

2004 Vol 4 Issue No. 01 — Regions of Sexuality

> EDITORIAL



Introduction: Queering Regionality

Iain Morland and Wendy O'Brien

Queer went pop in 2002 with the publication of *Queer: The Ultimate User's Guide*, a glossy coffee-table book that describes itself as 'The wonderful world of gay in one easy-to-use package' (Gage, Richards and Wilmot, 2002: 11). The world of gay, which according to the book ranges from the 'Top Five Gay Best Friend Movies' to 'Gay Serial Killers', and from 'Sex Types', such as The Twinkie and The Bear, to Barbra Streisand, is presented by the book as a sexuality beyond regionality. 'Whether we acknowledge it or not, gay culture pervades every aspect of the world as we know it', the *User's Guide* announces (2002: inside cover). In this account, the gay world is not a subculture but simply is culture: 'Kids learn their humour from the campy heroes of children's TV presenters and cartoons. Blue-rinsed grandmas act skittish at the sight of even bluer-rinsed entertainers, and we all have a gay 'best friend' ' (2002: inside cover).

Yet paradoxically the insistence that for people of all ages (kids, grandmas, and those with gay best friends who presumably represent the middle-aged remainder) the world is already thoroughly and inescapably gay renders uncertain the agency of the 'user' of queer who is named in the book's title. The title suggests a voluntary engagement with queer discourses and practices, where queer is an instrument of entertainment or politics available for 'use'. At the same time, however, the rhetoric in the body of the book implies that one's subject position is already necessarily queer, because the queerness of the world is all-pervasive. Consequently, in Boy George's foreword to the text, the alleged pervasiveness of queer acquires a coercive edge: 'whether you enjoy a night in front of Sex And The City or The Golden Girls or a night out in some foxy tight jeans reeking of the latest Calvin Klein scent', he writes, 'you're gay whether you're into the same or the opposite sex' (2002: 7).

If this sounds like blissfully apolitical fun, it may be as much because the gayness of the world makes politics redundant and impossible, as it is because of a political choice to participate in queer cultures and communities. In other words, Boy George is suggesting both that queer is a lifestyle choice between a variety of brands and hedonistic experiences, and also that there is no such choice, because the gayness of individuals precedes their volition. The question raised by Boy George's rhetoric is whether an individual is a user of queer who would benefit from an *Ultimate User's Guide*, or whether queer itself is the 'ultimate user' of individuals. Boy George accordingly ends his foreword with a cheeky but didactic warning: 'Now, don't make me out you' (2002: 7). [1] In this view of the world, the closet is not an option. In a world that is queer without limits, there is, perhaps paradoxically and disturbingly, no escape for the subject from the region of the sexual. [2]

If the *User's Guide* is correct in conceiving of sexuality as ubiquitous, a further question of regionality arises. Is the sexual a region within the subject, or is the subject located in the region of the sexual? In an important essay, 'Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification', Judith Butler has theorised subjectivity as an effect of melancholy, whereby homosexual desires become gendered identifications. Prohibited by heterosexist culture, these original homosexual attachments must be lost, yet they are grieved by being secreted inside the subject to constitute the repudiated ground of gendered identity (1997: 135). In Butler's neo-Freudian account, the burial ground of homosexuality is the plot of land on which heterosexuality is constructed: 'The straight man *becomes* ... the man he 'never' loved and 'never' grieved', argues Butler, and 'the straight woman *becomes* the woman she 'never' loved and 'never' grieved' (1997: 147). Homosexuality in Butler's essay, like in *Queer: The Ultimate User's Guide*, becomes a cipher for sexuality generally: it is a foundational element of subjectivity. Here the subject *is* the closet, and so is coextensive with the region of the sexual.

But the special value of Butler's psychoanalytic reading of gender is that it profoundly and interestingly troubles the possibility of specifying whether it follows that the subject is located necessarily within the region of the sexual, or whether the sexual is instead a constitutive region inside subjectivity. In an apparently contradictory move, Butler suggests that 'melancholic identification permits the loss of the object in the external world precisely because it provides a way to *preserve* the object as part of the ego, and, hence, to avert the loss as a complete loss' (1997: 134). There are borders in this operation, but they exist to be crossed. The 'the status of the object', Butler continues, is transferred 'from external to internal' (1997: 134). In the mechanism of melancholic transference that she describes, subjectivity is constituted by the infolding of regionality and sexuality.

It is not the case that sexuality is sited straightforwardly in a particular location; rather, sexuality's development, which is for Butler the development of the subject, is consubstantial with the development of regions—the internal and external—across which the transference of homosexuality into heterosexuality occurs. 'What Freud calls the 'character of the ego' appears to be the sedimentation of objects loved and lost, the archaeological remainder, as it were, of unresolved grief', she asserts (1997: 133). In short, the formation of subjectivity is accomplished by the folding together of regionality and sexuality.

There are, of course, many other ways beyond the Butlerian of figuring the character of sexuality's domain, of identifying the character of its influence upon subjectivity. In contemporary Western culture, the region of the sexual can be understood in at least six ways, all of which trouble any account of sexuality as situated either wholly within or wholly outside the subject. One might construe sexuality's region as biological (whether situated within a particular part of the body, such as the gonads, or in an evolutionary impulse, as sociobiology would have it (Wilson, 1975)); as libidinal (effected by sexual activities that invest experiences and sensations with erotic significance, for instance in phenomenology (Hale, 1997)); as political (principally as a commitment to particular configurations of community, power, and desire, as in some queer accounts (Lance and Tanesini, in press)); as psychic (organised around fantasies and the obduracy of childhood psychosexual influences, for example in classical psychoanalysis (Freud, 1991)); as virtual (where the subject is inseparable from the interactive instruments of its desire (Stone, 1996)); or one might construe the region of the sexual as above all economic (effected by patterns of distribution, ownership and consumption, as certain feminist theorisations of kinship would put it (Hennessey, 2000)). Opening collectively onto the less abstract but nonetheless fraught issue of where sex acts are permitted to take place (Warner, 1999: 149–193), these ways of understanding sexual regionality inform, overlap, and interfere with each other. It is difficult to conceive of a sexual act that could *not* be simultaneously described, in varying degrees, by *all* of these critical registers.

For example, in an obvious sense the practice of cybersex situates sexuality in a virtual region, yet the appeal of cybersex to its participants might have a psychic origin, and the participants' access to the required technology can be understood as a matter of economics. Cybersex is also political insofar as it constitutes participation in a particular technologically literate, diffuse community, as opposed to (for instance) the political communities and demographics of the gay bar scene; it is biological, because computers require particular kinds of bodies and capabilities for their operation, and because cybersex produces physiological effects; finally it is libidinal too, because the reading of text on a computer display during cybersex transforms that display into an erogenous and intentional surface to which the subject is acutely sensitive. (The relation between tactility and textuality, in another context, is explored by Nikki Sullivan in her article in this Special Issue.)

What emerges in the light of such categorical interferences between the biological, libidinal, political, psychic, virtual, and economic, is the impossibility of any endeavour to ground the sexual in a plotted region from or within which sexuality grows. It might seem that regionality works as a cartographic metaphor for a cognitive and conceptual reliance on boundaries; however, as Butler showed, the sexuality of regionality makes those boundaries unreliable. (M. Morgan Holmes analyses the impact of this problem on anthropology in her contribution to this Special Issue.) Consequently, 'It may be more useful', writes psychoanalyst Adam Phillips in his response to Butler's 'Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification', 'to talk about gradations and blurring rather than contours and outlines when we plot our stories about gender' (1997: 159).

The kind of blurring that Phillips advocates can be more than merely analytically 'useful'; it may also be sexy, entertaining, and progressive. Gender crossing has been celebrated as sexually liberating by authors such as Carol Queen, who attests that 'It is the queer in me that empowers—that lets me see those lines'—the lines that regionalise sexuality and gender—'and burn to cross them' (in Däumer, 1992: 99). In Queen's formulation, 'lines' are regulatory, and their transgression is the task of the subversive queer subject. Those lines of sexual regionalisation, such as the border between desires constructed as dysfunctional or immoral, and those constructed as healthy and morally proper (discussed, in different ways, by Steven Angelides and Lisa Downing in their papers for this Special Issue), are lines that signal for Queen a distinction between a set of crossings-which-may-be-performed and a queer-subject-who-crosses. To put this another way, because sexuality is regionalised, and because such regionalisation is necessarily susceptible to border-crossing, sexual subversion by the queer subject is possible. The queer subject is a hybrid produced by the very purity of the lines that it transgresses. [3]

This insight prompts a different way of reading Phillips' advocacy that we tell blurred, gradated stories about gender. If one refuses to see the region of the sexual as a place in which the dissident subject simply performs a range of deviant acts, and one changes the scale of the analysis to encompass within the term 'gender' not only the subject and the sexual, but also the lines that make possible their points of crossing and transgression, then gradation and blurring are not merely storytelling techniques, but essential characteristics of the 'gender' about which we tell stories. The queer-who-crosses and the crossings-which-may-be-performed can be accounted for in a dynamic analytic model that understands gender to be, by definition, constantly mobile. 'Butler's language of performance keeps definition on the move, which is where it is anyway', concludes Phillips (1997: 159). Gender is in motion: regionality, sexuality, and subjectivity are continually interpenetrated.

This is a different way of phrasing Boy George's claim in *Queer* that if you stay in watching *The Golden Girls* or if you go out in foxy jeans, 'you're gay whether you're into the same or the opposite sex'. Our claim is not that the sexual subject is secretly or essentially deviant, but that the subject's sexuality, as well as the regions in which the subject experiences its sexuality (at home, in an armchair, with *Sex And The City*, or out on the town, dancing), are effected by a mobile relation between regionality, sexuality, and subjectivity. That relation is always blurred and gradated, and demands a dynamic explanation rather than a static definition.

So, in some contexts one's sexuality may indeed be measured by one's interest in *The Golden Girls*; in a gay community one might need to demonstrate literacy in such camp, cult media commodities. In different contexts, one's choice of television viewing would be unrelated to sexuality; for instance, homophobes tend pejoratively to define gay identities entirely by the sex acts that they presume gay individuals perform. Further, sometimes one might go to a gay nightclub as the straight companion of a gay friend; on another occasion, one might go there alone for a surreptitious bisexual encounter. And again, in another context, one's sexuality would be deemed irrelevant to one's subjectivity—for example, when applying for employment.

The limit of the region of the sexual, and the position of the subject in relation to that limit, changes in different situations: it is mobile because it is context-dependent. Moreover, because it cannot be assumed, it demands interrogation and critique. 'The boundary which I have hardly addressed, it occurs to me as I draw my themes finally together, is between the sexual and the non-sexual', Alan Sinfield (1998: 194) has written in *Gay and After*. In one sense, Sinfield is saying simply that he has not paid attention in *Gay and After* to the borders of sexuality's region; however, in another sense Sinfield's concession that he has hardly

addressed the boundary that marks the extent of the region of the sexual connotes an epistolary relation to sexuality's region. To 'address' the region of the sexual is not to effortlessly attend to its boundary, but instead to address an epistle that may or may not reach its destination. At what address might the edge of sexuality be situated? And what response might be received from that address? The outstanding quartet of papers in this special issue of *Transformations* are written to address that limit, in four different constitutive contexts. [4]

Notes

[1] The addressee of Boy George's comment is uncertain. The book, as a whole, addresses itself squarely to a gay readership: the introduction, for example, is written in the first person plural, and thus indicates that readers and writers alike are gay:

And let's not forget that there are gay men and lesbians outside New York, London and Sydney: we are everywhere! In *Location, Location, Location* we take you on a whistle stop world tour, telling you where you can live it up and where you should avoid if you want to keep both of your hands (Gage, Richards and Wilmot, 2002: 10).

In this excerpt, the gay grammatical subject slides between the three authors and the implied readership ('we are everywhere ... we take you on a whistle stop world tour'). Elsewhere, however, the authors claim to 'provide the ultimate user's manual for all gay men and women, as well as those who want to understand what all the fuss is about' (2002: inside cover; our emphasis). So Boy George's comment is ambivalent. Even while seeming to free queer from all boundaries, he also invokes the homophobic fear of inhabiting the region of the queer. It is precisely 'those who want to understand what all the fuss is about' who are most likely to laugh anxiously at the idea of having their identities conflated with the region of the queer by being 'outed'. [return]

[2] If there is a closet here, it is perhaps a glass one (Sedgwick, 1994: 80). Eve Sedgwick has argued that 'Living in and hence coming out of the closet are never matters of the purely hermetic; the personal and political geographies ... are instead the more imponderable and convulsive ones of the open secret' (1994: 80). [return]

[3] Susan Squier, writing about interspecies reproduction, has observed that 'purification produces hybrids' (1998: 372). [return]

[4] We thank the contributors for their hard work, and the eight anonymous reviewers for helpful commentaries and suggestions. Also, we are appreciative of Annabelle Willox's comments on a draft of this paper. [return]

Works Cited

Boy George. 'Foreword: It's a Gay, Gay, Gay, Gay World' in Gage, Simon, Richards, Lisa and Wilmot, Howard. *Queer: The Ultimate User's Guide*. London: Unanimous, 2002. 6–7.

Butler, Judith. 'Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification', in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. 132–150.

Däumer, Elisabeth D. 'Queer Ethics; or, The Challenge of Bisexuality to Lesbian Ethics', *Hypatia* 7.4 (1992): 91–105.

Freud, Sigmund. *On Sexuality*. Penguin Freud Library Vol. 7, Angela Richards (Ed.). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991.

Gage, Simon, Richards, Lisa and Wilmot, Howard. *Queer: The Ultimate User's Guide*. London: Unanimous, 2002.

Hale, Jacob. 'Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies: How to Have Sex Without Women or Men', *Social Text* 52/53 (1997): 223–236.

Hennessy, Rosemary. *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

Lance, Mark Norris, and Tanesini, Alessandra. 'Identity Judgements, Queer Politics' in Iain Morland and Annabelle Willox (eds) *Queer Theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, in press.

Phillips, Adam. 'Keeping it Moving: Commentary on Judith Butler's 'Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification' ', in Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. 151–159.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994.

Sinfield, Alan. *Gay and After*. London: Serpent's Tale, 1998.

Squier, Susan. 'Interspecies Reproduction: Xenogenic Desire and the Feminist Implications of Hybrids', *Cultural Studies* 12.3 (1998): 360–381.

Stone, Allucquère Rosanne. *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1996.

Warner, Michael. *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. New York: Free, 1999.

Wilson, Edward O. *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975.