

Faceless sex: glory holes and sexual assemblages

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Abstract

According to our previous research, the use of glory holes in public venues such as saunas and bathhouses is very popular. The popularity of glory holes is due in part to the anonymous sex that these architectural elements allow. This post-structuralist theoretical reflection seeks to understand the specific nature of anonymous public sex among bathhouse patrons, focusing on the links between desire–architecture–place–sexual practices. Drawing on interviews with glory hole users gathered during an ethnographic research project in bathhouses, this essay goes beyond traditional public health discourse to offer an original perspective on anonymous public sex. Utilizing the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of assemblages and machines, we re-theorize glory hole sex – what we call 'faceless sex' – and rethink the ways that desire is imbricated with our understanding of architecture, place, and public. Finally, we reflect upon the particular ethical challenges that are posed by these particular sexual practices, and ask whether a post-structuralist ethic might be possible.

Keywords: assemblages, face, glory holes, philosophy, sexuality.

Flows of women and children, flows of herds and seed, sperm flows, flows of shit, menstrual flows: nothing must escape coding. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 142)

The prime function incumbent upon the socius has always been to codify the flows of desire, to inscribe them, to record them, to see to it that no flow exists that is not properly

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dammed up, channeled, regulated. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 33)

Introduction

Internationally, despite public health agencies voicing heightened concerns about sexually transmitted infections (STI) and HIV, anonymous sexual encounters remain common practise (Woods *et al.*, 2007; Binson *et al.*, 2009). These behaviours have been the focus of intense debate, particularly as they concern the subpopulation of men who have sex with men

(MSM). Anonymous sexual encounters are arranged in a variety of ways, and often take place within specific environments that are designed for MSM sexual contact, such as saunas or bathhouses (Richters, 2007). Through the use of glory holes, however, an even greater level of anonymity can be attained: sex with faceless partners.

The glory hole is usually a circular opening, roughly 6–7 inches in diameter, cut into the wall at penis height between adjacent rooms. They can be found in bathhouses, saunas, and sometimes in adult video arcades, nightclubs, bookstores, sex shops, and between the stalls of public toilets known colloquially in the gay community as ‘cottages’ or ‘tea rooms’. Individuals on opposite sides of the wall have limited physical and visual contact with each other, while the hole allows direct contact with specific bodily organs that can be displayed through these openings and through which pleasure can be shared, bodily fluids exchanged. According to Bapst (2001), the use of glory holes in public venues has always been popular, due in large part to the anonymous nature of the sexual acts that these architectural elements provide, as well as the feeling of erotic detachment that these holes induce. In response to the popularity of glory hole sex, as well as the perceived ‘riskiness’ of this behaviour, our theoretical reflection seeks to further understand the links between desire–architecture–place–sexual practices among the subpopulation of glory hole users.

Our analysis of glory hole use focuses on gay bathhouses and draws on Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of assemblages and machines. The work of Deleuze and Guattari is important here because it helps to articulate the connections between desire, normative social structures, and socio-political identity and processes (Patton, 2000). This essay builds on earlier ethnographic nursing research that involved interviews with bathhouse patrons who are glory hole users (see Holmes *et al.*, 2007). In this paper, however, we do not present excerpts from these interviews; rather, here our principal objective is theoretical and philosophical, namely, to understand this sexual practise from an original perspective, beyond the dominant discourse that informs public health research and debates. In other words, we are interested in glory hole sex –

faceless sex – and seek to re-theorize this specific type of anonymous sex from a Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective. Consequently, this paper ‘brackets’ the substantial epidemiological research (and its positivist worldview) that charts the risks of this behaviour, turning instead to the user’s lived experience, and seeking to understand the ways that the circuits of erotic desire are caught up in the space, the place, the architecture, and the veiled publicness of a sexual encounter in which the users are both exposed and hidden.

Finally, by contrasting ‘assemblages’ with ‘machines’, we reflect on some of the possible benefits and motivations for engaging in faceless sex at the glory hole. Can we trace a productive relation to the user’s psychosocial and psychosexual identity? And are there unique ethical challenges associated with the ‘faceless’ dimension of glory hole sex? Without rushing to a moral judgement, we look at some of the ways that this behaviour might be experienced variously as socially, politically, and sexually liberating, on the one hand, and addictive, on the other.

Glory hole sex at bathhouses

Some authors argue that anonymous sex at bathhouses is responsible for the recrudescence of STI and HIV (Pomerantz, 1999; Condon, 2000). These sexual practices include bareback sex, backroom or blackroom sex (in the dark), and glory hole sex, among others; drug and alcohol use is frequently involved, which might loosen ordinary inhibitions and lead to risky behaviour. Our previous research used an exploratory research design to help better understand particular MSM sexual practices in bathhouses. As there is very little scientific literature on glory hole sex per se, and because this practise is assumed to belong to a particular MSM subculture (gay, bisexual, and straight-identified MSM who are maximally discreet, having same-sex sex ‘on the down-low’), ethnography seemed to be an appropriate methodological approach (Lindell, 1996). In effect, men who engage in glory hole sex constitute a community based on their sexual practices, even if this community comprises a wide range of sexual, personal, professional, and political public identities – one reason

we hesitate to write 'gay bathhouses', because not all bathhouse patrons would self-identify as 'gay', either sexually, socially, or politically. An exploratory qualitative design allowed us to formulate research questions with an objective focus on the architectural and design features of bathhouses – especially the areas with glory holes – and how these features influence the type of sexual activities in these places.

Prior to conducting our ethnographic nursing study, the research team met with bathhouse owners to discuss and set the terms for a nursing inquiry regarding sexual health issues. Three bathhouses were selected based on the variety of their respective clientele and on the sexual possibilities offered to them. After receiving funding from a major Canadian health research institute and obtaining ethics approval, we spent approximately 50 h in each of the three bathhouses to amass a total of 147 h research time. Located strategically within each of the facilities, we were able to gather relevant data by distributing questionnaires, observing the architectural and design features of the premises, interacting with patrons in the designated common/public spaces, and noting the specific features and ambience of each bathhouse.

Same-sex sexual desire has created a landscape of sex spaces, both real and virtual, where sex takes place in parks, alleys, toilets, motorway rest stops, adult cinemas, video arcades, bookstores, bars, nightclubs, bathhouses, and finally, through telephone chat lines and over the Internet (Bérubé, 1996; Lindell, 1996; Tattelman, 1999; Ko *et al.*, 2006; Woods *et al.*, 2007). In recent years, burgeoning Internet access has facilitated casual and anonymous sexual encounters, at the same time increasing the number of potential partners through chat rooms, classifieds, and virtual cruising communities. This new environment for virtually arranged encounters constitutes an unprecedented key element in risk management regarding STI. Although the Internet is an easy way to meet sexual partners, bathhouses remain a popular and convenient way – and perhaps the most discreet venue, for MSM to meet in a reasonably safe and controlled environment for anonymous sex (Bolton *et al.*, 1995; Pryce, 1996; French *et al.*, 2000; Ross *et al.*, 2000; Woods *et al.*, 2000; Binson *et al.*, 2001; Somlai *et al.*,

2001; Holmes *et al.*, 2007; Dean, 2009). In some cases, bathhouse encounters are arranged online in advance, and partners meet up in the bathhouse for an individual or group sex scenario; however, this is seldom the case for glory hole sex, which is often perceived as a 'quick' or spontaneous activity (Flowers *et al.*, 2000; Richters, 2007).

For 40 years, bathhouses have been an important, sometimes even prominent, aspect of the gay male community (Tattelman, 1999); they have been sites of pleasure, of political struggle, and resistance; they have provided a public place where strangers can come together, connect, and have sex (Haubrich *et al.*, 2004). Usually tolerant of differences, bathhouses provide MSM the 'space to define, support, or flaunt their sexual interests' (Tattelman, 1999, p. 71). The architecture and design of bathhouses create multiple public and private spaces where men can defy usual sexual conventions through the 'guarantee' of a sexual encounter while exploring new sexual horizons. Bathhouses multiply desire and their design promotes 'alternative' sexual practices. Glory hole sex is one of these practices.

Bapst (2001) defines the glory hole in early 21st century gay culture as a 'hole through a wall through which a man exposes his genitals to another man in order to be fellated or masturbated' (p. 90), usually without having previous or future contacts with the partner. Although glory holes can be found between the booths or cabins of adult video arcades, and less frequently between the cubicles of public toilets, their presence in public venues is increasingly rare because of police surveillance and laws that punish indecent exposure and public sex (Bapst, 2001). Most bathhouses, however, provide their patrons basic to sophisticated glory hole areas. Figure 1 provides an aerial diagram of one possible layout for glory hole rooms commonly found in bathhouses around the world.

Data from our ethnographic research in gay bathhouses (Holmes *et al.*, 2007) confirm that the use of glory holes is quite popular. In the interviews, some participants suggested that glory holes were exciting because of the anonymity and the strictly genital–oral sex they allow. Bapst's (2001) qualitative study of ten glory hole users corroborates our results. In effect, men who use glory holes report that they like to feel

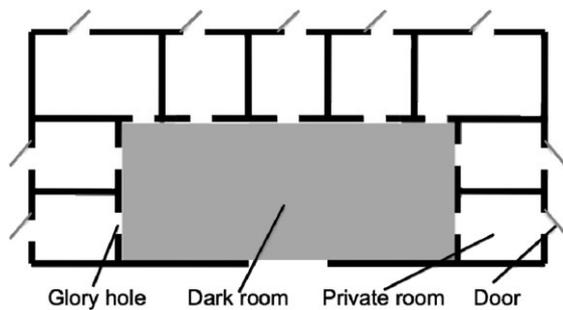


Fig. 1. An aerial diagram of glory hole rooms

their penises being ‘completely detached’ from their bodies. They also report enjoying the purely tactile sensation of wet warmth focused on a limited area of the body, and that the sensory deprivation of the rest of the body intensifies genital eroticism. Maintaining anonymity was important, and most felt it was best to keep their interaction limited to a physical encounter with no verbal communication, while restricting their vision to no more than a glance through the hole. The hole itself became the site of sexual energy and exchange. Finally, most participants in Bapst’s research (Bapst, 2001) as well as our own research felt that glory hole sex was ‘primal’ and ‘animalistic’, as the focus was on physical sensations rather than on another person. Indeed, the glory hole affords an intense, temporary escape from the demands of subjectivity. For this reason, most men we interviewed suggested that glory hole sex flaunted society’s rules surrounding sex, and in this sense was experienced as ‘experimental’ and liberating, allowing them to ‘escape’ from their ‘social roles’. It is precisely these experiences that we seek to understand. These dimensions of glory hole sex are rarely the focus of scientific studies. In what follows, we turn to the work of Deleuze and Guattari in order to ground our reflection within a critical, hence philosophical, standpoint rooted in post-structuralism.

Rethinking glory hole sex

Post-structuralism represents a mode of enquiry that was developed chiefly by French philosophers in the 1960s and 1970s. The work of late philosophers such as Althusser, Derrida, and Foucault has revitalized

the philosophical tradition, challenging long-established conventions that privileged metaphysics of clear essences, logical meanings, and original causes. Post-structuralist thinking opened towards new intellectual horizons, turning from the ‘depth’ and mental ‘interiority’ associated with conventional ‘truth’ (based in the Cartesian cogito), and focusing instead on surfaces of bodies, effects, intensities, impulses, and flows. Post-structuralist philosophers have taken pains to theorize the body in productive ways, and for this reason our understanding of glory hole sex must start with the body, as we are talking here about surfaces, intensities, and flows, as these bodies meet at the shared surface of a wall that separates, but allows, intimate contact and erotic signification. We have selected the work of Deleuze and Guattari to look at ‘faceless sex’, because for them, the body is neither fixed nor stable. Bodies take on myriad forms and assume many functions according to the types of connections they form with other bodies or parts of bodies (organs): ‘A body’s function or potential or “meaning” becomes entirely dependent on which other bodies or machines it forms assemblages with’ (Malins, 2004, p. 85).

Moreover, according to post-structuralist thought, bodies are political surfaces, sites of inscription and socio-political significance. For Deleuze and Guattari, then, we are exhorted to escape the structuralist ethos of the body, in which the ‘truth’ is found in its depths – in an individual, rational mind presumed to be distinct from the body – and instead conceive that body away from internal meanings and essences. This is not just a paradigm shift, that is, it does not simply reverse the mind/body binary; rather, it does away with paradigmatic thinking altogether, it dares to think something new, differently. The analysis should be geared towards surface effects and intensities, not founded in stable concepts or Platonic ideas or forms. The body has no meaning in itself; it exists because it is connected to other bodies and to other objects, it is a contextual body, a body that is situated along a vector of meaning that is in flux. Bodies are ‘internally capable of producing desire and affective relations, regardless of the identity or form of the objects’ – animate or not – in and/or through which they come into contact (Moreno, 2009, p. 220). Defined through

the assemblages they make with others, bodies become subjects able to interact with the social world.

The glory hole-using body assemblage

At the bathhouse, bodies are displayed and display themselves in such a way that they send messages about their intentions and desires. They form connections with each other. These preliminary connections, which may operate initially through the gaze, create intensities that lie at the core of desire – a result of it as well as its cause. Further connections between bodies, through touch, oral sex, etc. – or even between parts of bodies or inanimate things – create connections that can be multiple and intense. Suffice to say here that assemblages between persons–persons, persons–things, and things–things are legion and constitute important aspects of our daily existence (hand–spoon at breakfast, toothbrush–teeth, etc.). The body enjoys forming assemblages with others, whether persons or things, in order to allow desire to flow in different directions, producing new potentials (becomings) and therefore new subjectivities. Becoming is a process, not a state; it implies flux and constant reorganization and, as a consequence, entails the destructuring of stable systems, be they moral rules, social orders, conventions, and so forth. According to Deleuze and Guattari, bodies tend to create their own configurations with animate and inanimate objects; they seek to form new and original assemblages that have the potential to transform them or to experience new modes of being, and, in the case of anonymous faceless sex, to ‘become-other’ through new forms of desires, bodies, and pleasures.

Assemblages are collections of desires: the mouth is an assemblage, the penis is as well. Together, the mouth–penis combination is yet another assemblage. The physical movements from the atomic level to the macro-organ level produce the mouth and the penis as the organs that we see. Thus, it is important to emphasize that assemblages need not be tangible; of course, they can be, but more often than not they are virtual. The appreciation of a variety of ideas as forming another idea also constitutes an assemblage. For example, the understanding of what a penis does, whether in relation to urination, erection, or ejacula-

tion is part of the construction of the penis assemblage. The mouth comprises the lips, tongue, and teeth while being at once part of the face, the head, the body, the digestive system, the human, and the animal assemblages as well. All are comprised of impermanent connections, and therefore forever in the process of becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Although a full discussion would exceed the scope of this essay, it is important to grasp the intransitive state of becoming, which signifies not an instrumentalist or teleological transition from one point to another, but rather, a perpetual state of transition that is experimental, and never actually achieves a final form or arrives at a final destination. The assemblage is perpetually transforming into other assemblages, breaking apart and having its sub-assemblages growing into, joining, or producing, in their turn, other assemblages, and so on.

However, if the fluxional logic of the assemblage is pressed to extremes, it breaks down or becomes monstrous. One must stretch the limits without breaking them. Meaningful social interaction requires the body to bear a specific identity and to tolerate specific ways of organizing itself – so that it is legible according to terms that are acceptable in the social context, inscribed in a socially meaningful way. This organization takes place against the backdrop of a highly predetermined grid that fixes meaning and identity, impeding ‘nomadic’ movements of the body. Meaning is always negotiated, agonistically, in and against that grid, between the flux and the fix – to bend the rules, to make new connections, but not to shatter the rules of meaning entirely.

The body as assemblage stands in opposition to the stasis of the Modern subject. Indeed, for Deleuze and Guattari the fixed identity of the Modern subject is nothing more than the particular way in which bodies have been mapped or stratified (*cartographié*). In order to make sense of the body and to code it and to make it useful for social production and organization, the *socius* reduces the body’s movement and complexity to fit within stable and predetermined categories. In this respect, the body becomes ordered and trapped through and within discourses (Malins, 2004) that tend to identify, classify, and hierarchize its behaviours. Thus, social forces attempt to block creative forces by imposing rigid grids in and through

which all members of the socius can be assessed. These grids impede the creative connections bodies make and therefore threaten the becoming process of the human subject; they reduce the body's potential to 'become-other'.

The glory hole-using body machine

In contradistinction to the assemblage defined as fluid becoming, stands the machine. While the 'machine' terminology seems to be similar to the 'assemblage', Deleuze & Guattari (1987) define the machine as an assemblage that has been given the attribute of consistency or fixity – an assemblage that has been nailed down and forced to remain the same. One of the many problems inherent in any practise of experimentation is its potential to coalesce, to ossify, in and around a particular practise or set of practices. In their words, the 'machine is like a set of cutting edges that insert themselves into the assemblage undergoing deterritorialization [the act of "coming undone"]', and draw variations and mutations of it' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 367; also see Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 322). In other words, at the moment that a series of connections combine to form the sexualized pound of flesh known as a penis, and when this penis is seen to be the penis, which functions identically for everyone, then it has become part of a mechanism, a machine. In glory hole sex, there is for some an element of interchangeability, a detached objectivity, where the penis is abstract – and so the assemblage is temporary and fragile, always perilously close to becoming machinic. In other words again, each of the various anatomical combinations of body parts on either side of the glory hole can become so rigidly fixated that these assemblages – potential vectors of pleasure and emancipation – are transformed from assemblages into machines. In this sense, the fluid potential of the assemblages is supplanted by stratified identities, and the glory hole-using body becomes a machine, caught in an addictive trap, and caught up in the architectural fixtures that enable and sustain its own desire – an apparatus of capture. Not surprisingly, then, the negotiation of glory hole sex is often described as rigidly scripted, almost 'automatic' like a machine (see Elwood & Williams, 1999, p. 122). To offer the analogy

of the drug-using body, Deleuze and Guattari write: 'the causal line, or light of flight, of drugs is constantly being segmentarized under the most rigid of forms, that of dependency, the hit and the dose, and the dealer' (1987, p. 274). In other words, we move from assemblage to machine when we pass from experimentation to dependency.

Resisting identity, assemblages, and the ethics of faceless sex

If there is an ethic to be found in Deleuze and Guattari, it might be summed up by the following injunction: 'Only retain . . . what augments the number of connections' (1987, p. 634). In this light, the glory hole-using body must become-other, either inside or outside the bathhouse, and connect with others to configure new potentialities (becomings): assemblages must avoid coding, and this includes their own machinic codification, however tempting. Assemblages must allow bodies to form creative connections with other animate or inanimate structures. And as such, becomings must be continuous and not static (Malins, 2004); if they are not, they turn into machines and become fixated. The injunction, then, is towards movement, and not to fall into, to become, a cliché or a stereotype.

For some, such an injunction will seem anything but 'ethical': it might be perceived as too ludic, even irresponsible. But we hope to understand the practise of glory hole sex, rather than pass judgement on it; we hope to shed light on the links between desire–architecture–place–sexual practices. How might we understand the particular 'facelessness' of glory hole sex, where bodies are fragmented, where visual social cues are limited or non-existent, and where verbal communication is likewise limited or non-existent? Space does not allow more than a schematic reflection, but this might open up avenues for future research. Certainly, due to the fragmentation – the disorganization – of the body, the glory hole allows the free play of desire and fantasy for both users. Users may feel liberated not only from the social roles and expectations dictated by a predominantly heterosexual world, but also from the codes of the gay world, many of which assign a high priority on youth, physical fitness, and the

conventional markers of 'masculinity'. Through the glory hole, these considerations rarely come into play. Indeed, conventional socio-sexual identities can be suspended or can commingle, promiscuously. Is the user gay, bisexual, questioning, or decidedly straight? And as Richters (2007) writes: 'Perhaps the non-gay-identifying man likes it because it explicitly removes any suggestion that what he is enjoying is the other man's body, rather than the specifically genital and sensual service being done for him' (p. 285). She adds, rather suggestively, 'He does not lose face because he was faceless to start with' (Richters, 2007).

Here, then, is what Deleuze and Guattari mean by the assemblage and augmenting the number of connections: an open potential for different vectors of desire, for becoming-other, to suspend or to mix or to subvert identities, recognizable practices, and expectations. It is difficult to map what might be going on in these encounters. Although bodies that form part of specific assemblages (such as the glory hole-using body) might run the risk of being rigidly stratified from the inside through addiction and from the outside by the state (e.g. through the moral contagion of public health discourses), bodies can nevertheless change locations and form new assemblages. By changing locations and forming new connections, bodies can experience new ways of being. And these bodies can do so without facing – literally – the moral judgement of others. The hole and the wall break the circuit of mirrored reciprocity; not only is the user not face-to-face with the other, he is not face-to-face with himself, that is, he is not forced to face the other as a reflection of himself, as an embodiment of his own desire, which may be shameful or otherwise intolerable to him. Perhaps detaching one's penis from one's body frees the individual from his own desire – enacting a kind of castration fantasy. Or perhaps he knows full well what he wants: I want to be serviced, I am not gay, I do not want another man'.

Elwood & Williams (1999) propose a 'cognitive escape' model when assessing anonymous sex at bathhouses. They posit a heightened level of cognitive–emotional dissonance, encouraged by the etiquette of silence between patrons, and suggest that these environments 'fulfill a desire to escape cognitive awareness of very rigorous HIV prevention norms and

standards' (p. 122; also see Williams *et al.*, 2000). Can we extend their analysis to the glory hole-using body, an encounter marked not only by silence but by visual and bodily fragmentation and dissonance? Does the glory hole user similarly harbour a kind of false consciousness, enabled by the architecture? Might we say that he engages a cognitive–emotional dissonance not only in the face of those 'norms and standards' that define public health discourse on disease, but a cognitive–emotional dissonance in relation to his own activities, his own desire, his own identity? Conservative authors would likely make such a claim, and back it up with epidemiological data concerning the risk factors and the transmission of STI. And at first blush, such an argument might be persuasive. After all, in a commonsensical way we do understand the face as the site of social cues: without the face, it might be argued, we are not having sex with a person, but only with a part that has been severed from the whole. In this sense, the face is a synecdoche, a part that stands in, metaphorically, for the whole. And this, we might say, induces a kind of reckless abandon that should be condemned in the harshest terms. Indeed, it is just this depersonalization, anonymity, and lack of communication that some authors choose to problematize in public health debates, arguing that these individuals have waived their moral (if not legal) right to know their partner's HIV status (see Ainslie, 2002, p. 58).

It is perhaps simplistic or even utopian to suggest that the glory hole is part of a liberatory assemblage designed to mobilize bodies and pleasures in ways that disrupt the unwelcome experience of highly restrictive social roles, an onerous politics of identity. Again, the conservative position might be that these ludic and theoretical approaches are too true to the etymological meaning of 'utopia' – literally, occurring in 'no place'. They might complain that glory holes and bathhouses are places, real places. And so, to be fair, we must acknowledge that we are caught up within the circuits of desire and disease that take place in real places. Consequently, sex is a machine, as much as public health discourse, the pharmaceutical industry, socio-sexual mores, and so on – all part of the discourse of sexuality that produces the so-called 'truth' of sex (Foucault, 1978). There is no place that is free, and so to speak of freedom will require careful

qualification. We suspect that this is not quite the simple condemnation that conservative authors have in mind.

It is a mistake, too, to reduce ethics to the presence (or absence) of a face. While the face is important to subjectivity, too often it is part of the machine – a means of immediately verifying an individual's identity, his 'personhood', his claim to human dignity. Indeed, the face is caught up in the Modern Enlightenment discourse that tends to reduce the ethical subject to his autonomy, his rationality, and his personal and individual agency. This, too, might be experienced as oppressive. Even Levinas (1969), the philosopher of the face par excellence, is clear not to equate the face with something that can be seen or touched, with physiognomy or anatomy, with its form. For Levinas, the face solicits the Other through an infinite demand, calling on him to be ethical. The face resists my grasp, resists my visual or intellectual containment or mastery: 'In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp' (1969, p. 197). As Levinas remarks, the face is not just in the face; the face can be the nape of the neck or it can be a simple gesture – it is what presents the Other as a 'stranger', in his 'nakedness' and 'destitution' and 'hunger' and 'vulnerability' (pp. 74–75). In this sense, perhaps glory hole sex is not entirely 'faceless'; and, despite conservative views, perhaps it is not devoid of ethical import. To be sure, the face here suggests an ethics of the assemblage, rather than of the machine; it is an ethics that is not easily rendered by a moral 'code'. It would be an ethics that would respect movement and difference, but that would honour nakedness, vulnerability, hunger, and destitution. Is this not what happens at the glory hole? If I slide my penis through the glory hole, am I not immediately engaged in an act of profound trust? Must I not trust that the other will do no harm to that intimate, delicate, and over-determined part of my body? Perhaps it is for this reason that some patrons have described the bathhouse as a site of spiritual quest (Prior & Cusack, 2010).

This is no ethics of autonomy (see Murray & Holmes, 2009). It is an ethics of non-autonomy, one that recognizes and enacts the limits of my autonomy, the fragile fragmentariness of my identity, virtualized

through a hole in the wall. Certainly, it is not sex with a 'whole person', but what is? In a radical gesture, glory hole sex may emblemize every sexual encounter: even the most boring and routine sex, every Saturday night, in the missionary position – even here the partners are not alone in their desires, they are not self-contained autonomous units; they are fragmentary, disclosing some desires, withholding others, unaware of others still, thinking secretly of the neighbour's wife or son, caught up inexorably in an assemblage that is positively carnivalesque. If one dares admit it. And perhaps this is one reason that anonymous sex at bathhouses and at glory holes is so strongly condemned. We have barely begun to think through an ethics of non-autonomy. Judith Butler (2005) gives us terms that may help us in this endeavour. For her, the scene of shared vulnerability and 'exposure' is a beginning: this 'singularizing exposure, which follows from bodily existence, is one that can be reiterated endlessly, it constitutes a collective condition, characterizing us all equally, not only reinstalling the "we", but also establishing a structure of substitutability at the core of singularity' (pp. 34–35). Here, in seeking to offer an ethical account for oneself, one must confront the limits of reason and autonomy: 'my own opacity to myself occasions my capacity to confer a certain kind of recognition on others. It would be, perhaps, an ethics based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves' (p. 41). Here, we suggest, we might begin to understand – and do justice to – the dynamics of glory hole sex.

Conclusion

We have argued that glory hole sex implies the glory hole-using body assemblage, which, from a public health perspective, is a risky one because it is a potential vector of STI. When health and moral discourses are tied to this specific assemblage, it is suddenly reduced to only one potential. In public health the glory hole user is defined as risky – and this is less for what he does than for who he is. His identity is risky, he is 'at-risk', and it is this subjectivity that is stratified as part of public health discourse. As Lupton (1997) has remarked, the public health apparatus has come to dominate the ways we understand our bodily

practices and ourselves, including the ways in which we have sex. If the glory hole-using body constitutes a specific assemblage made up of a hole, a mouth, and a penis, for instance, this specific assemblage is also tied – and at times co-opted by – the panoptic apparatus, that machine known as public health.

Nevertheless, bodies resist and repel these rigid, violent forms of categorization because their intention and desire is to ‘become multiple’ and to experiment – as Deleuze and Guattari write, to privilege the ‘and’ of experimental connections over the ‘is’ of identity. We have argued that glory hole sex provides an escape route from the violence of stratification. We have also suggested that it is time to rethink the ethics of sexual encounter, away from the stratifying identities of the Modern body politic and towards an ethic of non-autonomous life.

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