Gay Activism and Scholarship from the Front Lines: Contributions of Eric Rofes—A Memoriam

Donald C. Barrett, PhD
California State University, San Marcos

Eric Rofes, gay activist, writer, and scholar, died of a heart attack on June 26, 2006, at the age of 51. Though Eric's career start was an elementary school teacher, he quickly touched a wide swath of gay culture with writings on being a gay elementary school teacher and for the Gay Community News of Boston in the mid-1970s. In the mid-1980s he was director of the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center, and then later of Shanti in San Francisco. Most recently, he was an associate professor of education at Humboldt State University. Throughout his life he was a prolific writer and speaker, almost always pushing the edge on issues of sexuality. Proud of his sexuality, he was also quite open about his involvement in leather and S&M. Eric is survived by his mother and family members, his partner of 16 years, Crispin Hollings, and by the very many that crossed paths with him over the years.

"Prophet," "visionary," "tribal elder"—such were the descriptions of Eric in many of the community reflections and eulogies that circulated shortly after his death. Many academics and gay political leaders,

Donald C. Barrett is Associate Professor of Sociology at California State University, San Marcos. He is co-editor of Sociological Perspectives and he chairs the Internal Review Board of AIDS Project Los Angeles. Correspondence may be addressed: Sociology Department, California State University, San Marcos, CA 92096 (E-mail: dbarrett@csusm.edu).

Journal of Homosexuality, Vol. 53(3) 2007
Available online at http://journals.haworthpress.com
© 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1300/J082v53n03_01
however, would have been less complimentary as Eric was a controversial figure. Not only did Eric regularly challenge the conventional perspectives on sexual culture, but his challenges were delivered in unconventional, and sometimes alienating, ways. Having known Eric for more than 30 years, I definitely understood (and shared) the conflicted feelings that many had both for him and his work. However, a re-examination of his most prominent books on gay culture suggests previously unseen strengths.

In his *Reviving the Tribe* (1996), he frequently spoke from the perspective of a middle-class, white, urban, gay man. That background, along with his comfort in public settings and his masculine bearing, gave him a presence that was well received. Through his writings, work, and speaking, he was a key player in keeping honest the discussions of gay male sexuality. But, the class-bias embedded in some of his communications, and the class-influence in his ability to be heard, frustrated many.

Eric’s success as a public scholar, activist, and commentator is clearly evident in his multiple careers, in his volunteer work, and in the fact that he published extensively on education, gay culture, and the intersection of the two. While all of his writing addressed difficult and sensitive issues of sexuality, in this article I emphasize two books that are considered to be particularly salient for sexuality scholars and activists: *Reviving the Tribe* (1996) and *Dry Bones Breathe* (1998) are strong challenges to how we think about sexuality and community, though both are also problematic.

Written in response to the effects of AIDS on gay culture, *Reviving the Tribe* focuses on gay men’s experiences from the advent of AIDS to the early 1990s. In this book gay men are described as a “tribe” that had found their sexuality together during gay liberation but were, in the early 1990s, dealing with the shock of AIDS. Due to public perception of AIDS, gay men were finding that cultural acceptance of their sexuality was reduced tremendously, often by their own community in eahoof with public health efforts. In addition, Eric argues, gay men suffered tremendously from the losses of friends and community. Combining the strong community/public health avoidance of understanding men’s sexuality, with the ongoing trauma and stresses of AIDS, Eric finds it not surprising that in the mid-1990s the rates of HIV infection of gay men remained at a level that many would consider unacceptable. To address these rates of infection, Eric suggests that what is needed is a more realistic approach to community sexual health. An approach that (1) discontinues the practice of assuming that sexuality has no meaning, (2) realistically acknowledges and addresses the effect of AIDS-trauma
felt by gay men, (3) provides honest and complex, rather than simplistic, knowledge of HIV risks so men are able to make reasonable choices, and (4) embraces the fact that some men will make valid choices that place sexual intimacy and risk of infection over longevity. *Dry Bones Breathe* continues in this vein, and will be addressed later.

The overall message of *Reviving the Tribe* was a powerful and very challenging statement, raising questions about politics and sexuality that remain true today. The relevance of the work was enhanced by three factors. In the first place, Eric’s approach was very inter-disciplinary, drawing not only on multiple social science disciplines but also on literature, cultural studies, education, and popular culture. In doing so he created a flexibility in perspectives that facilitates understanding for readers who not only come from various levels of knowledge, but also from diverse schools of thought. Second, Eric implicitly addressed the question of the potential biases that are due to the author’s own place in the social dynamics being analyzed. By very clearly and explicitly locating his emotions, desires, behaviors, and resources in his writing, Eric removes any doubt about his own investment in the approaches he suggests. Third, the book touched on issues that were (and still are) considered almost sacrosanct. He openly criticized the implicit or explicit anti-sexualism in many of the authors who have been revered for their analysis of AIDS; he clearly described the shifts in sexual politics from gay (sexual) liberation to gay rights; he brought up the delicate subject of the increased presence of lesbians in gay politics and the problems of gender differences in thinking about sexuality; and he addressed the health consequences of generalizing to all gay men from the experiences of middle-class, white, urban, gay-identified males.

The overall message of the book was quite valuable but the benefits just cited were also a source of problems. For one, the structure of its inter-disciplinary presentation was problematic, resulting in a sense of weak theoretical and methodological rigor. Second, though there are valid reasons to reveal one’s relationship to the analysis, going too far inadvertently reduces the book’s strengths. Eric’s disclosure of himself as a sexual being in gay culture made the text more relevant, but it began to sound like bragging when the reader was provided with detailed descriptions of sexual acts, number of partners, and roles in sexual power dynamics. The hazards of illustrating masculine sexual prowess became even more evident when they were combined with the relative frequent dropping of signifiers indicative of middle or higher social class (e.g., extended leisure in highly desirable, expensive locations, “cocktail” hour social activities). Not only does this level of disclosure
draw attention to details unrelated to the analysis, but it suggests inattention to the role of class and gender privilege in one’s interpretation of community experience. As Eric himself later noted in *Dry Bones Breathe*, writing is easily taken out of context and misinterpreted. Unfortunately, in the case of *Reviving the Tribe*, the reader is often left with critique, but not awareness, of the complexities surrounding the early response to AIDS. Needed earlier in the text and more clearly was a stronger cue to the sexual, gender and class dynamics that had resulted in the following: (1) the ill-considered public culture of apology about gay men’s sexuality; (2) the difficult gendered changes in both public politics and community leadership; and (3) the false assumption that men outside of the “tribe” experienced AIDS the same as did men in the “tribe.”

*Dry Bones Breathe* picks up where *Reviving the Tribe* ends, examining gay culture in the later 1990s. *Dry Bones Breathe* was written while Eric was working on his PhD in education at UC Berkeley, and it clearly reflects the effects of being in that environment. The writing and analysis are exceptionally good, which is a clear contrast to *Reviving the Tribe*. It was particularly relieving to see *Dry Bones Breathe* start off with an acknowledgment that one of the basic tenets of the previous book, that AIDS had been emotionally devastating for all gay men, turned out to have not been true. In *Dry Bones Breathe*, Eric recognized the need to address these differences in exposure to HIV risk, but more importantly he recognized that AIDS had not been as salient for many who were not part of the “tribe” and faced more immediate housing and job concerns.

As Eric’s analysis in *Dry Bones Breathe* demonstrated very well, despite a public health and gay community atmosphere that was frequently in denial about the realities of gay men’s lives, very many men had muddled through the AIDS-scare somehow, developing fairly well-constructed patterns of behavior that allowed them sexual satisfaction at levels of potential HIV risk that they could live with. Thus, as Eric stresses, the fact that gay men developed reasonable harm reduction strategies with little help from AIDS agencies indicates that the zero-tolerance stance of many such agencies was simply unrealistic. Working from this critique, Eric then pushes further, illustrating how community zero-tolerance policies are linked with the use of sexual moralism in the broader culture. Particularly good here were two points: (1) his analysis of the link between sexual moralism and the tendency of those with power (who are thus older and wealthier) to castigate the supposed excesses of youth (particularly gay male circuit culture), and (2) his analysis of the role of sexual moralism in creating scapegoats that hide the social consequences of structural inequality.
Although the writing and analysis in *Dry Bones Breathe* are much improved, problems remain. As in *Reviving the Tribe*, the dominant perspective continues to be based on the relatively limited set of experiences of middle-class, urban, white, gay men. This bias is somewhat addressed with chapters examining the differences in the AIDS-experiences of various groups of men, but far too much of the analysis and recommendations are based on assumptions that the sorts of community, commercial, identity, and therapeutic resources available in San Francisco are widely available. Second, though there is much less of “Eric” and his personal exploits in this book, the detail still feels excessive and tends to detract from the gravitas the book would otherwise have. Finally, the chapters on recommendations for change don’t quite live up to the overall power of the arguments for why change is needed. There are interesting challenges (e.g., putting away the AIDS Quilt, ending World AIDS Day) that are congruent with the doubts many of us have about the symbolism embedded in AIDS rituals, but there is little about how we might work on the broader societal scale to form alliances that reduce the power of the culture’s tendencies towards periods of sexual moralism.

A question that arises in using these works is whether they should be judged by scholarly standards, should be considered as activist treatises, or should be seen as efforts to integrate activism and scholarship. Three examples from recent years suggest that, at least since he became a graduate student and college professor, his focus was on integrating scholarship and activism. A clear example of integrating his thinking about male sexuality with activism is his key role in initiating a series of annual meetings titled the *Gay Men’s Health Summit*. The 2000 summit in Boulder, which I attended, was very much in line with the perspectives in his books. The summit had an egalitarian, grassroots feel that was reminiscent of the early gay movement, and the discussions of sexuality were very frank and nonmoralistic. A second example of Eric integrating scholarship and activism was his participation in organizing a meeting of California State University system LGBT educators to form a system-wide coalition for developing LGBT-related programs of study. Using a community-building perspective, the facilitators (including Eric) organized the meeting so that many of the typical academic boundaries disappeared and were replaced by open and unstructured discussions of the relations between our own lives and the development of realistic LGBT and sexual curriculum. A third example of the norm-challenging activist scholar in Eric was evident in his participation in the annual meetings of the Pacific Sociological Association (PSA). Most notable at
PSA was when, in 2006, he led a tour of a gay-oriented sex club including a discussion of the place of sex clubs in male sexuality.

What, then, to make of Eric's contribution to gay scholarship? Although his writings and approaches had difficulties that were contested in various circles, the value of his call for an activist scholarship outweighs the imperfections of his work in general. By forcefully pushing for attention to the realities of sexuality and the complexities of sexual culture, he challenged both public health and the safety of scholars who easily bought into a sex-neutral or sex-negative ethos. Though there are regularly efforts to write off such a sex-positive perspective as a remnant of a bygone era of urban gay male excess, the strengths of Eric's arguments and his documentation of our (and publicly his) pasts will consistently provide ammunition for keeping sexuality out of the shadows.

In sum, Eric's activist scholarship essentially poses four challenges to us:

- To consistently and assertively draw attention to the multiple realities of sexual behaviors and identities—that we must not homogenize twinks, bears, and MSMs into one "gay" category;
- To be both respectful and tenacious in bringing to attention uncomfortable sexuality issues (e.g., that sexual exploration may be more salient than HIV status) and politically embarrassing sexual politics (e.g., agendas do differ by gender);
- To reveal our own location within our scholarship, valuing the additions of relevance and validity gained by openness over the discomforts of being publicly sexual beings, and probably most important;
- To be an activist scholar—that scholarship without action too easily becomes an endorsement of the status quo.

Considering the number of newer scholars that have stepped forth since his death to respect, continue, and positively critique his work, it appears that his legacy will be enduring.

NOTES

1. We were both volunteers at the Gay Community News in the mid-1970s; our social and activist activities intermittently overlapped for the next 20 years. Starting in the mid-1990s, our academic careers began to overlap as well.
2. For descriptions of his life, see obituaries in the Boston Globe of July 2, 2006; the Los Angeles Times of June 30, 2006; the New York Times of June 26, 2006; or the San Francisco Chronicle of June 28, 2006.
3. The CSU system is separate from the University of California system. There are 23 campuses in the CSU system, including among the more widely known San Francisco State, San Diego State, Chico State, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, and Humboldt State. Eric's professorship was at Humboldt State.

REFERENCES