

Yes, but: The state (but not nation) of queer media and culture

Kevin G. Barnhurst, ed., **Media Q Media / Queered: Visibility and its Discontents**, Peter Lang Publishing, 2007, 298 pp., \$32.95 (paperback).

Kate O'Riordan & David J. Phillips, eds., **Queer Online: Media, Technology & Sexuality**, Peter Lang Publishing, 2007, 244 pp., \$32.95 (paperback).

Thomas Peele, ed., **Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television**, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 234 pp., \$69.95 (hardcover).

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That this review has warrant to exist at all is something of a cause for celebration: insofar that a journal wants to review three books on queer media; that at least three scholarly collections on queer media have been published in a year; and recent years have seen production of queer media with enough plenitude to justify the three collections. However, as several contributors to these volumes suggest, this historical moment of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans media visibility is not without issues. Certainly it is a testament to the influence of queer theory, not to mention feminist and critical race theories, that the proliferation of representations of sexual and gender variance is not uncritically embraced. Yet queer theory's gangly maturation is reflected in the varied quality of these books. To indulge in a gaudy flourish of metaphor, the institutionalization of queer theory runs on tracks nearby the explosion of LGBT media hypervisibility, both eyeing each other warily from lounge-car windows as their trains depart from Marginalization Station to . . . somewhere else. These three books represent different paths charted through media queerscapes, a trio of analytical Baedekers to our moment of queer überexposure. Useful, yes, necessary, certainly, but I cannot help but find it sadly telling when one describes itself as "not radical" and another pleads that "queer is still a force to be reckoned with."

The 20th anniversary of Queer Nation's founding looms on the horizon. With some, but not much nostalgia, I remember how simple the titular concept once seemed. Back when I first learned of the New York chapter and went on to co-found the Chicago chapter, "queer" seemed so clear; it seemed to make so much sense. With its necessarily narrow agenda and unnecessary infighting, ACT-UP had become exhausting and frustrating. This grand new Queer Nation presented an opportunity to do direct action around topics not limited to AIDS/HIV. Instead, visibility was the answer. The reasoning was that raising the visibility of sexual and gender differences was key to ending our oppression — including the homophobia driving the AIDS crisis.

Skip or march ahead to 2004. "We were wrong about visibility," sighed writer and activist Sarah Schulman at the Saints and Sinners LGBTQ Literary Festival in New Orleans. "We invested in it too much as a strategy. They see us now, and they still hate us." After that fall's election, writer and ACT-UP co-

founder Larry Kramer presented his excoriating plea, "The Tragedy of Today's Gays," to students at Cooper Union. Kramer opened by noting the millions who had voted for state anti-gay-marriage initiatives: "Please know that a huge portion of the population of the United States hates us. I don't mean dislike. I mean hate."

Yes, but in 2004, *Will & Grace* was in its sixth season, *Queer as Folk* in its fifth, and *The L Word* in its first.

None of these three collections deeply engage this ambivalent moment, begging the question of what such scholarly reticence or modesty says about the state of the radical, transformative project of queer—theory or nation—if political reality is too big an issue with which to grapple. LGBT studies, even wholly textual, can be fiercely transformative: The first book to politicize me was Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet*. Numerous queer projects such as Mark Simpson's *Anti-Gay*, or Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal*, Mattilda AKA Matt Bernstein Sycamore's *That's Revolting!*, and Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw*, managed to analyze, theorize, and truly critique, not to mention provoke passionate debate inside and out of the academy. Broad assessments of power and struggle do not necessitate losing sight of media texts or the particular: Thomas Waugh's recent epic volume, *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas*, presents a great example of a narrow focus whose relevance to broader issues is clearly and coherently articulated.

Yet too often, even disciplinary conflicts seem outside the reach of the three collections reviewed here. Each exists in the ambivalent terrain of LGBT studies co-mingling with queer theory, drawing on each, if not staking out broad claims. In crude reduction, the former's project recovers, documents, and analyzes same-sex affections in history and media, while the latter more broadly re-theorizes and destabilizes normative boundaries of sexuality, gender, and identity. Their intersection, while at times productive, is often contradictory. Attempts at third-way style reconciliation notwithstanding, essentialism wrestles with social construction, as does pragmatic focus with broader application, assimilation with revolution, and theory with praxis — despite the political urgency which begat both LGBT studies and queer theory. In contrast to recent titles such as Thomas Piontek's *Queering Gay and Lesbian Studies* or Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, none of these collections as a whole successfully articulates, much less enacts building a mighty disciplinary bridge.

Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television is the most demure of the trio. Editor Thomas Peele, from the English department at Boise State, asserts in his introduction that "The essays in this text are not radical; none of them claim that hegemonic narratives about non-normative sexuality have been completely undermined" (p. 7). While there are many forms of radicalism other than claiming a revolution has already taken place, one wonders what are the implications of a non-radical queer project, and if queer evacuated of radicalism is possible, meaningful, or useful. To Peele's credit, he outlines a modest focus and sticks with it, arguably a better scenario than failing to deliver grandiose goals. Peele has gathered essays that examine queer media representations, analyzing and complicating their readings as not merely causes for celebration. The volume doesn't claim to be radical and mostly delivers, only to then actually go there in its final essay by Laura Gray-Rosendale and Kendra Birnley. Their articulation of a queer pedagogy involves a classroom deployment of queer theory, colonialism, and intersectionality in

order to provide building blocks “toward a radical pop culture pedagogy” (p. 224). It is in contributions such as this where *Queer Popular Culture* shines — not simply in the sense of the most radical essays, but in those that push forward new areas of study, subjects of analysis, and/or practical applications. Too many essays provide textual analysis of media artifacts that come to familiar conclusions of ambivalent, mixed resistance to and complicity with hegemonic structures, identities, and sexualities.

Happily, several contributors provide more productive, pragmatic engagements, expanding queer or applying it to other disciplines, or simply documenting new, worthwhile objects of study. Gust A. Yep and John P. Elia’s read on the Logo series *Noah’s Arc* suggests new forms of blackness and engages in the practice of racially inflected “Quare Studies.” Amalia Ziv’s look at Israeli transsexual superstar and spokesperson Dana International provides a welcome subject outside of the U.S./Western Europe and a broad yet lucidly focused examination of Zionism and gender. Similarly, Terri He’s piece on Taiwanese *tongzhi* and *kuer* provides a complex example of alternate, politically ambivalent paths the evolution of queer has taken. He’s incorporation of sexuality, nation, identity, globalization, and online technology delivers a succinct punch. Christopher Le Coney and Zoe Trodd’s research on gay rodeos adds a welcome dose of fieldwork, providing useful data for others to build upon. Daniel Mudie Cunningham offers a thoughtful articulation of queer as movement and white trash cinema as a contradictory insight into marked whiteness. Overall, Peele’s collection, while at times treading on well-worn cultural studies terrain, and perhaps somewhat coy in its relation to queer theory, nevertheless includes some solid contributions. While everything in the book may not be illuminating to scholars in the field, most are fairly up-to-date topics, and it certainly would make a useful introductory classroom text.

Two collections from Peter Lang are ostensibly more queer, if not always more successful. What might be viewed as cybervisibility is tackled in *Queer Online: Media, Technology & Sexuality*, edited by media scholar Kate O’Riordan and information studies researcher David J. Phillips. The book aims to provide an overdue examination of the intersection of queer theory and online media/communication studies. Unlike Peele’s collection, this is a less modest project, from its cover image of fairy-winged youngsters blazing through the air on plant-leaf surfboards, to the editors’ opening claim to more overt radicalism: “We hope to show that contemporary ideas and practices about queer subjects and the current intersections of queer and cyber formations are both radically different and have direct similarities to those 15 years ago” (p. 6). Although they say of their collection, “Its reach is not grand but it is particular,” (p. 6) they see impact in such particularity, citing a recent contention by leading scholars in the field that “queer is still a force to be reckoned with as we revisit contemporary intersubjectivities in the techno-practices of everyday life” (p. 6). Indeed, the book’s sections suggest an agenda of productive change, movement, and expansion. After outlining “Theoretical Landscapes,” the editors aim for “Rethinking Community and Spatiality,” “Reformulating Identities and Practices,” and “Relocating Structures and Agencies.”

Unfortunately, the book’s introductory chapters outline a potential not realized by the rest of the volume. In their theoretical reviews, O’Riordan, Phillips, and Irmi Karl map the literature on queer intersections with cyberstudies, surveillance research, and ICT studies, respectively. Each are useful historical summaries, but their arguments for the productivity of such interdisciplinary pairings raise expectations that subsequent chapters largely fail to deliver. Some contributions do present insightful new

perspectives, such as Adi Kuntsman's persuasive presentation of flame wars as a productive form of community-building rather than, contra Judith Butler, speech violence. However, many do not. Shaka McGlotten provides a cogent argument for the productive mess and violence of online spaces and selves, yet it is hard to get past the familiarity of reading another autoethnography of online cruising. Sharif Mowlabocus's conclusion that online spaces provide an opportunity for gay communal discussion and debate of barebacking feels less than earth-shattering. Melancholic disillusionments with the online persistence and reproduction rather than transcendent instability of race (Andil Gosine's autoethnography of Gay.com) or sex and gender roles (Debra Ferreday and Simon Lock on crossdressers, Marjo Laukkanen on teen girl magazine fan sites) feel like typical rather than essential additions to or radical reworkings of the field. For example, several conclusions reached in this volume can be found in the 1996 "Sexuality & Cyberspace" issue of *Women & Performance*, unmentioned in the editors' review. No one expects exhaustive completeness, however, it does question the necessity of an intervention if much of it feels like less-than-significant advances on work more than a decade old.

While the editors state that their focus is on the quotidian more than on global macropolitics, a soupçon more political economy, historical data, or material analyses in the contributions would help support the book's argument for practical impact. Whereas John Edward Campbell's history of Gay.com cogently illustrates its shift from supporting members as consumers rather than citizens, when Nathan Rambukkana champions the easier enculturation to BDSM and leather communities online, he fails to acknowledge the negative impact of the internet on the material, concrete community networks of bars, clubs, and contests.

Perhaps symptomatic of this "Yes, but" moment, both collections suffer from fuzziness. Ambiguity is certainly destabilizing, but it also can be mere blurriness. The time is past for simply identifying slipperiness, pointing out ambiguity, and fixing motion — taking fluidity and pinning it to a specimen board like a moth. There are innumerable texts and practices that deviate from normalcy, and while I'm the first to celebrate and support their study, shouldn't we also be fierce enough to ask questions of *degree*? How much do readers find empowerment from these texts? How meaningful is this resistance? More research is needed that articulates the paths from out-of-focus to resistant. Too often theories of power remain absent — while critical, progressive, socially engaged scholarship cannot afford to conflate being out-of-focus with revolutionary.

Media Q Media/Queered: Visibility and Its Discontents puts its "Yes, but" right in the title. Editor Kevin G. Barnhurst, head of the Communication department at the University of Illinois at Chicago, manages several balancing acts missing from the other two collections. Barnhurst's introduction argues that this moment of unprecedented media visibility is one of deeply complicated paradox and contradiction. Therefore, navigating and moving beyond paradoxes requires that, following Foucault, "Queers must find different ways of not saying such things as these: organizing our stories around the closet, ministering professionally to our invisibility, celebrating our popularity, and hoping for a technological, queer utopia" (pp. 18-19). Such rich complexity and determination to avoid familiar tropes sets the tone for the rest of the book. His engagement with queer theory is more coherent and consistent, neither hyperbolic nor coy, and is reflected not only in the content but also in the very structure of his book. Essays on queer media, from a variety of disciplines, methodologies, and theoretical perspectives,

are organized into sections with scholarly introductions as well as “interludes” by media practitioners, ranging from Chicago-area publisher, Tracy Baim, to author, broadcaster, and historian, Studs Terkel. A web supplement to the book provides further innovative engagement.

Productive, new inflections on queer are suggested by Deirdre McCloskey's libertarian take, Lisa Henderson's symbiotic relationship of queer visibility with class invisibility, and Gavin Jack's analysis of “whorephobia.” Han N. Lee's examination of race in online classified personal ads provides a useful application of queer theory, critical race theory, and cyberculture studies. Rather than merely musing whether racial categories are more or less stable online, Lee shows how the theories' mutually reveal the inherent instability of race itself as a category of difference. The online/offline binary is happily queered throughout this collection, with the two interwoven overall into the fabric of daily life — a welcome advancement in the field(s) of study.

Vincent Doyle's archival study of the campaign to stop Dr. Laura's television show, Edward Alwood's history of queers in 1950s-60s independent broadcasting, and the testimonials and anecdotes recounted in Larry Gross's piece on queer media's relevance for youth all provide welcome data to ground the theory and illustrate its utilitarian applications. Even more theoretical pieces, such as David J. Phillips' essay on the value of combining queer theory with surveillance research (a different version than in his co-edited volume with O'Riordan), have stronger impact when resonating off concrete examples, such as the Israeli gays interviewed by Amit Kama, who cite fears of outing as reasons for not consuming queer media. Similarly, the reflexive interludes by media practitioners, as well as ethnographic works, such as Katherine Sender's distillation of her book on LGBT marketing and Marguerite Moritz' piece on same-sex commitment listings in the *New York Times*, provide insight into media as institution, practice, structure, and system.

Ultimately, though, Barnhurst's volume still left me hungry for a bit more radicalism, particular experience, and passion. At one time, one kind of queer was also about struggle — about baseball bats, barbed wire, and plastic handcuffs. It still is for many: as this review went to press, 15-year-old Lawrence King was shot by a fellow student at an Oxnard, CA junior high weeks after coming out as gay. I'm not saying queer scholarship has completely lost sight of urgency and struggle, but how can either queer theory or LGBT studies have relevance without explicitly and specifically thinking through issues of power, oppression, and even — dare I say it — liberation? Finally, while the books reviewed here document passion in many of their topics, for the most part I'm not feeling it in the writing. Where's the audacity, the sweeping operatic scope, the biting personal context, the pain, the insightful humor, the joy, or the fight? Sober analysis doesn't negate such qualities: Douglas Crimp, Leo Bersani, Dorothy Allison, Wayne Kostenbaum, Steven Zeeland, Patrick Califia, come on down. Whether in the academy or in the streets, on TV or at the podium, I'm not sure of the use of passionless queers — or gays and lesbians, for that matter.