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intimacies

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The University of Chicago Press Chicago and London

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The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London
© 2008 by The University of Chicago
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Printed in the United States of America

16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08
1 2 3 4 5

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-04351-7 (cloth)

ISBN-10: 0-226-04351-7 (cloth)

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bersani, Leo.

Intimacies / Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-04351-7 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-226-04351-7 (cloth : alk. paper)

I. Psychoanalysis. I. Phillips, Adam. II. Title.

BF173.B4677 2008

150.19'5—dc22

2007034834

Ⓢ The paper used in this publication meets the
minimum requirements of the American
National Standard for Information Sciences—
Permanence of Paper for Printed Library
Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

Shame on You

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Queer intellectuals are curiously reticent about the sexuality they claim to celebrate. It is frequently said that gay culture — at least gay male culture — is to a large extent a sexual culture, and while it could be argued, as Freud implicitly did, that “sexual culture” is an oxymoron, defending our right to have sex — lots of sex, in many different, and at times surprising, places — is certainly a defense of a long if not exactly respectable gay tradition. A certain reticence about gay sex, even *entre nous*, may, however, be a necessary part of that defense. The relation between the celebration and the silence was especially striking at a 2003 conference called Gay Shame at the University of Michigan. For two days, normativity — both straight and gay — was strenuously, and perhaps deservedly, attacked, but very little was said about the precise value of non- or antinormative sexual practices. Peculiarly, AIDS was not mentioned in any of the talks. I say “peculiarly” because AIDS became a major shame-inflicting weapon — a gift, as it were, sent from God — in homophobic assaults from,

principally but by no means only, the Christian right on the homosexual “lifestyle.” However morally repugnant we may rightly judge such attacks to be, it is difficult for HIV-infected gays not to be also infected by the shame-inducing judgment that AIDS is a punishment for their sexual sins. If, as the gay-shame theorists forcefully argue, shame is necessarily constitutive of gay subjectivity in a society that trains us from early childhood to think of homosexuality as unnatural and even criminal, to be stricken with a life-threatening disease as a direct result of having sex with another man can hardly fail to reactivate at least some of the shame that even the proudest of gay men probably felt when they first discovered their sexual tastes.

Of course, things have changed considerably since the early years of AIDS. The Christian shame tactic is undoubtedly much less effective than it was twenty years ago, and, all the resistance to gay marriage notwithstanding, our insistence on having the right to marry has helped to make us more acceptable to straight people by allowing them to think that we have the same conjugal dreams as they do. We should not, however, exaggerate the degree of acceptance. Let’s not forget that an institution as august and as powerful as the Roman Catholic Church has officially characterized homosexual being as fundamentally disordered being. There would, then, have been sufficient reason for the Gay Shame conference to devote some time to the ways in which AIDS has interfered with the project of constructing a gay dignity both on and despite

the ground of an ineluctable gay shame. I suspect that the failure to consider this as a topic for discussion may have to do with certain shame-inducing mechanisms internal to the gay community itself. A potential sexual shame is inherent in being HIV-positive. For the overwhelming majority of HIV-positive gay men, to acknowledge being infected amounts to a sexual confession: I have been fucked. Many gay men admit freely (generally to other gay men) that they like being bottoms, although a significant number of less liberated brothers may still subscribe, perhaps secretly, to the view that Foucault, in a 1982 interview, attributed to most homosexuals according to which “being the passive partner in a love relationship” is “in some way demeaning.” For Foucault, gay S/M—partly because of the frequent reversibility of roles in gay S/M, partly as a result of the demonstration S/M provides of the power of bottoms—has “helped to alleviate this problem somewhat” by empowering “a position traditionally associated with female sexuality.” Since the political credo of the gay men likely to participate in an academic conference on Gay Shame includes being a good feminist, they would probably feel uncomfortable publicly investigating, first, homophobic shame associated with being HIV-positive, and, second, the involuntary misogynistic shame of being exposed to others (gay and, even worse, straight others) as having succumbed to, or actively sought, the sexual “position traditionally associated with female sexuality.” While it seems to me that a discussion of all this among gay

men might be useful, I can also see how it could easily become politically messy.

Add to this the equally embarrassing fact (also scrupulously avoided at our conference) that a significant number of gays have, in the past ten years or so, been barebacking, that is, engaging in unprotected anal sex. When I mentioned this at the conference, I was dismissed as having bought into homophobic media propaganda, which, I was told, has transformed a few isolated incidents into a general practice. The widespread nature of the practice (documented in Tim Dean's recent research on the topic) can be easily verified by visits to the impressive number of flourishing barebacking Web sites on the Internet, as well as to the video stores renting and selling dozens of barebacking films. To what extent is gay shame both a source and a product of gay barebacking? There is of course a politically correct way of dealing with barebacking: all self-destructive, and even murderous, behavior on the part of gay men testifies — rather spectacularly at times — to a self-hatred directly and uniquely traceable to a subjectivity molded by a homophobic culture. Dangers, however, are lurking in this position. First of all, while the socially inflicted shame argument gets gays off the hook ethically, it also radically deprives us of agency in our behavior. Barebacking would show how deeply we have been injured by homophobic insults to the very core of our being, but it also shows what a small inner margin we have in excess of a shamed subjectivity. Catastrophically shamed: we are in such deep if uncon-

scious agreement with the original perpetrators of our shame that, ratifying their judgment of us, we move on to the sentencing stage and condemn ourselves and others to death. Such considerations would hardly further the projects of those for whom gay shame serves as the foundation for gay pride. Even more: once we begin to speak of such apparently suicidal and murderous behavior as barebacking, we run the risk of tracing the profile of a psychoanalytically defined death drive. When behavior is unambiguously destructive, oriented toward an orgasmic embrace of annihilation, the ultimately malleable social unconscious (the unconscious favored by anti-Freudian queer intellectuals) becomes a weak rival to the rage for death inherent in the human psyche. We would thus return to the issue of *every* individual's responsibility for the violent impulses that are partly and inescapably constitutive of our psychic structure. We are now in psychoanalytic territory (anathema to marry queer theorists), by which I mean territory ontically prior to social inscriptions, and "beyond" such intersubjective categories as shame or pride.

AND YET I DON'T THINK the death drive provides a satisfactory account of barebacking. Once we have pushed beyond both the shame-based and the death-drive arguments, we may find ourselves confronting something rarely associated with irresponsible self-indulgence: the ascesis of an ego-divesting discipline.

Let's begin with a brief discussion of someone who has been taken as the very model of nonascetic self-indulgence, the French writer Guillaume Dustan. Dustan, who died in 2005 at the age of forty, was both an exceptionally gifted novelist and, we may learn with some surprise, a magistrate in Tahiti and in northern France. He became a favorite of talk show hosts on French television (and the pariah of AIDS activists), largely because of his carefully cultivated shock value: he was always ready to defend the practice of unsafe sex in the name of individual freedom taking a stand against both the straight and the gay censors who would suppress it. His first book, *Dans ma chambre* (*In My Room*), a novel or, to use a term favored by Dustan, an auto-fiction, published in 1996, is prebarebacking Dustan, although it outlines the sexual and spiritual logic of barebacking, as well as its inevitability. The 150 pages of *Dans ma chambre* are filled with short, declarative sentences that unrelentingly and rather breezily describe in great detail Guillaume's extraordinarily rich (yet also monotonous) sex life. The book seems designed to confirm the most cherished heterosexual fantasies about how gay men live: Guillaume does almost nothing but fuck, take drugs, and dance the night away in packed gay discos. But *Dans ma chambre*, for all its matter-of-fact presentation of a voluminous quantity of scabrous sexual details, is also rather "respectable." There are three pages that simply list all the sexual accessories or toys that clutter Guillaume's closets; while they include such things as handcuffs, nipple clamps,

harnesses, testicle-stretchers, and whips, there are no scenes in the novel that would qualify as bona fide S/M. “I am not a sadist,” Guillaume candidly writes, “only a little megalomaniacal.” Above all, Guillaume, who is HIV-positive, never has unprotected anal sex—or, more accurately, he only briefly has it, always managing not to ejaculate when he is being the active partner and to avoid receiving the ejaculations of the many tops who enjoy his anal favors.

So Guillaume has a wonderful life, one in which, as he says, “sex is the central thing.” *Dans ma chambre* is unabashed confirmation of gay culture as a culture of sex. It justifies putting those two words together. When Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, opposes the pleasures of sex to the demands of civilization, he is thinking of those pleasures as entirely private, as removing the individual from the social spaces in which a shared culture is elaborated. Although it is almost always between only two or three people, the gay sex in *Dans ma chambre* is a communal construction. Everything in the “ghetto” where, as Guillaume notes, you can do just about everything except, perhaps, work and see your family, is organized around sex: “clothes, short hair, being in good shape, the sex toys, the stuff you take, the alcohol you drink, the things you read, the things you eat, you can’t feel too heavy when you go out or you won’t be able to fuck.” Tireless sexual promiscuity makes for a connectedness based on unlimited bodily intimacies. In the most reflective chapter of the book (its title is in English: “People are still

having sex”), Guillaume happily announces, “I live in a wonderful world where everyone has slept with everyone.” For a period of time Guillaume’s former lover Quentin had the same different tricks every night of the week; there was the regular Monday trick, the regular Tuesday trick, and so on. Weekends were left open for new contacts. Sex was apparently always better with the regular ones, but, Guillaume writes, “the problem is that with them you get into relations that have to be managed.” Quentin wasn’t bothered by that because he “is a little schizophrenic.” And Guillaume concludes this brief portrait of his friend with the astonishing remark: “When no one really exists, there is room for everyone.” A universal relatedness grounded in the absence of relations, in the felicitous erasure of people as persons.

Might some serpent enter this garden of sexual felicity? *Dans ma chambre*’s Dionysian delights are not exactly spoiled by the specter of HIV infection, but it has clearly become an inescapable part of Guillaume’s “wonderful world.” Guillaume and his friends are not, as we say, in denial: they talk about their HIV status with one another, Guillaume consoles a sick friend, and he and most of his tricks are never too excited, too drugged or too drunk to pause and don the always available condom. And yet, perhaps inevitably, AIDS infects sex with a consciousness of death. Death, however, not as a threat, but as a temptation, a lure. The monotony of Guillaume’s sexual exploits — especially of his insatiable anal appetite for multitudinous pe-

nises and dildoes of the most impressive dimensions — is relieved by a narrative movement away from the sex the narrator appears never to cease meticulously to describe. Indeed perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of this account of gay sex as, it would almost seem, inherently mindless and affectless is the sexual hero's discovery, within or just to the side of sex, of something superior to, or at the very least more desirable than sex. Dustan's novel delineates a wish to die that is at once related to sex and foreign to sex, and in so doing it unself-consciously resolves the Freudian quandary of a death drive different in its psychic essence from Eros, Freud maintains, and yet, as he writes in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, undetectable "unless its presence is betrayed by being alloyed with Eros." *Dans ma chambre* gives a phenomenological account of that seemingly unaccountable "alloy." At first it would appear that the threat of death merely intensifies the sexual pleasure of unsafe sex. What interests the practitioners of unsafe sex, Guillaume writes, is "to wallow in poisonous come, to have a romantic and dark fuck," to taste and to give "the kiss of death, as they say." Guillaume remembers seeing one man come while penetrating another without a condom, a spectacle he found dizzying, *vertigineux*. The potentially fatal fuck is a powerful aphrodisiac.

For Guillaume, the excitement of unsafe sex seems to be the psychic effect of his knowing that the bottom may be penetrated by his own death. It's as if the prospect of death were in itself exciting; here, however, the

excitement is being “lent” to sex, where it both intensifies the sensations of those having sex and even momentarily shatters the psychic equilibrium of someone present merely as a witness. So it may be possible to experience the excitement without the sex. Guillaume seems, as it were, to be working toward this desexualizing purification of the death drive; it is his personal ascesis. Unable to come one night while penetrating Stéphane, he masturbates after making Stéphane come. Then he lies next to Stéphane, without touching him, and closes his eyes. “After a moment Stéphane asks me what’s wrong. I say I would like to shoot everyone, break all my toys, and remain all alone in the spilled blood, screaming until I die.” The rhythm of excitement leading to a fantasized death parallels the rhythm of a sexual excitement leading to a sexual climax. But here the exciting “friction” is entirely mental (it is the blood-soaked exacerbation of a fatal fantastic scream), and what is ultimately evacuated is not semen but life itself.

Unsafe sex becomes so tempting to Guillaume that, to escape that temptation, he gets a job elsewhere and leaves Paris. “If I stay here I’m going to die. I’m going to end up putting sperm in everybody’s ass and having them do the same thing to me. The truth is, that’s the only thing I want to do.” Why? There is perhaps the memory of the dizzying excitement Guillaume felt watching a condomless top transmit “the kiss of death” to his bottom. But Guillaume also speaks of frequently losing the desire, while having sex, to reach an orgasm;

at such moments, he adds, he would like to be dead. To be done with it all; nothing exceeds the desirability of that. From this perspective, both Guillaume's excitement in his fantasy of screaming himself into death and his dizzying thrill as he watches someone else being fatally infected would be necessary to overcome his instinct of self-preservation — as if a destructive, rageful ecstasy could “trick” that instinct into impotence and assure the triumph of the death drive at its most profound instinctual level (where instinct and drive would be indistinguishable).

For all the bourgeois-shocking details he scrupulously transcribes of fisting and dildo-fucking, the Guillaume of *Dans ma chambre* turns out, reassuringly for some of his readers, to be a fairly decent fellow. He is scrupulous about safe sex, and he ends his narrative by confessing how good it was to have been loved by Stéphane. This also means, however, that there are limitations to his imagination of intimacy. There is no speculation about the possibility of something other than death, or more exactly in addition to death, resulting from uninhibited unsafe sex. The desire to spread and to receive death is enough to put an end to sex and, apparently, all reflection on sex. Of course, the ground staked out by his indefatigable drugged cruising is in itself a seductively unconventional form of intimacy. Guillaume's wonderful world, where everyone has been to bed with everyone else, is a world where no one is interested in penetrating — invading and possessing — anyone else's desire. Do you want to have sex

with me? This is the limit of psychological curiosity in *Dans ma chambre*, and it is a limit consistent with Foucault's call for a relational move from a hermeneutics of desire to the pleasure of bodies. Correlatively, there is a profound shift in registers of intimacy: from our heterosexual culture's reserving the highest relational value for the couple to a communal model of impersonal intimacy.

THE EVOLUTION OF GAY SEX since the publication of Dustan's first novel includes an even more radical relational inventiveness, one Guillaume might have discovered had he stayed in Paris and given in to the temptation to go bareback. Unsafe sex means nothing more to Guillaume than acting on his frightening desire to propagate death, in himself and in others. What has happened since *Dans ma chambre* is an amazing—most of us would say appalling—efflorescence of barebacking as the defining practice of a new if limited gay male sexual culture. I say “culture” because barebacking has not only a large number of conceptually inarticulate practitioners who simply reject condoms as unacceptable inhibitions of pleasure and intimacy, but also a few coherent, at times impressive theoreticians. Tim Dean has recently completed a book-length study of barebacking, and much of what I will say is indebted to his research and remarkable analyses. First of all, let's distinguish (although the distinction is by no means clear cut in the barebacking community) between those who

practice unsafe sex hoping that it will turn out to have been safe (or who are perhaps so anxious to have “the real thing”—something many gay men under forty-five may never have known—that they’re willing to take the risk), and those who go bareback *in order to be infected*. (There is, of course, the important category of lovers who have returned to fucking without condoms under conditions of negotiated safety.) In the barebacking vernacular, the men who pursue infection are called bug-chasers, and those willing to infect them are known as gift-givers. Since the sex often takes place at parties at which one bottom may be anally penetrated by any number of tops he doesn’t know (someone anointed the King of Loads received the ejaculations of fifty-six tops in one night), the “unlimited intimacy” (to use the title of Dean’s study) of barebacking is obviously an impersonal intimacy. It is as if barebackers were experientially confirming a specifically Freudian and Lacanian notion of sexual desire as indifferent to personal identity, antagonistic to ego requirements and regulations, and, following a famous Freudian dictum, always engaged in group sex even when the actual participants are limited to the two partners of the socially approved couple. What is most startling about these psychoanalytic analogies to which Dean is exceptionally alert, to the extent that they are accurate, is that they delineate a social practice that, perhaps unprecedentedly, actualizes, in the most literal fashion, psychoanalytic inferences about the unconscious. It is as if barebacking gang-bangs were laboratories in which

impulses and fantasies condemned by ego-censorship as nonviable were being tested for, precisely, their social viability.

We may, of course, not be overly impressed by a social viability that does not extend beyond the confines of a gang-bang. Furthermore, as Dean points out, it is by no means certain that devoted barebackers have entirely dispensed with ego-identities. For Foucault, the virtue of role reversals in S/M was that, by undoing fixed assignments of top and bottom, and of active and passive, such reversals help to create intimacies no longer structured by the masculine-feminine polarity. I think that when he told gays not to be proud of *being* gay, but rather to learn to *become* gay, he meant that we should work to invent relations that no longer imitate the dominant heterosexual model of a gender-based and fundamentally hierarchical relationality. Gift-givers have been known to become bug-chasers, but, while it may seem like a deliberately cruel parody of straight masculinity to call some one like the King of Loads (as he has indeed been called) heroically masculine, the intention in so doing seems to be wholly nonparodistic. It is a way of acknowledging the bottom's right to the most revered attribute of manhood. Also, the most articulate members of the barebacking community think very seriously of the act of transmitting the virus as an impregnating act. The title of a barebacking porn film is *Breed Me*; in it, bottoms ask their tops to breed them, thus invoking a familiar if perhaps consciously infrequent fantasy accompanying gay sex.

Asking your top to give you a baby can intensify the excitement of anal sex, an effect that, from a fantasmatic perspective, makes logical sense. The bottom is thrillingly invested with women's power to conceive, and, in a throwback to childhood (and now unconscious) theories about the path of conception, the rectum becomes the procreative womb. But the barebacker's rectum is a grave. And this is where the reproductive fantasy becomes at once more sinister and more creative. Sinister because it's difficult not to see this as a rageful perversion of the reproductive process. A horror of heterosexual breeding (Lee Edelman's recent book, *No Future*, is already the classic textbook of this horror) becomes the sexual excitement of transmitting or conceiving death instead of life. It is here that we can legitimately speak of barebacking as a manifestation of a sexualized death drive. What could be more ecstatically *vertigineux* than to participate in (and not merely watch) this suicidal act that is also potentially a murder? More exactly, what could be more fantasmatically explosive for the bug-chaser than to feel the infected gift-giver's orgasm as an anticipatory shattering of his own biological life *and* the murder of the "baby" itself by virtue of the fatal properties of the reproductive seed? Violent aggression toward the other not, as Freud would have it, as a deviation of an original drive toward the subject's own death, but the two ideally, "creatively," condensed in a sexual climax.

I should add that, from a more pragmatic social and ethical perspective, this literal enactment of the death

drive fully justifies the heterosexual *and* homosexual revulsed and often convulsed condemnation of barebacking. It *is*, from this perspective, an irresponsible spreading of disease and death, and it is a disastrous setback for the AIDS activism that has saved thousands of lives since the early years of the epidemic. I emphasize this just before turning to the ethical originality and the ethical seriousness of the barebacking rhetoric, something of which Tim Dean is acutely aware. Against the view of bareback sex as “mindless fucking,” he speaks of it as “deeply invested with meaning.” More specifically, barebacking “signals profound changes in the social organization of kinship and relationality,” changes that can be thought of as serving love and promoting life. The exceptionally articulate documentary pornographer Paul Morris speaks of unsafe sex as both “insane” and “essential.” Insane for obvious reasons; essential in that, according to Morris, allegiance to the gay sexual subculture requires the subordination of the individual to the culture’s self-defining traditions and practices. “What is at stake isn’t the survival of the individual, but the survival of the practices and patterns which are the discoveries and properties of the sub-culture.” Barebacking is necessary for cultural transmission. Or at least this is Morris’s rather muddled argument. It would have been nice if the right of all citizens to have consensual sex had been enshrined in the Bill of Rights (especially nice given the attacks on this right), but this is not the same thing as sacralizing sex as a cultural treasure. Cer-

tainly homosexuals — especially gay men — have a long history of enjoying, more or less guiltily depending on historical and cultural contexts, exceptionally active sex lives. While this may be, as Morris puts it, a central and defining activity, I'm not sure that it qualifies as a cultural heritage that is our duty to pass on to future generations. Having a lot of sex is, or should be, immensely enjoyable; it seems to me peculiar to make it a source of collective pride and distinction. In any case, sexual activity hardly needs to be vigilantly transmitted from one generation to the next. Human beings are never more ingenious (remember the cruising ingenuities of Proust's "inverts" during World War I blackouts) than they are in overcoming obstacles to finding sexual partners; unsafe sex is in no way necessary as a guarantee of gay male promiscuity in the future. Furthermore, it is by no means clear why unsafe sex is a better transmitter of sexual practices than safe sex; indeed, given the number of men who risk death as a result of unsafe sex, there may be fewer and fewer members of the culture to whom the honored tradition can be transmitted.

There is, however, something else that can be extrapolated from barebacking manifestos and barebacking cinema. There is another way to formulate the intergenerational connections established through bareback sex. Tim Dean speaks of a Paul Morris video in which semen collected from various sources is funneled into some one's anus. We not only see several men fucking the handsome man introduced in the final scene of *Plantin' Seed*; after the tops' departure, another

man uses a blue plastic funnel in which he has collected the semen of other men to inseminate young Jonas with the ejaculate of men he has never met. (Several bottoms in these videos, like Jonas, maintain a smile that struck me as at once idiotic, saintly, and heavily drugged.) Dean calls the funneling scene a “ritual summoning of ghosts” that engenders “a kind of impersonal identification with strangers past and present that does not depend on knowing, liking, or being like them.” Barriers of disgust and shame having been overcome, bareback bottoms become “interpersonal intermediaries,” as Dean puts it, “communicating and identifying with previous generations of the subculture.” This is much stranger and more original than Morris’s pious invocation of the obligation to transmit cultural practices and traditions. In fact, *Plantin’ Seed* proposes a view of barebacking wholly at odds with that invocation. The written manifesto transposes onto bareback sex a conventional view of cultural transmission. The video, on the other hand, is not about the survival of a tradition; what survives — what *lives* — is the agent of several men’s illness and death. Not only does the bottom receive fluid from both those who are penetrating him during the orgy and all those who have contributed to the container from which semen is funneled into his anus, there is also a kind of communication — however psychologically and physiologically unarticulatable it may be — with the men who gave the virus to the men he has had sex with as well as to those whose semen has been dutifully collected in the Tupperware con-

tainer, *and* with those who infected the men who gave the virus to all these “close” infectors, in addition to all those from a previous generation who may have been the founding infectors in this lineage of HIV-infectors. From the moment of the gang-bang to the time of the bottom’s death (from whatever cause), the virus — unlike uninfected semen, which, depending on whether it is received orally or anally, may be quickly absorbed into, or expelled from, the receiver’s own system — remains alive as a distinct and identifiable cohabitant within the bottom’s blood. A certain community thus thrives internally, although I am aware of the oddity of using the word “community” for a potentially fatal infection from multiple sources. At the very least, the community engendered by barebacking is completely nonviable politically and socially. More exactly, the rich social bonds it creates are entirely reducible to single individuals’ awareness of the interpenetration of fluids within their own bodies. Furthermore, this displacement of community from what we ordinarily think of as the theater of social relations to the interior of bodies could be thought of as a freakish elaboration into adult categories of thought of infantile fantasies about the life within us, about what goes on inside (as well as what goes into and what comes out of) the body’s holes.

Nevertheless, barebacking’s distorted and regressive version of community also strikes me as a model of an ultimately unfathomable spirituality, a spirituality at once exalted and unrelievedly somber. Nothing useful

can come from this practice; barebacking does nothing to further the political goals of a minority community (on the contrary!), and it does nothing to transmit the presumed values of that community to future generations. The barebacker is the lonely carrier of the lethal and stigmatized remains of all those to whom his infection might be traced. He may continue to move and to act socially, but that which constitutes his most profound sociality isolates him, makes his life like that of a hermit in the desert. It is as if some monstrously appetitive god had had his way with him and left his devastating presence within him as an ineradicable reminder of his passage. We are used to seeing, and even applauding, the willing submission of entire populations to the manipulations of political power, but nothing even remotely resembling this truly evil power (the subject of my next chapter) enters into barebacking. Power has played no tricks on the barebacker: from the beginning he was promised nothing more, and he has received nothing more, than the privilege of being a living tomb, the repository of what may kill him, of what may kill those who have penetrated him during the gang-bang, of what has already killed those who infected the men who have just infected him. An intensified sexual excitement may have helped him to reach his willing martyrdom, but a momentarily explosive thrill was really nothing more than the accessory pleasure that accompanied him through his passage into something that is neither life nor death. In fact, barebacking is, teleologically considered, the renunciation

of what Jean Laplanche has spoken of as the sexual ecstasy of the death drive; it is the ascetic discipline necessary in order to be replaced, inhabited by the other.

Bareback rhetoric tends, however, to be far removed from such spiritual depths of self-divestiture. There is the bottom's hypermasculinized ego, the grotesquely distorted apeing of reproductive values, the all-too-visible appeal of an eroticized militarism, and, finally, the patriotic ethic embraced in the idea of the individual's sacrifice for the sake of the group. As Dean acknowledges — his vast capacity for empathy notwithstanding — “bareback culture would be ethically troubling less for its radical departure from mainstream values than for its perpetuation of them.” In its most radical form, however, barebacking perpetuates something quite different: an ethic of sacrificial love startlingly similar to the officially condemned form of Catholic mysticism articulated toward the end of the seventeenth century by Quietism and the proponents of what was known as “pure love.” As Jacques Lebrun has emphasized in his admirable study, *Le Pur amour de Platon à Lacan*, “the quarrel of pure love” both continued the quietest philosophy of the Spanish theologian Molinos (condemned by the Church in 1687) and shifted the emphasis from the prioritizing of passivity over activity in spiritual life to the exact nature of the state of being, of the love, that would correspond to a perfect passivity. Central to the notion of *le pur amour* is what is known in mystical texts as “the impossible supposition”: if God were to annihilate the souls of the just

at the moment of death, or if He were to banish their souls to hell for all eternity, those whose love for God had been pure would continue to serve Him with an absolutely disinterested love. Not unexpectedly, from the point of view of the politics of Catholic spirituality, the use of “the impossible supposition” as a kind of touchstone for the love of God was not only frowned upon but officially condemned as it was set forth in a work by the principal theoretician of pure love in France, Fénelon, archbishop of Cambrai. What could be more dangerous than a doctrine that preached a purportedly holy indifference to eternal punishment and an eternal reward? But for Fénelon and the remarkable woman who was his mentor in pure love, Jeanne Guyon, pure love demands, as Mme Guyon never ceased to emphasize, a saintly hatred of oneself, a perfect passivity toward God’s will, and *une entière désappropriation de soi*, total self-divestiture. Nothing, she writes, concerns the practitioner of pure love: neither paradise, nor perfection, nor eternity. Self-annihilation is the precondition for union with God; only those who have given their eternity to God can be the perfect receptacles for all that God, in His unfathomable arbitrariness, may will to give them. An extraordinary passage from the life of Saint Catherine of Genoa expresses very well this total absence of self from the self. Saint Catherine writes of not knowing how to go about confessing her sins. She wants to accuse herself of sinning, but she can’t; she no longer knows to whom the guilt of her sins can be imputed, there is no longer any self that could have said

or done something for which she might feel guilt or remorse. As Lebrun strikingly formulates the extreme consequence of Fénelon's thought, it is "as if love were 'pure' once the subject absents himself from it, once this love without a subject is settled on its object and is itself absorbed into its object."

The similarities between the theological notion of "pure love" and the dangerous sexual practice of barebacking may not, to say the least, be immediately clear. And yet both can be thought of as disciplines in which the subject allows himself to be penetrated, even replaced, by an unknowable otherness. The barebacking gang-bang has none of what we usually think of as the humanizing attributes of intimacy within a couple, where the personhood of each partner is presumed to be expanded and enriched by knowledge of the other. The barebacking bottom enters into an impersonal intimacy, not only with all those who have pumped their semen into his body, but also with all those unknown partners, perhaps now dead, with whom he has never had any physical contact. His subjecthood is, we might say, absorbed into the nameless and faceless crowd that exist only as viral traces circulating in his blood and perhaps fatally infecting him. For him, their identities are nothing more than these viral remains; his willingness to allow his body to be the site of their persistence and reproduction is not entirely unlike the mystic's surrender to a divine will without any comfortably recognizable attributes whatsoever. For those of us who insist on more personal intimacies, both these instances

of pure love can, I suppose, only be thought of as appalling examples of prideful masochism. But it is difficult to locate in either case the pleasure inherent in masochism or, more radically, the subject to whom pride might be imputed. Of course, both barebacker and the proponent of pure love continue to exist, for other people, as identifiable individuals; but at the ideal limit of their ascetes, both their individualities are overwhelmed by the massive anonymous presence to which they have surrendered themselves. My analogy between the two may appear less grotesque in the light of the vicissitudes in the history of spirituality. In a fundamentally atheistic culture in which religious belief has become indistinguishable from a humanistic agnosticism or has been reduced to an ignorant, intolerant and ego-driven fundamentalism, the spirituality practiced by Fénelon and Mme Guyon can perhaps only be sheltered and nurtured in such admittedly debased forms as the ethically and politically ambiguous cult of barebacking. We might, however, remind ourselves that a defining characteristic of the spiritual culture we live in is its suspicion of spirituality *tout court*: commentators have, for example, not hesitated to reduce the sublime self-abnegation of Fénelon and Mme Guyon to a discredited sublimation of their sexual interest in each other, just as barebacking can be reduced to an ingenious variation on such mainstream values as patriotism and heroic masculinity.

To the extent that it embodies, both through and beyond death, the desire to maintain an inter-

generational brotherhood, barebacking, for all its ethical ambiguities, is a ritual of sacrificial love. A sign of my own troubled response to the practice is that I also find bug-chasing and gift-giving sexually repellent and staggeringly irresponsible behavior. Of course, even the irresponsibility can appear to be a minor sin in the larger social context of the murderous irresponsibility of the domestic and foreign policies of our current government. Many barebackers (not the self-confessed bug-chasers) prefer not to know the HIV status of their partners, but no one is advocating nonconsensual unsafe sex. This is not to deny the seriousness of spreading the infection, with or without mutual consent, but even the most ardent gift-givers seem unmotivated by the thrill of exercising murderous power. Interpreted as a mode of ascetic spirituality, bug-chasing and gift-giving among barebackers are implicit critiques of the multiple forms of ego-driven intimacy: from the most trivial expressions of sexual vanity (bareback videos, unlike other gay porn, include singularly unattractive bodies), to the prideful exclusiveness of the family as a socially blessed, closed unit of reproductive intimacy, and even to the at once violently aggressive and self-shattering ego-hyperbolizing of racial, national, ethnic, and gendered identities.

A critique but not a resistance: the awesome abjection of “pure love” can only take place in the margins of the far more viable, inventive, and destructive exercises of personal and collective ego expansion. Might there be forms of self-divestiture not grounded in a

teleology (or a theology) of the suppression of the ego and, ultimately, the sacrifice of the self? Perhaps self-divestiture itself has to be rethought in terms of a certain form of self-expansiveness, of something like ego-dissemination rather than ego-annihilation. To affirm, as a paradoxical conclusion to the rest of this discussion, that only the ego can love is to suggest the necessity of a theory of love — a necessity I will presently address — grounded in what has become, for me, the indispensable concept of an *impersonal* narcissism.