The Care of the Flesh[†]

João Florêncio

Sacrificium

When I finished writing *Bareback Porn, Porous Masculinities, Queer Futures: The Ethics of Becoming-Pig* in 2019, I had no idea that a book that tried to speculate on the ways in which twenty-first-century gay pig masculinities can help us think the porosity of bodies as living flesh cut across and shaped by political forces and ethical imperatives would be published in the middle of a new global pandemic. That newer pandemic brought a whole new set of concerns regarding the exchanges of bodily fluids that, to me, were—and remain—practices that raise important challenges to our understandings of our bodies, our pleasures, the plastic mess of our fleshy selves, and the ways in which—alongside and despite all that mess—we manage to find ways of relating to others, of surrendering our/selves to others.

To a certain extent, as soon as the book came out riding the speculative promise—yet to be wholly fulfilled—of a joyful world of collective sexual experimentation and becoming no longer haunted by the specter of AIDS and sustained by an ethics of care toward both our flesh and the flesh of those we *becum* with, I was taken by an immense sense of dread: the book I had written was aiming at something that suddenly appeared gone, impossible, unthinkable. *Bareback Porn, Porous Masculinities, Queer Futures* seemed to me to have appeared in the world out of sync, out of time. That opening of our selves and of our sense of collective existence alongside and within an other; that opening of the skin to the inner flesh of another in

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what Liz Rosenfeld describes, in their contribution to this forum, as a mixing of personal cosmologies; that sense of potentiality that I had hoped could be achieved through something that, to me, is germinal yet certainly not fully realized in pig sexual ethics—all that seemed to have been interrupted by the urgency of another kind of sacrifice, the sacrifice of touch and intimacy as a result of COVID-19. The life-affirming sacrifices that were central conceptual actors in my book had now been seemingly overridden by the need for another kind of sacrifice, one that to me and most, I think, felt instead to be life-hindering in its interpellation. *Bareback Porn, Porous Masculinities, Queer Futures* thus ended up feeling to me like a book about the potential of a certain kind of sexual self-sacrifice and the ethics that ought to come with it in order for that potential to be realized, yet one that came out at a time of a much different, more pressing, and less joyful kind of sacrificial imperative. And how much sacrifice we did sacrifice.

At the same time, however, the COVID-19 pandemic and the institutional responses to it also reignited and reinforced some of the arguments I made in the book, especially those regarding the often messy and internally conflicted ethico-political potential of pig sex. Oliver Davis, in his critical response to the book that is included in this forum, foregrounds the neoliberal rationality that—undoubtedly—sustains pig masculinities, highlighting that feminist thought has "moved on" past (some of) the feminist thinkers I draw from—even "wholesale" adopt—and claiming that "too much relatedness and too much merging can be self-defeating pathologies," that autonomy and "dissensual self-separation" are needed when forging the political. Davis is also suspicious of my deployment of the porosity of the pig body as a conceptual tool for thinking a more open polity, arguing that I rely "too heavily on the hoary politico-theological conceit of the 'body politic,'" and that the complex nature of governmentality in the modern world gives "minimally meaningful content to the claim that any

particular type of body (or masculinity, or femininity) might model a different type of macro-political structure." Yet, *contra* Davis, it was exactly that very paradigm of the nation-state as body politic—of the individual body as the guarantor of the body of the nation—that once again appeared, clearly and unquestionably, at the helm of institutional responses to the new pandemic. And, as if following an age-old and well-recognized script for some kind of overrated genre film generated by those Netflix or Pornhub algorithms that give you what your scapegoating heart desires, immediately the question of gay men and the sex we get up to became the story driving quite a bit of the sexual panic and pearl-clutching in many newspaper and TV headlines. So much for my relying "too heavily on the hoary politico-theological conceit of the 'body politic'" when—it turns out—it was that very same conceit that called upon all of us to act like responsible subjects over the last two years. So when Davis worries that I may be subscribing to an outdated and "unpalatable sacrificial theology," the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that sacrifice is an everyday demand placed upon every single one of us: "STAY HOME > PROTECT THE NHS > SAVE LIVES."

In that context, and beyond my disagreement with both Oliver's claim that scholarship has "moved on" and the linear understanding of time such claim entails—as if we didn't always carry the past within us, as if mourning were not so much a way of moving on as it is a way of learning to live with—the question that I was left with is: what are we being asked to sacrifice? What life is to be sacrificed and on whose behalf? That, to me, and given the ubiquitous and continuous presence of calls to sacrifice, is more important a question than the question of sacrifice itself. And it is only by answering that question that we can learn to put sacrifice in context, to understand its political nature, and to differentiate between the lives that are affirmed or hindered by different calls for sacrifice, by different stakes. Because it is only through that that

we can think sacrifice through the ethical demands it places upon us rather than through moral imperatives. And it is only ultimately through that that sacrifice has the potential to become a means towards something a little closer to the kind of autonomy Davis sees as needed in every political project, an ethical autonomy that—while being perhaps different to the one endorsed by Oliver—I certainly did not reject in the book, much to the contrary.

In calling on us to sacrifice ways of living in the name of life itself, public health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic once again brought to the fore the limitations of the abstracted public in "public health," as well as the ways in which what was considered a life worth protecting in official discourse is certainly not consensual but, instead, highly contested by different counterpublics with different values and lifeworlds, as recently discussed by Ursula Probst and Max Schnepf in "Moral Exposures, Public Appearances: Contested Presences of Non-Normative Sex in Pandemic Berlin." In that article, the authors draw from the tensions that emerged between governmental public health restrictions and individuals and organizations involved in Berlin's infamous non-normative sex cultures, from sex workers to club promoters and gay men who used to attend sex parties, all of whom were suddenly placed, once again, "under particular public scrutiny and moralised (health) governance" (2022: 75S). This resulted both in increased politicization of those scenes and practices and a subsequent attempt, by some actors, to evade, contest, or eventually incorporate public health governance into their lives, organizations, and/or events in an attempt to legitimize themselves as "good" biopolitical subjects and thus ensure the survival of their scenes during the pandemic. What Probst and Schnepf's example shows us is the ways in which, yet again, it was non-normative sex cultures and their subjects who were exponentially targeted by police, public health surveillance, and press headline upon press headline during this newer pandemic, with gay men in particular being

portrayed as irresponsible hedonists and vectors of infection in so-called "superspreader" events. In refusing to sacrifice their "lifestyle," gay men were seen to be sacrificing the lives of others—and, ultimately, the body politic of the state—at the altar of their sexual desires and pleasures. It's a familiar story: 1980s, here we go again.

One of the things that a recent series of events highlights is the tension at the heart of the relationship between sacrifice and autonomy, one that was already very much present in my book through my reading of Lacan's reading of Antigone. Indeed, as I wrote, citing Lacan at the end:

> Reflecting on her decision to break Creon's law and bury her brother Polynices, Lacan understood Antigone's law-breaking as something she had to do in order to become the Antigone we've come to know. Despite all the risks associated with breaking Creon's command, which stands as an allegory for Lacan's Law of the Water, it was only in the exact moment in which she broke the law in spite of herself—that is, despite all the likely consequences of her unruly behaviour—that Antigone, did, paradoxically, become herself. . . . As such, the ethical act embodied by Antigone "affirms the advent of the absolute individual." (Florêncio 2020: 174)

It was Antigone's sacrifice that opened the path to her autonomy. In order to become herself, she had to risk losing herself. And while as a faggot I may be biased, I like to think that it is that very kind of ethics that has sustained queer culture historically, indeed the ethics that, as Davis also notes, makes queer culture remarkable as an alternation between desublimation and sublimation, "the elation which comes of fluidly navigating between them," between doing and undoing, being and becoming, between breaking yourself down and putting yourself back together in new

glorious constellations. Sacrifice needs not be reduced to a letting go of the self. Instead, it can be carefully enacted as the ongoing writing forward of a self that will have been.

Curatio

To undo the self in order to stimulate its becoming—like a muscle that has to be torn before it can grow—requires an ethics of care: to care not for the self that is but for the bodies of self and/as other, to their flesh with all its potentiality, its plasticity, its desires, its ability to affect and be affected, its power as animated matter in the world. Michel Foucault highlights this point very clearly1 in ways that are casually overlooked by contemporary public discourses that push back against his cultural legacy as one of supposedly "everything-goes" neoliberal hedonism. Suspicious of a sexual politics purely based on narratives of liberation that had been informed, among others, by Wilhelm Reich's articulation of psychoanalytical theory and Marxist political thought, Foucault asks instead: "In the other of sexuality, is it obvious that in liberating one's desires one will know how to behave ethically in pleasurable relationships with others?" Rather than being a champion of reckless, unaccountable individualism, for Foucault "liberty is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the deliberate form assumed by liberty" (Fornet-Betancourt et al. 1987: 115).

Foucault's are important points to consider when reflecting on the pig sex scenes I explored in the book, its potential as a laboratory of production of new bodies and embodied constellations of being and becoming, as well as its current shortcomings that only an ethics of care can help avoid. Fundamentally, assuming the sacrifice of the self as a ground zero—a destruction of all structures—ethics is required to avoid a subsequent crystallization of liberty into fascism. From zero, anything can grow—both more capacious and more self-hindering formations of the subject. The zero has no politics beyond being a site for the coalescence of

something new. Only care allows us to shape that process in the direction of a horizon of joy and self-enhancing possibility. When asked whether "the care for self, released from the care for others, [does] not run the risk of 'absolutizing itself,'" Foucault replies:

> No, because the risk of dominating others and exercising over them a tyrannical power only comes from the fact that one did not care for one's self and that one has become a slave to his desires. But if you care for yourself correctly, i.e., if you know ontologically what you are, if you also know of what you are capable, if you know what it means for you to be a citizen in a city, to be the head of a household in an *oikos*, if you know what things you must fear and those that you should not fear, if you know what is suitable to hope for and what are the things on the contrary which should be completely indifferent for you, if you know, finally that you should not fear death, well, then, you cannot abuse your power over others. (cited in Fornet-Betancourt et al. 1987: 119)

Foucault's argument is useful to frame my interest in gay "pig" sexual subcultures, not because I wish to "redeem sex . . . in an ethico-political sense," as Ricky Varghese asks in his contribution to this forum, but because—as anyone of his psychoanalytical persuasion will agree, no doubt—sex tells us something about ourselves in the current episteme. Namely, it is that the pull of the negative that psychoanalysis associates with *jouissance* can give us access to new aspects of the self to think and care about, a level of what Tim Dean (2013) describes as a kind of pre-individual ontological sameness from which we can restart shaping new and more capacious ways of relating to ourselves and one another. There, "the pigsty offers an alternative model of community premised in different ways of knowing and being" that, as Claire Rasmussen writes in her response to the book, "may find points of solidarity with other marginalized subjectivities

expelled by the body politic." Yet the risk remains, as Christien Garcia notes in his contribution, that, while we attempt to think the pig in academia, it becomes institutionalized and that its potential as a dissident body withers away, that the sexual excess of the pig becomes sublimated into capitalistic knowledge production. What happens to the pig when it goes to university? I'd like to think that, at best, he can function as a glitch, a virus that corrupts the code that structures institutionalized knowledge, that breaks through the immunity of the university. At worst, he'll become crystallized, ossified, dead, while the sexual subcultures outside the ivory tower will continue to live and invent themselves anew, oblivious to whatever academics think or write. And that is not, dear reader, necessarily a bad thing.

Ecce Porcus

In this book forum, Varghese notes that "perhaps, the pig can't be contained by the seeming excess that is denoted by the word 'extreme.' Perhaps, he simultaneously both tries to exceed all our redemptive, political expectations of him and, at the same time, fails to exceed any of it at all." This is precisely indeed why—in my view—the pig is such an alluring creature in contemporary gay male sex cultures. *Porcus*, the pig—the etymology tells us—is a swine that is somewhat tame, somewhat domesticated, or otherwise it isn't that which we claim it to be. As I've argued in the book when discussing the work of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986), it is exactly because the pig is both like us and not like us that it invites us to reckon with ourselves: it is one that would not be triggered by an encounter with a wholly wild, alienating swine. The pig is a creature of threshold, and it is there that its value resides. There is no reason—I don't think—to mourn the sanitation of the pig, as John Thomas does in this forum. Similarly, there is no reason to worry about the risks of "too much relatedness and too much merging" as Davis does. Because unlike—say—the wild swine that is the boar, the pig is neither

here nor there. Should it move decisively into either one of those two directions, he will cease to be a pig, becoming instead either too much of a familiar pet or too much of a wild beast. This is exactly why the pig that I imagine—one that may not always or not yet be wholly found in the scenes I describe—can only be a pig who cares for his own body and, through that, for the bodies of all others; for we are all, ultimately, delightful agential beautiful flesh. That is why the pig belongs to the threshold. He belongs neither to order nor to chaos while somehow having something in common with both. That is also why, politically, the pig is neither of the far right nor of the radical left, neither a centripetal libertarian nor a centrifugal anarchist, even though he can feel the pull of both and sometimes veer either way in a radical line of flight toward dangerous forms of ontological hyperstratification and political sedimentation—and a rock is always a hard place. The pig is also—most certainly—not a centrist, for the threshold is never a center: it is a boundary, a *limen*, where everything comes undone to allow for new unforeseen possibilities to be reckoned with and pursued. That is why the pig can only be true to himself in the domain of ethics, not of law. Because law requires knowledge of what is possible, ethics—Antigone has shown—requires that we make decisions that laws cannot fully account for, that we be present and porous to the other in all their strangeness, in all their ungraspability, for ethics, as I understand it, is anathema to jurisprudence. Therein lies not only the ethico-political potential but also the risks posed by pig sex as an existential laboratory, as a zero point of new configurations of matter and meaning, of affects and flesh. Perhaps the caring pig my book speaks toward—this pig that cares and therefore curates himself ethically in relation to others—is not yet here. Yet, perhaps, we already carry within us his seed, the seed of his becoming.

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