

The Vocabulary of Spiders :
A Novel and Critical Commentary Exploring Gay Male
‘Post-AIDS’ Identities

Michael Edwin Langan

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Abstract

The Vocabulary of Spiders is a 38 000 word novel that tells the story of Simon, an arachnologist, who is developing a virtual reality program to cure people of their fear of spiders. He is also collaborating with Jay, a choreographer, to create a dance piece based on the spiders' movements. This collaboration, plus Simon's attraction to Jay, unlocks his memories of growing up gay in the nineteen-eighties during the AIDS hysteria, and his unresolved grief at the death of his partner, Arturo. Since Arturo died, Simon has created a spider identity for himself. He is an emotionally disengaged loner who indulges in anonymous sex in clubs and cruising grounds.

Following a conversation with Jay, Simon discovers a web site, Anansi's Web, which invites people into the world of barebacking - unprotected sex. Simon begins to communicate with Anansi's Web, posting stories of his life, and withdraws into himself even more, living with the spiders in their colony. One of the male spiders mistakenly attempts a sexual encounter with another male spider and is killed. This represents, for Simon, the death of Arturo and he decides that he wants to join him. With the help of Anansi's Web he becomes a bug chaser - someone who seeks out AIDS.

He has unprotected sex in a club but decides that, rather than dying, he wants to live and to assume the identity of gift-giver, passing on AIDS to others. He is sure that Jay is the one he wants to give the gift to but Jay, horrified, rejects him. Simon contacts a bug chaser via Anansi's Web and has sex with him in the spider colony. The novel ends with Simon's fantasy of a living Arturo who, like a spider, is able to renew his damaged body by shedding his skin.

In a series of interwoven narrative threads, *The Vocabulary of Spiders* explores themes of sex, death and gay identity. It examines the effects of the AIDS crisis on the generation of gay men who were young teenagers in the nineteen-eighties and attempts to understand why someone would eroticise and seek out AIDS.

The Critical Commentary of 34 000 words contextualises the themes of the novel through an examination of the works of theorists such as Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Georges Bataille's notion of The Gift and Susan

Sontag's *AIDS and its Metaphors*. The commentary discusses the phenomena of barebacking and bug chasing: the deliberate acts of unprotected sex, and the seeking out of HIV infection, respectively. It also seeks to illustrate how a particular 'vocabulary,' has an effect on the construction of the identities of barebacker, bug chaser and gift giver. The commentary examines high-profile exposés of barebacking and bug chasing and how these are constructed within a wider context of placing gay desire in a cultural framework of sex and death. The commentary also discusses the notion of 'post-AIDS' gay identities and how texts, such as novels, films and new media, work to construct such identities.

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Critical Commentary

The Beginning

In 1982, when AIDS was first mentioned in the mainstream British media, I was a 14 year old boy, living in the north of England. It is difficult for me now to tell the story of that time, to tease apart the feelings and emotions I experienced, but my overriding memory is one of fear: fear of my sexuality, of what I knew myself to be, fear of exposure, fear of the censure and ridicule of others. Trapped in a world that seemed to hate me I was frightened *of* myself and *for* myself. Almost every teenager feels alienated, separate and apart, but it's not the case for everybody that the culture around you colludes in this, as it did for young gay men in the 1980s. As the journalist, Justin Webb, says: 'During those years the hysteria around HIV seeped into schools so that, when you got caught in a game of schoolyard tag, you didn't get fleas, you got AIDS.'¹

It seemed inevitable that, at some point during my time at the local comprehensive school, my homosexuality would be uncovered. The consequences of that would have been very serious; not only the disapproval of my peers and the disappointment of my family, but I could have been placed on a proposed register of high-risk individuals, or taken away and left on an island quarantine. This was the story I told myself about myself. Coming out would have put me at risk, not from AIDS, but from the web of hysteria that was being woven around me. Simon Watney writes: 'It should not be forgotten that at least two generations of British school children grew up in an often frightening atmosphere in which AIDS was constantly in the headlines.'²

¹ Webb, Justin, 'A Date With Hate', *The Observer*, 27th October, 2002, p.50

² Watney, Simon. *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity*, Routledge, U.K., 2000, p.6

There was, however, the potential for a different story. As much as there was fear and disgust at gay male sex, AIDS also caused a cultural shift in talking about sex. I had never heard the word 'condom' before the mid-eighties, let alone as spoken by a government minister on prime-time television, and there was often a general sense of sympathy towards those affected by HIV and AIDS. I could have come out and experienced love and sex and happiness and disappointment and heartbreak during my late teens, like so many other people. I could have joined a strong community created out of anger and grief at the effects of AIDS, media hysteria and political inaction. That could have been the story of my life. Instead, I decided that I would never tell anyone my true feelings.

Prior to this the only gay histories I knew were ones of adversity and shame. When the television adaptation of *The Naked Civil Servant* was shown in 1975, it may well have changed some people's attitude towards homosexuality, but where I came from the word 'Quentin' became an insult, a euphemism for 'queer.' I was vaguely aware, in 1979, of the trial of Jeremy Thorpe. I remember ugly phrases used about him in the playground: pillow-biter, shit-stabber, fudge-packer. I didn't know what these meant, but I somehow knew that they referred to me and that I should keep quiet.

I withdrew into books and music and fantasy. I was conscious of differences between me and my family and friends - not just in terms of my sexuality but also in my interests in art, classical music and literature. Writing, as a solitary, secret activity, became my space of articulation, the place where I explored those feelings I could not otherwise express. The poet Octavio Paz wrote, 'I write what I could never say,' and nothing felt (and still feels) truer than

that, and nothing was more of a struggle. I was often too scared even to write things down, scared of them being discovered, perhaps, but also scared of the consequences of words about my self appearing on the page - as potent and dangerous as an evil spell.

In a household where it wasn't really done, reading also became a solitary, secret activity. Sometimes I would shut myself in a cupboard with a book, to avoid questions about what I was reading. Most of my reading was not of 'gay' texts at all. Like many young, gay readers I found the objects of my desire within a heterosexual framework and attempted to 'translate' them into my own, as yet unformed, sense of my sexuality, or, more frequently, 'translate' my self to fit into that established framework. In *Love in a Dark Time*, Colm Tóibín says, 'The gay reader moves subjectively among texts which deal with forbidden territory, secrecy, fear.'³ This reflects how I moved through my formative years.

Gregory Woods writes:

...at the end of the nineteenth century male homosexuality... starts to be written about as an essentially tragic condition. Sadness, loneliness, and a tendency to end in either suicide or worse have been regarded by many – and not only hostile heterosexuals – as being inherent in the condition.⁴

I read Oscar Wilde - his sexuality the only thing I knew about him. I was ignorant and unable to de-code the gay subtexts in his work, but it was enough just to be reading him. I knew that Wilde was 'the model of the twentieth

³ Tóibín, Colm, *Love in a Dark Time: Gay Lives from Wilde to Almodóvar*, Picador, U.K., 2001 p.17

⁴ Woods, Gregory, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition*. Yale University Press, U.K., 1998, p.217

century's tragic queer,'⁵ having seen him played by Peter Finch in the 1960 film *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, and Woods goes on to say:

When I use the word 'tragic' here, I do not simply mean unfortunate, sad or condemned to die. I am referring to a specifically literary quality of fatedness which casts the queer as an inglorious version of the tragic hero.⁶

This is what I felt myself to be; not just because I was gay, but because I was a gay boy at the time of AIDS. Wilde's fate seemed an inevitable consequence of his sexuality. So too did the deaths of all those gay men, nearly one hundred years later, in the 1980s. Wilde's fate could've been mine.

Later, I saw a televised version of Quentin Crisp's one-man show, as performed in New York. I videotaped it, replayed it over and over, copying down what he said, reading it repeatedly. At the same time, Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story* seemed to speak directly to me with its exploration of adolescent longing, and I remember the shock and delight of seeing Daniel Day-Lewis kiss Gordon Warnecke in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Moments like this were brief flashes of light, in which I saw myself illuminated, not scared, not hiding, and given affirmation by my feelings represented in stories.

Now, in conversations with friends, I am struck by how those glimpses of gay characters, kept as secret, were shared by others, that there was a common experience of isolation and identification. There we all were, in our separate bedrooms, listening to the same things, reading the same things, watching and feeling the same things, but not able to communicate. It's as if our stories connect us, though we aren't aware of this at the time.

⁵ Woods, p.218

⁶ *ibid.* p.218

There is no general cultural history of the oppression of gay men and women offered up in mainstream education – you have to go looking for it, but by then it is too late; you have not been able to prepare yourself through the experience of those around you. It doesn't matter how supportive and loving your family are; it doesn't matter how many positive role models we have; the fact is that, ultimately, realising your sexuality is, like writing, something done in isolation. 'Gay people,' says Tóibín, 'grow up alone'⁷ and fear is something that 'almost every gay person has felt at some level, at some age, in some place.'⁸ There also came a point for me where the life I had created for myself – my story – became difficult to escape from. I went from being afraid of exposure as a gay man, to fear of being exposed as a liar. I was not telling the true story of my life.

In *The Vocabulary of Spiders*, Simon's past, his personal history, is something he has kept secret. The ordinary difficulties of being a gay boy in an unsympathetic environment are compounded by the event of AIDS – a historical event concerned with the most intimate and private act. His experiences of being bullied at school, followed by Arturo's 'abandonment' of him (both in his leaving and then in his dying) have created a specific identity: he has become spider-like; that is, emotionally constricted, enclosed, secretive and evasive. His sex life, after Arturo's first leaving, and after Arturo's death, consists of anonymous cruising in the dark. I am not suggesting that this is the only possible sexual response to the AIDS crisis – Jay's response is different – but it is a result, for him, of a number of factors combined. It is *his* story.

⁷ Tóibín (2001), p.9

⁸ *ibid.* p.14

In a recent interview with the magazine *Attitude*, George Michael said, ‘I think every gay man is a recovering gay child or teenager.’⁹ It wasn’t until I was twenty-three that I began my own version of that recovery. A university friend had, in his final year, developed chronic depression and withdrew from his studies, returning to live with his parents. Many people thought Graeme was gay but, like me, he denied it. A few months after returning home, and a few days after I had spoken to him, Graeme killed himself. Within a month of his funeral I began to tell my friends I was gay. I didn’t want Graeme’s story to become my story, I didn’t want that ‘fatedness.’ At the same time it seemed that my own sexuality was linked to death; that someone had to die for me to be free.

My coming out resulted in a certain ‘freeing up’ of my writer’s voice, something that links my sexuality with my creativity, and became, for me, a question of identity. I often questioned whether I was a gay writer or a writer who is gay and finally faced up to this issue when I heard about the founding of a gay writing group in Liverpool. I joined QueerScribes and the question resolved itself. I felt, for the first time, like a member of a community. I performed my writing, and enjoyed it. I had stepped into the spotlight but, while this was a great leap forward, it was difficult to change the habits of a lifetime. Instead I decided I should attempt to express those habits, to express my past, my story. As Colm Tóibín writes:

The struggle for a gay sensibility began as an intensely private one, and slowly then, if the gay man or woman was a writer, or a painter or a filmmaker or a reformer, it seeped into language and images and politics in ways which were strange and fascinating.¹⁰

⁹ Mattera, Adam. ‘Days of the Open Hand,’ *Attitude*, May 2004, p.39

¹⁰ Tóibín (2001), p.3

So, I became a gay writer, and now feel very strongly that I should celebrate this. So much interesting art is created from a position 'on the margins,' and that is where I want to be.

Tóibín asks why it should be important to investigate the sexuality of writers and he concludes that:

...as gay readers and writers become more visible and confident, and gay politics more settled and serious, gay history becomes a vital element in gay identity, just as Irish history does in Ireland, or Jewish history among Jewish people.¹¹

As a gay writer I wanted to examine that history, and a moment in history - the event of AIDS - as central to contemporary gay identities. I felt an identity imposed on me by AIDS - of someone who was considered poisonous and deadly - an identity based on fear.

For my M.A. thesis, I examined AIDS writing from a theoretical perspective and became aware of how this fear was being explored in a variety of texts. Studying was also something that had marked me out in my family from an early age. I was, and am, the only member of my family to attend University. My relationship with studying and with theory was an affirmative one - I was good at it, felt comfortable within it, but was also conscious of it providing another hiding place: I find it easier to write academically than I do creatively. My decision to write my first novel as a PhD is indicative of this. I can write in a context that doesn't frighten me and using theory allows me to access the creative ideas I have.

¹¹ *ibid.* p.7

The first texts directly addressing AIDS that I read were Oscar Moore's 'P.W.A.' columns, written for *The Guardian* between June 1994 and August 1996. I felt they showed the importance of bearing witness to AIDS. His bravery was something I should aspire to – in my writing and in my life. In one of his columns Moore wrote:

There is a secret fraternity of sickness between people who never meet, but whose tales of hell and high water in the pursuit of temporary relief from terminal crises provide a mutual support. Somehow the reflection of one's own miseries in someone else's life soothes the pain of the suffering. The loneliness of illness is one of its bitterest aspects...¹²

Given that, for some people, homosexuality is an illness and to be gay is to be sick, I felt that, while not directly affected by AIDS, I was part of that 'secret fraternity.' Fear of AIDS was enough to make me part of that fraternity.

Paradoxically, AIDS also provided, for Moore and others, the possibility for creativity. Moore says, 'Writing can be a very isolated life,' and that 'Illness too can be very isolating.'¹³ The writing of the columns was, for him, a means of connecting with others, and a 'weapon' in the 'life-and-death struggle with the Pac-men of HIV.'¹⁴ This ability to create connections was evidenced by the letters sent to *The Guardian* in the days following Moore's death, by people who felt they were mourning the loss of someone they had known. I was one of them.

¹² Moore, Oscar; *PWA: Looking AIDS in the Face*. Picador, U.K., 1996, p.xxxi

¹³ *ibid.* p.xxxv

¹⁴ *ibid.* p.xxxvi

Moore also explored, in his novel, *A Matter of Life and Sex*, the aspects of fear connected to HIV and AIDS, which were also bound up in particularly English cultural constraints and, crucially, a fear of *words*:

In the whole conversation, neither of them had mentioned the word that was sitting on the edge of their tongues. It was like a curse. You said it. You had it.¹⁵

He contrasts the 'American' attitude towards AIDS with the 'English' attitude. The English were 'scared in a different way. Quietly, at home. Hidden. They were still too ashamed.'¹⁶ The reaction to an event like AIDS, Moore says, can be influenced by political, cultural and social mores:

Here the suffering is solitary. Individuals, in individual rooms in quiet, carpeted wards, being visited by their particular family, and nobody talking to each other very much. The suffering is privatised. The English are so afraid. But not of death. They are afraid of embarrassment; of appearing to suffer too much of the wrong thing, of looking too ill, being too weak and certainly of being too dependent... There is no momentum here, just the feeling that the trickle of death will weave its inexorable way through all our lives again and again in slow and unpredictable twists and bends.¹⁷

I have often explored fear in my writing, as something I feel has stalled or halted progress in my personal and writing lives. It has also become something that intrigues or even attracts me to certain things. On a train journey from Liverpool to London I listed in my journal things I feared. High on that list were spiders. They both fascinate and repel me. I wrote about the way they

¹⁵ Moore, Oscar, *A Matter of Life and Sex*, Penguin, U.K., 1991, p.91

¹⁶ *ibid.* p.92

¹⁷ *ibid.* p.93

move, their hairiness, the fangs, the thought of them touching me and how they often appear from nowhere. I was intrigued as to why one rarely sees two spiders together, imagined that they must communicate in order to mate, and wondered how they did it.

I made connections in my mind between general arachnophobia, which is very common, and the individual and cultural phobia of gay men. I also saw parallels between the courtship rituals of spiders and the sub-culture of gay cruising; the silent signalling in the dark, the anonymity of brief sexual encounters and thrill that comes from the element of danger. I was interested in how cruising activity, developed in response to the historical repression and stigmatisation of gay men, had become eroticised and celebrated as part of gay identity and culture. I wanted to write a novel that explored all this and the title, *The Vocabulary of Spiders*, came instantly.

During the writing of my novel I encountered a discussion of 'barebacking' - the deliberate practice of unprotected sex - on the Internet. I discovered that a small number of gay men use barebacking as a means of attempting to contract HIV, a practice known as 'bug chasing.' This not only connected a sexualised language with my central metaphor of spiders, but also deepened the thinking behind the central themes of *The Vocabulary of Spiders*. It encouraged me to think in a wider context about the cultural history of AIDS, twenty years after its beginnings as an 'event.'

I examined websites facilitating barebacking and bug chasing and discovered a culture of sexual freedom and risk-taking, which asserted the right to explore the pleasures of unprotected sex between consenting adults. Furthermore, sites such as *Barebackjack.com* arrange parties and private clubs where HIV status is not discussed, where individuals are able to chase the bug –

to seek out HIV - or heighten their pleasure by taking the risk of becoming infected at a 'Russian Roulette' party.

It seemed to me that some people were trying to re-assert their status as 'outsiders,' subjecting themselves to that identity, and creating new identities of 'bug chaser' and 'barebacker.' This vocabulary seeks to change the 'meaning' of unprotected sex and shift the position of gay men from victims of AIDS to being in control of one's sexuality and desires. This re-positioning could be a reaction to the mainstream attitudes towards AIDS, gay men and sex, but perhaps also serves to confirm the stereotypical views of gay male sexuality as unmodified and dangerous. Both activities seem to celebrate unsafe sex and place primary importance on the 'sexual dissidence' of gay male identity.

This raised questions of the 'narratives' of identities and the extent to which individuals become subject to such narratives. How far do those narratives influence the construction of identity? Are our notions of 'self' and our identities, in fact, more narratives? *The Vocabulary of Spiders* seeks to explore the way in which the narratives of AIDS subject individuals to an identity (as dangerously poisonous sexual predators) and how some individuals adopt behaviours which confirm that identity, either as a symptom of the ways in which such identities formulate the way individuals regard themselves, or as a subversive act of defiance against attempts by social structures to subjugate difference.

In *AIDS and its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag analyses how Western culture thought, spoke and wrote about AIDS during the 1980s and explains how dominant metaphors created AIDS as an event with meaning. However, hers is an analysis that does not include barebacking and is pre-bug chasing; that is, these activities may have existed, but were not named as such. It is possible now

to examine how those metaphors and the meanings created by them may have transformed elements of gay identity, while at the same time they were used to confirm well-established prejudices directed at gay men. *The Vocabulary of Spiders* attempts to examine how that process may have engendered the activities of bug chasing and barebacking - activities given meaning by being named as such.

For me, one of the functions of the novel is to act as an antidote or an alternative to the rapid response in contemporary Western popular culture. The fact that novels can take years to produce means that they can exist outside of the need to participate in the instant production of disposable ideas and artefacts. In Milan Kundera's *The Art of the Novel*, a book I often turn to for inspiration, Kundera is reminded of a quote from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, in which he says, 'The novel is not the author's confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become.'¹⁸ He goes on to say:

That life is a trap we've always known: we are born without having asked to be, locked in a body we never chose, and destined to die. On the other hand, the wildness of the world used to provide a constant possibility of escape. A soldier could desert from the army and start another life in a neighbouring country. Suddenly, in our century, the world is closing around us... henceforward, nothing that occurs on the planet will be a merely local matter...¹⁹

AIDS is also not a 'merely local matter,' though its 'meaning' can change from location to location.

¹⁸ Kundera, Milan, *The Art of the Novel*, Faber and Faber, U.K., 1986, p. 26

¹⁹ *ibid.* p.27

Kundera asserts that, 'A character is not a simulation of a living being. It is an imaginary being. An experimental self.'²⁰ The stories we tell and tell ourselves are also experiments in the self. Kundera wants to position himself outside the 'so-called psychological novel,' and, to do this, he asks the question: 'What is the nonpsychological means to apprehend the self?'²¹ His answer is that, 'To apprehend the self...means to grasp the essence of its existential problem. To grasp its *existential code*,'²² made up of a string of words.

Kundera invents experimental selves in an attempt to understand various possibilities, to 'interrogate' them. He says, 'Meditative interrogation (interrogative meditation) is the basis on which all my novels are constructed.'²³ It is this basis on which I would like my own novel to be constructed. It is the basis on which I have decided to tell this story, which is one of *my* stories. I have created 'alternative selves' in both Jay and Simon, to interrogate the possible long-term effects of AIDS on the identities of gay men. The spiders too have their existential code – the essence of them as 'alternative selves' – hence their movement as strings of words across the page.

The Vocabulary of Spiders also faces up to the 'difficult' subjects of barebacking and bug chasing and interrogates them in a wider, fictional context rather than in the noisy bullring of journalism and the populist commentariat.

The Vocabulary of Bug Chasing

Heterosexuals may indulge in unprotected sexual activity, either casually or in a relationship, but it is unprotected anal intercourse between gay men that has

²⁰ *ibid.* p.34

²¹ *ibid.* p.29

²² *ibid.* p.29

²³ *ibid.* p.32

drawn attention to itself as a 'dangerous' phenomenon and been given the tag of 'barebacking.' This is because the history of AIDS in the West associates HIV predominantly with gay men. Barebacking re-affirms old prejudices about gay male sexual behaviour, confirming cultural stereotypes of gay men as irresponsible, promiscuous, sexual predators. The labelling creates the identity and therefore the 'reality' of it, which, in turn, confirms 'the way gay men are.'

There has been fierce debate in the gay press and on gay websites about the ethics of both barebacking and bug chasing. Many activists and health workers have fought hard for gay rights and to have the safe sex message heard. Barebacking seems, to a lot of them, an act of incredible selfishness and insensitivity. Some fear that the practise and discussion of it will do great harm in the (constant) struggle to combat AIDS amongst gay men, and the fight against homophobia. This highlights the 'political' dimension to barebacking. Those who assert the right to determine their own sexual lives and sexual identity may resent being told how they should practice intercourse – no matter who proscribes it, or for what reason – believing 'unprotected' sex is not the same as 'unsafe' sex and that, within a relationship, or between consenting adults who are aware of each other's HIV status, barebacking should be permitted. Some gay men, having fought for the right to express themselves sexually, may be unwilling to give that up.

Rick Sowadsky, writing on *thebody.com* (an American website describing itself as 'an AIDS and HIV information resource'), attempts to answer his own question: 'Why do gay men bareback, despite the possible risks?'²⁴ The

²⁴ Sowadsky, Rick (2001), 'Barebacking in the Gay Community,' at <http://thebody.com/sowadsky/barebacking.html>

ensuing list includes assertions such as, 'Some men no longer fear AIDS...'²⁵ as if fear is what one *should* be feeling in relation to AIDS. Advances in drugs may make AIDS a more manageable condition, but some gay men may bareback because they expect to die anyway. It is a negation of the future by privileging the present. Sex becomes an extreme sport, like driving too fast or free-fall parachuting. More often than not, unprotected sex is a 'heat of the moment' occurrence. However, rather than involving the risk of creating a new life, barebacking risks creating death.

Many young gay men have not directly experienced the loss of large groups of friends and lovers in the way older gay men have, and are seen as less likely to protect themselves from infection. Conversely, others claim that, for younger gay men, HIV and AIDS have become an inevitable part of gay identity, because they grew up associating homosexuality with the illness; if AIDS is going to happen to them they will get it in their own way. This is in a wider cultural tradition of seeing gay men and their relationships as 'doomed' and intrinsically linked to death.

This raises questions about the notion of a 'gay community' and the actions of individuals as a response to its safer sex message. It's possible to get safe sex fatigue to the extent that one switches off from the message, or even defies it as a deliberate act of rebellion. This appears to privilege the needs of the individual over the effects on a wider community.

Statistically, barebacking is more likely to occur when someone has been drinking or taking drugs and, given the prevalence of bars and clubs in gay culture, rates of drug and alcohol use amongst gay men are generally higher. This could also be linked to low self-esteem, caused by negative attitudes

²⁵ *ibid.*

towards gay men, which are then internalised. Dr John Sonego, from the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), writes in *The Advocate*: 'It's all about a sense of your own value and just how much you believe you are worth.'²⁶

Sonego asserts:

...unconscious shame is reinforced by ongoing social rejections, some subtle and some overt...It's no wonder many of us engage in self-destructive behaviour. My friend Joe, who grew up in a household where Southern Baptist religion and alcoholism went hand in hand, told me, 'I remember lying on my back in a Dallas bathhouse when I was 20, thinking, *I hope I get it tonight*. I just didn't think I deserved anything better.'²⁷

Not only does cultural and social history influence people in this way, but personal history does too:

My partner, Michael, told me about a dark time in his life six years ago. His mother died of cancer and three of his best friends died from AIDS-related illnesses, all within a couple of months. 'I was reeling from so much death,' he said. 'Most of my friends who were still alive were positive, and the thought crossed my mind that I should just go out and get infected so I wouldn't die old and alone.'²⁸

I count myself as part of the generation just 'after' AIDS: not old enough to have contracted it before it was known about, but old enough to have experienced the hysteria first hand. As a result, I believe, the development of my

²⁶ Sonego, John (2003), 'What should we do about bug chasers?' at http://advocate.com/html/stories/884/884_chasers.asp

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

sexuality and my sexual identity were adversely affected. At school there were three boys in my circle of friends and we were all aware, though it was unspoken, that we were gay (we have all since come out). We have never spoken about that group deception and why we felt unable to say what we wanted to say to each other but it engendered in me a sense that you can be very close to someone and still have an important secret.

In *The Vocabulary of Spiders*, Simon has kept secret the story of his life and developed his spider life, which is both his work and the way he is. His accessing of *Anansi's Web* and the opportunity to tell his story to Anansi 'unlocks' his feelings, which is precipitated by his attraction to Jay, and his *fear* of that attraction. Simon is not looking for, or aware of, barebacking websites. Anansi unlocks and also *creates* his desire. It tells him things about himself that he doesn't consciously know: the desire for unsafe sex is there already, albeit unexpressed and unacknowledged; it is an extrapolation of his current sexual practise and is linked to his unresolved grief for Arturo with its suppressed sense of betrayal; his own low self-esteem is as a result of his childhood experiences during the AIDS crisis; his work with, and attraction towards, Jay is bringing this to the surface.

It is also argued that barebacking promotes monogamy within relationships and can strengthen emotional ties between a couple. It enforces a level of trust and commitment that may otherwise be absent. It may also be the case that 'sero-conversion' could be carried out within a relationship as a bond. Barebacking becomes a signifier, not of irresponsibility, but of responsibility: the 'meaning' of barebacking is transformed and those who participate apparently *create* the meaning, rather than having it imposed on them.

Tony Valenzuela, an HIV-positive gay man and originator of the website *Sexpanic!*, was one of the first to publicly assert what he sees as his 'right' to have unprotected sex with a consenting partner: 'The levels of erotic charge and intimacy I feel when a man comes inside me is transformational, especially in a climate which so completely disregards its importance,' he says.²⁹ He goes on to write about, 'how beautiful and intimate and powerful that sex was... how empowering it felt not to fear another man's semen.'³⁰ Valenzuela claims it is 'irresponsible to state that there are no situations in which unprotected sex for gay men is healthy, either physically or emotionally' and that the decision to have unprotected sex 'does not always prioritise physical health over erotic, psychological or emotional needs.'³¹

For many gay men, fucking without a condom indicates intimacy. This is important because sex and intimacy have been difficult for them to find - not only in their personal history but in their cultural history. Testing positive for HIV means one is free to enjoy the experience of sex without condoms, without fear, heightening a sense of intimacy:

When he came inside me, I was in heaven, just overjoyed... Knowing the guy was positive made it empowering, not guilt-inspiring. I relaxed into my desires instead of fighting them and felt good doing so... I can't comment on a negative guy's decision to go raw, but for us positive men, the benefits are obvious. The physical sensation is much better. The connection feels closer and more intimate. The sharing of cum on the physical level heightens the sense of sharing on the emotional and

²⁹ <http://gaytoday.badpuppy.com/garchive/viewpoint/040698vi.htm>

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*

spiritual planes... There's even something empowering about the idea of sharing someone else's HIV.³²

When Tony Valenzuela talks of 'power,' 'transformation' and his 'needs,' he is privileging those aspects of his identity he feels are important to him and presenting barebacking as an act of personal freedom. It's also possible that Valenzuela is in denial about his own low self-esteem – that his feelings of 'empowerment' are actually the opposite, that those desires he 'relaxes into' are ones formed by the placing of gay male sexuality into a framework of death and the gay man's need for intimacy is 'corrupted' by that. Similarly, bug chasers often frame their activity in a discourse of self-expression and personal freedom, but it can be argued that they are not acting 'freely,' in that their 'psychological needs' have been negatively affected by their experiences as gay men.

One of Valenzeula's most vocal critics is Michelangelo Signorile who wrote, 'Once you have some people promoting barebacking and making it a hip thing, it makes it a lot harder for a lot of men not to do it.'³³ Barebackers may talk about freedom and empowerment, but are actually creating a culture that encourages unprotected sex, in which barebacking 'feeds on itself and grows.'³⁴ So, do the websites and personal ads merely reflect people's behaviours and desires, or do they create them? Does the forbidding of unprotected intercourse make us want to do it more and, further, eroticise it?

Barebacking is often described, on websites, in chat rooms, personal ads, and within the debate itself, as not only being more intimate, but also more intensely physical and pleasurable. Further, it is eroticised as 'raw' sex, or 'real'

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*

sex; an extreme sport providing the ultimate pleasure that has been disallowed for too long. To wear a condom is described, on *BarebackJack.com*, as ‘cissy,’ because ‘real men do it raw.’³⁵ Like certain gay identities, such as the Bear or Muscle Mary, it parodies, fetishises and plays around with heterosexual notions of masculinity: you have to take it like a man.

In an article entitled ‘Protease Dis-Inhibitors?’ Nicholas Sheon and Aaron Plant argue that the safe sex message prevents discussion of anal sex as an act of sexual intimacy and pleasure: ‘When risky behaviour is discussed, it is often framed in terms of pathology (“relapsed”), sin (“slipping up”) or even murder.’³⁶ What this engenders is a situation in which barebackers and bug-chasers are attacked from all sides and that establishes their identity as evil madmen and potential killers, without regard for the ordinary, everyday place of unprotected sex as something that just happens.

Condoms have always been considered to ‘interrupt’ sex, both physically and emotionally, despite attempts by sexual health officials to convince people that putting on condoms can be erotic or ‘fun’. They also act as reminders to gay men about recent gay history – they force you to think about AIDS at the moment you least want to think about it – and eliminate notions of ‘spontaneity,’ ‘romance,’ and ‘love.’ They create a narrative of sex we do not want to read.

At the same time, barebacking could be a reaction to prevention efforts which have not taken into account the complexity of sexual behaviours in relation to identities that have developed around HIV status. Barebacking becomes an act of defiance against sexual proscription in the same tradition of gay men striving for sexual freedom, but it is also linked to gay identity, an

³⁵ <http://Barebackjack.com>

³⁶ Sheon, Nicholas & Plant Aaron (2001), ‘Protease Dis-Inhibitors,’ at <http://managingdesire.org/sexpanic/ProteaseDisinhibitors.html>

identity constructed as transgressive and 'other' and subsequently celebrated as such:

Gay men have traditionally been at the vanguard of sexual liberation and experimentation with new forms of human relationships. This experimentation has always existed under the threat of sanction from powerful institutions such as the police, the church, schools and the family. Barebacking can thus be seen as merely the latest in a long line of challenges by gay men to the sexual status quo and the institutions which support it. Attempts to 'manage desire,' whether they originate from within or without the gay community, tend to produce 'transgressive desire,' a fetishising of certain acts because they are dangerous, stigmatized and emotionally charged. Thus the barebacking backlash appears to be particularly aimed at subverting AIDS prevention messages by fetishising not just sex without condoms, but the very 'exchanges' of fluids that have been prohibited between gay men.³⁷

Bug chasing takes the notion of transgression much further, both as a sexual activity resulting from a specific gay identity, and as a set of behaviours codified by its own rules of engagement and vocabulary. Rick Sowadsky provides a glossary of bug chasing terms:

Bug chasers = men looking to get themselves infected with HIV.

Gift givers = men with HIV who are willing to infect bug chasers.

The gift = HIV.

Conversion parties = group sex parties where bug chasers allow themselves to get infected by gift givers.

Russian Roulette parties = barebacking parties with both positive and negative men. Negative men take their chances that they will be infected when having sex with the positive men there. Depending on the

³⁷ *ibid.*

circumstances, the participants may or may not know ahead of time who is positive and who is negative.

Bug brothers = a group of positive men.

Charged cum or poz cum = semen from an HIV positive man.

Fuck of death = intercourse where HIV infection takes place.³⁸

The website *XtremeSex.com* is one of those that facilitates bug chasing and Michael, the webmaster for this site (who goes by the screen name PigBotm), feels that some people 'are doing it out of desperation or depression rather than choice'; they are 'pure dysfunction.'³⁹ He also believes that many of those posting bug chasing fantasies are doing so within a wider context of 'kink':

The expression of HIV as a gift is very much like some people feel about being beaten or pissed in or on, or any of those kinds of things. The idea of something from the other person being a gift is nothing new. It's just a part of the general mindset of people who play kink. They view it as a relationship, not as an activity. So another person's body fluids are of value to them. The inclusion of HIV there is a matter of necessity. It's different, it's special, not everybody's got it.⁴⁰

Gay culture, or, perhaps more accurately, Queer culture, has traditionally played around with representations and expressions of gender and sexuality that include S&M and pornography. Both are linked to notions of fantasy. The banner on *XtremeSex.com* that reads 'Pozcum: The Fuck of Death' is intended to be an erotic fantasy; 'To some... it is intrinsically sexy to risk death.'⁴¹ So, while some people may feel they deserve nothing better, others feel they want nothing more.

³⁸ Sowadsky (2001)

³⁹ <http://gaytoday.badpuppy.com/garchive/viewpoint/040698vi.htm>

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

In *The Vocabulary of Spiders*, Simon feels that he wants to join Arturo; death is what he deserves. However, when he receives the fuck of death, he experiences a kind of ecstasy, because it is also a fuck of life, *the* fuck of *his* life. In *Testaments Betrayed*, Milan Kundera describes ecstasy as a forgetting of oneself. 'Through ecstasy,' he says, 'emotion reaches its climax, and thereby at the same time its negation (its oblivion).'⁴² Ecstasy means being 'outside oneself,' but this 'does not mean outside the present moment, like a dreamer escaping into the past or the future.'⁴³ Rather, it is:

Just the opposite: ecstasy is absolute identity with the present instant, total forgetting of past or future. If we obliterate the future and the past, the present moment stands in empty space, outside life and its chronology outside time and independent of it (this is why it can be likened to eternity, which too is the negation of time).⁴⁴

The classic example of ecstasy, says Kundera, is 'the moment of orgasm,' which makes one forget the immediate past and the future; 'Man desires eternity, but all he can get is its imitation: the instant of ecstasy.'⁴⁵ In this instant we 'step outside ourselves' and 'verge on death's dominion.'⁴⁶ Imagine, if this is true of sex generally, how much more true it is of unprotected sex.

Bug chasing may be a forgetting of the past (the history of AIDS) and the future (the consequences of becoming HIV-positive) and a forgetting of oneself. It is, as we have seen, 'raw' sex, 'extreme' sex, '*real*' sex. Bug chasing is a searching for, a bringing about of, a moment of complete ecstasy, which is negation, oblivion and an imitation of eternity and of death. But what if it is also

⁴² Kundera, Milan, *Testaments Betrayed*, Faber & Faber, U.K., 1995, p.85

⁴³ *ibid*, p.85

⁴⁴ *ibid*, p.85

⁴⁵ *ibid*, p.86

⁴⁶ *ibid*, p.87

the opposite of that? What if it is a complete *affirmation* of the past, a confirmation of everything that has always been told about us and that we have told ourselves? For Simon it confirms everything said about him in the playground, at school, and at the spider barn, but in a way he appears to be in charge of. When Simon is fucked in the club it is just such a moment of complete ecstasy for him; it contains the possibility of both life and death.

Simon seeks to re-create this moment of ecstasy, but finds this is also a search for the 'right person' to receive his gift. His identity changes from bug chaser to gift giver and he goes from being fucked in a sex club to wanting intimate exchange with Jay. In the same way he goes from wanting to die to wanting to live. Jay's rejection takes him full circle – he reverts to fucking strangers again – but his unresolved grief for Arturo, the cause of his wanting to become HIV-positive, has dissipated and he has become active rather than passive.

Rick Sowadsky's article was one of the few relatively objective discussions of barebacking and bug chasing I found during my research. The majority of the articles in the gay media focus on the discussion of barebacking as a practice, and have much less to say about bug chasing. It seems that, in the mainstream media, the reverse is true, with lurid and scandalised tales of men deliberately seeking out gift givers, so that they can become 'bug brothers.' Such stories allow journalists and commentators to draw on stereotypes of gay male sexual behaviour, and place them within the context of gothic horror conventions including blood exchange, vampirism and death. These are also conventions sometimes celebrated and eroticised within gay culture to create a romantic story.

Is it that a negative representation is being subsumed into a constructed identity and power diverted back to those who are subject to it? Or is this an illusion? Is this seeming choice merely an acceptance of the dominant identity? It may be the case that unprotected gay sex has always happened, even when the AIDS crisis was at its worst, but what is new is the idiom, the language surrounding it, and it is this that creates the particular identities of barebacker and bug chaser, by placing the activity into a linguistic framework, a vocabulary of bug chasing.

My desire to write about this subject matter is also a desire to confront my past and my self. It is controversial. It opens me to attack, but it also exposes me emotionally, and this is what is more frightening. By writing about bug chasing I am acknowledging my own fascination with the sex and death narrative in a way that relates it to my own life, to my self, and to the choices I have made. When I did finally come out, a close university friend told me that, when asked by others if I was gay, he had told them that I couldn't be because I'd have told him. What I was unable to say to James was that I couldn't *tell* anything; even my coming out happened, conveniently, on paper. Back home and apart from my closest friends I *wrote* to them all and waited for *them* to speak to *me*. My vocabulary was always greater written than spoken; the act of writing gives me access to my feelings. To paraphrase E.M. Forster; how do I know what I feel, until I see what I say? The written word gives me an emotional vocabulary. The novel is, literally, *my* vocabulary of spiders.

Weaving Stories

In February 2003 a controversial article, 'Bug Chasers: The men who long to be HIV+', was published in *Rolling Stone* magazine. Written by Gregory A. Freeman, and based largely on anecdotal evidence, it was condemned for its representation of gay men. According to Freeman however, 'the article has been a touchy issue for everyone involved,' and he could 'only guess that now that it's getting a lot of attention, people are getting worried.'⁴⁷ I am not concerned here with the 'truthfulness' of the article, but rather its representation of bug chasers and gift givers.

The article typifies the way the eroticised sex and death narrative pathologises its gay subject:

Carlos nonchalantly asks whether his drink was made with whole or skim milk. He takes a moment to slurp on his grande Caffè Mocha in a crowded Starbucks, and then he gets back to explaining how much he wants HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. His eyes light up as he says that the actual moment of transmission, the instant he gets HIV, will be 'the most erotic thing I can imagine.' He seems like a typical thirty-two-year-old man, but, in fact, he has a secret life. Carlos is chasing the bug.⁴⁸

Carlos is immediately framed as both superficial and immature - his concern over the fat content of his coffee combined with the child-like response to the thought of HIV - and also as dangerous: the sinister phrase 'secret life' and the paragraph's final, ominously short, sentence.

Carlos is presented as an archetypal, metropolitan, body-conscious and well-groomed gay man who is also marked out as 'Other' by the pseudonym

⁴⁷ Freeman, Gregory A. (2003), 'Bug Chasers: the men who long to be HIV+' at <http://rollingstone.com/news/newsarticle.asp?nid=17380>

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

Freeman assigns to him; its Latin quality identifying him as a passionate, exotic and potentially dangerous creature. Like Carlos, Arturo's 'exoticism' in *The Vocabulary of Spiders* marks him out as being 'Other.' He is a different species to Simon, embodying an element of erotic fantasy fetishised by the young boy. It also places Arturo as, metaphorically, 'spider-like' in that he comes from a place where dangerous, poisonous spiders exist, and where spiders have a certain cultural and mythological symbolism.

I am attracted to Carlos, and to Arturo, and I fear them. I know that they are 'damaged' in some ways, but they do not, on the surface, have fear. Arturo *does* fear Simon, though he masks it: it's why he sent him away from the shop and his disappearance could be interpreted as a result of this. He fears losing Simon after they find each other again and this is why he doesn't tell him of his HIV status. Arturo also fears the wider reaction to his illness and is silent as a result.

Freeman witnesses Carlos arranging to meet Richard, a regular fuck-buddy who is HIV-positive. Carlos says, 'It's erotic that someone is breeding me,'⁴⁹ and invites Freeman to come and watch them having sex. Freeman declines. Carlos has not had an HIV-test for two years and doesn't wish to have one. He prefers to believe that he doesn't have the virus, even though he may have contracted it already. This would deprive him of the erotic charge of being 'breded,' and of the romanticised search for 'The One.'

Carlos is asked how he would feel if he found out he was HIV-positive, thereby 'ending the fun of being a bug chaser.'⁵⁰ He replies that he may switch to becoming a gift giver, altering his identity:

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

‘If I know that he’s negative and I’m fucking him, it sort of gets me off. I’m murdering him in a sense, killing him slowly, and that’s sort of, as sick as it sounds, exciting to me.’⁵¹

We’re told that, ‘the conversation veers from the banal – his fascination with the reality show “The Amazing Race” - to his desire for HIV,’ and that, ‘Carlos’ tone never changes when switching from one topic to the other.’⁵² This implies that Carlos has no ‘sense of reality’ – a seemingly objective standard set by Freeman in collusion with his readers. Carlos likens having AIDS to being diabetic; something which is inconvenient but can be controlled and managed by drugs. He, like others, no longer sees AIDS as life threatening or a ‘death-sentence,’ for him the ‘reality’ of AIDS has changed. It is as if, in the search for ‘real’ sex, he has lost his sense of the ‘real.’

The other character in Freeman’s story is Doug Hitzel, who, after six months as a bug chaser, became HIV-positive; ‘He’s now a twenty-one-year-old freshman at a Midwestern university, so wholesome-looking you’d think he just walked out of a cornfield.’⁵³ How different is this portrait of all-American manhood from Carlos the foreigner, and how different Doug appears on the surface from that which lives inside him. Hitzel is also pathologised, but in a way that explains his actions:

Hitzel’s experience started when he moved from his home in Nebraska to San Francisco with his boyfriend. When that relationship broke up, Hitzel was at the lowest point in his life, and alone. He sought relief in

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ *ibid.*

drugs and sex, as much of each as he could get. At first, he started out just not caring whether he got HIV or not, then he found the bug chasing underground and embraced it. He was sure he'd get HIV soon anyway.⁵⁴

Doug was seeking death in a way that was symbolic for him, in a way that was self-destructive, erotic and transgressive; 'Hitzel says he was committing suicide by chasing HIV, killing himself slowly because he didn't have the nerve to do it quickly.'⁵⁵

Unlike Carlos, Doug is also allowed to show insight. He recognises the power of codified language that is so much a part of gay identity and gay experience:

'Bug chasing sounds like a group of kindergartners running around chasing grasshoppers and butterflies...a beautiful thing. And gift giving? What the hell is that? I just wish the terms would actually put some real context into what's going on. Why did I not want to say that I was deliberately infecting myself? Because saying the word "infect" sounds bad and gross and germy. I wanted it to be sexualised.'⁵⁶

Crucially for Freeman (and therefore the reader), Doug expresses regret. Having contracted HIV, he is living with his condition and is angry at the idea of HIV being erotic. Freeman uses Doug as the voice of reason, as opposed to Carlos, for whom 'Bug chasing requires a great deal of self-delusion,' and 'hunting for partners' is a 'secret hobby.'⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

The reaction to Freeman's sensationalist article illustrates the anxiety felt by many individuals and organisations at the portrayal of bug chasing in the mainstream media. *The Observer* reported how HIV specialists had lined up to 'rubbish' the article. Dr Kathleen Jordan, who works in the gay district of San Francisco, said, '...not once in my years of practice have I ever come across a person who actually set out with the intention of becoming infected.'⁵⁸

Dr Marshall Forstein claimed the article was 'entirely a fabrication,' and Dr Bob Cabaj accused *Rolling Stone* of 'sensationalising.'⁵⁹ Both Cabaj and Forstein were quoted in Freeman's article and had statistics attributed to them that they (subsequently) rejected as false. Forstein said he does not see bug chasers 'regularly,' as the article claimed, but that it is a 'small phenomenon' that is 'real and significant' for a 'specific group of men,' rather than being widespread practice.⁶⁰

One of the many responses to Freeman's article posted on the Internet was David Salyer's editorial on *thebody.com*. He says of bug chasers, 'Yes, these men exist' and describes bug chasing as, 'a minor phenomenon of the last decade,' accusing *Rolling Stone* of 'twisting and distorting' the facts to 'generate greater news-stand sales.'⁶¹

Salyer goes on to criticise Freeman himself:

...his publicist asserts that 'Freeman's books are scrupulously researched and entirely factual, yet they read more like novels because

⁵⁸ Donegan, Lawrence, 'British editor in row over HIV "thrill seekers" claim', *The Observer*, 26 January 2003, p.3

⁵⁹ *ibid.* p.3

⁶⁰ *ibid.* p.3

⁶¹ <http://www.thebody.com/asp/mayjun03/lazarus.html>

he weaves the personal stories of his subjects into a compelling narrative.' Hmmm.⁶²

This 'weaving' of the combination of fictional and non-fictional techniques is obviously problematic for Salyer. It's as if you can't use story to tell history, but, if Carlos and Doug seem stereotypical, they are also archetypal, and we recognise them as such. They provide the reader with a shortcut to the 'reality' Freeman wants to create.

In the April 2004 issue of *Attitude*,⁶³ Gareth's McLean's article, 'Dangerous Game,' refers to the furore caused by Freeman; 'This is, to begin with at least, the story of a story.'⁶⁴ It is a story about 'morality, personal responsibility, ethical dilemmas and sexual mores... quite literally, about life and death.'⁶⁵ McLean says that Freeman's article was seen as 'yet more evidence of gay men's irresponsible hedonism, a recklessness everyone was paying for...'⁶⁶ at a time when gay groups were outraged, because so minor a subculture as bug chasing did not warrant a story.

McLean accuses Freeman's article of being 'sensationalist' and 'hysterical,' but asserts that the issues it raises must be discussed. 'Spend your time surfing the net,' he says, 'and you will find web rings celebrating barebacking... whether it's as a subject of frenzied fantasy or object of genuine desire, barebacking is real.'⁶⁷

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ This is a special 'Porn Issue' of *Attitude* and McLean's article is placed between a feature on straight men who make gay porn movies, and a history of gay pornography: barebacking and bug chasing have been placed in a discourse of pornography.

⁶⁴ McLean, Gareth, 'Dangerous Game', *Attitude*, April 2004, p.51

⁶⁵ *ibid.* p.51

⁶⁶ *ibid.* p.51

⁶⁷ *ibid.* p.51

McLean says that discussion of bug chasing 'raised wider issues of unprotected sex between men.'⁶⁸ Gay rights groups had 'closed ranks' in the past at any suggestion of gay men having unprotected sex deliberately as 'they didn't want homophobes having any more ammo than they already had.'⁶⁹ But, these days, he claims, 'too many men are having unsafe sex.'⁷⁰ He doesn't tell us how many is too many but he does say, 'Some have called the tendency to deny the existence of unprotected sex among gay men dangerous, the sex itself "a dirty little secret" that lurks behind closed doors.'⁷¹

On *Gaydar* - the most popular gay website in Europe - profiles contain tick boxes allowing you to state 'Always,' 'Sometimes' and 'Never', in relation to barebacking - or even 'Rather not say.' This leads McLean to conclude that, 'While bug chasing may be a fantasy, barebacking looks much more real a prospect, a measurable phenomenon.'⁷² If barebacking is 'measurable,' then this somehow makes it more 'real,' perhaps because it allows gay men, once more, to become medicalised and pathologised in a way that reinforces them as recognisable 'characters' in stories, or fictions, created *for* them and *by* them.

The debate over the extent to which bug chasing is fantasy links it to the fictional process itself, and to the notion of self-created identities – we are all stories, but how do we have a relationship with those stories told about us? In *The Vocabulary of Spiders*, Simon begins to relate the story of his childhood and of Arturo to Anansi, to the point where he *lives* in this story, he lives in that other created identity – it traps him and allows him to express his desire at the same time, a desire that may have been created for him by *Anansi's Web*.

⁶⁸ *ibid.* p.52

⁶⁹ *ibid.* p.52

⁷⁰ *ibid.* p.52

⁷¹ *ibid.* p.52

⁷² *ibid.* p.53

Gareth McLean says:

There are plenty of pop psychologists out there who can speculate on why gay men would want to 'dice with death' or 'play Russian Roulette'...with theories such as internalised homophobia and self-loathing mutating into a protracted death-wish firm favourites.⁷³

Gay men are not the only people who make decisions that damage their health, or who have low self-esteem. What is important is how these things are written about, spoken about or assimilated into our culture. In writing his article, McLean has seen some 'depressing' and 'uplifting' material including a *Gay.com* survey of 3000 men, two thirds of whom had admitted to having unprotected anal sex, something McLean finds 'sad reading.' The assumption is made that these men are all, intentionally or unintentionally, irresponsible, promiscuous and even, as the title of his article presumes, *dangerous*.

In the same month as Gareth McLean's article was published in *Attitude*, an article appeared in the *Independent on Sunday*. Written by their deputy political editor, Francis Elliott, it claimed that HIV experts had said, 'Gay dating websites should carry health warnings amid increasing concern that the Net is encouraging potentially lethal sex,' and that research carried out for the *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes* stated, 'men using gay dating websites are now significantly more likely to risk contracting HIV through unprotected sex than gay men who meet in clubs and gyms.'⁷⁴

After this article appeared an official letter was written to the Press Complaints Commission by *Gay.com*, describing it as 'homophobic, inaccurate

⁷³ *ibid.* p.53

⁷⁴ Elliott, Francis, "'Gift' of potentially lethal sex is linked to rise in HIV cases,' *Independent on Sunday*, 8 April 2004, p.3

and misleading.’ Ben Townley of *Gay.com* says that ‘many have questioned whether the phenomenon of “gifting” and “bug chasing” is anything more than an urban myth.’⁷⁵

What appears to be happening is a wrestling for control over the stories of barebacking and bug chasing. Who tells them? In what context? Those who control the stories have the power and, as the history of AIDS has shown, there will be a struggle by many gay men to tell their stories, rather than have their lives narrated to them. Gay men *did* tell their stories from within the event of AIDS - in films, poetry, novels, plays and journalism - but it was often within this context of a ‘struggle to tell.’

Different kinds of stories have a place within gay culture. The locker room story, for example, is a cliché from gay porn, but is also recognisable from people’s lived experience and personal histories. It creates our sense of what is erotic, as well as reflecting something called ‘reality.’ As someone involved in the teaching of theory and literature I am seduced by the notion of putting ‘reality’ into inverted commas but, as a writer, a creator of fictions, I believe stories are the search for the real, not an escape from it – they *become* the real.

When Simon, in *The Vocabulary of Spiders*, begins to tell his story to *Anansi’s Web*, he is contributing to a whole body of stories, weaving a universe, which he feels is particular to him, but has a position in relation to certain generic stories of struggling with sexuality, being bullied, feeling oppressed, and a lover’s betrayal. These stories reflect our experience of being gay but also create it. Stories become skins we put on and wear, multi-layered and/or changing over time. Perhaps ‘reality’ is just another one of these skins, but, like virtual reality, like the rubber suit, like the protective hospital wear, like the glass

⁷⁵ <http://www.gay.com/article/2613>

screens of the colony, the computer and the camera, it acts as both an aid and a barrier to identity.

In all the fuss over Freeman's article it doesn't matter so much if Carlos is 'real' or not. He becomes real if we are willing to believe in him (maybe there's a part of us that wants to) and that may be so that we can condemn gays or because we find it sexy. What makes Carlos real is that, like a fictional character, he exists within *us*. If we don't believe in him - as some people dismiss bug chasing as an urban myth - is it because we fear him, and him in us? Do we fear those aspects of our desires that are linked to death, or make us uncomfortable? It is in fictions that we can play out these questions and, while not necessarily finding answers, explore those areas of ourselves that we fear.

In that search, that exploration, there are certain questions we can ask, of the kind posed by Milan Kundera in *Testaments Betrayed*:

What is an individual? Wherein does his identity reside? All novels seek to answer these questions. By what, exactly, is the self defined? By what a character does, by his actions? Yet action gets away from its author, almost always turns on him. By his mental life, then? By his thoughts, by his hidden feelings? But is a man capable of self-understanding? Can his secret thoughts be a key to his identity? Or, rather, is man defined by his vision of the world, by his ideas, his *Weltanschauung*?⁷⁶

As writers, as authors, do we stand apart and create characters that express their personal ideology (what Kundera calls 'Dostoyevsky's aesthetic')? The characters discover it, along with the reader, and the writer has to create the illusion of giving them free will. But why do people, or characters, do the things they do? Why *does* Simon bug chase? The author needs to know this, though the

⁷⁶ Kundera (1995) p.11

characters may not, or have only a sketchy idea of their motives, a mere notion of them 'selves':

To this unending investigation, Thomas Mann brought his very important contribution: we think we act, we think we think, but it is another or others who think and act in us: that is to say, timeless habits, archetypes, which – having become myths passed on from one generation to the next – carry an enormous seductive power and control us (says Mann) from 'the well of the past.'⁷⁷

Simon reveals his motives by revealing his past. His history, as related to Anansi, is his own, fictionalised, version of his past, his 'secret thoughts,' but Simon himself does not know that he has these, because he has suppressed them. He is nevertheless, as we all are, seduced by the powerful myths of his sexuality, the archetypes of sex and death.

In the second volume of Georges Bataille's *The Accursed Share*, which is a *History of Eroticism*, he writes:

...the charm of a novel is linked to the misfortunes of a hero, to the threats that hang over him. Without troubles, without anguish, his life would have nothing that captivates us, nothing that excites us and compels us to live it with him. Yet the fictional nature of the novel helps us bear what, if it were real, might exceed our strength and depress us. We do well to live vicariously what we don't dare live ourselves.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ *ibid.* p.11

⁷⁸ Bataille, Georges, *The Accursed Share: Vol 2, History of Eroticism* (1947), Zone Books, U.S., 1993, p.106

Bataille also asserts that the novel is 'most engaging when the character of the hero leads him, of his own accord, to his destruction.'⁷⁹ Simon is trapped inside the 'role' or identity that has been assigned to him, but he also has a 'relationship' with that identity, one in which he is more active; he develops a response to it by acting in certain ways containing different degrees of free will.

Like so many gay men and women I spent my formative years searching for myself not in the world, but in books and music and art and film and theatre and fashion, because those things offered an alternative, or virtual, world to the one I was being told about in the schoolyard and the newspapers. Those things became my virtual reality suit and gave me my secret life.

The Internet brings us closer to our desires, like fictions, but claims reality for itself, while allowing us to adopt identities, many at once should we choose. It also helps create our desires, as we create those identities, those fictions of ourselves. Carlos' 'secret life' takes place in a space that is both recognisable and hidden, an 'intricate underground world that has sprouted, driven almost completely by the Internet,'⁸⁰ and could not exist, or thrive, without it. It is also a world that seems out of joint:

While the rest of the world fights the AIDS epidemic and most people fear HIV infection, this subculture celebrates the virus and eroticises it.... Carlos has been chasing the bug for more than a year in a topsy-turvy world in which every convention about HIV is turned upside down. The virus isn't horrible and fearsome, it's beautiful and sexy - and delivered in the way that is most likely to result in infection. In this world, the men

⁷⁹ *ibid.* p.106

⁸⁰ Freeman (2003)

with HIV are the most desired, and the bug chasers will do anything to get the virus...⁸¹

It is a Wonderland, dangerously web-like in its intricacy and secrecy, existing within the worldwide web, and made *real* there.

Spirals of Power

Francis Elliott's article in *The Independent on Sunday* claimed that, 'Sexual health experts are now calling for a crackdown on [web]sites that are helping to fuel a worrying rise in new infections,' and, 'experts also fear that the Internet may encourage irresponsible behaviour.'⁸² Dr Mark Pakianathan, spokesman for the British Association of Sexual Health and HIV, said, 'It may be that these sites should, at the least, be required to carry health promotion messages.'⁸³

Will Nutland of the Terrence Higgins Trust rejected that demand and said the Internet had "'liberated" men who would otherwise be isolated because of their HIV status,' and claimed that, 'the Internet has been demonised in the way that cinema or books in the past were seen as somehow encouraging irresponsible sexual behaviour.'⁸⁴

In *AIDS and its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag calls computers, 'the newest transforming element in the modern world,'⁸⁵ and AIDS, 'our newest transforming illness.'⁸⁶ Computer viruses 'infect' and destroy data as HIV infects and destroys the immune system, and a computer virus in 1987 was called 'PC

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² Elliott, April 2004, p.3

⁸³ *ibid.* p.3

⁸⁴ *ibid.* p.3

⁸⁵ Sontag, Susan, *AIDS and its Metaphors*, Penguin U.K., 1989, p.70

⁸⁶ *ibid.* p.70

AIDS.⁸⁷ The computer, the Internet and virtual technology have further contributed to the 'photographic or electronic simulation of events':

Reality has bifurcated, into the real thing and an alternative version of it, twice over. There is the event and its image. And there is the event and its projection. But as real events often seem to have no more reality for people than images, and to need the confirmation of their images, so our reaction to events in the present seeks confirmation in a mental outline, with appropriate computations, of the event in its projected, ultimate form.⁸⁸

Sontag is referring to projections of the AIDS crisis as a medical and social disaster, but we could extend the reference to barebacking and bug chasing; activities that also allow the prediction of increasing numbers of deaths, prejudice against gay men and damage to the gay 'community,' and the re-emergence of fear.

In the same way Bataille and Kundera describe novels as operating, Virtual Reality allows people to explore constructed realities of their choosing and live out 'alternative lives,' or experience certain situations, without 'really' facing the consequences. It has this in common with Sado-Masochism, which is a controlled simulation of danger, linked to sexual desire. According to Sontag: 'Machines supply new, popular ways of inspiring desire and keeping it safe, as mental as possible...'⁸⁹ The Internet, as a supplier of pornography and facilitator of on-line sex was, and is, seen as a means of safer sex. Increasingly, it facilitates the opposite, and is a means of exposing the 'real' extent of people's sexual deviances. In this way it becomes the 'future' of AIDS, and the 'future' of sex.

⁸⁷ *ibid.* p.70

⁸⁸ *ibid.* p.89

⁸⁹ *ibid.* p.79

The Internet can transform any fantasy to instant reality. Sex can be ordered on the Internet as easily as any other product and is merely another consumer choice, with pleasure and personal fulfilment the overriding concern. Sex has always been a readily available commodity, especially if one had the money and leisure time. Advances in technology cause a general speeding up of culture, and sex is no exception. Perhaps one's daily access, via computer, to any number of sexual fantasies, combined with the screen acting as barrier and protector of the senses, has altered some people's perception of the 'real' consequences of unprotected sex.

The Internet allows us to be whoever and whatever we want and, if one arranges to meet and have sex with someone on the Internet, they are meeting with that created identity. This is merely a development of what already happens at cruising grounds or in sex clubs and darkrooms where people are masked in darkness or rubber.

While the Internet allows one to communicate with more people across almost every country in the world, it also isolates the individual in front of the computer screen. Is it this that allows people to believe in their right to individual material, emotional and sexual freedom, at the expense of everything else? Post-modern theory celebrates the fragmentation of metanarratives and the challenging of established orders - something gay men have undoubtedly benefited from - but does the fragmentation afforded by post-modernism alter our perception of community by privileging the individual so that we feel there is an inalienable right to personal fulfilment, whatever the consequences? This right could well include the right to unprotected sex and, in this way, the Internet is often blamed for the increase in barebacking and bug chasing.

Does being able to act on one's desires with immediate effect lead to immoderate behaviour? Computer projections allow us to look into the future, Virtual Reality allows us to change the present moment, and both encourage us to forget the past. The Internet, as a space of sexual exploration, allows for disparate and individual desires to connect with others in a literal web, a network of interlocking discourses. Stories are just such interlocking discourses - both fictions and confessions. The fictional process is affected and influenced by new technology, and, in turn, fiction can determine that structure's use and our experience of it. As Henry James says:

Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue.⁹⁰

Even if the past is forgotten, if experience is limited, the residue of it hangs in the air, invisibly brushing against us so that we are connected and these invisible narrative strands are revisited over and over again, each time as if new.

In *The Vocabulary of Spiders*, Simon's research starts with his recording the spiders' markings on paper, writing down their registered names or identities. Later, when we meet him in the present, he has developed his cameras to watch and record the spiders. His computer data system tracks their movements, their identities now appearing on screen, and his Virtual Reality suit allows him to 'feel' like a spider. Similarly, he begins his spider life by cruising for sex in the cemetery and at the arches and then discovers *Anansi's Web*, which further

⁹⁰ James, Henry, 'The Art of Fiction' (1884), in Leon, Edel (ed) *The House of Fiction*, University of Glasgow Press, U.K., 1957, p.31

facilitates his desires. The technology, his sexual life and his identity develop together.

Simon is putting on and taking off layers - whether in the hospital, at the sex club or during bug chasing sex - all barriers and facilitators of his desires - and he seeks also to strip away some of the screens placed between him and what he wants; Arturo, the spiders, Jay, his own emotions. Paradoxically, he seems only to be able to reach these things by adopting other skins, like the virtual reality suit or the sterile suit at the hospital, or by watching through screens, glass and plastic. His one attempt to forgo all of that is rejected - Jay will not bareback with him. Even then he is attracted to Jay because he sees him as both spider - in the dance - and as bird, which makes him potential prey.

The Internet has been, or is presented as, an independent, unmediated space that is outside of those 'power mechanisms' examined by Foucault in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*. It has, however, a relationship with these mechanisms that function with 'a double impetus: pleasure and power,'⁹¹ and has created a mechanism of its own:

The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and, on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting.... These attractions, these evasions, these circular incitements have traced around bodies and sexes, not boundaries not to be crossed, but perpetual spirals of power and pleasure.⁹²

⁹¹ Foucault, Michel, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, Penguin U.K., 1976, p.45

⁹² *ibid.* p.45

These 'perpetual spirals' are mirrored in the spiders' webs, and in the world wide web where all specified sexualities can find expression and where new ones can be created, connected.

Foucault says that modern society has:

outfitted and made to proliferate, groups with multiple elements and a circulating sexuality: a distribution of points of power, hierarchised and placed opposite to one another; "pursued" pleasures, that is, both sought after and searched out; compartmental sexualities that are tolerated or encouraged; proximities that serve as surveillance procedures, and function as mechanisms of intensification; contacts that operate as inductors.⁹³

The Internet is a means to pursue individual pleasures and, like all modern technologies, a means of categorisation and surveillance. Both kinds of bug chasers – gay men and spiders – can be tracked; on the web and in the colony.

Foucault also claims that power is a 'multiplicity of force relations...which constitute their own organization' and a process of 'ceaseless struggles and confrontations,' which 'transforms, strengthens, or reverses them.'⁹⁴ These force relations support one another, 'thus forming a chain or system,' or there is a contrary force of 'disjunctions and contradictions, which isolate them from one another.'⁹⁵ States of power are 'local and unstable,' there isn't a 'central source of sovereignty.'⁹⁶ Rather than being an institution, or a

⁹³ *ibid.* pp.45-46

⁹⁴ *ibid.* p.93

⁹⁵ *ibid.* p.93

⁹⁶ *ibid.* p.93

structure, or a 'certain strength we are endowed with,' power is 'the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.'⁹⁷

Those websites, those individual computer terminals, each with a potential bug chaser, constitute a 'plurality of resistances.'⁹⁸ Gay men, having been kept as outsiders, while being also (dangerously) inside, negotiate their own strategy within force relations; 'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.'⁹⁹ This is why there can be 'resistance,' both to mainstream proscriptions, but also to the safe sex message, to those trying to help.

Further, there are multiple points of resistance, acting certain roles of 'adversary, target, support, or handle,' rather than being only a 'reaction or a rebound.'¹⁰⁰ Resistances are 'distributed in irregular fashion':

...the points, knots or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behaviour.¹⁰¹

The varying densities in a cobweb, the uneven distribution of gay men in urban communities, the categories of sexuality involved in bug chasing and the creation of Internet communities are all points of resistance, but ones that are not necessarily overarching, uniform or static. More often they are, 'mobile and transitory... fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remoulding them, marking off

⁹⁷ *ibid.* p.93

⁹⁸ *ibid.* p.96

⁹⁹ *ibid.* p.95

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.* p.96

¹⁰¹ *ibid.* p.96

irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds.¹⁰² So gay men are re-categorized as barebackers, bug chasers, gift-givers, risk takers, tops, bottoms, versatiles, poz and neg, in and out, victor and victim, which is itself merely a regrouping of what they have always been. One can move in and out of such power relations, and also in the spaces between them, 'forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them,'¹⁰³ which itself mirrors the institutional integration of power relationships that the state relies on.

Gay identities are not changed merely by power acting upon them, or as a reaction to power, but transform and alter themselves and also act upon other sexual identities; 'Relations of power-knowledge are not static forms of distribution, they are "matrices of transformations,"'¹⁰⁴ like the Internet where identity can be transformed. These identities all come with discourses of straight, gay, queer, bi-, trans- and omni- sexualities and, Foucault says:

We must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies.¹⁰⁵

Discourses are not 'subservient to power'; they can be an instrument of power and a 'point of resistance and starting point for an opposing strategy.'¹⁰⁶

Discourse reinforces power and 'renders it fragile'. 'Silence and secrecy' are

¹⁰² *ibid.* p.96

¹⁰³ *ibid.* p.96

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.* p.99

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.* p.100

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.* p.100

both anchors for power and ‘loosen its holds’ and provide ‘relatively obscure areas of tolerance.’¹⁰⁷

In the nineteenth century there was the appearance in law, literature and psychiatry of ‘a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and “psychic hermaphroditism,”’ which brought with it ‘social controls into this area of “perversity.”’¹⁰⁸ At the same time a ‘reverse’ discourse was formed:

...homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.¹⁰⁹

The same is true of AIDS and the ways in which it advanced the visibility, articulation and acceptance of a whole variety of sexual identities and also made progressions in sexual health and sex education.

‘There is not,’ Foucault says, ‘a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it’; rather, discourses are:

...tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy.¹¹⁰

The creation of the identities of barebacker, bug chaser and gift-giver can occur because sexuality contains such contradictory forces, as individuals contain such

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.* p.100

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.* p.100

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.* p.100

¹¹⁰ *ibid.* pp.101-102

contradictory forces, and perhaps it is these that go towards making up our identities, our sense of self:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.¹¹¹

The worldwide web is a 'great surface network' and novels and narratives are also networks, in which sexualities can exist.

As a gay man I find it difficult to accept without question the notion of sexuality as a historical construct because, having had to negotiate that sexuality, I know that, at its core, there lies a sexual desire for other men that I have struggled with, denied, fought against, accepted and celebrated, despite my fear of prejudice and violence. I know that Foucault is not seeking to deny the existence of this, but in the privileging of the constructionist argument it seems to get lost. Do the narratives about our sexualities create us? Or do we create them? Does the existence of bug chasing websites create that desire, that identity – at least for some? Or do they merely reflect the 'way we are,' which is waiting to be discovered or confessed?

¹¹¹ *ibid.* pp.105-106

Micro-Cultures and Confessions.

In *The Will to Knowledge* Foucault states his 'main concern' is:

to locate the forms of power, the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates in order to reach the most tenuous and individual modes of behaviour, the paths that give it access to the rare or scarcely perceivable forms of desire, how it penetrates and controls everyday pleasure – all this entailing effects that may be those of refusal, blockage and invalidation, but also incitement and intensification: in short, the 'polymorphous techniques of power.'¹¹²

Barebacking is an 'everyday pleasure' in that it has always occurred. Bug chasing, as a rare form of desire and behaviour, is scarcely perceivable because it is kept largely secret, intensifying its appeal. It is also scarcely perceivable to many of those who come to know about it, the common reaction being shock and disbelief. The first question usually asked is, 'Why?' The attempt to satisfy this curiosity, this fascination, is the will to knowledge. Some think they already know - it is because gay men are irresponsible, decadent, immoral and sinful. Or, in the spirit of 'dual discourse,' some 'know' that it is an act of freedom, of choice between two consenting adults. Between these two opposing, connected, discourses there are many more, one of which is that it is as a result of an imposed identity.

Foucault also writes that the 'putting into discourse' of sex has resulted in the 'dissemination and implantation of polymorphous sexualities.'¹¹³ The worldwide web allows these polymorphous sexualities to flourish, creating virtual communities of individuals in front of their screens, like the spider living

¹¹² *ibid.* p.11

¹¹³ *ibid.* p.12

in the centre of its individual web or lair; traditional community structures are augmented by virtual ones.

Francis Elliott's *Independent on Sunday* article quotes Professor Graham Hart as saying:

'There are changes happening in some gay men's sexual cultures around the world... There are sexual micro-cultures developing where there is less of a sense of gay community and more the sense that an individual has to look after their own risk.'¹¹⁴

Dissemination, polymorphing, micro-cultures: all seems to point towards fragmentation; the fragmentation of communities, the fragmentation of sexualities, the shattering of Anansi and the creation of sovereign individuals who are, nonetheless, tenuously linked by their stories.

According to Foucault there has been, since the 18th century, a 'steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex', a 'multiplication' of discourses that were a production of the 'institutional incitement' to speak about sex.¹¹⁵ This multiplication of discourses is another fragmentation, a telling of many stories about people's lives, but this telling is not always in the control of the subject:

The implantation of perversions is an instrument-effect: it is through the isolation, intensification, and consolidation of peripheral sexualities that the relations of power to sex and pleasure branched out and multiplied, measured the body, and penetrated modes of conduct. And accompanying this encroachment of powers, scattered sexualities rigidified, became stuck to an age, a place, a type of practice...Pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and

¹¹⁴ Elliott, April 2004, p.3

¹¹⁵ Foucault (1976), p.18

reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement.¹¹⁶

Today, the institutional incitement often comes from popular culture and media, with their insistence on disclosure, often under the threat of exposure. We have become, according to Foucault, 'a singularly confessing society'¹¹⁷ and he sees the confession as the main instrument of power:

One confesses – or is forced to confess. When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by violence or threat; it is driven from its hiding place in the soul, or extracted from the body... Western man has become a confessing animal.¹¹⁸

This is only an extension of a 'metamorphosis in literature':

...we have passed from a pleasure to be recounted and heard, centring on the heroic or marvellous narration of 'trials' of bravery or sainthood, to a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering image.¹¹⁹

The Internet allows us to confess to our desires: by looking, fantasising, and acting them out. The Internet is both private and public. It gives the illusion of privacy, of secrecy, but is also a means of surveillance, open to all and potentially seen by all; a form of forced confession. The home page, the blog, or the webcam, are all designed to reveal or confess, as if we secretly desire to be

¹¹⁶ *ibid.* p.48

¹¹⁷ *ibid.* p.59

¹¹⁸ *ibid.* p.59

¹¹⁹ *ibid.* p.59

exposed. Simon tells his story to his high-priest Anansi through an electronic confessional screen; it is both private and public.

In March 2000 the BBC journalist and presenter Nigel Wrench, having written a previous column for the *Pink Paper*, wrote an article for *The Guardian*, called 'Sex on the Edge.' It frames Wrench's initial column as being a secret confession, claiming he was 'taking a chance that no one outside the *Pink Paper's* readership circle would notice' when he wrote: 'Since I've been HIV-positive, I've had "unsafe" sex more times than I can remember, often with men whose names I could not tell you now.'¹²⁰ Such statements, *The Guardian* claims, 'will shock even the most tolerant of Hampstead liberals,'¹²¹ and the article describes 'extreme' barebacking websites as 'dancing right at the precipice of sexual edge-play.'¹²²

Wrench's 'confession' is not only lifting the lid on the sexual practice of barebacking but it is 'dangerous for the journalist himself, given his high-profile role...'¹²³ One presumes this is because his exposure may compromise his position as a serious journalist, or lose him his job. Wrench's 'confession' is dangerous precisely because it reveals, not only his behaviour, but the behaviour of others and influences wider perceptions of gay men:

I think that having unprotected sex is something that people just don't talk about, even in the gay community where you can talk about everything. It is the unspoken. It is something that other people do. Because everybody knows people who are dying, it is unacceptable. That makes it very hard for people to speak about it, I think precisely because of the Aids crisis,

¹²⁰ Wrench, Nigel, 'Sex on the Edge,' *The Guardian*, 14th March 2004 at <http://guardianunlimited.co.uk/g2/story/0,,230240,00.html>

¹²¹ *ibid.*

¹²² *ibid.*

¹²³ *ibid.*

because everybody knows somebody who's died, everybody knows somebody with HIV.¹²⁴

This seems to prove Foucault's point about the incitement to speak about sex, because the taboo of speaking about barebacking and bug chasing comes not from mainstream media who, in fact, seek to expose it as proof of another hidden danger of gay sexuality, but from the gay 'community' who fear the consequences.

Wrench says those who have unprotected sex must not be labelled pariahs, but must be able to make an informed decision:

We are not somehow 'other,' we are people with sex lives, we are having sex and it is important for our views to be heard. We are not people who want to be preached at, but we are people who are responsible, who are making responsible decisions about our sex lives.¹²⁵

But how responsible can that decision be, given that it is subject to all kinds of factors? Is it possible to have a neutral attitude or position in relation to one's sexuality given the ways in which sex has been inescapably placed into discourses? Foucault says:

This is the essential thing: that Western man has been drawn for three centuries to the task of telling everything concerning his sex; that since the classical age there has been a constant optimisation and an increasing valorisation of the discourse on sex; and that this carefully analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself... A

¹²⁴ *ibid.*

¹²⁵ *ibid.*

censorship of sex? There was installed rather an apparatus for producing an even greater quantity of discourse about sex, capable of functioning and taking effect in its very economy.¹²⁶

So the 'love that dare not speak its name' fought to be freed from the discourses of medicine, morality and psychology only to see those same discourses applied during the AIDS crisis and again in the debate surrounding bug chasing. Even worse, bug chasing becomes that sexual behaviour that we do not want to hear about or talk about, but there is an insistence on its revelation that is beyond our control, an insistence that revels in its own outrage.

Foucault merely hints, at first, at a web metaphor for this organising structure, then becomes more explicit:

Through the political economy of population there was formed a whole grid of observations regarding sex...Between the state and the individual, sex became an issue, and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions settled upon it.¹²⁷

The secret activity of bug chasing is discussed in public only to condemn those who practise it - barebacking less so - and only to indulge in the lurid fascination with sexual activity linked with death. This 'discursive fact' of sex is the trapping of people in the web of discourses, wrapping them up in stories told by others that one comes to believe about oneself.

Why, in *The Vocabulary of Spiders*, does Simon make the decision to become a bug chaser? It is the death of the young male spider, caused by his

¹²⁶ Foucault (1976), p.23.

¹²⁷ *ibid.* p.26

mating dance, which tips Simon over into that identity. It is not a rational decision but one informed and influenced by grief – for the spider and, crucially, for Arturo: a decision that is not *really* a decision. Further, it is the sight of the spider's death, from behind the computer screen, behind the glass colony wall, and his inability to prevent it, that reminds Simon of his experience of Arturo's death inside the plastic bubble of the intensive care ward.

Sex, like the spiders, like death, is both everywhere and hidden. It is not the case, Foucault says, that modern industrial societies have increased sexual repression; rather, there has been a 'visible explosion of unorthodox sexualities' and the 'proliferation of specific pleasures,'¹²⁸ effecting the multiplication of disparate sexualities:

...never have there existed more centres of power; never more attention manifested and verbalized; never more circular contacts and linkages; never more sites where the intensity of pleasures and the persistency of power catch hold, only to spread elsewhere.¹²⁹

Each website, each computer, each individual is a centre of localised power, each able to contact, link and articulate desires, an electronic heteroglossia, given voice by the Internet.

Foucault identifies what he sees as the significant intentions behind establishing discourses of sexuality and the consequences of that. What is said in these discourses is not immaterial, in fact, it goes to the heart of Western, Capitalist, Christian democracies:

¹²⁸ *ibid.* p.49

¹²⁹ *ibid.* p.49

...was this transformation of sex into discourse not governed by the endeavour to expel from reality the forms of sexuality that were not amenable to the strict economy of reproduction: to say no to unproductive activities, to banish casual pleasures, to reduce or exclude practices whose object was not procreation?¹³⁰

Furthermore, the result of this has not been homogeneity of sexuality but the creation of 'sexualities'; 'The nineteenth century and our own have been the age of multiplication: a dispersion of sexualities, a strengthening of their disparate forms, a multiple implantation of "perversions." Our epoch has initiated sexual heterogeneities.'¹³¹ This multiplication, this dispersion, is, once again, the fragmentation, the shattering, of Anansi into millions of pieces, and with him, the creation of individual stories, hidden in the dark or behind computer screens. This is both good and bad; it allows for sexual self-determination, but also, perhaps, for barebacking and bug-chasing. Perhaps these are responses to discourses, discourses about safe sex, discourses about AIDS, discourses about being homosexual, gay, queer, whatever you want to call it, but it is also, crucially, about the creation of identities and our position within them.

Versions of Gayness.

Section 28 of the Local Government (Amendment) Act, 1988 stated that:

- (1) A local authority shall not

¹³⁰ *ibid.* p.36

¹³¹ *ibid.* p.37

- (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality;
 - (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.
- (2) Nothing in subsection (1) above shall be taken to prohibit the doing of anything for the purpose of treating or preventing the spread of disease.

The Act's intent, in the discourse of the particular pedagogical institution that is state education, was that homosexuality should never be 'promoted' or spoken of as 'acceptable' and to define gay men and women with children as merely 'pretend' families. The equation with homosexuality and the 'spread of disease' in subsection (2) meant that this was the only context in which homosexuality should be mentioned in schools; the story of homosexuality fits only into a discourse of illness - physical, mental and emotional.

For me, at the age of 19, Section 28 seemed to confirm everything I knew about myself - I was invalidated, diseased. Justin Webb writes: 'the purpose of Section 28 was not lost on us youngsters aware enough to realise we were "one of them."'¹³² Unlike Anansi, I was not able to delight in my transgressive, outsider status. I wasn't banished, but my feelings were. I had already, between the ages of 16 and 17, experienced a deep but unrequited love that I kept secret, and the same would happen to me in my first year at University. If Section 28 sought to silence the pedagogical institutions it ensured that others were silenced too; made invisible because it was easier that way.

In 1987, an official circular from the Department of Education stated:

¹³² Webb, October 2002, p.50

There is no place in any school in any circumstances for teaching which advocates homosexual behaviour, which presents it as 'the norm', or which encourages homosexual experimentation by pupils.¹³³

Such wording, says Simon Watney, like that of Section 28, provides an insight into 'the world that the prejudiced inhabit,' it is 'a world that is mainly defined by fear...a world in which homosexuality is a perpetual and terrifying menace...' ¹³⁴ This is the world I and others grew up in. *The Vocabulary of Spiders* seeks to examine the effects such an environment may have had on gay individuals and gay identities. It combines the 'new' event of AIDS with old archetypes, and the 'new' gay identities, of barebacker, bug chaser and gift giver, with their predecessors.

According to Watney:

'Homosexuals' are envisaged as a discrete number of invisible individuals, who preferably do not act on the basis of their desires. This is the picture of homosexuality and 'homosexuals' that traditionalists wish to impose on young people and as far as possible, throughout the rest of society. 'Homosexuals' are thus depicted as a uniform type, an abstract, generalised and thus dehumanised menace - especially dangerous because they cannot necessarily be readily identified.¹³⁵

The rhetoric of the 'promotion' of homosexuality exposes deep-rooted fears creating a narrative, which is:

¹³³ Watney, Simon. *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity*, Routledge U.K. 2000, p.39

¹³⁴ *ibid.* p.39

¹³⁵ *ibid.* p.43

...an essentially pre-modern construction, that is only able to conceptualize homosexual desire in the likeness of sinister, predatory pervers, luring innocent victims to their doom, having corrupted them from within.¹³⁶

Making them 'other' has its purpose because it allows the continued repression and marginalisation of gay men and women. The discourse of the 'promotion' of homosexuality confirms the fear of the homosexual; as a person and as an identity.

This is the same kind of fear as arachnophobia. So, gay men are like spiders, either trapping their innocent prey, injecting them with poison to 'corrupt' them and thereby consume them, or like the female spider killing and eating the male after copulation. Homosexuals are treated the same as other creatures that are also the subject of phobias. Simon's attempts to classify the movements of spiders, and to cure people of their phobias, is a displaced wish to lay to rest the prejudice he suffered at school and the grief at the death of his partner.

Obviously, Section 28 is no more, and, in some ways, its vocabulary and attitude seem from a different era. If the purpose of Section 28 was to expose (or re-create?) the 'otherness' of gay men and women, articles on bug chasing seek to expose gay men as the dangerous and poisonous predators they have always been. They are deemed to have reverted to type and articles in the mainstream media seek to do the same as Section 28.

In *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, Jonathan Dollimore writes: 'In fiction especially, the gay underworld has often been a place of both death

¹³⁶ *ibid.* p.48

and redemption.'¹³⁷ By 'underworld' he is referring to the bars, clubs, saunas, cottages, cemeteries and parks in which gay men seek each other out, most often in the dark. Such 'places of adventure,' Dollimore says, 'echo in the mythology of the modern city underworld - residually wild, but above all shadowy and transient, full of some magic and rather more loss.'¹³⁸ This weaves a thread all the way from classical myth to modern literature and popular culture:

...we encounter the gay underworld as a place where the hero or heroine suffers into truth, and, by dissociating himself or herself from the tormented inhabitants of that place, writes of its tragedy. These heroes and heroines are romantic, fallen figures who suffer, and maybe redeem, or at least atone for, that alienation which they find at the heart of deviant desire. So charged are such scenes they could almost be regarded as a convention of some gay writing... a representation of distress, of lack and longing, which makes sense of it by recourse to art, and in ways which elicit understanding and even identification, without having to be trusted. Whatever, such scenes have been one way of trying to struggle free from, of redeeming, the apparent mutual implication of death and desire.¹³⁹

There is an alternative response to the underworld, and that is to revel in it, and to celebrate it, to see it as a valuable and creative space. In the 1970s, Dollimore says, 'the promiscuous homosexual encounter became the inspiration for revolutionary aspirations.'¹⁴⁰ At the same time:

...the wild space of the promiscuous encounter was narrowing even further (from underworld bar to bathhouse), with the sexual practices becoming more transgressive (sado-masochism and fist-fucking) but

¹³⁷ Dollimore, Jonathan. *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, Penguin, U.K., 1998, p.296

¹³⁸ *ibid.* p.296

¹³⁹ *ibid.* pp 296-7

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.* p.297

rather harder to represent as revolutionary; the wilderness of a once vaguely defined illicit sexuality became in a sense even wilder, yet now *precisely* defined and ritualised.¹⁴¹

The space has narrowed further to the computer screen. Barebacking and gift giving and Russian Roulette parties are precisely ritualised and codified and classified, like the behaviour of spiders, like the vocabulary and notation of a dance, like the etiquette of the cruising ground.

According to Dollimore, Foucault described bath-houses as 'laboratories of experimentation,'¹⁴² and Dollimore himself calls them 'claustrophobic spaces.'¹⁴³ He describes Michael Rumaker's novel, *A Day and a Night at the Baths*, as an 'allegorical appropriation of primitive sexual ritual,' which is 'all about a therapeutic recovering of a lost wholeness,' of being freed from the 'falseselves' of sexual difference.¹⁴⁴ For some, barebacking is a way of doing that, of 'getting back' to a mythological, pre-AIDS, time of carefree sex. Web sites have now become laboratories, places of experimentation and classification, like Simon's laboratory. Further, the chat room has now replaced the bath-house, cruising is done on-line, *Gaydar* and other websites supplement, and possibly substitute for, cruising grounds.

In barebacking terms, semen from an HIV-positive man is called 'charged cum' or 'poz-cum.' Furthermore, Gregory Freeman tells us that 'HIV-infected semen is treated like liquid gold.'¹⁴⁵ Liquid Gold is the name of a well known brand of 'poppers,' or amyl nitrate, sold in gay bars and clubs as a drug to dance with and to fuck with. Such vocabulary is an example of the 'valorisation

¹⁴¹ *ibid.* p.297

¹⁴² *ibid.* p.298

¹⁴³ *ibid.* p.298

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.* p.299

¹⁴⁵ Freeman (2002)

of sperm' as described by Foucault in *The Care of the Self* and accounts for much of the anxiety around how AIDS is transmitted.

Foucault describes the attitude of the ancient Greek physician Galen towards 'that precious substance which Nature, when she designed the human body, took so many precautions in forming.'¹⁴⁶ Sperm 'gathers up all that is powerful in life and transmits it, thereby enabling us to cheat death.'¹⁴⁷ This precious substance became tainted and poisoned by HIV and AIDS - perhaps this was the gravest sin gay men had committed - and the power it transmitted became that of death, not life. AIDS made sperm venomous.

As Susan Sontag points out, with AIDS, 'Life - blood, sexual fluids - is itself the bearer of contamination. These fluids are potentially lethal.'¹⁴⁸ There was a general fear of exposure to blood, which led to precautions being taken by dentists, doctors, nurses, firemen or others potentially 'at risk.' This behavioural shift, caused by fear, does not change once the perceived threat has disappeared, because it has established itself, according to Sontag, over time. These behaviours become 'part of social mores.'¹⁴⁹ They also become part of the story of what it means to be HIV-positive, or have AIDS, or even just to be gay, which is to be treated as poisonous.

According to Foucault, Galen compares the 'noxious powers of corrupted sperm' with 'virulent poisons' in nature:

¹⁴⁶ Foucault, Michel. *History of Sexuality: Vol.3, The Care of the Self*, Penguin, U.K., 1984, p.112

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.* p.112

¹⁴⁸ Sontag, p.73

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.* p.74

‘We can see that the entire body is affected by the bite of the venomous spider, although only an insignificant amount of venom enters through a very small opening.’¹⁵⁰

In the same way, just one sexual encounter is all that is necessary to transmit HIV, which is testament to its power. In bug chasing, that one encounter, that one person, the gift-giver, becomes *The One*: the longed for, the sought for, the ultimate. In this sense he is romanticised, though the actual experience may be more erotic than romantic: random, anonymous, violent. Simon’s fuck of death in the sex club is just such an experience, though he desires to give the gift to Jay in a much more intimate, romantic context. He wants to *share* it. When Jay rejects this, Simon reverts to anonymous sex, though it is organised over the Internet.

Galen also endowed sex with healing and transforming properties. In the vocabulary of bug chasing one is ‘initiated’, ‘converted’, ‘bred’, or ‘seeded.’ The valorisation of sperm has developed to a point where sperm is *both* poisoned and precious. In this dual discourse it is bug chasing’s closeness to death that affirms life: life as extreme experience, as lived ‘to the full.’ Unprotected sex is ‘real sex’ or ‘raw sex,’ sex with the pleasure and fun put back in. Conversion to HIV only adds to the pleasure. As Carlos asserts:

‘What else can happen to us after this? You can fuck whoever you want, fuck as much as you want, and nothing worse can happen to you. Nothing bad can happen after you get HIV.’¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Foucault (1984), p. 117

¹⁵¹ Freeman (2002)

For the HIV-positive protagonist of Cyril Collard's *Savage Nights*, 'Since death is inevitable, it may as well be brought by someone you love, or whom you think you love.'¹⁵² So, in this dual discourse, AIDS is about both life and death and it is why Simon is able to view bug chasing as containing the possibility of both.

Within each of the many varied reasons that people bug chase is the notion of choice, but is it choice, or the illusion of choice? If the bug chase is the result of the inevitability of death, or of AIDS, then this is less of a choice if that inevitability is imposed on to one's sexual identity. Who establishes the inevitability of HIV infection, the 'fate' of AIDS? Wasn't it imposed on gay men during the 1980s and 1990s and even still today? And isn't it the latest in a long line of the relationship between sex and death, and more specifically gay sex and death? Are these men victims of a cultural structure or paradigm, which they in turn celebrate?

Jonathan Dollimore has explored how narratives of gay male sexuality and homosexual love have traditionally been influenced by the sex and death dichotomy and informed the way that we view gay lives. He cites James Miller's biography, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, in which Miller quotes Foucault's apocryphal comment: 'to die for the love of boys: what could be more beautiful?',¹⁵³ along with Oscar Moore's novel, *A Matter of Life and Sex*, as texts that explore the eroticisation of AIDS while invoking the 'medieval or Jacobean obsession with death as somehow the motor of life.'¹⁵⁴

For Dollimore, the link between gay sex and death was one originally imposed by those who sought to discriminate against gay men; they have been

¹⁵² Collard, Cyril, (tr. William Rodarmor), *Savage Nights*, Quartet Books, U.K., 1993, p.208

¹⁵³ Dollimore, p.ix

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.* p.x

made to 'imply each other.'¹⁵⁵ Dollimore describes Moore's novel as a 'representation of AIDS,' in which there is 'brutal material proof... that death inhabits sexuality: perversely, lethally, ecstatically'¹⁵⁶ and points to passages like this one:

The mouth on his dick was chewing. His dick had gone limp. He didn't know if he had come or not. The pumping in his back hurt somewhere far off in the distance. Arms were gripping his shoulders. He knew he was leaning forward... his body now little more than a toy, a greased-up sex doll. He didn't know any more whether he was standing or lying, whether this was sex or death.¹⁵⁷

To Dollimore, 'homosexuality and death become inseparable' in Moore's novel, and 'homoerotic desire is construed as death-driven, death-desiring and death-dealing.'¹⁵⁸ This has its cultural and literary precedent and is not, in itself, unique to representations of gay male desire, but it is consistently applied; there are few, if any, alternatives. AIDS becomes an inevitable consequence of gay male sex because, one way or another, it ends in tragedy.

Unprotected sex is not new, the idea of dying for sex is not new either, nor is its association with gay male sexuality; AIDS invokes old ideas about sex, disease and punishment. What *is* new is the application of a 'vocabulary' of bug chasing and, crucially, the ease with which it can be carried out, thereby making the fantasy 'real.' It is a new application of old ideas, old words:

...to conceive the category of the sexual in terms of the law, death, blood, and sovereignty - whatever the references to Sade and Bataille, and

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.* p.xi

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.* p.xi

¹⁵⁷ Moore (1991), p.252

¹⁵⁸ Dollimore, p.xi

however one may gauge their 'subversive' influence - is in the last analysis a historical 'retro-version.' We must conceptualise the deployment of sexuality on the basis of the techniques of power that are contemporary with it.¹⁵⁹

It is precisely this 'retro-version' of sexuality that barebacking and bug chasing taps into and uses to assert the 'naturalness' of unprotected sex, as coming from a bygone era.¹⁶⁰ The West has, says Foucault, 'defined new rules for the game of powers and pleasures,'¹⁶¹ and bug chasing seems to confirm that this process is ongoing and renewable, its rules and codes strictly laid out. It points to the past, present and future. Dollimore writes:

Before AIDS, homosexual promiscuity was often regarded as epitomizing an impossibility of desire unique to the homosexual by virtue of his or her supposed immaturity and inauthenticity.... In the context of AIDS there were some for whom this specifically gay version of desire's impossibility became intensified into a kind of death-driven futility.¹⁶²

Dollimore is describing a development of the dominant narrative representation of gay sexual relations, a narrative that both confirms and re-creates a particular gay identity. It is an identity with an inbuilt fatalism: biologically and psychologically maladjusted, un-reproductive; we only have responsibility for ourselves and are self-indulgent, decadent, as a result. We have no future, so we live only for today. This representation presumes a metropolitan existence of club culture, darkrooms and saunas, separated from 'normal' communities but

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.* p.150

¹⁶⁰ Simon Garfield's study of the cultural and political history of AIDS in the U.K during the 1980s is called *The End of Innocence* (1994), suggesting a particular care-free, pre-AIDS existence.

¹⁶¹ Foucault (1976), p.48

¹⁶² Dollimore, p.295.

existing in a sub-community of its own - a colony, like the spider colony, a contained or controlled freedom. It is a representation that refuses to see any advantage in its fluidity and freedom and confirms the sterility and selfishness of gay sexual relations, as both unproductive and luxuriant.

I have never felt that it is inevitable that I would get AIDS, because I fear it too much. That fear permeates everything else and alters one's behaviour. In this way, one is never outside of, or post-, AIDS. Some men feel that they are taking control of their fate by bug chasing, empowering themselves, and shedding their victim status. For others, the very extreme nature of the taboo imposed on bug chasing is what makes it so erotic, so 'charged.' The erotic appeal of death is not unique to gay men, but it is perhaps uniquely privileged in cultural stereotypes of gay male sexuality, so much so that a good proportion of gay men come to believe this themselves and go on to act it out.

AIDS as Gift

Georges Bataille begins *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, with the statement: 'Eroticism is the asserting of life up to the point of death.'¹⁶³ By eroticising AIDS and inviting the possibility of death, is bug chasing then an assertion of life? If to live fully is to invite death, then unprotected penetrative intercourse with someone you know to be HIV-positive could be framed as the ultimate life experience, which the threat of death gives to it.

Bataille also writes: 'If the union of two lovers comes about through love it involves the idea of death, murder or suicide. This aura of death is what

¹⁶³ Bataille, Georges, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (1956) pub. City Light Books, 1986, U.S., p.2

denotes passion.’¹⁶⁴ We may be attracted to the idea of dying for love but the idea of dying for sex is not so romantic. It is, however, well-established and, crucially, it contains the possibility of *living* for sex, especially if, in the past, one has had to fight for sex. For barebackers, safe sex is unexciting, the act of putting on a condom interrupting the flow of ‘passion’ (and thereby, in Bataille’s terms, dissipating the ‘aura of death’). Unprotected sex is also romanticised as the ‘giving’ of oneself to another person; a supreme act of submission when passive, and the ultimate symbolic and physical exchange when active. Bug chasing takes this one step further.

In his essay, ‘Georges Bataille and the Notion of Gift,’ David Kosalka describes how Bataille sought to move away from the assertion that economic necessity was the major driving force of history. Marcel Mauss, in his ‘*Essai sur le Don*,’ published in 1950, proposed the notion of ‘the gift’ as an alternative to capitalist exchange, and Bataille used this notion to support the possibility of ‘human sovereignty within economic systems.’¹⁶⁵ By giving a gift, one places oneself *outside* economic systems, becoming sovereign, or *free*.

Bataille was more concerned, Kosalka says, with the irrational than the rational, the erotic instead of bourgeois morality, excess as opposed to capitalist restraint, transgression rather than conformity and, in *The Accursed Share*, ‘conceived of a meta-category of the movement of energy to which classical economics is only a subcategory.’¹⁶⁶ This flow of energy results in an ‘excess’ or ‘surplus’ that must be expended. Bataille proposes a law of surplus and writes: ‘The Surplus is the cause of the agitation, of the structural changes and of the

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.* p.20

¹⁶⁵ Kosalka, David, ‘Georges Bataille and the Notion of Gift’ (December 1999) at <http://lemmingland.com/bataille.html>

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.*

entire history of society.’¹⁶⁷ He also analyses history in terms of ‘the expenditure of excess energy and production.’¹⁶⁸ Cultures are defined by how this excess energy is ‘annihilated,’ whether through religion, military might, the creation of art, or spending on luxury goods.

Sex is part of that flow of energy and gay men’s sexual choices are often framed as self-indulgent and decadent – because they do not involve the possibility of reproduction – and are thereby ‘surplus.’ They are excessive in sexual terms but also morally and materially so. Throughout the AIDS crisis the ‘cost’ of treatment has been constantly referred to as a waste of money, those requiring it having brought their illness on themselves, especially as compared to those ‘innocent’ victims of AIDS. They could be annihilated as excess. Similarly, bug chasers and barebackers are ordered to consider the ‘cost’ to society of their irresponsible actions, both financially and socially.

In the second volume of *The Accursed Share, a History of Eroticism*, Bataille asserts: ‘the principle of the gift, which propels the movement of general activity, is at the basis of sexual activity,’ and that, ‘physically, the sexual act is the gift of an exuberant energy.’¹⁶⁹ The naming of HIV as ‘the gift’ in bug chasing gives the virus, and AIDS itself, the same kind of significance; elevating it and giving it a ‘meaning’ beyond its fact.

Bataille’s notion of the gift is closely related to his idea of the sacrifice, which removes the objects of the gift from the ‘demands of utility’ and places them where they can ‘exist free of their constraints in the moment of the

¹⁶⁷ Bataille, Georges, *The Accursed Share, Vol. 1: Consumption*, (1947), Zone Books, U.S., 1991, p.106.

¹⁶⁸ Kosalka (1999)

¹⁶⁹ Bataille, Georges, *The Accursed Share, Vol. 2: History of Eroticism*, (1947), Zone Books, U.S., 1993, p. 41

sacrifice.’¹⁷⁰ For those who feel they are sacrificing, or ‘risking,’ their lives by bug chasing (even though they may also feel that they are living it most fully by doing so), they are investing themselves with the symbolic value of the sacrifice that is beyond, and therefore more profound than, the order of things – what could be more beautiful?

According to Bataille, a relationship of immense intimacy was created between the victim of a sacrifice and those for whom he was a substitute. At the same time, the victim is ‘removed from the realm of the object,’ and becomes ‘a sovereign subject in its absolute uselessness.’¹⁷¹ He, and the one offering the sacrifice, ‘enter the realm of the sacred, of the free subject who is not subordinated to the demands of useful production.’¹⁷² As gay sex is not a ‘utility,’ that is, it is not ‘productive,’ it can easily shift itself into the realm of sacrifice, which is joyous in its sovereignty, and revels in its excess. Bug chasing *proves* one is living life to the full.

There is also a relationship between the sacrifice and literature, ‘of which it is the principal heir.’ Literature has ‘received sacrifice as a legacy,’ as ‘this longing... to lose ourselves and to look death in the face, found in the ritual of sacrifice,’ is a ‘satisfaction’ we get from reading novels. Indeed, ‘sacrifice was a novel, a fictional tale illustrated in a bloody manner,’ and ‘sacrifice is no less fictional than a novel; it is not a truly dangerous, or culpable killing; it is not a crime but rather the enactment of one; it is a game.’¹⁷³

Gregory Woods describes how, in Jean Genet’s *Querelle of Brest*, *Querelle* has ‘twin roles as murderer and passive queer,’ which ‘not only overlap,

¹⁷⁰ Kosalka (1999)

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*

¹⁷² *ibid.*

¹⁷³ Bataille. *The Accursed Share, Vol.2.* (1947), p.106

but are actually functions of each other. He kills and is killed in turn.¹⁷⁴ This is similar to the relationship between the identities of bug chaser and gift giver in *The Vocabulary of Spiders*: Simon moves from one to the other. Querelle knows that the experience of being fucked 'will transform him, perhaps into a monster, perhaps merely into one who gets fucked,'¹⁷⁵ and there's a sense in which these two things are the same.

These 'roles' can also be played out in the context of a 'Dangerous Game,'¹⁷⁶ an extension of the games of cruising and cottaging. As Woods also points out, when Querelle 'submits to being fucked,' he and Nono 'roll dice to decide, according to the dictates of chance, who should fuck whom.'¹⁷⁷ Querelle wants to lose. Russian Roulette parties, in which the HIV status of the participants is not known, frames bug chasing within a game – a *dicing* with death. Simon, in *The Vocabulary of Spiders*, plays a game on *Anansi's Web*, in which he traps and uncovers the pornographic images. It is facilitated by the trickster god and designed to ensnare.

Bug chasing could have come straight out of Genet because, according to Woods:

The confusion between anal pleasure and murderous pain lies at the heart of all of Jean Genet's fiction. He cannot conceive of any homosexual act that does not involve a fundamental struggle between opposed masculinities, or the willing surrender of one to the other. The ultimate end of any such act is always death, whether literal or only symbolic. Seduction is a form of betrayal, and consummation involves no mere petit mort, but rather a bloodbath of overblown (if nonetheless repressed)

¹⁷⁴ Woods, p.276

¹⁷⁵ *ibid.* p.276

¹⁷⁶ cf. the title of Gareth McLean's *Attitude* article

¹⁷⁷ Woods, p.276

emotionalism, which might have graced the closing moments of some cheap, tragic melodrama.¹⁷⁸

Simon's consummation, his 'conversion,' is indeed overblown and melodramatic, and he wouldn't have it any other way: such a moment should not be ordinary. It is also a moment of madness, where a taboo is transgressed, and it is a moment of ecstasy, a forgetting of one's 'self.'

Woods writes, 'there is no room in Genet for the sanity and balance of liberation...' and that Genet is 'one of the most eloquent laureates of the condition of male homosexuality, and men's fears of it, prior to liberation.'¹⁷⁹ He says, 'It is precisely the absence of liberation that makes the homosexual tragedy plausible.'¹⁸⁰ And yet, those who bug chase claim that they *are* liberated, that what they are doing is a matter of choice and freedom. It is the story they tell themselves.

As *The Vocabulary of Spiders* progresses, Simon begins to live more and more in the story of his own past, a story he has kept hidden and secret as he kept himself hidden and secret in the cruising grounds. He lives, then, in the realm of sacrifice, a realm which includes the colony, *Anansi's Web*, and his own story. He enters this realm wanting to sacrifice himself - to die - but leaves it wanting to live, transforming his identity from bug chaser to gift giver. This elevates his status and gives him a power he lacked at school, and in his relationships with Arturo and Jay. Only in the colony and the laboratory does he feel in control, but this is taken from him by the death of the young spider, which he is unable to prevent, and by his being trapped in the narrative of this death by the virtual reality suit. His use of the suit to attract a gift-giver enables him to feel powerful,

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.* p.278

¹⁷⁹ *ibid.* p.278

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.* p.278

as does his subsequent conviction that he has contracted HIV. The fact that he does not *know* this prolongs the game.

For Mauss, there is a 'spiritual force' associated with the gift, which necessitates a 'counter-gift.'¹⁸¹ This removes or reciprocates the gift's power and lifts the hold that the gift-giver had over the recipient. Mauss also felt that gift-giving was crucial in maintaining social structures, by creating social bonds that join individuals, but also a sharing of social power through the reciprocity of the exchange. In some societies, particularly those of the American Northwest, one of Anansi's homelands, gift-giving could become competitive and, eventually, destructive. The ceremony of 'potlatch,' for example, could become 'an orgy of gift-giving' with an emphasis on 'luxury and excess.'¹⁸² Ultimate status is gained by the destruction of wealth in a 'war of property.' This suggested to Bataille the idea of the drive to annihilate excess, as opposed to the idea of rational exchange, and also made the gift a central means to achieving this:

We need to give away, lose or destroy. But the gift would be senseless (and so we would never decide to give) if it did not take on the meaning of an acquisition. Hence *giving* must become *acquiring of power*. Gift-giving has the virtue of surpassing of the subject who gives, but in exchange for the object given, the subject appropriates the surpassing: he regards his virtue, that which he had the capacity for, as an asset, as a *power* that he now possesses.¹⁸³

As well as annihilation, we acquire the respect and regard of others and 'Pure and simple destruction evidently commands great prestige.'¹⁸⁴ This is also

¹⁸¹ Kosalka (1999)

¹⁸² *ibid.*

¹⁸³ Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vol.1* (1947), p.69

¹⁸⁴ Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vol.2* (1947), p.42

linked to a fear of someone who engages in such destruction. In the context of bug chasing, power and status is given to those who are HIV-positive and who become gift givers: they were given the virus and, in turn, pass it on in greater force. In moving from bug chaser to gift giver, one's status changes.

Barebacking is an act of sovereignty and bug chasing transforms sex, or more specifically HIV, into a 'gift.' What may have started as an act of self-destruction and irresponsibility, or an erotic sado-masochistic fantasy, or a considered decision, now heightens the recipients' status, making them want to continue living, rather than die.

Kosalka writes: 'Bataille saw the modern world... to be lacking the type of intimacy that the gift allows.'¹⁸⁵ A lack of intimacy is one of those arguments used by barebackers and bug chasers against the safe sex proscription. Sex, they argue has become pedestrian, ordinary, or, in Bataille's terms, 'utilitarian,' which is a denial of subjecthood. Safe sex, like capitalism, does not allow for personal power and subjecthood, but the gifting of HIV does.

The 'thing' exchanged, in this case infected body fluids, is no longer a 'thing,' but rather, 'the *gift* that one made of it was a sign of glory, and the object itself had the radiance of glory,'¹⁸⁶ like the aforementioned Liquid Gold. Not only that but 'subjecthood' is also 'taken from the realm of utility to the sacred uselessness of sacrifice,' and becomes 'the basic freedom to express an individual will of the giver.'¹⁸⁷ Unsafe sex becomes, for bug chasers and gift givers, an expression of will, of subjecthood, and of sovereignty.

Kosalka ends his essay:

¹⁸⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ Bataille, Vol.1 (1947), p.65

¹⁸⁷ Kosalka (1999)

Bataille affirms that in *the moment of madness* that is the gift there is an opening of freedom to change and define individual and cultural self-understanding. The gift, for Bataille, is a manifestation of the demand to escape a structural determinism, allowing for a return of the subject and human freedom to philosophical discourse through a paradox of losing it, of giving it away.¹⁸⁸

In the section of *The History of Eroticism* called 'Death is Finally the Most Luxurious Form of Life,' Bataille writes about the 'opposed forms' of life and death being 'interdependent.'¹⁸⁹ The anxiety this causes is due to 'the common misappreciation of death,' which asks us to 'despise the link associating death with eroticism, regarded as a promise of life.'¹⁹⁰ It is 'dishonourable,' says Bataille, and a lack of 'intellectual virility' to 'turn away from the luxurious truth of death.'¹⁹¹ Death, he asserts, 'is the youth of the world...death, and death alone, constantly ensures the renewal of life.'¹⁹² He explains himself further:

The law given in nature is so simple as to defy ignorance. According to this law, life is effusion; it is contrary to equilibrium, to stability. It is the tumultuous movement that bursts forth and consumes itself. Its perpetual explosion is possible on one condition: that the spent organisms give way to new ones, which enter the dance with new forces.¹⁹³

This is how death, or its possibility, can become an expression of life's effusion. This is how one can desire death, and how that desire becomes erotic. The problem with gay male sex in this context is that the primary condition for

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ Bataille, (1957), p.84

¹⁹⁰ *ibid.* p.84

¹⁹¹ *ibid.* p.84

¹⁹² *ibid.* p.84

¹⁹³ *ibid.* p.84

life's effusion, as laid down by Bataille, is not met. The spent organisms are not replaced in reproduction and this was the fear of the 1980s - that the human race would, literally, die out. Are they not replaced, though, in bug chasing? When a bug chaser asks a gift giver to 'breed me,' he is not only using the vocabulary of reproduction, but opening himself up to the possibility of transformation into a gift giver himself. Simon wants to pass on the gift to Jay and then to the young trick who reminds him of himself as a boy, and who is also part of Simon's story for Anansi. It also provides an 'end' that, like death, is both destructive and creative:

Everything within us demands that death lay waste to us; we anticipate these multiple trials, these new beginnings, unproductive from the standpoint of reason, this wholesale destruction of effective force accomplished in the transfer of one individual's life to other, younger, individuals. Deep down, we even assent to the condition that results, that is almost intolerable, in this condition of individuals destined for suffering and inevitable annihilation. Or rather, were it not for this intolerable condition, so harsh that the will constantly wavers, we would not be satisfied....¹⁹⁴

Have those who condemn bug chasers and see them as purely selfish recognised that freedom of expression includes the right to do things we may not approve of, or we feel harms the 'wider community,' the 'greater good'? Whether we like it or not, the right to life includes the right to death:

...those among us who best make themselves heard are unaware (and want at all cost to be unaware) that life is the luxury of which death is the highest degree, that of all the luxuries of life, human life is the most

¹⁹⁴ *ibid.* p. 84

extravagantly expensive, that, finally, an increased apprehension of death, when life's security wears thin, is at the highest level of ruinous refinement... But oblivious of this, they only add to the anguish without which a life devoted entirely to luxury would be less boldly luxurious. For if it is human to be luxurious, what to say of a luxury of which anguish is the product and which anguish does not moderate?¹⁹⁵

The safe sex lobby 'best made themselves heard,' in order to save lives, but, at the same time, highlighted the possibility of unsafe sex. Bug chasers are not moderated by anguish, they are driven by it in all its luxury. Are they aware that death is the highest degree of a luxurious life? Do they lack an apprehension of death? They are oblivious and, therefore, add to anguish, unknowingly.

How then does this square with the idea of sovereignty? Do the narrative and cultural representations of sexuality, which work to construct our identities, mean we can never be truly sovereign? Do we not, rather, simply choose between different versions of what it means to be a subject? But what about desire? What about the urge to fulfil ourselves sexually, even when that means a difficult life with the disapproval of others, or the threat of imprisonment, even death? Does this prove something that exists outside of culturally imposed identities?

The eroticism of death, according to Bataille, is both excessively joyful and contains horror, which is 'present and plays a part in erotic attraction.'¹⁹⁶ Those things that horrify us, that otherwise would have no meaning, 'take on the highest present value in our eyes.'¹⁹⁷ Is this why people are fascinated by those things they also fear: sex, disease, death, spiders? Phobics often reveal or

¹⁹⁵ *ibid.* pp.84-85

¹⁹⁶ Bataille (1957), p.104

¹⁹⁷ *ibid.* p.104

‘confess’ a sexual element in the attitude towards the object of horror, and in the genesis of the phobia. Sex, when it is represented as draining, is even more satiating when directly connected to a virus, and therefore more erotic:

Erotic activity can be disgusting; it can also be noble, ethereal, excluding sexual contact, but it illustrates a principle of human behaviour in the clearest way: what we want is what uses up our strength and our resources and, if necessary, places our life in danger.¹⁹⁸

Rather than running away from the object of our horror, we run towards it:

...the horror I experience does not repel me, the disgust I feel does not nauseate me... I may, on the contrary, thirst for it; far from escaping, I may resolutely quench my thirst with this horror that makes me press closer, with this disgust that has become my delight. For this I have filthy words at my disposal, words that sharpen the feeling I have of touching on the intolerable secret of being. I may say these words in order to cry out the uncovered secret, wanting to be sure I am not the only one to know it; at this moment I no longer doubt that I am embracing the totality without which I was only outside: I reach orgasm.¹⁹⁹

When Simon is at the sex club, bent double, having unprotected sex, he feels the ‘filthy word,’ but more, *he lives within the fuck*, has never felt more alive.

Similarly, he orgasms in the virtual reality suit when his body is stimulated as spider; while his mind attempts to reject what he is ‘seeing,’ his body reacts erotically to the physical stimuli, thereby increasing his association between the spiders and sex, which was already there, created by the experience in the spider barn, and the spider-gift, left for him by Arturo. When he sees Jay as spider he

¹⁹⁸ *ibid.* p.104

¹⁹⁹ *ibid.* p.118

wants to fuck him. When the young male spider is killed in the colony he accesses his feelings, *creates* feeling, by fucking the spider hole.

Dollimore quotes an interview Foucault gave in 1982 in which he said:

‘I would like and I hope I’ll die of an overdose [*laughter*] of pleasure of any kind... the kind of pleasure I would consider as *the* real pleasure would be so deep, so intense, so overwhelming that I couldn’t survive it. I would die.’²⁰⁰

Foucault, and ‘some other gay intellectuals,’ Dollimore says, ‘wanted to destroy certain normalizing and oppressive ways of thinking and being’²⁰¹ and homosexuality, they believed, could provide a release from those. Further, ‘extreme scenarios of sado-masochism,’ especially when combined with drugs, enabled polymorphous self-invention, which was a step towards ‘new ways of living.’²⁰² Bug chasing and Russian Roulette parties are a return to a Utopian ideal of a past sexual history, and a leap forward towards death as a release from oppressive mechanisms: a death from pleasure, which is an affirmation of life.

Dollimore says:

...for Foucault the disidentification of the self, which in turn involved a fascination with death itself, was at once personal, political and historical... Throughout his work there are cryptic, lyrical, paradoxical speculations on how we live death - how, that is, death’s changing face organizes our identity, language, sexuality and future - speculations which are sometimes disorientating even as they fascinate and engage.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ Dollimore, p.305

²⁰¹ *ibid.* p.305

²⁰² *ibid.* p.306

²⁰³ *ibid.* p.307

Death, for Foucault, becomes 'constitutive of singularity' and it is in 'the perception of death that the individual finds himself or herself.'²⁰⁴ During the AIDS crisis many gay men felt they were defined by the manner of their death or their *potential* death and this led to a re-defining of gay male sexual identity, which was, in turn, a confirmation of one that already existed.

In the section of *The Will to Knowledge* called, 'Right of Death and Power over Life,' Foucault writes: 'For a long time, one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death,'²⁰⁵ and Foucault examines the various ways that this sovereignty has been exercised. In the modern era this has been through war and the death penalty:

Capital punishment could not be maintained except by invoking less the enormity of the crime itself than the monstrosity of the criminal, his incorrigibility, and the safeguard of society. One had the right to kill those who represented a kind of biological danger to others.²⁰⁶

AIDS has often been described as a punishment from God - the ultimate sovereign who was protecting society by killing those with AIDS. Similarly, sovereign governments felt they had the right to withhold adequate health care and rights to gay men with AIDS because they didn't 'deserve' them and, with the assistance of the media, emphasised their monstrosity.

Foucault goes on:

²⁰⁴ *ibid.* p.307

²⁰⁵ Foucault (1976), p.135

²⁰⁶ *ibid.* p.138

The old power of death that symbolised sovereign power was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life.²⁰⁷

Gay men's sex became managed as safe sex - both by governments and gay men's health organisations. There was openness and control, the imperative to speak about gay male sex becoming a way of containing it. It was also, obviously, an attempt to save lives and created a discourse of safe sex, which became a form of power. 'It was the taking charge of life,' says Foucault, 'more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body.'²⁰⁸

In the post-modern era, AIDS, as a post-modern event, has ensured the survival of gay men through safe sex practice, and also created the sovereignty that allows them to bareback and bug chase. This has come about as a progression of the struggle for sovereignty through sex, and of the individual's struggle for sovereignty over life and death:

...what we have seen has been a very real process of struggle; life as a political object was in a sense taken at face value and turned back against the system that was bent on controlling it. It was life more than the law that became the issue of political struggles, even if the latter were formulated through affirmations concerning rights. The 'right' to life, to one's body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfaction of needs, and beyond all the oppressions or alienations,' the 'right' to rediscover what one is and all that one can be, this 'right' ... was the political response to all these new procedures of power which did not derive, either, from the traditional right of sovereignty.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ *ibid.* p.140

²⁰⁸ *ibid.* p.143

²⁰⁹ *ibid.* p.145

In *AIDS and its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag writes:

Fear of AIDS enforces a much more moderate exercise of appetite, and not just among homosexual men. In the United States sexual behaviour pre-1981 now seems, for the middle-class, part of a lost age of innocence - innocence in the guise of licentiousness, of course.²¹⁰

If the fear of AIDS disappears, is it possible that licentiousness and excess of appetite can re-appear? Sontag also expresses this, metaphorically, in economic terms: 'After two decades of sexual spending, of sexual speculation, of sexual inflation, we are in the early stages of a sexual depression.'²¹¹ Does barebacking mark the end of a depression? If so, is it cyclical, like economics? Are we witnessing sexual boom and bust?

The commodification of sex, both as a tool for selling and as 'consumer choice' in its own right, means that it becomes simply another means of material satisfaction:

One set of messages of the society we live in is: Consume. Grow. Do what you want. Amuse yourselves. The very working of this economic system, which has bestowed these unprecedented liberties, most cherished in the form of physical mobility and material prosperity, depends on encouraging people to defy limits. Appetite is *supposed* to be immoderate.²¹²

This shows the link, as advocated by Bataille, between economic surplus (as a driving force) and eroticism.

Sontag continues:

²¹⁰ Sontag, p.76

²¹¹ *ibid.* p.76

²¹² *ibid.* p.77

The ideology of capitalism makes us all into connoisseurs of liberty - of the indefinite expansion of possibility. Virtually every kind of advocacy claims to offer first of all, or also, some increment of freedom. Not every freedom, to be sure. In rich countries, freedom has come to be identified more and more with "personal fulfilment" - a freedom enjoyed or practiced alone (or *as* alone). Hence much of recent discourse about the body, re-imagined as the instrument with which to enact, increasingly, various programs of self-improvement, of the heightening of powers.²¹³

So this fulfilment is not only economic.

According to Foucault, another powerful function of sex is that each individual 'passes through' it, in order to gain 'access to his own intelligibility' and sex then tells us 'who we are.'²¹⁴ Foucault claims that we now get our identity from what was once perceived as 'an obscure and nameless urge.'²¹⁵ This secret, the secret of who we 'really' are, as revealed by sex, has become 'more important than our soul, more important almost than our life...'²¹⁶ He goes on:

The Faustian pact, whose temptation has been instilled in us by the deployment of sexuality, is now as follows: to exchange life in its entirety for sex itself, for the truth and sovereignty of sex. Sex is worth dying for. It is in this (strictly historical) sense that sex is indeed imbued with the death instinct.²¹⁷

Sex has superseded love as being worthy of death. This is what Foucault's apochryphal comment really means; it is not about dying for 'love' at all. The

²¹³ *ibid.* p.77

²¹⁴ Foucault (1976), p.155

²¹⁵ *ibid.* p.156

²¹⁶ *ibid.* p.156

²¹⁷ *ibid.* p.156

deployment of sexuality established the desire for sex as a 'must have,' something essential - we think we are affirming our right to sex but we are actually 'fastened to the deployment of sexuality'²¹⁸ Rather than being liberated or freed by the Internet, for example, we are simply creating more categories, each with its own micro-culture:

Given the imperatives about consumption and the virtually unquestioned value attached to the expression of self, how could sexuality *not* have come to be, for some, a consumer option: an exercise of liberty, of increased mobility, of the pushing back of limits. Hardly an invention of the male homosexual subculture, recreational, risk-free sexuality is an inevitable reinvention of the culture of capitalism, and was guaranteed by medicine as well. The advent of AIDS seems to have changed all that, irrevocably.²¹⁹

Susan Sontag's use of that final word 'irrevocably' here places barebacking and bug chasing as being both post-AIDS and pre-AIDS as it takes us back to sex as consumerism.

AIDS has been assimilated into that hegemony that is also about the luxury of those western countries to indulge in these activities. In the struggle for acceptance there has become a link between money and being gay. In a consumer-led society, those with more spending power are rated more highly; economics pushes for acceptance and provides a place for gay men and women, especially those without children, as part of the market economy. So homosexuality, often described as a 'lifestyle choice' by those who disapprove of it, is now given approval by capitalism courting the 'pink pound.' It has become a marketing category that seems far removed from the days when insurance

²¹⁸ *ibid.* p.157

²¹⁹ Sontag, p.77

companies would not allow single gay men to take out policies because they were a 'risk' to their investment. Today, mainstream representations of gay men, particularly those on television, are all about consumption, makeovers, and 'lifestyle.' Is it this kind of appropriation and assimilation into the mainstream that some object to? Are those who bareback and bug chase rebelling against becoming part of the hegemony in this way, while, paradoxically, giving themselves over to the notion of sex as personal fulfilment, as created by the capitalist system?

Spiders as Metaphor

In *AIDS and its Metaphors*, Sontag writes, 'one cannot think without metaphors,' but there are certain metaphors that one should attempt to 'abstain from,' or 'retire.'²²⁰ She describes metaphorical 'wars against diseases'²²¹ such as cancer. Similarly, we have society's 'fight against AIDS' or the individual's 'battle' with AIDS but, Sontag argues, the use of such metaphor 'implements the way particularly dreaded diseases are envisaged as an alien "other," as enemies are in modern war.'²²² Furthermore:

...the move from the demonisation of the illness to the attribution of fault to the patient is an inevitable one, no matter if patients are thought of as victims. Victims suggest innocence. And innocence, by the inexorable logic that governs all relational terms, suggests guilt.²²³

²²⁰ *ibid.* p.5

²²¹ *ibid.* p.11

²²² *ibid.* p.11

²²³ *ibid.* p.11

So, in the fight against AIDS, gay men were often blamed for their getting ill, or were seen as guilty of spreading HIV and this demonisation was reinforced by the distinction between innocent victims of AIDS (such as haemophiliacs or those 'bravely putting themselves at risk' from gay men, like health workers or fire-fighters), and promiscuous gay men who posed a threat to all others and got what they deserved.

My use of spiders as metaphor is not to say that gay men are inherently 'spider-like,' but that they have long been assigned an identity of poisonous predators, intensified by the AIDS crisis, that this identity has been adopted by some gay men, and, further, fetishised and celebrated. The representation of gay men as dangerous and predatory becomes a kind of truth, impossible to shake off but capable of modification and appropriation. The acts of barebacking and bug chasing celebrate and eroticise that identity, seeming to both confirm and subvert it.

It is, of course, possible for AIDS to have more than one meaning at any one time and the real battle may be between the metaphors that create these meanings. Not only that, but the meanings of the metaphors themselves can change. There are many AIDS, Sontag tells us, it is not a single disease. Similarly, there are many gay identities and it is important to recognise the marginality of those who bareback or bug chase, rather than claiming that this is 'how gay men are.' There are many gay identities, as there are many species of spider.

Diseases, like spiders, gain reputations or mythologies: '...tuberculosis had been often regarded sentimentally, as an enhancement of identity, ... as a

disease apt to strike the hypersensitive, the talented, the passionate.'²²⁴ While, conversely, 'cancer was regarded with irrational revulsion, as a diminution of the self....' Sontag goes on to say:

In recent years some of the onus of cancer has been lifted by the emergence of a disease whose charge of stigmatization, whose capacity to create spoiled identity, is far greater. It seems that societies need to have one illness which becomes identified with evil, and attaches blame to its 'victims,' but it is hard to be obsessed with more than one.²²⁵

That disease is, still, AIDS.

AIDS has a dual metaphoric genealogy of both 'invasion' and 'pollution,'²²⁶ and there is, further, the use of military metaphor; an invading 'enemy' causes disease. Sontag identifies the effects that such metaphoric uses in relation to AIDS has had on the identity of gay men, which confirms existing prejudices but also creates identities:

...to get AIDS is precisely to be revealed, in the majority of cases so far, as a member of a certain 'risk group,' a community of pariahs. The illness flushes out an identity that might have remained hidden from neighbours, jobmates, family, friends. It also confirms an identity and, among the risk group in the United States most severely affected in the beginning, homosexual men, has been a creator of community as well as an experience that isolates the ill and exposes them to harassment and persecution.²²⁷

²²⁴ *ibid.* p.12

²²⁵ *ibid.* p.16

²²⁶ *ibid.* p.17

²²⁷ *ibid.* p.25

Sontag hints at a dual discourse when she asserts that AIDS has been a ‘creator of community’ as well as an instrument of persecution and this reinforces her claim that the ‘identity’ of AIDS is not fixed.²²⁸ Similarly, gay identities are not fixed, and barebacking and bug chasing are both instances of newly created identities related to established ones, and to ancient ideas of sex and death. The ‘identity’ of AIDS has developed from terminal illness to manageable disease to gift.

One of those identities of AIDS is as an illness, ‘designed for purposes of investigation and with tabulation and surveillance by medical and other bureaucracies,’²²⁹ which provides an opportunity for the surveillance, examination and categorisation of gay men. They are contained like the spiders in Simon’s colony and, like those bureaucracies; Simon has developed more sophisticated ways of examining his spiders, from sketching their markings on paper to surveillance cameras, to virtual reality. Not only can he examine the spiders, he can become one. What he doesn’t realise is that he already *is* one and it is in the bug chasing and gift giving that he truly experiences this.

Sontag also compares metaphoric descriptions of AIDS with those of syphilis in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

As if in honour of all the notable writers and artists who ended their lives in syphilitic witlessness, it came to be believed that the brain lesions of neurosyphilis might actually inspire original thought on art.²³⁰

A crucial difference for Sontag though is that:

²²⁸ *ibid.* p.28

²²⁹ *ibid.* p.28

²³⁰ *ibid.* p.23

...with AIDS -though dementia is also a common, late symptom - no compensatory mythology has arisen, or seems likely to arise. AIDS, like cancer, does not allow romanticising or sentimentalising, perhaps because its association with death is too powerful.²³¹

This has changed. Combination drugs mean death is no longer assured and the taking of steroids as part of AIDS treatment has seen the controlled transformation of the sick body into a new version of a particular pumped-up, ultra-masculine gay aesthetic.

A lot of early AIDS texts focused on artists, dancers, painters and writers and this has, perhaps, romanticised the effects of AIDS, as having 'robbed' the world of creative people. Of course, it tends to be the makers of those texts who focus on this particular 'meaning' of AIDS and it is a luxury denied the vast majority of those directly affected by it in other parts of the world. The artistic community also stepped in, to a certain extent, where Government feared to tread, in terms of fundraising and publicising the effects of AIDS.

In *Love Undetectable*, Andrew Sullivan describes a party he goes to in New York where he sees, 'a mass of men, in superb shape, merely enjoying an opportunity to let off steam.'²³² However, Sullivan also detects, 'sexual danger translated into sexual objectification,' and the 'unspoken withering of the human body transformed into a reassuring inflation of muscular body mass.'²³³ This transformation is made possible by steroids taken as a treatment for AIDS and Sullivan sees in it an archetypal symbolism of masculinity.

Behind it there is:

²³¹ *ibid.* p.23

²³² Sullivan, Andrew, *Love Undetectable: Reflections On Friendship, Sex and Survival*, Vintage, U.K., 1999, p.11

²³³ *ibid.* p.11

...a kind of circling, silent interaction, a drifting, almost menacing, courtship of male brevity and concision. It was raw male sexuality distilled, of a kind that unites straight and gay men and separates them from women: without emotion, without knowledge, without apparent weakness, armoured with testosterone and an almost marble like hardness of touch.²³⁴

It seems Sullivan indulges here in a mixture of gay male stereotyping, which is also a fetishising of what he sees. The 'silent interaction' and circling is reminiscent of the mating behaviour of spiders. The aforementioned party is called 'The Black Party', at which everyone is made dark and sinister by what they are wearing. The male body is presented as statue, as an icon of the calibre of Michelangelo's David. Male hormones forge an 'armour,' which, like all armours, is a false carapace of the male physique.

This transformation of the body's appearance is significant in that it has been accredited with changing the 'reality' of AIDS. Moral judgements about disease are often aesthetic judgements, says Sontag: 'The marks on the face of... someone with AIDS are the signs of a progressive mutation, decomposition; something organic.'²³⁵ But what happens when one has the means to disguise the 'sinister characterisations of the organic,' as Sullivan calls them.²³⁶ Even those who develop AIDS are able now to change or transform their facial appearance by undergoing procedures, advertised in the gay press, such as botox injections to prevent the face from looking sunken or drawn. The 'organic' has been replaced by the 'cosmetic.' Does this make AIDS less 'real'?

²³⁴ *ibid.* p.13

²³⁵ *ibid.* p.41

²³⁶ *ibid.* p.41

Those who undergo such treatments would argue that, as they are judged by others according to their appearance, they have a right to minimise the distress that causes them, and one could argue that it is no different to a cancer patient wearing a wig or an amputee a prosthetic limb. Perhaps such arguments seek to mask the ancient cultural fears around disease, but also expose them, and are symptomatic of them. The advent of certain combination drugs, including steroids, in the treatment of AIDS brought the paradoxical phenomenon that those who 'look' healthiest were the ones infected. It is as if, by making the body *look* well, it *is* well. It's what's on the surface that counts.

Sontag's central assertion in *AIDS and its Metaphors* is that, "“Plague” is the principal metaphor by which the AIDS epidemic is understood,²³⁷ and that this metaphor also seeks to confirm illness as a punishment and the notion that most feared diseases are transforming. AIDS is a new disease characterised in old ways:

In contrast to cancer, understood in a modern way as a disease incurred by (and revealing of) individuals, AIDS is understood in a pre-modern way, as a disease incurred by people both as individuals and as members of a 'risk group' - that neutral sounding, bureaucratic category which also revives the archaic idea of a tainted community that illness has judged.²³⁸

This notion of judgment is central to AIDS as plague. AIDS was linked to the decline of moral, social and political values and was (and still is) used by governments, religions and individuals to judge and condemn gay men. Today, barebackers and bug chasers are judged by the hetero- and homo- orthodoxies to be irresponsible, selfish, self-harming and suicidal. A lot of the discussion in the

²³⁷ Sontag, p.44

²³⁸ *ibid.* p.46

gay media around these issues is characterised by anger at those people who would seem to be confirming all of the worst stereotypes of gay men and ignoring the recent history of AIDS.

It is the link to sex that makes AIDS an issue of morality but it is also the link to sex that gives AIDS its pre-modern characteristics. Sontag says, 'AIDS obliges people to think of sex as having, possibly, the direst consequences: suicide. Or murder.'²³⁹ What Sontag doesn't say is that the connection between sex and death has historically been eroticised and that AIDS is no exception to that. 'To die for the love of boys' is a pose become real, but it is also an inversion of the notion of being *killed*, or, at the very least, punished for loving boys. The link between sex and death also connects the past and the present:

The fear of AIDS imposes on an act whose ideal is an experience of pure presentness (and a creation of the future) a relation to the past to be ignored at one's peril. Sex no longer withdraws its partners, if only for a moment, from the social. It cannot be considered just a coupling; it is a chain, a chain of transmission, from the past.²⁴⁰

Not only is that ignoring of the past dangerous on an individual level – trapping one in a web of all the sexual partners one has known – but, now, ignorance of the history of AIDS, or the changes in its meaning, is socially dangerous.

Gay men became poisonous, hazardous, dangerous and, furthermore, in a way that was 'unnatural.' Because AIDS affects the West it is not seen as merely another 'natural disaster,' like famine or flood, but rather becomes 'filled with historical meaning.'²⁴¹ Its 'meaning' is that gay men are immoral and dangerous,

²³⁹ *ibid.* p.72

²⁴⁰ *ibid.* pp 72-73

²⁴¹ *ibid.* p.83

that society is corrupted by them, made decadent and, ultimately, doomed. It became a given that AIDS was far more of a threat than murder, war, pollution or famine and that humankind was itself in danger:

That even an apocalypse can be made to seem part of the ordinary horizon of expectation constitutes an unparalleled violence that is being done to our sense of reality, to our humanity.²⁴²

As a result of such a 'violent' and damaging view of gay men Sontag posits that, 'it is highly desirable for a specific dreaded illness to come to seem ordinary,'²⁴³ expressing this hope:

Even the disease most fraught with meaning can become just an illness.... It is bound to happen with AIDS, when the illness is much better understood and, above all, treatable.²⁴⁴

This gives rise to a current paradox, which is that many of those who bareback, and even some bug chasers like 'Carlos,' cite the fact that AIDS is now treatable and has, they feel, become 'just an illness' that is manageable like many others, as one of the factors in their behaviour. They are attracted to the notion of dying for sex, but safe in the knowledge that they need not die. Like many other high-risk behaviours it is a controlled, even illusory, danger. In the West, where AIDS no longer equals death, at least not immediately, the sense of apocalypse has disappeared. In some people's minds, AIDS is a minor inconvenience that will not stop them from having what they want, the freedom

²⁴² *ibid.* p.94

²⁴³ *ibid.* p.94

²⁴⁴ *ibid.* p.94

to enjoy sexual intercourse in the way they see fit; the pursuit of happiness at all costs.

Sontag says:

...much in the way of individual experience and social policy depends on the struggle for rhetorical ownership of the illness: how it is possessed, assimilated in argument and in cliché. The age-old, seemingly inexorable process whereby diseases acquire meanings (by coming to stand for the deepest fears) and inflict stigma is always worth challenging, and it does seem to have more limited credibility in the modern world, among people willing to be modern - the process is under surveillance now. With this illness, one that elicits so much guilt and shame, the effort to detach it from these meanings, these metaphors, seems particularly liberating, even consoling.²⁴⁵

This is what happened initially, with those health workers and charities and activists determined to wrestle with those who controlled the rhetoric – governments and media – and describe AIDS in the way they wanted it described but, at some point, a generation or so later, their rhetoric was itself challenged in an environment that was different, one where AIDS had lost some of its power to control and ability to frighten.

The presumption Sontag makes, understandably, is that the critique of those metaphors she has described will lead to understanding and treatment and acceptance of people with AIDS. However, she doesn't account for those forces that *still* work against gay men, and could not foresee the changing relationship between some gay men and AIDS.

²⁴⁵ *ibid.* p.94

To research spiders and their behaviour, I went to what is considered the 'classic' text, W.S. Bristowe's *The World of Spiders*.²⁴⁶ Bristowe spent many years observing and documenting spiders' behaviour and any subsequent text written about spiders is heavily indebted to Bristowe's. As I read his book I began to make more connections between my initial idea and the use of spiders as a metaphor, such as his assertion that lots of spiders inhabit the same area to increase the chance of them meeting, though they don't live together as a community because they don't have much interaction. This seemed to confirm my idea of gay cruising as a form of interaction which is outside of traditional ideas of 'community,' originally conceived as a response to social oppression and the illegality of gay sex, which has subsequently become eroticised and part of a particular gay identity. It works in opposition to gay men and women creating their own safe environments, their own communities. Cruising could also be said to create a kind of community of its own, thereby transforming the meaning of that term; it exists outside of it and is part of it.

Spiders have a 'chemotactic,' or taste-by-touch, sense, developed to prevent them from biting unpalatable insects. They also have fine, erect hairs on the legs called trichothria, which aid orientation in the web and act as sensory organs able to perceive air currents and certain types of vibration detected by humans as sound. I imagined that these were like those touch senses necessary in the darkroom / cruising arena where one is not relying on clear vision but glimpsed movements, barely heard sounds, and an awareness of another's presence.

Other examples of metaphorical uses or cultural references to spiders garnered from Bristowe were the fact that the garden spider, *Araneus*

²⁴⁶ W.S. Bristowe, *The World of Spiders*, Collins, U.K., 1958

Diadematus, like other web-builders, constructs its web without any instruction, so it uses instinct, not intelligence or individual thought:

Instinct, without question, is the dominating force that controls the wonderful activities of spiders. This force is innate and automatic. It is born with the creature as part of its nature. The animal possesses no choice with respect to it, but must obey its imperious demands. It is a force of amazing perfection and performs acts of such precision that they some-times seem to surpass intelligence.²⁴⁷

Bristowe could almost be talking about sexuality here.

He also concludes that spiders have no memory beyond their instinct. This is the main reason for my use of the present tense throughout *The Vocabulary of Spiders*, and Simon has felt compelled to exist as much as possible in the present, but when he begins to recount his memories of childhood, emerging sexuality and Arturo's death, he sees himself more as a character in a story and as subject to that story, as he is of other narratives of homosexuality, particularly the established narrative of gay tragedy as re-assigned to him by AIDS. He begins to live in story. Perhaps barebackers and bug chasers live in 'the moment,' live for the present with no sense of future consequences or the recent history of AIDS. But it is perhaps also the case that these people are very aware of these things and that their activities are as a response to them. Either narrative is possible.

Sontag writes:

...the way viruses are animalistically characterised - as a menace in waiting, as mutable, as furtive, as biologically innovative - reinforces the

²⁴⁷ *ibid.* p.238

sense that a disease can be something ingenious, unpredictable, novel. These metaphors are central to ideas about AIDS that distinguish this illness from others that have been regarded as plague-like. For though the fears AIDS represents are old, its status as that unexpected event, an entirely new disease - a new judgment, as it were - adds to the dread.²⁴⁸

So AIDS is both ancient and modern - a new way of playing on old fears.

At the start of his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault describes how perversion was incorporated into the 'specification of individuals'²⁴⁹ and how the nineteenth century homosexual became a 'personage' whose sexuality affected everything about him. As Foucault succinctly puts it: 'The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.'²⁵⁰ Foucault claims that the classification of aberrant sexualities was a result of a strategy to 'strew reality with them and incorporate them into the individual.'²⁵¹ In *The Vocabulary of Spiders*, Simon's research into spider communication and arachnophobia illustrates a desire to understand them and, in doing so, to understand himself. He classifies spiders as sexuality has been classified, updating and modifying his classification of them as sexuality has been.

The fact that spiders shed their skins in order to grow I linked to emerging sexuality; 'It is only at the final moult that the male and female genital organs are exposed and that the male adopts his full colours.'²⁵² Spiders having an inner body and outer skin, and being two at once put me in mind of notions of identity. Spiders also use skin moults as a way of repairing the body and I linked this to Simon's wish for the renewal of Arturo. I also incorporated the movement of the

²⁴⁸ Sontag, pp.70-71

²⁴⁹ Foucault (1976), p.43

²⁵⁰ *ibid.* p. 43

²⁵¹ *ibid.* p.44

²⁵² Bristowe, p.63

shedding into the first dance sequence, which is Jay's overly literal translation of the spider movement into human expression.

Spiders use movement to communicate during their courtship ritual and this can take different forms. Web-building spiders may tap on the female's web or vibrate it. The long-sighted hunting spiders, like the wolf spider, use what Bristowe describes as a 'visual "semaphore."'”²⁵³ The legs and palps are raised and waved, sometimes displaying decorations or plumes, which prevents the male spider from being mistaken for prey. After depositing his sperm the male spider can then 're-charge' his palps with sperm and go to find another mate. One of the terms for HIV-positive sperm in the context of barebacking is 'charged' sperm and personal ads by bug chasers often ask to be 'charged-up' with the HIV.

All barebacking and bug chasing websites have a facilitator, whether Bareback Jack, Bareback Billy or PigBtm and it was in this role that the figure of Anansi, the trickster god, insinuated himself into my thinking. Represented as a spider he is a transgressive, anti-authoritarian, symbol and one closely connected with the telling of stories. Anansi appears in African, Afro-Caribbean and both North and South American mythologies and, in some African myths, the Supreme Being is referred to as the Great Spider.

According to the Yoruba people of Nigeria, in the time before creation, 'The gods came down sometimes to play in the marshy waste, coming down spider's webs which hung across great gaps like fairy bridges.'²⁵⁴ One of the most widespread myths in Africa is that of God leaving the world, having become angry at man, and His method of leaving was to climb a spider's web:

²⁵³ *ibid.* p.67

²⁵⁴ Pelton, Robert D., *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight*, University of California Press, U.S., 1980, p.20

...at the order of God the spider spun a thread which reached right up to the sky, and God and his family climbed up there and have stayed above ever since. But on the advice of the diviner [a wagtail] the eyes of the spider were put out, so that it could not follow them up to the sky.²⁵⁵

In some myths the universe itself is a vast web, spun by the great Mother Spider, or the earth is held up in a giant hammock web.

Fables told in Africa characterise the spider as clever, deceitful, triumphant and guileful. He is often given tasks seemingly beyond his physical capabilities, so he uses cunning and trickery to achieve his ends. When he is successful he is rewarded by the laughter and approval of those listening to the tale who enjoy the powerful being defeated or made foolish. When he is caught, however, his punishment is usually severe. In a number of Anansi stories his punishment is that of being shattered into many pieces, so that all spiders are a fragment of the original whole. This idea of fragmentation is crucial to post-modern notions of identity and of storytelling.

Ashanti legend, as told in Ghana, relates how Nyame, the sky-god, knowing the value and power of stories, kept them all locked in a box. Many had tried to take them, but none had succeeded. Anansi is given a number of tasks to complete if he is to be given the stories, all involving the capture of other, more powerful, creatures. He completes all of these using his cunning and web-building skills and is gifted the stories by the sky-god. The stories are spread across the world and can be seen in each individual spider, spinning a web. In another version, however, Anansi steals the stories and, as punishment, is thrown out of the sky, shattering into millions of tiny fragments. Each spider we see is a

²⁵⁵ *ibid.* p.37

piece of Anansi, each with a story. It is the website, '*Anansi's Web*,' in the novel, that controls the unfolding of Simon's past, his story that he has kept secret.

Foucault says:

In the erotic art, truth is drawn from pleasure itself... not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself; it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul.²⁵⁶

In the generic, fetishised stories that appear on '*Anansi's Web*' there is a recognition of the individual truth of them and their shared, common, experience. They are linked to lots of people, which gives them a truth that individuals can then apply to their own self-representation - they become 'true' because we make them so and that gives us pleasure. As Foucault says, 'this knowledge must be deflected back into the sexual practice itself, in order to shape it as though from within and amplify its effects.'²⁵⁷ Key to this is secrecy, not because of a fear of infamy, but because of 'the need to hold it in the greatest reserve, since, according to tradition, it would lose its effectiveness and its virtue by being divulged.'²⁵⁸

Pornographic stories are often framed as overheard confessions or divulged secrets and this is part of the thrill of reading them:

Consequently, the relationship to the master who holds the secrets is of paramount importance; only he, working alone, can transmit this art in an esoteric manner and as the culmination of an initiation in which he guides

²⁵⁶ Foucault (1976), p.57

²⁵⁷ *ibid.* p.57

²⁵⁸ *ibid.* p.58

the disciple's progress with unfailing skill and severity. The effects of this masterful art, which are considerably more generous than the sparseness of its prescriptions would lead one to imagine, are said to transfigure the one fortunate enough to receive its privileges: an absolute mastery of the body, a singular bliss, obliviousness to time and limits, the elixir of life, the exile of death and its threats.²⁵⁹

'*Anansi's Web*' becomes the master who facilitates the 'multiplication and intensification of pleasures connected to the production of the truth about sex,'²⁶⁰ which gives us knowledge about sexuality.

This multiplication of stories is effected by Anansi's shattering, which is the same as post-modernism's 'incredulity towards metanarratives,' which becomes polymorphous sexualities and individual identities linked by stories and the many and varied reasons divulged for bug chasing:

All the stories told to oneself and to others, so much curiosity, so many confidences offered in the face of scandal, sustained – but not without trembling a little – by the obligation of truth.... All this constitutes something like the errant fragments of an erotic art that is secretly transmitted by confession and the science of sex.²⁶¹

In *The Vocabulary of Spiders*, Anansi becomes the bug chaser's god and a symbol of the transgressive, colourful outsider, the one who uses his wits instead of physical prowess to achieve his aims, the attractive, gleeful rebel, a role assigned so often in culture to gay men. Anansi also acts as Jay's inspiration in early life as an attractive, beguiling character in oral stories. The 'vocabulary' of spiders is one of movement and is like a dance vocabulary - that is the specific,

²⁵⁹ *ibid.* p.58

²⁶⁰ *ibid.* p.71

²⁶¹ *ibid.* p.71

recognisable movements developed by a particular choreographer and / or made by a particular group of dancers. European mythology links spiders with dance in the dance form called 'Tarantella,' which evolved in the fourteenth century in relation to the *Lycosa Tarantula* in the area of Taranto in Italy. Those who were bitten by spiders, or even thought they had been bitten, would dance wildly until the point of exhaustion, believing this would help them survive the bite.

Dancing in the Dark

The tarantella is a 'kind of mimed courtship dance, usually performed by one couple surrounded by a circle of others.'²⁶² Grove's *Dictionary* asserts that 'A disease known as tarantism, prevalent in southern Italy from the 15th century to the 17th, seems to have been more a form of hysteria than a consequence of the bite.'²⁶³ This is yet another example of a cultural link between disease, spiders and dance. The hysteria was as a consequence of the mythology, the story created the illness. If you control the stories, you control the truth.

W.S. Bristowe uses the language of dance to describe spiders' courtship rituals. He uses words like 'skip' and 'jigged' in relation to jumping spiders and describes the male's use of his 'massive' dark brown and yellow front legs during courtship as 'gyrations.'²⁶⁴ Bristowe says of another spider:

²⁶² Sadie, Stanley, *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians: Vol. 18*, Macmillan, U.K., 1980, p. 575

²⁶³ *ibid.* p.575

²⁶⁴ Bristowe, p.153

The male's courtship reminds me of the movements of a ballet dancer. Poised on three pairs of legs he scampers rapidly sideways with his first pair raised steeply and swaying gracefully from side to side.²⁶⁵

Bristowe gives evocative and vivid descriptions of the courtship of the family of spiders of which the tarantula is a member – the Lycosidae - and it is this kind of description that forms the basis for the spider movements in *The Vocabulary of Spiders* and for Jay's dance pieces in the novel:

In most of the Lycosa males the black palps are conspicuous objects and it is these which play the principal part in courtship poses, their semaphore signalling sometimes being supplemented by leg movements and vibrations of the abdomen...the male [Lycosa amentata] stands high on his legs, stretches his palps out sideways and then raises one at an angle of 45 degrees while the other is lowered at a similar angle. Standing in this position of display, he makes his palps and front pair of legs quiver violently and sometimes his abdomen as well. Now the palps are withdrawn and again stretched out in the same manner with their positions reversed - one raised, the other lowered. Repeating these movements over and over again, he advances step by step... pausing occasionally to lift the front pair of legs slightly off the ground and vibrate them at great speed.²⁶⁶

Dance has always had a prominent place in gay culture in terms of dance performance as a space for gay men to express themselves or as somewhere for gay men to congregate both as performers and spectators. Social dancing has often provided an opportunity for physical closeness, such as tea-dances from the 1920s onwards to disco in the 1970s and club culture in the late 1980s and 1990s

²⁶⁵ *ibid.* p.156

²⁶⁶ *ibid.* pp.178-179

as an integral part of a particular, metropolitan, gay identity. It's on the dance floor that I feel most free and least afraid. It was in clubs, just after I came out and still, where I have expressed my sexuality. For a long time I did wear dark glasses. Taking ecstasy removed the need for hiding behind the lenses.

Dance and performance art were forms in which early expressions of the AIDS crisis took place. This may be because there were a high proportion of gay men involved in the dance and performance worlds who had direct experience of the AIDS crisis from its very start and, therefore, lost a lot of friends or became HIV-positive themselves. The use of the body perhaps made them uniquely able to express the physical aspects of being HIV-positive or having AIDS, and, further, these forms, particularly performance art, have often been designated 'marginal,' 'transgressive' and 'edgy,' which seems particularly suited to certain 'difficult' subject matters.

The relationship between dance and homosexuality is not unproblematic. According to Ramsay Burt in *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities*, 'There is a profound silence in the dance world on the subject of male dance and homosexuality,'²⁶⁷ as well as a homophobic prejudice against effeminacy that dance has striven to deny since the nineteenth century. Burt describes this homophobia as, 'the social mechanism which prohibits or makes fearful the idea of intimate contact or communication with members of the same sex,' which regulates 'the behaviour of all men rather than just self-identified homosexuals.'²⁶⁸ It is 'an essential characteristic of patriarchal society.'²⁶⁹ The physicality of dance, that thing which makes it so open to expressions of the body and insists that the body be looked at, also makes it threatening. Burt says:

²⁶⁷ Burt, Ramsay *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities*, Routledge, U.K., 1995, p.12

²⁶⁸ *ibid.* p.23

²⁶⁹ *ibid.* p.23

The mechanisms which limit the subversive potential of some representations of masculinity (including disapproval of male dance) can be seen to serve the purpose of keeping out of sight anything which might disrupt the relations within which men work so powerfully together in the interests of men.²⁷⁰

It is easy to see from such arguments why men performing dance together is problematic and it also explains the historical legal prohibitions on men dancing together socially. The paradox of such prohibitions is that they serve to highlight the very thing they seek to prohibit and only make those inclined to do so want to do it more - it *creates* the transgressive nature of men dancing together.

Burt goes on to quote Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who connects homophobia to the ways men relate to one another 'homosocially.' She asserts that there is 'a fundamental triangular structure,' in a male-dominated society, in which a woman is situated in a 'subordinate and intermediary position between two men,' and that 'men use women in order to impress other men.'²⁷¹ It is also possible that this structure masks homosexual desire:

Sedgwick argues that male homosocial relationships in our society are characterised by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality. This repressed homosexual component of male sexuality accounts for correspondences and similarities between the most sanctioned forms of male homosocial bonding and the most reprobate expressions of male homosexuality.²⁷²

²⁷⁰ *ibid.* p.23

²⁷¹ *ibid.* p.23

²⁷² *ibid.* p.23

Burt says, 'Men are in a double bind in that they are drawn to other men, but this acceptable attraction is not clearly distinguishable from forbidden homosexual interest.'²⁷³ He quotes Sedgwick again: 'For a man to be a man's man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already crossed line from being "interested in men."'²⁷⁴

In *The Vocabulary of Spiders* the conflict between the two male spiders centres on sexual desire for the female spider and the desire to mate. The relationship between the courting ritual and the fight is a close one; male conflict is often eroticised because it demands physical closeness. By initiating the courtship ritual, the younger spider has transgressed the boundaries of male homosocial relations and is killed for it. The victory of the older male spider, and the death of the younger one, is the triumph of patriarchy and the triumph of the heterosexual orthodoxy.

Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* (1995), created for his dance company, Adventures in Motion Pictures, is often referred to as the 'gay *Swan Lake*.' It is unavoidably homoerotic because of the male corps de ballet dancing as swans and the two male leads. This *Swan Lake* becomes the 'gay' *Swan Lake* because this is the spectator's only possible response to two men dancing together, as dictated by the 'strategy of homophobia':

The usefulness of the concept of homophobia is perhaps strategic, in that to give a name to the way social restrictions function to maintain certain norms of male behaviour is to make visible aspects of male experience that are otherwise hidden. It then also becomes possible to discuss the

²⁷³ *ibid.* p.23

²⁷⁴ *ibid.* p.23

way male-male social relationships have been represented in theatre dance in terms of homophobia.²⁷⁵

It is this strategy that privileges homoerotic readings of Bourne's ballet, precisely because of previous restrictions on men performing pas de deux. It also serves to obscure a distinctly Freudian interpretation that the Black Swan appears to be a manifestation of the Prince's suppressed desires; the Black Swan is less the man he *wants* and more a version of the man he *wants to be*. When the two male characters dance together, it is not as equals in a power relationship, or a homosocial bond - the Prince is made passive, feminised, so that the traditional dynamic of the pas de deux remains - it is only the sex of those participating that has changed. The fighting spiders perform a pas de deux, as does Jay in his choreography. Jay and Simon circle each other tentatively, Simon and Arturo come together at a club, dancing.

One new development in twentieth century choreography that helped to break down limitations placed upon men dancing was the invention of 'contact improvisation' as a method of producing dance. Burt defines this as:

...a duet form where two partners improvise and explore movement that arises from contact with each other. It often involves doing things like leaning and giving weight, lifting and carrying or maybe wrestling, giving in to the floor and to gravity. A frequently used starting point for contact is standing.²⁷⁶

A central innovation of contact improvisation is that gender is not a factor in the lifting of dancers; it allows women to lift men, women to lift women, and men to

²⁷⁵ *ibid.* p.24

²⁷⁶ *ibid.* p.151

lift men. It tends to be non-hierarchical and can rid dance of 'the dominance implicit in the male dancer's presence.'²⁷⁷ Burt sees it as a form of 'anti-choreography,' which uses everyday movement. It also uses the body in unconventional ways and may challenge the audience to 'reassess aspects of masculine identity,' that are 'denied or rendered invisible in mainstream cultural forms,' such as 'softness, non-competitiveness, responsiveness, caring.'²⁷⁸

Contact improvisation, or work derived from it, has been used to explore issues relating to gender, sexuality and the social conventions governing those. The bringing together of male dancers in this way allows them, and the spectator, to 'develop a more relaxed awareness of the boundaries in the psychological construction of male identity.'²⁷⁹ Further:

Contact is a way in which men can develop a more relaxed awareness of the boundaries of their bodies, through flowing in and out of contact with another male body.²⁸⁰

The movement of 'cruising' is a form of contact improvisation; everyday movements that take on a coded significance because they are accompanied by silence in the outdoor cruising arena, or muffled by loud music in the darkrooms of sex clubs, or, in the case of Jay's dance pieces, accompanied by sounds that replace speech. This refers contact improvisation back to the courtship dance of the spiders and the fight between the two males.

Contact improvisation may also complicate the relationship between the performer and the spectator. The effect of an acceptance of bodily intimacy in performance between two men may be to create vulnerability in the

²⁷⁷ *ibid.* p.154

²⁷⁸ *ibid.* p.148

²⁷⁹ *ibid.* p.154

²⁸⁰ *ibid.* p.154

characterisation or personae of the male dancers. Social convention dictates that physical proximity between two men could ordinarily be interpreted as either sexual or confrontational. Getting too close may trigger off 'homophobic fears.'²⁸¹ We have seen how the defence of 'homosexual panic' has been used in trials to lessen a charge of murder to that of manslaughter. A male defendant may claim that his violence was a reaction to a sexual advance from another man and, as such, they cannot face the more serious charge - his victim caused his own death. The violent reaction may also have been caused by anger at that sexual advance having been a response to a 'signal' given off by the defendant. The victim may have thought the defendant would reciprocate any advance and that interpretation of the defendant's physical behaviour must be eliminated.

According to Ramsay Burt, 'Male appearance signifies power and success.'²⁸² Problems arise however, if his appearance is also desirable:

...he is, from the point of view of the male spectator, drawing attention to the always-already crossed line between homosocial bonding and homosexual sexuality. His appearance therefore carries with it for the male spectator the threat of revealing the suppressed homosexual component within the links he has with other men and through which he maintains his power and status in patriarchal society.²⁸³

W.S. Bristowe tells us that male spiders sometimes mistakenly court each other, which can then turn into a battle. He describes what happens when two males of the species *Salticus scenicus* confront each other:

²⁸¹ *ibid.* p.154

²⁸² *ibid.* p.24

²⁸³ *ibid.* p.24

Both males adopt their courting attitude and draw closer and closer until the front legs and opened fangs are pressed firmly outwards against those of their rival whilst the palps are bent back out of harm's way. This apparently hostile onslaught is really a bloodless battle, the explanation for which lies, I believe, in mistaken identity accompanied by enough stimulation of the sexual instincts to dominate the predatory instincts.²⁸⁴

This caused me to think of the coded movements, or vocabulary, of cruising and the way they are tinged with anticipation and excitement and fear. I had also seen a television documentary in which two male tarantulas, when confronted with each other, had fought to the death, though they looked, to me, like two hands clasped.

When describing the possible sexual and/or confrontational interpretations of the close proximity of male dancers, Ramsay Burt claims that, 'the aesthetic radicalism of contact improvisation, allows such interpretations to be suspended.'²⁸⁵ But it is also true that such work plays on these interpretations, that the power of contact improvisation lies in acknowledging such interpretations and confronting the audience with them. Indeed, its 'aesthetic radicalism' *depends* on those established interpretations. Burt describes the influence of contact improvisation in post-modern choreography in the 1980s and 1990s as creating a 'risky,' male style of dancing.'²⁸⁶ For male dance to be 'risky' it must necessarily include the possibilities of homosexuality and confrontation.

The older male spider in *The Vocabulary of Spiders* represents patriarchal, masculine hegemony and, as such, defeats the younger male whose courtship

²⁸⁴ Bristowe, p.157

²⁸⁵ Burt, p.154

²⁸⁶ *ibid.* p.154

display is a sexual confrontation. The violent reaction can also be seen in the mating between the male and the female spider where it is the male spider who becomes subservient to, and in danger from, the female spider. Even so, for a male to be temporarily subservient to the female is more acceptable than for him to be subservient to another male.

Ramsay Burt says:

...the conventions of the duet and of partnering... generally ensure that the male dancer does not embarrass any male spectator: the male dancer should not appear sexually desirable and should direct the audience's gaze towards his female partner; if noticed at all he should be tested and must prove himself through bravura display.²⁸⁷

Burt asserts that the duet has now developed to the stage where it can show male friendship and illustrate, in recent choreography:

...the radical and disruptive ways in which male dancers have been made subject to a desiring gaze - when they are looked at by other men (where men partner men) or are presented as the object of female desire in the work of female choreographers.²⁸⁸

When men are looked at as objects of desire by the female gaze they open themselves up to a gay male gaze and, because this 'breaches the institutionalised conventions that defend the way the male body appears in representations,' the dancers appear 'vulnerable.'²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ *ibid.* p.172

²⁸⁸ *ibid.* p.173

²⁸⁹ *ibid.* p.174

Burt describes DV8's 1987 dance piece, *My Sex, Our Dance* as 'challenging homophobia' and asserts that 'the high-energy, risky dance style...was used to convey the fraught and dangerous nature of male-male relationships.'²⁹⁰ Its combination of social interaction, physical violence and thinly veiled eroticism is both typical of DV8's work and of contact improvisation. As with the spiders, the contact is fleeting and sets off an unpredictable reaction.

The themes of *My Sex, Our Dance* were developed further in *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men*,²⁹¹ first performed in October 1988 when the AIDS crisis was at its height, press coverage of gay men was unremittingly negative and Clause 28 was top of the political agenda. It was based on a biography of the serial killer Dennis Nielsen and presented, Burt says, 'the loneliness and hollowness that results when gay or straight men are unable to form meaningful relationships.'²⁹²

Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men begins in a club full of men, some dancing, some glancing furtively or staring boldly, some pressed up against walls, one - Russell Maliphant - outlined in white chalk like a murder victim, marked out for death from the start. Maliphant seems to be searching for affection, love even. When approached he is subjected to contact that veers from tenderness to brutality. He is undressed by Douglas Alexander, blindfolded, bound, manipulated and made passive. A stroking of his stomach turns into a slap. Nigel Charnock watches all this, his face stretched into a silent scream. Maliphant, stripped to briefs and boots and placed on a dais, strikes a series of poses reminiscent of classical sculpture, 50s muscle mags, Tom of Finland and

²⁹⁰ *ibid.* pp.178-179

²⁹¹ *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* was filmed for the *South Bank Show* in 1989 (dir. David Hinton)

²⁹² Burt, p.188

Saint Sebastian: all idealised representations of the male physique, made real by the spectacle of the dancer's body.

The use of contact improvisation shows the development of relationships dynamics, but also the cycle of violence associated with male relationships. The roles of aggressor and victim change back and forth; when Maliphant tries to touch Charnock gently on the face, Charnock flinches or pulls away as if being hit, until just the thought of Maliphant touching him knocks him to the ground. An energetic sequence in the underground club, at once both cell and dungeon, is a mixture of lifts, throws, catches, embraces, pushing and rolling, the dynamic repeated, developing into an attempt to escape via a barred window too high to reach. As Charnock, Maliphant and Lloyd Newson climb up and over each other, all watched by Douglas Alexander, the thumping music is punctuated by grunts and strains and intakes of breath, both violent and erotic.

Later, in a stripped down domestic setting, bodies wrap around bodies, or lie on top of each other to become multi-limbed, inhuman creatures, smothering or strangling each other. Nigel Charnock, as killer, drags his victim along the ground, crouching like a spider. He gives Douglas Alexander the kiss of life, which then becomes the kiss of death in a role reversal: a cycle of life, death and sex. Maliphant is strung up, suspended from a rope, and Charnock crawls along the skirting, across the ceiling and down Maliphant's swaying body. In the final sequence, Lloyd Newson, surrounded by dead bodies, places a record on his turntable and sits down in his armchair. Gay icon, Dusty Springfield, sings, 'Stay a while, let me hold you. / Stay a while, till I go... / Stay a while, what's your hurry? / Stay a while, 'cos I worry, / anytime that you're out of sight.'

The piece presents an image of male violence that is ‘so abject and grotesque as to be beneath humanity.’²⁹³ It also places homosexuality in the position of a problematised identity, an identity not allowed to flourish and pushed literally underground or into the dark recesses of clubs, cruising grounds and cottages. The sex acts in *The Vocabulary of Spiders*, particularly the bug chasing, take place in dark places – the club, the arches cruising ground, the colony – and are a form of contact improvisation

Dance focuses attention uncomfortably on the male body and highlights taboo areas of masculine behaviour through channels of non-verbal bodily communication. Men touching men is fraught with danger and misunderstanding; the unspoken, invisible boundaries are learned at an early age, so that they seem instinctual, like the spinning of a web. It takes artists who are willing to take risks and work on the margins to highlight these boundaries and attempt to alter them.

The dance artist who has most directly explored AIDS and male to male relationships is the American choreographer, Bill T Jones. In an article, ‘The Power to Provoke,’ Judith Mackrell describes ‘the ferocity of his determination to make the stage “a place of public witness.”’²⁹⁴ It was very important for Jones, and other performers, to step into the light as a response to the hysteria surrounding AIDS, which sought to make invisible those who were most affected by it. This often meant creating work that was intentionally confrontational or shocking. Intentionally provoking an audience can often cause a negative reaction, especially in dance with its reputation as an apolitical form.

²⁹³ *ibid.* p.190

²⁹⁴ Mackrell, Judith ‘The Power to Provoke’, *Guardian Review*, 5th June 2004, p.18

Bill T. Jones was accused of creating 'victim art' by the dance critic of the *New Yorker*, Arlene Croce, who described his work as 'too raw to review.'

She wrote:

By working dying people into his act, Jones is putting himself beyond the reach of criticism... I think of him as literally undiscussable - the most extreme case among the distressingly many now representing themselves to the public not as artists but as victims and martyrs.²⁹⁵

Of course, it doesn't seem to have occurred to Arlene Croce that Jones, when creating his response to the AIDS crisis and the death of his partner, may not have had her ability to discuss his work at the forefront of his mind. It also hasn't occurred to her that it may be the duty of criticism to find new ways to express the merits of artistic responses to events such as AIDS, rather than that those art works should confine themselves to pre-established structures of criticism.

Of *Still/Here* and the impulse behind it, Jones said:

Most of us, with or without HIV, are burdened with the perception, justified or not, that being HIV-positive equals death. This I refused to accept. I would shape a work that transcended difference. I would again shape it around the ideal of commonality, but this time, our mortality would be the central issue.²⁹⁶

This energy, this drive, seems to contradict Croce's assertion that the resulting work was victim art; Jones doesn't appear to see himself as a victim at all.

Judith Mackrell refutes dance's reputation as being apolitical and detached from real life:

²⁹⁵ As quoted in John O'Mahony, 'The Body Artist', *The Guardian Review*, 12th June 2004, p.22

²⁹⁶ *ibid.* p.20

In the arena of sexual politics, for instance, there is no art form better equipped to portray the physical dynamics of relationships or to confront the issue of body image.²⁹⁷

She quotes choreographer Darsan Singh Bhuller as saying that making dance is a way of 'facing up to horror and evil.'²⁹⁸ For Jones, himself HIV-positive, there is a passionate desire to explain what it is like to have HIV and, as a dancer, he feels a creative energy, or even a life-force, emanating from that desire:

'There are a lot of people who have seen too much, they are too educated, they are passive... I have to go on living and loving in the world - and find joy in it. I'm not all right, but I'm proud of it.'²⁹⁹

This is a man who appears to live his threatened life with a sense of immediacy and vitality, for whom his race, his very poor social background, his sexuality and his HIV-status are equal parts of him and who is able to create work exploring all those things that are both deeply personal and political. How can you separate the personal and the political if you are gay? Or black? And why would you want to?

Dance does have one major disadvantage as a political art form: its lack of words. Judith Mackrell says:

Movement may be more powerful and subtle than text when it comes to capturing the visceral dynamics of emotion, the sensual texture of experience. But it can present only the most generalised of facts, the most

²⁹⁷ Mackrell, June 2004, p.18

²⁹⁸ *ibid.* p.18

²⁹⁹ O'Mahony, June 2004, p.22

stereotypical of narratives. It can't analyse, it can't argue, it can't contextualise.³⁰⁰

But could this also be a strength? 'The lack of specificity in dance is also a source of its power and provocation,'³⁰¹ she writes, and what choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui likes most about dance is that it is more open-ended than any verbal argument: 'It's so subjective: each person can read their own story in it, and one image can mean several things.'³⁰²

At the same time choreographer Shiobahn Davies would not want to attempt political dance because it she feels it would make her art form 'appear inadequate,' and, for Merce Cunningham, any attempt to handle complex political issues would be like "“sending a message on a postcard.”"³⁰³

To counter this, some choreographers, Bill T. Jones included, have used text as soundtrack. There has always been some relationship between dance and narrative, because classical dance has traditionally transformed story into movement. To attempt to describe dance in text is to have to describe every movement, with all the subtlety and complexity involved in those movements. There will always be something 'lost,' as the two forms are very different. They have a dialogue with each other but one can never be completely translated into the other: if you could, then one or the other would become obsolete. They can, however, 'represent' each other: Simon in *The Vocabulary of Spiders* cannot completely translate the spider movement into human language, and Jay must eventually make the movement abstract rather than reproduce it. The representation in the text of the spider movements, and of the dance, allows me

³⁰⁰ Mackrell, p.19

³⁰¹ *ibid.* p.19

³⁰² *ibid.* p.19

³⁰³ *ibid.* p.19

to use those as a kind of existential code, expressing the bare minimum, the essential, in patterns of words.

What dance does have is the capacity to create arresting and immediate physical dynamics, which can themselves be political. Mackrell describes Bill T Jones dancing with his partner, Arnie Zane, who died of AIDS:

The two men made an extreme, extraordinary pair - Jones, big, muscled and black, Zane tiny, fierce and white. At that time, it was still exceptional to see two men dancing together so intimately, let alone two men of different colour. No medium other than dance could have got under the skin of that relationship so fast and revealed so directly both its lived reality and its symbolic value. The fact that dance is, uniquely, created out of live human bodies will always be its most potent political weapon.³⁰⁴

So the relation of one body to another had become politicised during the AIDS crisis and Jones and others had no choice but to express the politics of the body. The effeminate body is the sign of homosexuality, as is its opposite - the pumped-up, muscle-bound physique. The body was the carrier and the sign of AIDS, in its physical manifestations, but it was also the concealer of HIV-carriers, it could not be seen. The body is codified; bears, chickens, muscle mary, etc. and now the AIDS body is the steroid-enhanced white American male. There were stories of men with visible signs of AIDS, particularly marks on the face, forbidden from entering gay clubs. The body of those with AIDS was barred. We didn't want to see it. Dance forces us to watch.

³⁰⁴ *ibid.* p.19

The End

It never occurred to me to give *The Vocabulary of Spiders* a happy ending. From its conception I knew that it would end with death. I was wrong. Simon's story doesn't end with death, it begins with one – Arturo's. His death, and Simon's inability to grieve effectively for him, helps to explain why Simon is the way he is. This inability to grieve is compounded by his experiences at school which created the template for his adult emotional life. It is further compounded by his study of spiders, and his failed attempts at communion with them.

Colm Tóibín asks:

...why are gay lives presented as tragic in so much writing? Why can't gay writers give gay men happy endings, as Jane Austen gave heterosexuals? Why is gay life often presented as darkly sensational?³⁰⁵

The obvious answer, it seems to me, is that happy endings in fiction involved marriage; an ending not available to gay men. Their lives are 'darkly sensational' as those who live 'in sin' must be. Young gay men and women, growing up, have to look to heterosexual models of romantic love, passionate love, domestic love, and are compelled to 'translate' those models to make them personally relevant. At the same time they are presented, generally, with negative representations of gay love. Yes, there are plenty of stories of tragic, unhappy, dysfunctional heterosexual relationships, but even these suppose that there are also numerous happy, life-affirming, blissful endings to choose from. The same is not true if you are gay.

Gregory Woods characterises the post-war attitude towards homosexuality as one in which a man's homosexuality 'amounts to a tragic flaw'

³⁰⁵ Tóibín (2001), p.8

which fates him to destruction. Anal intercourse ‘unmans him’ and is an act of ‘merciless violence,’ that will inevitably lead to his death. Woods describes simplified versions of this ‘tragic motif’ as ‘ridiculous’ and ‘dangerous.’³⁰⁶ In the Twentieth Century, Foucault asserted that happiness, for gay men, was a ‘serious transgression.’³⁰⁷ Tóibín quotes Foucault as remarking:

People can tolerate two homosexuals they see leaving together, but if the next day they’re smiling, holding hands and tenderly embracing one another, then they can’t be forgiven. It is not the departure for pleasure that is intolerable, it is the waking up happy.³⁰⁸

Tóibín acknowledges in himself ‘an urge to have gay lives represented as tragic, an urge which I know I should repress.’³⁰⁹ In *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, Jonathan Dollimore, having examined certain AIDS novels, writes: ‘It might just be arguable that all, rather than just some, of the foregoing gay writers remain preoccupied with death because of an internalised homophobia.’³¹⁰ That might just be arguable, but I don’t think we necessarily choose that: it’s as if emotionally, psychologically, and culturally, it is tragically inevitable.

Woods asserts that, since the ‘Wilde debacle,’ gay men have been thought of as ‘inherently tragic figures.’³¹¹ Gay-themed novels of the 1950s and 60s, he says, and the films based on them, ‘almost invariably end in murder or suicide.’ Gay men and women ‘internalised this opinion of themselves, and set about living a tragic destiny of loneliness and shame.’ When, during the 1970s and 1980s, this tragic destiny was not central to political and sexual revolution, it is

³⁰⁶ Woods, p.275

³⁰⁷ Tóibín (2001), p. 24

³⁰⁸ *ibid.* p.24

³⁰⁹ *ibid.* p.28

³¹⁰ Dollimore, p.303

³¹¹ Woods, p.359

possible that it was still central to the individual and impossible to shake off in such a short period of time.

For a while, between Stonewall and AIDS, there was something of a golden age, though much of the writing from this time was tinged with a sense that this could not last. Woods quotes from Michael Rumaker's *A Day and a Night at the Baths*, in which the narrator sees the men in the bath house as diseased: 'I could hold all the visitations throughout my day here, *like gifts*, [my italics] always, in any dark times to come.'³¹² Woods says, 'he seems to mean memories of sexy moments; but he could just as well be speaking, again, of viruses or germs.'³¹³ He could, also, be speaking of the future of AIDS.

Other novels, like Christopher Coe's *Such Times* and Oscar Moore's aforementioned *A Matter of Life and Sex*, also look back on this pre-AIDS period with longing and foreboding, as if AIDS seems an inevitable consequence of it, making, Dollimore would say, the same connection as those seeking to condemn. As Woods writes:

It may be that we are facing, in such texts, evidence of undercurrents of guilt: a lingering suspicion that, just as our straight critics were never missing an opportunity to state, we were having too good a time of it... even at the height of physical pleasure, we were nevertheless conscious of mortality.³¹⁴

In bug chasing, that consciousness of mortality heightens the physical pleasure, it *becomes* the pleasure, beyond the physical sensation of barebacking, which can be done safely. In this way, bug chasing becomes both a reference to those old,

³¹² *ibid.* p.360

³¹³ *ibid.* p.360

³¹⁴ *ibid.* p.361

established, narratives of gays as tragic, but is also a way of thinking of AIDS not as *taking* power, but giving power – that is its gift.

For Tóibín, the AIDS elegies of the nineties present the end of a period of ‘gay happiness,’ with images of ‘lovers and friends, gay sex and gay society,’ but ‘every moment of life described has a sense of a sad ending; the freedom of gay life is seen both as an extraordinary gift and as a tragedy.’³¹⁵

In Tóibín’s own AIDS novel, *The Blackwater Lightship*, three generations of women, Dora, Lily and Helen, are brought together by the imminent death of Helen’s brother, Declan. They are joined by two of Declan’s friends, Larry and Paul, and so the three women - who do not get on - and the three gay men are confined to rural Ireland. As each is forced to confide in the other, the novel becomes about the telling of stories. Helen asks Larry if his parents know that he is gay, and Paul says, ‘Tell her your story.’³¹⁶ Larry replies that he has ‘told it too many times,’³¹⁷ but Helen insists. Larry then tells the story of his coming out, which, he says, is ‘like going to Confession.’³¹⁸

Gradually, the telling of stories becomes the *sharing* of stories, and Paul and Helen discuss their relationships and families. Helen, the novel’s central character, is forced to confront her feelings towards her mother, especially when Paul interrogates her. She is no longer in control of her own story. Later, when Helen’s mother gives her own version of events, Helen realises she was wrong in some respects; her point of view is no longer omniscient. Instead, she sees a ‘web of unresolved connections.’³¹⁹ What connects her and her mother is how

³¹⁵ *ibid.* p.27

³¹⁶ Tóibín, Colm. *The Blackwater Lightship*, Picador, U.K., 1999, p. 143

³¹⁷ *ibid.* p.144

³¹⁸ *ibid.* p.147

³¹⁹ *ibid.* p.232

one copes with death and what it means to be a good parent. The acknowledgement of this brings about the possibility of a reconciliation.

‘In the absence of stable definitions and the presence of unstable prejudices,’ says Woods, ‘the concept of “gay literature” has to be seen as a movable feast.’ It exists, he says, ‘in the spaces between texts, shaped by a debate between pro- and anti-homosexual historians and critics, continually reconstituted by new theoretical conceptions of both literature and sexuality.’³²⁰ In this way it seems that the gay writer will, in one way or another, always be on the margins, or, like Anansi, an exile. To be marginalised is, paradoxically, to be given a form of power and, for Woods, ‘There is at least as much power as powerlessness to be acknowledged in the history of gay male culture.’³²¹ It’s possible to say that what power there is, is ‘hidden’ power, which becomes a heightened power responsible for people’s paranoia and fears of gay men; their power, like spiders’ is exaggerated, made fearful. *The Vocabulary of Spiders* seeks to interrogate power and powerlessness in gay identities. Simon was ‘powerless’ to resist the pull of the gift and receives the power of the gift giver. Part of the on-going struggle against AIDS is the struggle to take control of the stories and, crucially, their endings, which are our fates.

Often, attempts at happy endings in gay stories don’t ring true (much as we would like them to); they are aspirational or, even, fantastical. The happy ending of *Maurice*, for example, which was E.M. Forster’s impetus for writing the novel, is unsatisfactory. It does not fulfil, ‘a certain truth outside of hopefulness.’³²² At the end of the novel, Maurice runs off into the woods with

³²⁰ Woods, p.16

³²¹ *ibid.* p.6

³²² Tóibín (2001), p.26

Scudder, but we can't believe that this would happen: not even in the world Forster has created.

Many contemporary gay narratives, if they want to end happily, often feel compelled to introduce fantasy, or dream. The play *Beautiful Thing*, written by Jonathan Harvey and made into a film in 1996, follows the burgeoning relationship between two teenage boys. It is sub-titled 'an urban fairy-tale' (pun intended) and takes place against the dreamy back-drop of a sun-kissed South-London council estate and concrete lidos. When, in the film's final scene, Jamie and Ste slow dance together on the estate's square, they are accompanied by the Mamas and Papas' 'Dream a Little Dream of Me.' We would like to think this scene could 'really' happen, that the world would, ultimately, understand them, but even the film undermines our faith in that.

Russell T. Davies's *Queer as Folk*, which, until the last ten minutes was one of the most uncompromising, hard-hitting and 'real' depiction of gay men's lives ever shown on television, ends with a pastiche of *Grease*, *Thelma and Louise* and *The Wizard of Oz* all rolled into one. The gay road movies, *Priscilla*, *Queen of the Desert* and *To Wong Foo...* contain elements of magical-realism, as do the films of Pedro Almodóvar, all with their focus on drag and trans-gender. The novels of Paul Magrs are also part fairy-tale, part magical-realism. These narratives are accessible, life-affirming (though they are often tinged with sadness and Almodóvar particularly does not shy away from presenting the difficulties of being gay), funny and beautiful but they are not realist; as if the gay sensibility cannot be contained in realist narratives, certainly not if it is to be happy. These texts have to say to their audience: we are fictions, we can make you happy, but you yourselves are not destined for a happy ending. It gets said so often that we believe it and, more than that, it becomes our reality, our truth.

‘This truth may change, of course, as gay lives change,’ says Toibin, ‘and then unhappy endings... may seem tagged on for reasons which have nothing to do with the truth which art requires.’³²³ Who knows - if gay men and women are allowed to marry, or have civil partnerships, or whatever the government want to call it, then maybe we can have happy endings in which relationships are affirmed, not doomed.

All predictions of the ‘future’ of AIDS failed to imagine bug chasing, but did comment on how AIDS confirmed established identities. According to Woods:

It simultaneously confirmed two models of the homosexual man which had been current for half a century at least; the self-destructive pervert whose sexual acts are so extremely and obviously ‘against Nature’ as to call down the righteous wrath of God more or less exactly in the manner of the eradication of Sodom; and, on the other hand, the diseased victim whose condition demands not blame but compassion, not punishment but prayers.³²⁴

So, while it never occurred to me to give *The Vocabulary of Spiders* a happy ending, it did occur to Simon who gives his narrative a happy ending, by indulging in a fantasy of Arturo repairing himself, becoming healthy, and living on. It is wish-fulfilment. He has searched for a happy ending and so writes himself one. It is fantastical but modelled on the reality of the spiders’ lived experience of shedding a skin and transforming themselves. It allows Simon to heal Arturo and reclaim him. It is his dream come true.

³²³ *ibid.* p.26

³²⁴ Woods, pp.369-370

Simon rejects the virtual reality experience of being a spider and chooses instead a lived experience as a bug chaser and gift-giver, which are extensions of his spider identity as already created by AIDS and all the gay narratives that have gone before. Simon also writes his own version of his gift giving; it is presented in the novel as part of the story that Simon writes for Anansi. Simon therefore feels he has some control over how it is presented as a narrative and is allowed to create his own 'reality.' At the end of the novel, Simon is living inside a story, which enables him to do what he does: he is playing a role as he has always done, having assumed identities of bug chaser and gift-giver.

One paradox of bug chasing is that, while seeming to court death, death is no longer assured (in the West) because of advances in medicine. The connection is a false one, but it is false in the way that so much thrill-seeking is – the threat of death is not as great as the experience would have you believe. Simon, by playing Russian Roulette, doesn't know if he has been infected or not. He could, if he chose, ensure his conversion by having an HIV-positive gift-giver. In sexual terms so much risk-taking creates an illusion of danger, a narrative of domination, or rescue, or violence that is a delicately woven story dependent on the collusion of the characters within it, and which can only be played out if one is safe in the knowledge that control is not lost, that one need only say the pre-determined code word for the pain to cease. Crucially, Simon does not know if he has HIV, he never tests for it, so that he can slip between identities as he chooses. Knowledge of his HIV status would deny him choice.

The Vocabulary of Spiders aspires to be part of a developing gay canon, a response to that tradition created by the 'bookish homosexual,'³²⁵ an identity I embrace with pride:

One does not have to subscribe to the myth of the tragic queer to recognise that the theme of mortal danger – along with *carpe diem*, its corollary – has recurred throughout the history of the literature I have been calling 'gay.' In the literature of AIDS we return, as it were, to our roots. Inevitably, while so doing, we find our way back to the most complex and memorable of our writers. Canons are centripetal. They lead us back to the centre – to Virgil, to Dante, to Goethe, to Shakespeare – even when we can see that the centre is itself shifting and only intermittently stable.³²⁶

If canons are centripetal, they are like the web with the spider in the middle. They are like Simon's presenting of his narrative in *The Vocabulary of Spiders*, giving it an ending that is tragic, but has an affirmative energy: it is fantastical, transformative and 'darkly sensational.' I still write what I could never say, but now I see this as an advantage. This is the transformation we learn to make in our own lives as the hiding places are revealed, the couch is pulled from the skirting, and we are exposed. *The Vocabulary of Spiders* is an attempt to shed the skin of that imposed 'spider' identity and repair some of the damage done while growing up during a time of crisis.

³²⁵ *ibid.* p.3

³²⁶ *ibid.* p.370

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