

Against the Flow:

When The Gift and Sexual Biopolitics Bleed Together

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Cutting straight to the chase, one question dominates here and now: what is the future of flow? Not just flow, but sexual flow, that vital image of an enduring and unending source of life and meaning that languishes below the surface of culture itself.¹ An image of the flow as generative, fecund, and final, one that bubbles up from a libidinal economy of law and order, with roots deeply knotted around a genealogy of sacrifice.

Being “Against the Flow” is not a theoretical attempt to staunch the presentation of a singular body as it flows, leaks, permeates and secretes *out* what is *in*. Instead, it is an attempt to stay the hand that would *cause what is in to flow out*, the hand that is seen to possess some inalienable right or claim over the ability to *make flow* and the decision to *let flow* as a form of justice, purification, or symbolic order.² This desire to *make flow* for philosopher Jacques Derrida in his seminars on *The Death Penalty* leaks out of both philosophical and literary archives as one of the skills that *homo faber* credits himself alone with possessing, as the privilege to spill and sacrifice in the name of progress and impermeable sovereignty.³ The history of *homo faber* is ‘a history of the treatment of blood’, according to Derrida, ‘a history of bloodletting, of the blood one sees flow, of the blood one lets flow, of the blood one causes to flow, of the blood that one does and doesn’t staunch, and of a history of blood as the history of a purification to be staunched, blood suddenly without blood, the history of an immunity to be saved, to be kept safe and sound.’⁴

The desire and the decision to make flow is one laced with sexual authority, power, and privilege. How then, might we upset this political investment in the word “flow”, this ability to spill that man wields as an inalienable right? What future of sexual flow, of life moving like a liquid in a continuous current or steady stream, can be conceived without recourse to this libidinal economy in which we still find ourselves today?

¹ Murat Aydemir, *Images of Bliss: Ejaculation, Masculinity, Meaning* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) 33.

² Jacques Derrida, *The Death Penalty Volume II*, ed. Geoffrey Bennington and Marc Crépon, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 220.

³ Lynn Turner, ‘Sanguine Resistance: dreaming of a future for blood’ in *7th Derrida Today Conference*, Arizona State University, Barbara Barrett and Sandra Day O’Connor Washington Center, Washington, D.C., United States, 12-15 June 2022.

⁴ Derrida, *The Death Penalty Vol II*, 220.

To leak or let flow, for Derrida, is a skilled incision into the conditional gift of life itself. Every citizen, Derrida notes in the *Death Penalty*, receives life from the state in the form of a loan, lent to 'him' as a gift given by the state as sovereign ruler.⁵ Readers of Derrida will recognise that the notion of the gift itself is an impossibility, since the act of giving always establishes an economy of exchange, of gifting and regifting, debt and reciprocity, wherein the gift itself becomes the opposite of what it claims to be.⁶ For Derrida, the gift can be metaphysical or gestural, for instance, to give someone your time. However, the gift becomes obsolete once it enters into a circular economy of exchange between the one who gives and the other who receives. 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.' In this sense, the gesture behind the act of giving becomes meaningless when we entertain the desire to repay the debt.⁷ To give is a principle of calculation, to give what is calculable. But the notion of the gift is what exceeds calculation.⁸ Thus, it is for this reason that Derrida speaks of the gift as something which is likely impossible.⁹

Blood is the gift of life, the calculation of what exceeds calculation, and what leaks out is the lifeblood of a conditional gift given by the state to the subject. Causing this so-called gift of life to flow freely sets in motion the logic of sacrifice on which sovereignty itself is built, and in which the hand of law enacts as an extension of sovereign rule. To make something leak or flow is inherently sexual. It is a desire to calculate what is incalculable, to try and measure what is hidden within, to make visible and significant what is invisible and not yet signified. As Derrida unravels in the *The Death Penalty*, blood draws out material, thematic, poetic and conceptual associations and presuppositions in relation to the question of sexual difference since the age of antiquity.¹⁰

What leaks out of the human body is an ambiguous concept, a blood that which either purifies or contaminates the living as it flows out. We all know painfully too well the negative treatment given to this sanguine substance, from the HIV/AIDS crisis during the 1980s to the infected blood scandal still unfolding in UK parliamentary proceedings to this day. But causing blood to flow also engages with a drive to purify, to bleed in order to indemnify the subject against a prospective threat or harm. Derrida justifies this claim in *The Death Penalty* with a recourse to Freud's essay on the "The Taboo of Virginity" first published in 1918. In this ethnographic paper examining what he deems to be an abject fear of blood by primitive races, Freud equates the desire to purify by making blood flow with the moment of so-called virginal deflowering.¹¹

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Death Penalty Volume I*, ed. Geoffrey Bennington, Marc Crepon and Thomas Dutoit, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 15.

⁶ Marcel Hénaff, *The Philosopher's Gift: Reexamining Reciprocity*, trans. Jean-Louis Morhange (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 11.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 11.

⁸ Derrida, *The Death Penalty Vol II*, 184.

⁹ Derrida, *Given Time*, 7.

¹⁰ Turner, 'Sanguine Resistance.'

¹¹ Derrida, *The Death Penalty Vol II*, 221.

For primitive cultures, Freud argues, blood is seen to be the seat of life, and nothing is more dangerous to man than the potential blood shed when the female subject is deflowered of her gift from nature. I should stress here that using the language Freud employed in his study is not an attempt to champion this inherent misogyny, but to highlight what is at stake when talking about the grave implications behind the desire to make flow.

In the “Taboo of Virginity”, Freud diagnoses female sexuality with a supernatural relation, where the seat of life between her hips acts as a threshold for communion with the other. In order to protect a newlywed husband from being afflicted with a blood omen cast upon him during his first night of matrimony, for which his now wife is expected to remain faithfully virginal, a sexual substitute is introduced in order to mitigate the potential for harm to the male subject.¹² On the wedding night, another male is the first to penetrate the newlywed female and thus displace the apparent deathly omen that is hidden behind the virgin’s so-called ‘gift of nature.’ Making flow in this sense is an attempt at purification, by causing blood to flow and by preventing it from flowing, by causing the first blood to be spilt and by preventing a threat to life from flowing out.

Why this taboo of virginity matters culturally today, Derrida argues, is because it informs much of our monosexual misogyny that we still attribute to blood and bodies, specifically around the taboo of menstruation that still permeates throughout most, but not all, cultural formations today.¹³ Freud’s reasoning that this fear of menstrual blood is born from a superstition that the virginal girl has been bitten by some spirit animal, as a sign of sexual dealings between female sexuality and the other side, is evident in language here and now, where offensive and misogynistic words used to describe female genitalia are still part of common parlance.

Therefore, it is important to stress that the language of leaks and flows is an inherited politics of action, control and authority, a sexual politics that we recognise today to be the by-product of a masculine libidinal economy, *homo faber*, or ‘man the maker.’ What bleeds from this history of *homo faber*, as that which stands for the idea that creativity is an inherent human trait which leads us to make tools to control our environment, is a monosexual regimentation of sexual difference and desire that is both violent and regulatory. However, I return to my opening question to ask again what a future of sexual flow free from a masculine economy might look like. ‘Is there a future for blood?’ Derrida wonders in *The Death Penalty*, ‘and what happens when blood disappears and remains as blood without blood?’¹⁴ It is this second gesture in Derrida’s question, of a future of a blood that remains without blood, that compels me to think how the flow of blood, the gift of life, might leak out as an expression of sanguine resistance in our current arena of sexual politics.

As I have already mentioned, the decision to make flow is indeed founded upon a history of visible bloodletting as a form of justice and state control, yet, as Michel Foucault outlines in

¹² Sigmund Freud, “The Virginity Taboo” in *The Psychology of Love*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), 271.

¹³ Derrida, *The Death Penalty Vol. II*, 221-222.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 220.

his series on the *History of Sexuality*, there is a distinctive transition in the nineteenth and twentieth century with the rise of sexology and psychiatry, a shift from the sovereign rule over life through the fear of bloodshed to a biopolitical management of life through the internal flow of blood in bodies themselves. Far removed from the sanguine hue of blood itself, endocrinology, pharmacology and psychiatry developed as newly consecrated fields of research underpinned by a desire to intervene on the inner networks of sexuality normally made invisible to the naked eye.

As Paul Preciado astutely highlights in *Testo-Junkie*, this step towards a biopolitical management of the body from within, through the increasing development of pharmaceutical hormones, antidepressants, porn and lubricants illustrates how industries have found a new method of sovereign control that speaks of a more sinister future for blood than what Derrida might have hoped.

In *Testo-Junkie*, Preciado makes salient the need to critique and change this historical epistemology of sex, gender and sexual difference, which has not always existed as the present day cultural, techno-scientific paradigm of binary dualism. ‘How’, Preciado asks ‘did sex and sexuality become the main objects of political and economic activity’, where “gender”, “sex”, “sexuality”, “sexual identity”, and “pleasure” became substances of political management of living?¹⁵ For Preciado, the problem primarily lies with the medicalisation of ‘homosexuality’ in the nineteenth century as a reservoir of negative affect and disorientation, pathologized by various institutions as a diseased deviation and crime and which soon became the dominant narrative for the biopolitical management of population and reproduction.¹⁶

In *Testo-Junkie*, Preciado names this new age of biopolitical administration ‘the pharmacopornographic era,’ as the biomolecular (pharmaco) and semiotic-technical (pornographic) orientation of sexual subjectivity in our modern capitalist society.¹⁷ For Preciado, the pharmacopornographic era is a manifestation of material authority over bodies, of capitalising and controlling the events of sexual life, such as erections, menstrual cycles, orgasms, fertility and sterility, in other words, the various leaks and flows experienced by the human body. The pharmacopornographic era can be defined as a control of the world’s orgasmic potential, and we only need to look to the current neoliberal investment in sexual wellness companies in order to validate Preciado’s argument.

However, the potential for disruption, according to Preciado, lies in our ability to revolutionise our organs, desires, chemical reactions and affects, to frustrate subject categories and force a revision of classical theories regarding sex and gender.¹⁸ We must participate in forms of gender-fuckery through the incorporation the new gelatinous technologies produced by our

¹⁵ Paul Preciado, *Testo-Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013), 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 33-35.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 33-34.

¹⁸ Sarah K. Hansen, “Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era by Paul B. Preciado (review),” *philoSOPHIA* 6, No. 1 (Winter 2016), 166-167.

pharmacopornographic society, such as hormone replacement therapy, interactive porn, antidepressants, and so on. Hormones, for Preciado, hold the power to pervert biopolitical controls imposed on the body via bloodstreams. While Preciado recognises that some take testosterone as part of a standardised protocol set out by governments or healthcare systems to transition, Preciado belongs to a group of testosterone users who self-medicate in order to ‘fool-around’ or ‘gender hack’ without the desire to change legal gender status or comply with psychiatric.¹⁹ For these gender hackers, hormones offer free and open biocodes, new chemical messengers that can be released into the bloodstream to create new and unforeseen somatic conditions.²⁰ Hormones, in this sense, can be introduced to the body to excite or active the chemical traffic which, according to Preciado, forces users to confront new perspectives on the production of power and subject.²¹

And for Preciado, increasing their testosterone levels in *Testo-Junkie* by self-administering Testogel purchased on the black market performs a political intervention on the dominant modes of production which control and convert bodily excitation into capital. As Preciado narrates in autobiographical fashion, they can feel the effects of this transdermal gel, exorcising the states of disorientation and dysphoria pathologized by institutional medical models. This process however, is not without its own set of disorientations and inversions. In diaristic fashion, Preciado records this experience in *Testo-Junkie*:

‘One of the first symptoms of testosterone lies in the sensation that the inside of my body is a fibrous and flexible mass that can spread itself through space in any direction; you could call it an organic conviction, the feeling that muscular intentionality can grab hold of any object, the certainty that any obstacle at all can be gotten the better of. But in addition, there is slightly more oily skin, sexual excitement, sweat. I want most of the effects of testosterone, but I can’t stand my own sweat when I’m on it. A smell that isn’t coming from somewhere else, from any other body, but from my skin, and from my skin directly to my pituitary gland and then toward my brain. I’m in T. I have become T.’²²

For Preciado, Testogel invites a ‘somatopolitical fictioning’ of the self, pushing the body to the extreme in defiance of the pharmacopornographic control over subjectivity. With Testogel, the future of Preciado’s blood is largely unknown, but what is clear its agential resistance to existing biocapitalist controls occurring *within* subjects themselves. The increased level of testosterone introduced to Preciado’s lifeblood appears to instigate a new purposeful sexual disorientation on the inner flows of the body, where new smells, tastes, metabolism, muscular tone and vocal timber accentuate the potential for autonomous sexual platforms, which are neither definitely male nor female, but are instead molecular ‘becomings between multiplicities.’²³

¹⁹ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 55.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 160-161.

²² Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 421-422.

²³ Ibid, 143.

While Preciado provides the theoretical mechanism to go against the flow of capitalist regimes from within, I cannot help but wonder what a future of visible blood can flow independently away from the sexual politics I have problematised earlier. It is hard to imagine how making flow might successfully drain the visible appearance of blood of its misogynistic, conceptual investment. However, in wondering about what a future of sexual flow might look like, I am reminded of an artwork by Jenny Holzer, a work introduced to me by Lynn Turner in her conference paper and soon to be book chapter “Sanguine Resistance”.

In 1993, Holzer received a highly public ticking off by the German press for her *Lustmord* series published in the Sunday magazine supplement of *Suddeutsche Zeitung*, a German newspaper given to showcasing artists work on the weekend.²⁴ The first 28 pages of this supplement contained photographs of human skin close-up, with capital letters of red or black ink inscribed on the surface in a kind of tattoo testimonial. *Lustmord*, literally meaning Sex Murder, was conceived to highlight the rape and murder of women during the Bosnian War, and these handwritten statements consisted of quotes that provided a chilling account of sexual violence from the three perspectives, the victim, the perpetrator, and the observer. What was particularly controversial however, was the fact that real blood, donated by the Bosnian victims of rape, had been incorporated into the ink used to print the supplement itself. The outrage that ensued illustrates what happens when the so-called gift of life and sexual politics bleed together. Holzer’s work was described at the time as perverse, wasteful and sensationalistic, but its ability to make visible the flow of sexual violence to readers in the comfort of their sitting rooms on a Sunday offers a counter narrative to histories of bloodshed. As Turner hints in “Sanguine Resistance” what flows from Holzer’s work is a sucker punch to any understanding of blood as a gift of nature or state.²⁵ Instead, blood will always confound us as it leaks and flows, and any future for blood must dispatch with the desire and decision to enforce flow as such.

Thank you.

²⁴ Turner, “Sanguine Resistance.”

²⁵ Ibid.