Queer Humanism

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I am going to explore the concept of queer humanism in relation to my own fiction, *London Triptych* and *Twentysix*. In this way I hope to elucidate what might be implied by the notion of a queer humanism. For me, Queer humanism immediately sets up a conflict, juxtaposing as it does two words whose meanings clash, threatening to cancel each other out and erase any meaning they might carry together, as a single concept. For humanism suggests a universality of human nature, a commonality of values or virtues that mark the human, whereas queer presupposes a radical uncertainty and difference, disrupting the neat reductive category of the human with its uncontainable, heteroclite realities. Humanism shores up and relies upon the concept of the human, whereas queer is post-human, even anti-human in its endeavours to broaden epistemology's reach and network. Humanism works with the notion of identity, maintaining or striving for an equality of identities; queer reclines in the space of the non-identical, has no identity or essence, indeed refutes the very notion of identity.

So how can the two concepts coexist in a meaningful way? What hybrid might they name?

There is a creative and constructive tension between the concept of queer and the concept of humanism. As Ken Plummer has argued, for humanism to work it needs to retain a critical energy which it shares with queer theory. The right to otherness, together with an ongoing reassessment of the concept of the human, to expand it and fight against any attempts to reduce it, limit it, or let inhumane value judgments define it. Queer maintains a critical relationship with

the concept of equality: this is what the two concepts share. The commonality – or community - of those with nothing in common.

Before I move on to read selections of my work I want to summarise briefly my understanding of queer theory and politics, in order to define the kind of queer humanism I think my work might be seen to work with.

At the end of his 1994 book *The Wilde Century*, Alan Sinfield claims:

> The ultimate question is this: is homosexuality intolerable? One answer is that actually lesbians and gay men are pretty much like other people, in which case it just needs a few more of us to come out, so that the nervous among our compatriots can see we aren't really so dreadful, and then everyone will live and let live; sexuality will become unimportant. The other answer is that homosexuality in fact constitutes a profound challenge to the prevailing values and structures in our kinds of society – in which case the bigots have a point of view and are not acting unreasonably. We cannot expect to settle this question, but the hypothesis we adopt will affect decisively our strategic options

In other words, is homosexuality to be understood as nothing more than a variant sexuality, affecting only those individuals or groups who label themselves as gay or lesbian, or is homosexuality to be understood as a phenomenon with effects across the entire range of human sexualities – and, beyond that, across the entire range of human culture?

Similarly, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her 1993 book *Epistemology of the Closet*, calls these two views the minoritizing view, and the universalizing view. The

minoritizing view, as the name suggests, sees homosexuality as of interest only to "a small, distinct, relatively fixed minority" – consisting of those people for whom it is an identity. The universalizing view, on the other hand, sees homosexuality, or same-sex desire, as "an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities".

While this is a crucial distinction – as Sinfield points out, to take the universalizing view is to see homosexuality as a threat to society as a whole and to consider that homophobia, as such, is in some sense understandable – it is, nevertheless, not a simple question of either/or: either minoritizing OR universalizing. Sedgwick argues that BOTH are at work in our society at any one time. Indeed, the dynamic created by both views is her central hypothesis.

To give a quick historical overview, the word 'homosexual' did not exist before 1869. Michel Foucault argues that the homosexual did not exist before this date. By this he means that the concept of 'the homosexual' names a personality type, a body type, a psychology that was hitherto unnamed. Further, in that naming a discrete and recognizable type of person is invented – the homosexual as a category of human being is invented, or discursively constructed. An identity is formed. From homosexuality as a sin that anyone might commit or a sickness that might afflict anyone, we move to the homosexual as a criminal and psychologically abnormal individual, with recognisible psychological and physiological characteristics.

This turning point from homosexuality or sodomy as a behaviour to the homosexual as a type or species is in a sense the start of the minoritizing view of homosexuality. It becomes regarded as being of importance only to a small number of people – those who fall within that identity bracket; the concept of

homosexuality comes to apply, or is applied, only to those individuals so named, or who so name themselves. This is also the start of identity politics, and there were gay movements in Germany, and to an extent France, Britain and America, dating back to the late 19th century. These movements were, for Foucault, examples of what he called 'reverse discourse', whereby the terminology concocted by psychiatry and the medical profession was employed as a self-definition and used to argue for the rights of those individuals.

Foucault writes that while the medical model sought to categorise homosexuals,

> it also made possible the formation of a 'reverse' discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturality' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified

So the labeling of the homosexual worked in both ways – it provided the means of oppression and exclusion, but also the means for fighting it.

But this turning point is also the start of the universalizing view, because at the same time as 'the homosexual' is being labeled and constructed in opposition to the 'heterosexual' (a word not coined until 1878), that discursive figure enters discourse in the widest sense, in a way hitherto unseen. In the decade between 1895 and 1905 there were over 1000 books published on the subject of homosexuality, and only a very small fraction of those were written by homosexuals themselves. Homosexuality had, in this sense, entered the domain of Western epistemology in a big way. The analysis of homosexuality and the homosexual becomes crucial to the subsequent formation, analysis and

controlling of society, and is part and parcel of what Foucault has termed 'bio-power', defined as the governing of populations.

As David Halperin writes:

> According to Foucault's analysis, civil society, scientific research, intellectual activity, and personal life are not in fact free zones from which power has progressively retreated since the Enlightenment, but colonized spaces into which it has steadily expanded, proliferated, and diffused itself.

Foucault's famous example of this discursive colonization is the construction of sexuality as a filed of knowledge that presents itself as a form of liberation but is in fact a method for greater surveillance. He takes as an example the received opinion concerning the Victorian prudishness and suppression of sex, arguing that far from suppressing sexuality, the Victorians actively pursued it and devised a system of categorization by which deviations could be labeled and a moral rating applied to sexual expression whereby individuals could be approved, treated, marginalized, sequestered, disciplined and normalized. For Foucault, the ascendance of psychiatry and medical models for sexuality was a strategy for expanding power beyond the realm of the public. Surveillance extended into the bedroom, into the private realm of desire, and sexuality became the key for unlocking the secret 'truth' of the self within Western discourses. His most famous example of this new technique for controlling populations is the invention of the homosexual. The division of humanity into two categories – the homosexual and the heterosexual – was an artificial means of governing the chaotic multiplicity of human desire, or what Freud calls polymorphous perversity.

As such, according to Halperin

> 'The homosexual', then, is not the name of a natural kind but a projection, a conceptual and semiotic dumping ground for all sorts of mutually incompatible, logically contradictory notions. These contradictory notions not only serve to define the binary opposite of homosexuality by (and as a) default; they also put into play a series of double binds that are uniquely oppressive to those who fall under the description of 'homosexual', double binds whose operation is underwritten and sustained by socially entrenched discursive and institutional practices

The contradictions brought into play by the arrival of these two understandings of homosexuality are still at work in our culture today. One recent example is the US Military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Indeed, Sedgwick arges that

> an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition

Those contradictions, in many ways, can be recast in modern terminology by regarding the minoritizing view as in a certain sense exemplified by the term 'lesbian and gay' – whereby there is a discrete minority of people for whom same sex desire is a defining condition of their identity and as such much be assimilated into existing cultural norms. This view is often termed 'assimilationist', but we could also call it 'liberal' or 'humanist' as well.

Conversely, the universalizing view is exemplified by the term 'queer', which sees societal norms as oppressive, sexophobic and in need of radical change. We might also call this view 'revolutionary', or 'critical' or even 'postmodern'.

In America since the mid 90s a fierce debate has raged between assimilationist lesbians and gay men and radical queers. The assimilationists want gay marriage, inclusion in the military, the right to adopt children – i.e., equal status within the status quo. Queers, on the other hand, want nothing to do with the status qu and see the most vibrant and radical aspect of queer as being precisely its opposition to normative sexuality and society.

Simplifying to the extreme, the assimilationists tend to be conservative, seeing nothing wrong with society as it is, apart from the fact that gay people are not allowed the same privileges as straights. As such, they tent to want only to be allowed a 'place at the table', to use the title of a book by Bruce Bawer, an American gay right winger. Queers, on the other hand, want to burn the table, they don't want society to accept them because they do not accept society. To quote Groucho Marx, they wouldn't want to be a member of any club that would have them as a member. They reject society's norms and challenge existing modes of behaviour.

Assimilationists want to fit in – hence the name. Queers want to celebrate not fitting in.

In a very real sense, this dichotomy has been around for as long as 'homosexual' has been used to name a type of person rather than a type of behaviour. Even in the late 19th century in Germany the movement for liberation was divided between those who called themselves third sexers, centred around Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, who relied on the medical figuration of a 'female soul trapped in a man's body', and those who called themselves the Community of the Self-Owners, led by Benedict Freidlander, who rejected the effeminacy model,

but who dabbled with Fascist politics and were virulently anti-feminist and misogynistic.

According to Richard Goldstein in his recent book *The Attack Queers*, "this duality creates an abiding conflict between those who demand the freedom to be otherly and those who pursue the right to be normal."

As David Halperin writes in *Saint Foucault*: "'Queer' is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence."

In this sense, I wish to understand queer theory, along with William Haver, as the opportunity for an interruption, an epistemological stammering, that ultimately offers the opportunity for various theoretical commonplaces to be rethought and challenged.

Haver's understanding of queer, as presented in his essay "Of Mad Men Who Practice Invention to the Brink of Intelligibility" (1998) insists that:

> Queer theory is queer only to the extent that it sustains an erotic relation/non-relation to the extremity that interrupts it: queer theory is queer precisely in its incompleteness

For Haver, queer theory functions much like deconstruction – that is, rip the ground from beneath its thinking, test its epistemological limits, interrupt its liminal points and address its lacks. It is concerned with unlearning more than learning. Focused not on producing good subjects but on dismantling the very notion of the subject. William Haver similarly calls for a queer methodology or

research which takes for granted that "there can be no authority", a queer research "which brings us to the inevitability of the erotic which it has been education's sole purpose to avoid" (Haver 1997, 292). Within the rubric of such an epistemology, relationality as such must be understood as "the site of pure interruption, at which we never arrive because it is never outside the here and now"(*ibid*). For Haver, queer theory must refuse to totalize the social field, and instead implement an interruption to academic business as usual. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Sue Golding and Michael Hardt, Haver suggests that queer can usefully demarcate the limits of knowledge precisely by recognizing that it "can never amount to an epistemological capture of an object by an understanding on behalf of knowledge" (283). Locating queer theory's philosophical roots, Haver suggests that queer research could do worse than recognize that whilst it cannot do without concepts, those concepts do not correspond to the object named. There is always some remainder, or supplement, some terrain of the non-identical that reveals itself precisely in concealing itself, that constitutes a limit or interruption in the production of knowledge. As such, queer theory is most usefully employed in recognizing the ways in which pedagogy reproduces culture by creating 'good citizens', based on the assumption that there is "an essential correspondence between knowing and acting, between the True and the Good: the right thinking makes for right acting"(287). Following Deborah P. Britzman's work on queer pedagogy[1], Haver argues that "thought must confront its own essential and enabling insufficiency" (290) if truly queer interruptions are to be made, ones that refuse epistemological respectability.

Today, some of the most interesting queer work is grounded in the understanding that queer is a political metaphor without a fixed referent, that it is intersectional, not extraneous to other modes of difference, interrogating the social processes that not only produced and recognized but also normalize and sustain identity. As such, the political promise of the term resides specifically in its broad critique of multiple social antagonisms, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, in addition to sexuality. And this multiplicity is a direct result of the post-structuralist expansion of critique to become trans-disciplinary. Like a rhizome, queer has made its way into anthropology, philosophy, fine art, literature, film, geography, social theory, history, economics - amongst other disciplines. It has informed, in its short history, many forms of pedagogy and knowledge.

The problem, which is a problem Derrida foresaw for deconstruction, is the institutionalization that occurs when a critical term enters the academy: the critical energy tends to get tamed. Queer, if anything, names a critical energy which can never settle or be tamed; never be declawed.

One of the things I set out to do with *London Triptych* was to explore the hidden histories of male prostitution, drawing on what little exists in the form of queer sexual histories – mainly through court transcripts and gay pornography. I tried to give a voice to the voiceless, to rewrite these figures back in to our history. I had the idea of rewriting the Oscar Wilde trials from the viewpoint of one of his panthers, those shadowy figures of whom we catch only a lithe glimpse as they

slink through the history books. I wanted to give one of these bit players the leading role – to represent a working class voice that doesn't appear in the official narrative. That is, to disrupt or interrupt the official narrative. To queer it. Queer, for me, is more useful as a verb than as a noun.

The novel begins with this quotation from Wilde's *De Profundis*: "A man's very highest moment is, I have no doubt at all, when he kneels in the dust, and beats his breast, and tells all the sins of his life".

And that's what I wanted each of my three narrators to do: kneel in the dust and confess, finding the full truth of their lives in the stories that might otherwise remain unsaid, unsayable. For me, queer is always a disruptive influence on language. And this is something I will say more about when I talk about my second book, *Twentysix*.

What both books share is a fascination with sexual subcultures; the romance of promiscuity; and the joy of having a body. But whilst I wanted to lay bare a certain sexual reality, or realities, I didn't want to subscribe to the notion that the truth of the self lay in these confessions. I am too much of a Foucauldian for that.

Both books work with the assumption that there is a great deal of knowledge in the sexual, sensitive to the socio-political uses of the body, as much as to the aesthetic and paraesthetic qualities of language.

My second book, *Twentysix*, is a peculiar creature – neither a novel nor a collection of short stories. I describe them as prose poems, because that is the form by which I was most influenced in the writing of it. I wanted to experiment with a fragmentary text, with no characters or over-arching narrative trajectory. The twenty six fragments are sketches, isolated moments and interventions, where the language interrogates itself, undermines itself, even as it tries to express. It is language aware of its own failings. I wanted to blend sexual explicitness, a depiction of sexual acts, erotic encounters and sensations, with a high philosophical or poetic register; to work with both the subjectivity of pleasure and the objectivity of the body in time and space. In the spirit of writers such as Kathy Acker, Georges Bataille and Jean Genet, who wrote about sex in the spirit of philosophical inquiry or critical reflection.

I've always believed that sexual life informs our understanding of the human, of what we mean by morals, or human values. As Samuel Delany writes in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*:

"Desire and knowledge (body and mind) are *not* a fundamental opposition; rather, they are intricately imbricated and mutually constitutive aspects of political and social life."

But I've always tried to make it also an aesthetic question or a philosophical enquiry. How do we capture the libidinous aspects of our being in a way that retains their libidinous energy? How do we put the body into discourse? I believe that one way we can do this is by making language itself sensuous. But I'm also

suspicious of the efficacy of discourse to make these intensities of subjectivity articulable; so I continuously fold in moments of interruption, disruption, and rupture.; try to make language trip as well as dance.

For me, then, queer humanism is about recognition of difference, about the dignity of difference; an exploration of those aspects of our behaviour which too often become sidelined, ignored, forgotten, or considered to be of no imporance. Queer humanism contributes to, and celebrates, our understanding of the human, of what Haver calls heteroclite sociality, a society built on difference and alterity, that bears witness to sexual subcultures even if it fails to understand them fully.