

**Del LaGrace  
Volcano &  
Marc Thompson  
on Queer Illness**

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*How is the history of illness inseparable from the history of queer life?*

MT: Homosexuality, same sex desire, gender difference, has long been pathologised and medicalised or associated with mental illness and disease. Therefore, the history of illness is inseparable from the history of queer life. From being classified as a mental disorder until the mid -1970's by the American Psychiatric Association, to the devastating impact of the HIV epidemic, to the current debates around conversion therapies and trans rights, our history and our lives cannot be understood without examining the intersections with health and medicine. Our communities continue to have disproportionately higher rates of drug and alcohol use, poor mental health, self-harm and suicide, and a generation of queers are still processing the darkest days of the AIDS epidemic, some of us left with lasting post-traumatic stress.

*How has being sick (please interpret this how you want) changed your life, how has it changed over time?*

MT: As a man with living with HIV, I have, ironically, never considered myself 'sick'. I expect sickness to manifest itself physically and fortunately I have been asymptomatic since my diagnosis. However, the spectre of becoming sick did hang over me for many years. Before the advent of effective HIV medication, I was conscious that I could become ill at any time. This makes one become alert to every physical change, cough, sneeze, or fever. Since starting medication in 2001, I have no fears of illness related to my HIV. Being diagnosed with HIV has encouraged me to take control of my health and lifestyle. Today my main concerns are ageing and ageing well.

*We've chosen to contrast two very different approaches to illness because we want to explore how medical discourses shape our relationship to illness and what we do with it, whether we retreat underground or become public-facing advocates. Marc – what for you, is the purpose of public advocacy & destigmatisation in relation to HIV/AIDS?*

MT: Since the start of the global HIV/AIDS pandemic, public advocacy has been central to the fight to end transmissions and end stigma. Public advocacy and activism have been and continues to be crucial to challenging stigma, increasing access to life saving medication, increasing funding for prevention campaigns, changing government policy, ending the criminalisation of HIV and enabling support for those infected and affected by HIV. The role of people living with HIV cannot be underestimated. We have consistently pushed our way into medical institutions to ensure our voices are listened to and our needs are met, especially the most marginalised of our communities. This is particularly necessary as the face of 'public' advocacy can often be homogenising. The destigmatisation of HIV is equally important. Stigma blights the lives of people living with HIV, causing poor mental health and isolation. Stigma is also one of the main barriers to people being tested for HIV. Without the ongoing effort to address HIV stigma we won't end new

HIV transmissions and the communities impacted by HIV will continue to have poor health outcomes.

*If you're sick, the aim is always to get well. But we're suspicious of wellness in the age of neoliberal individuality, what would a collective response to being sick look like?*

If I understand this correctly, we cannot only focus on the well-being on the individual. I have a very strong belief that if one of us is ill we are all ill.

**bODieS tHaT QwEeR**  
**Del LaGrace Volcano**

Queer bodies are 'Bodies That (Don't) Matter'. Bodies that are disposable and often disowned. Bodies that are not valued or valuable. Bodies that through the simple act of existence embody resistance. If bodies are sites of resistance then queer bodies are sites where the resistance is (most) fertile.

Queer bodies are vulgar bodies; plebeian bodies, street bodies, black bodies, brown bodies, bodies that don't know the meaning of discipline, that reject the adage "one can never be too rich or too thin" or too white. Queer bodies create the template for cultural disgust and teach us what we must not want to have or to be.

Queer bodies are bodies that refuse regulation and resist commodification, at the same time creating spectacles of themselves. Queer bodies are bodies that aren't pampered or Pilated. Bodies that seldom swim in public and feel forced to choose passing over personal comfort. Queer bodies are bodies that are confined to spaces where access is available and access needs to mean so much more than a just a handicap toilet.

[...]

Consider disabled bodies. Consider Bob Flanagan, Super Masochist. His body refused to renounce pleasure or apologize or behave (as a sick person should). A body with orifices that leaked and demanded to be filled, with wounds that opened and refused to close, reminding us painfully of our own.

Consider intersex bodies. Consider *my* body. A body that has chosen to amplify rather than erase its *inter-sex-iness*. A body that is unwilling and unable to conform to claustrophobic cultural definitions of female OR male. A body that puts itself on the line to be judged by you.

Consider the fact that a socio-medical industrial complex continues to have the power to regulate and reform our bodies, to cut into away our ability to experience genital pleasure or to reproduce ourselves in all our amBIGuous glory.

What does the queer body do? It performs abjection and performs it with absolute pleasure and pain. It shows us how to love all that we are taught to hate. Through this act of repudiation, the queer body screams, look at me and love me ... if you dare.

## BoDieS tHaT QWeeR REMiX

[...]

Queer bodies are bodies  
that refuse to restrain  
or retrain our pleasures,  
our fuck ups, our pain.

HERM bodies are measured,  
prodded and poked.  
We're cut up and sold  
as a cultural joke.

We're told we're disorders  
That need to be fixed  
That doctors can cure us  
so we're no longer mixed.

Queer bodies are bodies  
that cannot belong  
to families that hate us  
or just make us feel wrong.

Queer bodies disturb.  
This cannot be denied.  
Our queerness is sexy  
and unspecified.

[...]

Queer bodies *are*  
'bodies that qweer'.  
We do it in spite of,  
*because* of our fear.

Queer bodies, *our* bodies,  
we must not forsake.  
Qweer bodies, **OUR** bodies,  
are the bodies we make...

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