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Chris Ashford & Gareth Longstaff

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(Re)regulating gay sex in viral times: COVID-19 and the impersonal intimacy of the glory hole

Chris Ashford[a] and Gareth Longstaff[b]

[a]Faculty of Business and Law, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK; [b]Media, Culture, Heritage, School of Arts and Cultures, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has transformed the way we live our lives, and sex has been a significant element of that transformation. Gay male sex in the UK has faced the most significant (re)criminalisation and (re)regulation in living memory with intimacy outside of the heteronormative framework of domestic coupledom at best discouraged and, at worst, made into a criminal offence. This criminalisation provides a temporal praxis in which gay men experience sex in the shadows once more, an echo of a historic legal and cultural regulation of desire. This history also provides a space for experiencing forms of impersonal intimacy and queer desire in a way that is arguably well-suited for viral times, namely the glory hole. These historic partitions and apertures – connecting gay men across legal and cultural boundaries of desire and affirmed through modes of anonymous and promiscuous sex – may once again provide a queer way to experience intimacy as impersonal. This article explores this potential and situates the glory hole as a cultural and legal site of this tension between the intimate and the impersonal, as well as considering how it is being recast as commercial artefact and performance space during these viral times.

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Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic reached the UK in early 2020 – and amidst a surfeit of laws in the form of regulations – the various jurisdictions of the United Kingdom have constructed a mixture of legal interventions that seek to regulate and monitor human behaviour so as to minimise the spread of COVID-19. This has included local-level regulations in England, localised systems of 'tiers', and national measures, which – together with 'guidelines' which are advisory but not backed with a legal penalty – add further complexity.

These regulations euphemistically inspired the language of 'lockdown' and its shifting cultural narratives and meanings, whilst also introducing key doctrinal legal terms

CONTACT Gareth Longstaff gareth.longstaff@ncl.ac.uk

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that have re-positioned risk, sex and sexual contact between men. The regulatory language developed during 2020–21 in the light of reactive governmental controls has also shaped the use of idioms such as 'social-distancing' 'self-isolation', and 'new normal', and the ways in which these connect to socio-legal and socio-sexual modes of gay male desire and experience. Alongside these new modes of human interaction is the concept of a 'support bubble' and the tensions between experiences of intimacy and distance that it has intensified. In England, a support bubble enables a household to be formed between one adult and an existing household, or one adult plus one or more people who were under the age of 18 on 12th June 2020. Once a support bubble has been formed, the composition – and the intimacy it potentially allows – cannot be changed. Previously, the UK Government Health Secretary Matt Hancock advised in March 2020 that couples needed to rapidly decide whether to move in together or live apart (Walker 2020), underscoring the ways in which the UK Government and the devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have created and augmented a conspicuously neoliberal legal and cultural environment. It is here and within these bubbles of intimacy that units of UK citizens are given apparent agency, whilst being classified and contained by governmental power. This also takes the form of cultural 'guidelines' and informal mechanisms of surveillance and/or criminalisation, with governments variously tightening and loosening criminal provisions dependent upon documented rates of COVID-19 transmission.

Gay male practices of intimacy have been adapted within this pandemic setting of social distancing, self-isolating and self-regulating, and the adaption and negation of the 'new normal'. In this article, these forms of intimacy and their relationship to the pandemic and the glory hole riff with the work of Bersani and Phillips (2008) where the pursuit and realisation of bareback sex between men and, more so, the barebacking gangbang are conceptualised as a form of impersonal intimacy inasmuch that they allow the masculine subject to be 'penetrated, even replaced by an unknowable otherness' (53). Here, the barebacking bottom who is fucked by countless men and bound into a complex ruse of impersonal pleasure, risk and the potential infection of HIV is 'absorbed into the nameless and faceless crowd that exist only as viral traces circulating in this blood and perhaps fatally infecting him' (*ibid*). Dean (2009) has also analysed this kind of impersonality in bareback pornography and the 'breeding' practices of men ingesting multiple loads of semen into their orifices. Here, the ways in which sexual pleasure allows for 'impersonal identification with strangers past and present that does not depend on knowing, liking, or being like them' (143) seeks to reposition how sexual desire is practised and how we might situate and conceptualise the queer potentials of the glory hole and the enigmatic experiences of impersonal intimacies. In this way, COVID-19 and the glory hole also resonate and revitalise the queer ethics and practices of anonymous and barebacking sex explored by Dean and his ideas around 'an ethics of cruising as a way of life' (176–212). He uses the heritage and experience of gay male cruising and barebacking to embrace and affirm that precarious and promiscuous sexual encounters with strangers function as an 'intimate encounter with the other that does not attempt to eliminate otherness [and] that I wish to advocate as ethically exemplary' (180). The glory hole arguably functions as an impersonal space of desire which relies upon the anonymity or strangeness of the

stranger (see Anderson 2005/2006). This is particularly so in the context of COVID-19, where close contact and intimate modes of sexual desire are monitored. It creates an 'openness to alterity' (176) that 'involves intimacy with strangers without predicating that intimacy on knowledge or understanding of the other' (211) through normative modes of regulation and identification. The glory hole negates ideological modes of state surveillance as an 'aperture' (Dean 2009) or 'opening' of desire. In turn, and as we argue, it is this 'opening' and its simultaneously impersonal *and* intimate qualities that capture the queer potential to subvert and transgress. Moreover, this 'opening' counters the legislative rhetoric of social-distancing, self-isolation, and normalising methods of control and regulation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this way, the impersonal intimacy of glory hole connects to how gay male sexualities are allied to modes of queer transgression. In Dean's *Beyond Sexuality* and in his queer critique of normative identity and identity politics (2000, 223–228) queerness is seen as something that spreads beyond gay identity and 'extends the politics of sexuality beyond sex and sexual minorities' civil rights by insisting that 'queer' is opposed not simply to 'straight', but more broadly to 'normal' (225). In this way the homo-normative rights that have been afforded to gay men are undercut by the possibility of queerness and the ways in which 'queer political resistance provides access to alternate forms of community and other social ties […] different ways of knotting the subject to society and community' (227). It is in the pandemic space of the glory hole and the possibilities it produces for impersonal intimacies that a 'different way' for gayness and queerness to intersect may also emerge.

The queer politics of the glory hole

The State's use of law to reinforce norms and the ongoing construction of boundaries in which homosexuality operates (Ashford, Maine, and Zago 2020) reflects Guy Hocquenghem's (1993, 62) observation of the 'myth of constant progress' towards the liberalisation of public morals and respect for the desires of the individual. It is also in the purview of COVID-19 that these forms of desire which might be positioned through the strangeness of an impersonal encounter catalyse and inform the queer possibility for 'an alternative and transgressive configuration of kinship, bonding and affirmation' (Longstaff 2019, 168). Historic legal and cultural regulation and associated medical risk forms a well-documented discourse, yet COVID-19 reveals how sex can be quickly (re)read with behaviours reduced to the coupled and domestic frameworks that underpin queer critiques of hetero and homo normative discourse. Today, gay men in the UK can marry same-sex partners (since 2014 in England, Wales and Scotland, and 2020 in Northern Ireland), but many of our sexual encounters and those affirmative modes of queer promiscuously, anonymously and impersonally are *de facto* and *de jure* more restricted than any time since the partial decriminalisation measures that followed from the Sexual Offences Act 1967 and characterised the second half of the twentieth century. A particular and long-standing focus for the regulation and criminalisation of gay men (as promiscuous) and the sex many men seek (as anonymous) pivots on the tensions between the stranger and the 'strangeness' of public sex spaces. The behaviours of gay male cruising public spaces – often park, wasteland or

other open spaces, as well as cottages and tearooms[1] have a sustained history of both legal and law enforcement interventions (Ashford 2006, 2007, 2012; Johnson 2007) and cultural analysis (Humphreys 1975; Gove 2000; Turner 2003; Espinoza 2019). Alongside these public sex environments (PSEs). A series of commercial spaces or Public Sex Venues (PSVs) such as adult cinemas, sex clubs, and gay male saunas and bathhouses have similarly provided public sex spaces with an emphasis on displaying, affirming, experiencing and celebrating the personal and impersonal tensions associated with anonymous and promiscuous sexual intimacy between men.

The queer politics and aesthetics of the glory hole capture and encourage these forms of impersonal intimacy for gay men because it operates as a 'faceless' space (Holmes, O'Byrne, and Murray 2010) that 'affords an intense, temporary escape from the demands of subjectivity' (253). It is here that men can perform and encounter the discourse of the 'stranger' to 'form new and original assemblages that have the potential to transform them or to experience new modes of being and, in the case of anonymous faceless sex, to 'become-other' through new forms of desires, bodies, and pleasures' (254). Due to this anonymisation and the partiality of the bodies and body parts which are opened up and on offer (mouth, anus, cock) the glory hole expedites 'the free play of desire and fantasy for both users' (254). More so and because of its function to only ever allow for partial visibility, intensified sensory barriers and thresholds to touch, smell, and taste, as well as the impersonal encounter of the stranger, the glory hole can sanction its users to 'feel liberated not only from the social roles and expectations dictated by a predominantly heterosexual world, but also from the codes of the gay world, many of which assign a high priority on youth, physical fitness, and the conventional markers of 'masculinity'. Through the glory hole, these considerations rarely come into play' (255–56).

The glory hole disavows normatively personal, romantic and erotic encounters and (re)situates them into a queer heritage of illicit and marginalised spaces of sexual desire as sites of political resistance. Just as the culture of barebacking uses the intimate transience with a stranger and the arousing potentials of impersonal sex to destabilise 'the humanising attributes of intimacy within a couple, where the personhood of each partner is presumed to be expanded and enriched by knowledge of the other' (Bersani and Phillips 2008, 53), the glory hole opens up a politically queer and efficiently impersonal way to sexually encounter the stranger as other and, in the context of COVID-19, it also 'provides an escape route from the violence of stratification' (258) bound to systemic modes of reactive control and neo-liberal governance which are presented as forms of individual restraint, autonomy, and choice.

Glory hole encounters are predominantly silent providing a shield against other toilet patrons and also minimising the social presence of these acts – palpable arousal kept as impersonal, quiet and non-invasive as possible. It is in this setting 'where visual social cues are limited or non-existent, and where verbal communication is likewise limited or non-existent' (Holmes, O'Byrne, and Murray 2010, 255) that the politics of the glory hole and the tangible arousal of the silent, anonymous and detached amplify its relevance as a space of queer and impersonal intimacy. The Terrence Higgins Trust – a UK-based sexual health charity – provided advice in August 2020, amidst expectations of a 'second wave', that people should avoid kissing and face-to-face sexual

positions to limit transmission of COVID-19, although noting that abstinence was preferable (Parsons 2020). Earlier in the pandemic, in March 2020 amidst the first UK 'lockdown', they had a simpler message, saying 'don't hook up during the COVID-19 lockdown' (Brady 2020). A harm-minimisation message rather than abstinence was also provided by the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control in Canada (BCCDC 2020). They suggested being creative with 'physical barriers, like walls, that allow sexual contact while preventing close face to face contact' and – alongside similar advice from New York's Department for Health – received global media attention for identifying glory holes as an alternative to pre-pandemic sex between men (Duffy 2020).

Just as the San Francisco bathhouse closures of the 1980s and other global bathhouse/sauna interventions such as New York's zoning and sanitary regulations were a response to the HIV pandemic (Woods and Binson 2003; Colter 1996; Disman 2003), we see that today the surviving commercial spaces – an echo of the public sex environments before them – continue to provide spaces for the glory hole to operate as a connection through which history and power pass, along with the pleasure-seeking cocks, holes and tongues that use them. Moreover, 2020 saw San Francisco overturn its historic bathhouse ban, with elected officials expressing hope the following year that it would usher the return to bathhouses to the City (Bajko 2021; and on the impact of COVID-19 on queer spaces in the city see, Ferrannini 2020). The viral times of the 1980s and 1990s may have contributed to the decline and forcible closure of many of these spaces. Yet, in these new times these spaces may be a source for renewed hope and queer connection, potentially facilitated by law. It is here that the glory hole functions as a politically embodied space of agency and alterity, in which the motions and porosities connected to sticking, sucking, thrusting, pushing, pulsating, ejaculating and swallowing into the mouth and/or anus are pushed beyond the dynamics of an anonymous sexual encounter. This extenuates the glory hole as a political setting and/or ethic of queer resistance which 'insists that the others strangeness be preserved rather than annihilated through identification' (Dean 2009, 212).

Public sex environments: socio-legal discourse and the glory hole

The glory hole has a long association with law and the legal and cultural regulation of gay men. The Sexual Offences Act 1967 provided for the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales. It meant that two consenting adult men aged 21 or over could consent to sex in private. It did not extend to the presence of more than two persons and section 2(b) of the Act added a further restriction that acts would also not be deemed to be legal if they take place 'in a lavatory to which the public have or are permitted to have access, whether on payment or otherwise'. The provision was re-stated in law in S71 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 and remains in force today. This law – and similar legal provisions around the world – have enabled police intervention into these spaces; a presence that has been described by Robb as 'one of the most successful and futile police operations of all time' (2003, 33). Whilst much of the legal response and resulting literature has focused on 'men', these spaces also provide key sites for sexual encounters with/for trans men (Cavanagh 2010, 176–182).

In 1707, with London providing the first public toilets in the world, what is believed to be the world's first glory hole was cut into a partition in a 'bog house' (Espinoza 2019, 54). Within the public lavatory or cottage, the presence of a glory hole can connect two private spaces. Modestly sized, these holes are typically cut or drilled between cubicle walls, enabling cubicle users to view one another, and (assuming the hole is large enough) place their penis through the hole. This can also facilitate oral or anal sex, analingus, mutual masturbation, and historically, note passing to facilitate encounters elsewhere. Once found by authorities, these holes would be (and are) sealed or covered over with an additional partition, thus forcing the hole to be re-created and re-covered in a ruse of subversive ingenuity that has arguably contributed to the silence around the taboo behaviour (Bapst 2001). This hole – covered or present – is a symbol both of the possible, cultural and legal rules connected to 'various anatomical combinations of body parts on either side of the glory hole [which …] become potential vectors of pleasure and emancipation' (Holmes, O'Byrne, and Murray 2010, 255).

Prior to the creation of this specific public lavatory offence, the law in England and Wales – certainly from the nineteenth century onwards – was preoccupied with whether anyone had viewed the act who had not consented (Cocks 2010, 34, 38). A principal that still applies in the common law offence of outraging public decency which applies to other public sex offences such as cruising and dogging (Law Commission 2010, 2015; Ashford 2012). Visibility meant that a taboo could no longer be silenced, and thus the glory hole – whether covered or uncovered – reveals the presence of an exhilaratingly strange taboo in which an illicit from of impersonalised intimacy past or potential is embodied. The origins of the 1967 legislation lie with the Wolfenden Report of 1957 (see more generally Joyce 2019 and Wolfenden 1976). A Home Office Memorandum to the Wolfenden Committee (quoted in Lewis 2016, 25) noted both the presence and response of the glory hole:

> To give an example in 1953 in a certain lavatory in Greenford a hole about 2″ square was cut in one of the partitions between two W.C. cubicles presumably by a pervert, after this a number of men were arrested in these cubicles. The Local Authority placed sheets of zinc on both sides of the partition but holes were then cut by someone in the zinc and further cases occurred including 1 of sodomy. Similar occurrences have come to light in other parts of London including cubicles at Victoria Station.

The 1967 legislation was arguably the start of a process that would bring same-sex male desire 'in from the margins' of society and underpin narratives of individuated equality and liberation that has come to dominate discourses (see more generally Flynn 2017; Weeks 2016) allied to gay male identity politics. Hawkes (2004, 169) has noted that the 1967 Act, with its focus upon privacy meant the law re-instated the hierarchy of heterosexuality over homosexuality with men who desired intimacies with other men occupying a distinct category (in contrast to the lesbians who were entirely absent from the legislation along with any conception of bisexuality). Despite this historic focus upon private spaces, the long history of commercial public sex venues has acted to blur these boundaries between the public and private. In these settings the performance and pursuit of sex pivots on this tension, and the ways in which modes of public and private sex fold into the range of impersonal intimacies offered by the

glory hole and its presence in other spaces such as adult bookstores, sex clubs and saunas.

Public sex venues: socio-legal discourse and the glory hole

Commercial public sex venues have existed in all large Western urban centres (Richters 2007), although well-documented challenges from shifting economics, behaviours and gentrification, have seen the decline in the availability of many of these spaces in recent years (see more generally Ghaziani 2014) whilst the rise in private sex parties (Meunier 2014) has provided new – but less accessible, and in the light of COVID-19, increasingly clandestine – spaces. Whilst PSVs can empower pleasures, there are also risks for the men that use them. Whilst legal risk is largely eliminated from encounters in most of these spaces today with venues operating under a landscape of regulations and ordinances, other risk remains such as stigma for those who fear being branded 'sleazy', 'outing', or fear that sex in PSVs denote a lack of integrity and attractiveness to other gay men in other social settings (Richters 2007).

The North American adult 'bookstore' (See McKinstry 1974) is one of these PSV spaces. Video 'preview' booths often appear inside the bookstores and provide screens in cubicles that might have traditionally been coin operated but today may either involve digital payment (via a pre-purchased code from the payment desk) or via a flat fee upon entrance. These spaces have often been associated with 'filth' and being rather 'down at heel'. Couture (2008, 113) describes one Canadian venue in which 'guys had clearly shot their loads one after another until it formed a slippery coating on the floors of each of the booths. If you breathed in real deep and got past scent of a piss filled dirty locker room, you got the subtle but distinct whiff of cum in your nostrils'. The public/private tension, as well as the negotiation of visibility, pleasure, danger, risk and shame has been highlighted in a number of ordinances designed to clearly make the spaces 'public', by cutting down the size of cubicle doors in Indianapolis by half, or removing them completely in Los Angeles (Califia 2000, 21). Redevelopment and gentrification have led to closures of many of these spaces as part of 'clean up' operations, notably in New York City since the 1990s. This has also laid open divisions within the LGBT community with some queer spaces being viewed as a sordid affront to the hard-won legal respectability that has defined more recent legal change and citizenship (see Serlin 1996).

One San Francisco sex club (now long gone) captured something of these tensions and explicitly drew upon the glory hole history, calling itself *Glory Holes Ballroom* (Sides 2009, 105). Whilst another San Francisco sex club – *Blow Buddies* (closed for good in 2020; Avery 2020) is described by Bapst (2001) as one that had crowds forming at the door on weekend nights signifying that sufficient numbers of gay men in San Francisco 'are aroused by the prospect of largely anonymous, strictly genital-oral sex to keep a business in operation' (92), although empirical accounts in the same article also indicate that anal sex would also sometimes take place through the glory holes. *Blow Buddies* sought to use space and design in the venue to intensify the sexual experience of the glory hole. A raised platform and screened cubicles below aligned to a glory hole enabled men to stand below at full height rather than go on

bended knees to fellate the partner above. This structure meant anal sex or analingus/rimming was more difficult if not impossible, but the design could enhance the oral encounter and allow men to move more freely around the space. Prior to this and in the light of the AIDS crisis, PSVs adapted in the 1980s and into the 1990s with the emergence of 'JO' or 'Jerk Off' masturbatory clubs, and rules in public sex venues, notably 890 Folsom House in San Francisco, founded by Buzz Bense from 1986 until it closed in 1991 (see Perry 1990). Even before the emergence of HIV and AIDS, public sex was coming under heightened scrutiny with one CBS report in 1980 focussing on public sex in both public sex environments and public sex venues, producing alarm about the behaviour in the general population and linking public sex behaviour to ideas of gay power (Denizet-Lewis 2018). Saunas were a particular focus for these legal interventions at the time of AIDS, but despite the mass closure of these spaces, they too – and the glory holes within them – continue.

Taking this kind of history and heritage into account, and during 2020, it has been those PSVs devoted to glory holes that have for much of the pandemic managed to continue operating. In Amsterdam, Drake's Cruising Club operates along with the nearby venue of William Higgins Le Salon. Whilst Drake's pitches itself as male only, William Higgins pitches itself (above a sex shop) as a space for both men and women. Both venues were running the same update in November 2020, highlighting that they were open but emphasising the measures they had in place including ventilation and the need to wear facemasks, although the advert also seemingly highlights the flawed nature of the localised tracing system indicating that many users do not provide real names and/or contact details.

The Pipeworks, a gay sauna in Glasgow, used the summer and lockdowns to improve and refurbish parts of the venue, and re-opened on Monday 16th November 2020 with a YouTube video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ag6XcjGz5CU&t=3s) providing a tour of the venue and outlining the measures that were in place to comply with COVID-19 regulations and including a one way cruising space. In the run up to the re-opening, the venue promoted their building improvements, pricing structure and facilities – including the presence of glory holes. However, it was during the opening week that the Scottish government announced a move into the highest level of tiered restrictions for much of Scotland including Glasgow (unlike England they were not at this point in a national lockdown). At 6 pm on Friday 20th, the venue was once again forced to close. It had managed to stay open for just five days.

A similar yo-yo of opening and closing with regulations could be seen at one of England's saunas earlier in the year. ClubZeus in Nottinghamshire re-opened in July 2020 but – when this area was placed in England's highest tier measures in October 2020 (but before the second national lockdown in England) it was forced to close. The venue had – like The Pipeworks – promoted the full range of its facilities, including glory holes.

Many PSVs have also operated with links to online communities, for example bareback sex and events such as CumUnion which through the Bareback Real Time website promotes events and allows website users to sign up for events. During COVID-19, like other sites such as Fabguys which reduced site functionality relating to physical meets, BarebackRT switched off their party listing feature, but also promoted virtual

CumUnion parties, initially two free parties based around US and European time zones and then a single party orientated around US time zones for pay and then for free. These events which are hosted through Zoom typically feature disconnected guys wanking on cam, with a sex club vibe soundtrack provided by organisers. Their online expression of desire is arguably an attempt to forge and resonate real-time intimacies in the face of regulatory restraint but ultimately one which resembles a group wank party and is framed by a more alienated and distanced tension of how intimacy and impersonality might be articulated. Ironically, it is the real-world PSVs – many of them survivors of the forced closures of the AIDS pandemic – that now find themselves once again facing an existential crisis in these new viral times. Venues with precisely the facilities highlighted by some health authorities – notably the glory hole – arguably offer a key commercial space in which sex can take place with less harm than some other public sex spaces or the domestic setting of the home.

Pornography, the glory hole and the pandemic

In the UK, there is not the same history of adult bookstores with booths or glory hole venues as in some other parts of the world, although regulations do not prevent them opening *per se*. Sex clubs too are relatively rare with *Vault 139* – a London cruise bar – located in Bloomsbury being an exception that features four glory hole booths in its dark basement cruising space. Yet this particular venue closed during the early phase of the pandemic instead encouraging patrons to download an app containing pornographic content that at £9.99 would provide some income to the venue to enable it to stay viable with the promise of free entry for those who download the app once it re-opened. Throughout the COVID-19 epidemic, the venue has remained active on social media, sharing a range of pornographic memes, images and messages, including images that show the space and specifically the glory holes in use. This – the porn teasingly suggests – could be you. It could be your cock, your arse, using these holes too and participating in the 'affective urgencies, intensive thrills and extreme levels of sexual and bodily arousal' (Longstaff 2019, 174) that the pandemic has curtailed, but which the rhetoric and fantasy of pornographic representation can fulfil. For instance, in one post *Vault 139* has been set up with a sex sling, ready for the filming of a porn scene. Well known gay male porn performers such as Gabriel Cross who have entrepreneurially self-presented and self-styled their promotional and public persona through social networks such as Twitter and onlyfans are involved in the scene and configured into the post. Here, the pornographic fulfilment of witnessing Cross being given a 'brutal-bashing' by 3 other gay male porn performers is formulated as both a cultural and economic transaction. Like all pornography, this requires the spectacle and display of sex to be 'mediated and available for public consumption' (Sullivan and McKee 2015, 5) and its presentation of 'explicitness, public mediation and pleasure' (4) to be 'physically separated from the act on display' (*ibid*). In this way subscriber access is synergised to both Cross's onlyfans platform and *Vault 139's* app to curate a sexual narrative that exploits and reifies the personal, physical and emotional losses that derive from the inaccessibility of PSVs during the pandemic.

Pornography which draws attention to the context of the pandemic has often used the discourses of distance, inaccessibility and (self)isolation that COVID-19 has introduced to construct a potent fantasy and longing for tangible and physical contact. On social media platforms such as Twitter XXX, the gloryhole is re-fashioned and re-configured as a 'home-made' composition of fabric or wood. Amateur glory hole accounts which document and eroticise these impersonal encounters rely upon domestic settings. This is also intensified by self-representational modes of amateurism, ordinariness and authenticity on platforms such as onlyfans and JustFor.Fans. During 2020–2021, there was a significant surge in the number of subscribers and performers as 'content creators' on these platforms, where moments of personal intimacy compound with impersonal distance (Influencer Marketing 2021). The surveilling and witnessing of the sexual other within interior, domestic, and personal space draws attention to the powerful 'contradictions between the ordinary/extraordinary, public/private, inauthentic/authentic dynamics of sexual activity and revelation in porn' (Longstaff 2018, 187).

The self-production, self-presentation and self-promotion of sexual content during the pandemic has shifted the alterity of the porn fantasy as 'other' towards powerful yet ultimately precarious modes of sexualised authenticity, personality and selfhood. In turn this has produced a form of visual intimacy that exploits and amplifies the erotic possibilities of how non-sexual interiors and domestic settings within the home may be transposed and used as sexual spaces in a pandemic context. These online social networks also offer an enigmatic compound of surveillance and self-surveillance, voyeuristic desire, and modes of inter-passive safety, distance, and citizenship – all of which are augmented by the fact that you cannot catch or spread COVID-19 from subscribing and watching porn online.

Tim Dean has suggested that it is online or, more broadly, through the private consumption of pornography and sexual communication that 'everyone's pleasure diminishes' (2009, 193). Yet just as 'the privatisation of public space *homogenises* pleasure' (*ibid*), gay male processes of cruising, notions of the stranger, and paradigms of impersonality and anonymity are also 'narrow[ed] into more-privatised spaces' *(ibid*) to transform 'the erotic possibilities latent in an encounter with otherness' (179). More specifically, the glory hole functions as a nexus between corporeally intimate and digitally impersonal gay male sexual practices. In work that examines cruising and gay sex as embodied and experientially impersonal in PSEs and PSVs there is clear evidence of this tension between intimacy and anonymity and the relevance of the glory hole (Humphreys 1975; Weinberg and Williams 1975; Gove 2000) as 'a basic model of the social organisation of impersonal sex' (1975, 125). Here, the characteristics of impersonal sex and how it destabilises sexual desire as personal are understood in terms of 'sexual activity without any personal involvement whatsoever between sexual partners' (Weinberg and Williams 1975, 125).

If the production and consumption of online pornography is configured and mapped into this construction, we can see too that it also becomes a setting in which the rhetoric of impersonal sex that involves 'sex without commitment, obligation or a long-term social relationship' (ibid) can be realised. The precarity of the PSV and the PSE also urge the contemporary politics of the glory hole and COVID-19 towards a

reliance on socially mediated networks of public and private communications to capture sexualised spaces of the self. Here, there are potentially two layers to the impersonal intimacy of the glory hole and its alliance to pornography online. The first is connected to the physical and experiential politics of the glory hole in PSEs and PSVs which remain largely undocumented as pornography and which remain personal to the subject. The second is the glory hole that is documented as pornography and in some way shared, distributed and consumed for others to surveil at a distance. The technology of surveillance thereby provides another 'glory hole' to the body parts, lives, and desires of men, first through the creation and curation of profiles and then the location-based mobile technology personified by Grindr and other Apps (Mowlabocus 2010; Cassidy 2018). Just as codes of knowledge and a pedagogy of those public toilets that were cottages or tearooms would re-shape the use of the urban environment and the men visiting spaces (Molotch 2010, 12), the digital enables a (re)navigation of risk and pleasure, the embodiment of personal and impersonal desires, and the paradox of sexual intimacy at a distance. These shifts from impersonal modes of strangely intimate bodily pleasure, arousal and experience to algorithmic signifiers of pornographic desire speak to the continuing digitalisation, commodification and vulnerability of gay male sexual desire. The glory hole may be a gateway to the cultural and legal regulation of our past, but it may also be the portal to a transformational future in which the strangeness of the encounter and its correlation to modes of impersonal, transient and partial desires serve to curate and cultivate new forms of queer intimacy and pleasure beyond constraints of conformity, normality and legality.

Conclusion – *'as the glory hole is my witness'* …

In his poem *Iron Man*, the poet Thom Gunn (2000, 87) deploys the phrase 'as cock is my witness'. When we consider the glory hole, it too is perhaps a witness; a witness that 'opens up' the mouth and anus to the alterity and pleasure of the cock, and a witness to the queer ethics of promiscuous, anonymous and impersonal desire. The glory hole is also a space of testimony and witness to the history and the possibility of impersonal intimacies between men, via intimacies that are unambiguously sexual. The glory hole witnesses desire communicated through the cock, the anus, the tongue and the mouth. It is the nexus of intimate *and* impersonal desire. Moore (2004) has argued that 'as a gay community, our triumphs and our sorrows have become mixed together; because they are so intertwined, we cannot abandon either our sexual history or AIDS without throwing away both' (190). The history of criminalising sex reminds us that far from stopping sex, criminalisation merely drives sexual encounters into the shadows and incentivises greater risk taking. Gay men in particular, with a long history of the criminalisation of their sex lives find that casual hook ups and engaging in acts that align with queer desire, culture and identification are once more forbidden. Ackroyd (2017, 230) has noted that in more recent years London's 'queerness, with all its panache and ferocity, is in elegant retreat' in terms of public sex spaces. He notes that ''cruise bars' are increasingly open only to members, saunas are increasingly clean […], and bars no longer have back rooms which remain open

after public rooms have closed' (230), but COVID-19 and specifically the glory hole arguably offer a newfound urgency and relevance to these spaces. The historic criminalisation of gay men perhaps offers a harm minimisation way forward for all of us. If we accept that people will continue to have impersonal sex, the question becomes one of how do we regulate and minimise harm? In the context of COVID-19, this takes the form of minimising harm to the individuals engaging in sex, and to wider society – particularly the vulnerable – who would be impacted by a rise in infections.

Yet there remains scope to suggest that these forms of impersonality and anonymity give rise to queer forms of regularity and the potential for community and personal familiarity. The glory hole not only connects to a different temporal legal framework – one from which contemporary notions of gayness and concomitant frameworks of cultural and legal surveillance emerged – but it also links us to one another on the premise of impersonal intimacy and a queer politics of subversion which reworks the regulatory measures and narratives allied to the pandemic. The glory hole is witness to, and offers a viral connection to, a heritage of gay male sexuality, desire and sense of self that seemed endangered before the COVID-19 pandemic, but which now assumes new political importance and affective queer significance.

Note

1. Cottage is a British term to denote a public lavatory used as a public sex setting, drawing upon the Victorian cottage-like appearance of public lavatories found in parks and public spaces, whilst the term tearoom (from 'toilet room' or t-room') is more commonly used in the USA (see Ashford (2006, 2007, 2012) and Johnson (2007)).

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