



FEATURES

Top or Bottom: How do we desire?

What do queer memes of a top shortage reveal about the racialized orders of desire and new directions for gay critique?

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In June 2017, TNI's Lou Cornum brought together three writers to discuss what's really going on in queer lamentations of a top shortage. The conversation has been edited for length.

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LOU CORNUM. Is there actually a top shortage? If there isn't a top shortage, why do queers talk about it?

KAY GABRIEL. I think on the one hand “top shortage” doesn't actually name a numerical situation so much as a general disidentification from “top” as an avowed sexual position; and that this tendency derives from a highly overdetermined disavowal of desire. Being (or avowing oneself to be) a bottom allows one to assume an apparent passivity with respect to one's desires, at least according to the ideologeme whereby bottoming means “taking” and topping means “giving.” I should clarify here that I'm using top and bottom in their robust sense of sexual roles, rather than the (I think equally illustrative and somewhat clearer, if also clearly curtailed) sense of who's the insertive and who's the receptive partner, who's fucking whom.

BILLY-RAY BELCOURT. However tenuous its relation to statistical truth, a “top shortage” does take up queer attention. This bubbles up everywhere: a local drag queen recently joked that Edmonton was a city of bottoms. Might we want to think about a top shortage as something of a crisis in normative masculinity? If we follow this line of inquiry, then it holds that the so-called top shortage is caught up in the pathos of mourning, that something—a sexual identity, a mode of being in the world—disappears as tops disappear. In a homonormative semiotics of sex, topping is an enactment of gender; it is a performance of masculinity, which is bound up in the erotic life of whiteness. In *Blackpentacostal Breath*, Ashon Crawley reminds us that whiteness is a way of thinking the world. Topping is thus entangled in this mode of thought. So, as tops become fewer in numbers, the racial-sexual subject morphs too. Perhaps, then, the “top shortage” gives name to the affective rhythms of this shift in available forms of subjectification and desire. Desire needs to be redirected, and this is always a taxing process. We have to joke about it.

But, I think a more interesting question is, if there is a top shortage, is there also a “bottom surplus?” “Bottom surplus” might be a concept with which to begin thinking about the structure of feeling that bottoming ropes one into. It might nod to why more queers want to hoard that kind of pleasure. “The body” is a conceptual trapdoor of sorts for racialized and queered populations; it is a catch-22, something we don't always “have.” To face up to the coloniality of the world is to come to terms with the shoddy form of embodiment that “the body” shores up. I have written elsewhere that getting fucked is like disappearing into someone else for a little while. It is how one

unbecomes a body; it is how we give into the precarity of the concept of the self. I don't think we have to sensationalize bottoming to agree that it works differently than topping. In *A View from the Bottom*, Nguyen Tan Hoang insists that bottoming “reveals an inescapable exposure,” that it demands that we reach out to others. To extend this language, reaching out to others is an ethics. In this day and age, we are more beholden to others for our survivability. Bottoming is one way we knot ourselves to something other than the fragility of “the body.”

KAY GABRIEL. Reframing the top shortage as a bottom surplus points up the question of what desires bottoming actually canvasses—both consciously and unconsciously, which is why I am actually highly unenthusiastic about bottoming as a suddenly widespread site of identification. It strikes me that bottoming is heavily coded as absencing oneself of responsibility for or complicity with social power, which has at minimum the potential to join up with certain pernicious raced and gendered scripts. In this capacity, bottoming is the sexual correlative of the dissimulation of complicity with dominant structures that marks certain urban upwardly-mobile queer social scenes, whereby sounding off (say) anarchist principles can act as a fig-leaf disguising a *de facto* complicity with capital, real estate developers, and cops.

But “shortage” and “surplus” both carry the rhetoric of the market, where sex is transactional, a form of consumption. The true kernel that this rhetoric discloses is the relationship between gay sex practices and the commodity form, which mediates even the most utopian forms of gay promiscuity. This assertion can too easily be framed by the homophobic trope whereby gay men are just vapid consumers; The apparent alliance between capital and gay men is belied in the policing and crackdown on public sex that has proceeded apace with the gentrification of North American cities in the past three decades (which is one reason why criticizing gay culture for its focus on sex by and large constitutes a political alignment with cops). But where gay sex practices do bear a particular relationship towards the commodity form I think it's largely for the reasons Bruce Boone suggests in his instructive essay “Towards a Gay Theory for the 80's,” that “the commodification that characterizes the gay community takes place as a general demand for the introduction of subjective relations into the public sphere itself.” Boone's assertion reframes bottoming and topping as precisely these commodified positions introduced from the private into the public sphere. This substantially reframes the problem at hand: not which sexual position

produces a more liberatory affect or enlightened relationship towards power, but rather what liberatory potential is contained in this introduction of the private into the public, however mediated by the tyranny of the commodity form.

The cruising site has a capacity to function as a locus of gay public life—a public that does not simply reproduce the scrutiny of cops or the state or the street. This is in my understanding the co-theory of Samuel Delany’s tender evocation of sex in the old Times Square porn theatres in *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue*. Delany deploys a personal narrative of cruising in the theatres as a mediation of historical transition, the gentrification of New York City. This immanent polemic points up the social formations across racial and class lines enabled or foreclosed by specific urban geographies, and thus in Delany’s insightful account the sexual offers the coordinates for solidarity and political movement.

GEORGE DUST. To answer the original question: no, there is not a top shortage. I think I’d first offer a more psychological read on the “top shortage” non-phenomenon, or the phenomenon of talking about it. If I talk about a “top shortage” what I am saying is “nobody is fucking me the way I want, and I have no agency in that.” It’s overwriting a perhaps real situation of unmet need with a false narrative of scarcity. I think what is going on is that people have illusions and uncalibrated expectations about the frequency and ease of casual sex for other queers, how much negotiation and take-it-as-it-comes there really is. I frequently hear this language from people who are very inexperienced, who use this language to establish distinction for themselves: as worldly, as passive and innocent, as having conquered hang-ups, as having a disciplined body, as having a longer sweep of historical consciousness, etc. As long as it’s all talk, bottoming is positioned as a virtuous sexuality, though things of course get messier when it gets real. But commonly this is a way for people with no cruising culture and no cruising skills to assert a conditionally virtuous sexuality in public. As for *where* this sexuality is positioned as virtuous, things get interesting.

To get a start on that problem, I’ll suggest that top/bottom mirrors the animal/human distinction, that it’s a gradient of dehumanization. The top isn’t afforded innocence or subjectivity. The top is the brute. In this dynamic, one would expect to look for tops down the ladder from you on already-

existing gradients of dehumanization, whether that means class, blackness, sleaze, or pariah status.

But when I see it this way I think that everybody must experience a top shortage because no one can really conceive of topping within their social order or being topped by someone from it, you have to look down a link or two on the great chain of being in order to find a sufficiently charged interaction. So this might play out as a feeling that there is a shortage among men I consider human, all of whom consider me inhuman and are therefore looking to be topped by me. That's a standoff. But the gradient of coarseness or animality seems key to understanding where people are stuck. This is a hideous lens, but I think this is the lens people are seeing through.

Ultimately, I think queers who complain about a top shortage are usually people who've written themselves into social roles that exclude the kind of sex they want and who refuse their agency in doing so. Or they're trying to wheel and deal about it, to have their desires met without making changes in their own lives or accepting the compromise of social position that would come from immersion in a world where people actually fuck.

LOU CORNUM. This phrase “a world where people actually fuck” speaks to how this world seems absent or past for many queers. In [this Samuel Delany piece from the *Boston Review*](#), I describe the care practices between older men at a sex party and Kay, you had mentioned Delany's evocations in *Time Square Red*, *Times Square Blue* as tender. I have a feeling both of us are using “care” and “tender” in ways meant to be differently coded than how they are currently taken up by many queers. Is the rise of the “tenderqueer” identity correlated to the distancing from power that is wrapped up in disavowing topping?

GEORGE DUST. I think that “tenderqueer” is the queer equivalent of “nice guy” and everything that goes with that. As in “nice guys finish last,” which isn't at all true but there's a type of guy who always says that. The critique of the nice guy, which everyone understands, applies here.

Somehow, just as we find a culture of tender non-aggression, we find a corresponding investment in a mythic pre-AIDS free-for-all past. Perhaps we start carrying handkerchiefs. And there's something very strange about that, like we accept a kind of periodization and a kind of distancing, like “that's how they did it back then” or “that's how it goes with rough trade” but contribute

to the myth of a total division between the things Delany is talking about and the things you and your friends may actually be doing, in the nineties or right now. Tangentially, I think the tendency to cite Delany only through his theoretical work, and to avoid engaging the black gay writers who were and are his contemporaries, is not only tokenizing but bluffing.

BILLY-RAY BELCOURT. In “Friendship as a Way of Life,” Foucault turns his attention away from a “neat image of homosexuality” that is about seductive looks, ass grabbing, and fucking in the streets and toward a more troubling form of affection, a way of life, he says, that exceeds the sex act and because of this sneaks past the watchful eye of the law. This mode of life is un-institutional, it churns out a culture and an ethics that rend the fabric of the social. It is not shocking to point out that gay publics chronically fail to manifest this way of life. Relations between gay men are stuck in the rut of the sexual.

Grindr’s category of the “tribe” is settler-colonial evidence of this. That sociality is wired through unstable categories like the “bear” or the “twink” is symptomatic of our inability to work in the direction of a new way of life. Tribe coheres here only if we organize time as that which is post-Indigenous genocide. Desire is made out of the corpses of Indigenous peoples. The “top shortage” is likely indicative of this. We have been socialized into a “neat image of homosexuality,” and if sexual positions like top and bottom cease to rope us into relations with other men, then we are at a loss for how to go about making something of a romantic life. Maybe that’s what makes the top shortage so scary.

Foucault’s way of life is less about the precarities of life made under the gaze of the law and the threat of juridical violence and more about the precarities of reaching out to others. To resist categorical capture, to build a livable world undergirded by a shared ethical investment in the flourishing of those we love; this is to take seriously Foucault’s thinking in “Friendship as a Way of Life.” This is complicated too when we account for the raciality of desire, how indigeneity is calibrated as that which is love’s antithesis.

Demian DinéYazhi’ is a transdisciplinary Diné artist who makes art by way of a collective called Radical Indigenous Survivance and Empowerment. One of their works is an image captioned “PRE-AIDS” and “PRE-GAY MARRIAGE,” and sandwiched between these two captions is a sexually non-normative and

gender non-conforming Indigenous couple either pre-contact or shortly after contact (though this is of course language that I am sloppily taking from the present to talk about the past). I'm not sure it's worth it to temporalize indigeneity by way of a pre-aids/post-aids binary; if nothing else, this works up a cruel nostalgia for a past we can never get back. I think what DinéYahzı́ does get at here though is the semantic pliability of the discourse that is “sexuality”—how we, Indigenous peoples, don't need to ring queer life through the institutions of homonormativity or through the death drive that marks mainstream AIDS activism.

But, this mode of conceptualizing queer life is also a trapdoor of sorts for Indigenous peoples. We see everywhere how it stomps us into the anarchic past in order to animate white queer desires. Think not only to my earlier discussion of tribal intimacies, but also of the practices of groups like the radical fairies (see Morgensen 2011), who made recourse to a bloated idea of indigeneity to try to wish themselves outside of the horrors of the heteronormative present. Think also of a recent episode of the reality TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race* in which the contestant Alexis Michelle was required to produce a costume that orbited around the figure of the “native american.” Here, indigeneity is made into an empty signifier, unmoored from place and from living polities who govern a peoples who also go about the tricky work of making an animated life in the face of colonial governmentality. Indigeneity becomes a flimsy thing that settlers can mimic and put to use to intimate a racial-sexual-gender subject in the theatres of queer media.

KAY GABRIEL. I think utopia again is a productive framework for suturing together these disparate strands: the—as I think we're coming to some consensus on—misplaced and suspect desire to occupy a virtuous sexual position or excuse oneself from an objectionable one, which in absenting oneself of complicity with domination opens the possibility of the dehumanizations attendant upon the historical structure of feeling that is desire for trade; the reification of racial and sexual positions contained in both the colonial and racial histories that subtend uneven development in North American gay socialities; the back-to-the-land desire to circumvent this history that manifests as settler pretensions to indigeneity; and the dialectic of public and private that characterizes gay cruising, even as mediated and however commodified in the sex app. Let me then be clear: “bottom” and “top” are highly reified and socially overdetermined categories that we are here pursuing as a mediation of these processes, scenes, and histories,

practices, and desires; and this is more or less my answer to George’s provocations above to think these desires in psychoanalytic terms, which ultimately need to be returned to and grounded in the social.

But the genuine utopian kernel in these practices and affinities is not to be discovered in the settler fantasy of a land or space set apart from homophobic violence. Rather, this utopian kernel is contained in the cruising space in which a heterogeneity of desires is quilted into a commonality, producing a space of mutual commitment among subjects whose names you do not know; and this appears as the sexual and social obverse of political movement. Further, cruising marks out a space of social reproduction that, as against the nuclear family, takes place in public; and in superseding the public/private distinction contains the seeds of refusing and overcoming one of the central distinctions that allows for capitalist accumulation, that between production and reproduction. If this refusal stalls out at the level of the sexual—or, in fact, the affective—this utopian gesture risks turning into a hollow optimism, but I am committed to linking together the desires and practices enabled here with, at minimum, the form of politics they enable in turn.

BILLY-RAY BELCOURT. To do away with “the top” is to make us scavenge for new modes of subjectification. Few want to take on the turbulence of that process; even fewer want to tackle that their whole lives. Stability is addicting. But now that we might be done with “the top” and, in this, the “top shortage,” we can open ourselves up to new sex talk, to new categorical tongues. This will inevitably expose the degree to which whiteness has been deposited into the crevices of everyday life vis-a-vis the sexual.

GEORGE DUST. Guy Hocquenghem’s *The Screwball Asses* has a really sharp take on French queers who run after Arabs. Americans maybe have a model of this kind of acquisitive sexual racism in William Burroughs or Kathy Acker or, like, 90% of pornography. Here’s a quote:

What the young gay man says to the Arab is still an avowal of guilt: ” The bourgeoisie exploits you, my father exploits you, so fuck me!” ... Class struggle, class masochism, what hides beneath this artificial appropriation of the primitive? In “Arabs and Us,”

some homosexual boys explain to us that their desire is looking for the primitive and the oppressed. But what they are looking for, instead, is someone that is the least capable of exerting power over them, and yet this social victim is the most male chauvinist of all.

It's not a top shortage, it's a brute shortage. This is the dynamic people are crying out for. And maybe that helps explain why this supposed shortage seems to be a completely white phenomenon. Anyone who gets interpellated into this interaction as a top is going to be more critical of it.

KAY GABRIEL. I think Hocquenghem offers, in the context of the various gross displacements of the 'top shortage,' a gesture against the reifications of gay desire that subtend this peculiar discourse—which at this point we probably all agree can be dispensed with. In Hocquenghem's treatise:

We shall not count and index all those old domestic machines that have domesticated desire: sewing machines of desire, freezers of desire, brake presses of desire, paper cutters, riveters, grinding machines and plows of desire, irons of desire, routers and rolling-mills. They are all rattling and hissing inside until we end up crying: "I am free! I only desire what I like!" What I like, myself, is to desire all bodies that can produce joy and revolution.

Here the machine appears as a figure for the operations of desire, and while I don't want to push this metaphor too far there's a co-theory to be derived here whereby, just as the worker in industrial production is in a classical Marxian account employed by the machine, Hocquenghem's subject of desire is set in motion as a kind of conscious automaton that only desires "what it likes." Hocquenghem's coy "what I like, myself, is to desire all bodies that can produce joy and revolution" resummons the "desire to desire" that he stakes out elsewhere in the essay as a negation of this historical process of reification. This assertion predicates desire as the suture that binds political commitment to revolutionary practice. Instead of tarrying with the top shortage, I think the urgent question for the gay left is to ask how to seize on this incitement anew.