Creampied to death: Ejaculative kinship in the age of normative data flows

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Abstract This article reframes the kinship between all liquids (from the mother's milk to a lover's sperm) as a source of queer dissidence that becomes particularly relevant in times of normative data-flows, the necro-politicization of the ocean, and social media's injunction of permanent availability. Following Gaston Bachelard's general theory of material imagination, liquidness appears as the only matter antithetical to digitality, hardware's most threatening substance, and a reparative metaphor for contemporary anxieties. Through a queer psychoanalytic understanding of matter that harks back to the subject's earliest experiences, the argument ultimately anchors itself in the figure of the *creampie*, the ejaculate excess that oozes out of a subject's orifices after coitus, providing liquid evidence of a fantasy of fulfillment that is otherwise perpetually deferred by the digital economy.

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Definition of barebacking: Sex where skins touch without physical prophylactic mediation.

What is the allegorical function of water at a time when data is coded to flow smoothly to its destination and migrant boats predestined to capsize? From Alain Guiraudie's *Stranger by the Lake* (2013) to Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016), it seems that filmmakers have increasingly turned to aquatic symbolism to say something about queerness and what is left of, or for, queerness in a world governed by the binary and segregating tendencies of the digital and its injunctions of permanent availability. Although we

could date the cinematic queerness of water in its most aphrodisiac dimension to a film like João Pedro Rodrigues's *O Fantasma* (2000) and find the penchant of liquidness to inhabit a less sexual, though just as lethal, form of queerness in Robert Bresson's *Mouchette* (1967), the relationship between water and queerness gains new relevance and calls for new affective and material readings at a time when liquidness becomes perhaps the only matter antithetical to digitality, when "[s]wimming may well be the last refuge from connectivity" (Tsui, 2014, p. 5).

This essay locates the queerness of liquidness in its inherent instability and multivalence. Its writing aims to embody such qualities in arguing for liquid queerness, material and metaphorical, as a strategy of defense and dissidence in the face of the normativizing either-or demands made by digital networks. A core part of the argument is that we can find a profusion of examples of how liquidness can be deployed queerly – critically, poetically, non-essentially – in contemporary digital cinema. Following Gaston Bachelard's general theory of material imagination, I extrapolate the concept of liquidness across various substances which I propose might serve as an emblematic geo-political symptom and a reparative metaphor for contemporary anxieties, paying particular attention to sperm in the form of the *creampie*, the accumulated ejaculate oozing out of the orifice of the penetrated body following intercourse, as evidence that, although a relationship has not taken place, as Lacan famously put it, *something* has. The creampie, whose capacity to bear both life and death is rivalled only by blood, evinces a liquid communication in a world rife with alienation, disaffection, and algorithmic predictability. The creampie renders the often banal act of digitally assisted penetration detectable.

Much has been said about the beautiful, horrific powers of water. There is something contradictory about its bodies, small and large, public and private; their chameleonic shapelessness, simultaneous transparency and opaqueness; their being ever so threatening and under threat. Water is refreshing and toxic, feminine and masculine, maternal and paternal, infinite and scarce, nourishing and fatal. Water can also be deceiving in form and feeling: "Snow is warm," Akira Kurosawa reminds us in *Dreams* (1990). This is where the queerness of liquidness lives, if we define queerness as the incalculable, unverifiable, and unprogrammable fabric of desire.

Reflection, a liquid term, is both what critical theory is supposed to do and what kills Narcissus. In the ocean, Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) liquid modernity gains disturbingly literal status. Some are bound to float, while others are marked to drown, detectable at last. For Gilles Lipovetsky (1994), information makes individuals permeable, but permeable to what and for whom? Through his *thalassopolitics*, Michael O'Rourke (2016) evokes the ocean as a necropolitical site that metastasizes the entire world into a war zone. As climate change and the migration crises in Europe make clear, water *feels* more pertinent than ever, reminding us of the animality and materiality of all subjects,

not just those whose bodies have been constituted through a long history of non-humanness (Walcott, 2019).

Liquid Evidence

The genesis of this text is my work on new media technologies and barebacking, or the desire for sex unmediated by condoms as organized in and cathected through digital platforms. That is, sex that runs the risk, or is driven by, the likelihood or even certainty, at least in fantasy, of fluid transmission – sex driven by a one-sided communication with no hopes for reciprocity. The other is demanded to play a role in the subject's fantasy while the subject has no interest in the fantasy of the other. That is the default and inescapable condition of the sex scene writ large for Lacan, where the other's body never amounts to much beyond masturbation material for the subject, which makes for a sexual encounter where the most that can happen between the partners is "a little squeeze" (Lacan, 1998, p. 23).

It is worth noting that by the impossibility of the sexual relationship Lacan means that a lover doesn't get enjoyment from or with the other but *via* them. Lacan doesn't see this so much as a problem but a solution, as it is precisely this dynamic that allows for desire to emerge. Were sexual partners capable of the sort of seamless complementarity dreamed up by fantasies of romantic love, for instance, there would be nothing left for these bodies to do. The impossibility of the sexual relationship, then, sets up a link between bodies based on lack and the necessity of repetition. Love, in this context, appears as a consolation prize for the very lack of the sexual relationship. As in: *there is no sexual relationship, but at least there's love*.

Although the epidemiological repercussions of bareback sex have changed dramatically as bodies are able to take up different positions *vis-à-vis* HIV and its potential consequences, that doesn't mean barebacking as a fantasy has reflected such shifts. With regular pharmacological help, the HIV-negative barebacking body can now be virtually immune to HIV, and the HIV-positive body's ability to infect others can be deactivated. But there is an inevitable gap between the fantasmatic and the real, the conscious and the unconscious. We know, for instance, that an analysand might arrive at a conscious insight about their behavioral pattern that brings them a lot of suffering, as well as enjoyment, after several years of analysis. The behavior itself may not change until such knowledge is produced in the unconscious, which may take many more years – if such knowledge production ever translates to the unconscious at all. Although many of our barebacking bodies may run less "real" risks now, the fantasy that scripts our desire to act out in the first place is always anachronistic. In other words, that which drives us to do the things we do tends against catching up to externally enabled new paradigms governing our bodies. Within this logic, then,

even the queerest queering of sexual practices, or the most progressive forms of disidentifications, could never efface the phallus as the original organizer of psychic life.

In Rinaldo Walcott's (2019) theorizing of the *black cumjoy*, we are reminded that black bodies have never really enjoyed the privilege of distancing themselves from animality, being continuously re-placed in the position of (sexual) object bearing death. As such, we may consider that black male bodies are always trapped as bareback non-human figures of lethality and violence: "the Black" might murder you or 'the Black' might fuck you to death" (p. 77). We can see how the advent of new epidemiological paradigms, like intellectualization and reason, can have little effect on matters that have been sedimented long before, such as the structure of a subject's desire and processes of racialization that had already coded, for example, black bodies as inherently lethal. There is thus an important belatedness to pharmacology's luxuries at the level of desire and, in some instances, a downright futility.

For all the hopeful queer theoretical work about the exchange, kinship-making, sociality, and borderlessness at work in barebacking, I have argued elsewhere for the way the practice can be a response to bottom gay men's inability to take for granted the penetrating partner's phallic claims (Semerene, 2019). Barebacking emerges as a creative solution, as symptoms tend to be, to bottom gay men's inability to access heterosexual men, whose relationship to the phallus, and the claims of annihilation and invincibility that follow, goes without saying. Barebacking here works as a strategy to disavow the failure of the non-heterosexual penetrating partner to embody the more seamlessly accepted phallic expectations of straight men. The barebacking fantasy, in this bottom-centric interpretation, works by trapping the penetrating partner who would otherwise not be phallic enough, *black cumjoy*-style, in the paradoxical position of an instrument that bears death and is yet immune to it. The phallus is unflappable: it might hurt and kill, but it surely won't suffer or die.

The penetrating partner can slip into the penetrated position at any moment unless a fantasy pegs him into place: the place of the unwavering phallus. Such a fantasy is largely anchored, materially, in the figure of the creampie, or the ejaculative evidence of the violence enacted by the phallus, the one that cannot be effaced because it has founded us, and because we insist on conjuring it, indeed updating it, so it remains the same (Chun, 2017). In this analysis, barebacking is driven by fantasies of inflexibility, not permeability or fluidness, in the bottom gay subject's attempt to secure the other as phallic enough (despite signs of the contrary), mitigating anxieties around the top's actual desire to be topping at all. The not-straight-enough top, whose phallic position can be undone the moment he materializes or so much as moves (in real life or on video), is stabilized as "straight" inasmuch as he bears deathly violence and performs a nonchalant attitude *vis-à-vis* the death that might be transferred from top to bottom. Only the phallus might be inoculated from the violence of

such a virus. The anti-mask macho grandstanding that has emerged all over social media in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, a viral outburst of phallic porn of sorts, reiterates the fantasy of the phallus as the one that doesn't need protection. It wages violence but is inherently immune to it.

The introduction of PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) in the barebacking equation may upend the aforementioned logic at the level of the epidemiological real, as the bottom might be rendered all but organically immune to the virus, but not necessarily at the level of fantasy – particularly when PrEP usage isn't declared. Thinking that this logic of delay between unconscious desire and conscious knowledge would necessarily change for subjects living with HIV is a misunderstanding of the way fantasy works. Fantasy predates and trumps the conscious understanding of the epidemiological realities of one's body, as well as the subject's political stances. For example, Jacques-Alain Miller (2013) remarks on the “two levels of being” that allow for a “perfectly authentic feminist” to confess, on the couch, to nurturing fantasies of sexual violence (translation mine). Beyond contradictions between conscious politics and unconscious fantasy, a subject may have become bald late in adulthood but continue to appear as someone with a full head of hair in their dreams for many years, or forever. The concept of the phantom limb and some transamorous subjects' desire for trans women's woman-ness irrespective of their penis are useful in illustrating that what matters, for the fantasy, isn't the literal or material conditions of one's body, or the body of the other, but precisely that which the unconscious (fantasy) allows one to veil, deny, or re-signify about those very bodies. This asynchrony demonstrates Lacan's concept of the body as much more of an unstable, if not liquid, assemblage of signifiers than a bound and fleshly organism.

The fact that we continue to associate the penis with the phallus, despite overwhelming evidence that the former cannot keep up with the fantasmatic promises of the latter, further emblemizes my point. There is always some other threat to which HIV-positive subjects can be exposed through bodily transmissions. One is never completely shielded from the deathly repercussions intrinsic to encounters with otherness that are “only” mediated by fantasy. It is crucial, though, to understand the chronological relationship between the scripting of fantasy and its enactment. We are always performing fantasies that long antecede the conditions, somatic or otherwise, of our present bodies. As such, the fantasmatic governing of no-longer-negative bodies doesn't necessarily catch up with their serological conditions.

Barebacking is not just a sexual practice but a discourse, and specifically a digital discourse. When subjects speak or write about barebacking, either by scripting a looming sexual encounter on messaging apps or articulating the specificity of encounters that will never materialize on their profiles, they are barebacking too, I am arguing. As such, it may just be that HIV-positive subjects explore different areas or “levels of being” of barebacking as a fantasy beyond

those that may involve the possibility of being infected with a virus they already have. “Having” the virus in the context of undetectable viral loads too might be closer to a fantasmatic idea than an epidemiological reality. We can see how these engagements with barebacking as a fantasy live in the aestheticization of the virus through the biohazard tattoo or forms of discourse and play associated with being a *pig*: fist-fucking, piss, scat, poppers, and drug use. These practices tell us something about fantasies of a sexual encounter where much more than partial enjoyment, what Lacan calls phallic *jouissance*, is achieved, and a more substantial form of communion between bodies is performed. They point to the very “phagocytizing” of the body of the other, or by the other, that Lacan establishes as the impossible of the sexual relationship. No matter how extreme the practice, a body will never “completely wrap itself around the Other’s body (...). That is why we must confine ourselves simply by giving it a little squeeze, like that, taking a forearm or anything else – ouch!” (Lacan, 1998, p. 23).

Unstable Material

The creampie, that milky vestige that anoints the barebacking scene as an artefact of phallic proportions, overflows the receiving partner’s orifice when all is said and done, or done because unsaid. Predictably, then, the phallus is summoned to caulk *lack* shut and to attribute authorship to the deed. The hole, which the phallus gouges into the “there where there is nothing” as only it can, is filled to the brim with ephemeral liquidness, begging to be refilled *ad infinitum*. In the face of the phallus, the bottom is bottomless.

Lucien Israël uses “there where there is nothing” in reference to what the pervert knows (Israël, 1996, p. 98, translation mine). The pervert, one of the possible psychic structures in psychoanalysis that should be understood outside of the stigmatizing sheen of the pedestrian usage of the term, knows something of the female body that other subjects with different psychic structures do not, Israël claims. Without getting into the merit of associating specific structures with barebacking fantasies, we can think of the female body here as the body deemed female, by virtue of being penetrable at the level of fantasy; that is, the body pricked by the phallus, the body that the phallus needs to prick – again and again – to be phallus. The phallus too, as it turns out, is bottomless, or rather is a defense mechanism against bottomlessness.

A contingency thus emerges between the phallus embodied by violent pricking and putatively passive bottomlessness. Considering how much of the language around barebacking involves the utilization of terms normally associated with the woman’s body, from fantasies of impregnation to references to the male buttohole as a cunt or pussy, it is reasonable to see yet another fold in the fantasy of making the phallus come to life in the (bareback) sex scene, to verify its presence, by placing the penetrated subject in the (vaginal) position of

“there where there is nothing.” From the bottom’s perspective, the fantasy seems scripted along the lines of: *If I am a hole, and the creampie attests to my hole-ness, the phallus must have been here, for now I am temporarily filled* – even when, or precisely when, such a fantasy is rendered palatable by the conscious attempt of making the sex scene legible as the epitome of masculine endurance (p. 98). What better way to guarantee the need for the phallus to be called again and again to manage the hole but to turn it into a leak, filling it up with evanescent material? That is precisely the privilege of the phallus, which, though we can summon it as much as we like, “will always say nothing,” setting up its demand to be hailed endlessly (Lacan, 1971, p. 12). The “saved phrases” function of apps like Grindr embodies the repetitive nature of that interpellation.

The short-lived creampie evinces a liquid communication, or “communion,” in a digital world defined by antagonism and categorization, but it also rigs the barebacking scene with the impossibility of finality, that most terrifying prospect for the cruising subject. Shot at the peak of the AIDS epidemic as a buoyant alternative to an exclusionary fantasy of “unity” that flattens out one another’s differences (Riggs, 1994), Marlon Riggs’s film *Black Is...Black Ain’t* (1994) also presents the theme of communion, a concept Elliot Evans (2019) proposes in understanding fantasies of borderlessness and fluid exchange (blood, sweat, sperm) in the work of Monique Wittig and Patrick Califia. Evans notes the religious signification of the term in “summoning the presence of an entire body (the body of Christ)” and “incorporating that body into one’s own through drinking his blood and eating his body” (p. 106), further recognizing, for instance, the ways the liquid fantasies or permeability that percolate Wittig’s texts are often aimed at reciprocity, and even at the merging of two bodies into one. My argument is predicated on Bachelard’s (1994) theory of kinship between all liquids in their queer potentiality and materiality, much like Wittig’s linking of blood that “spurts from the seven openings” with rain and the inundated “I” that splatters “from top to toe” (Evans, 2019, pp. 102–3, emphasis in original).

We can contrast the malleable unpredictability of communion performed by liquidness to the rigidity of “affiliation” as performed by certain modes of digitality, which Jordan Crandall (2011) describes as a normativizing technology that structures movement across a specific path, helping perpetuate a particular kind of social negotiation and making sure that “[t]hings fall into place.” There is nothing liquid about affiliation in this definition, for which Crandall offers UAS (Unmanned Aircraft Systems), or drones, as an example: a regularity-sculpting system of “sensors, computers, communicators, actuators, controls, and platforms” that form “a process of bonding, synchronization, calibration, and agreement” through which “data is streamed, formatted, tagged, and rendered searchable across networks of datasets.”

We may go further, then, and associate language to the domain of communion and code to the domain of affiliation, as theorized by Crandall, recalling that Lacan famously claimed the unconscious to be structured like a language, not like code. Language *slides*; it is not stable (Wine, 2019). Although I am also interested in the extrapolation of barebacking onto multiple registers through liquid kinship, my reading is much less utopian than that of Evans. It is, instead, closer to Evans's brief but significant acknowledgement, in the same text, of barebacking as an act of liquid verification where one reassures oneself of the other's presence and what that presence makes of one. I understand this "other" to be the phallus, or its ephemeral representative, and the barebacking scene as an elaborate interpellation of phallic presence. The phallus is, like drones, inherently precarious and perpetually haunted by failure, crashing, limping. If the (barebacking) scene repeats itself with such persistence, particularly through digital mediation, it is because we unconsciously know the impossibility of phallic presence as something other than an ill-protected cover-up. The penis, which is "the phallus as people imagine it," "knows no limit, offering one of the rare 'experiences' of infinity" (one plus one plus one plus one...), a quality it shares with the ocean (Lacan, 1971, p. 100). By this Lacan wants to stress the fantasmatic aspects around the phallic signifier, produced in the name of an invincibility or inextinguishability that no signified could ever sustain. The fictitious boundlessness of the phallus is destined to flounder if ever the penis is asked to enact it, at which point the barebacking subject knows to log on and bring in another phallic representative.

Fethi Benslama (2016) explains that *jouissance*, or enjoyment, is so excessive, so oceanic, it can "drive someone to go beyond simple pleasure in the direction of suffering, and even self-destruction" (p. 39, translation mine). The phallus sells its invincibility while rendering us defenseless and invested in its destructiveness. Resistance is futile; we are always caught up in its ecosystem, thirsty for its waters, no matter how poisonous. *Jouissance* is never comfortable, it turns out. Once it begins, we never know when it will end. While we may associate the narrative paradigms of traditional porn with an erection–penetration–ejaculation circuit culminating in the money shot, digital culture is driven by an erection–erection–erection circuit. As excitation in digital culture becomes perpetually priapic – the ideal user is the user who is never not excited – it further becomes obvious that the penis can't keep up with its phallic expectations. So many lovers nursing a floppy dick after making the most phallic of promises; so many lovers dead on arrival, us wishing their next iteration could begin before the current one has had a chance to disappoint us any further. So many lovers logging on to hook-up apps immediately after, or even before, bidding us goodbye.

At CumUnion, an international barebacking party that takes place in several cities in North America and the United Kingdom, there seems to be a lot of fucking but hardly anyone cums. The naming of the event is thus contingent on

a phallic promise that, like all phallic promises, cannot be kept. The Twitter advertisements for the Brooklyn-based “Sperm Bank” party by PIGHAUS feature a drawing of a metonymic bubble butt swimming in an ocean of sperm and spitting out an unending cascade of creampiees through its hole. But surely not even the longest procession of tops, referred to as “DONORS” in the ad, could quench such phallic thirst from the bottoms or “DEPOSITORIES.” In “Streams of Pleasure,” a weekly “water sports” party in central London, there is not that much cum either. Urine at “Streams of Pleasure” seems to work in practice the way the creampie works in fantasy. Piss is here a less finite, more phallic surrogate for sperm, the way a fist or a dildo might be. The small inflatable swimming pool placed in the middle of the dingy underground club offers a more realistic invitation to swim in liquid. A nearby bar area with cheap beer makes the phallic promise of an unending stream more reasonable or verifiable. Cumming appears as the last release, an extreme unction, the buzz-killing declaration that repetition is over. Urine spares us from such a killjoy.

The creampie is emblematic of the significance of queer liquidness, or liquid queerness, in digital times. I use it as a gateway to evoke a broad queer kinship amongst liquids. The creampie is ultimately the fantasy of a lack actually filled, which digital culture insists on deferring. Perhaps this is a mechanism of defense against the horrific reality, brought forth with such anxiety-triggering doggedness by the digital, that not only does the phallus (invincibly masculine, tireless, and inextinguishable) not exist (being “fragile and fallible”), neither does the sexual relationship (Longstaff, 2019, p. 165).

Fluvial Roots

As we have seen, one doesn’t really have sex with the other. One has sex through the other but with the self. Yet there is something about fluids – whether sperm, urine, or spit – that seems to function as a visual and material proof of this relationship that ultimately does not exist and is coded as never really taking place. We say, for instance, that desire is oceanic, not only because of its excess, but because of “its indefinite contours” (Ricco, 2015, p. 7). Desire is uncontainable, always potentially changing form and temperature. The ocean, like the desiring body, is bound to betray. It is fluid, unreliable, temperamental. It can take us to beautiful places, new worlds, as well as drown us, rip us from family and continent for centuries, or eternally.

Water leaks from the most inconvenient places. Like the Freudian unconscious, we may see its surface but not its depth. “The opposite of a wall is a beach,” says Agnès Varda in *Varda by Agnès* (2019). Water also has a way of travelling through spaces that may not seem permeable. Indeed, it can expose the ineptness of categories and spatial divisions, of space more generally, making a mockery of the concept of boundaries. Christos Tombras (2019)

describes the work of the analyst in the clinical scene in liquid terms. She should let meaning emerge instead of ascribing it, allowing things to “make liquid again” so they can re-solidify in a different way. When considering the ways contemporary queer films have incorporated water as a symptom of the times, we could say a *thalassocinema* emerges in response to digital sorting and estrangement, or a kind of queer mourning arising after a hopeful period where digitality seemed to forge possible routes for queer impossibilities.

For Bachelard, matter, specifically water, outdoes form. He locates the root, at once fantasmatic and material, of this most fundamental liquid in the baby’s relationship with the mother, and with the mother’s milk, “the fabric of the real” (Jazani, 2020). Through Bachelard we can say that all liquids go back to the mother’s milk, and perhaps to the amniotic fluid of the womb, which is also referred to as a pregnant woman’s water or waters, and has as one of its functions the transmission of nutrients from mother to fetus. In Bachelard’s thinking, our earliest experiences with liquidness architect any other future ones. All fluids are part of the same family, or community. This is a logic that might emerge in the clinical scene of analysis when visual, aural, material, and sensual associations become clear through, for example, dream accounts where the manifest content might be rain but the latent content might be semen.

The logic of material kinship dramatizes Bachelard’s push for a psychoanalytic understanding of matter that always returns to the subject’s earliest experiences. A queer boy’s first sight of the nude body of other boys, or men, is often occasioned by water – in locker rooms, showers, the preparation and aftermath of swimming lessons. In G. Winston James’ (2009) short story “Uncle,” it is the swimming pool that brings the 6-year-old queer boy’s body together with the body of the big and refreshingly hairy uncle, that uncanniest of paternal surrogates. All relationships are transferential in parental as well as liquid terms. Here the water makes queer, and even incestuous, touch excusable ... or possible. In an argument that recalls *Moonlight*’s iconic scene of oceanic baptism when not an uncle but another paternal surrogate holds the boy, Little, and keeps him from drowning in the ocean, Giorgio Agamben (2010) argues that in the tradition of the Christian community of the first two centuries, the only occasion in which one could be nude without shame was in the baptismal ritual. Such a ritual entailed the immersion in water of the baby’s naked body in the presence of members of the community. Agamben claims that “it is to this ritualistic nudity of the baptized that we owe the relative and otherwise unexplainable tolerance in our culture toward beach nudity” (pp. 71–2).

Films such as Pedro Rodrigues’ *O Fantasma* (2000), Cam Archer’s *Wild Tigers I Have Known* (2006), Stephen Cone’s *Henry Gamble’s Birthday Party* (2015), and Tom Fassaert’s *A Family Affair* (2015) explore swimming sites as aphrodisiac spaces, that is, spaces for sliding, slipping, or slithering into desire, despite everything. In these films, swimming areas form “perfect storm” type scenes where objects of desire are not only exposed but floating, as in a dream.

New architectures and itineraries are possible through liquidness. The hazy softness of water seems to suspend the wounding sharpness that queer objects of desire gain in normative (eco)systems.

In *O Fantasma*, a film about a straight-identified garbage collector by day and avid sex cruiser by night, the locker room shower by the horny heterotopia of the swimming pool incites the most bestial of drives. The shower hose itself becomes a sexual partner – perhaps the most ideal, or realistic, of partners: a perfectly long and malleable masturbatory prop. In *Wild Tigers I Have Known*, the pool at once reveals and relieves the bullied High School boy's alienation: his alone-ness is excused if he is swimming. In *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party*, in which a conservative all-American pool party reveals itself to be anything but, the swimming pool is a magnetic field rendering bodies close, too close, causing secrets and secret yearnings, for alcoholic beverages and semen alike, to leak.

In Fassaert's self-ethnographic documentary *A Family Affair*, it is a cruise ship, headed from the South African coast to Europe, that sparks the sexual longing of a 95-year-old woman toward her own grandson to slip out. The ocean cruise that grandmother and grandson are taking is like a swan song, as it is billed as the grandmother's last trip to see her estranged family: a trip that precipitates her demise as well as the articulation of incestuous longing. The ocean pulls from the repressed bottom and shits the repressed material out onto the surface. The swan song, for Bachelard, is a "song of sexual death" and "of exalted desire" (p. 36): "[...] there is only one desire that sings while dying or dies while singing, and this is sexual desire. The swan song is, then, sexual desire at its culminating point" (p. 37). According to Bachelard, there is a material imagination that governs water, or the unconscious history of water. In referring to these liquid films, and wherever their waters may take us as thalassocinema, I am borrowing O'Rourke's term, *thalassopolitics*, a concept derived from biopolitics and necropolitics that relates to the way the ocean becomes borderless maritime hunting grounds for bodies that don't matter, for bodies that are marked to die, bodies stuck in movement in a space of liquid crisis. In this context, Rosi Braidotti (2017) has recently referred to the ocean as, amongst other things, "a liquid grave."

Thalassopolitics utilizes sea water as a metaphor for analyzing what has been called the age of the world target, when wars aren't fought in specific territories and instead the entire globe becomes a war zone – not just with the omnipresence of drones in certain areas but through a necro-politicization of water itself. Thalassopolitics thus aims "to bring the sea to bear witness to how it has been made to kill" (O'Rourke, 2016). The sea ends up determining who counts and who doesn't. We have estimates of bodies but we can't count them, and, in fact, they don't count anyway, O'Rourke notes. While we associate the sea with freedom, the world's oceans are increasingly surveilled, mapped, policed, and deadly. We can align the ocean with digitality, then, itself a liquid

technology of and for surveillance. As Wendy Chun argues, the Internet is first and foremost a technology built on leaking. Chun (2017) demystifies the idea of the Internet as a network that could ever be billed as safe, private or free (of prejudices and of races, as it was once packaged), claiming it has become “a series of poorly gated, trackable communities” (p. 94). If the Internet itself is noisy, why do we keep acting astonished when we hear its noise? she asks. Why are we surprised to see things leak from a network built for leaking?

The concept of thalassopolitics allows us to think about liquidness in a way that places such substances beyond the geo-political space of the ocean and into the erotics of human relationships, or desire. If certain liquids make visible human populations deemed sub-human or “all-too-human,” as O’Rourke puts it, we may wonder how liquid metaphors can help us understand notions of sexual scarcity, excess, mobility, danger, risk, otherness, destruction, and repetitiveness. Kai Stănicke’s short film *Cold Star* (2011) illustrates the core oceanic quality of desire. In the film, a public swimming pool invites even the most normative (-acting/-looking) folks to jump into queerness once a cross-dresser dares to enter the space in her girly attire and jump off the trampoline into its blue waters. A certain biological determinism – certain subjects go with certain objects – gets dissolved in the water that calls the bodies into queerness, the queerness of desire itself, instead of pushing them outside of some (closet) space and into a just as stuffy normative world.

O’Rourke (2016) evokes the ocean as a counter-site for dominant modes of spatialization. He describes the necro-politicization of maritime water where a perverse asymmetry is enacted, leaving no safe spaces. The sea erases traces – if not from existence, then from the field of vision. The sea cuts both ways: it conceals but preserves. It preserves by removing from the surface. Connecting this logic to the unconscious – itself, however, a non-place – is inevitable for our analysis. Might this be one of the reasons behind humankind’s visceral fear of and fascination with the sea, whether such hydrous terror be avowed, in literature or cinema, or masked by the desire to conquer it?

Poison and/as Serum

For Bachelard (1994), water issues a call that “summons like a fatherland” (p. 164). It demands a kind of offering, as though water needs an inhabitant. To be beside water is to want to be in water. He claims the leap into the sea to be “the only image that can be experienced as a *leap into the unknown*” – apart from analysis, surely (p. 165, emphasis in original). Bachelard’s leap into the unknown is a potentially tragic leap into water and kinship operation: it will be deep and potentially pleasurable, but will one survive?

Some downed planes are never found in water, nor are the bodies of the politically disappeared retrieved from it, as Patricio Guzmán shows us in *The*

Pearl Button (2015). Even if bodies aren't tied to metal bars and thrown from the Chilean sky down to the oceanic bottom, as in Guzmán's account, sea water can enable or thwart mobility. Freud famously names early infancy's sensation of a bond without borders with the external world an oceanic feeling – as if baby, mother, and objects were part of the same organism. This is a feeling that is also at the heart of the work of the Moroccan writer Abdellah Taïa. In his novel *Celui Qui Est Digne d'Être Aimé* (2017), loosely translatable as "The One Who is Worthy of Love," Taïa's literary double attempts to mourn the loss of his mother and utilizes the swimming pool as a refuge, or post-mortem partial object. If the mourning of the mother isn't (yet) possible, a re-encounter with her can perhaps be staged through water.

The primordial multivalence of water – it is milk, it is semen, it is poison, it is serum – can be quite tantalizing. Franck, the death-driven cruising nudist from *Stranger by the Lake*, should know, as the witnessing of Michel, his elusive love/lust interest, drowning another man only makes Michel more desirable. At the core of this film, set in a gay cruising utopia/dystopia in some unspecified time somewhere in France, is the irrational pull toward the lake, toward the death that water promises or teases, toward the ambiguous excess of water – that "marvelous narcotic," the only fundamental element that can rock you (Bachelard, 1994, p. 130). That is one more feature of water's feminine make-up, which for Bachelard "rocks like a mother" (p. 130). It is simultaneously the rocking element and the drowning element. Water carries us. Water rocks us. Water puts us to sleep. We want to swim and we want to sink, and that's why we dream. In dreams we can do all of that and much more, and nothing is ever final. That's why we waken, Bachelard notes.

In Taïa's self-fiction, he recounts going to the swimming pool of the rue de Pontoise twice a day, precisely at the times when it is almost empty. He dives into and cries in the water. He moves through the pool as though he is with, or rather inside, the mother. *I am not a man nor a woman*, he tells us; *I am you, momm* (Taïa, 2017, p. 19, translation mine). Water here is a time-travelling and shape-shifting device, a leaping into the aquatic unknown as if for the first time, where kinship doesn't need to be (re-)staged but lamented. This might actually be a leap not into the unknown but the most familiar of all waters, a backflip of a leap, a reverse-*pentimento* – what queer theorist Heather Love (2009) would call a "feeling backward" into the most amniotic of substances (p. 4). Taïa (2017) swims in a direct address to the mother:

I am (almost) naked in the blue water. I see red sometimes. Your blood that drips, that doesn't stop dripping. A small underground river, at the very bottom of the pool. I get close to it. I want this river to traverse me, passing through my skin, my bones, my cells. But the river evaporates the moment I touch it. Your pool of blood disappears inside the pool of water. [...] I cry in the water. I stop breathing. It's the great desperation. I am

abandoned. I am abandoned once again. [...] Mother, you are gone. (p. 28, translation mine)

Taïa's aquatic ceremony goes against Bachelard's (1994) claim that the swimming pool, unlike the ocean, doesn't lend itself to ideal solitude (p. 168). In fact, Taïa's ritual of aquatic mourning triggers very specific memories of the mother. He describes swimming twice a day "in the very bottom of the world, in the very bottom of the water, to raise my head, to see the floating bodies of oblivious others. [...] I scream. I begin again. Again and again. Without any fulfillment" (n.p., translation mine).

Bodies also float in the most oneiric sequences of Petra Costa's film *Elena* (2012), the filmmaker's essayistic attempt to mourn her deceased sister. But mourning, like governing the sea, can only take hold in the most fantasmatic of conditions. Both depend on a commitment to the dream, from which we are bound to awake. Bachelard's (1994) work is full of claims about the essential relationship between water and dreams, a child's first dream material being organic substances: "The child is a born materialist," in that sense (p. 9). To dream is to be submerged in water, and in the precariousness of sleep. In Costa's film, she addresses the lost sisterly object directly, telling her "I dreamt of you last night. But in a moment, you become water, breaking into droplets, you disappear."

An Ejaculative Kind of Kinship

Following Bachelard's logic of material imagination, we could say that an essential kinship links sea water to spring water, the ocean to the swimming pool, lakes to puddles, rivers to tears, ice cubes to icebergs, swallowing to gargling, spittle to raindrops, saliva to semen, and fresh water to milk. These humid relationships animate themselves rather clearly in instances of erotic pleasure. Taïa's (2014) short story "La Pluie" ["The Rain"] revolves around two boys named Abdellah, aged 15 and 13, trying to survive the scorching heat of the Moroccan sun in their walks to and from school. One day, Abdellah and Abdellah are lying in bed when big Abdellah places his hand on small Abdellah's sex; "as he would on a crying baby, he caressed it in order to calm it and make it go to sleep. [...] Then, Abdellah proposed: 'You give me your milk, and I give you mine'" (n.p., translation mine). The Abdellah who narrates the story describes the spectacle that arises: "A volcano of milk, milk that overflows, milk that exploded, flooding the entire world through me." The miraculous bursting out of milk from the penis into the mouth coincides with the end of the Moroccan drought, as though the orgasmic discharge of the boys' milky lava coordinated itself with the liquid production of their nation. Through this liquid, an ejaculative kind of kinship is (re-)staged, as though the

boys' desire could trigger the deluging of the nation. "A flood," Abdellah tells us, "an abundance." And before the bigger Abdellah ejaculates, small Abdellah encourages him by saying, "Go ahead, I want to drink it this time. I want to swim in it."

John Paul Ricco thinks of drool, particularly the drooling of the subject who's asleep, as a bodily fluid that exceeds, or full-fills, the mouth, spilling over the lips and leaving a trace on the pillow or a lover's body. Citing Jean-Luc Nancy, Ricco (2015) argues that drool "takes place further upstream" prior to the opening of orality or speech. Drool then, as "prior to the self" (p. 4), is a pre-verbal liquidness that "belongs to the zone of buccality rather than the realm of orality" and "flows toward nothing except consenting to the overflowing sense of bodies" (p. 2). Drool isn't saliva or spit. It is more than saliva, since it brings itself outside of the body, and less than spit, as it leaks out of the mouth unconsciously, with none of the intentional violence of spit. Drool is anathema to the hyper-habitual calculations of digital claims about the body and the self. Drool is counter-conscious. Drool is counter-digital. The liquidness of drooling reveals the subject's lack of mastery of the body, there where code cannot code.

Drool also stands in for the impossible statement of plunging from consciousness, sinking into unconsciousness: "I am asleep" (p. 5). It enables the tracing of the self "in its retreat from subjectivity" and cognition (p. 6), especially in the type of sleep when dreams are not at work, at which point drool is the psychosomatic evidence of the absence of the subject (p. 11). Could drool, then, be the material illustration of a subject that exists between, or beside, speech and meaning, mattering and muttering, what Gareth Longstaff (2019) might call "spluttering"? That is, drool as *jouissance*'s smoking gun.

Drawing on Sarah Kofman, Ricco (2015) links the mouth to the anus similarly to how Bachelard relates swimming in the ocean to being breastfed: "not simply in an analogical manner [...]. If, for instance, on a given day I was constipated, I would not be able to 'talk' on the couch either [...] 'it' would not produce anything [...] nothing would pass" (p. 4). The reverse can also be true, with the anus becoming mouth through fantasies of barebacking, for example, as the anus longs for the milky viscosity of sperm, spit, or urine: the so-called 'water sports'. Something to feed, to fill, only to be shat out in the form of the creampie as the anus, like the vagina and the mouth, can suck and swallow but also vomit. Indeed, it can swallow in order to vomit. It can take in to spit out, and even drool in the middle of the night.

According to Ricco, drool is also a form of pre-cum of a murmuring or groaning of the mouth. Becoming mouth, that "moist and warm grotto" for Michel Leiris (p. 7), the anus drools, leaking with fulfillment, lubrication, or infection. Discharge from the tip of the penis and the anus can be a symptom of disease: a material testament that something has been exchanged, communicated – that if the sexual relationship doesn't exist, some other kind of relationship does and has taken place. Perhaps a non-consensual one, as drool

“can be thought of as a non-consensual substance” akin to the discharge caused by communicable disease (pp. 7–8).

A heterosexual man’s anus is hardly thought of as evidence of the human subject’s condition of availability, penetrability, and open-ness to his environment. Since the figure, or fantasy, of the heterosexual male ass may serve as evidence of a universal hole (the anus as such has no gender, no race, no trans or cis status), it is generally disavowed through laughter and absence from the field of vision. But the anus and its vicinity are actually signposts for this universal condition, that is, of the human body as an open wound, transcending the forms of classification, organization, and border control that make digitality possible.

Simone Browne’s (2015) concept of “body data,” which she describes as “probabilistic” in the context of biometrics, makes evident the castrating orthopaedics waged by the digital (p. 116). Identities are imagined, produced, and re-produced by digital technology through biased (as in racist and cis-centric) processes of approximation and probability. Within this structure, once normative standards are established, abnormal movements can be detected, and flagged as anomalous events. This dynamic shares an uncanny kinship with signature strikes: the type of drone attacks that target individuals whose identities are not known but whose behaviour seems to fall into suspect categories or resemble the types of behaviours associated with insurgents.

Control of the anus may mark a point of subjectivation in the constitution of the subject, which the cultural disavowal of the heterosexual male ass aims to shut, like the patching up of a leak. Not a digital leak, but a real leak. Or a leak in the real. This is so even if, in many kinds of heterosexual pornography, men’s asses often overtake the frame while they caulk the very small anatomic evidence that props up naturalized fictions of a female lack – the vagina – as if emptying their own anal-existential anxieties by filling woman up to the brim, drowning her out of the picture, creampieing her to death. In this scene, too, the identity of the target barely matters, or barely counts; she slides into place interchangeably. The creampie takes care of that, sorting there where there is nothing from there where there is something. Herein lies the power of the creampie in resolving – for now – the anxiety of bearing a penetrable body. A body that leaks because it isn’t whole. The creampie masks that pesty universality, and provisionally fills it, exposing the smallness of sexual difference as a question of unsteady approximations, as a matter of liquid and thirst.

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