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'Party and Play': Online hook-up devices and the emergence of PNP practices among gay men

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Abstract
This article situates online hook-up devices as an emergent infrastructure of the sexual encounter that has become popular among homosexually attracted men in urban centres. A focus on intimate infrastructures does two things. It draws attention to the material technologies, objects and environments that facilitate erotic encounters, casting these devices as active elements in the shaping of sexual practices. And it references how the different kinds of erotic attachments that people come to find necessary for their lives may be ignored if not actively degraded by hegemonic 'institutions of intimacy' without critical intervention (Berlant and Warner, 1998). Where *institutions* allocate resources and establish hierarchies of authority, *infrastructures* produce capacities and shape encounters in ways that become more or less durable and hardwired into the routines of everyday life. The article traces some of the new genres of sexual interaction afforded by online devices, with a focus on the significance of the concept of 'play' among participants. Such a focus enables an understanding of relations between sex and sociability that are being elaborated with these media, and it generates an approach to HIV prevention that promotes acknowledgement of how drug practices and other objects and devices participate in the construction of sexual encounters: their pleasures, qualities, risks and potentialities.

Keywords
Crystal methamphetamine, gay men, mobile apps, online dating, serosorting, sexual community

Introduction

This article responds to normative tendencies within popular discourses of gay men's HIV prevention internationally that position HIV prevention as a possibility whose realization depends on the renunciation of substance use and even casual

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sex.[1] The problem with this trend is that HIV prevention comes to be aligned with moral compliance to the terms of normative citizenship (something that queer life frequently exceeds) rather than attending to the specific cultures in which HIV transmission takes place in order to devise practical ways of reducing transmission that are relevant to sexually active subjects (Race, 2009). Though not without their risks, nor in any sense uniformly taken by all participants, illicit drugs have in fact long been part of the sexual and social practices through which gay social bonds and community have been forged (Race, 2011). These bonds have in turn provided a basis for remarkably effective community responses to AIDS in many of the relevant contexts. From this perspective, the 'renunciative turn' promotes a disavowal of contexts and cultural practices that have been generative of sexual community and that need to be acknowledged and engaged in imaginative ways if HIV prevention is to be effective. One challenge, then, is to produce analyses of the relevant sexual practices, cultures and relations so that possibilities of care, safety, and pleasure that are immanent within these cultures can be acknowledged, identified and fostered.

To this effect, this article describes the emergence of a relatively new set of cultural practices and activities that are specific to gay sexual culture and that involve certain sociotechnical and material arrangements, namely WiFi, 3G and the devices that make use of these capacities to facilitate sexual and social encounters between men ('online hook-up devices'). I locate these devices as a relatively new *infrastructure of the sexual encounter*, by which I mean to draw attention to their material specificity and also make the point that they mediate the sexual encounter in new ways; making certain activities, relations, and practices possible while obviating others (see Hawkins and Race, 2011 for a theorization of the activity of objects and devices in the shaping of everyday practices). This is not to suggest that these practices are determined by the technological environment from which they emerge. But it is difficult to understand the shape of this culture – its emergent conventions, interactions, expectations and typical sequences of activity – without getting specific about the affordances, formats, design features and uses of online hook-up devices.

Of course, enjoyment of this sociotechnical infrastructure is predicated on certain forms of privilege. PC and smartphone ownership is far from universal, and the ability to enter into the fixed-term contracts that enable online access is largely dependent on economic security or at least the ability to obtain financial credit. Moreover, the sexual culture that has built up around the use of these devices in urban centres depends in part on participants' ability to access private accommodation in these locations – something that depends in the contemporary metropolis on economic affluence and/or cultural capital to an unprecedented degree. As with any sociotechnical infrastructure, ideas of the ideal user inform the design of these technologies, and these technologies configure and discipline their users in various ways (Woolgar, 1991). Their appeal to commoditized logics, and the narrow terms according to which members are obliged to present and categorize themselves, have been a source of predictable criticism (Light et al., 2008).[2] Meanwhile, the

racialized and masculinized forms of sexual capital that are typically valued and promoted on the most popular sites – and the privileging of certain body types (the gym body) – have been a source of critical concern (Faris and Sugie, 2012; Gosine, 2007), though minority racial or ethnic identity does not in itself preclude participation. While these issues are not my primary focus here, such disparities and inequities are a significant feature of this sexual infrastructure, which is reconfiguring sexual and intimate practices in wide-ranging ways (see Berry et al., 2003; Campbell, 2004; Davis et al., 2006; Dowsett et al., 2008; Mowlabocus, 2010; Race, 2010, Race 2014a). Any account that represents this culture – and its associated practices and technologies – as just the latest version of cruising misses something important about the specificity of the sociotechnical arrangements that shape its contours and conventional forms. There is a long and rich history of cruising practices in gay urban centres, to be sure (Bech, 1997). Indeed, these histories inform many of the design features and typical uses of online hook-up devices. But these practices are also taking new forms, assuming new genres and proceeding through new avenues in the encounter with digital media. *Something is happening here*: a sexual culture is emerging and transforming. We are faced with a significant transformation in practices of sexual community and genres of sexual interaction that requires acknowledgement, understanding and analysis.

There is of course a multitude of different possible ways of using and interacting with online hook-up devices, and these media are used for a variety of different purposes ('dates and mates', 'finding a boyfriend', 'chat', 'hooking up'). My earlier reference to the concept of genre is meant to suggest that, however variable and idiosyncratic they may be, the relevant interactions proceed in relation to preceding conventions that shape and constrain the form they typically take. In other words, online interactions are characterized by certain formal features that offer frameworks for constructing meaning and value (Frow, 2006). Since the term genre typically refers to types of texts and speech, it seems a particularly fitting concept for making sense of many of the activities I discuss in this piece. After all, digital media give a textual materiality to interactions that might otherwise be conducted verbally, or – more typically – non-verbally. Indeed, it is precisely the materialization of these interactions *in* and *as* text that invests this scene with many of its most significant and novel affordances, as we shall see (on the concept of affordances see Gibson, 1977). But this observation also indicates a certain paradox: in genre theory, material or technological elements tend to be bracketed in favour of a focus on discursive processes.[3] On my analysis, it is the very materiality of written texts and digital images, in part, that generates new capacities, experiences, and affective vectors. From this perspective, online devices represent an opportunity to push genre theory towards a more explicit acknowledgement of the *agency* of material objects and devices in communicative activity and formative processes (again, see Hawkins and Race, 2011). The distinction Bruno Latour makes between mediators and intermediaries is helpful here. Where *intermediaries* transport meanings without transformation, *mediators* 'transform, translate, distort and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry'; thus their specificity 'has

to be taken into account every time' (Latour, 2005: 39). In other words, online hook-up devices are not inert vessels or pathways for the same old meanings and interactions. They are not intermediaries; merely reproducing pre-existent characteristics of sexual cultures and practices. Rather, they act as *mediators*: that is, material actants that modify the practices and encounters they enable in quite specific, potentially impactful, ways.

The particular cluster of practices with which this article is especially concerned is known among participants as PNP, or Party 'n' Play, (also known as 'Wired Play' or 'ChemSex'). These terms refer to the use of certain drugs to engage in sexual activity, generally in the home of a given participant. Only a subsection of online participants engage in these sex and drug practices – between 20% and 25% of gay men in the last six months in recent Sydney community samples (Hull et al., 2013).[4] Yet the term has passed into everyday gay parlance in ways that are suggestive of its sedimentation as a recognizable cultural form. What was once a makeshift set of improvised activities and loose associations has congealed into a legible scenario; a mode of sexual encounter with its own protocols and expectations of participants. Moreover, as I argue in what follows, PNP is continuous with broader cultural framings that circulate within this sociotechnical constellation more generally, namely the framing of sex as play. To date, PNP and its correlates – internet use, crystal meth use, and sex with multiple partners – have largely been produced within the HIV epidemiological and behavioural literature as a pathogenic site, because of the associations with substance use and HIV transmission (Grov, 2004; Grov and Parsons, 2006; Halkitis et al., 2001; Kirby and Thornber-Dunwell, 2013; Parsons et al., 2007). Little attempt has been made in this literature to approach these behaviours as a culture; that is, a cluster of activities and practices that are meaningful for participants with their own organizing logics and relative coherence; a significant source of pleasure, connection, eroticism and intimacy – notwithstanding the known dangers. In this respect, an analysis of PNP may prompt a productive confrontation with one of the central paradoxes of HIV prevention among men who have sex with men. Many of the sites that epidemiologists identify as pathogenic are also key sites for the elaboration of significant social bonds. In these spaces, participants are undertaking some of the affective groundwork from which relations of community, care and connection may emerge.

But the sociomedical sciences are not the only discourses involved in the denigration of this scene. In gay community discourse and queer critical literature alike PNP is largely dismissed as a contemptible object. In *Unlimited Intimacy*, Tim Dean contrasts a romanticized yesteryear of street- and cinema-based cruising to the 'degraded form that cruising for bareback sex often takes, namely, hooking up online' (2009: 176). Here online sexual culture is deemed to participate in a 'troubling privatization of intimacy' (2009: 177), in which 'public and social' sex is contrasted with 'sex in front of a computer monitor, which tends to be solitary' (2009: 186) and embody 'a purely instrumental approach to the other' (2009: 194) – (as if sex at public cruising spots were always egalitarian and indiscriminate!).

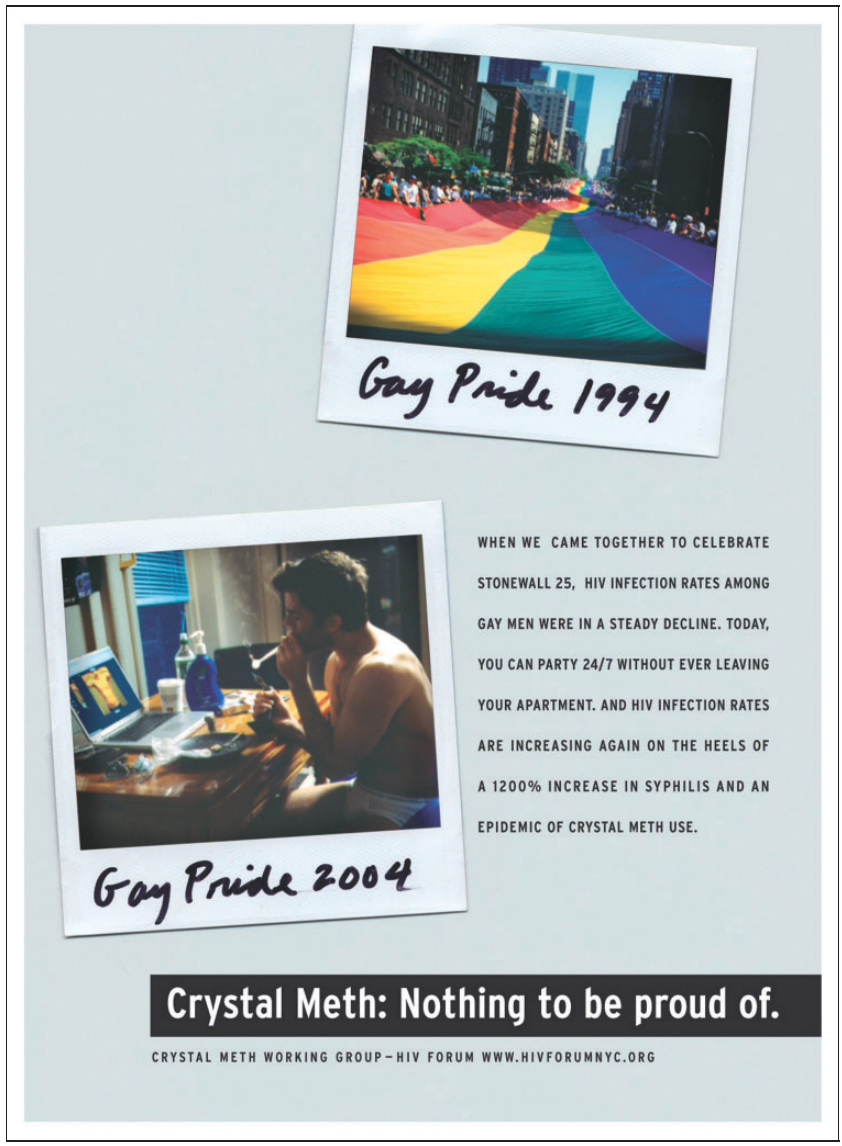

Figure 1. Crystal Meth Campaign 2004, HIV Forum NYC Crystal Meth Working Group.

Meanwhile, the campaign depicted in Figure 1 installs a former moment of idealized community politics and activism as a standard against which to measure the apparent isolation and atomization of online cruising. The latter image presents some of the key accoutrements of PNP practice in its typical social setting: the computer screen, the online profile, the crystal pipe, and so on, all situated within the solitary domestic space of the user.

One of the formative ideas of modern social and political theory is that the rise of the technical object can be held responsible for the demise of sociability and community. On this argument, industrial objects – whether technologies, objects, or commodities – have demolished authentic community, sociability and politics. This habit of thought has informed many of the analyses of online hook-up devices, and traces of them are clearly evident in the examples I have cited so far. But in this article I hope to complicate this diagnosis by paying more attention to what is actually going on in this space.[5] We need to investigate how modern objects mediate sociability if we want to offer something other than nostalgic complaint.

Methods

My analysis of online hook-up practices is based on an insider-ethnography of some of the changing spaces of HIV prevention in Sydney, Australia – a project supported by an ARC Discovery Grant awarded in 2011 that is ongoing (on insider-ethnography see Measham and Moore, 2006). This study comprises participant observation; open-ended interviews with participants in gay community, service providers and cultural producers; and the analysis of multiple forms of data including quantitative, textual, policy and historical material. The qualitative components of the study were approved by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval #14718). Among the material presented in this article is that generated by my own participation in this sociosexual culture, including screen shots of conversations I have had with prospective sexual partners. These conversations were undertaken for personal rather than research purposes. They would have taken place irrespective of this research. My selection of specific conversations for capture using the screen shot function was made on the basis of personal curiosity linked to my research interests: I have long been interested in how online devices give rise to new ways of negotiating HIV status – indeed, I am regularly faced with such questions in the course of my personal use of these mechanisms. Although no ethics approval was sought specifically to undertake these personal conversations (such approval would be difficult if not impossible to obtain), the committee did grant permission to collect and reproduce this category of data,[6] and nothing should prevent bona fide participants in sexual cultures from representing their experiences of these cultures in scholarly venues and using these reflections to inform their analysis. In accordance with general ethical principles, I have been careful to remove all identifying features of people I have corresponded with in this medium, including names, phone numbers, profile names, addresses and self-photos.

Two main criteria have informed my decision to reproduce specific exchanges here: (1) their illustration of what I take to be significant or characteristic features of wider norms, tendencies and attributes of this culture; and/or (2) their disruption of expectations and assumptions about how this field is working; in other words, their distinctiveness, novelty and potential for interference with established ways of

negotiating the matters they concern. While I have assembled the material presented here according to specific criteria, it is worth observing that capturing and storing images and conversations that are exchanged via these media has emerged as a popular practice within gay culture in its own right in recent years; a means of collecting and sharing erotic information and memorabilia (Race, 2014a). Such records serve various emergent social and personal functions; a source of recollection, speculation, fantasy, gossip, comparison, evidence, analysis, betrayal and ammunition. Indeed, beyond familiar concerns and anxieties around personal privacy, the capacities that are emerging from such practices of mobile sexual archiving are yet to be explored in any expansive or inventive detail.

Looking to play?

PNP can be approached as a marginal practice that has emerged from a more general attitude to sex and its social function that circulates within gay online culture, namely the framing of sex as 'play'. Play is a key term that motivates and sustains much of the sex arranged between men online. 'Looking to play?' is one of the most common questions employed to initiate conversation in this medium. The question does a number of things. It attempts to establish whether the recipient of the message is aiming to arrange an offline sexual encounter, indicating a key rationale and ostensible motivation for online participation in general. Second, it characterizes that encounter as casual, fun, and obligation-free. Third, it references (by omission) the possibility of a number of other modes of online participation – from 'checking messages', to 'having a look', to random chat, to casual browsing – that may be differentiated from actually 'looking to play'. 'Looking to play' is the online equivalent of cruising, but it differs from cruising in significant ways; most obviously in *how* it takes place, its reference to the mediating environment, the visuality of the medium and its textual format. PNP is a subset of this more general framing of sex. Not all of the sexual play that is arranged online is PNP, to be sure, but PNP would not take the forms it does in the absence of this framing, or indeed the capacities afforded by online devices.

The frequent deployment of the term 'play' affords further insight into the arrangement of this culture and the operation of sex within it. In Georg Simmel's essay, 'The Sociology of Sociability' (1949), the play-form is situated as a constructive aspect of social formation. Simmel conceives play as a non-instrumental form of association in which the exchange of stimulus is the governing principle and in which personality, serious content and substantive ends are suspended or displaced in favour of cultivating the pleasures of association. Indeed, the need or desire of an individual for serious results or instrumental ends is deemed by Simmel to interrupt the play form. To describe sex as play is to dislodge sex from the narrative that emphasizes the mutual development of biographical intimacy. Rather, it foregrounds a role for sex in the assembly of affective associations that Simmel would term 'sociability'. For Simmel, play has an important social and associative function and this is why for him 'it becomes apparent that

men can complain both justly and unjustly of the superficiality of social intercourse' (1949: 261). (Tellingly, such a complaint has long been levied at gay sexual culture in general!)

This perspective on play as an associative activity resonates also with certain approaches found in science studies, in particular those which led Bruno Latour to coin the term 'associology' in place of conventional approaches to sociology. In *Reassembling the Social* (2005), Latour rejects the common tendency within the social sciences to frame 'community' or 'the social' as explanatory devices with their own laws and properties that transcend specific instantiation (2005). Instead, he promotes tracing how heterogenous elements become *associated* in different forms or assemblages over time (hence the term 'associology'). This approach has specific value for social and cultural studies of HIV. The importance of 'community' for HIV prevention is widely cited in gay men's health promotion but it tends to be reified as an ideal or stable form that is then defiled by subsequent transformations (Dowsett, 2009). By adopting an 'associological' approach, and locating play as a key mechanism of association, we can track some of the ways in which sexual community is currently being assembled while paying careful attention to the performative impacts of objects, technologies, and devices in this process.

Among the many interesting features of online hook-up culture, there are three configurations that are especially distinctive and significant that I would like to analyse here. They include the pre-specification of practices, desires and HIV identities; sexual speculation and the co-construction of fantasy; and the formation of what has come to be known as the 'extended session' or 'wired play'. I deal with each topic briefly in turn.

Pre-specification of practices, desires, and prevention identities

Online hook-up devices afford members the opportunity to list various attributes and desired practices on their profile in both text and image to varying degrees (Davis et al., 2006). The ability to chat textually and relatively anonymously in real time prior to sexual encounters differs from the affordances of longer standing gay sexual environments, such as saunas and beats, where prolonged verbal communication is not necessarily customary prior to sex. Online cruising is thus distinctive as a sexual medium in that it allows users to stage their online presence to their own advantage, gradually releasing information about their appearance, attributes and interests to potential partners (Davis et al., 2006). This quality is made use of in various ways and appreciated by many users. For example Aaron, a transman I interviewed, explained how useful it has been for him to have a discussion about practices, desires and possibilities in the safety of relative anonymity prior to agreeing to meet up with a prospective partner. This feature is also regularly used by both HIV-positive and HIV-negative men to try to find partners of like HIV status, sometimes in attempts to arrange safe unprotected sex. In this respect,

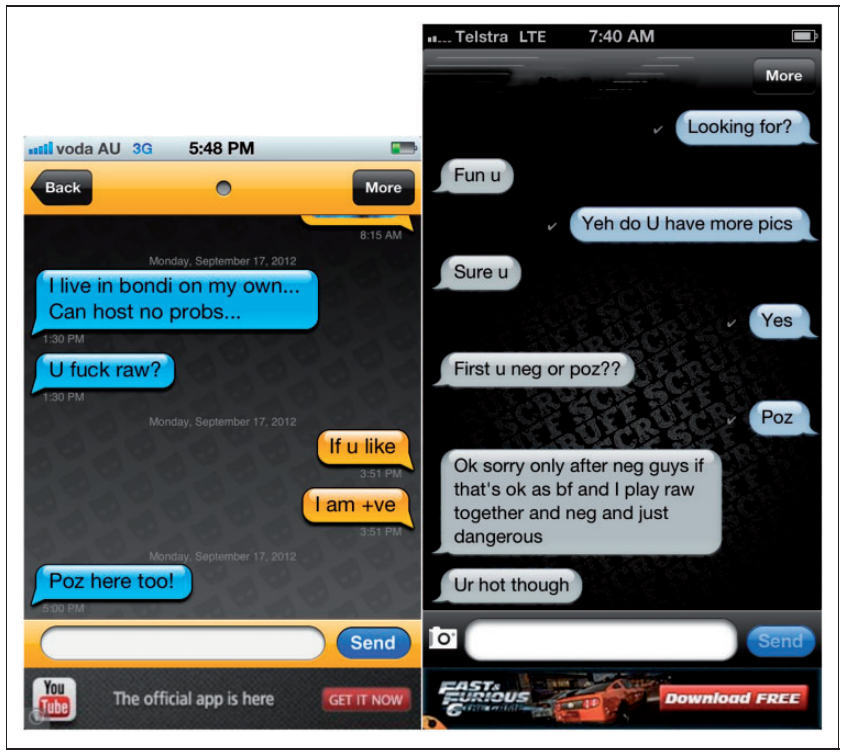

Figure 2. Serosorting.

these devices are implicated in the proliferation of 'serosorting' – a prevention practice whose implications – both promising and troubling – I have discussed in more detail elsewhere (Race, 2010). Here I would like to explore some of the ways in which these discussions are unfolding in Sydney, Australia at the present time (2012–2013).

Figure 2 consists of two relatively typical attempts to use HIV status to arrange safe bareback sex, using the mobile apps Grindr and Scruff respectively. In the first, I take the question about 'fucking raw' as a relatively safe opportunity to disclose my HIV status. While such a disclosure is not inevitable or guaranteed, and the perception of safety is to some extent guesswork, in this instance my disclosure is met with a positive response and a return disclosure of similar HIV status, signalling continued interest. In the second example, by contrast, the corresponding parties are seeking to arrange bareback sex with partners who indicate that they are HIV negative, so my response to the question about HIV status disrupts the momentum of the conversation. This kind of disruption and implicit rejection is a relatively common experience for HIV-positive users of these media. Along with the occasional use of more pejorative terminology on the part of presumed HIV-negative participants (such as asking other members if they are 'clean'), this goes

some way in explaining the reticence of many HIV-positive participants to disclose their status at all.[7] An alternative is to engage in various forms of *veiled disclosure* by testing the waters with thinly veiled signals that are assumed to be legible to sympathetic participants. The question 'do you fuck raw?' may be considered a move of this sort. By referencing a practice rather than HIV status, the user is signalling a preference for a practice that is associated with HIV transmission without undertaking explicit HIV disclosure. A positive response would typically be taken by many HIV-positive users to indicate the prospective partner's HIV-positive status (or else knowing consent to the risks of unprotected sex). But these inferences are not necessarily transparent to HIV-negative users, who may be under the illusion that HIV-positive users reveal their HIV-positive status automatically. In this sense, veiled disclosure reveals much about the conditions that shape the negotiation of HIV prevention: the fears, apprehensions and misunderstandings that interfere with the possibility of transparent communication about HIV status.

In Figure 3 we see another instance of veiled disclosure in which the user asks me whether I am on bbrt. Bbrt is an abbreviation for *Bareback Real Time*, a site that is currently popular among HIV-positive and other barebackers in Sydney, but

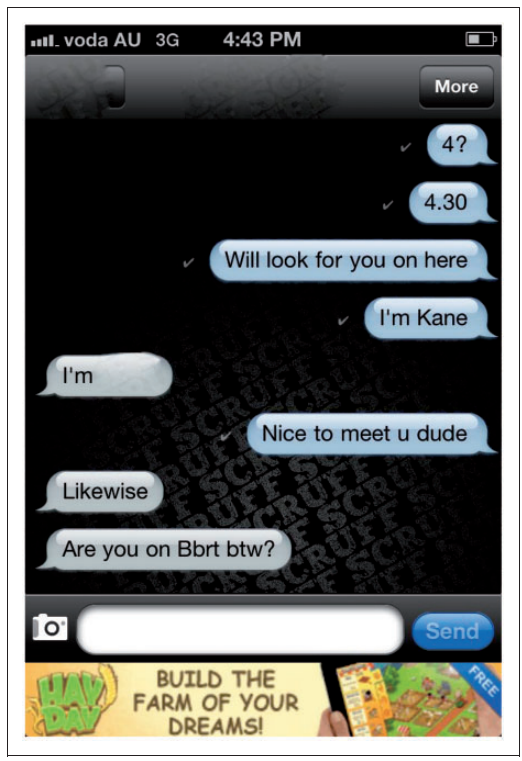

Figure 3. Veiled disclosure.

whose meaning and implicit associations are not likely to be evident to those who are unfamiliar with the site or the acronym. By avoiding direct disclosure in such a way, the HIV-positive user is exploring possibilities around bareback sex while reserving the opportunity to back out of the exchange should any of the risks associated with HIV identification emerge. The common employment of 'veiled disclosure' demonstrates the degree of apprehension that HIV-positive individuals experience in relation to the practicalities and possibilities of self-disclosure. Veiled disclosure is also employed in other domains – to feel out possibilities for desired but morally contentious activities such as drug use and more rarefied sexual fetishes, for example. The use of abbreviations, acronyms, and loaded terms comprises a heterogenous but covert vocabulary that is presumed to be decipherable to like-minded participants but opaque to outsiders and unsympathetic parties.

Figure 4 demonstrates how gay men are appropriating viral load test results to constitute new HIV prevention identities. The response of the interlocutor to my somewhat clumsy question about what he would do if I said I was HIV-negative ('U would have by now lol') indicates that what we are dealing with here is not simply a random sequence of personal responses, but a *genre* – that is, a conventionalized form of discursive interaction that organizes participants' expectations of their exchange and the turns it will take, which thus becomes available for conscious reflection, improvization, adaptation and reflexive comment.

Although my initial attempt to clarify the meaning of his proclaimed identity is fairly tightly framed – 'do you mean you are poz or neg?' – the interlocutor refuses the terms of the question and proposes a different identity for himself in the field of risk, namely 'undetectable'. HIV-positive individuals have long used viral load test results in attempts to reduce the risk of unprotected sex (see Race, 2001, 2003; Rosengarten et al., 2000). But the appearance of undetectability as an explicit identity mobilized to mitigate any alarm associated with HIV positivity – that is, as a prevention identity *in itself* – is a relatively recent development; one that connects with discourses of Treatment as Prevention and recent clinical trials that suggest the reduced infectiousness of HIV-positive individuals on treatment.[8] The emergence of this term as a prevention identity demonstrates how the field of sexual practice is directly and indirectly informed by biomedical discourse, though not in the ways necessarily expected or readily acknowledged by policy-makers. The use of viral load results to justify dispensing with condoms in such instances demonstrates how clinical findings participate in the emergence of practices that public health specialists might understand as 'risk compensation'. On internet hook-up sites such as Bareback Real Time, 'undetectable' now appears as one of the pro-forma options one can choose in the HIV status category on one's profile. This is a stunning demonstration of how clinical information can become part of a sexual architecture and provide a basis for the routinization of new assortative and risk/prevention practices.

While undetectable viral load has emerged quite explicitly as a prevention identity in recent years, it is nevertheless not universally accepted as such by all Sydney

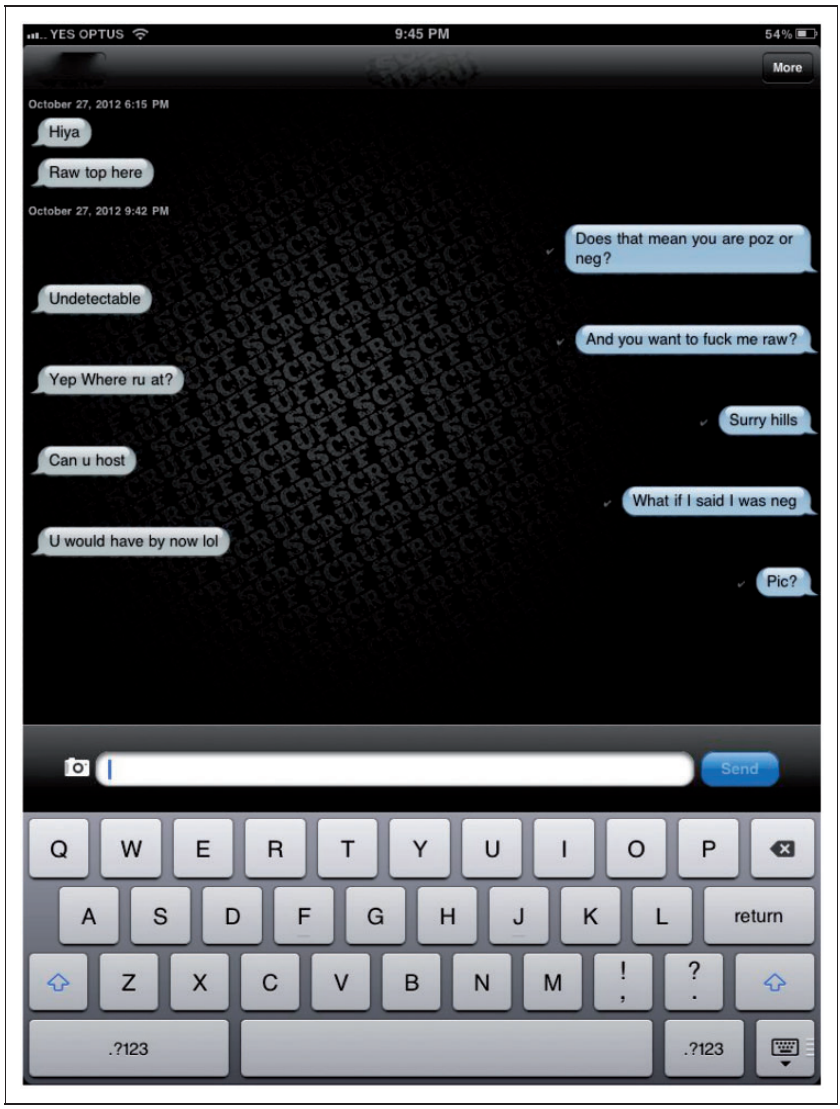

Figure 4. Undetectable as prevention identity.

gay men. Figure 5 sets out two conversations conducted in relative close proximity. In the first, the HIV-negative correspondent indicates that he will accept HIV-positive men with undetectable viral load as sexual partners, and that he has bare-backed with such a partner in the recent past. In the second conversation, my disclosure of undetectable viral load terminates the discussion, since the correspondents 'only play with neg guys'. While the first exchange involves an acceptance of anti-viral suppression as a viable basis for safe unprotected sex, the second not

only sees this strategy rejected, but sees safety identified entirely with HIV-negative status, as can be seen in the use of the phrase 'safe and neg'. As a stock phrase, the expression 'safe and neg' both emerges from and helps to constitute the increasingly prevalent practice of HIV-negative serosorting. In this approach, condoms are displaced from their once established position as primary guarantors of safety, in favour of a solicitation of HIV-negative status. These ontologies of prevention ('anti-virally mediated sex' vs 'serosorting') cite different sexual attachments, clinical devices, and networks of authority to substantiate practices, each of which have preventative potential, but nonetheless emerge as incommensurable with each other in this instance. Here we can see how multiple ontologies of HIV prevention are circulating in this environment. Like the divergent determinations of disease that Mol cites as an example of ontological multiplicity (Mol, 2003), these strategies may interfere with each other, creating certain tensions or dilemmas. Or they may sit alongside each other non-problematically, or even reference each other in certain formulations. Their multiplicity is nonetheless liable to generate some degree of conflict, confusion, controversy or miscommunication as participants operating on the basis of one set of determinations find themselves confronted with other modes of composing safety that dislodge the self-evidence of the strategies and practices they regard as habitual or established.

Taken together, Figures 2–5 thus depict negotiations of various expectations around HIV disclosure in the context of attempts to arrange safe sex. These strategies include veiled disclosure, serosorting and anti-virally mediated sex, though

Figure 5. Multiplicity in HIV prevention.

consensus on these expanded definitions of safety is far from evident. These negotiations are pursued through more or less conventionalized forms, indicating the emergence of new genres of biomedical disclosure and HIV prevention. Significantly, these in turn rely on the capacity to have relatively anonymous but explicit discussions about clinical markers of infectivity and infection with prospective casual partners – a capacity that is uniquely afforded by the entry of online devices into practices of sexual arrangement.

Sexual speculation and the co-construction of fantasy

The second distinctive feature of this sociotechnical environment is in many ways an outgrowth of the first. The ability to chat textually and relatively anonymously in real time has produced a new textual and material space in which sexual activities and desires are not only stated but co-constructed in conversational format, either as a prelude to – or irrespective of – a sexual encounter. Some participants describe this mode of erotic interaction as 'random chat'. This genre is a significant development, if only because such a space of erotic exchange among relative strangers has never existed in precisely this format before. Erotic chatting serves as a means by which people select and screen for sexually compatible partners. But these exchanges, which I dub 'sexual (or erotic) speculation', can also constitute a form of play in themselves, insofar as they hover in a precarious space that teeters between pure exchange and the pursuit of instrumental ends (i.e. actually hooking up. See Simmel, 1949). This ambiguity and prevarication about intentions is experienced by many as a source of frustration, as is evident in the frequent appearance on people's profiles of statements such as 'not into hours of endless chat'. But for some participants, these interactions constitute an erotic practice in themselves, in which various pleasures and desires are proffered in textual form, sometimes supplemented by photographs and explicit self-pics which are sent to solicit appreciation from the other party and indicate sexual intentions or desired scenarios. These conversations may extend to previous sexual experiences, or discussion of sexual desires and fantasies more broadly, or familiar scenes from porn films, desired activities, and so forth. Sexual speculation enables participants to experiment with ideas about what they might want, as well as learn about sexual possibilities and set parameters; constituting a space in which fantasies materialize into more concrete opportunities, desires, and intentions; or else remain in the realm of chat and fantasy.

Co-constructed fantasies may shape expectations of offline encounters in ways that either structure these encounters or lead to disappointment, insofar as the ensuing encounter fails to live up to the pre-constructed fantasy of it. Adam et al. have considered the sense in which 'the crystallization of their fantasies in the texts that constitute the vehicle for their interaction is akin to the joint construction of a script' (Adam et al., 2011: 507). They offer some evidence that talking positively about unprotected sex online prior to meeting a given partner correlates with unprotected sex in practice, even when using condoms is claimed as the initial

intention. Particularly interesting here is the suggestion that sexual desires, intentions and even identities do not precede the online encounter in any simple sense, but can be understood to emerge from it through a process of eventuation (on eventuation see Latour, 1999; Race, 2014b). This tells us something about the generative properties of this sexual infrastructure. Since online media are not simply spaces of representation but also vehicles for interaction – that is, devices that serve as the material means of arranging sexual encounters – they produce new proximities between chat, pornography and the sexual encounter that may generate new amalgamations of fantasy and practice. Many online hook-up sites feature prominent links to other sites that enable the streaming of pornographic films, including the widely popular genre of barebacking pornography, for example. Here, viewing pornography may be interspersed with practices of sexual searching, in an arrangement that produces new relays between pornographic scenes and material practices of arranging sex. What is significant here are the contingent agentic capacities of this sexual assemblage, the sense in which the convergence of various forces and relations in an actual occasion serves to mediate and transform the identities and ontologies of the various elements that are party to that encounter (Race, 2014b). This is not to promote a simplistic model of media effects, but to argue for more specific modes of attention to the potential generativity or 'emergent causality' of this structure of entanglement (on emergent causality, see Connolly, 2004; Race, 2014b).

Wired play/extended sessions

The third formation I want to discuss is what has become known as the extended session, or long session, or extended play, or group play, and I have come to think of this as the attempted construction of a pornographic 'elsewhere' or heterotopia, insofar as it is experienced as an exceptional or extraordinary scene. This is where the use of drugs often comes in (though not necessarily for all participants). Extended sessions probably qualify as an instance of what Hurley and Prestage have analyzed as 'intensive sex partying' (2009). I am making a case for further attention to the sociomaterial devices that come together in the construction of such occasions. Parties cannot be understood apart from the material devices and infrastructures that constitute them as specific occasions. They do not take place in some abstract space; rather, the space of the party is enacted through specific practices, objects, devices and arrangements (Race, 2014a, Race, 2014b). A preference for 'extended sessions' may be stated on one's profile or during chat, and it specifies a desire to engage in sexual play for quite a while – often with more than one partner, or a sequence of partners, over several hours or even days. While the focus of extended sessions is ostensibly sex, such sessions actually comprise a number of activities, including chilling, chatting, watching porn, browsing profiles, and a range of other group and individual activities that usually take place in the homes of participants.

Crystal methamphetamine is used in this setting to effectuate certain capacities: it enhances sexual sensation, but also keeps users awake and alert, enabling them to maintain the sort of focus and fixation required for browsing online profiles and watching porn for extended periods. The drug also delays ejaculation, sometimes indefinitely, which suggests that 'getting off' is not necessarily the privileged aim of the sexual encounter. Rather, what is valued is the capacity to maintain focus on various sexual possibilities and activities, and the staying power or stamina required to sustain these erotic engagements. Crystal functions as a baseline drug for this purpose, usually smoked through a glass pipe, or sometimes injected, often during time-out from sexual activities. The drug GHB (a depressant that enhances sensuality) is typically used to initiate or reinitiate sexual activities, such that an extended session typically goes through various temporal phases – sex, chilling, chatting, smoking, taking G, sex – which correspond with the high that GHB produces (which can last up to an hour). Because methamphetamine compromizes the ability to maintain an erection, erectile dysfunction drugs such as Viagra or Cialis are often used in tandem (see Holt, 2009). Crystal meth is also sometimes smoked alone, prior to any sexual encounter, in order to get into a sexual frame of mind, dispense with everyday inhibitions, browse profiles, initiate sexual conversations, formulate fantasies and build up the courage and confidence to follow through on these. If these attempts do not amount to anything (and often they do not) the result can be disappointment, loneliness and frustration – affects that, of course, are intensified by the highs and lows of the drug. The promise of instant sexual availability may clash with the sense of non-delivery that is actually a common experience of online sexual searching, and this may compound residual feelings of despair and isolation.[9]

Extended sessions can be considered a specific instantiation of a more general mode of experimentality (or play) that characterizes participation in this context more generally. What is being experimented here? Often it is masculinity (see Dowsett et al., 2008; McInnes et al., 2009), and the question of what men can do with each other, bodily and relationally, to erotic effect. This is carried out through actual sexual contact, but also through random chat; shared viewing and discussion of porn; exchanging stories about other encounters; 'camming' with remote erotic spectators; sharing information about previous experiences or images of sexual partners.[10] In Deleuze's Spinozist ethology, variations in intensity always correspond with some variation in extensive relations, and it would seem that PNP practitioners also actively experiment with such relations (Deleuze, 1988). However much enjoyment is experienced in a given configuration of participants, bodies, objects and activities, there will often come a time when people disentangle themselves from the situation and begin to browse online profiles on their devices in a bid to find further participants. This may give rise to further sexual speculation: banter and gossip about particular profiles, previous experiences and sexual encounters, and the issuing of invitations to new participants. Or it may turn what was previously a scene of sexual exhilaration into something that resembles nothing so much as a tense but dull scene of office administration, everybody locked to their

computers and devices, obsessively searching for newcomers to join the group. In either case, what we have here is a suspension or extenuation of enjoyment: a will to novelty and intensive variation. Though some sorting for partners may well take place, this is manifestly NOT the atomized or isolated activity that Tim Dean supposes – a fact that becomes evident in the frequent reference to 'buddies looking', 'hanging with mates', and group sessions, as well as practices of collective viewing and searching. Together these embody a will to sexual sociability that manifests as a basic tendency of this sexual assemblage. This characteristic is illustrated, for example, in this profile shot cropped from someone's Manhunt profile in 2011 (Figure 6), which depicts the member and his buddies browsing online profiles, in a mise-en-abyme that entirely substitutes for the more conventional individual portrait. As this instance suggests, collective activities and expansive relations are a distinctive feature of this constellation of practices, and may be regarded as an immanent attribute of this sexual culture.

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to describe some of the distinctive features, activities and modalities of sex arranged between men online. I have argued that these activities can best be understood as a form of play and sexual speculation in which men experiment with bodily possibilities so as to produce more expansive experiences of pleasure and masculinity. I have argued that sexual media can be approached as a specific structure of entanglement that gives rise to new capacities, modes of interaction, and affordances. It allows people to sort for preventive identities and desires; to co-construct fantasies; to arrange multiple forms of sexual encounter and enact fantasies derived from multiple erotic sources. That is to say, this sexual infrastructure is generating new modes of material participation in gay sexual culture, new forms of community and speculative practices (on material participation see Marres, 2012). While some studies have usefully characterized intensive sex partying in terms of its pleasures (Hurley and Prestage, 2009), they have not explored how online devices serve to facilitate these encounters and provide new opportunities for the enactment of HIV prevention.

Gay men's health promotion might seek to engage some of the emergent genres of sexual/risk negotiation I have begun to describe here, with the aim of equipping participants with more attentive ways of navigating them. But this would imply a different form of health education than that which addresses itself to the sovereign, intentional, rational-choice actor, since agency is understood here, not as a matter of individual sovereignty over circumstances, but as something that emerges from provisional relations and attachments. Moreover, it becomes impossible to classify any individual element in a sexual assemblage as good or bad, as though their identity and health implications were fixed for all time. Rather, what matters in this approach is the manner in which various different elements come together in an assemblage to generate specific effects (whether good or bad) – and it is this coming together that requires specific attention and vigilance (Race, 2014b). Promoting

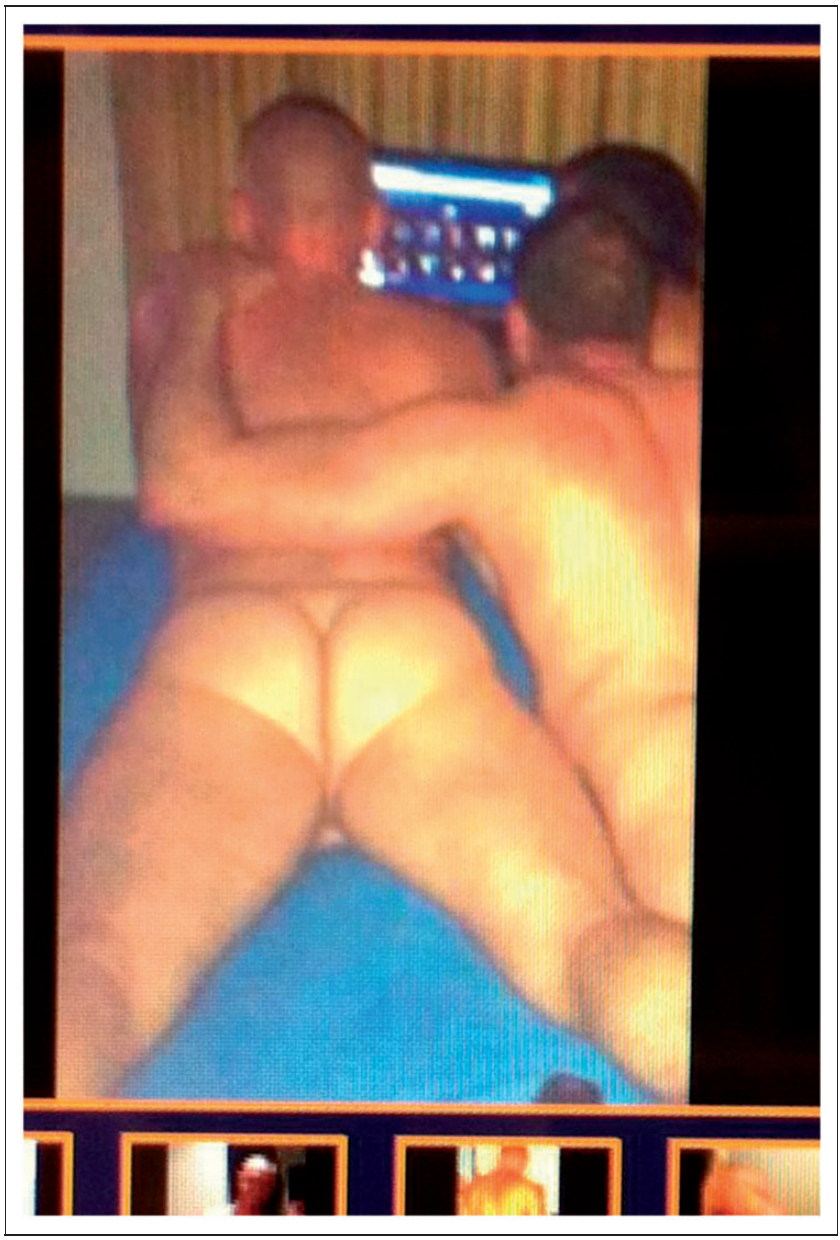

Figure 6. Browsing online profiles.

this mode of attention might become the goal of a form of sexual health education that is concerned with the relationality of sociomaterial processes.

Another aim of this piece has been to experiment with practices of acknowledgement: to find a register for grasping practices that are typically disavowed, making them available for more capacious consideration. As a form of play, online hook-up practices exist somewhere on a pendulum between playful exchange and instrumental ends, which means that they may not resolve into the private couple form easily or readily. Indeed, even those who claim to be searching for 'a reason to delete this profile' (i.e. a boyfriend) typically express interest in 'some fun along the way'. Noteworthy here is the potential disconnect between people's normative identifications and their actual sexual practices. This gap is a primary target of my intervention. At a time when marriage and monogamy increasingly monopolize the public discourse of gay desire, the capacity to maintain a loose web of fuckbuddies is perhaps more available, more accessible, and more widely accessed than ever before. But these sociomaterial arrangements and the specific forms of relation they enable are rarely acknowledged or given due consideration. The mechanism of the buddy list – a feature which allows participants to keep track of their favourite members – lends itself readily to the arrangement of repeat encounters. Online devices and apps thus present the possibility of arranging sexual encounters in real-time that are relatively casual and spontaneous but also recurring, such that they might involve known acquaintances, or relative strangers, or some combination of these, depending on who is online, who is looking, who is nearby, and who makes themselves available. This is a historically distinctive way of arranging erotic and intimate life, which may be approached as a specific infrastructure of intimacy that has erotic, social and communal potentials. These devices and practices are participating in the construction of a specific sphere of sociability and amiable acquaintance among men in urban centres that prioritizes sex as a principle mechanism for connection and sociability. But while online hook-ups are frequently framed as 'no-strings' or commitment-free, they are also subject to various forms of overflowing (Callon, 1998), in the sense that they generate affective bonds and affinities that are changing the texture of what Michael Warner has termed 'stranger sociability' (Warner, 2002). By paying attention to the pleasures, difficulties, activities and encounters that are variously emerging from and animating this space, we are better able to grasp them and engage the social assemblage they are generating.

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Notes

1. Though largely resisted by community-based HIV agencies in Australia and the UK, such tendencies are evident at numerous discursive sites: the growing popularity of the concept of addiction as a way of explaining not only substance use, but also non-normative sexual activities (see Downs, 2006; Weiss, 2005, not to mention the 'overuse' of digital technologies); a growing addiction-recovery movement that pits sobriety and normalcy against the sexual deviance and imputed depravity associated with gay substance use; epidemiological discourses and public health practices that promote simplistic associations between substance use and HIV risk; and those discourses of marriage equality that promote the latter in terms of its supposed public health effects, to name a few. See Race, 2009 for a fuller critical discussion.
2. Incidentally, it is often forgotten that sexual venues such as bathhouses and saunas – typically romanticized by critics of online sexual culture – owe a similar debt to architectures of commodification such as the arcade and the department store (see Chisolm, 2005).
3. For example, John Frow writes, 'the *semiotic medium* and *physical setting* constitute a material and technical matrix within which genres are embedded. *They are not themselves a component of genre*, but they form part of the framing conditions which govern and may signal generic structure, and they have direct consequences for the structural organisation of genre' (2006: 73). I would argue that having 'direct consequences for the structural organisation of genre' is not quite the same as the sense I am suggesting here of actively participating in – and shaping the quality of – the forces and affects generated by given utterances (or instantiations of genre). In this sense, genre theory externalizes or sidelines elements that might more effectively be considered internal to the sort of analysis that would seek to grasp processes of eventuation more comprehensively.
4. In recent iterations of this survey, between 20% and 25% of men report having used drugs for sex in the last six months, while between 12% and 14% report having engaged in group sex during or after drug use (Hull et al., 2013).
5. One body of literature which positions online facilities as formative, rather than destructive, of queer community is the Queer'n'Asian literature on this topic, which locates internet communication technologies as a key mechanism in the proliferation of modern queer sexual communities and political capacities in this region. This suggests that the association of gay decline with online devices may be a particularly Western narrative. See Berry et al., 2003.
6. In other words, de-identified screen-captured online conversations volunteered by study participants.
7. Attempted serosorting on the part of HIV-positive participants may also lead to the rejection of HIV-negative partners, though I would argue that the impacts of rejection are significantly compounded for HIV-positive individuals by the socially stigmatized status of HIV infection.
8. The HPTN052 trial found minimal risk of HIV infection in the context of sero-discordant heterosexual partnerships in which the viral load of the HIV-positive partner had been maintained at undetectable levels by antiretroviral therapy.

9. For an analytic description of how various dangers associated with this scene materialize, including increased drug dependence, see Race, 2009 (Chapter 7) and Race, 2014b.
10. Within this milieu, distinctions between sexual practice and pornography are undergoing significant transformation, blurring and convergence. Consider, for example, the widespread use of digital filming capacities on smartphones in sexual contexts; the use of online 'camming' facilities that are a feature of many websites for remote sexual interactions; and the prevalence of online porn sites where members can upload user-generated content. Each of these devices may in turn become a resource for use; part of the experimental infrastructure of future sexual encounters.

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