

“και ιάσασθαι τήν φύσιν τήν ἀνθρωπίνην”[and curing human nature]: Feminist Countergifts to Bareback and the Critique of Education as Prophylaxis

Zelia Gregoriou  
*University of Cyprus*

We had agreed to play by the school rules, by some unspoken contract we signed the day I turned her in eight years ago. She would suspend her story writing for a while, and would fill in the missing syllables on worksheets to serve fidelity to the wor[l]d’s phonetic realness: banana, duck, ball, beach, potato, pita. She would not write of imaginary monstrous creatures but instead learn to form humane full sentences: Subject-Verb-Object. The duck is at the beach. The duck holds pita. She would not report to “my daily news” session mournful (to be dismissed as “yucky”) stories of the kind “My friend and I found a dead rat and buried it.” She learned to recite our National Greek history of the rescue of schools and of Christianity from infidels by heroic Orthodox-and-Teacher martyrs. She would not follow queer lines of inquiry on the life of Hans Christian Andersen (a story on him being gay came up second to Wikipedia when she googled the name). She would not take noodles (or avocados) to school, but instead take a proper ham and cheese sandwich like all the other kids. But that day in Grade Four broke me down, cut me into two, pulled the skin around the cut that sews into a bellybutton - the monument and seal of my maternal body’s straightening - and moved my portal of intimacy to the back, to seal into shame, invisibility, unnameability. That day she came back from school and told me, “Mum, no more hugging, kissing, touching, cuddling, napping together. We were told in Health Education that all around our bodies there is an imaginary sphere” (and she stretched her body and her hands to the sky to maximize the measure of that sphere’s radius and that imperative’s moral gravity).

Psychoanalytic theory, writes Madeleine Grumet,<sup>1</sup> abandons mothers and children when we make room for Daddy. Or for School. Abandonment does not refer to a symbolic rejection of mother, or a devaluing of the mother-child bond. Rather, it refers to the intimate work of patriarchy: the turning of that bond’s abjectification into a necessary condition for the emergence of the child as an educational subject. The

bond has been misread as matter that does not matter. Atemporal, mere physicality, a nutritionist substratum where, as in Plato's definition of *kehora*, the bond partakes of the creation only as *hypodochē* (receptacle): a fertilizer of blood, tissue, and given time; undifferentiated affect, with no form of its own; and, most importantly, insulated by any possibility to participate in the imprinting of the form and the materialization of the idea. Its job is to feed without writing; to matter but not to temporalize; to animate the *phantastikon* (an underscored element of the Aristotelian definition) of life only in ways that do not queer the planet. Too often, writes Grumet, psychoanalytic theory portrays 2 (wrongly) the mother/child symbiosis as "undifferentiated, as if mother and child spent the early days of infancy plastered up against each other allowing no light, no space, no air, no world to come between them".<sup>2</sup> But the violent cut of the bond, the entry under the Law, and the welfare temporalization of school, I would argue, amount to something more (or perhaps something other than?) than the abjectification of the maternal body.

Extending Greteman's viral analysis of risk-of-contagion and bareback defiance-of-prophylaxis into what might appear a counterintuitive reading, I would say that the pre-school (meant in a genealogical and not chronological sense) cut of the bond, repeated over and over again throughout schooltime, amounts to a sexual straightening and sexual [re]orientation of the parental body. Orientations, writes Sara Ahmed (2006) in her critical reading of Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's bodily horizons as "sedimented histories," "are about the directions we take that put some things and not others in our reach".<sup>3</sup> The cutting of the bond before the school's threshold to scaffold the confirmation of the dichotomy between matter and spirit, intimate symbiosis and reproductive yearning for the success story, appears "effortless"<sup>4</sup> only against the background of a heteronormative reproductive arena. Edelman's assumption in *No Future*,<sup>5</sup> that parental orientation to the child amounts to a relation oriented to a "reproductive futurity," makes sense only if we also assume that that relation could not have been conceived and lived otherwise, that it is "natural," and just "kid stuff," and that it takes place effortlessly. It is not effortless or natural. Giving up on the child, giving the child to school to be reformed from erotic to clinical subject, amounts to a violent de-queering of the possibility of symbiotic education. Reproduction as prophylaxis: I give you my child and you give my child

the ticket to marketable skills; I promise to regulate the child's time, to force its investment into studious exercises and drills; to help discipline its desires and expectations to protect it from educational failure; to protect me from my child's failure.

“So from now on I cannot hug you?,” I asked. “You can, but I would have to give you my permission for that.” That hurt, because it brought the school's mandate “home.” And by home I mean that fecund domain of bodily interactions, orientations, bindings and binds, folds and folding, between people of kin (kin as a potentiality, not as ontology or presence). We call it in feminist policy “intimate citizenship,”<sup>6</sup> for lack of a better term, to articulate the politics of matter and the matter of politics. We call it “intimate citizenship” in an act of camouflage<sup>7</sup> that defends the rights of flesh and the right to flesh.<sup>8</sup> It carries on what the feminist reclaiming of the private once did, while avoiding subscription to the neoliberal privatization of the “private” (that is, replacing the struggle against justice with the entrepreneurial command for augmentation of personal potential, foreclosing the profane queering of the planet but sermon[ing] for the holy right of well-respected decent everybodies to “do what they want in their beds”).

Greteman's article has nothing to do with well-respected everybodies, or the privacy of beds, or the preaching of tolerance to the right to the privacy of beds. This is about bareback sex: about “bare” and about “back.” But why bring the “back” to the forefront? Commemorators of grandpa Aristophanes would object. Zeus had a good reason for curing (by re-pairing) the insatiable, death driven desire of the scarred, dichotomized halves of nature by moving the genitalia (τα αἰδοῖα) to the front (εἰς τὸ πρόσθεν) and leaving the unnamable “back” at the back:

and they sowed the seed no longer as hitherto like grasshoppers in the ground, but in one another; and after the transposition the male generated in the female in order that by the embraces of man and woman they might breed, and the race [genos, γένος] might continue; or if man came to man satiation might be reached by the copulation (πλησμονή γούν γίγνοιτο τῆς συνουσίας) and there would be pause/rest (καὶ διαπαύοιντο), and they would orient themselves to the other business of vios.<sup>9</sup>

By bringing the back to the front, Greteman ruptures the imaginary sphere around the body of education and invites us to rethink education's closure as its distribution of knowledge, incitement of affects, and exclusion of flying lines of desire and learning without means become increasingly regimented by rationalities of reproduction. In a counter-intuitive projection of Greteman's viral gift onto Plato's symposium, we could say that the Greek medicalization of *eros* (and medicalization of education as *eros*) is conceived in Aristophanes' (the comedian's) and not Eryximachus' (the doctor's) speech.

Greteman investigates how the human condition of vulnerability is taken over by a thanatopolitical condition of contagion's risk: how bareback defies the biopolitics of prophylaxis; how PrEP recuperates the potential of that rupture (and, I would add, how the power of the state re-emerges in the post- PrEP epoch as penalization of nondisclosure). His article explores parallels and continuities between modalities of virality, psychic processes of subjection and subjectification, and the education of desire. This kind of exploration would not have been possible without a necessary slippage — a viral rather than logical transposition — from HIV education to education at large. Virality becomes a condition for biopolitics, but also a condition for the emergence of new, precarious subjectivities. The viral brings in the risk of contagion, but the viral also impregnates contagion with the possibility of cultural and somatic resignification: from fear and subjection to, correspondingly, bug communion and breeding; from economic rationalities of investment to uneconomic expenditure; from birthing birthlings to replicating homos; from reproduction to viral kinship. As Greteman argues: “barebacking replicates itself through the transmission of a virus that symbolically passes on not only the virus, but the histories and intimacies of queer sexual subcultures.”<sup>10</sup>

“So, love (she is fourteen now), has that sphere around your body, the ‘health education stuff’, come up again in school these past years?” I ask her, as I revisit that day's failure to instill the prohibition of barebacking symbiosis. “Mum,” she replies, “I am a teenager now. Do you think a day goes by without teaching us not to be provocative?” Discipline of gender - its workings, its subjections, but also its failures - is something that we queer feminists know well. So well that we can teach ourselves and our kin to unlearn it. Barebacking as resistance to reproduction and

medicalization of the will can learn from our struggles how to recover the “swerve”<sup>11</sup> beyond the “death drive,” how to opt for life otherwise: “Life will out.”<sup>12</sup>

---

1 Madeleine Grumet, *Bitter Milk* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

2 Grumet, *Bitter Milk*, 16.

3 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 552.

4 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 553.

5 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

6 Ken Plummer, *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2003).

7 Elizabeth Povinelli, *Empire of Abandonment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

8 In discussing forms of resistant coping with neoliberalism’s colonization of the life of precarious others through forms of governmentality, containing and ad-ministering the “intimate event” (in ways similar to the medicalization of homosexuality), Elizabeth Povinelli explores a viral transposition of “camouflage” from its natural science meaning (the art of hiding within a given environment via embodied disguise) to practices of the cloaking of political significance, such as practices of mimicry and colonialism.

9 Plato, Symposium, 190c-192a, author’s translation from the original Greek text, available at [http://www.greek-language.gr/digitalResources/ancient\\_greek/library/index.html](http://www.greek-language.gr/digitalResources/ancient_greek/library/index.html).

10 Greteman, this volume.

11 Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

12 A quote from *Jurassic Park*, film, directed by Steven Spielberg (Los Angeles: Universal Pictures, 1993).