

**No cock needed: Exploring the hapto-erotic assemblage of fist-play in gay men's anal
fisting**

Jarred H. Martin

Department of Psychology, University of PretoriaPretoria, South Africa

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<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7406-147X>

jarred.martin@up.ac.za

Abstract

In this study, I explored how haptic modes of sense, contact, and practice affectively shape, become shaped with/in, the erotic experiences of gay fist-fuckers' fist-play. Unstructured individual interviews were conducted with 9 gay fist-fuckers from South Africa. Theoretically framed by DeleuzoGuattarian-inspired work on *sexuality-as-assemblage* and Mark Paterson's concept of *feeling-with*, a thematic analysis was employed to identify instances where participants' haptic sites and senses were co-articulated with the erotic experiences of their fist-play. What emerged were four themes of hapto-erotic sense-making in fist-play: *feeling-with trust*, *feeling-with desire*, *feeling-with care*, and *feeling-with pleasure*. Together, the findings highlight that erotic experiences of fist-play become (trans)formed with/in fluctuating assemblages of desire, communal ethics, repertoires of technique, sense perception, inter-corporeal contact, as well as nonhuman objects and substances that affectively charge and channel haptic sites and senses. The findings point to a queerer and relational sensing and making sense of intimacy, pleasure, and play that is not reliant on phallogocentric logics or tropes of gay sex.

Keywords: Assemblage, feeling-with, fisting, gay, play, pleasure

It is perhaps unsurprising that anal fisting centrally entails fingers, hands, wrists and, for the more experienced, portions of the arm in configuring the activity which gives its name. It is this erotic conformation of bodily parts and practices in the pursuit of pleasure that led Michel Foucault (1984/1997) to remark that it heralded: “[T]he real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, [...] These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies,” (p. 165). As David Halperin (1995) elaborates, fisting “detaches sexual pleasure from genital specificity, from localization in or dependence on the genitals. [...] [It] represents a remapping of the body’s erotic sites ... , a breakup of the erotic monopoly traditionally held by the genitals” (p. 88).

In fisting, there is a degenitalizing of sex and pleasure that gives rise to a distinct corpo-erotic “pleasure-knowledge” (Preciado, 2018, p. 21) which foregrounds a more haptically attuned form of sensual knowing and navigation. Fingers and hands do not simply serve as an ‘opening act’ for the penis or as foreplay to penetrative penile-anal sex (Thorneycroft, 2020). In fist-fucking, the normative codes and conventions of genitocentric, orgasm-oriented, and phallopenetrative gay anal sex are superseded by a queerer ethics and kinkier praxis of anal play which mobilises haptic¹ sites and senses as a principal (but certainly not only) means of erotic pleasure-making.

In this study, I explored how gay fist-fuckers’ haptic modes of sense, contact, and practice shape and become shaped by the erotic experiences of their fist-play. The haptic senses and sensibilities (or sense-abilities) of fist-fucking are however not tantamount to any ordinary sense of touch. Fist-fucking invites the kind of intimately transgressive touching and being touched that “brings one man so far inside another as to temporarily obliterate the boundaries that conventionally separate persons” (Dean, 2009, p. 46). In exploring the kind of touching and feeling that, in the words of Springgay (2019), “threatens bodily boundaries” (p. 63), there arises an opportunity for “opening up different corporeal ontologies” (p. 63).

For this reason I theoretically frame the sensual hapticities of fist-fuckers' fist-play through DeleuzoGuattarian-inspired work on *sexuality-as-assemblage* (Alldred & Fox, 2015; Fox & Alldred, 2013). The aim here is to render the haptic sense, contact, and practice entailed in fist-play as an assemblage of affective forces that form and transform the experience of this erotic play. By conceptually configuring fist-fucking as a sexuality-assemblage it becomes analytically possible to resist reducing the sense and sense-making of fist-play across a binary logic of individuated and bounded human subjectivities (top/bottom), bodies (penetrating/penetrated), and bodily sites (hand/hole) which ultimately reinforce the heteronormative and phallogocentric tropes that subtend hetero- and homo-sex (Abou-Rihan, 1997). I contend that this gives way to an analytic of anal fisting as a dynamic (re)assembling of more-than↔humanⁱⁱ flows and intensities with/in which the sensory, sensual, and semiotic become relationally co-articulated in affectively charging and channelling the haptic-erotics of fist-fucking.

A haptic sex/uality? Anal fisting, play, and pleasure

Anal fisting, also referred to as handballing, fist-fucking, or by the online abbreviation 'FF' or 'ffun', is the solo and/or partnered erotic practice of having the hand and portions of the arm inserted through the anus and into the rectum and colon. Although having been described as an 'art', 'sport', and even 'science' (Cheves, 2018; Neeze, 2022; Rubin, 1991), fisting is commonly regarded by most fist-fuckers as a kinkier form of erotic edge play (Shockey, 2009). In fist-fucking, a fist-top (insertive partner) employs a repertoire of haptic techniques which alter the depth, width, speed, and duration of their insertive play as well as the form, size, position, and placement of their fingers and hand(s) to produce the defining sensualities of internal fullness, pressure against bodily organs, and stretching of the anus experienced by a fist-bottom (receptive partner; Niederwieser, 2013). These sensations are

accompanied by a range of psychophysiological experiences reported by fist-tops and bottoms including intense pleasure, emotional fulfilment, spiritual tranquillity, and a deep sense of partner connectedness (Martin, 2020, 2022, 2023).

It is the shifting network of bodily orifices and appendages which are recruited in fist-fucking that have become a focal point for queer theorisations of alternative sex/uality/ies (Huffer, 2013; Jagose, 2013). Fisting has achieved the status of a queer countersexuality for the way it creatively deviates from the organising structure of genitocentric and orgasm-oriented gay sex (Holmes et al., 2018; Preciado, 2018). Fist-fucking neither relies on or reproduces the “conventional beginning (erection), middle (fucking), and end-point (orgasm)” (Thorneycroft, 2020, p. 156) of gay sex: it is the “intensity and duration of feeling, not climax” (Halperin, 1995, p. 91) that is “pursued for its own sake” (Abou-Rihan, 1997, p. 505). The penis is drained of sensual primacy and phallic force as the hetero-patriarchal tropes that normatively suffuse the sexual subjectivity of the so-called ‘top’ (dominance/active/‘masc’) and ‘bottom’ (subordination/passive/‘femme’) of gay sex are subverted (Barcelos, 2023).

Fist-fucking is however not just an erotic practice, but “a sexual and subcultural phenomenon” (Halperin, 1995, p. 91) with its own historyⁱⁱⁱ and norms that circumscribe membership, customs of play, and unique forms of erotic iconography and signification (Rubin, 1991). It is in this subculture that fist-fuckers are socialised with values of trust, care, and fun which orient their fist-play and pleasure (Brough, 2005; Herrman, 1991; Niederwieser, 2013; Shockey, 2009). In this study, I explore how fist-fuckers’ haptic modes of sense, contact, and practice become erotically fashioned for fist-play. In bringing to bear DeleuzoGuattarian-inspired work on sexuality-as-assemblage, I aim to map how fist-fuckers’ fingers, hands, and sense of touch, being touched, and feeling are affectively (trans)formed as focal sites for sensing and making sense of their erotic play.

Theorising a haptic sexuality-as-assemblage: Touching, being touched, and feeling-with

Following in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's (1987) theorisation of "assemblage"^{iv}, the conceptual formulation of sexuality-as-assemblage or, sexuality-assemblage, has found application in the work of Pam Alldred and Nick J Fox (Alldred & Fox, 2015, 2019; Fox & Alldred, 2013), amongst others (Allen, 2015a,b; Bhana, 2022). Framed within Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) horizontal ontology of immanence, the concept of assemblage rests on a processual view of reality in which all entities (be they an idea, an organ, a rock, an identity status, or a social structure) come into momentary existence through a ceaselessly ongoing and fluctuating web of relations. Breaking from an essentialist metaphysics, this relational ontology articulates existence as a perpetual state of (re)emergence and (trans)formation, where entities are always in a process of *becoming* through and with the ontological array of material and discursive forces which co-constitute and shape them (Colebrook, 2002). An assemblage is itself a fluidic and ever-adapting wellspring of heterogeneous and contextually contingent forces which rhizomatically concentrate, interconnect, and dissipate in shaping trajectories of becoming (Colebrook, 2002). It is within the relational assemblage that flows of affect^v emerge and circulate, (re)shaping the capacities, intensities, and modes of existence for the co-participating elements. Assemblage therefore provides a theoretical opportunity to conceptualise forms of human subjectivity, embodiment, and experience as "never separable from ... relations with the world" (Deleuze, 1988, p. 125).

Through the lens of sexuality-assemblage, sex/uality is conceived as a relationally emergent phenomenon forged through "an impersonal affective flow within assemblages of bodies, things, ideas and social institutions, which produces sexual (and other) capacities in bodies" (Fox & Alldred, 2013, p. 769). It is through the affective relations of sexuality-assemblages that "both novel and normative capacities" (Alldred & Fox, 2019, p. 694) for

sex/uality take shape, engendering bodies, bodily parts and practices as well as sites and senses with (varying) capacities for normative and/or new sexual potentials.

Focussing on how fist-fuckers' haptic modes of sense, contact, and practice become (trans)formed with the capacities to erotically sense and make (sense of) pleasure, necessitates specific attention to the sites and sensualities of touching, being touched, and feeling. For Rodaway (1994), touch is simultaneously "the most intimate sense, limited by the reach of the body, and ... the most reciprocal of the senses, for to touch is always to be touched" (p. 41). This is because, as Kinnunen and Kolehmainen (2019) assert, "touch works in and between bodies through affects" (p. 49), enfolding bodies into relations of momentary interconnection as "[t]ouch makes our bodies more-than-one" (p. 34).

The relational qualities of touch have been examined in Mark Paterson's (2005, 2007) work on the affective tactilities of therapeutic touch in Reiki massage. Paterson (2007) productively engages the "conceptual slip between *touching* and *feeling* ... to positively foreground the manifestly affective content of sensuous experience, particularly the 'touching' nature of touch." (p. 13, italics and quotations original). Paterson (2007) formulates the concept of *feeling-with* to capture how touching and being touched is always a relational sense of "feeling-with, involving another tactile body, wherein the tactile and the emotional arise within each other" (p. 152). However, where Paterson's (2005, 2007) feeling-with focuses largely on cutaneous touch between human bodies, I engage it through the more-than↔human analytic of sexuality-assemblage. I contend that this provides the basis for mapping a more-than↔human feeling-with which (e)merges through the heady interrelation of desire, values, techniques, substances, stimulants, sense perceptions, as well as experiences of fist-play that together shape the kinkier kinds of hapto-erotic touching, being touched, and feeling-with of fist-fucking.

Methods

Study design, ethics, and data collection

The present study employed an exploratory qualitative design. This research design is favoured for studies which take as their focus the subjective meanings, understandings, and experiences of research participants (Creswell, 2007). Following this, I opted for a method of data collection that would allow participants the opportunity to express themselves in a nonprescriptive way about their fist-play. To do this I employed unstructured individual interviews which facilitate more open-ended, flexible, and longer forms of dialogue that would then undergo analysis (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

Prior to commencing with the recruitment of participants, ethical approval was received from the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee at the University of Pretoria (reference: HUM003/0322). Cognisant that interviews would entail in-depth discussion of each participant's sex life, attention was given to rigorous informed consenting, including, the provision of detailed information about the scope of participation in the study, participant rights, and the responsibilities of the researcher. All the interviews were audio-recorded, conducted virtually, and typically ran between 60 and 90 minutes in length. The substantive component of each interview was initiated with a framing question to set the conversation in motion, i.e., *I am interested in understanding how the sense of touching, being touched, an feeling feature in the erotic experiences of fisting. Could you share with me how, in your experience, this shapes your fist-play?* No other questions or prompts were pre-emptively prepared for the interviews.

Sample and participants

A sample of self-identifying gay men who fist-fuck were voluntarily recruited. Fist-fuckers, much like other kinksters, develop "private communities of practice" (Busbee, 2008,

p. ii) organised around their particular kink. This required me to rely on research contacts developed from a series of research projects with South African gay men who fist-fuck (Martin, 2020, 2022, 2023). I initially approached 3 research contacts and asked if they could reach out to playmates within their respective networks to gage the availability of other fist-fuckers to participate in the study. In following a relational ontology of touch which co-entails “those touching and those being touched” (Paterson et al., 2012, p. 10), I deliberately sought to recruit fist-fuckers who topped, bottomed, or were versatile and asked my research contacts to approach playmates with different play preferences. The research contacts yielded a total of 12 playmates who indicated their willingness to participate and whom I subsequently made contact with. However, only 9 participants were ultimately able to avail themselves for interviews with unforeseen scheduling conflicts prohibiting the other 3 from participating.

The recruited sample represented a diverse range of participants in terms of their ethno-racial profile, age, and years of experience in fisting (see Table 1). All the participants lived in South Africa and resided in an urban or suburban area of Johannesburg, Pretoria, or Cape Town. All the participants described themselves as cisgendered gay men, with some variation in their self-described fist-play preference: ‘exclusive top’ ($n = 3$), ‘versatile top’ ($n = 1$), ‘versatile bottom’ ($n = 1$), and ‘exclusive bottom’ ($n = 4$). There was also some variation in the sample around how many years participants had been fisting ($M_{\text{years}} = 12.1$; range: 3–2).

Table 1. Participant demographic information.

Pseudonym	Age	Race	City of Residence	Play Preference	Years Fisting
David	42	White	Pretoria	ET	20
Josh	31	Coloured (i.e. "mixed race")	Cape Town	ET	3
Theo	27	Black (i.e. African)	Johannesburg	Exclusive bottom (EB)	4
Marthinus	44	White	Pretoria	ET	10
Johan	53	White	Pretoria	Versatile bottom (VB)	20
Kgothatso	34	Black	Johannesburg	EB	4
Malusi	28	Black	Johannesburg	EB	2
Waven	38	Coloured	Cape Town	Versatile Top (VT)	7
Bob	59	White	Johannesburg	EB	39

Data analysis

Critiques have been raised about how research employing assemblage theory has “continued to draw on traditional modes of data collection” (Feely, 2020, p. 180) and analysis. This is not to say that analyses of sexuality-assemblages reject outright the utility of qualitative designs or methods of data collection and analysis. Studies exploring sexuality-assemblages have used thematically oriented analyses to chart the more-than↔human relations which assemble, for example, the use of wireless sex toys (Flore & Pienaar, 2020), sexual consent and ‘stealth’ practices (Daroya, 2022), and sexualized drug use (Holmes et al., 2023) – troubling the ontological status of ‘The Human’ his/torically at the gravitational centre of sexual desire, agency, and practice.

However, when employing conventional techniques of qualitative analysis in concert with assemblage theory, Fox and Alldred (2023) argue that such techniques must themselves be viewed as an “analysis machine ... within the research-assemblage” (p. 102). From this perspective, a thematic analysis can be thought of as a research-machine which “acts on raw data ... to reduce complexity in data and aggregate together disparate aspects of an event in ways defined by the analyst (for instance, in terms of a conceptual or theoretical framework)” (Fox & Alldred, 2015, para 5.5.). This explicitly highlights how theoretical concepts not only direct and delimit the focus of analytical attention but, furthermore, how these concepts affect (and are affected by) the data, particularly in ways which a thematic coding process cuts apart

the fluctuating intertwinements of corporeal↔psychological, biological↔synthetic, individual↔communal, and more-than↔human relations of an assemblage event into neatly presented themes (Fox & Alldred, 2015). For the present study, it was not just the broader theoretical framework of sexuality-assemblage which shifted analytical focus towards the multiform relations within an assemblage of sex/uality that productively (re)shape “a body’s sexual capacities (what a body can do, what it cannot do, and what it can become)” (Alldred & Fox, 2019, p. 694) but, moreover, the concept of feeling-with that provided an acute analytical lens for the affective relations which enable (or foreclose) bodies to touch and be touched, sexually or otherwise. Using the NVivo 12 software package, each transcript underwent a six-step Thematic Analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Throughout this analytical process I was guided by the concept of feeling-with in searching, identifying, coding, and interlinking participants’ accounts of how haptic sites and senses shaped the erotic experience and activity of their fist-play.

Findings and discussion

The four main themes derived from the analysis are presented and discussed here as:

(1) *feeling-with trust*; (2) *feeling-with desire*; (3) *feeling-with care*; and (4) *feeling-with pleasure*.

Theme 1: Feeling-with trust

For fist-fuckers, trust is *the* defining feature of any scene (Martin, 2023). Emerging as a main theme in this study, it was evident that trust comes to undergird the entirety of fist-play and highlights that fisting is as much about the physical insertion of a hand into someone’s lower large intestine, and the risks that come with that, as it is about the psychological sense of intimacy and mutuality between playmates, and the vulnerability which this entails (Powers, 2005). Trust therefore becomes an essential experiential

component of any play where fist-fuckers and in particular fist-bottoms feel safe with a playmate. Throughout the interviews of this study there were recurring references to trust and the significant role that sensing and feeling trust in a scene had on the course of fist-play:

Your bottom must be able to trust you with their pleasure, so they're comfortable. Locking is about trust. Locking is not about your cock or fucking. It's about playing. So, your cock is not needed here. Locking demonstrates a commitment to play with your partner. It shows your partner that you're focused on them, not your cock. (David, 42, ET)

A cock cage was *really* helpful when I first started [fist-topping]. It forced my attention to my fingers. I mean, honestly, that's a mindfuck for a top. Your dick is your default. That's where you get your pleasure. Now, you've got to re-train yourself, you've got to trust your hands. [...]. Taking my cock out like that makes my fingers more sensitive. It makes me concentrate on what I'm feeling with my hands and that makes me much more confident in how I play. (Josh, 31, ET)

From these extracts of data it is clear how trust emerges as a sense of, for David, a topping playmate being entrusted with a bottoming playmate's pleasure as well as, for Josh, a fist-top's capacity to trust their own sense of touch and their ability to play in pleasurable ways with their partner. Across David and Josh's data, trust is discursively intertwined with a top's capacity to provide pleasure to the bottoming partner, and is perhaps equivalent to the broader definition of a so-called 'service top'^{vi} in gay sexual slang. For both David and Josh, as it was for all participants in this study, trust emerged within a distinctly bottom-centric paradigm of partnered pleasure-making. In this way, fist-fucking queers the heteronormative and phallogocentric lens of gay sex that has typically tended to privilege the positional identity and pleasure or sexual role and penetrative performances of gay men who top (Allan, 2016). From this lens, largely Western, ano-phobic, and narrowly defined constructions of gender, masculinity, and femininity have worked to render gay bottoms in feminised/ising tropes of

passivity and receptivity (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017); emplacing and then minimising (if not erasing) a bottom's sexual subjectivity, agency, desire, and pleasure within a hierarchical sexual equation defined by a dominant top and subordinate bottom (Hoppe, 2011). However, as David alludes, trust circulates with/in a fisting scene through and with erotic affects that seek to directly centre the fist-bottom's sense of comfort and pleasure.

What is particularly apparent from David and Josh's data is that trust is affectively made in material↔discursive ways through the act of locking. Locking describes the use of a metallic or plastic 'cock cage' (or other chastity device) that is voluntarily placed over the penis to preclude penile stimulation, impede a full erection, and inhibit masturbatory touch. Amongst gay men as well as straight and queer kinksters, locking carries a diverse range of subcultural and personal meanings (Krevitt & McCarty, 2017), including that of chastity and denial of orgasm, as well as sexual power play, emasculation and submission. While the act of locking may not be practiced by all fist-fuckers, for David and Josh the act of locking comes to signify the secondary erotic status of the penis and penile stimulation in fisting – a consensus amongst the participants in this study. It is not the top or bottom's penis which is the focal site of erotic touch and stimulation, but the bottom's hole.

Interestingly, however, this symbolic erasure of the penis is not met with David or Josh's fingers, hands, and arms becoming erotically transmogrified into some kind of substitutive or pseudo phallus. David's account suggests that fist-play resists a phallogocentric logic that erotically recentres or relocates the penis through other means. Rather, David affirms that fist-fucking "is not about your cock or fucking. It's about playing". This highlights how a queerer understanding of intimacy and pleasure underwritten by an erotic logic of sexual play displaces phallogocentric and genitocentric modes of sexual activity in fisting. In conceiving fist-fucking as "playing" and not "fucking", David highlights how fisting assembles into motion an erotic trajectory of pleasure-making that departs from the

normative conventions of gay anal sex. This is akin to Paasonen's (2018) contention that "[s]exual play, driven by the quest for pleasure and the intensification of sensation, steadily probes and stretches the horizons of what people may imagine doing, liking and preferring" (p. 3), forming new erotic possibilities that fall outside the normative formulas of hetero-and homo-normative sex.

David and Josh's data attests to locking as a relationally informed practice of trust-making that (re)defines the erotic logic and activity of fist-play apart from gay penile-anal sex. Locking not only symbolically signifies that anal play is at the core of producing pleasure for fist-fuckers but, moreover, affectively assembles a sensory configuration of bodily parts and sites that sensitises the fingers and hands for erotic ends. This is particularly evident in Josh's experience of his fingers becoming "more sensitive" and erotically attentive. For Josh, it is through his cock cage that the corpo-erotic circuitry of his body and mind become reconfigured for fist-play. In locking, Josh describes losing the semiotic and sensual loadstone that is his penis as a "mindfuck". In training to play as a fist-top by locking, it is evident that Josh's "becoming [a fist-top] ... is by necessity also a process of unbecoming – of both learning and unlearning and, occasionally, of unravelling" (Paasonen, 2018, p. 8), as he becomes more haptically attuned to new intensities and sensualities of touch, temperature, pressure, and force that enable his fist-play.

By fisting-with a cock cage, David and Josh develop a communally valid etiquette of playing-with their partners that is more acutely focused, attentive, and trustworthy. It is however through their cock cages that new capacities to feel-with sensibilities and sense-abilities which haptically anchor their erotic sense-making as fist-tops come to take shape and guide their fist-play.

Theme 2: Feeling-with desire

The second main theme emerging in the analysis centred on how fist-play was experienced through an active desire to fist-fuck or be fist-fucked. Here, desire was often articulated as an erotically impelling force which although evolving in different ways before, during, and after play sessions, became corporeally concentrated and felt with/in the fingers and hands as well as anus. In doing so, fingers and hands would come to feature in the interviews as erotically intensive sites of desire for fist-play:

There's something sexy about a hand coated in lube. It goes from this [body] part that you write with, you open doors, and do all this other ordinary stuff, into this shiny glistening thing that's just about providing pleasure. Nothing gets my hole hungrier. It just gives me this *oomph* to be played with.

(Malusi, 28, EB)

What is underscored in Malusi's account is how desire functions in erotically (re)shaping a hand for fist-play. In this data desire is described as flowing with/in lubricant and congealing in and on lubricated fingers and hands. Malusi describes how a hand palpably transmutes into a "shiny glistening sexy thing" through lubricant, culminating in what he experiences as an erotic "oomph" to play. The lubricated hand is one which assembles a "material vibrancy" (Bennett, 2010, p. xiii), with the gloss, shine, and luster of the lubricant fomenting an erotic repurposing of a playmate's hand. The lubricated hand is no longer a 'functional' body part tasked with the mundane or "ordinary stuff" of day-to-day life. The lubricated hand becomes an appendage in the complete service of pleasure and one which also plays a significant role in animating a desirous hunger with/in Malusi's anus.

The metaphor of hunger and the 'hungry hole' was a recurring subtheme that appeared through a variety of ingestive metaphors in the interviews for this study: assholes would be described as 'swallowing' a hand or 'gobbling' up an arm, and 'greedy' holes as

hungry for more than one hand. For the fisting tops and bottoms in this study, it was understood that a key experiential dimension of any fisting scene was the active desire for a topping playmate's hand by a bottom's hole. It is here that Malusi tellingly reveals how the peculiar material agencies of fisting lubricant assemble and stabilize a relational "connection and synergy between individual body organs" (Wadiwel, 2005, p. 99) around which fist-play becomes enabled, namely, the hand and hole. Malusi's yearning hole points to new erotic agencies that are permitted with/in the lubricated hand. The lubricant here not only permits the insertive passage of a hand through his hole but, simultaneously, forms an affective passageway which reshapes the erotic status and sensual capacities of his hole. Rather than a "closure to a passive receptacle", Malusi's hole becomes an "entrance to a dynamic, active space" (Wadiwel, 2005, p. 100) – a space of embodied play and pleasure where his ravenousness hole can only be satiated by a playmate's hand. In this sense, lubricant reconfigures the phallopenertrative logic that conventionally subtends the top-bottom binary of gay anal sex: Malusi and his hole are not passive or submissive, but actively enlivened with a desire to be touched and played with.

From Malusi's data it is evident that lubricant can hold an intoxicating "thing-power" (Bennett, 2010, p. 2) which affects a dramatically carnal sensuality of craving for a top's hand. However, as Marthinus suggested, lubricant also becomes vital in productively shaping a desire amongst prospective playmates for coupling different kinds of hands and holes:

My hands are big and bony, and I've got thick knuckles, so I had a long period of experimenting with different brands and mixes so [lubricant] works for me. Not everyone wants to play with a top whose got a pair of meat tenderizers for hands, so getting a good consistency to lube is essential. It took me a while to get a feel for a good consistency. Thick enough for comfort, but not too thick that I can't move smoothly; kind of liquidy, but not too watery or it'll slide right off. Two caps of X-lube do the trick if

I'm staying shallow, but going deeper means another half cap. For depth play with my hands, or even punches, I'll also have to pour lube directly into their hole. (Marthinus, 44, ET)

In this data it is clear that lubricant assembles multiple forms of hand↔hole connections. Marthinus highlights that as different hands and holes come into contact to pursue play and pleasure, so too does lubricant dynamically aid with/in these interconnections. Marthinus's account suggests that, as a fist-top, he is not solely playing-with a bottom's hole as he is, at the same time, playing-with lubricant. This is a hand↔lube↔hole assemblage which affects and is affected by the specificities of Marthinus's hand, a bottom's hole, and the X-lube in use. The specific morphological features ("bony"), size ("big"), and shape ("thick knuckles") of Marthinus's hands require him to feel-with the lubricant, both in the techniques of mixing it and in the repertoires of applying it in play. It is the relationally shifting viscosities, thicknesses, and fluidities of lubricant that permit safer hapto-erotic pathways for shallow or deeper fist-play.

What is revealed by Marthinus is the development of a sensual sexuality-assemblage that forms a tactile-textural 'haptic knowledge' (Paterson, 2009), that is, an embodied expertise and more-than↔human memory which is shaped and becomes sedimented with/in his fingers and hands through the gloopy viscidness of lubricant. Amongst kinksters, this kind of sensorial knowing is however not unique to fisters. In leather culture, leathermen have described how the material textures of leather sensed through touching, feeling, and smelling leather shape an immersive sensorium that not only helps them subjectively embody and comport leather culture but, also, connect them through a felt sense of attachment to leather history, community, values, and practices (Van Doorn, 2016). Rope bondage practitioners have also described how their sensory feel for different types of rope and rope fiber forge a haptically nuanced sense of how different ropes can be put to erotic work (Jones, 2020). Likewise, Marthinus's ability to fulfil his duties as a fist-top require him to feel-with his

fingers, his playmate's hole, and the material in/consistencies of X-lube in skillfully determining what haptic-erotic possibilities for fist-play are permissible with his hands.

Theme 3: Feeling-with care

The third main theme to arise from the data was a haptics of care. Borne from an appreciation of, on one hand, the possible risks entailed in fisting and, on the other, the potential pleasures, it was evident that fist-fuckers exercised subculturally informed but often personally adapted customs of play to mitigate risk and maximise pleasure. These practices would not only render fingers, hands, and touch in more (or less) care-ful ways but, further, come to signify the knowledge and skills of potential partners, allowing fisters to make partner-specific judgement calls concerning the trustworthiness and safety of a given scene:

Yes, it's fun, but it's also serious. If you want to play as a top, you have to follow the rules. A top must know how to prep his [finger]nails carefully before he plays. Those nails need to be cleanly clipped, then filed, and rounded off so smooth so there's no sharp edges. [...]. That's a top who's planned to play and that takes my pleasure seriously. (Theo, 27, EB).

A lot of people say [wearing gloves] diminishes their pleasure. They want that skin-on-skin feeling. How many times have you heard that about condoms? With my [HIV] status I need to be careful. Even if I'm undetectable, the last thing I need is to pick up Hep C or something. Gloves are a non-negotiable for me. They let me still do this thing I love. They're a sign that I care about your health and my health. That's responsible, I think. (Bob, 59, EB)

From these data it is evident how care becomes assembled with/in discursive regimes which render a fist-fucker's hands and, more broadly, their sexual subjectivity as "serious" (Theo) and "responsible" (Bob). The trope of the 'responsible sexual subject' is conspicuous in the fisting community (Powers, 2005). Although a product of neoliberal approaches which

individualise sexual behaviour, in communities of kink discourses of responsabilisation are often deployed to distinguish BDSM^{vii} and fetish play from sexual abuse or torture (Weiss, 2011). These discourses underpin ethical codes of informed practice and care in kinkier sex and play, such as, in the slogans ‘safe, sane and consensual’ (SSN), ‘risk-aware consensual kink’ (RACK), and ‘personal responsibility, informed, consensual kink’ (PRICK). These slogans highlight the existence of kink-specific norms of practice that structure safe and responsible play. In this vein, Theo highlights that a fist-top is one who has “done research” and has “planned” to play, as evidenced in their ability to “follow the rules”, such as, in the refined clipping and filing of their fingernails. For Theo, such hands become evidence of a competence and skill crafted through a care-ful haptic preparation to play which not only takes his pleasure “seriously” but, simultaneously, mitigates his risk of potential injury. The reiterative emphasis on seriousness alongside fun and play are significant in Theo’s account because they point to fisting as a form of ‘serious leisure’ wherein the production of pleasure “involves considerable time and effort to obtain special skills, knowledge, and experience ... and requires significant planning” (Sprott & Williams, 2019, p. 76).

In a similar way, Bob encodes his self-described responsible use of gloves as a care-ful practice which renders fist-play with him “safe”, given his HIV status. However, Bob notes that there are some fist-fuckers who may forgo gloves in preference for the sensualities of gloveless skin-on-skin fist-play. This demonstrates that while subcultural conventions for the use of gloves in fist-play may exist, especially as a measure to decrease the likelihood of transmitting an STD (Shockey, 2009), it is ultimately up to playmates to “negotiate their own relationship to these rules, to define safety and risk for themselves” (Weiss, 2011, p. 83), as has been evidenced amongst other kink practitioners. In Bob’s particular case, the inorganic materiality of fisting gloves covering a playmate’s hands are not experienced as a disconnecting barrier to pleasure (akin to discourses of reluctant condom use) but affectively

assembles his access and feeling-with the sensations, intimacies, and community of fisting. It is the use gloves that allow Bob to discursively circumscribe fist-play as an erotic practice of intimate care and connection which serves his health.

It is worth noting that while haptic practices of care often distinguished scenes of sexual satisfaction, intimacy, and pleasure, the absence or lack of care came to mark less enjoyable and less safe experiences of fist-play, such as Kgothatso's experience with chems:

... [M]y personal experience hasn't been great [with chems]. I've only played once before on G[HB] and the guy I was with got careless. You take this stuff because you get told it is going to make your play super amazing and that you are going to feel more. But I was so out of it, and [the topping playmate] got sloppy and I think he just started manhandling my guts. That's the problem with chems. They can dull your senses, and, in that moment, I couldn't actually feel how I was being played with. (Kgothatso, 34, EB)

In recent years, chemsex^{viii} (also known as Party-and-Play, or PnP) cultures and practices amongst gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (GBMSM) has been a growing area of scholarly attention and often regarded as a 'high risk' form of sexualised drug use (Maxwell et al., 2019). In the fisting community the use of chems is contested, with prominent aficionados like Larry Shockey (2009) encouraging sobriety and the podcast host and fister Jazzmatazz having talked openly about their experiences of fisting with chems (Bigbuttgeek & Jazzmatazz, 2020–present). Although there is no data available on the frequency of drug use in organised communities of fist-fuckers, research has reported that GBMSM engaging in chemsex typically experience disinhibition, a higher pain threshold, and other experiences of sexual enhancement that contribute to or aid in their participation in more 'riskier' sexual practices including fisting (Bourne et al., 2014).

In Kgothatso's account of his one-time use of GHB (Gamma-hydroxybutyrate), a psychological disinhibitor with anaesthetic qualities, it is interesting to see how a haptic form of feeling-without care takes shape through a chemsex-assemblage characterised by a desensitising and detached session of fist-play. In this data extract, carelessness takes shape as an inability to properly sense his partner's haptic activity. The fist-play described by Kgothatso appears distinctly at odds with what is usually a carefully synchronised and coordinated level of activity between playmates during fist-play (Martin, 2023). It is perhaps unsurprising then that affects of displeasure (e)merge with/in this chemically assembled scene of fist-play as Kgothatso experiences becoming extricated from his own erotic sense-making. GHB relationally dis/assembles a "sloppy" and seemingly uncoordinated form of fist-play with a chemically-induced incapacity to, in Kgothatso's words, "feel" his partner's touch. In this scene, the play itself dis/assembles into what appears to be a less gentle, less playful and more masculinely gendered "manhandling" of Kgothatso's body by his partner. From this data it is possible to see how care-less play becomes less-than-pleasurable play as Kgothatso is sensorially and sensually anesthetised from his partner, the scene, and himself. Rather than a desired feeling-with GHB to "feel more" erotic intensity, Kgothatso describes feeling-with less as the GHB molecularly reshapes the sensual sensitivities with/in his body. It is this assemblage of detached, disconnected, and desensitised fist-play that highlights how the making and unmaking of sexual satisfaction, intimacy, and pleasure in fisting is predicated on an erotic ethos and praxis refined through an understanding of how to feel and play-with care as well as how not to play carelessly.

Theme 4: Feeling-with pleasure

The fourth main theme to emerge through the data analysis was the premium placed on pleasure. Underwritten by subcultural discourses of fun and play, the pursuit of pleasure

becomes significant in shaping the communal conventions and practices of fisting. In ways similar to Simula's (2019) study of BDSM participants' differentiation between sex and sexual BDSM, fist-fuckers also understand and experience pleasure in ways which deviate from a hetero-reproductive logic that centres the genitals in sensing and making sense of erotic satisfaction. Fist-fucking puts to work an erotic system of bodies and parts that acquire distinctive value and meaning in conjunction with a unique corpo-erotic economy of scale and (hand) size, as Califia (2000) attests: "Men at handballing parties don't usually cruise each other's dicks. They cruise each other's hands and forearms. It is not unusual for fisters to go all night without a hard-on. Tops with small hands are in demand ..." (p. 192).

For the fist-fuckers in this study, fingers, knuckles, hands, wrists, forearms, elbows, and shoulders all came to take on distinct forms of erotic import and meaning, invested with capacities to perceive and receive as well as give and make pleasure:

... no colon is like the picture you see in anatomy textbooks. Some guys have a sharp bend at their second ring, some have sacral bones which pop out of nowhere. Every playmate is different. You can't just rely on anatomy pictures you've seen online. You've got to feel your way through them, like you're reading brail. You build a roadmap of your partner with your hands, so you know how to play with them and what is going to give them the most pleasure. (Johan, 53, VB)

[Pleasure] is a two-way street. Sure, you're giving pleasure, but you're also receiving it. Having a playmate hold you inside them is intense. You can feel how warm and soft and vulnerable they are. You feel their heartbeat. They're giving that to you. It pulses through them, through your fingers, and into your body. They're transferring that energy to you (Waven, 38, VT)

From the above data provided by Johan and Waven, it is evident that fingers and hands as well as the tactile senses of touching and feeling become an important means of erotic sense-making in fist-play. For Johan, the fingers and hands become a key site through

which a fist-top haptically maps a fist-bottom's colon in an effort to plot a repertoire of play by acquiring a sense of the corporeal affordances and limitations of a playmate's colon. It is through this tactilely attentive tracing of the rectum and colon that a unique and more accurate "roadmap" for pleasure-making is (re)drawn. In likening this exercise to "reading brail", Johan draws direct attention to the erotic modes of haptic visualisation that take shape in fist-play, wherein the unique colonic cartography of a fist-bottom's bowels are charted for play and pleasure. In feeling-with the unique curvature and features of a colon, Johan highlights how a new sensory-assemblage of fist-play haptically reconstitutes the visualised image of a playmate's colon through an in situ impression of their innards, as opposed to the generic textbook image found online. In this way, it is not just that fist-play becomes particularised to a playmate's body but, moreover, that the sensory and sensual predominance of fingers and hands come to affectively *trans*/form these bodily sites into haptic↔optic or 'hapoptic' apertures for erotic exploration.

Johan's data suggests a sensory assembling of a haptic-optic-erotic pleasure-making complex that is akin to what Eva Hayward (2010) describes as the "fingeryeyes" (p. 580) of cup corals and starfish. Hayward (2010) engages the fingeryeyes of these ocean creatures as a way of theorising a sense of "tentacular visibility" (p. 580) that takes shape with/in "the overlay of [haptic-optic] sensoriums" (p. 581). In displacing the sense of detached vision typical of ocularcentric modes of sensing one's place with/in the world, fingeryeyes portend a queerer sense-making of intimacy in our contact with bodies and environs beyond our own skin. What takes shape in Johan's account is tantamount to a "distributed sensuousness" (Hayward, 2010, p. 582) of touching↔seeing↔feeling pleasure with/in and across erotically entangled bodies, as Hayward (2008) explains:

[F]ingery-eyes, optical groping, or tactful eyes haptically and visually orient the sensual body across mediums. This kind of seeing through/across/with interfaces requires a perception that navigates by constantly referencing the medium of the environment. Fingery-eyes are about closeness, near proximities – visual distance is not an option here. (p. 84)

In a very similar way, Johan's hapto-erotic sense-making lends itself to a deeply relational "point of view/touch" (Hayward, 2010, p. 580) that entails a feeling-with/in, sensing-with/in, and playing-with/in one's playmate. As Johan attests, "[y]ou've got to feel your way through them ... so you know how to play with them ... ". What this suggests is that the thinking of how to play with a partner does not necessarily occur before the feeling and doing of play, as if cognition/reason/mind were separate from emotion/affect/body and where the former enables or 'permits' feeling to unfold – a model of human subjectivity subtended by a long history of "Western Enlightenment, anti-emotionalist, binary logics" (Taylor & Fullagar, 2022, p. 14). Rather, Johan's account suggests that fist-play forms with/in a horizontal sensory assemblage that enfolds in-touch the thinkings↔feelings↔doings of fist-play.

Interestingly, this haptically relational production of pleasure and intimacy is also echoed in Waven's account of the ways in which touch acts as a sensory modality for not just providing pleasure but also receiving it. In Waven's data, touching, being touched, and feeling become affectively indiscernible and enmeshed in fist-play. There is for Waven an affectively relational experience of pleasure in fist-play that closely mirrors Hoppe's (2011) identification of the kinds of "relational pleasure" (p. 199) that are significant for gay men who bottom in anal intercourse. For Hoppe (2011), gay men who bottom describe an experience of "pleasure that is relational and circuitous – relational in the sense that it is

dependent on their partners, and circuitous in that it is described (to varying degrees) as flowing in a particular fashion” (p. 199). Waven alludes to a similar affective flow with/in the pleasure of touching that takes place when fisting a playmate and, at the same time, the pleasure of receiving a sensually intense ‘energy transfer’ through this touch. When Waven suggests that a fist-bottom ‘gives’ erotic energy to a topping playmate, he highlights how hetero-and homo-normative tropes of activity, passivity, and sexual subjectivity become reworked with/in the interconnected and interembodied intimacies of fist-play. The fist-bottom is not just a ‘passive receiver’ of penetrative action, but an ‘active giver’ of pleasure; in this sexuality-assemblage, the body which is touching and the body which is touched becomes unclear. Waven is affectively touched and moved through his fist-play by a felt sense of vulnerability on the part of the bottoming playmate. Sensations of temperature (“warm”) and texture (“soft”) not only draw attention to the multi-layered sense of touching and feeling but, also, how a sense of vulnerability is sensually formed for Waven as his hand is held and enveloped inside a bottoming partner’s body. There is a sense from Waven’s account that feeling-with sense-abilities which are receptive, appreciative, and affirmative of a bottom’s vulnerability foster new ethico-erotic ‘response-abilities’ (Barad, 2012) of care in fist-play.

The foregoing data highlights how fingers, hands, and arms become assembled into a kind of corpo-erotic bridge for Waven through which a heady traffic in erotic energies takes place, unsettling any unified and bounded sense of erotic embodiment. The kind of esoteric or tantric dimensions of fist-play alluded to by Waven are not unique to his experience. Fist-fuckers have described fist-play as an almost spiritual experience where the intense sensations of pleasure as well as interpersonal connection and intimacy produce transcendental shifts in a fist-fucker’s sense of self and consciousness (Herrman, 1991; Mains, 1991). In a similar sense for Waven, touching, being touched, and feeling in fist-play

are not in any sense solely physical sensations of contact but become “a short circuit to feeling a deeper connection, feeling attuned to larger forces and energies” (Paterson, 2007, p. 165) that make the erotic experience of intimacy in fisting.

Conclusion

Drawing from qualitative data generated from unstructured individual interviews with a sample of South African gay men who fist-fuck, this study examined how haptic modes of sense, contact, and practice affectively shape, and become shaped with/in, the erotic experiences of fist-play. While the present study is not the first to theorise fist-fucking through a DeleuzoGuattarian lens of assemblage (see Holmes et al., 2018), it is the first to extend the conceptual formulation of sexuality-assemblage to those haptic sites (fingers, hands, and arms) and senses (touching and feeling) which are so central to the erotic activity of anal fisting. Guided by Paterson’s concept of feeling-with it was found that fist-fuckers’ haptic sensibilities/sense-abilities of touching, being touched, and feeling come to act as a focal means through which the erotic sense-and meaning-making of fist-play becomes formed. I contend that this points to a distinct mode of ‘queer relationality’ (Yep et al., 2023) amongst fist-fuckers in which the experience of intimacy, pleasure, and play become sensually intelligible through subculturally specific modes of haptic-erotic sense-making.

The four main themes presented here give insight into different affective articulations of feeling-with in fist-play: (1) *feeling-with trust*; (2) *feeling-with desire*; (3) *feeling-with care*; and (4) *feeling-with pleasure*. Across these themes it is evident that fist-fuckers come to understand fingers and hands, as well as the haptic repertoires of fist-play which these bodily parts become implicated in, as more or less un/trustworthy, desired/desiring, care-ful/less, and capable of providing/receiving pleasure through relational assemblages of things, substances, bodies, personal desires, communal norms, and feelings that shape and reshape

erotic sense perception, in both material and discursive ways. It is through these often scene-specific and momentary sexuality-assemblages that fist-fuckers haptic sites are affectively formed and transformed with erotic sense-abilities and capacities for sensing and making (sense of) pleasure in fist-play. The sense of feeling-with is however not just a physical sensation of tactility but, as Waven highlighted, psychologically, affectively, and cosmically touching, reciprocal, and mutual. These modes of feeling-with not only attune and sensitise fist-fuckers to one another in intensely intimate ways but, furthermore, entangle networks of nonhuman others in making and unmaking the pleasure of fist-play, such as, cock cages (David and Josh), lubricant (Malusi and Marthinus), nail clippers (Theo), gloves (Bob), chems (Kgphatso), and online pictures of the large intestine (Johan).

What is evident from the findings of this study is that fist-fucking deviates from those “hegemonic frameworks of sensemaking” (Yep et al., 2023, p. 7) that normatively scaffold gay men’s anal sex and their sexual subjectivities around phallogentric and phallopentratve tropes. In fisting, penetration is displaced by play and fucking by touching, being touched, and feeling-with. What fist-play presents us with is not just a kinkier kind of ‘sexual orientation’, but a “handmade orientation” (Vaccaro, 2014, p. 96) that demonstrates a consciously crafted erotic ontology of what bodies are capable of when (trans)formed in a subcultural community organised by ethical relations of intimacy, pleasure, and care. Fist-fucking comes to entail the kind of touching and being touched that remoulds the somatic connections which we typically think to be possible between (sexual) bodies (Rubin, 1991). It is the kind of touching and being touched that does not remain on the surface of the skin, reaffirming the corporeal contours of the human body, but trans-and con-fuses the ontological divisions of surface/depth, inside/outside, self/other, and interiority/exteriority through an affectively intense but playful practice of bodily entry and more-than↔human exploration. Who (or what) is touching, being touched, feeling becomes uncertain as nonhuman and

human bodies and parts intimately (e)merge and dis/appear with/in the other. It is in this “erotic assemblage” (Wadiwel, 2009, p. 493) that the haptic practices of fist-play are formed as an always already interconnected/ing feeling-with, sensing-with, and playing-with the body of one’s playmate as well as nonhuman substances and objects.

Limitations and future directions

The findings presented in this study are delimited to those accounts of touching, being touched, and feeling that implicated in making sense of intimacy and pleasure during fist-play. By virtue of this focus, other non/erotic forms of haptic sense, contact, and practice were omitted. However, in some data it was evident that being flirtatiously caressed by a playmate during a pre-play drink, or being physically held by a partner post-play, formed affectively intense dimensions of touching and being touched for some of the participating fist-fuckers. While these may not have been directly implicated in the erotic activity of fist-play, they were nonetheless significant in affectively shaping the ‘atmosphere’ of a scene or ‘vibe’ between playmates. Future work which charts a much fuller account of the haptic sensorium of fisting scenes could prove helpful in detailing the kinds of “complex interactional styles” (Sprott et al., 2019, p. 50) that underpin fist-fucking as a kinkier form of sex/uality and erotic pleasure-making.

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ⁱ The term 'haptic', derived from the Greek *haptikos* (to lay hold of), refers "to the sense of touch in all its forms" (Paterson, 2007, p. ix). However, the haptic system is not reducible to touch, or tactility, or the fingers but "involves the whole body" (Rodaway, 1994, p. 41) through conjoined sensory systems of proprioception (position), vestibular (balance), kinaesthetic (movement), and cutaneous (skin).

ⁱⁱ I employ the double arrow to disrupt the atomised and binarized model for understanding the relationship between the human subject/body and the so-called 'nonhuman' world, the latter being conventionally defined as a negation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peakman (2013) speculates that one of the earliest representations of fisting can be found in Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement*, where a demon appears to be impaling a damned soul with their fist. Peakman further traces one of the earliest descriptions of fisting to 1759, in the Marquis de Sade's *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*. The roots however of today's organised community of fist-fuckers is believed to have taken shape as one amongst "many other sexual specializations located in the leather population" (Rubin, 1997, p. 103) of gay men who congregated in San Francisco and New York City, during the 1970s. It is here where the first fisting networks (e.g., Fist Fuckers of America) and clubs (e.g., The Catacombs) were established.

^{iv} Originally articulated in French as *agencement*, referring to an arrangement of connections that bring phenomenon into existence and meaning.

^v For Massumi (1987), affect is the “ability to affect and be affected. ... [A] prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act” (p. xvi).

^{vi} In contemporary sexual slang, a ‘service top’ typically refers to a topping partner whose sexual activity during intercourse or play is oriented around their bottom’s sexual satisfaction.

^{vii} An abbreviation for the collection of kinks defined by bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism.

^{viii} ‘Chems’ (i.e., ‘chemicals’) refer to psychoactive and non-psychoactive stimulants and intoxicants used during sex to amplify the sexual experience of the user. Commonly used chems include methamphetamine, mephedrone, GHB, and GBL.