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**(Bare)ing our desires**

By Trevor Hoppe

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Every since the term "barebacking" was popularized by talking gay heads and prevention activists in the mid-90s, pundits and academics alike have concocted a flurry of explanations for a phenomenon that has been described as the sign of the next gay apocalypse (we're still waiting on that one). Similar to what Tony Valenzuela has argued about crystal methamphetamine use by some gay men, the explanation given largely depends on who's talking. Psychologists might offer up an explanation linked to internalized homophobia and depression among gay men, while sociologists might suggest that men are socialized from an early age to engage in high-risk behavior - sexual or not. Because of the rabid vilification by activists and pundits of anyone who admits to having unprotected anal sex, it's rare for gay men to actually speak for themselves on the topic.

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As a young HIV-negative gay man who has had unprotected sex, these explanations have grown a bit stale. I didn't feel depressed or particularly prone to risky behavior. As a member of a community unwilling to talk about it, I've had trouble sorting through it all myself. This was complicated by my move to San Francisco two years ago, where the term "barebacking" takes on entirely different meanings among the large community of HIV-positive men. After two years of fucking here, I want to suggest an alternative "barebacking" narrative that has little to do with mental health issues but everything to do with gay male sex culture in San Francisco.

When I moved to San Francisco, I (perhaps naively) expected to find a thriving sex-positive gay male culture that celebrated gay male pleasure. It's supposed to be the "Mecca" for gay men, right? Instead, I quickly realized that San Francisco gay male culture, like mainstream representations of

hetero sex, was narrowly focused on the act of penetration. Online profiles and ads abound featuring guys looking to find you face-down, lubed up, and ready to fuck. No chit-chat - no questions asked. On the surface, this may seem as though only an incredibly sex-positive sex culture could allow for such a non-normative encounter. Indeed, exploring such anonymous fantasies has been profoundly useful for me - as it has been for many men that I know. However, it's pervasiveness as the dominant fantasy quickly presented barriers to exploring other possibilities as well.

It took me a long time to figure out exactly what was going on. At first, I thought perhaps it was a reflection of San Francisco's fractured "gay community" that felt less and less like a community with each day. Making connections with other gay men outside of the bedroom was, to say the least, something of a challenge. Thus, it might make some sense that such disconnected, anonymous fantasies would proliferate in a culture that does not promote intimacy - whether that be in the form of friendships, fuck buddies, or lovers. Indeed, were it not for my graduate program in Human Sexuality Studies that provided me a ready network of queer friends, I'm not sure that I would have made such connections with many gay men in San Francisco.

While this sense of isolation has certainly contributed to the abundance of hyper-anonymous encounters, I began to notice another pattern that troubled me. When I was looking for sex online, I quickly discovered the popularity of ads looking to explore fantasies built around the ideas of "mounting" and "breeding." For the unfamiliar, generally guys looking to be bred are hoping to find a top who will come over, fuck them, and cum inside them. The fantasy is clearly built around ideas of heterosexual sex and male domination. Guys will often use hetero-loaded words like "cunt," "slut," "bitch," and - perhaps the most telling - "rape."

Now, at first, none of this particularly interested me. I'm a pushy bottom, after all. I can play submissive, but it's always just a performance - I know who's really in control. However, like many gay men I know, rape-like fantasies had always turned me on. This was especially true for fantasies about high school bottom boys being "used" by their classmates, in which the bottom boyslut is turned into a whore - at first against his will, but then with his consent. Indeed, in this particular fantasy, after his first fuck, he cannot help but ask for more. This is not unlike similar narratives of the good-girl-gone-bad that has inspired countless straight porn videos.

I had other fantasies, though, and my jerk-off material ran the gamut of gay porn. Increasingly, however, I noticed that I was only beating off to this material - whether it was "barebacking" video porn or erotic stories about

high school bottom boys. In my personal ads looking for sex, I was now describing myself as a "slutty cocksucking bottom." Part of this, of course, was about trial and error. My Craigslist ads looking for "intense, passionate play" yielded only a handful of replies, while my ads looking to "get my brains fucked out" sometimes got upwards of 100 responses. Thus, it became clear which kind of fantasy had more currency.

The other piece of this, though, was a real shift in my fantasies towards that of the bottom boyslut who's ultimately convinced (with some pressing) to take it bareback. This was crystallized for me when I was hooking up with one of my regular fuck buddies a few months ago. Both of our ads said "safe only," but he had been fucking me without a condom since our second hookup. Of course, we never discussed this turn of events. That lack of discussion was part of what made it some of the best sex I've had in San Francisco - at least until our last encounter. When he was about to cum, he asked me if I wanted him to "breed my white ass." The question totally turned me off - partially because I was afraid of what it meant if I really did want him to breed my white ass. It also essentially broke our silence about fucking without condoms. Most importantly, however, he had asked me for permission to cum inside me. He had, in effect, destroyed my fantasy. In the end, I think I murmured a weak yes, he finished, and after we cleaned up, he left. We didn't play again.

Our original "safe only" tacit agreement is key here. I don't hook up with guys who ask me to have unprotected sex or respond to ads seeking it out. My fantasies about unprotected sex rely on the dominate hetero narrative of "giving it up" - perhaps with a little coercion. While no one has actually ever verbally pressured me into having unprotected sex, I've had plenty of tops try to "stick it in" without a condom and without asking. This doesn't mean that I'm not complicit in his actions, but it does mean that the top initiates unprotected sex. That's the fantasy - and, on occasion, my reality.

While I want to be clear that I'm talking about my experiences in San Francisco and not elsewhere, a blogger in New York recently told stories essentially exploring the same kind of narrative. The blog, titled "Confessions of A Bareback Top," featured allegedly true stories from an HIV-negative top in New York who met guys online for sex. He describes himself in the subhead this way: "Publicly - a SAFE ONLY top on many websites including Manhunt & Adam4Adam but secretly - a raw cum-dumping top." His stories were mostly about his attempts to get bottoms who he had agreed to use condoms with online to "give it up" and let him fuck them bareback. His stories have most zeal when guys who were obviously uncomfortable with fucking bare give him their phone number afterwards - essentially asking for more. Indeed, in a post titled "It's been a

while. Latin bitch got what he deserved," the story ends this way:

"I got up and rinsed off in his bathroom. I threw some water and soap on my dick and washed my hands. He asked if I really came in him and I didnt reply. You can tell he regretted doing it - and by me not answering, I wanted to be sure I confirmed his worst fears...that he took a raw load. I grabbed my bags to leave and I heard him say (face down, still on the floor, hands bound), 'Leave your number if you want.'"

His stories suggest that San Francisco isn't the only gay male sex culture experiencing an increasing connection between fantasies about barebacking and those about domination. However, at this point, I should make a few things very clear. First, I don't want to be read as analyzing gay male sex culture everywhere. While the stories from Mr. "Bareback Top" suggest a larger-than-San Francisco-phenomenon, it isn't yet clear if this is the case. Second, I don't want to sound as if I'm glamorizing unprotected sex - though I won't apologize for wanting, having, or fantasizing about fucking without condoms. And, finally, I'm not interested in demonizing or vilifying any of the fantasies I've just talked about. They're real and that makes them valid and important.

Instead, what I want to do here is open up a real, honest dialogue about gay men's fantasies and our sex culture. If HIV prevention organizations want to remain relevant in their efforts to stem increasing levels of unprotected sex, I suggest they start demanding research that evaluates fantasies - not just cold numbers. Of course, my fantasies and experiences are mine and mine only. Other men in San Francisco are certainly having entirely different kinds of experiences. I'm not suggesting that mine is the only one worth considering. I am suggesting, however, that qualitative research (that is, research that relies on in-depth analysis of meaning, typically based on interviews or focus groups) can provide more rich, complex, and even contradictory data about gay men's sexualities than quantitative work (that is, research that relies on statistical analysis, typically based on surveys) that, to me, too often seems detached from reality.

If we want relevant prevention, then we'd better start doing substantive investigations that break out of the tired numbers-driven model handed down from public health and epidemiology. This became clear to me when, at a recent LGBT health conference, an epidemiologist from San Francisco wondered out loud why researchers always seemed to be several years behind what was actually happening on the ground. While any potential explanation seemed to elude this incredibly intelligent scientist, it immediately seemed obvious to me: our models for research, while well suited for, say, monitoring new HIV infections, are wholly incapable of ever

substantially investigating the richly complex sexual cultures that gay men have worked hard to create over the past thirty years.

Without new approaches - and thus, new understandings - we will continue to be shortchanged by well-meaning researchers alleging to document our sexualities, norms, and desires. As a community, we should decry these misrepresentations and demand better. At best, they provide underdeveloped and utterly inadequate data to our community organizations and prevention efforts. At worst, they do violence to gay men by misrepresenting and potentially demonizing what they only superficially understand. As a young gay man committed to culturally relevant research and prevention, I think we deserve better. Much, much better.

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