

# Queer Replication: Viral Gifts in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Adam J. Greteman

*School of the Art Institute of Chicago*

## THE VIRAL

“Viral infectious diseases,” Catherine Waldby argued, “represent not only a practical but also an ontological threat.”<sup>1</sup> In seeking to make sense of humanity in a posthumanist age, I look toward the work of a virus and its replication, particularly the human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV, in thinking through education in the twenty-first century. The viral saturates everyday thinking and action. From photos or videos going viral on the web, to concerns about one’s computer catching a virus, virality has come to define what we might call this “posthumanist” age of networked realities. As Tony Sampson argued, we live in an age of networks, where fears of contagion continue to saturate our political and everyday lives.<sup>2</sup> A virus is, of course, not a living thing. Its existence is dependent on a living host, not necessarily human, that allows for its survival and replication. It infects the host and replicates, unchecked, if allowed, forcing “we-the-living” to attend to the impact and presence of the “virus” in our lives — be that our computer or our bodies, collective and individual. “HIV infection” in particular, Waldby continued, “involves a permanent and indissoluble form of lethal hybridity, where virus and host cannot be functionally separated.”<sup>3</sup> If the human and the viral are inseparable, how does the viral gift reframe becoming human within our post-humanist time?

To explore this question, I attend to discourses around barebacking to illustrate virality’s connection to queer subjectivity. How does the transmission and replication of HIV via barebacking as a mode and model of intimacy disrupt education’s normative logics of health and reproduction? Such an engagement with the viral, barebacking, and queerness may ring odd in an educational philosophy forum. Historically, education has had a conservative purpose that conserves a culture by reproducing that culture through the so-

cialization of youth. It has tended toward things that are acceptable to the masses, and relegated other things to the margins. The philosophy of education is at these margins — slowly being pushed out of the way for more methods and best-practices in teacher preparation. After all, “thinking that does not produce an immediately identifiable and quantifiable product is wasteful in a context that is structured to only understand bottom lines.”<sup>74</sup> Yet, the philosophy of education, as Cris Mayo suggests, might prove successful in maintaining its unproductive excess. For Mayo, this excess is tied to queerness and “excess in the midst of normal time is meant to be a disruptive spectacle that in turn shows the problems in time and practice as usual, literally how much time is spent avoiding thinking about the pressures of time.”<sup>75</sup> Barebacking disrupts normative time, presenting a queer time of becoming human.

Early arguments for caring, protecting, and advocating for “Persons Living with AIDS” were rooted in humanist discourses that sought to separate the virus from the person. The “person” came first; the virus came last. The task was to care for the person, with energies put towards eliminating the virus and stopping (or reducing) its spread. Yet, the realities showed such separation was impossible, as the virus and person became intimately integrated. As Waldby describes: “Integration occurs at the genetic level, where ... the virus’s genetic ‘identity’ replaces the human genetic ‘identity’ of the cells it infects, utilizing the previously human cells to further its own replicative interests.”<sup>76</sup> The human and non-human intertwine in the infectious interactions, creating something, someone, monstrous where: “By virtue of this infection or association they [Persons with AIDS] have passed irrevocably over onto the side of the inhuman, the side of the virus, the side of death, and have thus become the enemies of the medical campaign to contain viral spread.”<sup>77</sup> The presence of the virus presented new challenges to queer survival and new possibilities for cultivating queer subjectivities in the midst of such challenges.

In the early days of the AIDS pandemic this was made visible in the violence hurled at infected bodies, and the education campaigns that sought to create particular populations. The “human” and “virus” became inseparable with hysteria, violence, and inaction ruling the day. Medical practitioners,

family members, and more were unable to touch the infected body for fear of viral spread, and unable to be touched by the growing devastation, until it was much too late. While the virus was not contagious, the homophobia and anxiety seemingly were. The AIDS body became the *cause célèbre* of public health campaigns and sex education, but only in order to cure the body and eliminate the monstrous virus, separating it from human identity. Safe(r) sex, at its root, sought to minimize the spread of the virus, but simultaneously invented normative logics around bodies, sexualities, and education. Education sought to reproduce healthy bodies that avoided risk.

These were educational projects or public health campaigns that addressed the practical threats of infection relying on particular models of health. Knowledge about HIV/AIDS, its transmission, and how to use external prophylaxis (e.g., condoms, dental dams) became the primary project of establishing new sexual subjects. And for particular subjects these lessons from public health were, as Eric Rofes argued, “dependent on creating a community mindset of crisis, or relying on terror, panic, shame and guilt as primary tools to shift community norms and later social and cultural practices.”<sup>8</sup> Imagining other models not based on such approaches, he argued was quite difficult; imagining other models is still quite difficult. These or any new educational and health approaches implicitly addressed and created new conditions for addressing the ontological threats that HIV/AIDS presented. HIV/AIDS was a threat to human existence or, for those on the far right, punishment for queer lifestyles. Having survived the threat, however, how do we attend to the possibilities of HIV/AIDS, its perverse ontologies, and the continued challenges of “education” in an age that still must address HIV/AIDS as it impacts bodies – both physical bodies and the growing bodies of knowledge? Further, how do we engage bodies that are after, in search of, the virus as seen in the sexual subculture of barebacking?

## AIDS IN EDUCATION

Early queer work in education took up, in particular ways, some of

these less practical threats and the ways in which they were shifting or altering education's foundations in developing subjects. For Deborah Britzman, the emergence of HIV/AIDS as a matter for education opened up the challenges a virus brought to the "coherence of knowledge and its subjects."<sup>9</sup> Her project on "the psychical consequences" centered on the failure of knowledge, in an "attempt to do less harm in social, ontological, and an epistemological breakdown."<sup>10</sup> Her work went on to attend to the pedagogical challenges of readying the ego's ability to address such breakdown. HIV/AIDS infected the ego, and the ego would have new work to do in the midst of such infection and the emerging discourses around it. These varied discourses, however, have changed over the decades since Britzman's engagement on the psychical consequences of HIV/AIDS education. Yet the tasks for pedagogy remain. HIV/AIDS may no longer capture the attention of the public as much as it once did, due to advancements in pharmaceuticals and a straightening out of the radical histories of AIDS activists, but its risks and possibilities persist. And its risks change with various advancements, as bodies come to encounter HIV/AIDS differently.

Eric Rofes detailed specific moments of AIDS – from "The Dawn of the Epidemic" (1980-1984) to "The Rock Hudson Moment" (1985-1987) to "The Crisis Moment" (1988-1993), "The Protease Moment" (1994-1997), and "The Post-AIDS Moment" (1998-2003)<sup>11</sup> – in order to illustrate the emerging histories of HIV/AIDS and the impacts on, in particular, gay male sexuality and subjectivity. Gay men, as shown by the work of Douglas Crimp, were at the forefront of establishing safe(x) sex practices, both to maintain their diverse sexual subcultures and because no one else was attending to these needs — aside from hysterical moves to close down bathhouses and shame any variety of sexual practices rightly (and wrongly) tied to gay male sexuality.<sup>12</sup> Yet, AIDS is not only a gay story. It is, as Sarah Schulman argued, an American story that illustrated both the traumatic neglect of despised populations and the resilience, care, and activism to act up and fight back.<sup>13</sup> AIDS is still, unfortunately, not part of the American story as told in the curriculum of American schools, by and large. It is, despite its impact on the physical landscape of

cities, the arts, politics, and more, a story largely seen through the prism of progress — that people eventually came around to care.

As we near the fifth decade of living with HIV/AIDS, persistent concerns remain about this virus and the emerging technologies used to address HIV/AIDS and sort bodies. This remains something that education — in schools and on the streets through ad campaigns — continues to grapple with. For Britzman, and I quote her at length:

We know in the field of education, not everyone notices right away. And if one attempted to write the history of AIDS in educational discourse, by which I mean if one could study the contemporary responses to the pandemic known as AIDS in that place where the masses of people in North America are legally mandated to go, namely compulsory education, one would have to begin by writing stories of the woeful disregard toward the events known as AIDS and notice how even such tiny and intimate objects like condoms and safer sex pamphlets can contribute to a school district's hysteria, to the cruelty of social policy, to the passion for prohibitions.<sup>14</sup>

These histories have slowly been written as hysteria around condoms and the cruelty of social policy, and, over time, passion for prohibitions have altered or yielded to a particular form of tolerance. Yet, things may not be as good as we might want to imagine.

The continued presence of queer work in education, of course, attests to the reality that there have been net gains around sexuality being brought into the hetero-and-homo-normative fold. However, as Schulman argued:

The trauma of AIDS — a trauma that has yet to be defined or understood, for which no one has been made accountable — has produced a gentrification of the mind for gay people. We have been streamlining into a highly gendered, privatized family/marriage structure en masse.<sup>15</sup>

The AIDS of yesterday has “been slightly banalized, homogenized.”<sup>16</sup> The narrative has been written that things have gotten better as the American people have come around, because “we *come around* when it’s the right thing to do.”<sup>17</sup> Yet, there has not been any national mourning for the victims of the AIDS crisis, with those in the government and elsewhere never held accountable for the massive death of queer populations. This, of course, is disconcerting as it covers over the complex realities that “no one with power in America ‘comes around.’ They always have been forced into positive change.”<sup>18</sup>

As education has come to recognize queer students — within “reason” — it still must grapple with the complexity that sexuality brings to the table. This includes emerging forms of “prophylaxis” and their ontological implications, specifically after the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) 2012 approval of Truvada – a daily antiretroviral medication – for use by HIV-negative individuals as a Pre-exposure Prophylaxis. How does such a recent pharmacological advance ask education to update its understandings of becoming human, while also grappling with a sexual subculture such as barebacking, which has pushed against prevention messages to illustrate the gift of HIV/AIDS?

### A GIFT OF QUEERNESS

“What is given in teaching, in the initiation into a culture, is a gift that cannot be refused.” So argued Blake, Smeyers, Smith, and Standish.<sup>19</sup> One cannot refuse the gift despite the possibility the gift might not be welcome. In education, there may be ideas that teachers “give” lessons and that such lessons are gifts, but there remain the political and ethical challenges that emerge around what lessons can be given and how those lessons impact student becoming. The gift, while it cannot be refused, must still be created before being given. When we look at the history of debates about curriculum, there are all sorts of disagreements about what can and cannot be given to students. And these debates are implicated in any variety of normative discourses, from ideas about “developmentally appropriate” curricula, to the perennial vacillation be-

tween “traditional” and “progressive” curricula. Should we give a “common” gift to all, or a gift that prepares students to encounter the everyday, or a gift of job preparedness? Within these debates, however, the lessons that are to be given exist within particular reproductive logics: whether we reproduce “academic knowledge,” or “progressive students,” or students who grow up in particular ways. And when sexuality enters the conversation, concerns about reproduction are often foregrounded despite decades of resistance to a narrow understanding of human sexuality. Sex outside of particular normal parameters continues to be, as Zimmerman’s history of sex education illustrated, “too hot to handle.”<sup>20</sup>

Education refutes and refuses the perverse, despite the gifts it brings. Perverts and perversion are viewed as threatening the projects of education and its imagined straight reproductive future. This makes sense given education’s history of developing citizens and socializing youth within particular, what we can now call, “heteronormative” and “homonormative” ideas and ideals.<sup>21</sup> The gift within particular logics reproduces particular types of relationships and sociality. This has evolved to include more types of relationship, as we have seen changes in the recognition of GLBTQ students who can no longer be bullied without repercussions, at least according to anti-discrimination policies and anti-bullying work.<sup>22</sup> In the ever-changing history of sexuality in education, forms of sexuality formerly deemed perverse have become normalized as individual identities. Yet, sexuality continues to perturb, disturb, and provoke all kinds of responses, both when brought into curricular discussions and as cultural reality, as sexuality is never simply about identity.

Within sexuality and relationship education there is a call to attend to homosexuality as a reality, and this reality requires teaching about sex and its complexities. There is also a persistent resistance to attending to the presence (or even the existence) of homosexual students, although this has *seemingly* declined. These debates — debates that have been on-going for at least a century in different ways — focus on sex acts. Foucault, in his interview “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act,” drew an important distinction between sex acts and the gay lifestyle, noting: “I think what most bothers those who are not gay about

gayness is the gay lifestyle, not sex acts themselves.”<sup>23</sup> For Foucault, it is “the common fear that gays will develop relationships that are intense and satisfying even though they do not at all conform to the ideas of relationship held by others. It is the prospect that gays will create as yet unforeseen kinds of relationships that many people cannot tolerate.”<sup>24</sup> Barebackers have, over the last decade or more, established kinds of relationships around eroticizing HIV that are intolerable not only to medical professionals but also to other queers and to the work of education. “When it comes to bareback sex,” Tim Dean argued, “most people prefer to hear about gay men who are dying rather than living their lives.”<sup>25</sup> Sexuality can be controlled and normalized — educated about under certain parameters of health — while alternative sexualities and the ways they disrupt such norms are. Further, such relationships and their related practices are mediated by the presence of a virus. It is not only the presence of the other human that is necessary — be it an opposite sex or same sex partner — but the presence of an unseen virus conceptualized queerly as a gift.

To be sure, barebackers are not ushering in some liberatory moment for queer sexuality. Returning to Foucault, we do well to remember:

We must not expect the discourses on sex to tell us, above all, what strategy they derive from, or what moral divisions they accompany, or what ideology — dominant or dominated — they represent; rather we must question them on the two levels of their tactical productivity (what reciprocal effects of power and knowledge they ensure) and their strategic integration (what conjunction and what force relationship make their utilization necessary in a given episode of the various confrontations that occur).<sup>26</sup>

Within queer subculture, the emergence and growing attention to barebacking as a sexual practice and sexual subculture has paralleled not only the struggles for same sex marriage, but also the continued political call for treatments for HIV/AIDS.<sup>27</sup> For Rofes, “when ‘barebacking emerged on the American scene in the late 1990s, some argued that such a renegade movement should have been expected to emerge as a backlash against fifteen years dominated



by a brand of health promotion they characterized as simplistic, patronizing, disempowering, sexphobic, and homophobic.”<sup>28</sup> Health promotion and education not only sought to discipline people into safe(x) sex practices, but also produced a rather queer reverse discourse in the form of barebacking. This happened also in opposition to the quest for marriage, a quest that ended in 2015 with the US Supreme Court decision *Obergefell v. Hodges* making marriage legal in the US. The queer resistance in the form of “raw sex” came to rub raw the reasonable and respectable politics that sought responsible “sex” and domestic bliss. And this subculture and practice may prove to be a gift to a continued project of queerness in our posthumanist age.

The subculture itself engages the logics of a gift economy, as illustrated by Tim Dean.<sup>29</sup> The gift is not one given by one who is known, but by an anonymous other. And that gift is not merely the transmission of a virus from one body to another, but the transmission of a larger symbolic, temporal, and cultural reality. The gift breeds in a perverse reversal of heterosexual reproduction to replicate a virus — a virus that has and continues to impact various queer populations. Barebackers, while pathologized for their actions and hyped within the media for their dangerousness, call into question a host of heteronormative familial ideas while also pushing against the “new homonormativity” that comes to fruition in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> Such practices and subcultural realities upset, upend, and perversely reify previously held ideas about public health, gay male sexuality, and the work of becoming a subject. The virus comes to present a lineage of queerness passed on through biomatter (blood or semen), so the matters of queerness, sex, and culture persist beyond the sex act. It is not simply a matter of attending to individual psyches, but to the collective psyches of a collection of people and a virus.

## REPLICATING QUEERNESS

Lee Edelman lodged a trenchant critique of what he called “reproductive futurism,” a concept that attended to “terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute

privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations.”<sup>31</sup> At the emergence of the queer sexual subculture known as “barebacking” various expert discourses argued there was a certain death wish – illustrated with *Rolling Stone’s* provocative cover story “In Search of Death.” Such discourses maintain a particular understanding of communal relationships, however, that is not rooted within the histories, politics, and ethics of queer sexual subcultures. Such subcultures, particularly in a world of AIDS, have never been human. Rather, they have always been something beyond or other than human — monstrous, even, as Waldby argued. At the same time, such a subculture continues to be useful for expert discourses as pharmaceutical forms of protection become more common and acceptable. The human is remade, perhaps undone, in the likeness of pharmaceuticals, illustrating further what Beatriz Preciado has called the “pharmacopornographic era.”<sup>32</sup> The internalization of safety in the form of a pill both presents new ways of relating (safe “raw” sex) while being controlled by pharmaceuticals. The “control society” has gone internal, as humans consume drugs that work at the molecular level. To refuse such treatments may come to be seen much like refusing condoms was before. Sex was disciplined before via external prophylaxis and now becomes controlled by internalized prophylaxis. Uncertainty, of course, remains, as no prophylaxis is ever completely “safe.”

Barebackers raise not only a variety of epistemological quandaries and hand-wringing —How can queer men be so dumb? Don’t they know better? — but also ontological possibilities —What does queerness become in the moment of not only protease inhibitors, but also the emergence of PrEP? Barebacking, to be sure, does not provide some liberation, nor does it simply illustrate a form of repression. It is conditioned by and conditions the evolving relationship between the human body, a virus, and expert technologies. After all, as Tim Dean argued: “Via the expert technologies of PrEP, the long history of medicalizing homosexuality has embarked upon a significant new phase.”<sup>33</sup> Homosexuality, while on one hand normalized in the form of same-sex marriage, continues to be medicalized for its practices when those prac-

tices are deemed to be outside the normative circuits of health and futurity. Barebacking replicates itself through the transmission of a virus that symbolically passes on not only the virus, but also the histories and intimacies of queer sexual subcultures. The viral opens up not only new forms of queer kinship, but also new temporalities, which both become something expert technologies seek to control.

This is significant in that, with discourses on barebacking, we see a return to contemplating sex acts that push the limits of what reason and expert knowledges assert. Jen Gilbert articulated that “sexuality will push education to its limit, and education, despite this debt, will try to limit sexuality.”<sup>34</sup> Barebacking quite literally pushes people to the limits of comprehension. The trajectories of living with the virus may have changed, but the histories connected to such living persist in and are transmitted through various means. However, following Foucault, engaging the work of replication and its queer practices provides us with a critical ontology of ourselves. For him:

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.<sup>35</sup>

As education continues to catch up with and make sense of the posthuman, it is the intersections of the pharmaceutical, the human, and the temporal body that *come* together to invent forms of living that both contribute to and contest previously held ideas of being human. While “gay” may very well prove to be an outdated identity — held onto by some for political and historical reasons — the lifestyles and forms of resistance connected with those politics and histories persist, notably in

queer subcultures that push against normative logics of reproduction in order to replicate queer histories virally.

“One could perhaps say there is a ‘gay style,’” Foucault argued, “or at least that there is an ongoing attempt to recreate a certain style of existence, a form of existence or art of living, which might be called ‘gay.’” While significant attention has been given to HIV/AIDS within humanist discourses, tending to the ways particular populations were dehumanized and allowed to die, HIV/AIDS opens up ways to contemplate how contemporary HIV/AIDS builds upon the traumas and activisms of the past, while replicating the pleasures of culture. Queerness, in part, is opposed to reproduction and, arguably, will not become fully embraced in education any time soon. Queerness’s boundaries will shift; we have seen these shifting boundaries in the gentrification of particular understandings of gayness. Posthumanist discourses, or discourses that attend to non-human interactions with the human (the viral with the bios), may very well allow for a certain type of anti-gentrification that replicates queerness in a refusal to be normalized completely: to be human, otherwise and elsewhere.

---

1 Catherine Waldby, *AIDS and the Body Politic: Biomedicine and Sexual Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 1.

2 Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press).

3 Waldby, *AIDS and the Body Politic*, 20.

4 Cris Mayo, “Philosophy of Education is Bent,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 30, no. 5 (2011): 471-476, 475.

5 Mayo, “Philosophy of Education is Bent,” 475.

6 Waldby, *AIDS and the Body Politic*, 19.

7 Waldby, *AIDS and the Body Politic*, 4.

8 Eric Rofes, *Thriving: Gay Men’s Health in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2007),

9 Available at: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?>

doi=10.1.1.694.2275&rep=rep1&type=pdf

9. Deborah Britzman, "Some Psychological Consequences of AIDS Education," in *Queer Theory in Education*, ed. William Pinar (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998), 321.

10 Britzman, "Some Psychological Consequences of AIDS Education," 321.

11. Rofes, *Thriving*, 33.

12. Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *October* 43 (1987): 137-171.

13 Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

14 Britzman, "Some Psychological Consequences of AIDS Education," 325.

15 Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, 155.

16 Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, 2

17 Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, 2-3.

18 Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, 3.

19 Nigel Blake, Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith & Paul Standish, *Thinking Again: Education After Postmodernism* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1998), 88.

20 Jonathan Zimmerman, *Too Hot to Handle: A Global History of Sex Education* (New Haven, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

21 See Michael Warner, "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," *Social Text* 29 (1991): 3-17. Lisa Duggan, *Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003).

22 See Cris Mayo, *LGBTQ Youth and Education: Policies and Practices* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2014).

23 Michel Foucault, "Sexual Act Sexual Choice," In *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, NY: The New Press, 1997), 153.

24 Foucault, "Sexual Act Sexual Choice," 153.

25 Tim Dean, "Bareback Time," in *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, eds. E. L. McCallum & M. Tuhkanen (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011), 78.

26 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1 An Introduction* (New York, NY: Vintage Press), 102.

27 See for instance: Leo Bersani & Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago, IL:

University of Chicago Press, 2008); David Halperin, *What do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

28 Rofes, *Thriving*, 4.

29 Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

30 Lisa Duggan, *Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003).

31 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

32 Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York, NY: The Feminist Press, 2013).

33 Tim Dean, "Mediated Intimacies: Raw Sex, Truvada, and the Biopolitics of Chemoprophylaxis," *Sexualities* 18, no. 1-2 (2015): 224-246, 228.

34 Jen Gilbert, *Sexuality in School: The Limits of Education* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), x.

35 Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1984), 50.