

# Ricky Varghese, ed., *Raw: PrEP, Pedagogy, and the Politics of Barebacking*

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The edited collection *Raw: PrEP, Pedagogy, and the Politics of Barebacking* illustrates how difficult it can be to historicize and theorize barebacking—a “loaded” term that encompasses various historically-situated social practices, cultural meanings, and affects. As such, the term is inseparable from the cultural moment it emerged from: the late 1990s–early 2000s, a period marked by the arrival of new drug therapies that greatly diminished AIDS-related mortalities. Barebacking, a notion loosely defined as intentionally and willingly seeking condomless anal sex, captured many anxieties around HIV/AIDS: historically, it has been associated with HIV transmissions, promiscuity, and ultimately death. It has also corresponded to and was appropriated by a subculture of (mostly HIV-positive) gay men whose sexual practices helped create new forms of intimacy based on the exchange of semen (Dean 2009).

Today, the term barebacking is widely used to describe a wide range of behaviours and sexual practices—including but not limited to safer forms of condomless sex. This evolution clearly corresponds to both medical advances and changing attitudes (most notably: treatment as prevention [TaSP]; post-exposure prophylaxis [PEP], and pre-exposure prophylaxis

[PrEP]).<sup>1</sup> The question of what counts as barebacking is in part generational: PrEP and TaSP have rapidly redefined what counts as “risky” sex.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the term has retained some of its transgressive aura and still animates cultural fears. For instance, it is regularly associated with so-called excessive sexuality and/or the use of recreational drugs as part of sexual intercourses. Barebacking carries with it the weight of its history—it simultaneously invokes and displaces past modes of queer relationality, affects, and community formation. As Tim Dean judiciously puts it in the Afterword to *Raw*:

The terminology for sex without condoms, as well as its import, continues to morph. What used to be called, in the early years of the AIDS epidemic, unsafe sex, has been variously renamed as unprotected, risk, bareback, raw, real, natural, or skin. Far from neutral, this shifting nomenclature inscribes competing values that suggest a lack of consensus regarding the phenomenon under consideration.... Bareback signifies variously risk, freedom, community, filiation, masculinity, queerness, vulnerability, irresponsibility,

closeness to others, disregard for others. The signifier “barebacking” is highly overdetermined, now more so than ever. (Varghese 2019, 258)

The anthology *Raw: PrEP, Pedagogy, and the Politics of Barebacking* refuses to define what counts as barebacking. Significantly, the title of the book contains three words traditionally associated with condomless sex (raw, PrEP, and barebacking)—each carrying a slightly different social meaning. As such, the book juxtaposes oftentimes contradictory analyses of condomless sex, simultaneously accounting for the messiness of our sexualities and stretching what counts as barebacking. This openness and willingness to use the nostalgic charge of barebacking (affectively, a *queer, bad* object) to contaminate our understandings of a wide variety of sexual practices is perhaps the book’s most valuable contribution to the field of sexuality studies.

### Testing the Limits of Raw Sex: Barebacking as a Method

The first half of the book perfectly illustrates what I would call “barebacking as a method”: rather than analyzing actual condomless sex, the authors mobilize the affective ghost of bareback to propose momentary points of convergence—stretching, loading, and corrupting the meaning we traditionally associate with other forms of sexual practice. Significantly, the book opens with Jonathan A. Allan’s analysis of the foreskin—an overdetermined part of the penis which, just like barebacking, refracts many cultural anxieties around sexuality and race. This chapter illustrates the difficulty of theorizing the prepuce on its own:

the foreskin typically constitutes a bad object, rendered visible by and thinkable only in relation to circumcision. Bringing forth a theoretical apparatus traditionally associated with the literature on bareback sex and late 1990s queer theory, Allan teases some of the cultural meanings associated with the foreskin and timidly points to its erotic potentialities. In other words, Allan mobilizes the affective charge of the debate around barebacking in order to theorise an under-studied and often taboo object.

Three authors use the literature on barebacking and extend it to account for other forms of sexual practices and/or intersections of identity. Frank G. Kariotis argues that, for heterosexual men, unprotected sex signifies both virality and virility: playing on the opposition between barebacking scholar Tim Dean and straight porn actor/director James Deen, they underscore how straight men’s unprotected sexual practices both depend on toxic masculinity and redistribute the risk onto women. Elliot Evans’s masterful analysis of the works of Monique Wittig and Patrick Califia extends the gay male centric notion of barebacking to BDSM lesbian sex. Evans unearths a wide variety of materials that both depend on the exchange of fluids (blood, sweat, and semen) and question the limits of bodies. According to them, Wittig’s and Califia’s texts manifest a type of sexual pleasure that creates a form of intimacy not unlike that of 2000s bareback communities: it is through the exchange of potentially dangerous fluids, the swallowing of others, and the opening up of wounds that the authors simultaneously disrupt and eroticize the distinction bet-

ween self and others. This notion of a dangerous form of pleasure that can potentially create new, ethical ways of relating to oneself and to others is also at the core of Walcott's chapter—a brilliant analysis of the figure of the “Black cumjoy,” defined as a joy and pleasure of cum that refracts, echoes, and potentially subverts the cultural meanings associated with Blackness and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Walcott reclaims pleasure in a racist epidemic: his Black cumjoys simultaneously reveal the centrality of Blackness in the construction of HIV/AIDS and locate incorrect forms of pleasure as producing new modes of relations and of being together. As he eloquently puts it, Black cumjoys “require us to think differently about the stakes of the present, and how our practices of sexuality produce modes of being human and less than human” (85).

### When was Barebacking? Nostalgia and Desire in *Raw*

Other chapters more explicitly discuss bareback sex: they historicize the rise of condomless pornography (Tziallas), analyze the relationship between past and present forms of raw sex (González, Greteman), or theorize the ethics and politics of barebacking (Morris and Paasonen, Longstaff, and Semerene). While these chapters seem, at first, to follow a more conventional route, they do not necessarily adopt the same definition of what barebacking is and, at times, contradict one another. This is particularly clear in the book's last section, “Psychoanalytic and Pedagogical Limits”. Indeed, the section starts with a highly theoretical take on barebacking: Diego Semerene's use of Lacan enables him to discuss mascu-

linity, virality, and the body. It may, at times, ignore the realities lived by HIV+ people: as such, Semerene is invested in the *idea* of barebacking as it relates to the Symbolic.<sup>3</sup> This chapter is immediately followed by a practical call to *queer* sexual education curricula: Adam J. Greteman argues that barebacking has the potential to reorient the ways we think about risk reduction and to challenge long-held conceptions about safe(r) sex.

This tension between different understandings of the notion and the value of barebacking is itself productive: it posits barebacking as a constantly shifting practice—simultaneously subversive *and* conservative; minoritarian *and* mainstream; safe *and* unsafe; past *and* present; real *and* symbolic. Most importantly, it understands barebacking as an *affective* category that necessarily brings forth and refuses to let go of past modes of queerness. In other words, the book's porous use of the notion of barebacking often echoes and replays our desire for a time retroactively seen as transgressive. As Dean argues in the Afterword, “naming the practice as bareback might be a way of holding on to a frisson that has become obsolete. I'm wondering whether the term ‘bareback’ already feels nostalgic” (262).

As an edited collection, *Raw* is fundamentally about the work performed by and the uses of barebacking: it simultaneously aims to reflect upon contemporary sexual politics and to refract the complex temporalities of the field. In aiming to rethink canonical texts on barebacking (such as Dean's *Unlimited Intimacies*) in the context of PrEP, PEP, and TaSP, *Raw* both comments on the evolution of the

field *and* replays our affective longings for modes of sex and scholarship that have historically been understood as transgressive.

Here, I am particularly interested in this temporal pull exercised by the notion of barebacking. Tellingly, most of the essays in the collection reference the same canonical texts: Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987), Edelman's *No Future* (2004), and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). This framework heavily places barebacking in a specific disciplinary and temporal context—1990s queer theory. Put another way: while each chapter adopts a slightly different definition of barebacking or places it within a specific sociohistorical context, they are all haunted by the same historical moment. Mainstream or minoritarian, safe or unsafe, barebacking refracts the political project of queer theory: it remains a "bad object" that scholars can reclaim, deconstruct, or transform. This nostalgic pull corresponds to what Kadji Amin identifies as the stickiness of queer theory: it necessarily associates barebacking to "affective histories that influence, without it being acknowledged, what meanings adhere to queer, how this term is deployed, and what happens when it takes on life in new contexts" (Amin 2017, 183).

As an edited collection, *Raw* includes a wide variety of chapters, each bringing forth their own disciplinary apparatus and political project. Taken together, they ultimately illustrate how barebacking, an unstable category, is haunted by, replays, and aims to displace a set of emotions and politics associated with 1990s queer theory. This nostalgic pull may well be unavoidable; as such, *Raw* begs the que-

stion of whether sex—and bareback sex in particular—can be thought *for itself*, outside of the social practices which overdetermine its meanings. This issue is taken up in the book's last chapter: Christien Garcia's nuanced analysis of the expression "it's just sex" reveals how theoretical endeavours simultaneously overdetermine sex and do not manage to capture its bare essence. *Raw* certainly exemplifies Garcia's point: sex is everywhere yet it escapes the meanings we seek to ascribe to it. Perhaps, then, the book exemplifies another form of pleasure: the titillation caused by our choice of a bad object; the almost erotic energies we invest in academic writing; the subtle strip-teasing that comes with analyzing our own sex lives; and the jouissance built up and released through theoretical arguments.

#### Notes

1. TaSP is the idea that the use of antiretroviral treatment (ART) decreases the risk of HIV transmission: an undetectable viral load means that HIV cannot be transmitted. PEP is an antiretroviral treatment taken by HIV-negative people immediately after a potential exposure to HIV to avoid being infected. PrEP is an anti-retroviral treatment taken daily or on demand by HIV-negative people that greatly diminishes and almost nullifies the risk of transmission.
2. Given how quickly the attitudes towards and meaning associated with barebacking are changing, I often wonder how younger queers understand the term—whether they see it as related to past modes of queer relationality or as a mere

synonym for condomless sex. I offer the following short reflection on my own positionality as a way of locating my understanding of and experience with barebacking: I am a 30-year-old white gay man who grew up in rural northern France—without access to any form of positive queer representation. I forged my sense of self through HIV/AIDS activism: in particular, Act Up Paris provided me with a way of envisioning queerness as a *radical* political practice. I came of age in 2008, in the immediate aftermath of the “war” between Act Up and pro-bareback queer intellectuals/writers Guillaume Dustan and Erik Rémès: particularly violent on both sides, this debate created a real rift in the French gay community (see for instance: Broqua 2020). It notably led to the creation of dissident associations such as Warning that reclaimed barebacking as a viable, ethical political option. My personal experience with barebacking came a bit later: first, with numerous instances of (willingly and perhaps willfully) “forgetting” condoms, then with ongoing relationships with undetectable lovers. I started PrEP a couple of years later. Most of the sex I currently have is raw.

3. To some extent, Semerene’s chapter is interested in the *theoretical* idea of barebacking—in the idea of potentially dangerous condomless sex as it relates to psychoanalytical frameworks. To that end, this chapter contains many claims

that “make sense” at the level of the Symbolic but that could be understood as replaying damaging ideas around HIV. For instance, his analysis of dating apps leads him to argue, in a book about bareback sex, that “a rejection (...) is a deadlier interruption than a deadly virus itself” (197). The chapter includes other claims that may be experienced by some as violent. Dean raises this issue in the Afterword when he asks: “How are HIV-positive men supposed to feel about this argument?” (277).

### References

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