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Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking

by Tim Dean

University of Chicago Press, 2009

Octavio R. Gonzalez

In a recent issue of PMLA, Gregory Tomso laments the current dearth of humanities research on HIV/AIDS.<sup>1</sup> He proposes that humanist scholars take a page from the social sciences, where contemporary research focuses on the political economy of HIV/AIDS, or the “global reach of the pandemic and the vast technological, disciplinary, and governmental expertise required to contain it” (443). Tomso celebrates such analyses, indebted to the discursive materialism of Michel Foucault, for their attention to the diverse ramifications of HIV/AIDS and its biopolitical governmentality. One such ramification is the emergence of new sexual identities, such as the “barebacker,” which denotes homosexual men who deliberately or habitually engage in unprotected anal sex—which, needless to say, remains one of the highest risk behaviors for HIV transmission (444).<sup>2</sup>

Tim Dean’s Unlimited Intimacy is a study of the barebacking subculture in San Francisco that arose in the late 1990s. This subculture emerged following the improving prognoses of AIDS with the advent of highly active anti-retroviral therapy (HAART). Before HAART, an AIDS diagnosis was an acute death sentence. After HAART, living with AIDS in the United States and other developed nations became akin to managing a chronic illness, with all that entails, in terms of prolonged longevity and the resumption of the natural rhythms of ordinary life, including professional development and healthy sexual and romantic attachments. One effect of the relative improvement in AIDS outcomes in the West was the loosening of safer-sex norms among men who have sex with men (MSM), and the emergence of a subculture of MSM who identify as barebackers.<sup>3</sup> According to Dean, San Francisco became a Ground Zero of sorts for this subcultural form of sexual engineering.

Dean’s study is brave, rare, and thought provoking. As the subtitle makes clear (“Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking”), Dean’s book focuses on the cultural rather than the individual dimension of the phenomenon. Rather than pathologize unsafe sexual behavior among gay and bisexual men as irrational, Dean seeks to understand it ethnologically, that is, answering Gayle Rubin’s call for adopting a neutral methodological stance guided by the anthropological principle of benign sexual variation (x). Dean thus suspends moral judgment of

barebacking, urging that the subculture be “regarded as a foreign culture” and thus be “approached with due care and respect” (x). Dean presents this subculture ethnographically, documenting its “language, rituals, etiquette, institutions, [and] iconography” (x). For the remainder of the book, this approach means a sustained cultural analysis of barebacking’s natural mode of self-representation—hardcore pornography—which is natural because it is a subculture based on hardcore sex and devoted to documenting and experimenting with “unlimited” sexual intimacy (sex without barriers), as Dean’s title makes clear. Interesting also from a methodological perspective is the personal note that Dean takes. Dean provides his own “confessions of a barebacker,” the title of his introduction. Following the postmodern anthropological norm of self-reflexivity, he avows his role as participant-observer in the subculture of barebacking; Dean writes himself into his own study.

Beyond providing a scrupulously researched chronicle and analysis of hardcore pornography in the age of AIDS, both gay and straight, Dean’s book addresses the nonnormative (or queer) ethics of sexual sociability in this subcultural context. Indeed, his argument depends on meeting the ethical and political challenge that barebacking presents for the broader LGBT community: barebacking encourages a willful suspension of safer-sex norms and an organized approach to engaging in HIV risk behavior. Arguing against the grain, Dean wonders what it would mean to not consider barebacking simply as an extremely irresponsible mode of “Russian-roulette sex” (6). To the contrary, Dean reflects on what he considers the “ethical exemplarity” of barebacking—the ways in which it “raises questions that complicate how we distinguish life-giving activities from those that engender death” (xii, 176, 6). Dean believes that barebacking is ethically exemplary in the way it represents unlimited intimacy, or a “disposition of openness to the other” that might appear dangerous (xii, 30). Being open to radical alterity entails being “more promiscuous about promiscuity,” in Dean’s words, thus following the model of psychoanalysis and its practice of studied neutrality and its legitimating of nonrational logic (5). Dean, perversely, notes that psychoanalysis, too, is an ethically exemplary practice homologous to barebacking (30). Both practices are based on a broadminded ethics of openness to the “strangeness” of the other, an ethic of listening or fucking without judgment (5, 28–29). Thus, Dean states that in

advocating an ethic of openness to alterity, Unlimited Intimacy suggests that barebacking allegorizes such openness through its acceptance of risk and its

willingness to dispense with barriers; therefore, in a sense, the subculture models how we might approach it. This book advocates barebacking less as a sexual practice than as a figure for an ethical disposition. (30)

The more concrete argument the book makes is that barebacking subculture constructs an alternative kinship system, based on the exchange of semen and—or as—HIV (“how to do things with HIV,” in Dean’s words [69]), which mediates social bonds among men in largely anonymous scenes of sexual intercourse. (Unsurprisingly, given the kinship function that sex has in this subculture, the sexual gangbang is the preferred scenario for staging barebacking as a pornographic queer counter-public.)

Nevertheless, Dean is alive to the epidemiological fact that barebacking poses a concerted public health risk, in terms of shifting sexual mores away from safer sex, and facilitating—at times fetishizing—HIV transmission. Yet, Dean reminds us that most barebacking, all accounts to the contrary notwithstanding, is conducted so as not to spread the virus. Dean carefully notes this in the introduction. But he still focuses on the strain of barebacking that most interests him, collectively called bug-chasing and gift-giving, because this social form “appears to be the least explicable from a rational point of view,” as it involves the sexual desire to acquire or transmit the virus (12–17, 17).<sup>4</sup> Dean’s psychoanalytic ethnology distinguishes between irrational and nonrational logics (the latter is the logic of the unconscious), seeking above all to depathologize the behavior under study in order to ask what it can teach us about forgoing the privatization and domestication of sexual life in the drive toward LGBT assimilation within the neoliberal public sphere.

Hence, Dean’s queer ethical case of barebacking informs an anti-normative queer politics, which is a critique of the liberal mainstreaming of the LGBT community. Dean analyzes the queer “outlaws” of barebacking subculture to counter the gay “in-laws” of marriage equality.

At this point, within the privileged cordon sanitaire of the global north, HIV/AIDS means not certain death, but managed life.<sup>5</sup> This structured management of populations and individuals entails comprehensive administration by the welfare state, at the level of medical care, housing, and other services, and everyday social negotiations that exceed the equation of HIV with death. To Dean’s credit, he moves beyond the semi-hysterical rhetorical conflation of barebacking with the death drive, but his argument itself maintains this symbolic equation of semen exchange as HIV transmission, given the fantasies invoked in barebacking representations. The limits of

representation, and the necessity to analyze the material conditions of mediated and medicated lives, could not be clearer, which is why Tomso's call for research into the political economy of the HIV public-private apparatus ("AIDS Inc.") is a welcome recommendation.

Dean's final chapter, "Cruising As a Way of Life," begins to distinguish between barebacking as ethical and barebacking as instrumental—between, to use psychoanalytic parlance, object-usage and object-relating. According to Donald Winnicott, to use an object is (paradoxically) to engage with it as an autonomous being, separate from oneself, and to allow it to affect oneself independently of one's own interests or designs on that object.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, to relate to an object is to see the other only as an extension of oneself; in this scenario, it means to view him as a means toward personal sexual satisfaction. As Dean's chapter elaborates, it is increasingly the case with gay men and online cruising, whether it involves barebacking or not, that sexual encounters are planned as if ordering from a takeout menu. Dean's vision of bareback subculture as instantiating an ethic of openness to alterity—the subculture is racially and ethnically diverse, as well as diverse in HIV status, body shape, age, class status, and so on—dissolves in his view of online cruising. Online cruising is dedicated to object-relating, weeding out true strangers and strangeness; many profiles represent the "I'm such-and-such, you be too" phenomenon. Hence, this type of homosexual object-relating selects those who meet certain demographic criteria required for a controlled sexual interaction designed in advance.

Dean's final chapter thus reads as a paean to Samuel Delany and the latter's Times Square memoir of public cruising; "Cruising as a Way of Life" expresses a sweet nostalgia for a bygone era. And it is this coda to Unlimited Intimacy that suggests its overall project is independent of barebacking. Dean's study risks distilling a subculture into an ethical paradigm, one that barebackers might find it difficult to recognize themselves in.<sup>7</sup> Like any cultural ethnography, Unlimited Intimacy risks speaking for a culture, in a foreign language of expertise, that is already quite voluble (if minuscule, compared to broader swaths of the gay community, both outside San Francisco and outside North America). In identifying with and as a barebacker, Dean recuperates a scene of belonging that seems to answer to his own desires for an impersonal ethics and anti-assimilationist politics.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, that is perhaps Dean's most enduring contribution: the demonstration that discomfort and risk are themselves valuable as provocations for sustained analytic reflection, for an ethical thought experiment. Relatedly, he suggests the perils of reflexively assigning political

litmus tests for any sustained cultural practice, whether pornographic or ethnographic. But such an abstract proposition probably causes more resistance than any psychoanalyst (or psychoanalytic critic), no matter how tolerant, could probably bear. Dean's book, to paraphrase Susan Sontag, is artful because it has the capacity to make us nervous. Most importantly, though, Dean's intervention ought to inspire further responses to HIV/AIDS in the humanities.

### Biography

Octavio R. Gonzalez is a doctoral candidate in English at Rutgers University. His dissertation is entitled "Half a Person: Bad Affects, Impersonality and Self-Divestiture in Twentieth-Century Minoritarian Fiction." He specializes in the long twentieth century, transnational modernism, queer studies, affect theory, and cultural studies. Octavio's first collection of poetry, The Book of Ours, is available from Notre Dame University's Letras Latinas/Institute for Latino Studies, Momotombo Press (tianguis.biz).

### Notes

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1 Tomso argues that strong governments and powerful global agencies such as the United Nations have seized on the pandemic as a threat to national and international security. He terms this the "securitization" of AIDS (445). The global scale of HIV and its largely governmental administration intervenes into the affairs of certain countries—"hollow states" (445)—unable to deal with the epidemic in their own populations. Tomso argues that this current wave of the pandemic requires scholarship that attends to the interconnected global and local political economy of HIV/AIDS as an unprecedented public-health emergency. A notable exception to the lack of humanities research in HIV/AIDS is, of course, Tim Dean's work on barebacking in male homosexual communities, the subject of this essay. Another is David Halperin's book-length essay What Do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity.

2 There is much controversy surrounding the definition of "barebacking," not least because the term can refer to intermittent or accidental behavior (a "slip"), rather than to a coherent sexual identity organized around having unprotected sex and deliberately incurring the risk of HIV transmission. Dean adopts the latter and more limited sense, as does Tomso. For a primer on the dissensus regarding proper definitions of barebacking, see Halkitis, Wilton, and Galatowitsch 2005b.

3 Needless to say, HIV/AIDS presents a very different complex of public health outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa and in other less-developed territories. This disparity is why Tomso's call for greater AIDS research in the humanities is so important: the pandemic divides the world just as emergently as other more traditional sites of humanities research do, such as socioeconomic class divisions and ethnic conflicts.

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In public health discourse, the term “men who have sex with men” (MSM) is used to designate the universe of men who engage in homosexual behavior, including those who do not identify as “gay” or “bisexual.” Dean makes an interesting point when he claims that barebackers are themselves a new form of sexual identity (9), almost superseding the frame of sexual orientation that governs how we understand sexuality as an identity defined strictly by gender of object choice (9–11).

4 Dean thus takes pains to admit that a “substantial proportion and perhaps the majority of instances of barebacking combine a desire for unprotected sex with a desire to contain HIV,” as opposed to a desire to spread it (12). Other research studies corroborate this indemnification of barebacking from an epidemiological perspective. See, for instance, Alvin G. Dawson and his coauthors, who conclude that “the large majority of cases advertising for bareback sex, even in a worst-case scenario, involve interactions . . . specifically designed to minimize HIV transmission” (81).

5 I use the phrase “global north” to distinguish life outcomes between Western or northern countries and those of the global south, where AIDS impacts populations much more severely. For more on the “securitization” of AIDS in a global context, see Tomso 2010. Despite this north vs. south distinction that social science deems self-evident at this point in the pandemic, Leo Bersani’s chapter on barebacking, “Shame On You,” in his recent *Intimacies*, makes a symbolic claim that barebacking, as gift-giving and bug-chasing, is a murderous and suicidal “alloy” of the sexual instinct and the death drive (39). For a different perspective on bug-chasing, see my article, Gonzalez 2010.

6 As Winnicott frames the distinction, object-relating is a “phenomenon of the subject,” but in object-usage we must “take into account the nature of the object, not as a projection, but as a thing in itself” (118). Winnicott adds that object-relating “can be described in terms of the individual subject,” whereas object-usage “cannot be described except in terms of acceptance of the object’s independent existence” (118–19). To give a salient example: a barebacker lets a man come inside him without knowing the man’s HIV serostatus. Such an encounter preserves the mystery and strangeness of the other—who is thus not reduced, or reducible, to his positive or negative serostatus. By contrast, to choose partners strictly based on their serostatus, what is called sero-sorting, means that the subject relates to sexual objects as mere projections—in this case, as either safe or unsafe harbors of HIV.

7 One of Dean’s more recent interventions (2011) in the discourse of barebacking seems to turn away from the claims of ethical exemplarity he ascribes to this subcultural practice. His “Bareback Time” argues against the conflation of HIV/AIDS with death sentence; indeed, Dean’s argument in this essay is that the temporal changes inherent in longer AIDS prognoses have shifted the relations to time among infected and affected (specifically Western) queer populations. According to Dean’s new thesis, “participants in bareback subculture are experimenting also with temporal relations ... with what it might mean to intentionally expose oneself to temporal contingency and to finitude” in, say, incurring the risk of HIV acquisition (76).

8 One question I would ask is whether barebacking even in its more impersonal and anarchic forms, as in the anonymous gangbang, instrumentalizes sexual relations any less. Rather than exemplifying ethical openness to alterity, does indifference or opposition to condom use represent anything more than doing away with material barriers—could not psychic and social barriers themselves remain firmly in place? Dean 2011 seems to take such concerns to heart in gestures such as a footnote to “Bareback Time,” in which he states that “Neither in this essay nor

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in Unlimited Intimacy am I suggesting that bareback sex or the subculture it has generated should be considered as transgressive or radical per se” (94n2). Such a gesture mitigates the claim in Unlimited Intimacy for the exemplary ethical disposition of barebacking subculture, as a culture dedicated to embracing radical alterity, which can be epidemiologically, if not socially, threatening.

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