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The Gift in Lube: Erotics of Facilitation

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Panel: Screw The System Chair: Justyna Jajszczok

“The Gift in Lube: Erotics of Facilitation” is first and foremost a question of how we might think the difference between entities as lubricious, as a wet mediation which enables new movements, gestures and openings between bodies implicated in the landscapes of sex and power. This is a paper fascinated by the material potentiality of lubrication and lubricity, and how lube might present itself as a substance that challenges preconceptions of the body, interrogates its limits, and approaches the ontological question of being differently.

Personal lube has emerged as a defining symbol of the ‘sexual wellness’ industry over the last 15 years, yet it still bears the stigma of a deeply entrenched aversion to its slippery inclusion. Despite the numerous advertising campaigns by companies which promote an ‘open and frank’ conversation on the issue of sex, lubricants still commonly play second fiddle to ‘naturally produced’ genital fluids in the social imaginary. In keeping with the aim of this conference, I return to more traditional questions of embodiment in order to think how the body might facilitate or present new or unforeseen gestures and movements which resist the ossification of sex into defined categories, with lube in hand.

I arrive at this question of whether the body can be thought of as a site of facilitation between self and other through a return to Derrida’s notion of the gift. For Derrida, the act of giving is understood based on a relationship between both a giver and taker, an exchange between the two that suggest a debt or reciprocity, wherein the gift itself becomes the opposite of what it claims to be.¹ As Marcel Hénaff tells us, in order for the gift to be a true gift, the giver must be completely unaware that what they are giving is, in fact, a gift, and the receiver must be wholly oblivious of the giver’s identity, in order to avoid the desire to return the gesture, which would

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 7.

annual the possibility of a true gift.² Here, I draw on Derrida's notion of the gift to reframe the binary of 'giving' and 'receiving' in relation to sex, and most importantly to contest the dangerous misogynistic fantasy of man's innate right of access to sex in the world at large. The gift in lube, I will argue, acts as a substance of facilitation, which loosens the rigid cultural values we ascribe to the body and destabilises the dynamics of power and non-power that play out in colonial-patriarchal fantasies.

Before I consider Derrida's aporia of the gift as something gelatinous and lubricious, I want to turn to some of the important ontological connections facilitated by lube in the history of ideas.

Lube, and its origins in mud and oil, manifests as a divine gift or intermediary substance between life and death. In Ancient Egypt, it was believed that life itself began in the generative compost of earth and mud, and the time for death was marked with the use of petroleum during mummification, the dark colour of which was likened to the skin of the gods.³ At the same time, crocodile dung and honey were spread across genitals owing to their apparent ability to act as a natural contraceptive, which arguably marks one of the earliest iterations of spermicidal lube in human culture.⁴ Like the Egyptian use of excrement and honey, olive oil doubled as both a contraceptive and a lubricant in ancient Greece.⁵ Physicians living during the age of antiquity claimed that such an oil would clog the entrance of the uterus and prevent sperm from passing through, an idea which Aristotle referenced in *The History of Animals*, where he documented that 'if the labia are smooth, women will not conceive.'⁶ Reflecting on these ancient philosophies of compost, mud and oil, we can surmise that these lubricious substrates were culturally recognised at the time as sources of interplay between life and non-life.

In the history of ideas, lube is also connected to slime and mucous, substances which gained traction during the nineteenth century when science became infatuated with life's apparent ability to self-sustain or self-organise and research at the time was guided by the desire to

² Marcel Hénaff, *Philosophers' Gift: Reexamining Reciprocity*, trans. Jean-Louis Morhange (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 11.

³ Alfred Lucas, "The question of the use of bitumen or pitch by the ancient Egyptians in mummification," *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 1, no. 1 (1914): 241.

⁴ "Crocodile or elephant dung," MUVS: Museum of Contraception and Abortion, accessed August 6, 2023. <https://muvs.org/en/contraception/barriers/crocodile-or-elephant-dung-id2519/>

⁵ Emma Stafford, "Olive Oil, Dildos and Sandals: Greek Sex Toys Reassessed," in *Sex and the Ancient City: Sex and Sexual Practices in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. Andreas Serafim, George Kazantzidis, Kyriakos Demetriou (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022), 222.

⁶ Aristotle, *History of Animals*, trans. Richard Cresswell (London: George Bell & Sons, 1883), 182-183.

identify a viscous fluid that served as the physical basis for life as we know it.⁷ Influential biologists like Ernst Haeckel referred to this imagined substance as a ‘protoplasm,’ a word used by many in his field to describe the gelatinous fluid in the living cells of animals and plants.⁸ However, what differentiated Haeckel’s interpretation from his contemporaries was his belief that protoplasm not only acted as a fluid which contained information regarding the origins of life, but that it also retained the traces of meaningful forms which life inevitably undertook.⁹ In other words, Haeckel believed that certain viscous liquids effectively contained a written history of the world and also a blueprint for the development of culture itself.

However, the idea that all life began in some kind of primordial slime or soup unwittingly becoming a defining example of racist and sexist rhetoric at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Susanne Weidlich writes in her natural history of slime, writer H.P. Lovecraft was particularly inspired by Haeckel’s brand of primordial goo, which is evident in his nightmarish portrayal of slime as a motif for the demonisation of black bodies, Jews, and female genitalia.¹⁰ For Lovecraft, primordial slime represented a threat to Man’s progress and cultural elevation. As Ulf Houe notes in his essay “Protoplasmic Imagination,” ‘for Haeckel, protoplasm naturally developed towards civilization, while in Lovecraft it is exactly what civilization has left behind and must keep at bay.’¹¹ We can also see a heterocentric aversion to mucus and the female body in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre who in one instance described slime as a soft feminine sucking or sickly-sweet revenge.¹² As Constance Mui writes, for Sartre, it is a woman’s given nature to be soft, threatening, and obscene, since she does not choose, but is borne with a body that bears such slimy qualities.¹³ As we can see, racism and sexism during the nineteenth and early twentieth century became an abject relationship between self and other based promulgated by biofluids, which ultimately excluded certain bodies from just ontological consideration.

During the late twentieth century, lube started to manifest as a refined commodity of erotic capitalism, evidencing an economy infatuated with the idea of biopolitically managing life through investments made in sexual life. North American department stores such as Saks Fifth

⁷ Ulf Houe, “The Protoplasmic Imagination: Ernst Haeckel and H. P. Lovecraft,” *Configurations* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2022): 48.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Susanne Weidlich, *Slime: A Natural History*, trans. Ayça Türkoglu (London: Granta, 2022), 15.

¹¹ Houe, “The Protoplasmic Imagination,” 50.

¹² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1982), 609.

¹³ Constance Mui, “Sartre’s Sexism Reconsidered” *Auslegung: A Journal of Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (1990): 37.

Avenue and Bloomingdale's began stocking personal lube in bottles reminiscent to cologne or perfume, which could adorn bedside tables as novelty ornaments or collectables.¹⁴ Annual lube trade shows hosted in Silicon Valley became a wet haven for customers to rub testers between their fingers or sample a quick taste of flavoured goo. Far from its material connections with mud and slime, personal lube became one of the defining commodities produced by sexual wellness industries as something 'natural' or 'clean,' to titillate sexual parts with minds at ease.¹⁵

Yet while the current zeitgeist may feel sexier or more inclusive, there is still notable reservations about introducing synthetic lube in sexual practice. A common misconception for the archetypal heterosexual couple nowadays is that lubing up signifies a less than healthy sex life. Women who experience discomfort or vaginal dryness are too ashamed to include a personal lubricant for fear of being labelled sexually frigid, whereas men who are unable to stimulate a 'natural response' during sex consider their partner to be 'not ready.' Staging women as wet and ready-to-go at the slightest fumble, something we might witness in a 'coming-of-age' film perpetuates oppositional positions which are steeped in misogyny and biological inaccuracies. It should go without saying that genital wetness and arousal are not mutually exclusive.

Ultimately, there is more to lube than the image constructed by sexual wellness industries. Lubricants are messy, slimy substances by their very nature, caught up in the production and subversion of sexual identities. They facilitate a veritable *feeling of difference* at the most intimate contact zones of the body during sex, where its viscosity introduces a certain slippage to positions of power, mastery, and subordination. The word 'lubricious' itself suggests 'having a smooth or slippery quality' or 'bearing a mark of wantonness or salaciousness.' This dual meaning reflects the two distinct yet compatible uses of lubricants in everyday life as a mechanical, productive biotechnology in industrial structures and a carnal, stimulating fluid in erotic encounters. In this sense, lubricants emerge in bedrooms and car body shops as a biotechnology that energises both human and machine assemblages, materially and socially opening our sense of being to undecidability and translation.

¹⁴ Lynn Comella, "Inside the Wet, Slippery, Booming Business of Lube," *Forbes*, October 1, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lynncomella/2018/10/01/inside-the-wet-slippery-booming-business-oflube/?sh=7ebe7e97753a>

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

And it is with this notion of lube's overarching potential that I return to my earlier connection with Derrida's notion of the gift. As already mentioned, Derrida positions the gift as something which is paradoxical, implicated in an economy of exchange between a giver and a receiver, where the act of giving suggests a debt or reciprocity. For Derrida, the gift can be a simple thing or a metaphysical gesture, for example, to give someone your time.¹⁶ However, all gifts become obsolete once they enter into the circular economy of exchange between individuals. As Derrida tells us in *Given Time*, the idea of the gift defies the unity of its meaning or significance once it is recognised for what it 'is.'¹⁷ According to this logic, the gesture behind the act of giving becomes meaningless when we entertain the desire to repay the debt. It is for this reason that Derrida speaks of the gift as something which is likely impossible.¹⁸

Positioning the gift alongside sex exposes certain colonial-patriarchal fantasies imposed on sexuality throughout history, which are more often than not fixated around issues of domination and power. The purity of virginity, man's 'natural right' for access to women, the special status assigned to sperm or the theological significance attributed to motherhood – all have been described by past and present conservative commentators as divine 'gifts from Nature.' These are not true gifts at all but are, in fact, lessons in patriarchal culture. Another example again is the archetypal heterosexual couple who fear synthetic lube. For this couple, producing fluids naturally is seen as some kind of desired goal. But if we think of Derrida's aporia of the gift, we quickly realise that this is nothing more than an economy of exchange between entities which some might argue is transactional: the goal to satisfy yourself through the other, the satisfaction you receive when making your partner squirt, scream or shiver; depending on your kink.

So, how can we think of sex as something which is not reduced to a transactional 'gift of nature' and instead prioritises the body as a site of facilitation for new or unforeseen gestures and movements? For me, Derrida provides the hint of an answer in his essay "Heidegger's Hand," which constitutes the second instalment of his four essays on "Geschlecht," which mark an important critique of Heidegger's relative silence on the issue of sexual difference in relation to the ontological question of Being.

¹⁶ Derrida, *Given Time*, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 13.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 27.

In the essay, Derrida reflects on Heidegger's elevation of the human hand as a defining characteristic of the Cartesian subject. For Heidegger the human hand is 'an organ that signs,' which is infinitely different from all other animal appendages, such as paws or claws, due to its ineffable ability to perform the act of thinking or thought itself.¹⁹ As Heidegger writes in *What is Called Thinking?* 'Only a being who can speak, that is, think, can have hands and be handy in achieving works of handicraft.'²⁰ However, Derrida sees the hand in opposing terms, as an organ which he describes as something monstrous. As we know, the hand signs, instructs, orders, and, ultimately, the hand facilitates the development of culture itself. However, the hand also performs a kind of monstrosity as it signs, in the way that it crafts culture and language in wondrous and unforeseen ways through acts of signification.²¹

We can also argue that the hand presents itself as a bodily site of facilitation or a gift on the threshold of sexual difference. As Derrida tells us, the hand reaches and extends, receives and welcomes – not only other things – but others and the hand of the self as alterity.²² Looking to one line in particular, Derrida marvels that:

'At issue is a discourse that says everything about the *hand* or the *gift* as a site of sexual desire...'²³

By conflating the hand with the gift, it is conceivable to suggest that the hand gives itself without thought, in the sense that we do not consciously register the hand's general ability to craft thinking itself. Earlier I mentioned that a true gift requires the giver to be unaware that what is given is a gift, and the receiver must be oblivious of the giver's identity. Juxtaposing this with the organ that signs, I would argue that the hand mirrors this principle of the gift in the sense that the hand does not know what it gives, and we tend to forget about the technicity of the hand which exists outside of conscious thought. As such the hand performs an impossible task, it gives itself to the subject time and again without the need for exchange. While Heidegger frames the hand as a historic symbol of human exceptionalism, Derrida frames the

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. Jesse Glenn Gray (New York and London: Harper & Row 1968), 16.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other: Volume II*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 35.

²² Ibid, 35.

²³ Ibid.

hand as a monstrous organ that is impossible to truly apprehend, in the same way that a true gift is impossible to give.

Now, if we start to apply lube to this figure of the hand, we might finally arrive at my initial question of how the body might exist as a site of facilitation in sexual living rather than something which is transactional. With a lubed hand, I turn to the sexual practice of fisting, and the ways in which lube manifests as a substance which facilitates so called impossible sexual experiences. As many will know, fisting is a sexual practice popular mainly among queer subcultures, where historically gay men have used commercial products such as Vaseline, Crisco or KY Jelly to grease the human hand for insertion into the anus. Fisting, in a nutshell, is the gentle coaxing of a sphincter by a greased human hand, which relies upon facilitative gestures and carnal lines of communication between consenting individuals, to transform and displace what would ordinarily register as coercive pain or violence.²⁴

Fisting and lube go hand-in-hand, where the wet hand works its way between bodily surfaces as an intimate form of queer intervention and displacement. In his essay “Sex and the Lubricative Ethic,” Dinesh Wadiwel writes persuasively about how fisting fosters an ethics of sexual sensitivity in the ever-changing landscape of sex and power between bodies. Hand over fist, lubricants ease the passage of impossible relations from one to the other, disturbing the notion of an individual ‘giver’ and ‘receiver’ during sex.²⁵ Both participants continually act and communicate together, jointly collaborating in a queer event mediated by the science of friction. The act of fisting, then, becomes an art form, where lubricants emerge as substances which enable a multiplicity of movements that render frictional effects as pleasurable.²⁶ Fisting is therefore a transformative gift shared between lovers; it fosters a desire to ‘lay ourselves open to the other’ while simultaneously upholding the capacity for consensual transformation within the erotic field.²⁷ When inserted into the anus, the hand becomes something monstrous but also creative in the way that it invents new pleasurable openings and experiences. On a fundamental level, lube provides the hand with the material means for making possible what would otherwise be considered impossible.

²⁴ Dinesh Wadiwel, “Sex and the Lubricative Ethic” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Michael O’ Rourke (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 495.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 497.

²⁷ Ibid, 502

In closing, I suggest that the greased hand in this case presents itself as a gift in the way that it reaches, extends, and is welcomed by another who receives the gesture without any expectation or pressure of returning the sexual favour. The gift in lube, it would seem, is an ‘erotics of facilitation,’ which recognises the difference between entities as lubricious rather than transactional and enables us to queerly touch upon what might be otherwise considered impossible in the dynamics of power and non-power. With lube in hand, I fist bump with the words of Foucault, who observes how queer practices provide an opportunity for reopening the ‘affective and relational virtualities’ of sexuality left by the proverbial wayside throughout history:

‘What we must work on is not so much to liberate our pleasures but to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasure. We must escape and help others to escape the two readymade formulas of the pure sexual encounter and the lovers’ fusion of identities.’²⁸

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 137.