

beyond
penetration

martin
page

translated by Roland Glasser



monstrograph

Martin Page

BEYOND PENETRATION

Edited by Coline Pierré

Translated from the French by Roland Glasser

I thought with our bodies we could forge a path for our words to cross.

Jean Hegland

I don't want dick tonight, eat my pussy right

Lil' Kim

Simply put, it's about bringing more beauty to this world: more in ourselves, more in our gaze.

Maïa Mazaurette

Look around you, at the lives we live, and you'll notice how some things are taken as normal. Nobody ever questions them. They're *natural* – that seemingly magic word used to justify a conservative mindset.

Our ideas of things are stacked on shelves, they're part of the décor; we don't really pay them any mind and yet some of these ideas oppress us. But because we've been taught so thoroughly not to be free, we don't notice this weight on our shoulders hampering us.

What if we got rid of these ideas? Not just because of the pain they sometimes cause, but also for the sheer joyful thrill of disobedience. It's a delight to shake up the world, to kick up some dust and make the ground quake. Then you can begin to dance.

It all starts with what seems like good news. We inherit sexuality as if it were a reinforced-concrete house bequeathed to us. A godsend. Who would turn down such a gift? We slip inside, all smiles (it seems pretty sturdy), quite comforted, too, at the thought of living where our parents and our ancestors lived. We replicate their positions and their actions; it's a means of weaving an ongoing connection, of being with them. These moves handed down to us are precious. So we continue the age-old sequence.

From time to time, we lend some variation to the sexual norm, trying out new positions gleaned from books, magazines or films, from friends too. But in the end, it's as if we'd simply added an extension to the reinforced-concrete house. The adventure flounders. Nothing really changes, the concrete walls remain. Whatever you may read in magazines or on the internet, there is nothing new under the sun. The troubling thing about sex is that, however much we feign belief in subversion, conservatism still reigns behind our airs of amusement and excitement, as we repeat what we have inherited. Sexuality has this curious power to cloak conformism – obedience to the most coercive social norms – in apparel that is provocative and fashionable.

As much as society hums with conversations about sex, no one is actually saying anything new. Discussing sexuality outside of the usual clichés is a rare and complicated thing.

Penetration therefore holds sway. It's *natural*. Nobody sees it as a social construct. Animals penetrate each other, after all, with males penetrating females and males penetrating males. It's the way of the world. Pleasure and reproduction incite us; nature and culture invite us. We penetrate our mouths, too, with food. The body is a place into which we push certain things and from which other things exit. Why call into question this circulation, this status of our anatomy as highway interchange?

There is a penis, there is a vagina; and since humans are logical beings, the decision to slot them together is obvious. See that nail? Hit it with a hammer!

But although humans have discovered that they can sit down and meditate in spite of their legs, that they can *not walk*, they have difficulty realising that they can *not penetrate* in spite of all the tackle available for it, and, what's more, they can even derive pleasure and reflection from *not penetrating*.

I think we should expect more from this animal species so sure of its unchanging nature and its axioms. This is, after all, a species that manages to bypass the seemingly impassable walls it erects for itself (as we have seen recently with economic growth, the devotion to meat eating, capitalism or those practices from another age that consist of: not taking your shoes off when entering a home, putting sugar in your coffee or whipped cream on your tomatoes). Sometimes, this species shows a certain ability to question its most deep-rooted beliefs. So let's be optimistic.

I must be honest as I write this critical text on penetration: I like it. I like the act of penetration. It gives me great pleasure. It's very oh-my-god-wowwoweeee! But just because you like an act doesn't mean you can't question and critique it. Our minds shouldn't only tackle unpleasurable things, otherwise we miss out important subjects. We should critique our pleasures, our joys and our orgasms, for there are pitfalls and prisons in those too. Of course, this desire to reflect upon penetration is something I owe to women. It was thanks to their words and their reactions that I became aware that there was food for thought.

There is everything to like about penetration, that oh-so practical interlocking evocative of construction sets. It's self-evident. Human beings like order, we like tidiness; it's how we've been taught. Puzzles have, after all, been a feature of our lives since we were small. And it's so pleasurable, isn't it? Pleasurable for the penetrator? Most of the time. Pleasurable for the penetrated? Not quite as often.

It's not easy to talk about sexuality. Or rather, there seems to be only one discourse possible: that it is obviously pleasurable and arousing. This makes it difficult to bring up unpleasant aspects caused by intimate relations, or the lack of desire for such or such a practice. It doesn't fit the zeitgeist. To such an extent that not climaxing, or not climaxing well, or not climaxing enough or not having the desire to climax (for a while or all of the time) makes you feel that you're at fault (if you're heterosexual, at least). It's not cool. It's a shameful thing not to fuck (because you're asexual, for example, or because your needs aren't great, or for a thousand other reasons). In other words, those who fuck "badly" (that is to say differently) or who feel pain from fucking, or who suffer some handicap are not heard either.

I recall a dinner with friends – a couple (let's call them Jeanne and Serge). I mentioned my wish to write something about penetration (as abstract as that project was). Immediately, Jeanne said she thought that quite a few women would happily forego this practice. Serge and I were speechless, flabbergasted, curious, like the two idiot males we so often are.

I raised the question of penetration with other cis friends and I learned that this is not so simple a ritual as one might think. Not only do women have a different, more complex point of view on the issue than men, they also have much to say about it to those prepared to listen. Being a guy often means taking our dominant viewpoint to be the natural order of things. We should always feel a little suspicious of being a guy, and admit that it's high time we turned renegade against our own side and questioned the seemingly obvious.

I continued my investigation; I asked questions and I listened.

Women talked to me about pains and discomfort. Sometimes the issue is premature penetration (we often talk of premature ejaculation, but who ever talks of premature penetration?), when there hasn't been enough time for lubrication and desire to take effect. Sometimes, natural lubrication is insufficient and the addition of a gel would be required, but there again, it's not so simple for everyone to take that step of going to buy some lubricant. I know people who stick bottles of it in their supermarket trolley as they would salad or shampoo. For others, it's more complicated. One female friend told me that it had taken her some time to be able to discuss her need for a lubricating gel with her partner; she felt ashamed of not getting wet enough and of requiring an aid. She felt that it was her fault; that she wasn't normal; that she didn't measure up; that she wasn't desirable enough, or was lacking in desire. It's high time we were rid of such feelings of guilt. We should pen odes to lubricating gels (which should be available everywhere, in all shops, in bakeries, in post offices, in florists, in cafés, in bookshops) so that they become normal, joyful things. Once and for all, let's be done with the destructive notion that "it's not natural" is a valid argument. You could say the same about sex toys: it's hard to understand why their use is not

more accepted and widespread, why you don't find them everywhere (there again, some criticise sex toys because "it's not natural, you don't need any equipment to make love." and moreover they never use any equipment whatsoever, they eat without a knife and fork, never wear glasses, or shoes, or indeed clothes for that matter; they write with neither pen nor computer, only with their fingers directly on clay slabs).

Anxiousness, fatigue, physical disease, the memory of unsatisfying past sexual relations, a sexual assault, pressure, performance anxiety: all can lead to a painful penetration. Micro-tears, injuries, fungal infections and STDs are also a reality.

Some women quite simply don't like penetration much, they don't experience the incredible pleasure we command them to feel during this act. It's not that they suffer from some condition – they have no injuries, or fears – it just happens not to be the most exciting thing for them in terms of sexuality. At most it's "just OK", and perhaps not even that. They prefer cunnilingus with caresses, light penetration with a finger, or the touch of a vibrator or clitoral suction stimulator. Indeed they'd like their partner to be more skilled with their tongue and their hands.

Female friends tell me that they could forego penetration for a while or forever. But they put up with it anyway to fit the norm: it has to be done. They don't wish to disappoint their partners and lovers. And then there are their own female friends, some of whom talk about their amazing vaginal orgasms (clitoral orgasms, in fact: see how Freud's mistake – the fallacious distinction between clitoral orgasm, seen as "infantile", and vaginal orgasm, seen as mature and complete – is still causing damage today, although Freud does not bear sole responsibility, he was merely a product of his time, and indeed female sexuality has been caricatured by the whole medical establishment until very recently, and still is). So obviously there's something wrong with women who don't have orgasms, right?

Some women also accept anal relations, even when they don't feel like it. It's in vogue, and so they feel too conservative, not to mention guilty, for refusing a pleasure that their partner desires. Damn and blast it! What a tragedy.

Competition, performance, benchmarking: comparison floods the discourse (both masculine and feminine) on sexuality. It wounds and humiliates.

Sometimes penetration is simply not possible, or it is painful or complicated. The body may refuse it (for psychological reasons; because of vaginismus, endometriosis, vestibulodynia or pudendal neuralgia; because of a rape; because of having given birth recently; because of bad experiences in the past; or simply from lack of desire or just not feeling like it) or else the man may have trouble getting hard (for psychological or physiological reasons; because he's suffering from

prostate cancer; because he has a fear of entering another person's body; because he is intimidated or tired; because he prefers other practices).

A female friend told me that the problem with vaginal penetration is that it necessarily involves contraception, which represents a cost for women. It's an additional mental load, a responsibility, something they need to think about. And then there are the consequences: the fitting of an IUD ("intrauterine device", the term that has replaced the less appropriate "coil") can be painful and you have to make an appointment for it with a gynaecologist (which may incur a financial cost); hormone pills bring an increased risk of blood clots, vaginal dryness and loss of libido; not forgetting the morning after pill and the stigma attached to it. Condoms can tear, risking pregnancy, infection or a sexually transmissible disease (although we should note that oral sex also carries risks, for which there are three solutions: condoms, dental dams or special lingerie such as Lorals). Penetration costs women dearly in every way.

The question is: are there certain practices that are "mandatory"? Let's say that for a particular couple, penetration (or any other sexual practice) was not (or no longer) possible, or not (or no longer) desired, would this be such a tragedy? If my female partner no longer wished to be penetrated, or if my male partner couldn't get hard anymore, would that really signify the end of desire and pleasure? Or would it actually be an opportunity to get creative?

I sense that we've lost sight of a reality: sexuality is not limited to a single organ and a single action. It can take many forms. Sexuality should not be reducible, limited to "it's either that or it's nothing at all". Thinking that fellatio is "the glue that holds a couple together", that penetration is obligatory, or indeed that any sex act is "essential", seems to me to be a sad, destructive and not very imaginative way of perceiving things.

We should laud couples (and non-couples too – fortunately, the physiognomy of romantic and sexual relationships is vast and complex) who don't take traditional routes. A person who refuses penetration should not be stigmatised or mocked, and a person who wishes to indulge in uncommon or seemingly unusual practices should no longer be discredited either. I would like us to wipe from our faces those little judgmental, mischievous, condescending, victorious smirks that often appear when we discuss sexuality and which encourage normalisation and the silencing of all that's different. Let's throw out those value judgements regarding different kinds of pleasures, and end the notion of the clitoral orgasm obtained through vaginal penetration as superior to others. Let's stop thinking it's the "Holy Grail", as I read in a magazine only recently. This religious metaphor pops up often and I can't help thinking that this image has more to do with the guilt-tripping of women than it does with anything holy (taking the image of the cup that collected the blood of Jesus to talk of female pleasure is truly a magnificently depressing symptom), the message being that of course

women are guilty of not obtaining an orgasm: their perineum is not sufficiently muscular, they're not sufficiently relaxed, they lack sufficient desire. It's their fault. They're not woman enough. And it gets even better (better to show women that they'll never measure up): yet another magazine mentioned something called the cervical orgasm...

It's simply infuriating.

The sexual pressure we lay on women's shoulders is the continuation of an age-old mistreatment that was once religious and is now secular and trendy. We see it too in the increasing number of vagina tightening operations and labiaplasties.

It is up to the people whose sexuality is commonplace and socially acclaimed to support and praise the expression of different sexualities that would otherwise not speak their name, seen as shameful, inferior, a failure. There is a responsibility for those who are on the side of the norm (and are sometimes happy there). Society is filled with pro-penetration discourse. Fine, we've understood, let's listen to someone else. Let's stop thinking that our own taste is good and true. What I mean is, for a long time I was that idiot who praised penetration to the sky. It was the goal, the wonderful thing. I didn't realise that I was contributing to the stifling of other voices – shyer, different and no less interesting – and to the limiting of other practices and pleasures.

Hypothesis.

Vaginal penetration is supposedly the be-all and end-all of pleasure precisely because society declares that to be the norm, the path to take (with the target being reproduction). It is because penetration can lead to fertilisation and to the future birth of a child that it is the norm in heterosexual relations, not because it procures greater pleasure.

There is no separation between our physical body and our social body. The sensations we feel, which we believe to be so natural, are partly constructions. So if we left room for other narratives, other thoughts, then no doubt our sensations and our emotions would change too.

Disparagement has real effects. Shame causes physical damage. But an appreciation of sexual practices that are currently undervalued or discredited would have beautiful and exciting consequences.

And dammit, enough with the competitive "my orgasm is better than yours". Incidentally, I note that the quality of men's orgasms is never discussed, it's just a monolithic block in which ejaculation and pleasure are lumped together.

My questions regarding penetration do not negate the fact that many women like penetration more than any other sexual practice. They adore it, find it astonishing, invigorating and fabulous

(some do not achieve orgasm through penetration, but still derive pleasure from it). I knew one woman who liked nothing else and refused cunnilingus. There are women who like double penetration, there are women (and men) who like fist fucking. Everything is possible. We should be open about it all. If you're a man who considers yourself a feminist ally, then you should listen to your partner and, better still, ask questions, because the weight of social convention prevents some women from saying that there are certain things they don't like and other things that they do. Don't think that just because you've known a woman or a man who likes to be spanked, or who enjoys anal sex, or who dislikes anything but penetration or who has a thing for being tied up (or tying others up), that that will be the case with your next partner. If your lover likes a particular thing, then explore it together with them, talking about it as you go, in a spirit of sensitive invention. Treat every relationship as a novelty, without preconceptions; an opportunity for discovery, change and reappraisal. Have total trust in the words, gestures and sighs of your partner (and I mean "partner" in the broadest sense, whether in the context of a long-term relationship or a brief liaison) and never judge their desires or their lack thereof. Everything is possible, nothing is obligatory. Talk, explore each other, change together and never forget about each other. A wonderful relationship depends on the ability to discuss things, to welcome your partner's uniqueness and to discover your own. Our sensations, our excitations and our pleasures are not set in stone: they can evolve.

Men unanimously treasure penetration, at least publicly, although no doubt some men dislike it – all or part of the time – though they would never dare say so. This makes perfect sense: they derive considerable pleasure from it. But they rarely ask their partners and lovers what they think. It's not an issue, or barely one, because, when it comes to sexuality, it is the power of masculine domination that determines what is or is not an issue.

Nevertheless, it has been established that orgasm through penetration is much rarer than it is through cunnilingus. And as such, the practice of vaginal penetration is symptomatic of human ingenuity: it works poorly, it's not the best way to achieve pleasure and yet it's the norm.

According to the Hite report (the seminal 1976 study on sexuality that shattered a certain number of received ideas on the subject), just a minority of women (30%) regularly experience orgasm through vaginal penetration only (more recent studies talk of 18%). Most of the time, it's a pitiful way to reach orgasm, and yet it holds hegemonic sway – though what I should really point out is that it is precisely because it is inefficient and provides little pleasure that it does so.

At the end of the day, the goal of penetration is not really the pleasure of two partners, but first and foremost that of the man, and then (possibly) that of the woman. Indeed, penetration

generally ceases once the man's own pleasure has been achieved, thus enshrining an unequal relationship as the ideal.

Can one imagine this practice being so generalised if only 18% of men derived pleasure and were able to orgasm through the penetration of a vagina with their penis? I think that it would be the opposite: the guilt would be reversed and penetrating men discredited (not that that would be any smarter). Caresses and oral-genital relations would be the norm and we wouldn't consider that those 82% of men had a problem or that their orgasms were of lesser quality.

It needs to be said, again and again: women who don't orgasm through the penetration of a penis in their vagina are neither sick, nor crazy, nor insensitive, nor less mature, nor incomplete; they have no problems they need to resolve (at least no more than any other human). And if we stopped hassling them about this, they would no doubt live their sexuality more serenely and experience more pleasure.

Another study (*Sexuality in France*), overseen by Nathalie Bajos and Michel Bozon, tells us that "women who say that they have painful sexual relations don't practise non-penetrative sex to any greater degree than other women". How sad, dammit, how sad.

We know all this, yet blogs and magazines continue to talk of penetration as the Holy Grail? Behind this insistence on promoting penetration at any cost and of talking up clitoral orgasm through vaginal penetration as the be-all and end-all, I see the continuation of a political project to subjugate and humiliate women. To change that, the whole vocabulary of sexuality should be analysed, critiqued and reinvented; we should free ourselves to sometimes forego the traditional terminology of "taking" and "penetration" and instead use a term such as "circclusion", a word invented by Bini Adamczak which means "to wrap/embrace the male sex organ with the vagina". The battle is also a linguistic one. We can help to change the sad sexual reality that is the current norm with our thoughts and our words.

The above study also reveals that "in women over the age of thirty-five, we observe a shift towards a preference for mutual caresses over vaginal penetration".

Penetration is not the panacea, that's clear to see.

The female pleasure organ, the clitoris, is still considered subsidiary. It's there to arouse, enable lubrication and facilitate penetration. This organ is still invisible in almost all natural science books for children, whereas the male glans is mentioned. It seems normal to assume that the clitoris is insufficient, hence the invention of the "vaginal" orgasm, and the enthusiasm for the G spot on the part of magazines and blogs (just compare the number of articles on the G spot with those on the prostatic orgasm, which is virtually absent from public debate and everyday conversation).

The clitoris is fabulous, complex and quite magnificent, complete in every way; but given that the whole of society has disparaged it, fought it and concealed it for centuries, it should come as no surprise that its sensitivity and importance has been undervalued, and that social injunctions against the clitoris have ended up working, with real physical consequences. Our orgasms are social.

I also sense that by carrying on penetrating, and thinking of nothing else, we forget all the rest, we don't see the full extent and heterogeneity of the body. Penetration is a form of avoidance. It means thinking you're *making* love when really you're disposing of it. I have the feeling that we penetrate to hide our genitals, so as not to see them, as if they were shameful things. It's a delusion, a smokescreen. We think that we're liberated through penetrating, whereas in fact we're concealing and obscuring our sexuality.

In the end, penetration is well suited to capitalism, to our days stunted by work, anxiety and competition. We have little time to philosophise on love, and so penis in vagina becomes a practical solution: it lasts a certain time, it's calibrated, there's a very clear beginning and end, and the act can be completed with neither thought nor imagination. Society applauds.

I get the impression that men who swear by penetration alone are scared of an uninhibited sexuality, a sexuality that goes far beyond anatomical genitalia. They want to keep control, to dictate where it should happen, to assign a place, and mark out the borders and the limits. They are terrified by a sexuality that might spill over into the realms of adventure; in short, a sexuality that would not be the traditional one or one taken from porn films (which is essentially the same thing).

What if being sexual meant taking the time to explore a body and to talk? Not penetrating offers the possibility of relishing the spectacle of our genitals simply being, swelling and contracting, brushing against each other, being stroked and licked, caressed by the whole body.

Without penetration, the whole body is hypersensitive and deliciously hyperactive. Making love should be a meeting of bodies and their ensuing conversation.

Men, as is often the case, understand nothing. Note: this was the case for me in my relations with women (and doubtless still is sometimes); I was a bumbling, arrogant, pathetic idiot.

For example, men strive not to come for as long as possible, turning penetration into an endurance sport, no matter how bored their partner may be. Sexuality is that one social interaction where dialogue is apparently not required. Men want to enter the other's body at any price, they use it as an object at the service of their orgasm, while their partner's pleasure is often secondary. They say they're making love but are in fact masturbating in women's bodies (I didn't come up with this

image, but it feels very eloquent to me). Like those new fathers who pressure their partner to have sexual relations with penetration as soon as possible after birth, whereas the mother often needs time to feel comfortable in herself and in her body. Satisfying their own male frustration is more important than their partner's pleasure.

The patriarchy reigns supreme. Penetration often reproduces man's domination over woman: the man holds the woman; his penis inside her; he directs and decides.

I'm not questioning this reality: domination games (handcuffs, blindfolds, dirty talk, spanking, hairpulling, role play, etc.) are appreciated and desired by many women too. Submission is exciting. To judge it would be to forget that everyone makes do with the sexuality they've inherited at that particular moment in history; it's not always possible (or desired) to free oneself from it: we take the pleasure that's accessible here and now, whatever suits us. And it's joyous. We won't resolve everything at the present time. But, without judging, without giving up what we clearly like, we could introduce something else, some variety, some liberty, some invention in our sexualities. Start at least, sketch something out. Let sexuality also become a place of imagination and words exchanged. A liberated sexuality is not either this *or* that. It can be this *and* that.

It is common for cis men to think that they've "had" a woman when they've slept with her. They've subjugated her. They've conquered her, taken something from her. Many heterosexual men take pleasure in thinking themselves superior and in dominating women. They've penetrated, they've been victorious. For as long as we don't talk about that, for as long as we don't put an end to any feeling of victory and humiliation, for as long as we don't heap shame on this kind of behaviour and individual, then there will be little change in the relations between men and women.

I am writing this text to educate myself, to discover, to learn not to follow my reflexes (as pleasant as they may be), to disobey my initial impulses and cultural habits of these times, as well as to imagine something else. My starting position was extremely favourable to penetration: I thought it was amazing, I thought it was unsurpassable, nothing could compete with such delight. My thinking has evolved, my sensitivity too. I still like penetration, but I no longer place this practice at the top of the podium; in fact there is no longer a podium, we must stop with this Olympic vision of sexuality, this endless ranking. My perceptions have changed. The body is part of the mind, and if my mind explores new avenues, my body gradually follows; it stumbles and hesitates sometimes, but it progresses. My body is not made of cement, my sensitivities are not forever fixed. I have my boundaries and my neuroses, of course; a past that prevents or complicates certain things; I am stuffed full of conceits but I am not immutable.

Sexual practices are not etched in stone. They are social acts, and so it is in their very nature to evolve. The excitement of sexual domination is connected to the history of men's oppression of women. If this oppression were to vanish through steadfast progressive action, then this domination would gradually vanish too, one would think. Other desires would come into being, and other pleasures would be invented that we cannot even imagine.

My impression is that the sexuality of conservatives and that of progressives (that is to say left-wing and right-wing people) is the same, even though these groups are distinguished by their ideas and their behaviours – as if sexuality couldn't be a locus and an act of political thought. What's worse is that being judgmental is very common amongst people who think they are leftist and liberated, but who are fatphobic in their sexuality, for example, or who fetishise – or abhor – on racist or ageist grounds, as if racism or fatphobia were acceptable once sexuality was involved. What does it mean to be sexually leftist? What does it mean to be a feminist in the sack?

Do we give a damn? Should sexuality and politics remain separate? Is it simply too complex and counter-intuitive to be politicised (after all, some feminists are proponents of BDSM while others are critical of it)? Or should we philosophise the issue, grapple with it and consider that our current reflections will produce different behaviours later? Do we screw differently now, inventing another way of making love while trying to rein in the patterns of the past, as pleasant as they may be? Or should it be a little of all that at the same time: reflect, experiment, try to evolve however we can and if we can? Each to their own, but I think it's a shame when the kneejerk reaction to the very idea of discussing the mechanics of one's sexuality is a definitive "that's private". The least we can do is to talk and enjoy the pleasure of debate and produce new reflections, not just content ourselves with the status quo. I am thinking in particular of cis men and heterosexuals who, being in a position of power and structural domination, have a duty to do a little soul-searching and read feminist articles and texts (while remaining humble in their opinions and expression: theirs is to listen and to learn).

The meeting of our bodies is not something separate from the rest of our social lives, and therefore the question is not: "Is sexuality political?" – after all, I fail to see how something could not be political – but rather: "Should sexuality (also) be the point of critique and invention?". In my view, the answer is yes. I think that it is really exciting to understand that sexuality is creative and political. This doesn't mean that we can't get off on more traditional, archetypal forms while waiting for our political values and our arousals to align. Changing our conceits takes time.

For now, and for the joy of triggering an earthquake, we could collectively agree to a moratorium on penetration (I'm imagining a session of the General Assembly of the United Nations

in New York) to upset the natural order of things and to explore a different sexuality for a few weeks. I can already visualise the poster campaign for No Penetration Month, complete with hashtag: #LeaveItOut! It would be a beautiful initiative, droll and joyful, one that would make people think and debate, laugh and argue; it would drive invention. There'd be revelations, no doubt about it. From "Enlarge your penis" to "Enlarge your reality", basically. Far from being a limitation, we'd see that it was an opening up of perspectives, a sensual adventure.

One day, we'll praise such intense moments of sexuality where there is no penetration. Exciting, wild sex scenes with no penis in the vagina or in the anus. One day, we'll see a man caress a woman, we'll see a man take the time to explore her body; and a woman simply run her fingers over a man's nipples or his neck, and we'll say: "What a beautiful sex scene!"

Not penetrating means unleashing our imaginations: what appears like a limitation would in fact deliver us from those roles we inherited from eras when men and women were not considered equal. Not penetrating is the sign of an artistic sexuality – artists being used to drawing ideas and liberties from apparent constraints.

The aim is not to make non-penetration the new norm, to replace one obligation with another, but to include it among the possible acts of physical love, accorded the same importance as penetration. Vaginal (or anal) penetration should no longer be the alpha and omega. And an absence of penetration should not be experienced as a failure. We need to relax, learn to give ourselves pleasure and receive it too. I suspect that it will take a fair few decades for things to change. Action follows words. Our bodies are still territories to explore; and the discovery of our bodies: a phenomenon barely conceived.

I speak here from my viewpoint as a heterosexual and cis man (even though I don't much adhere to this status; I really don't feel like a "guy"), with my limited, chaotic personal history. My viewpoint is specific and partial. There's a lot I don't know when it comes to sexuality. I listen and I try to understand. This book is not a conclusion for me, but the pursuit of questionings that will continue after its publication. Carried away by my blasted contrariness, I do take shortcuts (and I know full well that penetration can be sublime and complex, that sometimes I generalise, and that of course #notallmen; this book is not comprehensive on the subject). But there is a pleasure in brazenly defending a stance that goes against the flow, and in elaborating (with much commotion) an iconoclastic, political and critical point of view. It seems to me that one can find plaudits for penetration elsewhere – indeed, practically everywhere. If for once that's not the case, I think that penetration will recover from it, no problem.

I'm clearing fresh ground for myself. It seems to me that I'm doing with sexuality what I did with another subject a few years ago when I stopped eating animals: I understood that the norm served to mask pain, unheard emotions and submission to a reign of violence. So I changed and I stopped eating individuals of other species. I see links between animal rights advocacy (and the critique of human supremacy in general) and the critique of the supremacy of penetration (and of standardised sexuality in general). Eating meat and penetrating the other without taking them into consideration is the attitude of a being who profits from their dominant status without realising that they're dominant; it's all so *natural* (you'll notice that most people lose any attachment to the laws of nature as soon as their health is concerned, or they stretch out on the dentist's chair or have to undergo a surgical operation). My attitude consists of attacking my own camp each time: heterosexual, omnivorous, privileged men; barbecue and penetration buffs; those who dominate and destroy the planet. It's time we reflected upon and critiqued our behaviours which seem so perfect and justified in our eyes. We are catastrophes with the gift of language. Which is only half-bad news.

The problem is partly due to the fact that heterosexual cis men are not brought up to talk about themselves, to listen, to become emotional beings, to open up. They are brought up to become walls. Moreover, being macho procures so many social advantages (initially) that it's logical to proceed in this direction.

One morning in Strasbourg (I was just passing through), I sat down for coffee with a heterosexual friend at Les Savons d'Hélène and I asked him if he liked penetration. He answered straightaway:

“Yes, of course.”

So I enquired more keenly:

“And how do you like to be penetrated? With a finger? A dildo? A well-lubricated prostate massager?”

He tensed. He hadn't imagined that I was referring to *him* being penetrated. Never that. He was thinking of himself penetrating a woman. I placed a piece of paper in front of him and on it drew the silhouette of a man. I pointed out that he had an orifice (indicated with an arrow) via which he himself could also be penetrated and which could give him pleasure. The anus.

He had never thought about it. Well, perhaps a little, but fleetingly.

And that's just it: men prefer not to think about it. Or, to be more precise, they prefer not to think of themselves as being penetrable. They are fiercely against their own penetration.

Why?

After all, if penetration can give women pleasure, then it can surely give men pleasure too. It's a fact. The male anatomy is endowed with a prostate situated in the pelvic cavity, underneath the bladder, above the perineum, forward of the rectum and to the rear of the pubic symphysis. This organ is a powerfully erogenous zone and a great source of pleasure that can lead to orgasm and ejaculation. Without going that far (and yet the distance is small, just a few centimetres, but it might as well be light years in our minds), the anus has a profusion of nerve endings just inside it and is therefore itself an erogenous zone.

Men don't need any encouragement to talk about their pleasure, to defend it, to laud it and aggrandise it. And yet, when you talk to them about a splendid pleasure that they forbid themselves, they avert their gaze. Sometimes they even blench. The desire for their own penetration is singularly absent from heterosexual men, who are thus revealed as the ridiculous and paradoxical victims of their own domination. They will often not hesitate in urging their partner to try anal sex (which can of course also be a practice that women desire and request), but as soon as it concerns themselves, they become hypocritically prudish. For the most part, heterosexual men, despite being avowed adventurers when someone else's body is concerned, turn out to be puritans when it comes to their own.

Their anxiety is not being man enough, not fitting the virile cliché. Virility for men is a prison, in which they must prove at any price that they're not women, that they're not effeminate, that they are the penetrators not the penetrated. This is key for some of them: they penetrate so as not to risk exposing their own desire to receive a finger or a dildo in their anus, so as not to become a penetrable being. That is to say, in their dumb macho minds: not a woman or a homosexual. In other words: dominated, a weakling. Being taken for a woman or a gay remains a heterosexual's greatest fear.

Some heterosexual men are familiar with the delights of anal pleasure and the prostatic orgasm, but they are few, and even fewer to say it openly. Most of us, starting with myself, have not discovered this source of rapture. Even though I know that my anus and my prostate are organs which procure pleasure, still I refuse to take advantage of them; I don't wish to be penetrated by my partner, even with a delicate finger or with an abundantly lubricated dildo. I'm old-fashioned. I'm conservative and puritan in spite of myself. I'm not pleased about it, that's just the way I am. I have a complex and unresolved relationship with sexuality. I am the very stereotype of that dichotomy

between anticonservative ideas and the most timid desires. I am a kind of romantic puritan who, paradoxically, is very open and curious. I am trying to make progress with myself, but the resistances remain. So I explore gently. No rush, it's not a race. I am aware that it's as if my body was blocked and closed off. The cultivation of a man's body is a cultivation of insensitivity. What a darned tragedy. It is therefore not surprising that men are so stupid in the way they relate to women's bodies.

To cease being caricatures and statues, men need to consider themselves as penetrable beings who ardently desire this act and raise their little buttocks in the air invitingly.

It is therefore clear that at the end of the day, sexuality is not really about pleasure, otherwise women would be penetrated less, and men more.

Hypothesis.

Perhaps if men orgasmed by other means, they would be less insufferable and arrogant. Perhaps they would stop believing in their superiority over women (and the world and animals). Perhaps that would dent their dominative tendencies, and they would appreciate being dominated by their partners, and so domination would be a shared thing, a reciprocal game, no longer a one-way street (and perhaps one day we could do away with domination once and for all, and the person being penetrated would not be seen as being dominated).

Heterosexual cis men would desist from behaving like sages. They could ask questions, of homosexual men, for example, as well as lesbians (the fact that lesbians enjoy greater sexual pleasure than heterosexual women is something that we should be curious about, I think), heterosexual women, bisexuals, trans people, demi-sexuals, disabled folk and asexuals; anyone, in fact, whose sexuality is different than theirs. They could read their texts and their books. They would derive much from such a wealth of knowledge. By listening to other people, they could become better, more curious, more open, more sensitive human beings. They might lower their guard. They might also listen to themselves and talk. Breaking this exhausting and (self-)destructive image of the virile man.

Of course the challenging of virility is not just an internal task for men, it's also about being active in romantic and family settings, be that doing half of the domestic chores, taking paternity leave or looking after the children more. And everyone should cease encouraging virility in children's upbringing – and tell teenagers that love is not only and not necessarily about penetration.

Being part of the norm should be considered something violent and hurtful that cuts one off from the rest of the world. It's a problem. One that should be remedied, not made the object of enjoyment and boast.

It astonishes me that heterosexual cis men are not more curious about sexuality, that they are massively in favour of reproducing the same acts and attitudes. No doubt their fear is great, and so-called liberated men remain prisoners of their prudish virilism. A macho seducer is as much a cliché as the prim Victorian lady terrified of anything sexual (but more obtuse and with decidedly less taste in their choice of blouse). The social category that is the least familiar with sexuality, that has the most caricatural vision of it, is the one that dominates all the others. And it is this simplification which allows it to maintain its power by controlling bodies and desires, preventing the expression of complexity and liberty.

The human body is an erogenous zone. It's a truth we readily accept as regards women. Our caresses, our kisses, our breath and our tongues roam widely across a woman's body, procuring excitement and pleasure. Men, however, have succeeded in convincing the world, and themselves, that it's only their dick that's an erogenous zone. Yet far from concentrating their pleasure in a single point, they have imprisoned it.

Why have men been prevented from recognising the sensorial richness of their bodies? No doubt because it is not considered to be a serious preoccupation. It would require them to lower their guard. And it forces women to focus on men's cocks, thus allowing men to control women, to tell them "here and nowhere else", to stop men indulging their imaginations as they explore their partners' bodies. It is yet more proof that the patriarchy serves the cause of men, and they too pay a price: closing up, hurting themselves, restraining themselves, simplifying themselves.

Men are still at the threshold. They are a territory still to be explored (and to explore themselves). It will not be easy. It will take time. There is nothing subversive about those men who recount their "conquests". Subversion will come when a man talks about the pleasure he feels in being penetrated by his partner or when he tells of the infinite delight in being caressed on the nape of his neck, his nipples or his legs, and no one laughs, no one makes fun of him.

That will change everything.

There's no doubt that women and men will resist this idea of a sensitive man who refuses his position as a dominant. Virility continues to enjoy a fine reputation, after all. Women will be reluctant to fuck their partner in the arse or even see them in such a position. It's understandable, I think. The idea is not to demand an immediate change to our sexuality (our tastes and desires are already forged and it can be complicated to shift them), but to start to reflect, to open new pathways and to talk.

It will upset the established roles in relationships between men and women.

It will be messy.

So much the better.

It's high time that our sexualities branched out, that we disobeyed the traditions, social pressures and limitations placed on sexual practices, that sexuality is no longer seen as something shameful or victorious, as a means, a pretext, to stigmatise, mock, judge, classify, or consider oneself superior or inferior to others.

One day, people will be able to say, without attracting mockery, reprobation or pathologisation: "I made love with this person: we kissed and stroked each other's backs."

"I penetrated my boyfriend with a prostate massager as he lay on the kitchen table and it was quite beautiful."

"We have been making love together for ten years without his penis penetrating my vagina and it only gets more wonderful, exciting and pleasurable."

"I make love once a month and I adore that, it's just my thing, it's my rhythm."

"I make love every day and I adore that, it's just my thing, it's my rhythm."

"My biggest orgasms come when my boyfriend penetrates me anally."

And so on...

I would like to publish a sort of sexual guide in which positions involving penetration wouldn't be the rule. It would evoke the range of practices in the original Kamasutra, many of which did not involve penetration. In my own Kamasutra, you'd find caresses on the arms, kisses to the neck, foot massages, masturbation, all sorts of penetration, a hand or lips brushing delicately between the shoulder blades, nails tracing down the back; there'd also be conversation, words and amazing stories; bodies falling asleep against each other; laughter too, hugs and silk scarves; there'd be everything possible. Anything can be imagined. We could finally forsake that concrete dwelling for one constructed from wood; living, ever-evolving, an open house indistinguishable from a garden; a sort of potting shed where seeds would be planted to provide new forms for our explorations and new fruits for our adventurous appetites.

Note

The original French edition of *Beyond Penetration* was edited by Coline Pierré and published by Monstrograph (www.monstrograph.com), a literary laboratory founded by Coline Pierré and Martin Page, before being republished by Le Nouvel Attila.

In the original French edition, the essay is followed by a series of personal testimonies regarding penetration, as well as an exploration of the context in which the book was written, and several pages of acknowledgements. Only the essay has been translated so far.

Martin Page is a writer and publisher. He is the author of novels, essays and books for children and young adults (www.martin-page.fr).

He and Coline Pierré (www.colinepierre.fr) edited and published Pauline Harmange's book, *Moi les hommes je les déteste (I Hate Men)*, Lou Sarabadzic's book, *Poétique réjouissante du lubrifiant (The Joyful Poetics of Lubricant)*, and the essay, *Nos existences handies (Our cripp lives)*, by the autonomist tetraplegic activist Zig Blanquer.

Roland Glasser translates literary and genre fiction, and assorted non-fiction, from French. He is a co-founder of The Starling Bureau, a London-based collective of literary translators (www.thestarlingbureau.com). He would like to thank Ruth Clarke for her keen copyeditor's eye.

Martin Page's agent :

Roxane Edouard at Curtis Brown: <https://www.curtisbrown.co.uk/agent/roxane-edouard>