

Queer Studies: Where but Here?

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When Michael Warner published *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1991, 1993) the title left itself open to a number of interpretations. One of them was that the queer planet was a possible future, something to be achieved. But the ever-growing body of literature in queer theory leaves little doubt that the planet has always been very queer, although it has rarely been recognised as such.²

Nonetheless some theorists, including one presenter at a recent conference,³ are already using the term 'post-queer'. In an environment where globalised multi-media accelerate the diffusion of new knowledge and understanding (for the affluent and educated), even the most original ideas can expect to have 'post-' prefixed to them as soon as they begin to be popularised. So the question arises as to whether the 'queer revolution' was nothing but a quirky phase in the late twentieth-century comedy of manners being played out within the academy, select locales such as Greenwich Village, Soho or Surry Hills, and the broader arena of sexual politics. It may indeed have been that. But this paper argues that it was, and continues to be, a whole lot more. To understand why, it is important at the outset to distinguish between 'queer' as it has been applied to a social movement, and 'queer theory' as a philosophical insight.

Theorists who analyse queer as a social movement come up with two intractable problems. The first, astutely interrogated by Joshua Gamson, is that 'queer' is an identity adopted by those who question or reject identity labels, in particular those of gender and sexuality (including 'gay' and 'lesbian'), because these categorisations do not recognise the fluid nature of identity. The queer social movement is thus not just a contradiction in terms, but also faces the strategic difficulty of "haphazardly attempting to build a politics from the rubble of deconstructed collective categories" (Gamson, 1995: 390). The second problem with queer as a social movement is that its global aspirations, as Annamarie Jagose has pointed out, conflate American and queer nationalisms and thus make 'Queer Nation' an oxymoronic term (Jagose, 1996: 107-9). It may well be, as Dennis Altman has shown in *Global Sex* (2001) that economic, technological and cultural factors are making the planet a less heteronormative place than it used to be. But the breakdown of heteronormativity does not necessarily make a place more, let alone completely, queer-friendly.

In fact the backlash often affects those who are most vulnerable, including women and queers. And the queer movement, deriving as it does from the earlier gay and lesbian movement, is inevitably associated with the United States (see Altman, 1982), which makes it an obvious target for those opposed to American political and cultural hegemony. So it may well be that the world could enter a 'post-queer' phase, in the sense that the queer social movement will have run its course. Whatever the fate

² This conclusion is drawn from the ongoing deconstruction of heterosexuality that achieved its most celebrated formulation in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). For those interested in corroborative empirical evidence from biology, Bruce Bagemihl's *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (1999) provides a handy compilation.

³ Murray Pratt, 'Beyond the PaCS and Post-Queer'. Paper presented at the Queer Studies: Out from the Centre Conference, Newcastle, 29-30 October 2002.

of the global aspirations of queer as social movement, the proposition being put forward by this paper is that greater potential for social change is inherent within queer as a set of revolutionary theoretical propositions.

This is in no way to disparage the analysis of this social movement as a politico-historical phenomenon. It is rather to suggest that the theory that underlies this social movement is likely to prove more durable than the movement itself, and more capable of creating a queer planet. By this is not meant a planet where everyone identifies as queer, but rather a planet where everyone treats the basic tenets of queer theory as ‘common knowledge’. This may seem like a difficult task, given queer theory’s radical departure from what appear to be ‘common sense’ categories of gender and sexuality. Queer theory is all too easily dismissed as a subjective fabrication of the humanities and ‘soft’ sciences. But the central insights of queer theory are hard-edged and radical, and have the potential for changing not just academic discourse, but perhaps even humanity’s conception of itself and its place in the universe.

If queer theory is reduced to its barest essentials there remain two fundamental concepts. The first is a pre-condition of being able to understand queer theory, and it is the central insight of post-modernism: “the idea that nature is constructed, not discovered [and] that truth is made, not found” (Haraway, 1991: iv).⁴ While this proposition could be critiqued as a ‘descent into relativism’, queer theory questions the notion that relativism and its contemporary antonym, foundationalism, are separable. Queer theory may emphasise the fact that perspectives and identities change, perhaps as interests change, but also acknowledges that they do coalesce at points in time and space.

The second is the central insight of queer theory itself: that the privileging of a particular binary construction of sexuality, which divides the world into heterosexuals and homosexuals, affects knowledge-production in a way that creates inevitable social and theoretical distortions. This simple formulation has a potentially infinite number of ramifications. Much of the literature in queer theory has dealt with the ramifications for gender and sexuality, and with good reason. As Michael Warner has pointed out, “modernity has entailed the globalization of a new and exacting sexual order, so that the regime of sexuality that first transformed Europe has now been registered not only in the New World but in all the reaches of modern colonialism” (Warner, 1991: 7; see also Katz, 1990). But in fact there is scarcely any area of contemporary social life or intellectual endeavour that could not be or has not been in some way based ultimately on the privileging of this construction of sexuality and the biased perspective it has produced. This means that queer theory is ultimately relevant to everyone, and, in an academic context, to all disciplines.

The task then, in pedagogy, research and activism, is to strategise to get across a message that is not intrinsically difficult to comprehend but which seems to defy logic. A new form of what used to be called in the days of Gay Liberation ‘consciousness raising’ is needed.⁵ For Gay Liberation this implied a process where

⁴ Two other nice formulations succinctly express this point: “By postmodernism, I mean those discourses that recognize the futility of seeking an absolute foundation for knowledge” (Eilberg-Schwartz, 1988: 110); “All human understanding is interpretation, and no interpretation is final” (Tarnas, 1991: 397).

⁵ See Altman (1972: 123-25 and *passim*). This term has resonances with Paulo Freire’s *conscientização* (see Freire, 1970).

gay men and lesbians could recognise their oppression and gain the insight and confidence to 'come out' publicly. But queer consciousness-raising is not a process that just involves the fluid sex and/or gender minorities that gather under the umbrella of the term 'queer', such as do some gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered, transsexual, and intersexual people. It is much broader-based, and involves all the members of the localities where it happens. This process can happen anywhere, not just in localities that have ghettoised sexual 'minorities', which occur mainly in metropolitan centres. For the future it will be important to take into account the specificities of the particular places targeted for queer consciousness-raising. The multiplicity of their social and cultural differences demonstrates the need to go beyond the familiar division into urban, suburban, regional and rural areas. In the growing body of literature on queer geographies, there is an increasing focus on the differentiation of the social use of space and its potential for 'queerification' (see, for example, Bell and Valentine [1995], and Phillips, Watt and Shuttleton [2000]). The terms 'queer' and 'straight' are used in this discussion in a way that deserves some comment. The pitfalls of 'queer' as an identity category have already been pointed out. So the collocation of 'queer' and 'straight' suggests yet another binary of the type that queer theory is committed to questioning. But the terms are used here as 'folk categories', with the underlying recognition that gender and sexual identity are not given, but created and transformed through the process of their own performance.

There may be certain advantages in undertaking this project of queer consciousness-raising in locations that already have some kind of ambiguous identity, such as Newcastle. We focus on Newcastle at some length here, not just because this could assist us in various ways in developing our own queer studies program, but also because this quasi-ethnographic approach may provide insights which are not only useful locally but could also be of interest for comparative purposes.

Newcastle was once one of Australia's great centres of heavy industry, but its identity and role are being challenged by the new realities of the post-industrial world. For the last half century, Newcastle has more or less actively pursued a policy of decentralisation and suburbanisation. The old centre of the city no longer serves as the prime reference point for its citizens. Moreover, the city has strong ties to its rural hinterland. People from the Hunter Valley and lower north coast of New South Wales regard Newcastle as the regional centre, and many of the city's residents come from 'the bush', or from families who have been here long enough to remember when the city itself was mostly bush. So as a Novocastrian, one is hard pressed to understand the city as urban, suburban, regional or rural. This is more likely to make one open to recognising that the identities that these categories offer are suspect to begin with.

Newcastle does not have a gay ghetto. People jokingly refer to a certain section of town as 'the Pink Triangle', and transform the names of these suburbs into camponyms like Gayfield (Mayfield), Fairyville (Maryville) and Dykes' Hill (Tighes Hill). But there is not the commercial infrastructure that would support the development of a ghetto. Newcastle has one queer bar, which at times has been barely viable, and a gay men's sauna. What this means is that most of the residents who could be categorised under the term 'queer' belong to very mixed networks, and may have social ties with the straight residents of the city that are at least as strong as their ties with other queers. This is a two-way street. It means that the so-called 'straight' residents of the city are interlinked with 'queer' residents in a way that is less likely to happen in a place like the metropolis, where there is a fairly clear geographical demarcation between 'the ghetto' and the rest of the city.

At first sight, it would be tempting to say that this geographic and social mingling of straight and queer means there are specific arenas in Newcastle where heteronormative privilege is relaxed, but such a conclusion is problematic. There seems to be a Novocastrian public tradition of support for social justice, but when it comes to queers, this support is preferably tacit. Two indicative examples can be cited. One is the recent funeral of a senior gay academic, which was treated by the university, the media, and a large cross-section of the city as an event of celebrity proportions. At his high church Anglican funeral service and subsequent university-sponsored 'wake', his sexuality was barely hinted at. Another is the fact that the local press – the one daily newspaper and the two weekly papers – is generally supportive in its reporting of events in queer-street. In its 'personals' columns, one of the papers even has a category called 'Seeking same' – a discreet way of saying 'Seeking same sex or sexuality'. But the heading does not mention anything to imply sexual identity, and although some of the people who place ads in the column identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bi etc, others simply say that they are seeking someone of the same sex. In Newcastle the straights generally do not mind if queers talk about queer issues, but they do not want to do so themselves, or be exposed to such talk, at least in public.

The private sphere is a different matter. The owner/manager of the gay sauna claims that 80% of his clients are in heterosexual marriages. Scholars might question the methods he used to arrive at this figure. But he is a friendly gay man who chats to everyone when they sign in or come out to the lobby for a drink or a cigarette, so gets to know a fair bit about his clients. In any case the point is that, except for the raw novices, his 'straight' clients generally show a surprising familiarity with queer life in the city, and often do not mind talking about it.

This is confirmed by the personal experience of the authors. It should be noted that the findings and ideas presented in this paper are informed by the experiences and perspectives of three 'queer males' – who recognise that such gender identification remains problematic if one accepts that "queerness is the uncoupling of sexual orientation from gender identity" (Nordquist, 1997: 12). The acknowledgment of subject-positions in the discussion of queer issues is intended to make it clear that no author can speak on behalf of all those who identify as queer. This authorial ambiguity is reflected in the multiple ambiguities found in the sexual practices and identities of Novocastrians at large. Queer males in Newcastle have sex not infrequently with men who identify as straight. One of the aspects of this situation that adds to its ambivalence is that the straight identity of these sexual partners is not necessarily linked to being the 'top'. Whether a queer male is wearing a wig or leathers, or both, he may be requested to top a straight man who uses the excuse that it is 'something he can't get from his wife', or else that he 'just wants to try it out'.

From Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and numerous other sources, it is familiar knowledge that there is a widespread taboo (even in the most homophobic cultures) on grown males accepting penetration. In Latin America, for example, the top retains his status as 'a man' by never being penetrated, and the bottom is the despised *maricón* or *bicha* – the faggot.⁶ This Novocastrian example suggests a rather more complex interplay of sexuality and gender identity, which would merit further analysis. But for present purposes, the point is that Newcastle is fraught with ambiguities that make it potentially fertile ground for queer consciousness-raising.

The fact that queers have to find or create sexual opportunities on both sides of the sexual divide means that they are engaging in a very personal form of

⁶ See, for example, G. (1987: 108), and Fry (1982: 90ff).

consciousness-raising. The performance of the role of ‘the visible queer’ affects not just public personae, but also private lives. Even when straight sex partners are reluctant to talk about this hidden aspect of their lives, they get to see that others are not, and that this aspect of life is not hidden.

It has already been noted that the queer residents of Newcastle do not form a coherent minority along ethnic lines. Some queers regard this as a goal to be achieved. However queer consciousness-raising may actually be more viable when queers are not minoritised but play a diffuse role in the affairs of the broader community. This does not mean, of course, that having places and contexts where queers can socialise together and provide mutual support is not a good thing. But in Newcastle these places and contexts do not at the present time have enough continuity to allow for the development of a coherent minority based on the ‘ethnic’ model. And it is an open question whether ‘mainstreaming’, in the sense of the containment of various minority groups that have based themselves on an ethnic model within the culture of the majority, would actually be a hindrance to the queer project.

This gives a little bit of background to the proposition that it is places like Newcastle – places that are outside the metropolis and a bit hybrid – that may provide unsuspected opportunities for queer consciousness-raising. There is some evidence for this in the way the recently incorporated community group ‘Rainbow Visions’ has embraced intersexuality. The committee that drafted the constitution of the group focused on equal representation for women and men by delimiting the numbers of ‘born men’ and ‘born women’ on the executive committee. This was challenged at the incorporation meeting on the basis of another need for representativity - to create a space for intersexual people on the executive. This certainly puts a new slant on what Mary McIntosh calls ‘The War of the Sexes in Gay Politics’ (1993, 30-52). It was argued that any organisation purporting to embrace intersexual people could not, by definition, privilege those that were ‘born men’ or ‘born women’. This notion was accepted, and the drafting committee was re-commissioned to redress the omission. As a result Novocastrians can claim that, in forming the first intersexual-inclusive community group in the country, they were able, as Teresa de Lauretis suggests, to be *queer*. The inclusion of intersexuality “emphasis[ed] [...] the conceptual and speculative work involved in discourse production, and on the necessary critical work of deconstructing our own discourses and their constructed silences” (cited in Britzman, 1998: 52).

This does not mean there is no homophobia in Newcastle. Homophobia remains evident, from hate crimes as extreme as murders to more subtle forms of discrimination, and the pervasive silence that surrounds queer sexuality (except when it comes to name-calling, especially from moving vehicles). So here people are queer because they ‘fight back’ (Smyth, citing East Village pavement graffiti, 1992:17). The ‘Queer Studies: Out from the Centre’ Conference of November 2002, with its emphasis on local consciousness-raising, is one of the ways that have been found to put up resistance.

‘Consciousness-raising’ is used here in a way that gives a new meaning to the term. In this usage, this expression differs not just from its use in Gay Liberation. It is also a long way from its roots in the Marxist notion of the ‘false consciousness’ of the masses, which is implicitly contrasted with the ‘true consciousness’ of the enlightened vanguard. The notion of ‘true consciousness’ has a rather final, essentialist ring, which stands in contradiction to the multiple and mutable possibilities afforded by the queer project. And the notion of a ‘vanguard’ suggests a purity of doctrine that is hard

to take seriously when the word ‘queer’ has proved so useful precisely because of its connotations of impurity and deviance.

Ambiguous and hybrid Newcastle has a second advantage for queer consciousness-raising: an institution that has pedagogy and research as its two main functions. Activists, both inside and outside that institution, can make contributions to the project by enabling the queer nature of this place, and of the rest of the planet, to be recognised and, above all, discussed openly.

This leads to the question: what kind of queer pedagogy and research is wanted at the University of Newcastle? Can something be created that will not only be useful locally but also perhaps provide ideas for people in tertiary institutions in other non-metropolitan (or metropolitan) areas – and even beyond the academy? The Queer Studies Group at the University of Newcastle, like the Australian Centre for Lesbian and Gay Research at the University of Sydney, has attempted to promote the establishment of queer studies programs in tertiary education institutions in Australia. Such programs would not simply follow the North American model. The Newcastle Queer Studies Group has discussed this issue with academics and students, and is beginning to formulate a model for a queer studies program that is indigenous to Newcastle but which could provide useful ideas for, and possibilities for alliances with, other institutions in Australia. It should not be surprising that this is happening in Newcastle. Groundbreaking developments in this non-metropolitan setting in relation to intersexuality and representation have been discussed above, and this city can claim a long history of activism in lesbian and gay liberation (Ostenfeld, 2000: 265-66).

The proposals at the University of Newcastle for Queer Studies teaching programs build on a broadly based interdisciplinary team of scholars in this field. Some core queer course content at Newcastle is outlined in Donovan and Chan’s *Gay and Lesbian Studies in Australia* (1998), which situates the University of Newcastle as one of the Australian institutions where Queer Studies has a strong teaching record. Newcastle has good foundations on which to build Queer Studies programs, and its non-metropolitan setting provides, as suggested already, unexpected opportunities. Courses in non-heteronormative sexuality have been taught for a number of years at the University. A noticeable trajectory for students who go on to do postgraduate research in this area is that they end up finding employment in Sydney, because Sydney is where the jobs are, in areas such as AIDS prevention, violence-prevention, and the development of non-discriminatory government policy. This means that the issue of creating alliances with the as yet invisible queer diaspora in rural areas has largely gone unnoticed. There are only a few Australian scholars who have published research on queers in rural areas, and much of this research is of a fairly preliminary nature.⁷ One is Richard Roberts, who cites American studies that claim that “intolerance of homosexuality has been shown to be inversely related to the size of place of residence” (Roberts, 1992: 14). But he goes on to note that “rural communities differ considerably in the development of gay community organisations and accessible networks. The Northern Rivers area of NSW contrasts to the South West Slopes and Riverina in this regard” (1997: 14).

⁷ See, for example, the ‘Current Research’ link at <http://outlink.trump.net.au/index.htm>. Australia is fortunate to have a scholar, E. J. Green, who is making this his area of specialisation. He is currently completing a doctoral thesis on the topic at the University of New South Wales, with a comprehensive bibliography, and has already published work in the area (see, for example, Green 1996). Other significant contributions are a rural service-providers’ manual for challenging homophobia (Miller and Mahamati, 2000 and Coad, 2002).

It can be assumed that rural and other areas ‘out from the centre’ are as queer as the rest of the planet, but what Roberts’ article shows is that they have been considerably under-researched. Yet these areas provide intellectual and political problems that are of considerable interest. The most significant of these is their variability. It is difficult to make any generalisations about non-metropolitan areas without understanding the diversity of queer formations that have developed there. In some areas there appear to be higher rates of queer youth suicide (Fordham, 1998; see also Nicholas and Howard, 1998). But it is not known how the factors underlying these suicides are regionally distributed or whether they may now be ameliorated by the current equalisation of the age of consent in New South Wales. Roberts also mentions that isolation of queer folk is common in rural areas, because of the lack of commercial meeting places and other opportunities for sociability. It may be extrapolated from this that the use of ‘public space’ for cruising areas (which in Australia are generally known as ‘beats’) could be an issue in some areas (see, for example, Poetschka and Linnach, 1995).

Public sex and the age of consent are still two of the hottest domestic political issues for queer activists in New South Wales, where gays, lesbians and transgendered people are now in a fairly privileged position compared with other parts of the world. They are protected by anti-discrimination and anti-vilification laws, sex on premises regulations, and even have a limited degree of partnership recognition. It is worth noting that these privileges apply to the bourgeois population of metropolitan or semi-metropolitan areas. The queer underbellies of the cities have many of the same problems as non-metropolitan areas. For example, impoverished city dwellers may resort to public sex because they cannot afford access to the commercial venues – and may well feel out of place there anyway. Others seek public sex for its own sake. But it is in non-metropolitan settings that these problems are seen in their starkest form.

This is not to suggest that any proposed Queer Studies program at places such as the University of Newcastle would have a predominantly regional and rural focus. Students would expect a cosmopolitan understanding of the queer planet, based on a broad training in the analytical skills required for such an understanding. But instead of asking them to ‘think globally, act locally’, this slogan might be inverted to ask them to think locally first. The intellectual and political questions that are raised by living on this fault-line between the city and the regions are repeated in a myriad of variant forms across the queer planet. An in-depth understanding of a queer locality such as Newcastle and its surrounding hinterland will facilitate scholarly and political alliances with others in analogous settings throughout the world.

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