

# **Ethnographing Dangerous Pleasures: the desire for risk and disgust**

Victor Hugo de Souza Barreto<sup>1</sup>

Contact: torugobarreto@yahoo.com.br

My proposal here is to talk about methodological issues in my fieldwork on sexual practices. They are not specific to my current postdoctoral field, but are reflections throughout my academic career dedicated to this area.

I am an anthropologist and I have always been very interested in the discussion of gender and sexuality, especially in the key of what the Argentine anthropologist Nestor Perlongher called “anthropology of the desire”:

"Why is it that anthropology, so obsessed with talking about the other, is not encouraged to recognize the other's desire?"  
(Perlongher, 1984)

I did my doctorate at Federal Fluminense University (UFF), in Rio de Janeiro, and my thesis was about the practice of collective sex at orgy parties that are scheduled in Rio and are exclusive for cisgender men (Barreto, 2017b).

And in 2017 I started a postdoctoral research about the tension between a search for intense pleasure and the risks and dangers that surround these practices and how these dangers are also a source of eroticism. In this ethnography I follow some groups of online conversations (like the app *WhatsApp*) of people who organize meetings and debates about “bareback sex” (without a condom) and what we call “pig sex” (also

---

<sup>1</sup> PhD in Anthropology from the Federal Fluminense University (UFF, Rio de Janeiro/Brazil). Postdoctoral Researcher in the Postgraduate Program in Anthropology at UFF (PPGA/UFF).

known as “dirty sex”), that is, a set of sexual practices involving eschatological elements or what we consider “dirt” or “disgusting”)<sup>2</sup>.

The face-to-face meetings of these groups are also exclusive to cisgender men (although eventually transgender people are added to the virtual networks, their participation in these meetings is prohibited) and also happen in Rio.

My ethnography, therefore, is produced both on the notes of interactions in the virtual platforms and in the fieldwork carried out in the scheduled party-meetings, in a “continuum on/offline” (Beleli, 2015)<sup>3</sup>.

As you all can imagine, my work has caused some controversy. Especially in the current political scenario that Brazil is going through (online attacks, conservative newspaper articles, it was used as an example of “university mess” in Brazil, “the thesis about gay orgy” that demonstrates the misuse of public money and communist domination in the country, as some deputies spoke of my work at the Congress in Brasília)<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the most different erotic practices involving elements such as certain fluids, secretions and bodily excretions (urine, feces, vomit, sweat, blood, phlegm, semen, spit, etc.), fetishisation of spaces and bodies demarcated by a certain “dirt” (smell of sweat, smegma, dirty feet, worn clothes, bad breath, the eroticization of the bathroom, etc.) and other experiments that involve taking the body to physical and sensory limits (such as the presence of violence, slapping, swearing, suffocations, humiliations, torture and pain in the genitals and others, fisting and footing (penetration with fists and feet), sex with vegetables, other foods and even insects) make up the vast territory of what is considered to be pig sex. For an analysis of the practice see Barreto (2019).

<sup>3</sup> I also want to highlight that the problematizations brought up in this work from the tension between pleasure and risk are a result of a set of researches that sought to analyze various sexual practices and certain erotic conventions as a privileged field for understanding the organizations of desire (see, for example: Vance 1984; Rubin 1998 and 2001; Califia 1994; Facchini 2008; Gregori 2016; Sáez & Carrascosa 2012; Garcia 2009). I also include here a continuity line of my own research trajectory, in which I have been trying to contribute to this thematic universe from different ethnographic scenarios (Barreto 2017a, 2017b, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example:

<https://www.gazetadopovo.com.br/educacao/em-universidade-federal-doutorado-sobre-orgias-gays-temp-articipacao-especial-de-autor-3eppke8i3rfdghp29hacdbj6l/>

<https://twitter.com/xicograziano/status/1122837087106023425>

<https://br.blastingnews.com/brasil/2017/10/tese-de-doutorado-sobre-orgias-gays-usa-recurso-publico-em-universidade-federal-002064761.html>

<https://www.facebook.com/ccriminiais/posts/1133635366787890/>

The focus of on this text is not going to be so much at this point of the "controversy", even if I run into it a little, since it seems to me inseparable in the current political context in which we live not to think about the problem of how our research themes (and I am thinking here in gender and sexuality studies mainly) of how these themes are being received and being the target of attacks.

But my focus here is on field issues. Some "dilemmas", but mainly challenges for which I had to find solutions. And most of the time alone, because they were answers that are not usually given to us (for "us" I mean social scientists in general and mainly anthropologists who work more with some specificity, which is fieldwork and the ethnographic method). These responses to challenges and dilemmas are not found in manuals, are not explicit in codes of ethics, are not explained in classes. These are things that require a difficult combination of **improvisation** and **good sense**.

And, being honest with you, I don't see it as a bad thing. I even think that this is one of the funs of doing anthropology and because I am so excited to do fieldwork and research. Perlongher said that anthropological research has a certain "artisanal character" (Perlongher, 2005). It is always necessary to reinvent research techniques in each field studied.

Anthropology does not have all the answers. It is no longer intended to be a totality study of people's lives and social relationships. Neither has as mathematics, physics or chemistry, a formula that you can always apply to solve problems. Each field is a field, each case is a case.

Of course, the exchange of experiences, you know what challenges other researchers went through and how they solved it, what we are doing here right now, for example, it is fundamental and part of our training as a researcher.

Taking this into account, I proposed some questions when I put together this paper:

1. What are the ethical implications of following a field that deals with practices considered dangerous?
2. How to develop research based on elements such as disgust, revulsion and risk sexualization?
3. What kind of bodily and affective experimentation does such fieldwork produce for the researcher and help (re)think our methodologies?

I don't know if I'll be able to answer all of this here, I even thought I was kind of pretentious, but I'll point out some understandings, at least.

And contrary to the order, I will start with the last question. Not because I find it easier, but because I realize that there is already a significant production of works on this point: that of the researcher's body in the field. How much the dimension of the senses, affections, emotions, body presentation, makes a difference in fieldwork and, as I also wrote about it, of the body as a "work tool" (Barreto, 2017). It always is, but in a field made of sexual interactions, it takes on another dimension.

In my research, for example, any and all forms of interaction have my own body as a medium, there, exposed, most of the time naked, in contact with the other's bare skin, being touched, pressed, kissed, licked, bitten. There is no approximation during all the field work that does not involve me allowing my body to be used in some way.

I comment that I sometimes feel myself practicing a kind of "prostitution" for research data: "I let you take advantage of my body while giving me what I want to know".

However, it is necessary to understand that it is through this body, my body (and the markers that cross it: in my case being a white, cisgender man, middle class, relatively young, of heteronormative performance...) that the relationships take place there. Then I realized that it was necessary to put my body into experiment as well. Doing science with the body. To understand what causes disgust, what excites, what intensifies the practices and what is repulsive.

But I wanted to focus more on the first two questions.

Well, talking about bareback sex has always been a sensitive subject in terms of research. At least in a research that is not in a journalistic or polemic tone. Practitioners of bareback sex have been read since the 1990s as "biological terrorists" (Garcia, 2009), as a transgressive practice (which we may even question if much of that power of transgression of bareback sex has not been lost now with the implementation of the PrEP and PEP as a public health policy<sup>5</sup>), but it reached another level in 2015 in Brazil with the controversy over the "stamp club".

"Stamp Club" was the name of a blog that dealt with sharing texts, photos and videos about the bareback practice and encouraging HIV-positive people to transmit the virus (to "stamp it") on purpose to others, using techniques such as drilling a condom before the act or removing the condom during sex without the partner noticing. So, it's different from the (in)famous figure of the "bug chasing". The intentionality of the contamination here does not take into account the consent of the other. This case led to the creation of a "moral panic" (Rubin, 1998) about the theme in the country.

---

<sup>5</sup> According to the official website of the Brazilian government (<http://www.aids.gov.br>), PrEP (which started to be implemented in the country only in late 2017) is used as an intervention strategy for the prevention of transmission of HIV between "priority populations" - MSM, gays, sex workers, transvestites, transsexuals, drug users and people deprived of liberty and on the streets. PrEP consists of the daily use of antiretrovirals in uninfected people, but at high risk of HIV infection. And PEP is a preventive measure that consists of starting the use of medicines within 72 hours after a probable exposure to the HIV virus. It is already used, basically, in two situations: in cases of risk of HIV contamination by health professionals in the work activity, due to accidents, and in cases of sexual relations in which prevention measures fail, to reduce the risk transmission of HIV.

Behind this controversy, there is a whole debate on the issue of criminalizing HIV transmission, which has intensified with this case. Everything is very permeated by moral issues and in a clear movement of judicialization of public health issues. And these themes really affect our morality.

I remember the first time I went to a bareback party and how I was bothered by it all. The desire was to go out and distribute condoms to people: "Here, guys, don't forget to use those". And I was stuck for a long time in this "moral" and ethical shock of how to deal with a field in which people are, in fact, putting themselves in danger.

And, see, saying this, realizing and recognizing the risks and dangers implicit in a particular practice is not necessarily moralizing them. Many researches on these sexual practices as the bareback, in an attempt to clean up this moralism end up falling into another trap that is to focus only on pleasure, on enjoyment, making risks invisible and not taking into account that much of the pleasure in this practice, it comes from the **eroticization of risks**.

The most interesting thing, over time, was to realize that there is also a moral and ethical regime in these practices. It also obviously works as a legitimization discourse for outsiders, but I realized that they are based on a singular production of three main values: **responsibility, consent** and **care**.

What my interlocutors are calling attention is the fact that they are responsible and aware of the possible risks in the practices in which they are engaging, at the same time that they are autonomous and free for all possible choices (as long as they are made consciously and are consented by all present); and that they are also attentive to some form of care, even if it is in the key of "harm reduction" or "risk management".

Also to realize that exposure to risk is not something already given, it varies in each context and interaction. For example, at bareback parties I started to realize that condoms were used from time to time. And this was something that was negotiated and decided at each interaction with each partner. It wasn't because you were at a bareback event that you were forced to not use it, it was just a possibility. Your choice, individual, consented with the partner(s), for which you were responsible. Including responsible for the possible consequences.

It is precisely for these values that the question of the "stamp club", for example, does not apply here. At least not as a "big deal", whether you want to be contaminated is understood as an individual choice and whether it is legitimate or not, there is no room for debate, as long as it is something consented to.

When I comment about this, always ask me: "How can you empathize with people who have morally dubious attitudes or desires" (or even criminals depending on the point of view)?

Two things that are interesting to think about here: the first is what Geertz (2009) says in a text about Malinowski and the controversy about the publication of his field diaries, in which Geertz explains that "empathy" is not the same thing as "sympathy". Being able to be affected and empathetically understand what your interlocutors do or tell you is not the same thing as agreeing and, to use a more complicated term, "condone" with them (soon you will understand why I said that).

The second thing to think about is that the usual answer of the anthropologist who is asked about his field is usually the way out of the *relativistic principle* to exempt us from a certain responsibility: "It was not me who said or did this, they were". I'm saying this, because I've also used the "relativism card" several times, I still continue to use it. But I am aware that it is an easy answer, it does not say much.

Because, as I said at the beginning, our research has political implications. It is here that the previous “condone” gets complicated. How much of my work, for example, can serve as ammunition not only for attacks on all the Universities in Brazil and the social sciences (as it is already being), but worse, as an attack for my own interlocutors. I think it has become increasingly important that we think that we do have responsibility for these people and what we write about them. Mainly because they can be people who live in a context of vulnerability different than mine.

Every time I write something more sensitive about my research, I always stop to reflect: “Do I really need to tell that? It is not dangerous? Is this description really necessary for my argument? How can it be captured and used against these people or against me?” Nowadays I rethink even previous choices.

This problematization about the relativistic principle as an excuse is not only applied when we have to talk about our research to “outsiders”, but also during fieldwork, among our own interlocutors.

I remember when I was talking about my doctoral research with another anthropologist friend and I talked about how I perceived among my interlocutors many “macho”, misogynistic and even homophobic practices and discourses. And he provoked me: “But why don't you confront your interlocutors”?

And I don't think we do that much. It's not like I'm doing an ethnography with a tribe isolated from the population, or with an extremely vulnerable community. It seems to me that much of the fear of confrontation with our interlocutors is the result of the colonialist issues implicit in our discipline, from which anthropology always tries to extricate itself. However, paying attention to the colonialist risks of our practice is not the same as the preciousness of non-interference in the field.

I chose to change my attitude on the field. And what I realized is that this position of provocateur, of not running away from a certain confrontation, was much richer in terms of data production.

I remember one day, at the end of one of these group parties and talking to an interlocutor who had become a close friend. He said that, for the first time, it had become a “cumdump” that day. "Cumdump" is an expression for those guys who want to get as much sperm inside themselves as possible.

As he was a person with whom I established a greater contact and I knew he did PrEP, but it was not continuous, he forgot to take the pills and did not follow the treatment properly, I couldn't avoid the reproduction of a normalizing speech: “Man, what a danger, how could you do that? You have to be sense! ”

Then he replied:

“But I have sense. And the sense is mine, even if I want to lose it. I'm not doing anyone any harm, and I have my right to fuck myself if I want to”.

And I was left with no answer.

My shock came from an initial difficulty in understanding (or accepting) that one can also choose to risk, by a dangerous path in favor of something else, of what is believed to be the best or most pleasurable. This right is related to the idea that the judgment is mine and mine alone, even if I want to lose it.

And it was only at that moment that I was introduced to this idea of "the right to fuck myself". That we, of course, can relate to a form of individualism or as some authors

even say of a neoliberal subjectivity and how this is increasingly symptomatic of our contemporary society but also as a new ethics based on a singular construction between responsibility, consent and care.

So, already concluding, as I said, I didn't intend to definitively answer those questions that I proposed, but to point out how these challenges presented themselves to me and how I was trying to give solutions to them even if a little in improvisation, but I hope that mainly with good sense.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

BARRETO, Victor Hugo de Souza. *Vamos fazer uma sacanagem gostosa? Uma etnografia da prostituição masculina carioca*. Niterói: EdUFF, 2017a.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Festas de orgia para homens: territórios de intensidade e socialidade masculina*. Salvador: Editora Devires, 2017b.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Prazer e risco: o desafio entre as políticas de saúde contemporâneas relacionadas ao HIV/aids e os roteiros eróticos de homens que fazem sexo com homens". In: CASTRO, Rosana; ENGEL, Cíntia e MARTINS, Raysa (orgs). *Antropologias, saúde e contextos de crise*. Brasília: Editora Sobrescrita, 2018.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Sexo pig: algumas notas sobre prazeres extremos", em OLIVEIRA, Thiago e MAIA, Helder Thiago (orgs.). *Práticas Sexuais: Itinerários, Possibilidades e Limites de Pesquisa*. Salvador, Editora Devires, 2019.

BELELI, Iara. "O imperativo das imagens: construção de afinidades nas mídias digitais". *Cadernos Pagu*. 2015, n.44, pp. 91-114.

CALIFIA, Pat. *Public sex: the culture of radical sex*. São Francisco: Cleis Press, 1994.

FACCHINI, Regina. *Entre Umas e Outras: mulheres, (homo)sexualidades e diferenças na cidade de São Paulo*. Tese (doutorado em Ciências Sociais). Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas, Unicamp, Campinas, 2008.

GARCIA, Esteban. “Políticas e prazeres dos fluidos masculinos: barebacking, esportes de risco e terrorismo biológico”. In: Maria Elvira Díaz-Benítez & Carlos Fígari (orgs.), *Prazeres dissidentes*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Garamond. pp. 537-566, 2009.

GEERTZ, Clifford. *Obras e vidas. O antropólogo como autor*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 2009.

GREGORI, Maria Filomena. *Prazeres perigosos: erotismo, gênero e limites da sexualidade*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2016.

PERLONGHER, Nestor. “Antropologia das sociedades complexas, identidade e territorialidade ou como estava vestida Margaret Mead” in: *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, 22: 137- 144, 1984.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Territórios marginais”. In: GREEN, J. N.; TRINDADE, R. (Org.). *Homossexualismo em São Paulo e outros escritos*. São Paulo: Editora Unesp, 2005.

RUBIN, Gayle. “Thinking Sex: notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality”. In: NARDI, P . M.; SCHNEIDER, B. E. (Ed.). *Social perspectives in lesbian and gay studies: a reader*. New York: Routledge, 1998. pp. 100-133.

\_\_\_\_\_. “The catacombs: a temple of the butthole”. In: *Deviations*. Durham & London: Duke University Press. pp. 224-240, 2001.

SÁEZ, Javier e CARRASCOSA, Sejo. *Por el culo. Políticas anales*. Madrid: Egales, 2011.

VANCE, Carole. *Pleasure and danger: exploring female sexuality*. Nova York: Routledge, 1984.