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A special issue of *Sexualities*

Bareback Sex and Queer Theory Across Three National Contexts

(France, UK, US)

Guest-edited by Oliver Davis (French Studies, Warwick University)

To use the word 'bareback' to refer to condomless anal sex between men is to evoke the almost caricaturally US-American world of cowboys and rodeos to which the coinage of the term, in the mid-1990s, gestured salaciously (Rofes, 1998). This special issue offers new insight into bareback, as sexual practice and subcultural phenomenon, by investigating how it has been apprehended by queer theory and queer thinking within and across three national contexts: the US, in which bareback was first named and elaborated into an identifiable subculture and which is most prevalent in existing research (medical, sociological and historical alike), France and the UK. The dual objective is both to say something queer about bareback and to use bareback and the discussion it has sparked to reveal something about the respective states of queer thinking within these national contexts.

Defining bareback

A varied constellation of sexual behaviours and self-understandings gathers under the name 'bareback' and its cognates (Berg, 2009). For the purposes of inclusion in this special issue 'bareback' has been taken in its most minimal acceptance: anal sex

between men without using condoms and in cognizance of HIV/AIDS. More nuanced definitions of bareback are nevertheless also invoked in many of the articles and the nuancing distinctions usually involve spelling out what exactly is meant, in context, by such 'cognizance'.

Tim Dean – in his groundbreaking queer study of bareback in the US context, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* – distinguishes between three understandings, or categories, of bareback according to the implicitly or actually held views of participants about HIV: 'These three categories may be summarized as barebacking with the desire or intention to *not* transmit HIV, barebacking with indifference to HIV, and barebacking with a desire or intention for viral transmission.' (2009: 12) Even though Dean's most resourceful argumentation in that book is reserved for the lurid end of this spectrum, namely the third category and its particular subcultural forms, he is also careful to acknowledge that 'a substantial proportion and perhaps the majority of instances of barebacking combine a desire for unprotected sex with a desire to contain HIV' (p.12) and to consider bareback as a continuum. This special issue follows Dean's methodological approach in seeking to apprehend bareback as a continuum of behaviours and representations.

For researchers of some disciplinary backgrounds, notably in the social sciences, the question of defining what is to count as bareback will be fundamental in the sense that it will have a determining effect on subsequent results and conclusions; for others, in particular for those of us at the more theoretical and less immediately 'applied' end of the disciplinary and professional spectrum (that is, for those of us who do sex research in the humanities, or within a humanistic paradigm), the question of definition will be of lesser priority, primarily because: (i) we would presume that agents' intentions with respect to HIV transmission are not necessarily the final

arbiters of the meaning of the encounter, or practice, in question and (ii) the insistence on more rigid and rigorous definitions will be futile when the phenomenon is an essentially complex and socially mediated one in which elements of all three categories overlap, not only in discourse and cultural (including pornographic) representation but also in the psyche.

It is also important to bear in mind that even during the relatively short period with which this special issue is primarily concerned (1996–2014), some risk-reduction practices which were initially named, understood and resisted as ‘bareback’ have since become relatively normalized parts of community-driven safer sex education (Girard, 2013). This is particularly apparent in the case of the French bareback writer Guillaume Dustan (see the articles by Elliot Evans and Oliver Davis) and his advocacy of what would probably more readily be understood today as serosorting than bareback.

‘How queer is bareback?’

Bareback, in all its variety of forms, evidently marks a certain distance (variable by the precise form and context in question) from socially entrenched heteronormative ways of understanding futurity and kinship. This distance can readily be qualified as ‘queer’ in the uncompromising sense in which that term has sometimes been understood (e.g. Edelman, 2004). However, because bareback involves only men and because ‘the barebacker’ sometimes appears to be an identity category just as reassuringly stable as ‘the homosexual’, it can also be argued that bareback involves a tacit reversion to a kind of identity politics which is pre- or even non-queer. This special issue takes it as axiomatic that bareback can indeed sometimes correctly be understood as a queer practice, one which splits homonormative gay identity, while

also recognizing the inevitability of identitarian modes of the practice and its subculture; at the same time, the issue also suggests that some barebackers seem to need the dissident, or dissensual, thinking about sexual norms for which ‘queer’ has become a byword in order to resist being policed and pathologized into silence, whether by researchers, community leaders or healthcare professionals.

Speaking queerly about bareback (in 2014)

Much academic research into bareback to date has been premised on the assumption that the practice is dangerous and should be restricted, if not eradicated, although this particular journal has carefully marked a principled distance from that general trend. Elsewhere, a dual strategy of pathologizing and policing has generally prevailed, particularly in medical, sociological and psychological research. The prevalence of research on bareback which polices and pathologizes can be attributed, in part, to strong but largely implicit constraints and presumptions flowing from the way sex research is funded and organized in all three national contexts.

While this special issue acknowledges that bareback poses a challenge in health-protection terms – indeed two of the articles (Rojas Castro and Girard; Grundy-Bowers et al) are by researchers who have been primarily concerned with understanding bareback in the context of refining HIV prevention strategies – it also starts from the presumption that this challenge can only be addressed democratically (non-coercively) if researchers first take the trouble to try to understand what bareback means to those who are most invested in it, namely barebackers.

To explore bareback in a way which takes the self-understandings of barebackers seriously was Tim Dean’s objective in what has since become the internationally recognized queer study of reference on the topic (Dean, 2009). Dean

characterized bareback as a ‘subculture’, a move which allowed him to constitute the phenomenon as an object of academic inquiry for scholars in the social sciences and the humanities wanting to investigate the highly original ideas – or fantasies – about kinship, exchange and self-representation which the subculture involves without first having to pass judgment over it. Dean’s book was groundbreaking – it constituted a new object of inquiry and simultaneously embraced a radical investigatory ethic – yet it was also largely focused on bareback as it is found in those sites in which Dean himself had encountered the ‘subculture’ as an participant-observer, namely in the US. Dean’s own contribution to the present special issue updates his work on bareback by considering the biopolitics of an ongoing move towards ‘chemoprophylaxis’ (or pre-exposure antiretroviral prophylaxis, or PREP), in the form of the preventative use of antiretroviral drugs, notably Truvada, to limit the spread of HIV among men who have sex with men. The advent of chemoprophylaxis was recently (July 2014) welcomed by the World Health Organization, which now ‘strongly recommends men who have sex with men consider taking antiretroviral medicines as an additional method of preventing HIV infection’ (WHO, 2014).

In the recent history of gay male communities, bareback and its discourse have emerged with an almost vertiginous rapidity as the elaboration of a sex-positive response to the fear and stigma of seroconversion. This response is only fully intelligible in light of advances in biomedical science, in particular the arrival in 1996 of triple combination therapy treatments for HIV which, for most (though not all) HIV-positive people in the developed world, meant that a life-threatening disease would become a chronic manageable condition. It could be argued that as PREP increasingly becomes available to barebackers in all three national contexts, the era of ‘bareback proper’ is now drawing to a close. Many HIV-negative barebackers will

likely choose, in increasing numbers over the next few years, to use PREP, in line with the WHO's recommendation. Yet even if the WHO's goal of universal PREP were reached – most unlikely the world over, yet envisageable locally in parts of the developed world – the cultural and subcultural meanings of bareback would neither evaporate nor be transformed instantaneously as a result. To the extent that some men will continue to understand their behaviour as bareback, that behaviour will continue to refer back to the fraught period of bareback's emergence on which this special issue is focused. Furthermore, the advent of PREP can also be interpreted as indicating that the time is now ripe to analyse and evaluate the recent history of bareback's emergence.

The rapidly evolving biomedical context just outlined intersects with a rapidly developing legal context that has struggled, in all three countries, to challenge the most ethically problematic end of the spectrum of behaviours embraced by the term 'bareback', namely those which involve the intentional or 'reckless' transmission of HIV. In all three national contexts gay men have been prosecuted for either recklessly or intentionally transmitting HIV during consensual sex without condoms. A comparative analysis of bareback across these evolving socio-legal contexts in the three countries is undertaken for the first time here by Chris Ashford.

This special issue also shows how the different shapes which the often heated arguments over bareback have assumed in gay communities in the three national contexts reveal key differences between those communities and the self-understandings of their ordinary, as well as their more prominent and expert, members, not just about HIV/AIDS and health protection but also on much wider questions of community identity. For the emergence of bareback, with the challenges it evidently poses in health-protection terms, has been very vigorously contested from

within gay communities in all three national contexts. This contestation has, at various moments, targeted not only the practice of bareback but also its representation. The practice has been attacked at some of the most obvious urban community sites (activists from Act Up-Paris zapping sex bars, clubs and saunas; gay business associations being forced to police their members' commitment to enforcing safe(r) sex practices; sexclub owners, torch in hand, inspecting the darker recesses of their venues to check that condoms were indeed being used). Representations of bareback have been targeted in porn films, prominent examples of which are analyzed by Stuart Scott, and also in more reflective literary, philosophical and indeed academic or otherwise 'expert' discourses on the subject. Indeed, for many within gay communities in all three national contexts and most especially in France, it has often been thought that even to speak about bareback without, in the same breath, explicitly condemning it is tantamount to condoning and even promoting its real practice (Le Talec, 2004).

Scott and Ashford are both especially concerned with the porn production of Paul Morris's Treasure Island Media (TIM) studio, a bareback-only studio based in San Francisco and led by a theorist-director. Morris recently stated that internet porn connects 'communities of identical desire around the world' (Morris, 2014: 217), thereby instantiating 'a new socially engaged rumination or reverie' (228) by way of 'the masturbatory trance', which is 'a learning state and is the primary purpose, the real work, of pornography' (235), before going on to outline how sonic manipulation was used by the studio as part of an ongoing artisanal experiment in subliminal action (235-6). Yet even as Morris outlines his grand vision in the pages of *GLQ* in terms reminiscent of the mystical celebration of gay (hyper)masculinity by Edward Carpenter, as Ashford shows here the libertarian project of Morris's own studio is

increasingly threatened at home by unwarranted extensions into its very particular ‘workplace’ of ‘health and safety’ legislation in California.

The emergence of bareback has been vigorously contested within all three national contexts but in none more vehemently than in France. Three articles focus particularly on the distinctly more polarized French debate: sociologists and activists Daniela Rojas Castro and Gabriel Girard, in their jointly authored piece, examine the controversy over bareback which raged within their own organization, the leading French HIV/AIDS non-governmental organization, AIDES. I evaluate, in my article, the harder line taken on bareback by the French HIV/AIDS campaign group Act Up-Paris in a six year campaign (1999-2005) targeting two HIV-positive gay writers in particular, Guillaume Dustan and Erik Rémès, who were vilified as ideologues of bareback. Elliot Evans’s article focuses on the way in which queer theorist Beatriz Preciado has subsequently reflected, not without some ambivalence, on her dead friend Dustan’s ‘cause’ by recalling a shared fantasy in which they imagined applying for an arts grant to create an IVF baby from her ovum as a trans dyke and his HIV-infected sperm (Preciado, 2008). Evans’s article, with which the issue begins, accordingly considers bareback within the array of positions and questionings that is ‘queer’.

Overview of the articles

The first three articles (Evans; Davis; Rojas Castro and Girard) are mainly concerned with a France riven by the campaign against bareback waged by Act Up-Paris. All three study the emergence of bareback and responses to the phenomenon against that backdrop; Evans and Davis are concerned especially with the intersection between bareback and queer; Rojas Castro and Girard, in their article, are concerned more

pragmatically and empirically to show how AIDES approached the very sensitive subject of bareback. Evans shows how, for Preciado, the roots of queer activism lie in the collective response to the HIV crisis, even if queer activism today demands that distance be taken both from Dustan's 'path of death' (as Preciado puts it) and from the authoritarianism of self-appointed guardians of 'the community'. Davis offers a queer historiographical account of the French front in the bareback wars and a critique of Act Up-Paris's role in them. Rojas Castro and Girard show what was possible in terms of health prevention around bareback in the shadow of the bareback wars. They present a study of a series of sexual health workshops for barebackers run by AIDES in 2009. The focus then shifts to the UK with an article by Matthew Grundy-Bowers, Sally Hardy and Eamonn McKeown reporting on a qualitative empirical study of the impact of sexual position (or role) in bareback encounters. They show how some men's behaviour in abandoning condoms varies by position. For queer theory, in this study it is remarkable how the crude ('raw') fantasies of insemination pour forth from the interviewees' speech in a way that strains against its clinical frame, language and presumptions.

The focus moves back towards the US in the last three pieces, all of which are concerned with legal questions, pornographic representation and, in Dean's case, with the biopolitical stakes of chemoprophylaxis. Ashford examines the developing socio-legal contexts of bareback in the three countries, looking in particular at legislation on transmission of HIV and at attempts in the US to restrict the production of bareback porn. Scott looks closely at the work of TIM and the variety of metaphorical substitutes it has employed for unrepresentable HIV; he also probes the representational paradoxes of 'condomlessness' and argues that there is a limitation, or 'blind spot', in TIM's ideology and its aesthetic. Finally, in a major new article,

Dean discusses Truvada as chemoprophylaxis, using Foucault and Preciado to reflect on the biopolitical ambiguities of a post-bareback era.

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