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Shit in Public

by Gay Hawkins

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It's difficult to imagine a world without a distinction between public and private though there are times when you get an insight into what it might be like. Seeing half the contents of your garbage bin spread over the street after collection night is one of those times. After irritation, this experience can trigger strong feelings of disgust and exposure. All this evidence of your intimate life revealed as waste. In the rush to pick it up your body shudders with the horror of contamination.

Consider a different example. When it rains heavily in Sydney the stormwater system, designed to manage runoff from streets, is regularly polluted with raw sewage that leaks into it from broken pipes and ageing infrastructure.² This makes the beaches dangerously toxic and it can produce a strange miasma. When the rain clears and everything is meant to smell fresh and cleansed you can often get a strong stench emanating from gutters and street grilles. Shit is in the air. This is unpleasant but we generally don't feel personally exposed, let alone

implicated. We don't feel that our privacy has been challenged. It's an environmental problem, a failure of infrastructure. It can upset our sense of civic order and public health but our response is most often limited to 'what are "they" going to do about it', if we even care at all.

In these two urban encounters waste mediates the public private distinction in quite different ways. In the first, it is resolutely connected to practices of the personal, to rituals of everyday life and routines of self-maintenance. Waste functions as a marker of the structural differentiation between the realm of intimacy and public life; managing it is something you do in private, something that is naturalised as part of a pre-public individuality. Its removal, while bureaucratically managed, takes place largely in secret. While our bottles and papers may be displayed on the street in recycling crates for all to see, our really intimate waste, the waste that has been closest to our bodies or that is organic, is secreted away in drains and enclosed bins. While the blocked or overflowing toilet may be the ultimate domestic nightmare, spilt bins can generate a similar sense of abjection. Even though bin waste is not shit, it can metonymically suggest it. Contact with its slimy, putrefying reality has the capacity to disturb the body's boundaries and sense of stability. Waste that is most threatening to the self has to be rendered out of sight and mind as quickly as possible.

In the second, the public waste evident in deteriorating stormwater systems and contaminated rivers and beaches is most often represented as an environmental issue; regularly generating special investigative reports in the press and even the occasional beachside mass demonstration. Accounts of this waste problem constitute it as a failure of the state. Using the rhetoric of environmentalism, they are full of shocking statistics, attacks on utilities and queries about threats to public health. Sewage is seen as the domain of infrastructure. Its unwelcome appearance on the shoreline or gushing out of stormwater channels straight into the ocean triggers all sorts of public anxieties: possible epidemics, a site of pleasure and hedonism threatened, fear of a poisoned world.

The differences between these examples seem straightforward. There's private waste that is nobody's business but ours, and there's public waste that is the responsibility of government, a matter for urban administration. The status of waste in public and private spheres seems incommensurable. When we manage waste at home our subjectivity and self are at stake. When we protest about filthy beaches and ocean outfalls we become activist citizens concerned to make the state account for its actions: concerned to advocate for oceans and waterways to be protected from gross exploitation.

In the long journey from the bathroom to the ocean via underground networks of sewers and treatment works our bodily waste is transformed and so too is our relationship to it. Sanitation functions as a mediating system reordering not just the biological effects of shit but also its political and social meanings. This means that when we protest about visible urban waste and ocean pollution our personal waste practices are displaced by the performative demands of being a 'concerned' public. And in order to be a public, to invoke notions of 'public' health or 'public' interest or 'public' outrage, a necessary generalisation and abstraction takes place. Publics involve the active suspension of selfhood, the denial of any sense of particular bodies with their messy biological processes. As Michael Warner says 'the moment of apprehending something as public is one in which we imagine, if imperfectly, indifference to those particularities, to ourselves' (2002, 160). In other words, publics don't shit.

I am both fascinated and troubled by this proposition. Fascinated because it signals the important place of waste in the formation of the modern subject. Troubled because I wonder about the effects of this denial of the shitting body on activist campaigns around ocean pollution. Does this denial limit the political imagination of such campaigns? Does it restrict our sense of obligation to the oceans and rivers where our waste ends up? In taking up Warner's challenge to understand how private life can be made publicly relevant I want to investigate the relationship of our most intimate waste management practices to public campaigns around shit. I want to think about the ethical and environmental implications of our attachment to particular waste habits. What do these habits mean for the self and its most visceral registers *and* for notions of public order and environmental sustainability? While different measures of cleanliness and purity operate in public and private, both spheres depend on efficient techniques of waste elimination to ensure that shit doesn't disturb the stability of system. When shit happens, the demand for it to be rendered invisible and odourless generally means disposal in a place classified as somehow outside both public and private spheres, oceans and rivers, for example. The cultural and political distinctions between public and private are sustained by the gross exploitation of what is at once both 'nature' and a secondary treatment works.

My aim is to understand how the problematisation of shit in public is implicated in the 'privatisation' of shit. In making human waste management a state matter through the formation of regulations and institutions to administer it, the realm of privacy and personal habit was substantially reordered. And it is only by understanding how shit has been deployed to produce a modern public private distinction that it is possible to assess the fundamental paradox of shit in public. A paradox that goes something like this; horror at the very idea of defecating on the street and resigned acceptance of overflowing stormwater drains and waste treatment facilities pouring raw sewage into the ocean.

But does the sight of shit overflowing its limits ever completely repress the fact of our private waste practices? Or are the forms of embodiment and the social relations that surround this most intimate waste matter too powerful to contain? And, if they are, in what ways could they be used to generate new campaigns against environmental disintegration, new practices of ecological citizenship and everyday intimacy? These are the questions that motivate this essay.

Warner argues that struggles over the meanings of sexual intimacy and privacy have the potential to elaborate different practices. They can imagine different worlds that make trouble for oppressive public norms and restricted cultural contexts. Could the same be said of defecating? The visceral intensity of these struggles, their transgressive capacity to disrupt the boundaries that we take as 'natural', is a stark reminder of the political power of disturbance. Experiences of horror and abjection are where we confront the constitutive uncertainty of naturalised cultural distinctions. There is no doubt that shit (like sex) can be very disturbing and this is why it is of inestimable value for understanding the contingency of cultural boundaries. By looking at some examples of public campaigns around shit it is possible to see how a politics of disturbance can be generated around human waste and what its radical possibilities and limits are. But first a brief detour to the history of shit.

While there are many histories of the emergence of public sanitation these are often little more than triumphalist accounts of engineering and civic improvement. They reduce the sewer to the technological innovation of a few male visionaries and the effect is to write discourse and bodies out of the story.³ Yet, in making human waste a governmental responsibility, the realm of privacy and personal habit was substantially reordered.⁴ As Poovey (1995), Laporte (2000) and Osborne (1996) all show, the language of modern government has been fundamental to the transmutation of shit; implicating it in the reordering of bodies, family, public space and urban administration. And it is precisely the links between bodies, infrastructure and social regulation that is the issue. The sewer may be a great technological and public health achievement but it is also what *literally* connects shit as public problem and shit as private secret. Sewers link us to the state without any sense of direct intervention; *they are where citizenship and subjectivity intermingle*. This means that their technical and hygienic effects cannot be isolated from their ethical and visceral ones. Flushing, washing your hands, rituals of cleaning and self-care, as naturalised as they seem, are a product of very particular forms of reason. Habitus has a history.

Histories attentive to how the body is the site for modern disciplines disrupt the idea that shit is merely the bottom line of the body's biological identity. Like sex, it has been subject to shifting mentalities. This means that the biological reality of shit is less the object than our relationships with it. By tracing how practices of personal waste management are caught up in larger political assemblages and become implicated in the constitution of the self it is possible to see how modern public private distinctions have situated shit at the centre of norms of self-mastery and developed urban infrastructure. The logic that unites these two waste arenas is disappearance; keeping shit out of sight, eliminating that without value as quickly and efficiently as possible. And it is the possibility of elimination and removal failing that makes human waste management fraught with the dangers of personal shame and public contamination.

The key value of the poststructuralist histories of shit referred to above is that they all reinforce Warner's central argument in *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002) that privacy is publicly constituted. Their accounts of the historical specificity of different forms of privacy and personhood challenge psychoanalytic accounts of the self. By examining how various political and social processes mediate the meanings and experience of intimacy, these histories of shit foreground the shifting distinctions between public and private. They show how shit has given this distinction moral and visceral intensity.

Poo Protests

What then of public struggles over shit? I want compare two very different examples of political activism around shit, two poo protests: Sydney's famous Turn Back the Tide concert on Bondi Beach in March 1989 and the toilet festivals of Mumbai and other cities in India that Appadurai discusses in his paper 'Deep Democracy' (2002). What kind of publics are formed when shit is made into a political object? How do these protests configure the place of waste in the public private distinction? Does the formation of publics around shit necessarily involve indifference to the particularity of ourselves, as Warner argues? Do intimate waste practices get ignored or mobilized and to what end?

In January 1989 the *Sydney Morning Herald* began running a series of investigative reports on the state of Sydney's beaches. These highlighted extensive water pollution evident not only in the filth washed up on shore but also in reports of sick fish and sick swimmers. The primary target was the Water Board, the government agency involved in managing Sydney's water supply and human waste. Ocean outfalls and their failings were identified as the source of widespread ocean pollution. And no wonder: since white settlement all drains built in Sydney have pointed seaward. The first sewers built in the 1850s drained raw sewage into the harbour and this use of water as a waste treatment facility has remained largely unchanged since. For waste bureaucracies the value of rivers and oceans lay not in their recreational or real estate possibilities but in their seemingly unlimited potential as sites of elimination. Here was the ultimate natural resource for allowing waste to disappear and be rendered invisible.

Led by the media, the 1989 expose accused the Water Board of covering up the facts of serious ocean contamination and misleading the public. *Surflife*, the Water Board's daily report on the state of the beaches, was exposed as based on nothing more than visual observation. Scientific analysis of water samples revealed a very different story – high levels of faecal coliform, viruses and highly toxic industrial waste. Outraged reaction spread, the Surf Lifesaving Association threatened to remove its volunteers from beach patrol, fish sales plummeted, swimmers deserted the beach and doctors reported increased levels of illness amongst people who had recently surfed. Meanwhile, the media kept up the pressure branding the whole issue 'Watergate'.⁵

In this context the Water Board struggled to regain public credibility. Since the late 1970s it had been planning to build extended ocean outfalls in order to manage increased pressure on the sewerage system and increased pollution. Vigorous debate had surrounded this proposal, much of it devoted to disputes over the environmental effects of outfalls and the interpretation of scientific studies. Public calls for alternative and more environmentally friendly strategies for dealing with shit were met with claims that they were too expensive. The Water Board argued that ocean outfalls were the cheapest solution for dealing with a city's shit; more environmentally sustainable options would cost residents far more and generate significant resistance. The Water Board mobilized scientific 'evidence' to show that extended deepwater outfalls were environmentally fine. That effluent would behave just as predicted. But a group of sceptical environmental and community groups refused to buy this; effluent wasn't that obedient especially when there had been no secondary treatment. The Board's refusal to include this in the proposed outfalls meant that the ocean was, once again, regarded as a waste treatment facility. Currents, dilution and dispersal were seen as adequate alternatives to comprehensive treatment before dumping.

Lobby groups also raised the issue of industrial waste, the illegal and toxic substances coursing through drains- what would extended outfalls do about this? Stop the Ocean Pollution (STOP) and People Opposed to Ocean Outfalls (POOO), two small activist groups, campaigned as effectively as they could during the 1980s, struggling to get their position in the media but the Water Board had a massive public relations unit and a very cosy relationship with the press. Until 1989, that is.

The debate about ocean outfalls and contaminated waters took off when the press finally challenged the Water Board about its technocratic ethos and lack of accountability. But this challenge only escalated into a mass campaign because the small activist groups already established, STOP and POOO, grabbed the opportunity to mobilise public anger about state lies and state pollution. In late 1988 POOO organized a little publicized rally at Manly beach that attracted 5,000 people on a rainy day. In March 1989 another event was planned. Called 'Turn Back the Tide' it was envisaged as a rock concert on Bondi beach with a crowd of 50,000 the optimistic expectation. 250,000 people showed up and Jonathon Coleman, radio personality, named the event the 'Aussie Woodstock of Poo'.⁶

The phenomenal success of the 'Turn Back the Tide' concert surprised organizers, government, media and, most of all, the Water Board. It was no longer possible to claim that the issue was a media beat up; a mass rally of a quarter of a million people signalled a real groundswell of support. It signalled a new public formed by an ongoing media debate, emerging at an event as a mass assembly, linked not just by visibility and common action but also by a common anxiety.

But exactly how did shit become a political object in this campaign and was a different future for it imagined? Warner's (2002) account of the dynamics of publics and counterpublics is invaluable here. His book meticulously outlines the discursive and political operations of *a* public as distinct from *the* public. His aim is to understand how publics are historically formed, their crucial place in the modern social landscape and their role in constructing social worlds. The mass of bodies that gathered on Bondi beach was a public organized, brought into being, by discourse. Press reports, television news and radio talkback created a public merely through the fact that people all over Sydney gave the various discourses on ocean pollution some attention. No matter how minimal, listening, reflecting and glancing at the headlines is a way of participating in a public and accepting being addressed by its terms (Warner, 2002,53).

Being at the 'Turn Back the Tide' concert reflects another of Warner's premises: stranger sociability. If a public is a relation among strangers, then the bodies gathered at Bondi performed their public belonging not by sharing a common identity but by accepting and inhabiting the rhetoric of public address. Participants' private subjective concerns about oceans contaminated with shit were experienced as resonating with complete strangers. In this way the discourses circulating were ambiguously personal *and* impersonal. They gave, as Warner says, 'a general social relevance to private thought and life'(58). This performative dimension of publics, this sense of their membership being active, free, voluntary and non-institutionalised sets the 'Turn Back the Tide' event apart from the wider social movement of environmentalism. While pollution was a central point of discursive mobilization and while various environmental and activist groups were involved in mounting the campaign, the public formed could not be described as sharing a common history or political ideology. Those who turned up at Bondi beach could not be dismissed as 'rent-a-crowd' or the usual 'mad greenies'. As a public they didn't pre-exist, they were called into being by a vision of a contaminated world.

Warner argues that processes of public formation do not involve persuasion as this presumes that a public already exists waiting to be convinced by rational discussion – and that that public will all have the same reading of available discourses (83). The other problem with the assumption of pre-existing publics is that it excludes the poetic or textual qualities of discourse. Sense and reason are privileged rather than the play of meaning, affect and the expressive possibilities of public speech.

As one of the founders of POOO said, when interviewed about why he set up the organization: 'dumping shit and everything else in the ocean just seems wrong, I don't want to surf in shit'(Browne, 6). Not a lot of poetry here but definitely a sense of moral unease. The discourses surrounding 'Turn Back the Tide' and the POOO Parades were often driven by an affective horror, by a sense of personal and mass disgust. This affective register gave expression to a counter discourse about shit in public that challenged the Water Board's notions of technocratic efficiency and scientific evidence. And this was the source of their force. The rash of cartoons depicting people diving into toilet bowls or lifesavers hauling a roll of toilet paper into the surf instead of a rescue rope are evidence of how an alternative discourse about sewers began circulating. This discourse created a different image of the issue by making explicit the link between bathrooms and the beach. By exposing the literal connection between private waste practices and public space, the 'Turn Back the Tide' public produced another set of understandings of the outfall crisis. Their vision of a poisoned world, of the ocean as a waste dump, didn't just speak to a deep anxiety about boundaries collapsing, to a sense of mourning for the archaic value of the ocean, it also gave voice to an array of alternative strategies for managing shit.

As the issue grew the press began publishing different ideas for dealing with Sydney's shit. All kinds of weird and wonderful ecological approaches surfaced. These included giant sewerage farms out west converting shit to agricultural fertiliser, decentralised waste treatment works, the creation of artificial wetlands. All of these alternatives mobilised what could be called a 'popular expertise'. They involved creative, imaginative solutions driven not simply by the technical problem of managing a large city's shit but also by an ethical imperative to do this responsibly. None of them, however, targeted the bathroom as a crucial site of reform. The Water Board's domination of the issue, its desire to reduce it to an engineering problem, was contested by an alternative discourse that expanded the terms of the public debate. The expression of a range of emotions from anger to disgust to grief to hilarity acknowledged the visceral dangers implicit in all waste management. The credibility given to alternative ecological worldviews (usually dismissed as the work of cranks) was part of an emergent counterpublic. And the effect of this counterpublic was to problematise shit and its management, to establish a different ethico-political framing of the issue.

But it didn't last long – this fleeting counterpublic was soon co-opted by the disciplines of political negotiation and the terms of its discourse were gradually reduced to the technocratic agenda set by the state. The list of demands POOO put to government and the Water Board after the 'Turn Back the Tide' concert included removing all toxic waste from sewers, halting all future ocean outfall construction and classifying oceans under the Clean Waters Act (Tate, 2). There was nothing about initiating some of the alternative strategies for ecologically sustainable management of shit that had been proposed and nothing about changing what went on in bathrooms. The ocean was constituted as in need of protection, the public authority was constituted as in need of reform but private waste practices, while useful for the performance of protest, ultimately went unchallenged. Despite the scatological vision in much of the publicity during this period of beaches and bathrooms being intimately connected (swimming in shit, surfing in toilets). This was despite the recognition of the toilet and drain as technologies not for managing waste but for dumping it, despite all these transgressive representations of shit in public that the POOO parades and other events conjured up, intimate waste practices and their excessive use of resources were not regarded as part of a reform strategy. The politics of the possible overruled a vision of other ways of living with waste in domestic space: composting toilets, backyard worm farms for shit? Those present at the 'Turn Back the Tide' concert were ultimately unable to confront the particularities of their selves. Their private waste practices were deemed outside the ambit of the public reforms.²

The toilet festivals of Mumbai and other Indian cities offer a very different example of the politics of shit. Described by Appadurai (2002) as an example of deep democracy, they too involve a spirit of transgression and bawdy modes of public address but their political aim is quite different. Initiated by the Alliance, a group of activist organizations working on urban poverty in Mumbai, the toilet festivals involve the construction and exhibition of working public toilets designed by and for the urban poor and often timed to coincide with visits from various state and aid officials (2002, 39). Appadurai's analysis of these festivals begins with an account of the humiliation of shitting in public, an inevitable and shaming reality for millions of Indians living in urban slums without sanitation. Quite apart from the public health risks of shitting without good sewerage systems and running water, this reality involves the most fundamental lack of privacy. As Appadurai argues, the risks of shitting in full public view are not just biological: they're symbolic. The inability to establish distance from your own waste denies slum dwellers the most basic sense of dignity and status. Shit confirms their victimisation and poverty.

Contesting this means managing shit in a way that reduces risks and confers dignity. Hence, do-it-yourself sanitation. By designing their own toilets, building them and using them during public protests slum dwellers link technical innovation to a democratic practice focused on establishing the minimal conditions for privacy and a sense

of intimate selfhood. Appadurai (2002, 39) describes the effects of this strategy in this way: 'the condition of poverty moves from abjection to subjectivation'. The political object at stake here is not simply public health and basic waste management it is also privacy. And what gives these festivals such force, according to Appadurai, is the fact that access to privacy also inaugurates a visible citizenship, it makes entry into the public sphere possible (2002, 40).

Can these two cases of the politics of shit illuminate each other despite massive political and economic differences, despite vast variation in the place of shit in measures of a good life in Mumbai and Bondi? The toilet festivals confirm Laporte's (2000) insistence that shit is crucial to the making of modern subjectivity. That shit is at the heart of public private distinctions and the formation of a purified, private self. The Bondi POOO protesters weren't defending their privacy, they were defending the necessity for a clear, unambiguous separation from their shit in the name of stable moral frameworks: clean/dirty, self/waste. Swimming in shit undoes this classificatory regime and the security of the self that depends on it. In making ocean outfalls the focus of political action, private waste rituals were taken as given, as beyond question. The demand for uncontaminated oceans targeted the state as a polluter but not the self. The technology of elimination that the sewer represents means that the minute bodily waste disappears the self is no longer implicated or responsible for its management. It is transformed from shit to effluent, from private waste to public problem. Streamlined removal facilitates literal *and moral* separation. Distance from shit contributes to an ethical blindness about its management. Although the carnivalesque atmosphere of the POOO parades made much of shit's role in disrupting the private public distinction, the vision for reform was unable to sustain this. Public waste management was the problem *not* rituals of privacy. Different ways of dealing with shit that did not involve gross exploitation of oceans would have implications for self and private space but the POOO parade public didn't want to go that far ...

In the toilet festivals the demand for minimal public waste infrastructure is fundamentally linked to the right to privacy. Shitting in public, living your life in perpetual visibility, Appadurai argues, actually renders slum dwellers *invisible* to the state. In claiming the right to privacy, slum dwellers participate in a politics of recognition. To have privacy is to exist in the eyes of the state and this is the starting point for making claims for basic public services. Privacy is the political object at stake in these campaigns, and it is defined as the ability to be establish distance from one's shit, to be separate from its contaminating influence. And this minimal privacy is seen as publicly constituted. The capacity to make a private self to manage one's waste in a way that produces subjectivity rather than shame, to bracket off certain intimate practices from the gaze of others, is a fundamental process of distinction that anyone living with a bathroom takes as given. It inaugurates a public personhood. The radical claim of the toilet festivals, to make waste a private matter, is inseparable from the demand for basic public provision. Or to put this another way, in the toilet festivals the personal is political.

For the POOO public the personal was not political. The conditions for privacy and separation from shit that the public sphere provided were not challenged. Rather, it was what the state did with shit once they assumed responsibility for it that was under attack. And so the outfalls were built, further off shore and deeper but still pouring thousands of litres of effluent into the ocean every day. The fleeting counterpublic formed by the horror of shit along shorelines, grease in the breakers, viruses in the sand, dissipated once the Water Board was called to check and agreed to certain modifications to its technocratic vision. Privacy was not called to check. Sydneysiders' refusal to imagine a different way of living with waste meant that their senses of intimacy and decorum were never at risk. Public infrastructure would still be there to protect them from themselves.

How then to assess shit's place in ecological citizenship and everyday intimacy? Bondi and Mumbai are a long way apart and in many senses these two cases of shit in public are impossible to compare. But the differences between them are suggestive. When the counterpublic formed by POOO protesters briefly imagined a world where oceans were not exploited as waste treatment facilities the possibilities of an ecological citizenship were glimpsed. Here was a public disgusted by environmental disintegration, willing to contest government authority and advocate for oceans. The only problem was this vision did not extend to their individual practices of intimate waste management; the particularity of the selves that formed this counterpublic was actively excluded. The right to privacy, to all the resource hungry waste habits that sustain a private personhood, was separated from the public performance of concerned citizens. In the Mumbai slums privation and powerlessness are the norm not neoliberal notions of privacy. Shit is one marker of this. Getting it effectively managed to reduce disease shows how a kind of do-it-yourself governmentality inaugurates a self able to be minimally recognised by the state. By refusing to shit in public members of the Mumbai alliance use waste to inaugurate a private personhood and with it a nascent citizenship; different habits, different ways in which waste reveals the distinctions between a public and private self.⁸

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Notes

(1) I have shamelessly borrowed my title from Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's essay 'Sex in Public' *Critical Inquiry* 24, 2 (Winter 1998). This essay and much of Berlant and Warner's separately authored work has proved immensely useful for thinking through the issues in this essay.

2. See the recent spate of articles on the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* May 17-18, 2003: A. Davies 'Sewage emptying into harbour by the pool full as tunnel fails', J. Woodford and N. Wallace 'After the deluge comes the flooding and filth'.

3. The best example of this would be M. Melosi's *Garbage in Cities: Refuse, Reform and the Environment*, 1981.

4. For some excellent accounts of the history of shit see D. Laporte, *History of Shit*, 2000, M. Poovey, *Making a Social Body*, 1995 and T. Osborne, 'Security and Vitality; Drains, Liberalism and Power in Nineteenth Century', 1996.

5. I am indebted to S. Beder's *Toxic Fish and Sewer Surfing*, 1989 for this background information.

6. See newspaper reports of these events in the *Sydney Morning Herald* 29/03/89, 19/03/89, 27/03/89, 15/02/90, 23/09/91, 14/12/89, 01/10/89

7. See my essay 'Down the Drain: shit and the politics of disturbance' in G. Hawkins and S. Muecke, (eds) *Culture and Waste: the creation and destruction of value*, 2002, Rowman and Littlefield, for another account of the politics of shit.

8. Thanks to Kane Race and Stephen Muecke for their generous and insightful comments on this essay and for listening to me rave on about sewers. Thanks also to the referee for a really helpful report.

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