The Dough That Kneads the Kneader:

an Exploration of the Self and the Viscous

Sofia Esner

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First Reader: Professor Jerry Miller

Second Reader: Professor Benjamin Berger
Abstract

The viscous, when it has been discussed at all, has been under the guise of disgust, abjection, or fear. But what if that conversation obscures a more fundamental movement to separate the viscous and self? Drawing on work by Jean-Paul Sartre, Mary Douglas, Gaston Bachelard, Elizabeth Grosz, and Sara Ahmed, I will argue against the traditional viewpoint on viscosity to show that we are essentially viscous beings. We are soft and gelatinous. We sink into the world and the world creeps up into us. I will begin with a taxonomy of the slimy, sticky and the viscous which will lay out the (non)-differences between the three categories. I will argue that Sartre sees the viscous as horrible in and of itself because he sees it as fundamentally denying the project of self-determinacy. In this I will then move into a discussion of labor, showing how Bachelard words against Sartre to argue that we can control the viscous. I will also offer an overview of the relation of the body to the viscous, drawing on Grosz. Finally, I will argue that our relationality with the world can be thought of through stickiness. I will argue we are in part constituted as subjects through viscosity. And, importantly, that using the framework of viscosity allows for a conception of the self that is, like viscosity itself, a kind of process without end.
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Introduction

The story of viscosity, as it begins and as it plays out, is one of contact, of transference, of relation. During the summer of 2020, having just left a store and ensconced myself in the passenger seat of my car, I reached for the hand sanitizer I kept in the door of the car. As I squirted the gel in my hands I happened to look to my right and saw a woman, in her car, holding a bottle of hand sanitizer, poised to squeeze some into her own hands. And in the moment, we smiled, raised our bottles in mock ‘cheers’ and rubbed the gelatinous substances into our hands. Then, the moment ended, we each pulled away, but she stuck with me. She clings to my consciousness, this stranger, a residue I cannot rid myself of, a moment of relation, of shared sliminess.

That fall of 2020, I encountered the viscous as a subject of academic inquiry. Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger* introduced me to the world of the dirty, of the slimy; the viscous opened before me as though for the first time. The chapters I read from *Purity and Danger* radically shifted my understanding of dirt and brought the viscous to the foreground of my consciousness. Drawing from Jean-Paul Sartre’s discussion of stickiness, Douglas paints a compelling picture of an infant plunging their hand into a jar of honey.\(^1\) The hand in the honey jar haunted me for months after I first read Douglas. I could not help but imagine what it would be like to sink my own hand into a jar of honey. What it might be like to not just touch, but to be submerged in viscosity. To push the honey with my fingers as it pulled against me. To draw my hand from the jar while slow moving rivers of honey crept down my fingers.

For all those months I wondered – what is the viscous, really? Why are we so often disgusted, fascinated, and drawn in by that which is slimy, sticky, and viscous? What do

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\(^1\) Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2003), 47.
metaphors of viscosity, and all the ways in which stickiness features in language, reveal about our complex relationship to viscosity? What is the intellectual history that deals with these questions, and what is missing from the conversation? What does it change when our interactions with another person are slippery, undefined, or open and clinging? Are they always such? Can there be interaction that is “clean”? Are we always left with the residue of others upon us? What about in those moments of entrapment or disconnection? And what does this mean for the self? Could there be something viscous in the way we move through the world?

This thesis broadly seeks to answer these questions in order to propose a new conception of the nature of the relationship between the self and the slimy.² In this essay I will deal with both material and metaphorical stickiness. However, in line with Sara Ahmed, “I do not want to presume an association of the literal with the physical body and the metaphorical with language. Certainly, there are different forms of stickiness. But the sticky surface and the sticky sign cannot be separated through any simple distinction between literal and metaphorical.”³ Just as Ahmed does; I too will not draw strict definitions between “material” and “metaphorical.” Falling into that dichotomy would work against the aims of this project to illustrate how slippery our definitions actually are and would uphold another kind of dualism that I am committed to collapsing. That is not to say that there are not significant differences between contact with sticky matter and sticky language, but that the two categories are inextricably linked, and an attempt to fully separate the two would result in a false dichotomy.

² It must be noted here that throughout this work I will be using the terms “slimy”, “sticky” and “viscous” interchangeably. A thorough discussion of the non-differences will be offered in section one of this work “Taxonomies of the Viscous.”
This essay is split loosely into four sections. The first, “Taxonomies of the Viscous,” will work through the (non)-differences between the slimy, sticky and the viscous. This section will primarily draw on Jean-Paul Sartre and Mary Douglas and their respective discussions of material descriptions of viscosity. The second section, “The Transformation of Viscous Matter, or Working with and against the Viscous,” uses Gaston Bachelard to examine our tendency to work for the fantasy of cleanliness through wiping, cleaning, ignoring the viscous. The third section “Structures of the Self and the Sticky,” will draw on Elizabeth Grosz, Julia Kristeva, and William Ian Miller to argue for our slimy, viscous, leaking material existence. The fourth section, “Metaphors of Viscosity,” will examine the understudied prevalence of language around viscosity. I will argue in this section for our complex relationality through the viscous.

The philosophers I am drawing upon, in the passages where they deal with stickiness, largely work within the framework of fear, abjection, and disgust, and (until very recently) disregard the myriad possibilities of positive affective responses and relationality in the viscous. Furthermore, this discourse has sought to separate us from the slimy, to say that the matter that we are, the kind of beings that we are, is fundamentally separate from viscous matter. That is to say, those philosophers who discuss the relation between the self and the viscous pose even the material self as separate from sticky matter. Working against this, I will argue that it is the very framing of the relation between the self and viscosity that is wrong. I will illustrate the subtle ubiquity of viscous matter, the moist rot, jellied texture, and smooth movement that lurks around every corner, delights, and terrifies, buoys and transforms. Indeed, I will show that we do not become viscous, but that we are constituted in our legibility as subjects through viscosity. The focus on disgust, on othering the slimy, serves to obscure the distasteful truth – we ourselves are viscous, gelatinous beings, clinging to the world, to each other, to ourselves.
Taxonomies of the Viscous

Although there is unending interplay between the slimy, sticky and the viscous, the differentiation between the three merits consideration. While strict definition would not be possible when dealing with a topic that is itself so slippery, an examination of the salient features of the different modes which generally fall under one of the three categories slime, sticky, or viscous elucidates significant differences. There is tension between that which pulls you in, and that which that which does not allow you to grasp. A notable difference between that which holds together, and that which lubricates. The residue of stickiness and the softness that is wiped away. All of these are affectively different modes of contact – different ways in which the slimy, sticky and the viscous manifest, constitute, and function. Keeping in mind the distinctions that will be laid out below the linguistic interchange between the words will continue throughout this work.

Stickiness, as that which clings, seems like the obvious place to begin. Something that is sticky often functions as a hold, as an attachment. It quite literally “sticks” one thing to another. We can think of the most practical of uses of “sticky things”, such as making furniture, books, or hanging posters. Clear tape is sticky; it can hold a poster to a wall or a label to jar. All sorts of glues, tacks, and pastes function to hold objects together, or to stick one object to another. There is also, of course, the kinds of stickiness that feel less intentional. The candy that sticks to your hand, the grab of bread dough or the thin sheen of sweat that holds you to a leather seat on a hot day. Yet, there is another, almost more salient function of stickiness as residue. That is, it does not seem so remarkable to hold two things together, but to pull them apart with any semblance of “cleanness” would seem a near miracle. Anyone who has tried to peel a sticker of a laptop, a
poster off a wall, or pasted cardboard together will know that while things can be pulled apart, there is always a residue. A thin sheen of stickiness will mark the place a sticker once was, flecks of paint pulled off the wall reveal the mark of tape that would not let go so easily, a stickiness that will not so easily be erased.

Stickiness is not always (if ever) an isolatable property of matter. When the stickiness is “dry” like in the case of tape or tack, it is prone more towards residue than overflow. By contrast, when stickiness is a property of wet matter (as opposed to relative dryness of something like tape, or poster tack) we move into the realm of the slimy. Matter such as mucus or glue is not only sticky, but it is slimy as well. I should note, here, the intersection that can be seen between the sticky and the slimy. Slime, definitionally, is a moist, soft, slippery substance that is often regarded as disgusting. Anything from moss and mud to slugs and worms could be considered slimy. Initially, the slickness of slime might trick one into thinking of it as antithetical to stickiness. Any attempt to hold a solid handful of jam will result in trails of reduced fruit slinking through the gaps in your fingers, leaving you only with a residue filled palm but an empty hand. But to fall into this initial impression would be to overlook residue. Slime may not function as the firm hold that “dry sticky” does, but it certainly leaves a residue. Slime is not so easily cleaned away - removed from surfaces or fingers - it clings, it sticks. Its holding power is not in “functionality”, but in that no matter comes away from contact with the slimy unaffected.

This then raises the issue of literal consistency of any given material, which is an issue of the viscous. A viscous substance is that which is between the liquid and the solid. It is an ambiguous substance in that it cannot be placed in any fixed category of matter. The viscous exists in another realm of material life, ill-defined like the matter that occupies it. As Douglas
tells us, the viscous can be considered both anomalous and ambiguous.\textsuperscript{4} It is anomalous in that it does not fit the material characteristics that the majority of the matter we come into contact with does (it is neither solid nor liquid), and ambiguous in that is it open to many possible interpretations.\textsuperscript{5} Viscosity cannot be captured in the simplicity of solids or liquids. As Sartre says, substances that are slimy, like pitch, appear as though they are fluid, yet are aberrant in their movement, slow and thick and ambiguous in their “liquidity”.\textsuperscript{6} Slime is inherently an ambiguous substance; it does not properly obey the laws of a fluid nor of a solid. A drop of honey, for example, as it slips back into a jar, rests on the surface of the honey in the jar before it sinks into the whole again.\textsuperscript{7}

But perhaps, this, too, is a myth. To claim the viscous as anomalous - as something radically unlike liquid or solid - is to ignore the impossibility of firm classification. That is to say, even drawing the border of “ambiguous” and attempting to classify that which is unlike a lot of other matter (or is considered disgusting or repulsive) ignores that fact that borders are never really firm, never unbreachable, and perhaps never really there. The viscous is vast and glutinous, it creeps onto and within that which we might call solid, invades that which we might call liquid with a particular slowness. Classifying matter as solid or liquid is just as dependent on the idea of viscosity as the idea of viscosity is on fixed matter. Even moving beyond that, the material existence of solid and liquid is continually taken over, met with, or transformed by the viscous. The firm surface of a wooden table is quickly made sticky with a spilled soda. Mold, soft and slippery, grows on old structures and in uncleaned crevices. This is not simply decay, but the inevitable recurrence of viscosity.

\textsuperscript{4} Douglas, \textit{Purity and Danger}, 38.
\textsuperscript{5} Douglas, \textit{Purity and Danger}, 38.
\textsuperscript{6} Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 607.
\textsuperscript{7} Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 608.
There might still, despite this, be an urge to ask, “what is the viscous”? But, as Freddie Mason says, “the viscous doesn’t exist. It isn’t a thing, nor is it anything.”

It might be easy to say that of course *The Viscous* does not exist as such, but what Mason does here illuminates the slippery distinction between material and metaphor. As I have already mentioned in the introduction, it is not useful to strictly delineate between the matter and language around viscosity. Material stickiness is certainly different than the metaphorical stickiness of signs, but the two exist in relation, inevitably informed by the other. The viscous, to quote Mason, “is a quality of resistance and of flow, of stickiness and of slipperiness. But it is also many others: stretchiness, trembling, or its deeper version, shuddering. The list, as I see it, unfolds indefinitely.”

The viscous is nothing but can be seen in nearly everything, ever present even as it is ignored, pushed away from the self with all the might we can muster.

Douglas and Sartre are both working with a conception of the viscous as that which is, or should be, separate from the self. Sartre sees the viscous as an invader. In talking about how we apprehend qualities of things, Sartre wants to reject what he sees as the psychoanalytic view of projection. Under Sartre’s conception of this view (and using the example of a slimy smiley, handshake, thought or feeling) the “common opinion” is that one has an idea of behavior that is morally displeasing, and a “sensory intuition” of the slimy, and then these views are projected onto one another. This viewpoint is insufficient for Sartre because he thinks that it “takes for granted what it ought to explain”. Rather, in order to grasp the “symbolic relation” above “we must apprehend baseness already in sliminess and sliminess in certain baseness.”

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10 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 604.
12 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 605.
the slimy, the viscous, are in their very nature, base – something to be abhorred, just as baseness in behavior is itself slimy.

To touch the slimy, to make contact with it, is a risk. Indeed, to “touch the slimy is to risk being dissolved in sliminess.”13 This is an ontological risk unique to the ambiguous consistency of slime. Contact with liquid or solid does not produce this same state of uncertain being. That is, as Sartre says, when we make contact with water, there is no threat of our being absorbed into it. Perhaps there is the threat of being covered or submerged in it, but this does not pose the same risk to the relationship of the for-itself and the in-itself as slime does. Even being partially or totally submerged in water affirms the self as solid in the face of liquidity. Conversely, to touch a solid, dry surface, such as the face of a wooden table, affirms the self against the inexorable hardness.14 There is no fear that one will not be able to let go of the smooth surface of a drinking glass, no worry that one will get entangled with the metal legs of a chair. This is not so with the slimy, there is endless risk in the (non)contact we make with such things.

Slime can be compressed, and that gives us “the impression that it is a being which can be possessed.”15 This initial impression, however, is a grave mistake. The contact with the softness of the slimy gets to what is dangerous about our contact with the slimy. Just when it seems like something that can be dominated, “by a curious reversal, it possesses me.”16 The leech-like character of the slimy is revealed once again. In the Sartrean view of the subject, the for-itself which is supposed to have primacy over the in-itself. In Sartre’s philosophical framework, the in-itself can loosely be thought of as the objective world, while the for-itself

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13 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 610.
14 Douglas, Purity and Danger, 39.
15 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 608.
16 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 608.
represents the project, or event, of the self.\textsuperscript{17} The slimy threatens to reverse the desired framework, to undermine the for-itself. It cannot be properly held, but neither can it properly be let go of. The slimy \textit{clings}, refuses the end of the contact that is only sort of contact at all. The symbolism of the slime, in this possession that it exerts on us, is that there is a possibility that “in this new being the In-itself would draw the For-itself into its contingency.”\textsuperscript{18} Slime, Sartre says, “is the revenge of the In-itself.”\textsuperscript{19} There is dangerous, endless pull of the slimy that is like the sugary, sickly sweetness of femininity.\textsuperscript{20}

The fear of the mode of being that the slimy symbolizes is clarified in the theoretical “antivalue”. The sinking into slime that is described above the apex of the horror of slime. It is “horrible for consciousness to become slimy.”\textsuperscript{21} For if consciousness were to become slimy, it would take on its qualities, becoming thick, sticky, and \textit{slow}. What produces such visceral ontological fear in the Sartre is that “time might become slimy, that facticity might profess continually and insensibly and aboard the For-itself which exists it.”\textsuperscript{22} This is not, as Sartre clarifies, a fear of death or of nothingness, but a fear of “a particular kind of being, which does not actually exist anymore than the In-itself-For-itself and which is only \textit{represented} by the slimy.”\textsuperscript{23} The contact with the slimy, because of its characteristics, symbolizes a kind of being which Sartre fears.

\textsuperscript{17} I would like to note that these are entirely general definitions, a more thorough explanation of the being-in-itself and being -for-itself not being possible in this work.
\textsuperscript{18} Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 609.
\textsuperscript{19} Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 609.
\textsuperscript{20} Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 609. There is then, of course, an undeniable sexism here, especially considering the revulsion Sartre feels for the slimy.
\textsuperscript{21} Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 610.
\textsuperscript{22} Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 611.
\textsuperscript{23} Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 611.
This kind of being, termed an “Antivalue” would be “a being in which the foundationless In-itself has priority over the For-itself.” Antivalue would be a mode of being in which the desired mode of being (where the for-itself has priority over the in-itself) is completely reversed. The slimy, then, represents a state of being that must be literally abhorred. In that state of being, there would be a loss of self-individuation and determination. In many ways, that is the Sartrean fear of the slimy. The fear is a mode of being in which the self would lose its firm footing, its ability to direct, and fall into the contingency of the in-itself. For Sartre, we are helpless in the face of viscosity, powerless in the face of its encroachment.

The Transformation of Viscous Matter, or Working with and against the Viscous

There are many ways in which we work to uphold the fantasy of viscosity as an invading other. That is, this fantasy, as it has been laid out thus far, holds the viscous as something is a threat to us, that can take over us, that, perhaps, can come from us – but is not, fundamentally, us. This fantasy upholds the idea of a fixed, clean, subject, an idealized form that could be discovered if we work hard enough, scrub hard enough, peel back enough layers to reveal an unmarked subject under layers of grime. Additionally, this perspective upholds the idea that we, fundamentally, can be controlled, closed, autonomous subjects. If we can be in control of the viscous (which symbolizes the uncontrolled, the shifting, the formlessness that lacks clear definition or definition) then we can grasp desperately at the fantasy of cleanliness with ever more slippery hands.

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24 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 611.
The theory of labor is epitomized in Bachelard’s discussion of sticky/soft/viscous. Drawing on Sartre’s discussion of the viscous, Bachelard works against the Sartrean viscous to offer an active, labor perspective that puts the active hand in control of slimy matter. In a rather marvelous description, he characterizes the Sartrean viewpoint on the viscous as one where “The world is glue, pitch, paste- always too plaint; a dough that softly kneads the kneader, and whispers to the hand that material absurdity that it should loosen its grip, renounce its labor.”

While this is an accurate description of some of the potential danger that the viscous holds for Sartre, the introduction of labor ushers in an entirely different angle through which to view the viscous. For Bachelard “the material imagination of soft substances is essentially concerned with labor.” That is, Sartre characterizes the slimy as that which takes control of us, a fluidity coming to consume our self-determination. But, with Bachelard, there is a turn towards a consideration of the viscous that involves us activity working to change the consistently of the sticky/viscous thing. By positing the subject as in control, Bachelard thinks that we are no longer in the kind of danger that Sartre proposed. The viscous is dangerous, but unlike Sartre (who thinks we succumb to the viscous) Bachelard sees it is a threat we can conquer.

Once we are in the realm of active hands, we are in control of the viscous. Material labor, from kneading dough, making jam to spreading pitch, allows us to “determine the destiny of matter.” It is thus that we work against the viscous, we do not fall victim to it, but indeed become its enemy. Bachelard was mistaken, then, when he said that soft matter had no enemies. Despite the inability to firmly grasp soft matter (think of the ooze of bread dough between clenched fingers that, when opened, no longer even have a handful left inside) we can

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certainly work with and against it. And certainly, the transformation of matter is more than possible. I do not mean to claim that bread cannot be baked, or molasses cannot be cleaned up – but merely that those actions, even as we think that separate us from the viscous, do not reveal our cleanliness in the way Bachelard would like to think.

The very being of a human, for Bachelard, is revealed in its opposition and action. When the hands take control of matter “a person’s whole being comes to life.” Labor allows us to transcend and overcome the viscous. Spilled syrup is wiped away, dough is kneaded into smoothness and baked until firm. We reshape the material to our will. It is a call to say that this matter, soft matter, is not our matter. What matters for Bachelard is that we do answer this call. He is firm in his assertion that labor will triumph. Bachelard does not consider the errant piece of dough that clings between your fingers even after countless spoonfuls of flour have been added. The jam that sticks, stubbornly, at the bottom of pot and refuses to be transferred to a jar. The honey that runs down your hand while you try in vain to stop its course, the residue it leaves that you can sense even after having washed it off. That is all to say, the potentials for transformation of viscous instantiations does not demonstrate a ubiquitous control over sliminess.

When we take a labor perspective, we are set up against a never-ending task, a viscous that can never be fully transformed into hardness, a softness that will always seek to regrow. Even once the physical matter has been removed, or the residue scrubbed away, viscosity might remain. Take a for an example a person who has touched something viscous, something marked as vile and contaminating in its matter, something produces that affective shudder of revulsion. For instance, as occasionally happens, a person who comes into contact with the mucus of

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another person. This slimy contact might induce an episode of handwashing, that, long after the “actual” residue is gone, the contact is still felt. Matter can be transformed, removed, ignored – but that does not ameliorate or alter our affective responses to it. The viscous always calls us into contact. Slime is something that cannot simply be ignored.

Though Bachelard is certainly right that the Sartrean fear of absorption does not always come to fruition, that we often assert ourselves “over” viscous matter, both viewpoints cling to the idea that the viscous is something entirely other than us. Bachelard presumes that stickiness is outside of us. All his descriptions place the viscous as other, as matter that is not our matter. Bachelard reinforces the fantasy that we are clean in the face of the creep of life, and that the world could be clean too, if only we work enough. And do we not attempt to the very same with our own bodies? This can certainly be seen to be true in relation to the sexed body. One need only to think of the ridiculous number of products aimed at keeping (particularly the “female” body) as clean as fantasized.\textsuperscript{31} Even beyond the particular brand of disgust aimed at feminine bodily fluids one can see all kinds of work put into obscuring the body’s stickiness.

The intense privatization of bodily viscosity works to uphold the dream of a clean subject. We pretend as though the body does not drip, leak, or stick. Certainly, excretions are to be done in private, but the privatization of bodily fluids extends to other viscous substances such as milk, blood, semen, and vaginal fluid. There are many explanations one could offer for the personalization of bodily fluids ranging from the anthropological, sociological to the religious or the medical. However, I would like to offer one that is situated in viscosity. Privatization is part of the work that upholds the fantasy of bodily “dryness”. For example, it is extremely taboo in Western culture to nurse an infant in pubic. Once again, though there are other critical lenses to

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adopt here, I want to argue that part of the issue is because the act of breastfeeding displays the body as porous. Breastfeeding is a literal transfer of bodily substances, an illustration of how we might attach to one another. Therefore, it must be hidden under clothes, in specialized stalls. Women must take great care not to leak through their shirts, to expose a latched infant. Breastfeeding is allowed, acceptable, only under certain circumstances, hidden ones that allow for the maintenance of a fantasy of a unified body.

**Structures of the Self and the Sticky**

We ourselves are sticky. The body in its many iterations is alive with viscous matter. Blood, snot, excrement, vomit, milk, semen, vaginal fluid. All of these forms of viscous matter constitute our existence from the moment of birth, if not before. We can begin, then, as we so often do, with the child. Childhood is an exercise in viscosity, in uncontrolled matter (milk, feces, spit up, soft foods smeared on faces and surfaces). The fantasy, as Bachelard so wonderfully illustrates, is to chart a course into adulthood where the material imagination, which starts with the childhood obsession with softness, should harden over time, moving from soft matter to wood to stone and finally to iron.\textsuperscript{32} This movement away from softness it also a movement towards cleanliness. The normal child moves away from feces, mud, and smeared food towards cleanliness and solidity.\textsuperscript{33} The stickiness of the child’s body, the child’s state of being, accepted because of youth and presumed ignorance of material convention, becomes unacceptable, disgusting, \textit{wrong} in what should be the solidity of adulthood.

\textsuperscript{33} Bachelard, \textit{Earth and Reveries of Will}, 82.
But of course, this is a mere ideal, a fantasy that is readily seen to be false. A simple examination of the treatment of the female body shows the persistence of softness. Bachelard reveals his own sexist sensibilities by stating that the feminine imagination never reaches the “highest” stage of solidity, iron.\(^{34}\) That is, at least, when it comes to the “female body”, puberty, and the subsequent entrance into adulthood, produces a new, perhaps more potent, viscosity. Despite the ubiquity of the stickiness of the body, bodily substances are highly gendered. I must note that as I move forward in this section that I will be using the terms “male body” and “female body”, as well as ascribing certain bodily secretions to certain sexes. This is not to reinforce a strict binary construction of gender, nor to uphold any kind of biological essentialism, but is to ease a conversation centered on social constitution. There can be no illusion that the “biological” can be separated from the “social”. That is to say, despite the fluidity of gender, sexual characteristics and their gendered ethical valances (which are what is at stake here) must be discussed as they can be seen to function.

Prior to a proper discussion of gendered substances, I first would like to clarify what bodily fluids symbolize. Aside from tears and urine, which could truly be considered liquid, bodily fluids tend towards the slimy, sticky, and viscous. They are, by and large, characterized by thickness, slowness, clinging and dripping. All of these things can be found “outside” of us, but what does it mean when they come from what we might consider “inside”? As Elizabeth Grosz says, “body fluids attest to the permeability of the body.”\(^{35}\) They subvert:

a subject’s aspiration toward autonomy and self-identity… a testimony of the fraudulence or impossibility of the “clean” and “proper.” They resist the determination that marks solids, for they are without any shape or form of their own. They are engulfing, difficult to be rid of; any separation from them is not a matter of certainty, as it may be in the case of solids. Body fluids flow, they seep, they infiltrate; their control is a matter of vigilance,

\(^{34}\) Bachelard, *Earth and Reveries of Will*, 82.
never guaranteed. In this sense, they betray a certain irreducible materiality; they assert the priority of the body over subjectivity; they demonstrate the limits of subjectivity in the body, the irreducible specificity of particular bodies. (Grosz, 1994, 194)

The body is semi-permeable - not one with the world but not entirely separate from it either. And this seeping, weeping, uncontrolled flow which does not just come from us but is us often produces horror, shame, disgust. All of these function to separate us from the viscous, to locate the horrifying in the viscous itself, to mark it off as feminine and uncontrolled, something that seeks to possess us rather than what we are. As Grosz says, working against both Sartre and Douglas, “it is the production of an order that renders female sexuality and corporeality marginal, indeterminate, and viscous that constitutes the sticky and the viscous with their disgusting, horrifying connotations.”36 That is, it is only in certain orders, because of certain social orders, that the viscous is a horrifying feminine.

The viscous, the undefined, the leaking – particularly when it comes to the body – is inextricably associated with the feminine.37 It is the fluids of the feminine that produce the most disgust, the most fear – they are the viscous that must be most violently rejected. (One need only to think back the Sartrean fear of clinging femininity to see this manifest.) As Grosz says “in the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or simply the phallus but self-containment”38

Unlike the entirely phallo-centric view which might construe the social constitution of women through the lack of penis, Grosz illustrates the utility of posing the social constitution of women

36 Grosz, Volatile Bodies, 195.
37 I would like to clarify that I am only referring to way in which the female body has been characterized throughout Western thought. While it is true that in other ways (when it comes to cleaning, straightening up, hygiene) women are often characterized as neat compared to men, that discussion does not fall under the purview of the work.
38 Grosz, Volatile Bodies, 203.
as leaky. And if the feminine is the porous, then the masculine ideal “involves the constitution of the sealed-up, impermeable body.”\textsuperscript{39} The masculine, firmly placed on the side of solidity and cleanness, disavows the viscous exchange with the world. Grosz certainly is not claiming that women actually \textit{are} more viscous than men, but that women are viewed as such. The idealized “male” body is not “really” any less viscous, leaky, or open to the world than the “female” is. However, in a philosophical tradition that historically favors the fixed and determinate over the undefined and fluid – the ontology characterized by the feminine is denigrated.

Though there are many important ways in which Grosz ushers in a conception of the viscous body that works against the abject terror of Sartre, her own characterization of the viscous body is flawed. That is, Grosz is insightful in her acknowledgment that the viscous is not \textit{actually} anything (as opposed to Sartre – who thinks the viscous \textit{actually} is horrible), and in her careful explication of the many ways in which bodily fluids are constitutive of embodiment. However, as Grosz says, bodily fluids “infiltrate”, “betray” and “assert”.\textsuperscript{40} Though this is certainly Grosz’s characterization of a “normative” view on bodily fluids, these terms are also representative of her own conception of the viscous. This is a conception which characterizes the subject as trapped in their materially which is essentially apparent in bodily fluids.

Above all else, Grosz sees the stickiness of the body as representative of irreducible sexual difference. That is, the variety of flows and fluids that are specific to sexual organs lead Grosz to conclude that sexual and gendered difference renders men and women into separable, binary categories. In making this claim not only does Grosz express blatant transphobia, but she also theorizes a materially fixed subject.\textsuperscript{41} For Grosz, as can even be seen in the above

\textsuperscript{39} Grosz, \textit{Volatile Bodies}, 201.
\textsuperscript{40} Grosz, \textit{Volatile Bodies}, 194.
\textsuperscript{41} Grosz, \textit{Volatile Bodies}, 207-208.
discussion, bodily fluids (despite the movement and lack of fixity that characterizes their viscosity) reveals an “irreducible specificity.”\textsuperscript{42} This leaves Grosz’s acknowledgement of the porousness of the body permeated with a sense of entrapment. While Grosz offers a compelling account of the nature of bodily fluids, the materially fixed subject she ends up positing works against her own claims about the socio-historically contingent nature of bodily signification.

I would like to move away from Grosz here, who seeks to reinscribe binary sexual difference through irreducible bodily characteristics. I am not arguing for a “universal” body, nor a false ideal of a Body (which, always, really, is white and male), nor do I wish to pretend that we are not physically differentiated. What I do wish to argue is that physical differences are not irreducible, that (unlike Grosz) I think the material form of a body is open to change, that we are matter, but not irreducibly so. There are many kinds of viscous substances that make up and emit out of the human body in its complexity. All of us are constituted in through the viscosity of the body, bound to a set of possibilities but not a pure determination.

Furthermore, bodily fluids often serve as points of connection, of relation. Breastfeeding, as mentioned earlier, is a case in which the bodily fluids serve as a relational substance. To share bodily fluid with someone is to be stuck to them – literally and metaphorically. A similar analysis could be offered for sexual contact. Here, too, I would like to be clear that there are many other relevant modes through which to analyze the privatization of sexual contact, fluids, and the limited nature of socially acceptable sexual discussions, and I am taking up a highly specific one here. As in breastfeeding, sexual contact involves a literal and metaphorical stickiness. Viscous fluids are transferred, bodies are stuck together.

\textsuperscript{42} Grosz, \textit{Volatile Bodies}, 194.
Metaphors of Viscosity

A few weeks ago, I had lunch with a friend. During the walk to our lunch the plastic bottle their gel hand sanitizer was in opened, and the contents of the bottle spilled into their coat pocket. They went to retrieve the bottle from their pocket and in doing so stuck their hand into the gelatinous puddle that had formed. Immediately they pulled their hand from the mess, wrinkled their nose, and said “ew, that was disgusting.” Then, they paused, looked at me, and asked “why did I say that was disgusting? It’s hand sanitizer so really isn’t it clean?” In many ways the question my friend asked was entirely the right one. Why did the gel produce disgust in them immediate upon contact? Why did it not matter that hand sanitizer is “actually” clean, sanitizer, that which is meant to get rid of germs, not carry that which would make it disgusting. We can return, for a moment, to matter itself. The associations of the disgusting are attached to certain material forms. The texture of gel, regardless of what the gel is or does, is enough for it to be disgusting.

The language of disgust exists in complex relation to the sticky. As I have already said, the viscous is not always disgusting, but disgust (and fear and abjection) are often used as linguistic mechanisms to mark the viscous as other. As Sara Ahmed says, “the sticky and the disgusting have been linked, if not reduced to each other.”\textsuperscript{43} We can think of a plethora of viscous substances (mud, snot, slime, pus, etc..) that we mark off as disgusting and in need of clearing away. However, importantly, not all slimy, sticky, or viscous things are disgusting. Disgust itself is socially and historically contingent, changing in meaning and objects. Although Ahmed’s discussion is limited to the “sticky”, interplay between the slimy, sticky and the viscous keeps

\textsuperscript{43} Ahmed, “The Performativity of Disgust,” 89.
Ahmed herself takes glue as an example, a substance I have addressed previously. Ahmed rightly argues that “glue doesn’t bring with it disgusting associations because we think of glue as \textit{something we use to stick other things together}, rather than being something that threatens to stick to us.” Drawing on the meaning of stickiness where the sticky thing or object functions to hold things together, glue is something with clear function that hardens into utility and solidity. Of course, what Ahmed does not explicitly discuss, particularly when it comes to glue, is that in practice the use of glue is messy. It spills over, leaves \textit{residue}, worms between cracks to rest on our skin.

Perhaps, as Ahmed argues, we can say that “stickiness becomes disgusting \textit{only when the skin surface is at stake such that what is sticky threatens to stick to us}.” Though this framing, like much of the work that has come before it, posits the sticky as outside of us, Ahmed is drawing out something fundamental about the fear of the slimy. As we have seen in Sartre, the viscous becomes horrible, disgusting, when it threatens our bodies, our consciousnesses. Unlike Sartre, who thinks the slimy is inherently disgusting, Ahmed reveals that sliminess only \textit{becomes} disgusting under certain orders. Working with Elizabeth Grosz to push back against Sartre’s view – which considers the viscous itself a repulsive \textit{quality} – Ahmed argues instead that stickiness and sliminess are not inherently disgusting, “slimy things become disgusting only given the maintenance of an order of things, which allows such absorption to become threatening.” It is only in a system where looseness and absorption are denigrated that sliminess takes on the quality of the disgusting.

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\textsuperscript{44} Ahmed, “The Performativity of Disgust,” 89.  
\textsuperscript{45} Ahmed, “The Performativity of Disgust”, 90.  
\textsuperscript{46} Ahmed, “The Performativity of Disgust,” 90.
So then, perhaps stickiness is not a quality that adheres to an object. Instead of “using stickiness to describe an object’s surface, we can think of stickiness as an effect of surfacing, as an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs.”47 That is, stickiness is not simply a surface description, but an effect. To consider stickiness as an effect, as a historically situated effect of contact, is to open oneself onto a sticky world. Once one acknowledges that “stickiness involves a form of relationality, or a ‘with-ness’, in which the elements that are ‘with’ get bound together” the sheer ubiquity of sticky metaphors and understanding becomes clear.48 Take, for example, the idea of being “stuck” to someone. When a person “sticks” to someone else the material function of stickiness, holding, bubbles to the surface. A person “sticks” to someone in many ways. One way a person may “stick” to another is following them around at a party – another is by “sticking” by them when things are hard or taking their side in an argument. Although these are all quite different situations stickiness is functioning as a hold or an attachment in all three. Just as glue or tape binds two objects together, different things bind people to each other, or people to objects. To stick to someone, to be stuck to someone, even momentarily, is to be held in relation to them, bound to share experiences and time.

What, then, of sliminess, of residue? Just as with sticky matter, even when physical proximity or emotional work of stickiness is done, the encounter is not over. We rarely, if ever, come away clean from an encounter with another. We can think materially, like when sticky fingers of a child who has just had a candy leave sugary tracks on everything they touch. There are also the many ways in which sticky encounters leave residue on us. As Ahmed says, “to get

stuck to something sticky is also to become sticky."49 When we peel away from someone, something or some experience that has a hold on us, the residue of that encounter remains on us. A person does not disappear from one’s life once a relationship has ended, they stick around in memories, reminders, in the things they altered in one’s life or habits. Experiences, too, can stick with a person if they had a strong enough hold, they linger in bits and pieces, not entirely, but as layer that one cannot quite get off. These residues enrich and change our lives, keep experiences and people close to us even after we have lost them.

Sliminess or stickiness in a relation is not always positive. Slimy, when used in reference to a person, currently carries a negative valence. To call someone “slimy” (as Sartre himself says) is to associate them with untrustworthiness and baseness. A slimy person oozes, leaks tendrils that try to pull in the unsuspecting. Similarly, calling a person “slippery” implies that there are facets of their personality that one literally cannot get a grasp on, and often also that they are untrustworthy. The person that cannot be metaphorically grasped (socially) is one without a fixed self. A deceitful person is one who’s allegiances cannot be taken at face value, one who could potentially betray them at any moment. What then, about the example of a person or a place that “oozes” or “exudes” charm. Sometimes it feels as though saying a person “oozes” charm is pejorative, but not necessarily so. Sometimes it simply means that the charm is inexorable, that it is leaking out in a way that we cannot help but get stuck to. We return, then, to the idea that, subjects, feelings stick with us, cling like unyielding residue.

Then there is the issue “clinginess” to contend with. It is generally regarded as a bad thing when a person is overly clingy, will not let go, is “too” attached. One could regard this as one person being too absorbed into another, letting the boundaries of their own self float and

meld into another’s. To be too enmeshed, to be stuck in a way that one cannot get out of, to be stuck in slime that is too slippery to escape, that holds one down with its stickiness – this evokes horror, co-dependence, a loss of any self. In many ways it is this mode of being that was so feared by Sartre. The Sartrean fear is that one becomes so sticky, slow, viscous, that one loses control over the project of the self. When one person sticks to another, they hold them in a kind of relation. This can be a kind of horror (as in the case of the clingy person) where the stickiness calls up entrapment. Even under a conception of a relational self, one that does not exist in the pure self-determination Sartre imagines, one can imagine being sticky in ways that are harmful or unpleasant.

We become sticky, covered in residue, through our contact with stickiness. As Ahmed says, “a sticky surface is one that will incorporate other elements into the surface such that the surface of a sticky object is in a dynamic process of re-surfacing.”50 That is, stickiness, even as it is a force of attachment, is not static. It is a dynamic force, changing and shifting – sticking, un-sticking, and re-sticking again. I would argue, however, that “re-surfacing” might be better phrased as “re-constituting” since it is not simply the surface that changes, but the constitution of the object (or person) in the world. Even though it may be literally or metaphorically the surface of an object or person that is shifting in its sliminess, I would like to be very clear that it is not just that the surface of the object changes while some “essential” features remain the same beneath the flow of viscosity on the exterior. Rather, an object or person is in part constituted in their legibility as what they are though what sticks to them, what has stuck to them, and what they stick to.

Stickiness charts a path of transference across objects, people, and signs. The stickiness of a surface “still tells us a history of the object that is not dependent on the endurance of the quality of stickiness: what sticks ‘shows us’ where the object has travelled through what it has gathered onto its surface, gatherings that become a part of the object, and call into question its integrity as an object.”\textsuperscript{51} Ahmed argues that the integrity of an object, its wholeness or unity, is called into question because of the iterability of the object. In many ways I would argue that this is true. Any kind of essentially fixed nature or inherent unity is swept away under an understanding of the viscous. Understanding the ways in which objects, bodies and signs are constituted and re-constituted through the shifting fields of viscosity means letting go of inherent unity. Indeed, it means letting go of the idea of a fixed object, a fixed self, a solid ground. Instead, one must accept the slippery ground on which we stand, our semi-permeable selves leaking in relation to the world.

As has already been touched on, it is through contact that we become sticky. To “get stuck to something sticky is also to become sticky. In the event of being cut off from a sticky object, an object (including the skin surface) may remain sticky and may ‘pick up’ other objects.”\textsuperscript{52} This is, of course, through residue, which can function as a new site of viscosity for that which has come into contact with the sticky. We can take, for example, what William Ian Miller says about those who study disgusting things. Those who study things like disgust, for example, become stuck to their subject matter. Those who study disgust become themselves disgusting through contact with the disgusting – a particularly potent example because of the association between the sticky and the disgusting. As a scholar of disgust himself, Miller is well

\textsuperscript{52} Ahmed, “The Performativity of Disgust,” 91.
aware of how mere proximity or association, be it theoretical or physical, can cling to a person. Like all others, those connections are not to easily severed. They follow, they leave residue.

As Ahmed argues “Stickiness then is about what objects do to other objects – it involves a transference of affect – but it is a relation of ‘doing’ in which there is not a distinction between passive or active, even though the stickiness of one object might come before the stickiness of the other, such that the other seems to cling to it.” The lack of distinction between a passive and an active is absolutely crucial here. In Sartre, the viscous is an active invader from which the consciousness can only sink away. Consciousness (passive) is acted upon by the active viscous. In Bachelard, the viscous is a passive substance that we, the self, act upon, transform. Both viewpoints set up paradigms in which the self and the viscous are fundamentally opposed. But what if Ahmed is right, and the strict dichotomy of active and passive simply fails in this moment? What if the relation between sticky bodies, between objects and signs, selves, and contact, is one of relationality?

The sticky, slimy and the viscous can be thought of as characterizing a relation with the world. That is, the qualities of viscous matter – its softness, ungraspability, its stickiness and residue, its evasion of categories – these qualities can be thought of as characterizing the relation of the self and the world, and the self and others. Sticky relationality – what and who sticks, clings, and leaves residue – functions to hold us in paths of transference. That which sticks (be it a memory or a person) may not be pleasant. Slimy or sticky contact can be cloying, entrapping, nauseating (think of the person who is clingy, or co-dependent or unctuous). But it can also be pleasurable, caring, significant (think of sex, emotionally affective moments, of ideas that cling to you because of their relevance/utility/or significance). That is to say, broadly, that relations characterized through viscosity, whatever they may be, matter. It is not just that the matter
matters (though it does) but that recognizing the viscosity of relationality allows one to move away from an isolatable subject, to understand our constitution in the world as relational subjects.

As I have said previously, it is through viscous relationalities (in part) that we are constituted as subjects. Though Ahmed acknowledges that histories of contact become part of the object, her discussion stays at the level of the surface. Ahmed is mainly considering the surface of the body, of the object, of contacts of transference occurring at the level. There is certainly precedent for this form of argument. The horror and disgust associated with contact with the slimy is often one where is the skin itself is at risk of being touched by something or someone slimy. However, remaining at the level of the surface allows for the assumption of a subject that could become clean. A subject whose residue could be wiped away, could fade over time, and emerge clean. To argue for viscosity as a constitutive force, as I am, is to say that these sticky relations do not only become part of person or object but constitute them as legible subjects.

Perhaps Bachelard was right when he called the viscous a “dough that kneads the kneader.” Perhaps the dough does knead us, but we knead it back. Perhaps we can enter into a delicate balance with the viscosity that constitutes us. The dough kneads us, and we knead the dough. But even this cycle may be too clean. As apt as Bachelard’s description is, kneading dough presupposes a one-to-one contact that results with the inevitable hardening of bread into dough. Viscous relations are not a closed loop, or an entirely smooth one, but a web of sticky interconnectivity.
Conclusion

What would it mean to accept that we are gelatinous beings, kneading the world and being kneaded in return? To acknowledge that we are bound to objects, other’s, meanings though attachments, residues, histories of contact? There is no doubt that we become stuck on people, places, memories, experiences. Contact makes its mark, leaves it residue, holds us in relation to objects, people, places. There is no fixed, isolatable subject, but one that is constituted in relation to others. We are all working through and with the viscous. Existing as we are in complex sets of relations. Trails of slime holding us together, leaving residue when we move apart.

Perhaps an understanding of the constitutive force of viscosity could then offer an ontology that works against a veritable obsession with a fixed self. That is if, as I have argued a subject is in part constituted by what or who sticks to them, has stuck to them, and what or who they want or do not want to stick to, then we are in part constituted through viscosity, through a conception of the self that is not static. It is important to note here that viscosity is not liquidity. Liquids are formless in themselves, defined by the fact that they are given shape only by the container that they are held in. Constitution through liquidity might best be thought of as a process of total absorption. But I would like to be very clear that I am not proposing a liquid self, flowing into anything that might contain it, but a viscous one. Viscous substances are characterized by their thickness, their resistance to easy movement. The very slowness that Sartre abhors is what keeps a mode of being characterized by viscosity from slipping into a non-identity. A subject constituted through viscosity is not a liquid subject, not without form, but one that is affected by the movement, by the relation of others. Viscous substances are mutable in
form, but they (often) have shape even when out of “containers.” The thickness that puts viscosity “between” a liquid and a solid is what gives it a kind of form.

What is, precisely, viscous about our constitution into relation? As I have said, there is, of course, the literal exchange of bodily matter that occurs with those (theoretically) closest to us, family and romantic partners. There is the staying nature of experiences, memories, ideas. Indeed, the prevalence of metaphors of stickiness (saying something “stuck” with one, etc.….) reveals how well the material is symbolized in those kinds of connection. We can also think of how it feels to be stuck on someone, to be stuck with someone. How it can be hard to stick to something or someone in the first place – but then ever so difficult to pull away. And when one does, how people and experiences leave residue within you, reminders that they were once there.

Viscosity, perhaps more than other conceptions of an relational subject, pulls us away from the idea that we can be clean. That is, even when acknowledging that we are constituted into relations, there is often a kind of neatness presented. One could conceptualize a relational subject that exists in one-to-one relations that are a kind of balancing act. The relation breaks, falls away, and the subject is left behind, clean as they were before. But stickiness, sliminess, and viscosity as matter can help symbolize the messiness of relation, how rarely (if ever) we come away clean, without residue, from an interaction or a relationship. Furthermore, positing constitution through these sticky relations argues that there never was a “clean,” non-relational subject in the first place, that to be a subject is to be sticky. There is a way in which this recognition is already present, but not spoken of. That is to say, the very prevalence of sticky metaphors, of the language of viscosity that pervades, reveals an understanding of the stickiness of relation, the sliminess of being in the world.
The un-fixed nature of the viscous makes it full of possibilities. Mason himself states that “what makes the viscous so useful, so joyful, is that it is a site of abundance, it means far too much.” There is abundance in ooze, in the overflow and the stickiness. There is endless play in reconstitution, in the processes of sticking and re-sticking. That is to say, it is not just play as a kind of enjoyment, but play as movement, as change. The selves we are, the way we exist in the world, is a project in change. We are gelatinous beings, existing together in the life soup of the world.

53 Mason, The Viscous, 24.
Bibliography


