



Towards Radical Geographies of Complicit Queer Futures

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Michael Brown and Larry Knopp (2003) assert, “We’re Here! We’re Queer! We’re Over There, Too!” as they chart the spread of queer geographies from relegation to a disciplinary urban ghetto of sorts to engagement with an array of topics such as citizenship, rural geographies, and globalization. Beyond mere survey, they highlight many more areas sexuality and space studies might usefully take on and argue for a deeper queering of our discipline. They thus envision a future for queer geographies that contributes to the radicalization of the academy by challenging its heteronormative underpinnings. But within queer studies beyond geography, scholars have been grappling with a trend that poses a challenge to this challenge for some time. That is, they have been trying to come to grips with the gradual normalization of homosexuality, particularly in the context of the United States (see Alexander, 1998; Duggan, 2002; Hennessy, 1994; Warner, 1999).

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In the pages of *Antipode*, queer geographers have begun to explore the consequence of this trend for sexuality and space studies. Heidi Nast's "Queer Patriarchies, Queer Racisms, International" (2002a) outlines the possibility of a rather different queer legacy than the one outlined by Brown and Knopp, one that is neatly encapsulated in the quotation from the feminist science fiction novel *Swastika Night* that she employs. It goes (in part) as follows:

"Married?" said Alfred. "I'm sorry, sir, that's a German word I don't know."

"It's a lost word. It occurs nowhere except in von Hess's book. Being married means living in a house with one woman and your children, and going on living continually with her until one of you dies. It sounds fantastic, doesn't it? That men ever *lived* with women. But they did" (Burdekin, [1937] 1985, quoted in Nast, 2002a, 894-5).

No longer living with men, the women in this novel are secluded into breeding herds and ruled by men who consider male homosociality and male-male love superior. An incredible future, but one which Nast's polemic argues we not discount because "gay white male consumers and aesthetics are in" with "commodity patriarchy" displacing "biologized patriarchy" in the current postindustrial order.

Unsurprisingly, Nast's depiction of queer radicality imperilled has not gone unremarked upon. Glen Elder (2002) and Matthew Sothorn (2004) have offered direct responses to the piece and so a small debate has been spawned that I seek to further here. But in a debate in which very distinct sides have emerged, my response is voiced in rather more ambiguous terms than those of the three interlocutors to date. This ambiguity is central to the point that I write to make.

The broad strokes of all three arguments have merit. Nast usefully rejects easy distinctions of queerness as always and everywhere progressive by demonstrating that "alternative" sexualities in certain manifestations may serve to deepen race, class and gender exploitation and domination. And queer geographies, an area of enquiry that has arguably failed to make racism, colonialism and patriarchy central enough to its project (see Puar 2002), may just need to hear Nast's (self-described) "harsh" tone. Elder, in response, cautions against projecting "the" gay white male subject as an abstract and fixed rather than fluid, multiple, and ethnographically nuanced identity that is after all still "part of an oppressed minority" (2002, 989) and still a potentially radical figure. Sothorn echoes this critique to a certain extent but also takes it in a somewhat different direction by invoking the complications of an explicitly queer reading. He argues that Nast fails to consider the contradictions produced by the intersection of gay white male patriarchy and heterosexual patriarchy, contradictions that "might suggest that an

earlier modality of patriarchy is put under pressure by the ironic masculinity circulated by gay men and butch women without necessarily being the means for consolidating a new patriarchy” (2004, 184). Thus leaving open the possibility for slippage, Sothern points out that we can count neither on stable subjects nor on objective representations and so must explore the “cultural work” that the figure of gay white affluence does rather than assuming its alignment with contemporary capitalism.

While I am sympathetic to all three arguments in the general terms in which I have set them out here, taken together they leave me dissatisfied and uneasy. For it seems to me that the debate is about something other than it appears to be, something even more consequential. Because at the core of all three arguments is the figure of the affluent gay white male – a stereotype – and stereotypes inevitably do so much more than we think they do. Through reflection on what this stereotype does in this debate, I want to coax the figure of the complicit queer into our theoretical imaginations and argue that this figure demands that we take a more ambivalent approach to queer geographies of normalization.

Anxiety and the Affluent Gay White Male

“The act of stereotyping is always implicated in visibility” (Chow, 2002, 66). Accordingly, as it deals at least in part with an unveiling of sorts, so is this debate. Though viewed differently, revelation of the truth of the affluent gay white male is at issue for all the authors.

Nast’s argument hinges upon his definition. She states that “certain EuroWhite-identified gay men – relatively youthful, of some means, and typically childless – are well positioned to take advantage of key avenues of exploitation and profiteering in postindustrial world orders” (2002a, 880). And while acknowledging that the issues she raises relate more explicitly to the “representation” of gay white maleness than to the “real” lives of gay white men, she insists that hegemonic representations speak to hegemonic desires and therefore cannot be dismissed as “non-representative of the ideals and practices in which ‘real’ people invest” (2002b, 839). Thus called into existence, the affluent gay white male quickly vanishes with Elder’s retort that he is but a market fantasy rather than a member of an actually existing group. The hold of Nast’s fictive “queer patriarchs” on the popular imagination, he suggests, might more constructively be released through ethnographic study which would uncover “more complex and nuanced individuals” (Elder, 2002, 989) than reinforced with anecdotal evidence. Sothern similarly argues that “Nast reinforces the disciplinary power of the stereotype” (Sothern, 2004, 186) and highlights the importance of correcting the “misassumption” that “dominant representations are the self-expression of gay white men generally” (186).

But whereas undermining the stereotype is central to Elder's argument, Sothorn renders this task peripheral to his. He states explicitly that his main focus is not to "present more 'accurate' representations" of the affluent gay white male and outlines instead a project for exploring the "cultural work" that this figure does. It is at this point that the arguments of both Nast and Sothorn briefly converge. While all three authors invest to a certain degree in the affluent gay white male's being, Nast and Sothorn (most explicitly) declare the establishment or disestablishment of his truth secondary to their aims. For they recognize that for homomasculinism, as Edward Said notes in relation to that other 'ism' Orientalism, "one ought never to assume that [its] structure is nothing more than a structure of lies and myths which, were the truth to be told, would simply blow away" (Said, 1978, 6). Turning away from the emphasis on truth-telling, Nast and Sothorn both follow Rey Chow's (2002) lead as she suggests that we move away from an empiricist, cognitive reading of stereotypes towards a more politicized, performative reading that considers not whether they are true or false but how they function as representational devices. They ask, in short, not what the affluent gay white male stereotype is but what it does.

Both authors answer this question very differently. Nast suggests that because "certain gay white men have been *colonized* by the market" (2002a, 880; emphasis in original), white homomasculinist privilege bolsters, serves, and may even be on its way to displacing heteronormative racist capitalist patriarchies. The affluent gay white male spends his way out of subjection and into a position of culpability within a system based still on exclusion, just no longer his. Alternately, Sothorn, challenges what he characterizes as Nast's "very unqueer notion of queer masculinity" and argues that we re-read it through the "multiplicity, performativity and contradictions queer theory has struggled to theorize" (2002, 187). He states, a "unidirectional understanding of desire [such] as [that] offered by Nast flattens the messy intermediate spaces, and practices, between the production and consumption of these images where meaning is (re)produced" (187). Rejecting the appraisal of the affluent gay white male as a figure fixed by postindustrial capitalism, in Sothorn's reading there may still be dissidence and destabilization where conservatism appears. The stereotype is thus recuperated as a potentially radical body.

To again invoke Rey Chow, she states that stereotypes, "rather than simply being false or incorrect (and thus dismissable), have the potential of effecting changes in entire intellectual climates" (2002, 63). Thus, rather than exploring the "cultural work" that images of homomasculine privilege do out in the world, as Nast and Sothorn do, I want to explore a somewhat more introspective line of enquiry by asking what this stereotype does to and for queer studies. Homi Bhabha characterizes the stereotype as "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that

must be anxiously repeated” (1994, 66). I therefore wonder what is being anxiously repeated here and from whence this experience of anxiety stems?

Queer(ing) Complicity

To begin to answer this question, I go to where Nast and Sothern end up. For it is a surprisingly similar place given the very different directions their arguments take.

The postindustrial normalization of gay white masculinity requires rethinking the meaning of queerness. Both commentators agree on this. For Nast, a new queer politics is to be found in “queer activist organizations of color” that take intersubjectivity seriously by consciously working across the lines of race, class, gender and sexuality. Conversely, Sothern avoids proscription and argues that the location of queer politics cannot be determined a priori. He provocatively suggests that queer politics might already be happening where we least expect it and advocates greater attentiveness to the possibility of queer slippage from within the realm of the normal. Superficially, these are very different end points. But on closer inspection both arguments rely on a similar elision. Both cling to a notion of queer radicality that can exist outside complicity.

In Nast’s case, her overwhelming emphasis on the affluent gay white male creates the fiction that he is always and indeed the only queer figure embroiled in a complicit relationship with postindustrial capitalism. “Other” gays and lesbians whose emancipation the actions of the affluent gay white male is argued to play a role in preventing are implicitly portrayed as anti- or at least non-capitalist in nature, as absolutely outside spaces of complicity, and therefore harkened to as the source of a rejuvenated queer politics. Sothern usefully complicates this argument by emphasizing that there might be other ‘readings’ of the images Nast presents. He suggests that “oppositional appropriation” of dominant representations is possible and argues for example that the “commodity cowboy” that figures so prominently in Nast’s argument might alternately be read as a parody or resignification/ subversion of heteromascularity. Thus the consuming and commodified affluent white gay male (and for that matter lesbian as he points out that she is also imbricated in the processes with which Nast is concerned) is re-written by Sothern as a still potentially destabilizing and resistant subject. In other words, though inextricably bound up with capitalist logics and practices, he is relocated from a space of absolute complicity to the constitutive outside, a space in which he is not necessarily complicit and can therefore still be queer.

That the affluent gay white male may be a body that in certain times and spaces subverts dominant representations through their re-appropriation is a productive intervention and one with which I do not take issue. Nor do I reject

Nast's claim that "queer activist organizations of color" can do valuable work to undermine racist, sexist, capitalist and heterosexist logics and practices. But that both Nast and Sothorn look to counter new capitalist gay (and lesbian) normalizations by insisting that there can be a queer politics outside (whether absolutely or constitutively) complicity troubles me. First, I am not confident that such innocent spaces exist. For, "when opposition takes the form of a demarcation *from* something, it cannot, it follows, be untouched by that to which it opposes itself. Opposition takes its first steps from a footing of complicity" (Sanders 2002, 9; emphasis in original). And second, the maintenance of a distinction between non-complicit and complicit queers suggests (however unintentionally) a corresponding distinction between authentic and in-authentic queers. Here, I argue, the work that the affluent gay white male's discursive adventures in this small debate does to and for queer studies comes into focus.

Trinh T. Minh Ha states that "[a]uthenticity as a need to rely on an 'undisputed origin,' is prey to an obsessive *fear*: that of *losing connection*. Everything must hold together" (1989, 94; emphasis in original). And hold together everything does. For the anxious invocation of a non-complicit, authentic queer provides a way out of the threat that gay (and lesbian) normalization within postindustrial capitalism poses to queer studies. It offers an escape route that relieves us of the task of grappling with complicity's complications for queer theory and prevents us from uttering the difficult question, might queer radicality still be possible in a state of complicity from which we cannot ever fully be divorced and which we cannot always and everywhere assume to subvert through re-appropriation?

In voicing this question, I insist that we need to take complicity more seriously within queer studies. But, so that we might do so in a manner that will allow us to avoid becoming entangled in a cycle characterized by the castigation of purported sell-outs of the queer cause followed by the (necessary) reclamation of queer identity in reaction to this circumscription, we must think it differently. Instead of thinking complicit space as total and negative, we might reconceptualize it as ambivalent and porous, as an undetermined set of processes that simultaneously enables both resistance and capitulation. Sothorn opens up an important alternate reading when he argues that though "Lesbian advertising images...may commodify lesbian masquerade as legitimate high-style fashion,...lesbians are free to politicize these products or reappropriate them with other products/ fashions to act as new signifiers for lesbian identification or ironic commentaries on heterosexual culture" (2004, 188). Indeed, she *may* do so and this is a possibility I do not want to surrender. But, that she also *may not* is a possibility I want us to simultaneously account for. If both resistance and capitulation are enabled in and through complicity then a complicit queerness can still present a threat. But it is not the threat we thought it was, we may have to look harder and in different, unforeseen places to detect it, and we may not always like what we find.

Since the future of queerness is at issue in this debate started by Nast it seems fitting to end as I began with another quote from science fiction, this one from Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon*:

Alan and Rudy's relationship seemed closer, or at least more multilayered, than Alan and Lawrence's. Lawrence concluded that Alan's penis scheme must have finally found a taker.

It got Lawrence to thinking. From an evolution standpoint, what was the point of having people around who were not inclined to have offspring? There must be some good, and fairly subtle reason for it.

The only thing he could work out was that it was groups of people – societies – rather than individual creatures, who were now trying to out-reproduce and/or kill each other, and that, in a society, there was plenty of room for someone who didn't have kids as long as he was up to something useful (1999, 11).

In contrast to the far off, overdetermined future depicted in Nast's selection from *Swastika Nights*, Stephenson's work writes the present and does not suggest what sort of "room" might be occupied by the "useful" queer. Perhaps this is a useful strategy to adopt in our own renderings of queer futures.

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