

Role Play and Risk

Two timely exposés on gay men, sex and dating

It's summertime, and those sultry evenings lend themselves to a little added heat between the sheets. *Just Out* has received a number of requests for articles on sex and dating, so we thought this would be the perfect season to, ahem, fulfill some of your desires. In the first of a two-part series, we've asked two queer male writers to riff on what they see as pertinent, pressing issues for gay and bi men's sex lives today.

Glenn Scofield Williams explores sex roles between men and makes a case for how the old top/bottom dichotomy is being replaced by a limber versatility—bottoms on top and vice versa!

Floyd Sklaver reveals the shocking attitudes of a number of sexually active gay men who don't use condoms regularly. He then offers some hopeful and helpful tips on how to talk honestly about HIV when you're dating and hooking up.

In our Aug. 6 issue, we'll give women the platform when Gina Daggett tells how to keep the passion alive in the lesbian bedroom, and Helen Silvis talks to some of Portland's sexiest single queer gals.

So read on, and stay tuned!

The Joy of Switch Hitting

Gay male sex roles and how we live now

by Glenn Scofield Williams



My queer colleague Jon turns to me during a lull at work and says, "So, if you could have sex with either Batman or Robin, which one would you choose?"

"Catwoman," I answer. "You know I'm bi." He smacks my biceps with a paperback. "They're cartoons, Jon," I say.

"OK, then," he says, flicking back his in-need-of-a-trim bangs with a smooth toss of the head, "Ernest Hemingway or Oscar Wilde?" "They're both dead." I grin.

"Henry Rollins or Alan Cumming?"

I put down a stack of books and stare at him. "Are you trying to find out if I'm a top or a bottom?"

"Moi?" Jon says, batting his eyelashes rapidly.

Only then do I realize why Jon's questions have been irritating me, why I'm reluctant to answer. I fiddle a bit with the stack of books and finally mutter, "Can't you tell?"

Bottoms up?

These days, in our codified, queer mating rituals—in the bars, on the Internet, at work and especially in our beds—all gay and bi men seem to fall into one of these easily identifiable categories, don't we? Are you a top? Are you a bottom? The types are clear and recognizable.

Tops are masculine and dominant and like to be the aggressor. Bottoms are feminine and submissive and like to be passive.

Just spend a moment with Charles Silverstein and Felice Picano's *The Joy of Gay Sex* and you'll learn that "the top, for example, would seem to be the protector, the controller, the one who does the bulk of the leading and guiding, the one who takes on the responsibilities." As well, "You may find you prefer getting fucked" or you "find yourself evaluating the men you meet by...the size, shape and hardness of their cock.... When this happens, you have become a bottom."

Top/bottom. Masculine/feminine. Fucker/fuckee.

Most of us homos seem satisfied with some form of this. Even as we begin to settle for strict categories like gay, bi and straight (though most queer theorists and psychologists believe in a more complex sexual structure), we have accepted the top/bottom roles in our beds and cruising habits with little debate. This dichotomy mirrors what surrounds us in our heterosexual-dominated culture: the masculine and the feminine, the daddy and the mommy. It would appear that many of our queer subcultures have not only embraced these traditional sex roles but have exaggerated them for their own purpose and pleasure: domination/submission, daddy/boy, bear/cub.

We are a culture that loves dichotomy: black/white, male/female, straight/gay, top/bottom. But when we look more closely at our complex communities, these dichotomies break down into finer shades of gray and, ultimately, prove perhaps more confining than useful.

For some, this top/bottom talk smacks of the old phobia-laden comment we've all heard: "Which one plays the woman?" But hasn't the women's movement and the rise of transsexual culture taught us more about the complicated nature of masculinity and femininity? Doesn't queer theory have something more interesting and multifaceted to tell us about the way men fuck?

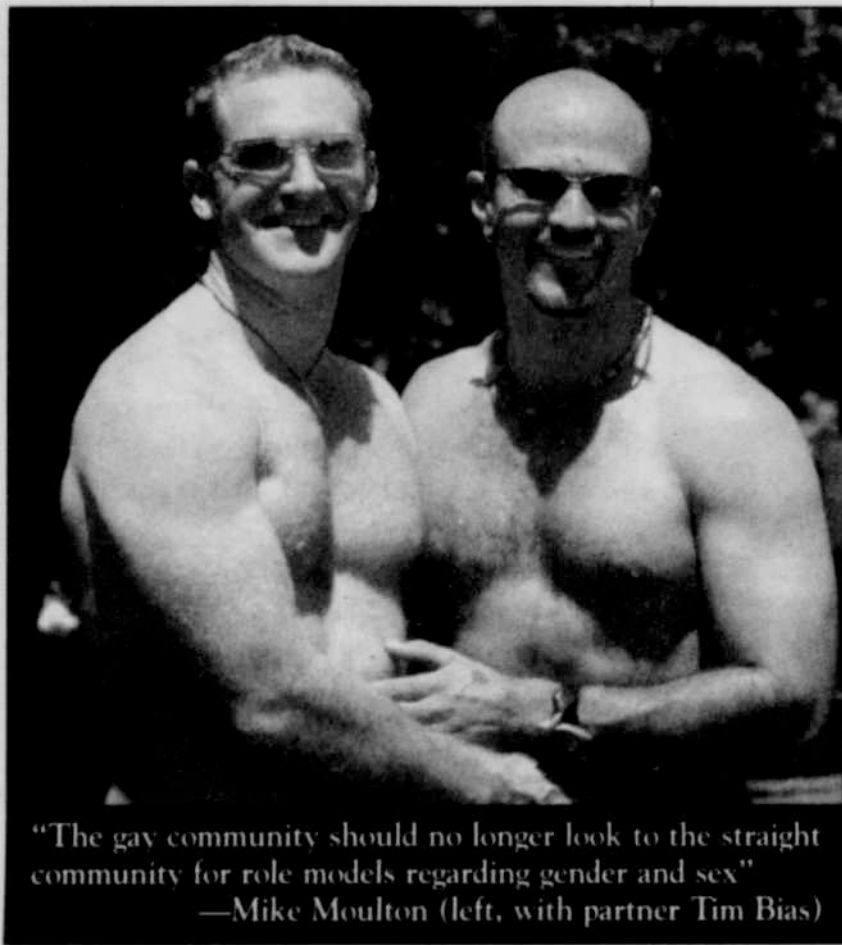
A recent study showed that the traditional top/bottom dichotomy may be far more complex in practice. Essayist and Web master Nicholas Yee conducted a survey of sex role preferences by polling 396

queer men in a Gay.com chat room. Though the results are only semi-scientific (as a product of "the milieu of Gay.com"), they are nonetheless interesting.

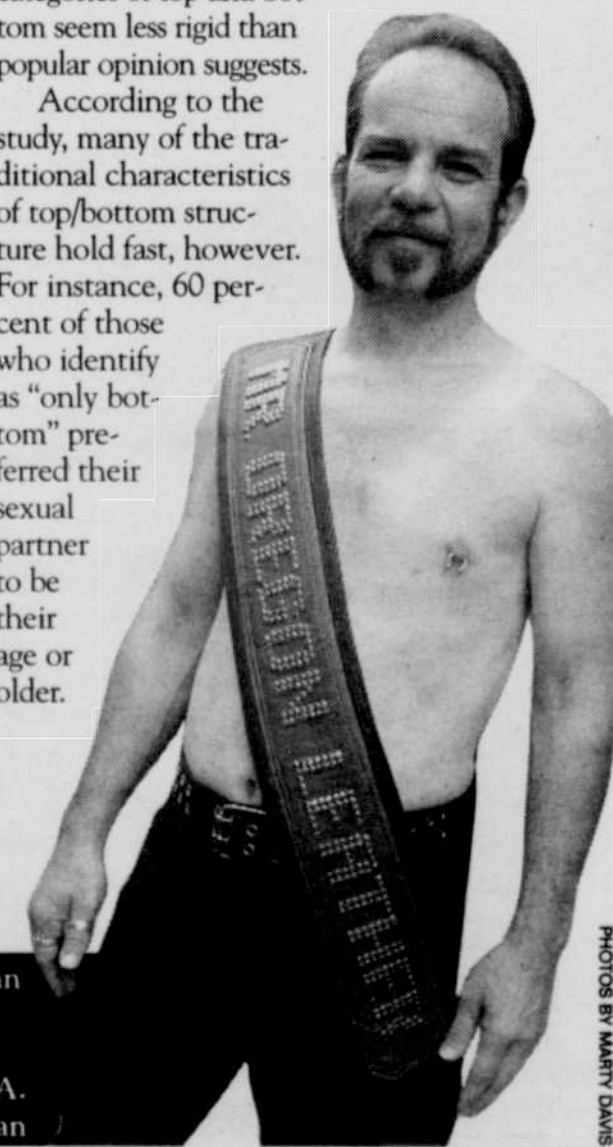
Yee found that 10.9 percent of the men in the study identified themselves as "only bottom" and that only 11.6 percent were "only top." One-fifth of the men identified themselves as equally "versatile," while 26.8 percent saw themselves as "versatile, prefer bottom" and 22.5 percent identified as "versatile, prefer top." Still others couldn't identify themselves in any of those ways, either because they didn't feel experienced enough or they just didn't know. With more than 60 percent of the respondents identifying as some form of versatile, the categories of top and bottom seem less rigid than popular opinion suggests.

According to the study, many of the traditional characteristics of top/bottom structure hold fast, however. For instance, 60 percent of those who identify as "only bottom" preferred their sexual partner to be their age or older.

And what if my answer to Jon is, 'I'd like to fuck Henry Rollins or get fucked by Alan Cummings'?



"The gay community should no longer look to the straight community for role models regarding gender and sex."
—Mike Moulton (left, with partner Tim Bias)



"Yes, you can be a top and get fucked."
—Earl A. Coffman

PHOTOS BY MARTY DAVIS