessary: the jar is the site and embodiment of the replication of queerness. With the words “POZ CUM” dully marked against a shining gold lid, the jar is labeled with its own symbolic weight. Its “radioactive” meaning is emphasized by its being shown to the camera, zoomed in on, examined (Figure 6). The jar is erotic because it holds both risk and promise, a future built on a re-examination of death.



Figure 6: Still from Viral Loads. The jar’s label is shown directly to the camera before

³⁷ Susanna Paasonen and Paul Morris, “Risk and Utopia: a Dialogue on Pornography” *GLQ* Vol 20 (2014): 229

But temporality bends in even more ways in *Viral Loads*. In all, the viewer has only two marks of time, both forms of duration: the ~20 minute viewing duration of the scene itself and the mention of “one hour earlier,” connoting that the orgy being filmed lasted about an hour. But the sense of time is morphed in various ways. As for the sense of time passing, the room the gangbang is taking place in has a bit of a casino effect. All the blinds are shut, there are no clocks on the walls, and with the repetitive structure of the gangbang (one man trades off with another, one man trades off with another) and the repetitive action of viewer masturbation, “porn-time congeals,” to use Morris’s terms. He describes that taking a nondescript setting like a hotel room and making it “dominated by flesh” deflates the space and therefore deflates its ability to mark a sense of time.³⁸ The hotel room allows as well for a sense of currency and immediacy for the viewer because it gains a certain level of availability or accessibility. It is poised as a room you could find in the real world; behind the right door at the right hotel, or motel, or hostel, you could actually find this group of men in orgy. In Beverley Brown’s early feminist analysis of pornography, she notes how pornography plays with a stock of familiar visual repertoires and seeks to make them “available or special, as objects around which sexual fantasy can operate without too much wit or effort” and, further, that the objects will be re-released into the world of actual experience enchanted with “a certain afterglow” of possibility.³⁹ The hotel room in the gangbang of *Viral Loads* is affected by this mechanism, allowing the viewer to feel as if the acts taking place inside are available and current. Therefore, the spatial aspects of this pornography allows both for a destabilizing of the passing of time and a mobile “now” of eroticism, making the orgy both irresistibly present and unchained to the problem of duration.

³⁸ Paasonen and Morris, “Risk and Utopia: a Dialogue on Pornography” 226

³⁹ quoted in Watney, *Policing Desire*, 72-73.

Of course, this content-based approach to temporality in pornography does not include personal and cultural experiences of sexual time, which I would argue make up the largest mechanism by which *Viral Loads* promotes a queer futurity. Paul Morris says that the men he works for are attracted to “the sense of the continuity of a real and ages-old lineage of practice...a living archive of male sexual practice...remembering, recognizing, and reconnecting with the deep practical experience of male sexuality” in his work. In the image of massed gay male bodies, it is implied and assumed that the viewer will experience a compression of the lived sexual archive. Or more directly, gay sex implies gay sexual history.

The orgy of *Viral Loads* (and it seems the same could be said for most pornography of bareback orgy) contains and implies a historical and cultural sexual past, a continuous present, and a promised future. In my estimation, we are seeing a vastly different viewing experience than is implied by the fetishization argument around *Viral Loads*, where the viewer will just replicate the actions seen onscreen. Instead, we see a complex interface with fantasy, one that stretches various modes of thought, identification, and temporal experience. Simon Watney stated, in a remark still controversial and sensitive just about 20 years after publication, that “it is through the mobilization of fantasy that we can protect ourselves from the risk of infection” and *Viral Loads* conducts work both equal and opposite to this evaluation, where the mobilization of fantasy protects us from the *fear* of infection or the *melancholy* of infection, by the propulsion of risk itself. In so doing, *Viral Loads* proposes a future that queer people still exist in without the false promises of monogamy, heteronormality, and reproductivity. *Viral Loads* conforms to what Edelman has called “the queer event” which locates its spirit in “the messy stuff of materiality”

and refuses to deny the relationship between “Hades and Dionysus.”⁴⁰ It refuses to turn away from the source of fear and death to find eroticism, safety, and life.

Where the fetishization argument sees the possibility of contagion for the viewer, a film that could bring death, a closer look at the film shows that it views erotic risk as an incredibly honest strategy that provides new possible modes of imagining the queer future. The orgy is *Viral Loads*'s genre and material: it gives shape to the modes of viewer identification, establishes various positions of fantasy which the actors embody, and allows for a network of communication between co-performers. In *Viral Loads*, the communicative possibilities of the orgy, where positions of power constantly shift along erotic lines, also communicate outwards towards a viewer and towards controversy. In the title of the film, I see not just the medical reference to the measure of the presence of HIV in blood, nor just the euphemism for “poz cum,” nor just reference to the burdensome “load” of the viral legacy, but a prediction of the “viral” nature of its controversy online. The film almost predicts and desires to become a site of conversation and controversy, to spread from reader to reader of publications like *VICE* and *Salon*, and to be shared between people. I must admit that the number of gay men I have talked to about *Viral Loads* who had already heard of it is astounding, even if they have never watched a Treasure Island Media film. The controversy of the film makes it feel almost more promiscuous, its fantasy spreading like gossip online.

Viral Loads knows the field of controversy it plays in and uses it. Much in the same way that it approaches sexual risk, Morris's work approaches the “rhetoric of harms”⁴¹ that surrounds pornography (the idea that what is seen in pornography harms both the viewer and performer) as

⁴⁰ Edelman, “Unbecoming” 36

⁴¹ Watney, *Policing Desire*, 73

an erotic possibility, transforming its own controversies into potential for longevity and potency. And as for the viewer, invited by Morris's performers to join the "island," to walk into the hotel room, to join the orgy at any moment, we should understand that, if they are to replicate the fantasy they see on screen, what they would be replicating is a strategy of grief, of evaluating risk, of casting off a layer of fear that sticks to the gay psyche like the skin of heated milk.

A friend recently told me a story that I would like to recount here. During a night at a local gay club, his friend J partnered up with a stranger on the dance floor and they went home together. At the stranger's home, he asked J if J was on PrEP, or a pre-exposure preventative medicine for HIV, presumably to see if he could avoid condom use during sex. J responded that he was on PrEP. The stranger said "prove it." J took a couple of PReP pills from his bag, small blue ovals, and began to chew them in his mouth. J passed the chewed dust into the stranger's mouth, like swapping spit or semen. The rest you can imagine yourself. I bring this up to echo Morris's statement that in a cultural and technological moment where HIV/AIDS can be rendered virtual non-issues, only about 30 years away from a time of mass death, where gay sex itself seemed a death sentence, gay men are trying to find ways to reorganize and reevaluate their erotic practices, fears, and possibilities. To reimagine the emotions and possibilities surrounding one's sex, the sex of their culture, a variety of sexual practices arise and evolve. We should understand *Viral Loads* not as the dangerous fantasy of a small amount of outliers, but as an example of this development, as a project that is indeed essential to the heart of the gay sexual imaginary and one that is intimately tied to grieving the massive loss of friends, family, and ways of life under the threat of HIV/AIDS.

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