

TIM DEAN

Breeding Culture: Barebacking, Bugchasing, Giftgiving¹

A COUPLE YEARS AGO after the Folsom Street Fair, an annual bacchanal in San Francisco that draws leatherfolk from around the world, I ended up at the South of Market loft of a beefy, transplanted Texan. Midway through the action, which had begun at Blow Buddies, a local club known (among other things) for assiduously promoting “safer sex,” the Texan whispered, “I want you to breed me.” His request that I ejaculate directly inside his rectum is one that I’ve encountered periodically during sex with strangers over the past few years, though the Texan was the first to put it to me in these particular terms. What does it mean to imagine unprotected anal intercourse between men as “breeding”? Exactly who or what is being bred?

More than an isolated incident, the Texan’s solicitation was expressed in the vernacular of a new subculture, that of barebacking. Barebacking refers to anal sex without a condom, and the term derives from equestrian pursuits: riding a horse bareback, without a saddle, as a rugged cowboy might do. Within the gay community of the United States there now exists something called the *bareback community*—a notion that was unthinkable a decade ago. What has changed dramatically over the past several years is gay men’s attitude toward condom-use and HIV, such that the practice of risky sex and even the deliberate transmission of the virus that leads to AIDS have become the basis for new sexual identities and for community formation. Barebacking has become a new sexual preference, an erotic practice overlaid with a whole set of social and political meanings. This paper tries to unpack those meanings and thereby to illuminate the significance condensed in my Texan trick’s appeal to be bred.

When I first began researching sexual risk during the mid-nineties, I was guided by the assumption (as were most investigators in the field) that men who had unsafe sex were essentially mistaken—that gay sex without a condom should be understood as “slipping up.” Why, everyone wondered, in the face of so much safe-sex education, were HIV-infection rates rising in the very population—urban gay men—that had invented safer sex procedures and guidelines in the early years of the epidemic? My answer to this question at that time was a psychoanalytic one, namely, that sexual slip-ups should be

understood like slips of the tongue or bungled actions (what the translator of Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* called "parapraxes"). You mean to say or do one thing, yet end up saying or doing something else—there's a conflict of intentions at work. In other words, I argued that unsafe sex cannot be considered independently of the unconscious, where the category of the unconscious is understood psychoanalytically rather than psychologically, that is, as social and therefore transindividual, rather than as the property of individual persons. Safer-sex education needs all the resources it can get, and I suggested that psychoanalysis could provide a conceptual armory that would help in the fight against AIDS—and in the corollary struggle to end discrimination against people with AIDS (PWAs).²

But does it make sense to continue to speak in terms of the unconscious when men consciously experiment with deliberate HIV-transmission? Although the problem of "slipping up" doubtless still exists, increasingly gay sex without condoms is figured as a "lifestyle choice," an option on the sexual menu that can be actively pursued in contexts that validate the choice. Thus has emerged a significant distinction between unsafe sex and barebacking, a distinction defined in this way by medical sociologist Michael Scarce:

Distinct from an infrequent slip-up, drunken mishap, or safer-sex "relapse," barebacking represents a conscious, firm decision to forgo condoms and, despite the dangers, unapologetically revel in the pleasure of doing it raw. Some people use barebacking to describe all sex without condoms, but barebackers themselves define it as both the premeditation and eroticization of unprotected anal sex. (Scarce 52)

Barebacker has become a new sexual identity because the practice of unprotected sex contravenes gay community norms that were established and held sway throughout the first decade of the epidemic. Somewhat akin to the category of *queer*, barebacking is defined by its resistance not merely to heterosexual norms but to gay norms as well.

During the second decade of the epidemic, as homosexuality inched its way from the margins into the social mainstream, becoming what Andrew Sullivan called "virtually normal," the discourse of barebacking was invented by some gay men to keep their sex outside the pale of respectability. These are men who don't want to be considered "normal," and who thus are making clear that something *other than normal* can be not merely defensible but positively desirable. If part of the appeal of gay sex consists in its transgressiveness (whether perceived or actual), then barebacking could be considered a strategy for reinscribing eroticism within the sphere of transgression. Another way of putting this would be to say that if the prospect of same-sex

THE MASSACHUSETTS REVIEW

marriage raises the possibility of gay in-laws, then the subculture of barebacking ensures that some queers will retain the status of outlaws. A primary context for making sense of this counterintuitive phenomenon is the campaign for same-sex marriage during the last decade or so; as one of the earliest and most notorious proponents for abandoning condoms said in 1997, "Now I believe in exchanging bodily fluids, not wedding rings" (O'Hara 69). Barebacking may be understood as an alternative to gay marriage not so much because it authorizes promiscuity as opposed to monogamy, but because HIV makes the exchange of bodily fluids homologous to the exchange of wedding rings, insofar as both sets of exchanges confer forms of permanence on their participants. About as far from casual sex as one can possibly get, barebacking entails lifelong commitments—commitments more permanent than those of marriage—since what's at stake is HIV-transmission. By contrast with marriage, straight or gay, what's exchanged at a "conversion party"—where gay men gather for unprotected sex and to exercise some choice over which man will infect them—what's exchanged is guaranteed to last a lifetime.

In speaking of unprotected anal sex as in some weird sense homologous to marriage, I am simply bringing into academic vernacular one of the terms in which it is spoken about within bareback subculture. The discourse of barebacking isn't quite as nihilistic or antisocial as some might imagine, but instead affirms a community of outlaws. While repudiating heterosexual and gay norms, bareback subculture nonetheless has created its own norms and standards of behavior. What particularly interests me is how unprotected sex has given rise to a discourse of kinship, based on the idea that the human immunodeficiency virus may be used to create blood ties, ostensibly permanent forms of bodily and communal affiliation. To conceive of exchanging bodily fluids as a viable alternative to exchanging wedding rings is to think about barebacking as the basis for not only one's sexual identity but also one's place in a kinship network.

The deliberate transmission of HIV through bareback sex isn't anomalous but should be understood as part of the ongoing history of sexuality at the turn of the millennium. Bareback subcultural practices are connected to the campaign for same-sex marriage, the exponential increase in lesbian and gay parenting, and broader changes in kinship that have received considerable media attention over the past several decades. Although one might think that a lesbian couple's decision to have a baby together has nothing to do with what gay men are up to in the sex clubs of San Francisco or New York, in fact both represent experiments with elective kinship that bear consideration. To simply pathologize bareback subculture as irresponsible, self-destructive, or crazy would be to obscure its profound connections with the

social reorganization of kinship that has been under way in North American culture for quite some time.

It is here that I claim psychoanalysis may be still of some use, because the clinical practice of psychoanalysis furnishes an especially valuable approach to thinking about disturbing material. The psychoanalytic rule of free association—"that whatever comes into one's head must be reported without criticizing it"—requires a suspension of judgment that permits different forms of thinking to emerge (Freud, "Dynamics" 107). Once you commit to following a train of thought irrespective of where it leads or how risky it seems, then you may find yourself thinking new thoughts and discovering spaces you would not have come across otherwise. We might say that psychoanalysis, like cocksucking, entails taking risks with one's mouth. Thus although psychoanalysis has an appalling institutional history of pathologizing non-normative sexual behavior and forms of desire, the actual practice of analysis depends on not pathologizing any desire in order to see where its logic takes you. Rather than the conservative moralism of Just Say No, psychoanalysis involves the permissive ethic of Never Say No—because the unconscious never says no. This practical refusal to pathologize desire amplifies thought.

The fact that barebacking often involves deliberate decisions does not mean that such decisions can be explained fully according to a rational-choice model of human behavior. One needs something other than a rational-choice model to appreciate how sex may involve maximizing risk rather than minimizing it. An early proponent of barebacking reports that, "over and over, I asked myself why it was so appealing for me to get fucked without a condom. I'm a bottom, and I honestly can't tell whether someone is fucking me with or without a condom. It feels the same to me. Yet I still didn't want the barrier, and it really disturbed me that I didn't know why" (Gendin 106). In suggesting that sexual behavior is permeated by the non-rational, I'm arguing not that barebacking should be considered irrational, only that it cannot be understood without taking seriously the fantasies that animate it.

Psychoanalysis originates with a fundamental distinction between the irrational and the nonrational, a distinction that exempts the nonrational from the taint of pathology. Freud's value lies in his insistence that all sexuality, even its most routine and vanilla expressions, involves nonrational logics that may be bracketed under the rubric of the unconscious. On those odd occasions when sex is undertaken primarily for reproductive purposes, still it isn't exempt from fantasies about reproduction—fantasies that inform nonreproductive sex too. By tracing subjectivity's nonrational logics, Freud revealed gender and sexuality as particularly dense sites for the elaboration of fantasy; gender and sexuality provoke our most wildly counterintuitive

THE MASSACHUSETTS REVIEW

stories about ourselves. With respect to the pernicious hierarchy of normal and perverse, Freud leveled the playing field by showing how nobody has a gender—or a fuck—free from the baroque complications of fantasy, whether they're aware of it or not. The category of unconscious fantasy thus undermines the distinction between normal and pathological, and this is one of its most important political implications.



Much of bareback discourse occurs online, where virtual communities coalesce around the exchange of words, images, and fantasies. Many of these fantasies involve exchanging bodily fluids too, and some even go so far as to articulate the desire to trade viruses—to literalize the exchange. No longer regarded as outcasts, HIV-positive men have become especially desirable in some quarters by virtue of their serostatus. Barebacking websites (such as ultimatebareback.com and raw-ride.com) have spawned intriguing new sexual identity categories, such as “bugchasers” and “giftgivers”: bugchasers are those who fetishize HIV-infected semen and want it inside their bodies; giftgivers are those positive men who are willing to oblige. Based on the model of sperm-donors, giftgivers consensually inseminate other men with HIV. They transmit the virus intentionally rather than inadvertently, and they understand their actions as creative rather than as destructive.

Since most states have criminalized deliberate HIV-transmission, it is hardly surprising that giftgivers remain shadowy figures. My research suggests that while the proportion of North American men who bareback is larger than one might expect, the proportion of those in the bareback community who identify as bugchasers or giftgivers is quite small. Most barebackers remain committed to the ethical principle that, as one man put it, “I don’t do conversions”—in other words, they’ll have unprotected sex only with men presumed to share the same serostatus. Yet this principle also concerns community and kinship, not only disease prevention, since choosing to have sex with other HIV-positive men establishes a sense of camaraderie among those who, in the 1980s, were treated as pariahs. The precise number of men who explicitly identify as either bugchasers or giftgivers is ultimately irrelevant, because these identity categories refer to fantasies of kinship—of insemination, child-bearing, and brotherhood—that may be shared by large numbers of those who feel no conscious connection to stigmatized subcultural identities. The popularity of bareback pornography testifies to the widespread appeal of these fantasies and suggests, moreover, that fantasy offers a means of understanding the subculture as distinctly permeable. You don’t need to embrace the identity of bugchaser to get off on the idea of being bred.

The fact that very few men wish to assume complete responsibility for another's seroconversion also helps to account for the subcultural phenomenon of "conversion parties"—ritualized group initiations into the "bug brotherhood"—during which men are penetrated bareback by multiple partners, thus making the specific source of infection difficult to identify. On a practical level, this arrangement confers a measure of legal protection on the participants; bareback parties often are advertised with the motto "Don't ask, don't tell." Gay men have appropriated the military's homophobic policy of nondisclosure for their own ends. But the practice of nondisclosure in a situation of group sex also enables the source of infection to be given over completely to fantasy: one can construct whichever narrative he finds most satisfying about the paternity of his virus. That is to say, bugchasing makes seroconversion something you can practice; it sustains a fantasy of repeating the unrepeatable. This helps explain why some gay men refuse to take an HIV test. By not doing so, they are able to imagine each unprotected encounter as the one that transmits the virus, which intensifies every fuck quite considerably. This idea rationalizes the unprotected sex pursued by Carlos, the pseudonymous Manhattan bugchaser profiled in a controversial *Rolling Stone* article, who allegedly thinks that "every date is potentially The One" (Freeman 47). Thus sexual risk can be perpetually renewed, and one's capacity for tolerating risk ever more enhanced. From this perspective, it isn't hard to see how barebacking and bugchasing involve quite familiar ideas about masculinity.

The presence of HIV has allowed gay men to transform the practice of taking it up the butt from a sign of failed masculinity into an index of hyper-masculinity. In bareback subculture, as in the military, masculine status is achieved by surviving a set of physical ordeals, including multiple penetrations, humiliations, piercings, tattooings, brandings, and infections. The more men you're penetrated by, the more of a man you become. The prophylaxis afforded by condoms is reserved for those who can't handle the real thing. Rather than offering protection, then, a condom makes you and your masculinity vulnerable to doubt or derision. Latex compromises not only sensation and intimacy but also masculine identity. From this perspective, HIV becomes simply another trial, the endurance of which proves your mettle. Being HIV-positive is like having a war wound or a battle scar.

For some gay men, the desire to avoid HIV thus has mutated into its opposite; indeed, some men who practice bareback sex are not interested in having an HIV-negative man ejaculate inside them: they want only semen that contains the virus—"poz" or "pozcum," as it is colloquially known. Semen containing HIV is radioactive with significance, and the slang term "poz" suggests that, for some men, infected semen paradoxically has come to

THE MASSACHUSETTS REVIEW

have a positive rather than a negative connotation. It has become a good object to be incorporated, rather than a bad object to be kept outside oneself. In bareback subculture the exchange of semen has become heavily ritualized; getting infected with HIV is now understood as a rite of passage, an initiation into a fraternal community from which one can never be exiled. Electing to become infected with the virus entails choosing a permanent identity; it marks the inside of your body somewhat akin to the way that tattooing marks the outside (self-identified barebackers tend to be heavily tattooed). Bugchasing and giftgiving involve fantasies about making an indelible connection with someone else's insides.

Much bareback discourse uses metaphors of insemination, pregnancy, and paternity. "Let's breed" is one of the refrains heard regularly on barebacking websites, though I've encountered it only once in a sexual context that was not marked explicitly as a subcultural venue. Men who used not to worry about condoms because there was no fear of pregnancy in gay sex now understand their abandonment of condoms as an attempt to conceive. Gay men have discovered that they can in some sense reproduce without women. In breeding a virus, these men are propagating also a way of life, a sexual culture with its own institutions, codes of communication, ethical norms, representational practices, and kinship arrangements. When the Texan asked me to breed him, he was expressing a desire for intimacy with not only me but also an entire subcultural community. We might understand his request—made in his own SOMA home on the evening of the Folsom Street Fair—as a yearning for direct corporeal connection with the thousands of men who congregated in that historic neighborhood on that particular day. At the time, I was disturbed by his assumption that I was HIV-positive and that, without so much as a how-do-you-do, I wouldn't hesitate to ejaculate inside him; looking back now, I realize that perhaps I shouldn't have taken his request personally.

The notion of an imagined community isn't sufficient for grasping what's happening in such scenarios. Instead, the metaphors of breeding, of reproducing a subculture through bodily exchange, require a reconfigured notion of kinship. One early lesbian feminist critique of kinship, Kath Weston's *Families We Choose*, charted a shift in the lesbian and gay community from thinking about kinship in terms of the obligations of consanguinity to thinking about kinship in terms of consensual, largely symbolic affiliations. Drawing on interviews with San Francisco lesbians and gay men in the mid-eighties, anthropologist Weston noted that members of this urban enclave already were intuiting connections between the "gayby" boom and the AIDS epidemic. What both the epidemic and experimentation with alternative families made apparent were the various ways that people could

become related to each other by blood without involving heterosexuality. Weston observes that “as the practice of alternative insemination spread among lesbians, relations conceived as blood ties surfaced where one might least expect them: in the midst of gay families that had been defined in *opposition* to the biological relations [that] gays and lesbians ascribed to straight family” (Weston 169; original emphasis).

During the eighties, against the background anatomized by Weston, gay men made the traumatic discovery that they were connected to each other in hitherto unanticipated ways. The identification of a blood-borne pathogen as the cause of AIDS entailed recognizing, among other things, that gay men sharing an urban space such as San Francisco had been creating viral consanguinity among themselves without knowing it. With the dawning realization that tricks one practically had forgotten might have permanently marked his insides came a sense that one’s bodily condition could be related to that of strangers with whom ostensibly he shared nothing but a few hours of pleasure. Such connections could affect one’s body as much as—or more than—his genetic inheritance. It was almost as if you were discovering in forgotten strangers long-lost kin. And it is but a small step from this discovery to deliberately creating kinship links, thus seizing agency in a situation where previously one wasn’t aware of having any. Rather than thinking about how to do things with words, barebackers have been conducting unregulated experiments in how to do things with HIV.

Understanding a virus as the basis for one’s kinship network may have been inspired also by the idea of “contact tracing,” a public health disease-prevention strategy that was floated in the 1980s and that aimed to control the epidemic by tracking who had transmitted HIV to whom. The strategy of contact tracing never quite caught on, due in part to the disturbing civil liberties implications of recording the identities of those who were infected (recall that when AIDS first emerged, some conservative politicians called for universal mandatory testing and then quarantining, even tattooing, of those who tested positive for HIV). Yet the discourse of contact tracing may have encouraged recent efforts to organize kinship around viral transmission. To identify as a giftgiver can entail assuming parental responsibility for the man who chooses you to convert his serostatus. Other men infected by the same giftgiver become your brothers, and one can start a single-sex family this way. Here is an unexpected twist on the Republican rhetoric of “family values.”

Patterning kinship on the contact-tracing model also alludes to the conceit that each time you have sex with somebody you’re also having sex with everyone he’s ever had sex with—that is, the idea that each of us brings our entire sexual history to any erotic encounter. Of course, this familiar idea,

THE MASSACHUSETTS REVIEW

which is part of high school sex education, effectively transforms every erotic encounter into a gangbang, a multipartner orgy. In the context of sex education, this idea is supposed to act as a deterrent, by conjuring the multiple, menacing shadows of previous partners hovering behind the single person with whom one has consented to have sex. But it might just as well act as an incentive, by conjuring a history and a community attendant on every coupling. It is far from coincidental that bareback subculture privileges not merely unprotected sex but specifically group sex, often with a single man taking the position of "bottom" while all the other men penetrate him. The gangbang represents barebacking's paradigmatic form, in which at least one man gets to literally have sex with everybody present, thereby establishing a corporeal connection, a kind of bodily community, among all those who enter the space in which this activity occurs. Overcoming the barrier that a condom represents is related to overcoming the numerical limit that a single partner represents.³

The man on the bottom in a bareback gangbang occupies something akin to the position of the father of the primal horde, as Freud describes it in *Totem and Taboo*. Whereas the father of the primal horde has sexual access to all the women in the clan, the multiply penetrated bottom in a gangbang represents the one to whom all other men have access; he gets to enjoy all the men, sexually possessing them all, and his proof of that elevated status consists in his containing all their semen inside his body. *Totem and Taboo* concerns the primitive rituals that establish kinship relations, and what we see in bareback subculture is an attempt to invent the rituals that enable a community to come into existence. One does not enter a community, just as one does not enter adulthood, without rites of initiation, and gay men have had to invent their own. In our culture of adolescence, with its intense pressure to remain youthful, adulthood has become a problem rather than a given. The sexual rites of initiation I've been describing are partly about establishing generational differences that help make evident what adulthood without heterosexuality means. By establishing generational differences, they also provide a structure that enables transmission of the culture from one generation to the next.

Another way of putting this would be to say that the ritual enacted in a bareback gangbang involves sexual contact not only among all members of the group via the intermediary of the bottom; it also involves contact, via the intermediary of the ritual form, with what the "primitive societies" described by Freud would call their ancestors. By taking all the other men inside him and storing their semen inside his body, the bottom in a bareback gangbang may be establishing communication (through impersonal, formal identification) with previous generations of the culture. This kind of

Tim Dean

connection through ritual is especially important for a culture that, thanks to AIDS, has lost whole generations of its members. It is owing to their role as impersonal intermediaries—and not just because they endure so much pounding and take so many loads—that famous bareback gangbang bottoms (such as Dawson, Max Holden, Jeff Palmer, and Billy Wild) are regarded as subcultural heroes.

For some people, reproducing the culture takes precedence over their own survival as individuals; these people are willing to sacrifice their lives so that something vitally important to them lives on. Just as a nation-state perpetuates itself through the ideology of patriotism, by convincing its members that the life of their country may be worth dying for, so one dimension of gay subculture survives through the sacrifices of barebackers. These men are not simply enjoying sex, they are also suffering it on behalf of others. From a certain perspective, their sex is altruistic rather than merely self-indulgent. In order to illustrate this counterintuitive idea, I want to quote a passage from Paul Morris, the most interesting documentary pornographer of barebacking. In his manifesto on the necessity of sexual risk, Morris describes the sacrificial ethic on which gay cultural transmission relies:

“Unsafe sex” is not only insane, it is also essential. For a subculture to be sustained, there must be those who engage in its central and defining activities with little regard for anything else, including life itself. . . . At the heart of every culture is a set of experiences which members hold not only to be worth practicing, but also necessary to maintain and transmit to those who follow. In the case of a sexual subculture, one often has only one way to do this: by embodying the traditions. Within the complex system of beliefs and practices of an American male sexual subculture, there can be little that is more defining than the communion and connections that are made possible through these central practices. The everyday identity evanesces and the individual becomes an agent through which a darker and more fragile tradition is enabled to continue. Irresponsibility to the everyday persona and to the general culture is necessary for allegiance to the sexual subculture, and this allegiance takes the gay male directly to the hot and central point where what is at stake isn't the survival of the individual, but the survival of the practices and patterns which are the discoveries and properties of the subculture. . . . The subculture and the virus require the same processes for transmission. (See Morris)

If the subculture can be kept alive only through bodily exchanges that also permit viral communication, then we might suppose that gay subculture has wedded itself to death. Paradoxically the life of the subculture depends on the death of its members. Yet this sacrificial ethic isn't as alien as it might appear,

THE MASSACHUSETTS REVIEW

because its structure is identical to that of patriotism. The communities of men formed around barebacking bond together like communities of soldiers during wartime. And it's worth recalling that since the first decade of the AIDS epidemic killed off whole generations of gay men, those who survived resemble survivors of war. Barebacking may be, among other things, a way of connecting with the dead through the medium of a shared substance. Rather than necessarily disregarding and thus dishonoring those who have died from AIDS-related illnesses (as some critics charge), barebacking may represent an effort to maintain their vitality in the bodies of the living. By means of a virus, some part of the deceased can be imagined as living on. Bareback subculture thus may be as much a culture of survival and imaginative reinvention as it is a culture of death (or of something called "the death drive").

It needs to be acknowledged that the subculture emerged in San Francisco at around the same time that the first generation of antiretroviral drugs became available for treating HIV. While the medications and the subculture are both features of the late nineties' gay landscape, it would be a mistake to conclude from this historical coincidence that the introduction of the drugs "caused" barebacking. Certainly a pharmacological substrate—including the shadow epidemic of crystal methamphetamine abuse—underlies the subculture, though it hardly explains the fantasies of kinship that animate bareback discourse and practice. Part of what is so striking about these practices is that, in contrast to youth-oriented subcultures, barebacking cuts across different generations and demographics; it cannot be explained adequately by reference to either a younger generation's sense of invulnerability or its ignorance of the AIDS-related suffering of the 1980s, just as it cannot be explained by what some commentators have described as an older generation's sense of "survivor guilt." Barebacking not only cuts across generations of gay men, it also connects these generations. Indeed, the idea of bareback breeding involves *creating* different generations—and hence a minimal kinship structure—without resorting to the heterosexual matrix that otherwise determines relational intelligibility. This notion of kinship involves replication rather than reproduction.

The emergence of organized sexual risk suggests that some men are not only survivors but also propagators of a subculture. Thinking about gay sexual culture *as a culture* allows us to approach it anthropologically and to view it as we might another "foreign" culture, with our reflex value judgments suspended in the face of social and sexual variation. Just because bareback subculture departs from many of the ethical norms of both mainstream U.S. culture and mainstream gay culture does not mean that it is devoid of ethics or norms. To consider barebacking less as a failure of the individual's

responsibility to practice safer sex than as the basis for subcultural participation and kinship alters the way that one thinks about erotic risk. When regarded in anthropological terms, the counterintuitive designation of HIV as a gift—and its deliberate transmission in ritualized sexual encounters—makes a certain kind of sense.

The study of giftgiving is almost as old as anthropology itself and has generated an enormous literature. In his classic treatise on the subject, Marcel Mauss found that premodern cultures organized social relations around the reciprocal giving and receiving of gifts of all kinds. Rather than a market economy certain cultures have a gift economy, in which giving occurs not primarily between individuals but between groups (tribes or clans), and in which all members and dimensions of the culture are engaged. For these cultures the purpose of giving is neither altruistic nor wholly self-interested. The social motive animating their elaborate cycles of giving and reciprocation is rather that of solidarity: gifts establish social bonds; they unite families in kinship networks; and in general they help build collectivities. “A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction,” explains anthropologist Mary Douglas (vii). By establishing relations of exchange, a gift economy generates social bonds differently from a market economy: when you purchase a commodity, the transaction completes the relationship, but when you make a gift you initiate a cycle of reciprocation that continues beyond the initial exchange. Through the principle of reciprocity, a gift creates or solidifies the relationship between donor and recipient.⁴

Considered in these terms, HIV-transmission becomes the basis for community formation. The idea of a “bareback community” is not simply a rhetorical analogue derived from the “gay community”; in other words, it is not a notion of community based merely on imaginary identification or symbolic affiliation, because barebackers repeatedly cement communal relations through acts of viral exchange. Exchanging viruses as gifts transforms social bonds into consanguinity. We might say that cum-swapping or “snowballing,” as it is called in subcultural vernacular, represents the form that homosocial bonding takes among gay men: gay men establish bonds with each other not via the mediation of women’s bodies (as in the Lévi-Straussean model critiqued by Gayle Rubin and subsequently by Eve Sedgwick), but via the mediation of a virus (see Lévi-Strauss; Rubin, “Traffic”; Sedgwick). From a bugchaser’s perspective, then, becoming HIV-positive involves less disease than fraternity. This prospect must be especially appealing in a postmodern world characterized by transient relationships. It might even tap into the same fantasies and desires as the socially sanctioned wish to get married.

THE MASSACHUSETTS REVIEW

By connecting the emergence of bareback subculture to the campaign for same-sex marriage and the boom in same-sex parenting, as well as comparing one of its rationales to the logic of patriotism, I have tried to suggest that the deliberate abandonment of condoms among men who have sex with men may be less alien or surprising than at first it might appear. Unprotected sex may entail as great a sense of responsibility as getting married and having children, or as enlisting in the army. Further, by speaking about unprotected sex as the basis for not only new erotic identities but also a subculture, I wanted to approach ostensibly unintelligible sexual behaviors anthropologically, that is, to accord them a measure of respect that would allow them to be considered in their own terms, rather than exclusively in terms of sexual normativity. Nothing is harder than to regard sexual variation in value-neutral terms; whether or not we readily admit it, we tend to view erotic practices that diverge significantly from our own preferences as pathological, abnormal, or slightly disgusting. We are still much better at grasping the notion of benign *racial* variation than we are at comprehending benign *sexual* variation.⁵ In this respect, I've tried to suggest that the clinical practice of psychoanalysis offers an approach to alien desires akin to that of cultural anthropology, since both entail a suspension of judgment that allows real thinking to occur.

If we acknowledge that barebacking represents not aberrant individual behavior but the basis for a subculture, then we can begin to see how the first step in understanding a culture—no matter how alien it appears—must be to resist the impulse to pathologize it. The second step in understanding a culture (really a version of the first) is to resist identifying with it. Either identifying with or, conversely, pathologizing a culture betrays an imaginary relation to it, since both depend upon seeing in the culture an affirmative or, conversely, rebarbative reflection of oneself. Both approaches make understanding a function of recognition; whereas I'm suggesting that a new subculture, especially one involving sexual practices that many find disturbing, merits an ethical approach that checks the virtually irresistible impulse to decide whether one approves or disapproves of it. Almost all the scholarship and media commentary on this subculture has pathologized it, if only tacitly, by operating under the assumption that if deliberately risky practices can be understood properly, then policies can be implemented to curtail them. By contrast, psychoanalysis makes available a conceptual space for thinking about bareback subculture without having to decide whether it should be treated as positive or negative.

NOTES

¹ This essay, based on a lecture delivered at numerous universities in recent years, provides a preliminary sketch of a set of concerns treated at greater length in my book *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking*, forthcoming from University of Chicago Press. Thanks to my hosts and audiences on the occasions of those lectures, and to John Vincent for his invitation to publish the lecture in revised form.

² I made this argument in *Beyond Sexuality*, ch.4—a chapter that was composed in 1996, just as what has come to be known as bareback subculture began to emerge.

³ Virtually the entire output of U.S. porn studios devoted to bareback sex (such as Treasure Island Media and Dick Wadd Media) is organized on the principle of the gangbang.

⁴ The distinction between a gift economy and a market economy is, in fact, much more controverted than my outline suggests. An excellent account of how modern biomedical technology is overcoming the established distinction between gift and commodity may be found in Waldby and Mitchell. Clearly HIV represents a gift for which the fundamental Maussian principle of reciprocity is limited. Put simply, I cannot infect the man who infects me because he is already infected; the prestation's precondition precludes its direct reciprocation. Yet when one considers giftgiving in terms of the group rather than in terms of the couple, arrangements of mediated reciprocation become readily apprehensible. And when one considers that semen exchange regularly occurs among men who are all already seropositive, it becomes apparent that seroconversion represents a limit case, rather than a necessary component, of this erotic gift economy.

⁵ The notion of benign sexual variation—the elementary idea that no form of consensual sexual interaction is better (or worse) than any other—was introduced nearly a quarter century ago in Rubin's classic essay "Thinking Sex" (283). Although scholarship on sexuality ritually cites this text, I'm not convinced that Rubin's central idea has been grasped more than superficially. One's attachment to his or her own erotic preferences, whatever they may be, tends to be of an intensity that precludes regarding others' preferences neutrally. In contrast to the prospect of different sexual identities, contemplating sexual practices that diverge widely from one's own habitually elicits revulsion, rather than an appreciation of variation. Among progressives this revulsion often takes the form of an assumption that variant sexual practices must be coercive—that one or another party's consent has somehow been overridden.

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