

Queer with Class: Absence of Third World Sweatshop in Lesbian/Gay Discourse and a Rearticulation of Materialist Queer Theory

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A NUMBER OF academic authors have criticized queer theory for its seeming inability to address postcolonial and class issues. They have described it as non-materialist, as focusing on desire over needs. As a theory for the exploration and analysis of constructed sexualities, it ignores a number of obvious and non-obvious "absences" both within its own theoretical focus and in its failure to address absence in the sites it attempts to explore. For the purposes of this paper, I make use of two instances of absence: the invisibility of the sweatshop and Third World labour in lesbian/gay discourse despite the way this practice is used to prop up bourgeois production in the West, and—through this spotlighting of closeted lesbian/gay skeletons—the absence of "class" and the Third World from queer theory.

I. Queer Theory

There is not the space here to explore the many strands and trends of queer theory other than to point out some of the basic tenets that can be drawn from the body of academic work on sexuality and sexuality constructionism that labels itself queer. As a form of textual reading and sexual politics, and reliant on post-structuralist/postmodernist theories derived chiefly from Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan, queer theory permits perspectives from which to challenge the normative, including those sexualities which have been normalized in contemporary discourse: lesbian, gay, straight. It opens a space for exploring diverse discourses that challenge heteronormativity while prompting examination of the constructionism of non-heterosexual sexual positions. A prominent target of

queer theory is identity, which, as is often asserted through the anti-foundationalist work of Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble, Bodies that Matter*), is performatively articulated as the *effect* of regulatory regimes—a constraint queer theory attempts to transgress, subvert, and disrupt.¹

“Queer,” as it appears in lesbian/gay discourse through lesbian/gay media publications, is not equivalent to the queer of “queer theory”² and frequently fails to stress the disruptive potential of the non-normative. It is used instead as a signifier for a grouping of non-heteronormative sexualities and genders (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered), with an ultimate effect of stabilizing and regimenting those sexualities *in opposition* to the construct, heterosexuality. Criticism of the constructionist trends of queer theory is found in much lesbian/gay (or “umbrella queer”) discourse which most frequently asserts an essentialist identity.

II. Queer Theory and Class/Race

Queer theory is subjected to more viable criticisms from within the academy. Much of this tension comes from non- (or anti-) poststructuralist theorists and researchers working within Marxism and neo-Marxist frameworks. Their criticisms of queer theory are based in a reading of the theory as inadequate for the exploration of class as an axis of differentiation and oppression. Donald Morton divides queer theorists into those who base their work in desire theory and those who look more closely at the issue of needs, finding that needs theory is almost completely absent from queer theory as a result of the theory’s basis in continental poststructuralist philosophy (“Class Politics”). He suggests that queer theory’s notion of “queering the planet”—derived from the title of Michael Warner’s anthology *Fear of a Queer Planet*—is part of a project of establishing Baudrillardian desire over any investigation of need, and that this erasure of need obscures world-wide social responsibilities in places as diversely located as Bosnia, Somalia, the South American and Asian Third World, as well as the non-privileged sites and subjects of Western cities (*The Material Queer* 29). For Morton, needs theory makes possible a globalizing explanation of social injus-

tice not just throughout diverse geographic localities but through local Western social problems such as disease (including HIV/AIDS), poverty, and sexual harassment in a pattern of determinate economic and class relations ("Class Politics" 474). He suggests that the liberal state—and by implication the concentration on desire—is a mask which covers over economic and racial exploitation (475-76), and that this is evidenced, as we shall see, by the pro-lesbian/gay strategies of transnational corporations.

At the same time, there has been some criticism of queer theory as overly universalizing. Leo Bersani sees Michael Warner's definition of the subjects of queer theory being those resistant to "regimes of the normal" as an obscuring of sexual distinctiveness (71-72). The assumption that world-wide sexual subjects transgressing heteronormativity operate in the same way is a chief failing of much queer theory; it ignores the different inflections class and postcolonial ethnicity perform on the sexual subject. Class theory and nation theory are, according to Omi and Winant, the identifiable primary paradigms of critical work on race (cited in Phelan, 77), whereby race is understood in terms of the social allocation of advantage and disadvantage; queer theory has not been conflated with those theories which enable an understanding of class, exploitation, and sexuality on a broad transnational level. This failing stifles the ability of queer theoretical analysis to examine the way the construction of sexual identities has occurred within and through the discourses which maintain late capitalism.

The vast majority of queer theoretical analysis has concentrated not on broad notions of sexual constructionism but on close examination of the bourgeois constructs of lesbian and gay in the West. It has explored how subjectivities are constructed in terms of lifestyle, taste, and culture (Hennessy, "Queer Theory" 107-08) without an appropriate exploration of the way social class and geographic location (West/Third World) might inflect and add to the knowledge on sexual constructionism. In other words, queer theory focuses on texts produced in the West and, generally, by those well-positioned in the bourgeois class. I am arguing here that part of the reason for such a focus has been the

inability of theorists to seek out the non-Western, non-bourgeois evidences of non-heteronormative sexualities, to see how the non-West is responsible for propping up the discourses of lesbian/gay sexualities, and to admit to the relative scarcity of research on non-Western desire, class, need, and position.

III. Materialist Queer Theory

What is necessary in order to extend the analytical potential of queer theory is its re-articulation through materialist theory,³ with a return of class and globalism including global exploitation as basic tenets within the theory. In the critique he makes of queer theory through positing a dichotomy of desire versus needs, what Morton misses is the way needs can (or should) be focussed upon while maintaining explorations of desire (through semiotics, through text, through spectacle, through *jouissance*) as the means which uphold or obscure those who are (or should be) the subjects of needs theorizing and analysis. A materialist queer theory would allow such a multiple zoning of exploration and retain an ability to blur those two zones of analysis.

Needs have not been absent, as Morton mistakenly suggests, from queer theory, as it was the exploration of the manner in which various Western discourses privileged some over others in terms of AIDS treatments in the 1980s which prompted the developmental exploration of difference and contributed to what we now call queer theory. The beginnings of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s caused a series of crises both in the lesbian/gay community and subsequently in the academy in lesbian and gay studies. There was an urgency and a necessity in addressing the *needs* of a community being quickly infected with—as much as affected by—a “killer disease”; this required the attention of lesbian/gay scholarship. Attempts in mid to later 1980s to educate the lesbian/gay community about safer sex methods caused awareness of the limitations and inadequate attention given to differences among those categorically labelled homosexual (Jagose 95). Considerations of difference in terms of sexual practice are apparent in the spotlight HIV/AIDS casts on sexuality, and, of course, necessitate further thought on

the roles, placement, and situations of non-white, non-English speaking lesbians and gay men. The fact that AIDS could no longer be defined a gay disease—despite continuing belief in this myth by certain groups (Sedgwick 5 n. 8)—caused a necessary re-thinking of the construction of the homo/hetero binary. Tasmin Wilton posits the idea that AIDS creates a new binary of at risk and not at risk in which heterosexual comes to be discursively equated with not at risk (Wilton, 129). HIV/AIDS discourse is one of needs—and it is through the queer theoretical analysis of the lack of attention given to the needs of those affected subjects outside the bourgeois-white construction of non-heteronormative sexuality that queer theory has a basis (albeit small) in exploring needs along with desire (and sometimes both together). But need in terms of Western sexuality remains, and goes beyond HIV/AIDS discourse into issues of lesbian/gay political practice and community formation. A materialist queer theory allows us to see the fact that sexuality is organized along community lines rather than class demarcations; this has the unfortunate effect of obscuring class status as an issue inflecting sexuality.

Through the exploration of needs and desires with globally-enhanced perspectives (without losing the site of the local), construction of sexualities would be understood as partly determined by the rate of distribution of resources of all kinds throughout the West and non-West. The different rates of capitalist development in different regions of the planet would be a useful starting place for understanding the vastly different constructions of sexuality between the Third and First Worlds. John D'Emilio points out in "Capitalism and Gay Identity," that the free-labour system of the West broke down the need for family units as basic economic units, permitting a very specific social/sexual freedom to emerge (5).⁴ The capitalist labour system of the non-West is markedly different, particularly in regions where sweatshop labour is extensive, and this, as well as cultural and discursive differences of the region, prompts us to see that non-heteronormative sexual identities can and will develop in markedly different ways in those regions. In other words, as Morton points out, the increasing visibility of lesbian/gay

subjects in liberal capitalist democracies is not the result of self-liberatory efforts but of the “reformatory modifications undertaken by the system of capitalism.” The interests of capitalism and the interests of heteronormative patriarchy no longer coincide in the West (*Material Queer* 275). The different emphases, positions, and styles of, say, religious/medical/legal discourses and of transnational marketing strategies in the non-West cause different conceptions and constructions of sexualities from the Western model and are a useful pointer for queer theory to promote effectively its anti-essentialist stance. But as a result of the differing uses transnational corporate capitalism makes of subjects between the West and the Third World (primarily consumers and primarily labour force, respectively), the focus of queer theory in terms of desires/needs must differ. In other words, that branch of queer theory that we might foresee as materialist queer theory *must* retain the conceptual ability to analyse need in the Third World to the same degree as desire as sexual motivation is analysed in the West.⁵

The recent evidence of transnational corporate behaviour in the Third World suggests an increasing necessity for a materialist queer theory which focuses on the needs of Third World subjects. As Rosemary Hennessy points out, the expanding network of the multinational industrial complex through exploitative relations of production and consumption has brought about violence against women in the Third World by corporate research, the increasing sexualization of women internationally by a commodity aesthetics, and the intensified contestation over women’s bodies as the site of reproduction in the First World and commodity production in the Third World (*Materialist Feminism* xii). She finds that a materialist queer theory can put forward a critique of heterosexuality “that stresses relations among divisions of labour while not shrinking from the examination of sensual pleasure” (“Queer Theory” 108-09). While it is not an easy task to incorporate theories of labour and exploitation into a desire-based queer theory, the dialogue that such an attempt can create will lead to further dynamic strengthening of two sets of (to date, seemingly incompatible) theories. The urgency of exploring needs can be suggested by articulating Mor-

ton's humanist/romantic conception of the difference: desire corresponds (following post-structuralism) to the unnameable yearnings of the unconscious, whereas need corresponds

to food, clothing, shelter, health care, education—the confrontational relation of these two modes of thought can be clarified by posing the question: What kind of subject can afford to explain politics and the social world strictly in terms of “desire” except the subject whose “needs” are already met? (“Class Politics” 474-75)

While this point seems strategically under-theorized and requires much further analysis of the potential intersections of need and desire, it is a useful platform from which we can launch an articulation of materialist queer theory that enables explorations of lesbian/gay discourse and the political implications of its bases.

The task that remains here—for now—is to examine, first, the lack of class analysis in the lesbian/gay discourse as posited through lesbian/gay media publications, and second, to discuss the way that discourse posits a global, essentialist non-heterosexual subject without due attention to class, economic and labour differences between the West and the Third World. I continue from there by opening the site of the Third World Sweatshop as the anomalous category *absent* from lesbian/gay media—an irony since the transnational corporations which fund those media publications are known to operate sweatshop labour. I close with a brief look at how absence in lesbian/gay discourse can be accounted for within both political-economy and conceptual frameworks.

IV. Gay/Lesbian Capitalist World And The Global Diaspora

Capitalism as economic structure and the emergence of the lesbian or gay (or queer) identity have intricately linked histories. As John D’Emilio points out, it is the free-labour system of capitalist societies which has allowed large numbers of men and women in the late twentieth century to be less dependent on the family as economic unit and to express non-heterosexual sexual identities away from that basic social model (5-6). Materially, capitalism weakens the economic bonds that once kept families

together, but at the same time it enshrines the family as the chief symbolic source of affection and emotional security (11-12). Further, the possibility of establishing a community and organizing politically on the basis of sexuality is related to the liberalist system necessary for laissez-faire capitalism to flourish. The ability to organize on the basis of community rather than class is a key notion of liberal politics and society and underpins the discourses which keep the working-class poor appropriately subjected (Altman, *Homosexualization* ix). It is ironic that as non-heteronormative sexualities have become more free in the Western world, they have become more reliant on business institutions to provide the means to express this freedom, most particularly as places to make contact with other sexually-interested persons (85), but also for the dissemination of (symbolic) lesbian/gay discourse. Without the social discourses of liberalist society that are inextricably linked with the promotion of capitalist organization, the possibility of economic survival outside the basic structure of the family would have been impossible. Likewise, the expression of a lesbian or gay or queer identity would not have been viable, nor would the organization of a community around business interests.

The promotion of a gay minority as a definable consumer market is, in some ways, a step towards tolerance and acceptance of non-heterosexual sexualities in America, Europe, and Australia. However, the dependence on consumerism and capitalist organization is, as Dennis Altman has pointed out, "a new form of social control more subtle and less violent than the old, but real nonetheless" (*Homosexualization* 102-03). Capitalist society and corporate enterprises are perfectly happy to allow lesbians, gay men, and queer persons to flourish with freedom to express sexualities, but only as long as we obey the rules of reciprocal promotion of a fixed, coherent sexual identity and of solid devoted consumption. There is freedom to express sexuality, but only as long as queer groups are *a market*, only as long as they are sold to corporate enterprise by lesbian/gay media publications as affluent consumers with ready cash. That is a constraint I find oppressive, with the effect of marginalizing those non-heterosexual persons who are not in a position to contribute by

freely spending and buying. Many non-heterosexual students and youth fall easily into this category.

Many corporations literally prey on queer people with disposable incomes. As Carrie Moyer recently discovered (443), an American advertising agency focusing exclusively on the gay and lesbian market, Mulruan/Nash, noted that since many non-heterosexual people are geographically or emotionally separated from their homophobic families, the buying patterns normally learned from parents are not in place. When a company therefore reaches out to the queer consumer, it can expect a certain amount of brand loyalty. In Moyer's words, "Mom and Dad might not like me, but I know Absolut Vodka does!" (443) In the case of Australia, there is a significant number of working-class people who are not in a position to *be* members of a supposedly diverse community. Lesbian/gay activities are centralized around available cash. Drinking, drug-use, patronage at clubs and dance parties, and coffee in queer cafés exclude the non-affluent and the working-class poor from participating in the established institutional practices of *being queer*. Such non-heterosexual members of the working-class are invisible: their particular class-cultural identifications and images are absent in lesbian/gay media publications. They are not represented by queer lobby groups and organizations,⁶ nor do such people make it into *OutRage* magazine's top one hundred and fifty "power-gays" in its December 1997 issue.⁷

In ways which are seemingly less specific but relevant to lesbian/gay persons and communities, capitalist society is responsible for a series of injustices, discriminations, alienations, and marginalizations. Most important is the way in which women have been treated in capitalistic societies built on patriarchal origins. As the free-labour system evolved over this century, capitalism drew more men than women from the home into the paid labour force, and this result is still evident today with the imbalance in wage rates for women (D'Emilio 76). This inequity along with male control of urban public space (76), results in a lower profile for female non-heterosexuals, the relative poverty of many non-heterosexual women (Hennessy, "Queer Visibility"), and the exclusion of lesbians and queer women from the gay

market and gay community. At the same time, the relative poverty of many persons of non-white ethnicities, migrants, the disabled and indigenous populations in Australia results in exclusions from the queer community because of a similar lack of buying power and available disposable income.

The freedoms that capitalist society has brought about for the expression of lesbian/gay desire apply only to white, middle-class males. The discourses of law, economy, and identity maintain non-white, indigenous, disabled, and female non-heterosexual persons in marginalized positions and frequently relative poverty. While lesbian and gay organizations have been busy battling it out with right-wing politicians on the misguided notion that affecting legal discourse will change the culture of sexually non-normative lives, major corporations sign deals with prominent community members and media owners,⁸ prompting the pink dollar strategy and permitting the marginalization of all non-heteronormative people who are not easy targets for a collusive marketing plan.

Early lesbian/gay discourse (in a period in which there was no definable queer academic discourse in competition with community-level minoritarian politics) was strongly marked by an awareness of capitalist structure and class difference. Dennis Altman's seminal work, *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation* (1971), focused its analysis of the early gay protests through a Marcusean class/psychoanalytic theory and made strong suggestions that the growing evidence of gay existence would drastically disrupt the system of patriarchal capitalism in the West. D'Emilio's work was similarly marked by a class awareness, as were the many newsletters, periodicals, writings, pamphlets, and publications of the Gay Liberation Front and other lesbian/gay organizations of that first decade after "Stonewall69." It could be argued that the growing professionalization of lesbian/gay political organizations, community institutions, and media publications combined with a shift in political focus from gay revolution to an assimilationism/gay nationalism dynamic, as well as the increasing and seemingly-positive tolerance extended by liberal democratic societies have resulted in the wholesale acceptance of the liberal-capitalist discourse as the *essential* and *natural* social system.

In terms of the non-West, lesbian/gay media discourse—with much reiteration—posits the notion of the global lesbian/gay essentialist identity, one which has always existed and crosses all axes of difference and locational/regional/cultural boundaries (D’Emilio 5). Taking the sub-title of Dennis Altman’s 1982 analysis of lesbian/gay culture, there has been an *Americanization of the Homosexual*. While communication technology and post-colonial economic colonization of the Third World are the driving forces behind the promotion of Euro-American culture systems on a global scale, increasing economic globalization is having the side-effect of prompting the cultural globalization of queer sexualities in the style of the American; this exporting of a Euro-American lesbian/gay sexual identity has two distinct negative effects. The first is that the discourse of lesbian/gay identity—with its rhetoric of Come Out! Be queer! Be happy! Pride!—puts Third World individuals practising non-heterosexual sexualities in a position of danger within a cultural and political context which may be incapable of conceiving of sexualities and sexual freedom along American and European models. The second is the distinctive cultural ways of representing and understanding sexuality and non-heterosexuality in the non-Western regions of the world, such as through the *banci kathoey* in Indonesia, are wiped out and sexuality is subsumed within the Western world definition of gay—similar, but clearly not the same (Altman, “Global Queering” 2). Much Euro-American cultural domination of the discourses of sexuality in the Third World is the result of American and European AIDS-related promotional material being funded for distribution in the non-West; equally so, the blame lies with the proliferation of more general cultural codes exported from the West. This destruction of unique and culturally-specific sexualities is part of a new colonial enterprise in the non-West and, as I shall later discuss, the buying power of so-called queer communities in America, Australia, and Europe are indirectly responsible.

This global essentialist lesbian/gay identity that is so strongly posited in lesbian/gay discourse has most recently been theorized as a cultural condition of diaspora—the suggestion is that a symbolic homeland (frequently, ancient Greece) and a shared

history of oppression and alienation on the basis of sexuality permits lesbian/gay self-identifying persons (and, by implication, those *yet* to identify or come out) to see themselves as part of a global, universal family, as destined eventually to return to a togetherness (Buchbinder). This symbolic togetherness through which an essentialist notion of identity is posited is one of the several conceptual structures within lesbian/gay discourse which obscures difference on the basis of regional situation or position in the labour market of the non-West. It is contemporary lesbian/gay discourse which (not necessarily deliberately) obscures the notions of class, ethnicity, and the postcolonial subject in favour of the simplistic essentialist identity and the notion of progress (along liberal-democratic or humanist lines) through coming out and through support of the capitalist enterprises supposedly catering to the needs (that is, desires) of Western bourgeois lesbian/gay communities.

V. Sweatshop

In the corporate search for new markets and through the cultural hegemony of the United States, capitalism as economic and social organization has manifested itself in the non-West—the Third World. With the continuing globalization of Western orders of knowledge (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 69) it is important for Western thinkers in *every field* to consider the implications for Third World peoples of the very corporate structures which have, in part, prompted the queer freedoms in the West. I want to talk briefly about sweatshops, which are the factory systems used by many corporate organizations for ridiculously cheap labour (often paying as little as 10 cents an hour and providing few safety or health measures) to provide massive profit margins. Sweatshops are in breach of standards of human rights in many countries, but they exist and flourish. They can be seen as the greatest, most disgraceful scourge of capitalism, with several major sweatshop factories known to make use of corporal punishment, child labour, and imprisonment as standard employment practices.

What does this have to do with sexuality and queer peoples? At first glance, not much—it seems to be a different problem for a different struggle at a different time. However, there is a very

clear and direct connection between the way corporate organizations market to queer middle-class people in the West and the way Third World people are subjected to the cruellest, most humiliating and most depriving means of existence. Many of the corporate organizations which market directly to gay and lesbian persons and advertise in queer newspapers and magazines produce their commodities under sweatshop labour conditions—Guess clothing, Gap clothing, Levi-Strauss clothing, and, to a lesser extent, Hyundai car manufacturing, McDonalds, Disney Productions, and Nike shoes (*Campaign for Labor Rights* 1997).

The ways in which these corporations frequently operate in terms of lesbian and gay marketing is astounding. To take one example, Levi-Strauss provides health insurance benefits to the partners of lesbian and gay employees; the company creates a supportive environment for employees who test HIV+, and it funds a Lesbian and Gay Employees association. Furthermore, it boasts about this commitment in its marketing strategies directed to lesbian and gay consumers (Hennessy, "Queer Visibility" 173). However, the workers in its sweatshops of Spain earn as little as US \$2.15 an hour and live in inhumanely cramped and crowded barracks. By operating with a window-dressing strategy of supporting lesbian/gay/queer rights and community, corporations such as Levi-Strauss suppress the issues of class and perpetuate an unjust division of labour. It is a common corporate strategy: Nike, which employs a largely female work-force in Asian sweatshop factories and uses severe corporal punishment for those who do not work hard enough, hypocritically advertise with female athletes in the West, asserting that women will be healthier, stronger, and more independent if they play sports and wear Nike shoes (Greenhouse, see also Alexander).⁹ By ignoring the underprivileged classes while publicly promoting queer rights, profit-motivated corporations like Levi-Strauss are responsible for keeping Third World working-class lives from view and for stemming deliberation on the ways sexual identities are complicated by priorities imposed by impoverishment (Hennessy, "Queer Visibility" 176).

While middle-class lesbian/gay consumers are busy buying commodities from these corporations, they are subjecting a very

large group of people to cruel and unfair work conditions. The affluence of middle-class lesbian/gay people rests heavily on the shoulders of an international/global working class. Part of the responsibility lies with media which unashamedly attract corporate advertising without questioning either the motives or the labour record of those companies and which fail to link issues which are of interest and implication for their queer readership. While these media publications, international corporations, HIV/AIDS organizations, and lesbian and gay political organizations are promoting the notion of a global queer identity, they are all failing to give attention to the people most in need of anti-corporate combat.

Finally, the greatest achievement of this corporate strategy is to break down the possibilities of large-scale progressive coalitionism, whereby queer issues can be understood, discussed, and fought alongside issues of class and transnational corporatism, where the underprivileged—whether economically or culturally—are pitted equally against the reigning power-bloc (Fiske 45) and where the discourses that maintain corporate capitalism are put in a position of material and cultural dominance.

While it can be argued that *much* middle-class affluence relies on the labour exploitation of the Third World, the case of Levi Strauss and lesbian/gay advertising (and purchasing) opens a space for the discussion of ethics in lesbian/gay discourse. The use of minoritarian language and politics and the positing of a sense of shared oppression (not just with other lesbian/gay persons, but with *all* the socially oppressed) obscure the global class demarcation of the visible Western lesbian/gay community and permit a certain self-righteousness among lesbian/gay persons as having suffered the ills of homophobia thereby becoming aware of other worldly injustices. The dissemination of this myth, the positing of lesbian/gay persons as *apart* from other middle-class consumers, and the obscurity of the Third World factor in lesbian/gay spending patterns are iteratively circulated by lesbian/gay media publications as part of their marketing process. My finding here is that there is no such right to a lesbian/gay self-image as ethical—in fact, the lesbian/gay reliance on the Third World working-class is politically more unethical than general

bourgeois exploitation on the basis of that self-righteous sense of shared oppression. The acceptance of corporate target marketing is the moment in which the ethics of shared oppression is lost.

VI. Materialist Queer Theory And Absence (Political Economy)

Despite the connections drawn between the Third World sweatshop and the operations of lesbian/gay discourse and lesbian/gay media, I am led to ask how we can understand the absence of the sweatshop in that discourse. At the level of political economy, material queer theory can assist us through briefly exploring the production of lesbian/gay media—which sees itself as the central arbiter and police(man) of lesbian/gay identity, community, and politics. Lesbian/gay media is almost always local or national based. In Australia, many publications cater to audiences residing in inner-city regions, and the two magazines—*Campaign* and *OutRage*—are both national Australian publications, promoting a certain Australian nationalism even as they posit a queer or gay nationalism and draw frequently on North American sources for news and lifestyle features. Being positioned within a liberal-democratic society which upholds transnational corporate activity and a national focus in terms of providing for needs/desires of the regional inhabitants, these media publications fail to subvert those national goals, even as much as they might subvert the nationally preferred heteronormatively constructed sexualities. At the same time, these publications are directly reliant on selling an audience (as commodity) to large corporate bidders in order to maintain finances for on-going publication. While it might seem an outrage that these publications do not scrutinize their advertisers in terms of their exploitative operations, it draws attention to the simple fact that lesbian/gay media publications are not about servicing anti-capitalist activism but exist for the generation of profits. In other words, the publication owners are implicated in the extraction of surplus value from Third World sweatshop workers. They are able to justify their position through the promotion of the “pink dollar”—the

attraction of large corporate interest in a lesbian/gay audience and lesbian/gay market, positing the idea that this is a form of progress (however temporary) in the liberal-democratic political struggle for tolerance of non-heteronormative sexualities. In other words, it would not be financially useful for the publications to name these silent sufferers, no matter what recognizable sexual identities might be discovered in the dark corners of the sweatshop. As Butler points out, the absent is such because it is, or has to be, *unnamed* ("Critically Queer" 12).

VII. Materialist Queer Theory And Absence (The Competing Spectacle)

While political-economic factors might be an underlying reason for the absence of the sweatshop (and the Third World) from lesbian/gay discourse, materialist queer theory is able to draw attention to the conceptual framework through which this absence can be understood, and the ways in which the absence is reinforced and stabilized. Within lesbian/gay discourse, the hetero/homo binary is central to the establishment of the essentialist lesbian/gay identity,¹⁰ and the repetitive promotion in lesbian/gay media of that binary distracts from the possibility of any other binarial representations: hence, the frequent exclusion of non-white ethnicities in the dominant publications (except, perhaps, as a highly irregular special interest issue); hence the lack of interest in class (as anything more than style from which stylistic appropriations can take place); hence the absence of women or lesbian women from many of the pages of the publications. The Third World *cannot* appear in lesbian/gay media, because that positing of a West/non-West binary would draw focus from the hetero/homo binary.¹¹

A secondary reason for the sweatshop workers' absence, which queer theory might provide some clues about, involves the notion of the body. Rosemary Hennessy draws attention to the differences in the role of the female body between West and non-West: in the latter it is primarily for labour, for production; in the First World, the body exists for *reproduction* (*Materialist Feminism* xii). In a similar (though not exact) way, the queer

body operates with parallel constraints between the two worlds: in the West the queer body is about desiring (and, in many ways, about purchasing that which is desired), whereas in the Third World, the body exists once again for the production of commodities for the West.¹² The Western labour system's comparatively easier working day (which includes technology, safety, and often household, after-work comfort) means that the body can be seen to be (even at a practical level) free for the expression of desire for at least some part of time, even if that desire must be performed through genital activity (though often the rest of the body remains at the disposal of the purchasers of labour). In the Third World sweatshop there is no time even for sexualized body parts. The understanding (and often the reality) of the sweatshop world is that workers are operating for ridiculously low pay during the majority of the hours of the day. The body cannot be used for the purposes of desire (sexual or otherwise) when, as Morton points out, the needs of survival are over-riding ("Class Politics" 474-75).

There is another way of making sense of that absence: through the notion of the spectacle. While contemporary liberal discourses exoticize non-heteronormative identities with unprecedented fascination, it remains for lesbian/gay discourse to maintain that spectacle—partly for the small political gains that the economic interests of corporations permit. The lesbian or gay must continue, in the lesbian/gay press, to be performed with glamour and flair. Part of that glamour has been dictated through the notion of shared oppression, through the hardship of the bourgeois white lesbian/gay life. By not concentrating on the Third-World sweatshop worker, by not naming, and not even Othering, the bourgeois lesbian/gay literally steals the limelight, refusing to permit a subject more exotic, more spectacular, more suffering to be posited. In this case the spectacle that is the lesbian/gay carnivalesque portrayal of itself is used not for Othering, for distancing itself from something grotesque (Stallybrass and White 290) but for establishing and reinforcing the boundaries that normalize the bourgeois white male as *the* non-heteronormative spectacle, as the *only* queer within the lesbian/gay discourse.

NOTES

- ¹ See Butler, *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*; Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*; Foucault *Power/Knowledge* and *The History of Sexuality Vol 1*, and for a good summary of the contentions and stresses within queer theory, see Jagose.
- ² And in fact it has a somewhat different origin. See de Lauretis.
- ³ A currently popular term for Marxist or neo-Marxist class analysis.
- ⁴ Religious, legal, medical, and moral discourses, however, have operated from time to time to counter the freedom from family that economic conditions have permitted, thus emptying the basis by which family is maintained and regimented from one discourse into another.
- ⁵ A dynamic of need/desire might also play a role in a queer theoretical analysis of the sexuality of prostitution in Western urban centres, a matter that needs further exploration, and one which might start with John Rechy's *The Sexual Outlaw*.
- ⁶ Among the agenda items addressed by the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby (Sydney) are legislative protection of superannuation and the right for same-sex marriage—both, arguably, are bourgeois institutions.
- ⁷ *OutRage Magazine* is the top-selling Australian national gay magazine, directed to a gay-male and ostensibly upper middle-class audience. The top 25 of their 150 "powergays" included 8 politicians/judges, 6 high profile personality artists, 6 major businessmen and investors, 2 senior academics, 1 high profile sports-person, and 1 fashion designer—the majority of the categories here are wealth-attracting positions promoted as important within contemporary bourgeois discourse.
- ⁸ Note particularly the role played by Australian gay press company Bluestone Media and its co-director Danny Vadasz in securing Telephone Corporation *Telstra* advertising for the magazine chain which includes the glossy *OutRage*.
- ⁹ Likewise, Guess clothing, which once operated a Los Angeles sweatshop attempted to buy off student protests by advertising their involvement in the sponsoring of a campus film festival (CLR: 1997).
- ¹⁰ Although bisexuality, which from time-to-time is alluded to in lesbian/gay discourse, disrupts that hetero/homo binary, the new umbrella term of "queer" has provided the answer to maintaining the binary while including bisexuality in lesbian/gay discourse—"all-of-us-non-heteronormative-sexualities" versus "the straights."
- ¹¹ There is, of course, some evidence of the eroticization of the black male and Asian transsexual Other in lesbian/gay imagery—a matter for which there is no room to discuss at present (see Mercer). It should be noted, though, that this eroticization is both a Westernization of the Asian Other, and one which—in the imagery—divorces (and obscures) that Other from notions of Third World sweatshop work.
- ¹² And for the desire of the West, see note 11 above, bearing in mind prostitution, sex tours, and so on.

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