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Virtuality, Immateriality, Homosexuality: Network Theory and the "Bad Copy"

Singles websites, online pages where individuals "meet" for a variety of reasons, often advertise to gay men much as they would to heterosexuals. In one such advertisement for Gay.com, a group of masculine, young, well-groomed men cast lascivious eyes into the screen, the focus on toned, speechless, commodified physiques mirroring that of the voiceless and reified bodies one finds in myriad advertisements, those geared towards people of all sexualities. But unlike advertisements for singles websites aimed at heterosexuals, this one comes with a compelling caveat: it asks, "Are You?" only to be followed by the "Gay.com" logo. The message reveals the supposed "secret" inherent to gay identity, the duality of divulgence against concealment, the complete exteriority of bodies against the inner secret of sexuality.[i] Yet the final secret may be in the hands of the advertisement itself: it already knows the answer. With the advent of online avatars in which individuals proclaim their sexuality and with the profusion of site-tracking technologies, niche marketing reaches completely new heights through cyberspace.

The wide accessibility of the Internet has rendered formerly hidden subcultures, such as that of homosexuality, greatly more apparent: the formerly peripheral becomes increasingly visible. Inner lives once seemingly impenetrable become projected through the virtual world, with the exterior and interior worlds of sexuality blurred. Yet inasmuch as many theorists claim that the Internet culture provides a new horizontality, leveling hierarchies and eliding differences through accessibility and visuality, reactionary calls

1

against gay rights and even cyberspace impediments prove to be a recalcitrance for heteronormativity, the so-called natural, prelapsarian structure of relationships that contrasts any celebratory call for universalism.

This paper investigates the conflation of the "virtuality" of the Internet with the supposed "immateriality" of homosexual relationships alongside discourses of authenticity. Many homosexuals, often isolated in a predominantly heterosexual "rl," rely on social networking sites or Internet dating services to make connections,[ii] physical or virtual, yet oftentimes relationships formed via the Internet are presumed to be illegitimate, inauthentic copies of "real" relationships—the "bad copy." Likewise, conservative discourses label gay relationships not only as mere copies of the heteronormative, but as functionless: the ability to physically reproduce is one of the categories in which compulsory heterosexuality positions itself as normative. In exploring the juncture between these two supposed immaterialities, this paper furthermore examines how virtuality and homosexuality are situated in material culture itself. Inasmuch as people of all sexualities must sell themselves via the Internet as products (listings for singles are set alongside listings for houses, cars; physical attributes are labeled like commodity assets), relationships mediated by the virtual may be said to more readily appear as taking on the commodity form. The media format itself, in which desires is manipulated in the realm of the signifier, further juxtaposes the non-essential, purely aesthetic commodity form of late capitalism, often colluded with the feminine, to that of function and pure use-value.

It is the proximity, the ever-present "elsewhere" of the virtual, that must be kept at bay. As far as gay relationships pose a danger to compulsory heterosexuality, the

broadcasting of homosexual subcultures through technology threatens not only

ideological contamination, but elicits fears of biological contagions as well.

The of rise of the consumer culture, noted by critics such as Dick Hebdige, is

often associated with the rise of women's autonomy in capitalist society; for it was

women, the shoppers, the selectors, who often controlled household consumption. With

the ascendance of the advertising industry in late-capitalism, women's roles as consumers

became closely related to their identity as a group subjected to the manipulations of sign-

values, such as the fashion industry, where style dominates substance.[iii] As this

consumption was increasingly mediated through the advertising industry and the

industry's creation of desire, women became seen as not just consumers of goods, but as

consumers of signs, of desires and styles churned out by marketing companies. Thus, we

see a conflation of femininity with a consumer society dominated by sign-value, where

desire is manipulated in the realm of the signifier and juxtaposed to the "'real' solid/

masculine/functional aspects of American industrial design."[iv]

The domain where commodity fetishism operates by a logic of the sign, as

originally posited by Baudrillard, relays this message of course via the transmission of

even more signs: though mass media and mass marketing. Inverting Marx's supposition

that all commodities themselves are fetishized, through the attachment of affect and the

disappearance of the object's history or labor-formation, Baudrillard claims that

"fetishism is actually attached to the sign object, the object eviscerated of its substance

and history, and reduced to the state of marking a difference, epitomizing a whole system

of differences."[v] The pervasiveness of this construct comes to structure the multifarious

ways in which people signify themselves and construct their identities.

Whereas consumers now desire how an object signifies their identity, "need" seems to disappear. Objects no longer fulfill use-value, and thus these "needs" must be created recursively in that these needs are only formed after the consumer becomes caught in the matrix of consumption and desire. Thus even what is construed as "need" lacks material substance: desire for sign-value replaces the need for use-value.

The association of gay men with consumer culture and the rise of the economy of sign-exchange parallels women's supposed relationship to this same emergence. This conflation between the roles of women and gay men, the association of gay men's "inherently" feminine nature and their supposed preoccupation with image and aesthetic values, operates both temporally as well as relationally. For the rise of gay rights and the rise of gay men's visibility certainly correlates at least historically to the growth of late capitalism's consumer culture as well as the emergence of women's rights. Relationally, gay men are very often portrayed as feminine throughout literature and media.

Arising from the late 19th century with the advent of dandyism, the correlation between gay men and the functionless, aesthetic commodity-form certainly precedes the information age. The dandy, most popularly associated with Oscar Wilde, venerates style over substance, appearance over essence, and as such is often portrayed as homosexual, lacking function. Writes Elisa Glick, the dandy becomes "[a]ssociated with the 'feminization' of modern culture… [a] retreat from politics and history into art and/or commodity culture."[vi] The emergence of gay identity into more mainstream culture from the 1970's further portrayed homosexuality as a subculture of the "spectacle." Gay activist Dennis Altman lamented the disappointing product of this newly discovered

sexual freedom: "the promise of social transformation held out by gay liberation has been replaced by the promise of an incessant, commercialised and commodified orgy."[vii]

Gay men thus inherit many of the negative qualities materialist nostalgia often attributes to women, including gay men's role as consumers and their association with the "fantastic," with the realm of style as opposed to that of function. For it is "function" that gay men, as is often viewed, distinctly lack: the supposed hallmark of gay relationships is that of impotence. The opposition to gay marriage is predicated not just along the lines of religious restrictions, but by the very factual nature of gay men's biology: they cannot reproduce. Gender critics following Butler remind us that the ability to reproduce is one of the categories in which compulsory heterosexuality positions itself as normative. [viii] Under this heteronormative binary, heterosexuality represents essence, content, and function, while homosexuality denotes appearance, artifice, and aestheticism.

Furthermore, following a well-known materialist thesis advanced by Engels and later by Althusser, gay relationships can be viewed as posing a threat to the capitalist mode of production, a reliance on the actual, physical reproduction of the work force. Gay men thus possess a certain "immateriality," a distinct lack of function and reproducibility within the capitalist structure.

If this association of gay men to the aesthetics of the signifier has a long history, it appears only to accelerate in the information age, where signs and information are incessantly relayed through the virtual, the non-material. The commodification of bodies appears to reach even fuller fruition via Internet dating and networking websites. Several factors distinguish online social networking and dating from its precursors in print media. Quantitatively, the Internet clearly provides a space for vastly more advertisements,

people, and preferences than in material texts, such as print classifieds. A study

conducted on the online dating habits of gay men concluded that a substantial majority

(75%) of American gay men used the Internet to access gay-oriented material.[ix] The same

study discovered that about a third of gay men had met sexual partners online, a figure

much greater than that of heterosexuals. Qualitatively, the Internet allows for more

rhizomatic searching and reading practices, with the ability to move through various

hyper-links and portals in a far less unidirectional manner than in print media. These

factors give online classifieds a degree of specificity previously unmatched, giving

people much more of a choice that can be tailored to their specific sub-preferences.

Not only do these sites commodify individuals into various substrata and social

categories, but their ubiquity and dominance of late seemingly projects images of the

"homosexual lifestyle" throughout the media and the collective consciousness of the

nation. While the dandy of the late 19th century would often hide his sexuality from the

majority, and the gay reveler of the 1970's would congregate with others in bathhouses or

discos outside of mainstream culture, today's homosexual seems to be visible on a whole

new scale. The once exceptional is now integrated into the everyday; the periphery melds

with the center.

Craigslist, for example, would seem to serve as the classified section of an

international newspaper in which fifteen million people a month self-publish objects they

wish to sell or share, such as themselves.[x] On Craigslist singles listings sit directly

alongside car sales, apartment postings, and employment directories. As someone would

select a car based on color, make, age, and form, so does one "shop around" for their

desired mate, where men list their color, age, and physical form. Similarly, individuals

advertising themselves must commodify their own bodies, stripping their character down to a few physical characteristics. Various dating websites ask their users to classify themselves and their bodies by ticking off boxes. Manhunt.com, a website that focuses primarily on connecting gay male sex partners, gives men the option to identify themselves under several body categories, such as "bear."[xi] Connections mediated through the virtual often take on the form of commodity selection: it is no wonder that the first question one generally asks through instant messaging or email is "A/S/L," or "Age/Sex/Location." Thus, relationships fostered through the virtual appear to constitute a reductive form of those cultivated in the "real" world. A cursory glance at the singles sections (such as male for male, female for female, etc.) on Craigslist generally reveals that the "men seeking men" listings are more sexually explicit, again only reproducing the notion that gay men are in essence more interested in the insubstantial. Such an assumption fails to consider that the constant (re)production of this phenomenon, the incessant relay of on-screen signifiers that seem to point to this "inherent nature" through their constant repetition, might actually reproduce this behavior through its own image.

Subject formation through the virtual thus appears to be the illegitimate copy of the "real," a flat representation of the authentic. Whereas a homosexual relationship, per Butler, is construed as an insufficient mimic of an "original" heterosexual relationship, Internet communications too come to represent a bastardized form presumed to be a shell of the genuine, and gay men's reliance on making connections via the Internet only perpetuates the collapsing of the two categories of "bad copies" I have outlined. This could help to explain why couples are often reticent, even embarrassed to admit they met one another online.

While people may be hesitant to acknowledge that their relationships came about through cyberspace or afraid to admit to their colleagues that they have avatars on networking sites, advertisers welcome relationships mediated through the virtual. Online identity construction has proven quite beneficial for niche marketing, where individual groups are targeted through what they have told sites such as Facebook or through their selections on shopping sites such as Amazon. When logging on to such sites, a gay man who has identified as such finds advertisements directly tailored to his sexual identity: messages advertising gay personals, gay vacations, even gay styles will emerge The information age could thus appears to be the fulfillment of Adorno and Horkheimer's "Culture Industry," where consumers "appear as statistics on research organization charts, and are divided by income groups into red, green, and blue areas; the technique is that used for any type of propaganda."[xii] In the age of user created content, moreover, users actively inscribe themselves into this panoptic model. Social networking sites allow advertisers to pinpoint their target audience well beyond the surface of income to the sexual identity the person has proclaimed. It is no longer a contradiction for capitalism to celebrate peripheral subgroups, and while some critics assert that the taking up of gay lifestyles into the channels of consumerism advances social causes, advertisers are generally more invested in cultivating the so-called "pink dollar." [xiii] [xiv]

If the seeming omnipresence of the virtual creates a visibility that both brings gay rights issues to the forefront of national discourse and reductively solicits gay subjectivities for its own capitalist greed, the virtual also comes to be feared as a contagion. The rapid dispersion of websites and online material (not surprisingly labeled as "viral") into global localities and millions of lives reflects the expansive nature of the

Internet as well as stirs fear of contamination, both immaterially, in terms of cultural contagions such as the unfurling of gay identities through cyberspace, or even materially, the fear that the diffusion of subcultures through the virtual, such as homosexuality, will create all too real implications. And with fear of the spread of homosexuality comes anxiety over HIV and AIDS. It comes as no surprise that the "men seeking men" category on Craigslist was once the only group for which a notice warned men of the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases.[xv] Robert Payne, writes that the

> open textuality of the Internet as a literal web of image and information availability suggests fertile conditions for a promiscuity that incites the spread of moral panic…. In these specific ways, the charge of "knowingly" transmitting obscene material implicitly tropes the vindictive homophobia inherent to certain AIDS panics: namely, that HIV-positive gay men might target "the general population" for deliberate infection…. [xvi]

Contamination anxiety proliferates through cyberspace and makes the leap from the virtual to the real, as even the Red Cross of America forbids men who have engaged in sexual intercourse with other men from donating blood, even though straight women, now have the fastest growing rate of HIV infection.[xvii] While I do not wish to suggest that the Red Cross acted directly out of the fear of virtual contamination, its actions do function as a codification of homophobia and furthers the association of gay men with HIV. The availability and ubiquity of the Internet only helps to promulgate the stereotype of the predatory, diseased gay male, and the proximity of the virtual, paradoxically everywhere and nowhere, perpetuates fears of contamination in that the formerly peripheral can no longer be boundaried.

Such fears of a de-hierarchized, horizontally-structured world levels the celebratory claims of theorists who perhaps too readily herald what Hardt and Negri label the "age of Empire" and may help to show why there has been a renewed push against

9

gay rights. Hardt and Negri, following Deleuze's theory of the rhizome, claim that the

"multitude," the global mass of people who have an infinite and immeasurable diversity

of classes and attributes, possess a much greater access to power than in the industrial age

because of the dispersal of capitalist production, which in the information age is mostly

knowledge production. Cyberspace is a keen example of how the multitude comes to

access these powers, and, according to the theorists, this diffusion of powers not only

leads to a fragmentation of the classic bourgeois/proletariat binary, but other hierarchical

social structures as well. The authors write that, "Empire present a superficial world, the

virtual center of which can be accessed immediately from any point across the surface…

there is no longer an 'outside' to power...."[xviii] This collapse of hierarchy forms a

collective where the boundaries of center and periphery no longer hold, creating a

horizontality where access to information is granted to all. This new order is readily

apparent in the increased accessibility to subcultural representations, such as

homosexuality which once banished to the margins of society.

Hardt and Negri see the creation of the multitude and the virtual as potentially

liberating, that this multitude will ultimately rejoice with calls for global citizenship, and

that this new order will lead to the transgression of racial and territorial boundaries. The

current status of gay rights, however, seems to put on hold such hopes. Though the

authors mostly speak in terms of class and racial relations, they provide a model for

speaking of various hierarchies, including compulsory heterosexuality and the subalterity

of homosexuals. In the past several years throughout the U.S., many individual states

have passed resolutions denying marriage equality to homosexual partnerships, and

various dating websites even faced court orders to allow homosexual usage of their sites.

Founder of eharmony.com Neil Clark Warren, a conservative Christian, claims that because marriage is the ultimate goal for his clients and that homosexuals cannot marry, they thus should not be allowed to participate on his website.[xix] While theories following the Deleuzian model of rhizomatic social structures focus on the possibility of flux and flow, homosexuality appears to be a site where boundaries are still being erected.

With the omnipresence of the virtual rendering gay lifestyles far more visible then ever before, the reaction against the "viral" spread of homosexuality worsens, and the detractors of gay rights still steadfastly adhere to the concepts of heteronormativity. What these reactions often signal is nostalgia for a dreamed past: the original, "real" heterosexual relationship. Judith Butler's now famous concept of gender performativity from the early 90's helps to undo this binary. Butler asserts that heterosexual norms are merely imitated, passed through culture by performance and ritual, so that compulsory heterosexuality comes to create an unsubstantiated ideal of itself, a nostalgic fantasy that positions itself as natural.[xx] With the creation of a "pure" notion of itself comes the inevitable hierarchization in which homosexuality is positioned as the "bad copy," the unnatural category which must be marginalized from view.

Yet compulsory heterosexuality, maintaining a strict archetype of its "original" self, must reinforce this fixity through perpetual repetition: the other must be called upon time and again to reinforce the dominance of the master, kept alive in the collective imaginary despite its peripheralization. Butler claims that although

> homosexualities of all kinds in this present climate are being erased, reduced and (then) reconstituted as sites of radical homophobic fantasy, it is important to retrace the different routes by which the unthinkability of homosexuality is being constituted time and again.[xxi]

This is to say that compulsory heterosexuality reduces the "homosexual" to a rather hollow signifier where the heteronormative's own desires can be projected, and thus the gay lifestyle becomes a fantasy for the dominant, one of falsehood that posits homosexuals as inherently obscene or even sadomasochistic.

But whereas Butler constructed her notions of gay marginality almost two decades ago, we might say that contemporary homosexuals are still barred from equal rights in most cases and maintain a lower position in the symbolic hierarchy, but this peripherality is projected as ever-present, carried through the virtuality of the information age and cyberspace. Emptied signifiers of homosexual lifestyle are "constituted time and again" much more so now then when Butler first theorized this precept: the homosexual is paradoxically marginalized yet ubiquitous, made invisible yet projected seemingly everywhere. One needs only to turn on a television to be inundated with images of the "gay lifestyle" or with information regarding the push for or against gay rights.

As much as homosexuality has found new visibility and proximity through the virtual, through the 24 hour news channels, and through other forms of media, it also becomes perpetuated as a stereotype, that of the commodity form and the "bad copy." Heterosexuality's constant repositioning of itself against this other shows that this elaboration "is evidence that it is perpetually at risk, that is, that it 'knows' its own possibility of coming undone."[xxii] That homosexual couples appear to appropriate heterosexual norms in their own relationships only proves that this "original," "natural," and "essential" sexual identity is anything but, and furthermore that it can be replicated and repeated, much like heterosexuality itself finds meaning through performance.

The Internet provides a space for sheer performance: the opportunity to make and remake oneself in almost complete exteriority. Though many homosexual relationships are indeed mediated through Internet connections, the mistake is to conflate the "virtual" of cyberspace with the so-called "immateriality" of gay relationships, and furthermore to posit heterosexuality as a prelapsarian form of connection that somehow predates this commodity-driven world of late capitalism. To view homosexuality only as the "bad copy," as juxtaposed to the solidity and authenticity of the "real," the "original," only serves to perpetuate discrimination against homosexuals, a myth submerged by heteronormativity through a process of "naturalization." The reduction of gay men to the aesthetics of the signifier and the illegitimization of gay relationships prove to be limits to the celebratory claims of the borderless.

[i] see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*

[ii] see Graham Brown, Sharyn Burns, Bruce Maycock, "Your Picture Is Your Bait: Use and Meaning of Cyberspace among Gay Men," *The Journal of Sex Research* (2005, Vol. 42), on the popularity of such sites in homosexual circles

[iii] Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light* (London: Routledge, 1988) p. 87

[iv] Dick Hebdige, p. 87

[v] Jean Baudrillard, *For a Political Economy of the Sign* (Telos Press, 1981) p. 92

[vi] Elisa Glick, "The Dialectics of Dandyism," *Cultural Critique* (Spring 2001, Vol. 48) p.130

[vii] Guy Davidson, "Liberation, Commodity Culture and Community in 'the Golden Age of Promiscuity,'" *Australian Humanities Review* (November 2001)

[viii] Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Subordination," *Inside/Out* (New York: Routledge, 1991) p. 21

[ix] Eric G. Benotsch, Seth Kalichman, and Maggi Cage, "Men Who Have Met Sex Partners via the Internet: Prevalence, Predictors, and Implications for HIV Prevention." *Archive of Sexual Behavior* (April 2002, 31.2)

[x] all information from Craigslist.com

[xi] Andrew T. Fiore and Judith S. Donath, "Online Personals: an Overview," *Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems,* 2004

[xii] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 2000) p. 123

[xiii] Rosemary Hennessey, "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture," *Cultural Critique* (Winter, 1994-1995) p. 32

[xiv] Rob Cover, "Material/Queer Theory: Performativity, Subjectivity, and Affinity-based Struggles in the Culture of Late Capitalism," *Rethinking Marxism* (July, 2004: 16.3) p. 296

[xv] Deborah Levine and Jeffrey D. Klausner, "Lessons Learned From Tobacco Control:A Proposal for Public Health Policy Initiatives to Reduce the Consequences of High-Risk Sexual Behavior Among Men Who Have Sex with Men and Use the Internet," *Sexuality Research and Social Policy:Journal of NSRC* (March 2005, 2.1)

[xvi] Robert Payne, "Virtually: The Refreshment of Interface Value," *Postmodern Culture* (2004, 14.3) ¶ 5

[xvii] Diane Cardwell, "Red Cross Policy on Gays," *The New York Times* (August 23, 2002); Darryl Fears, "U.S. HIV Cases Soaring Among Black Women," *Washington Post*

(February 7, 2005)

[xviii] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000) p.58

[xix] Janet Kornblum, "Eharmony: Heart and Soul," *USA TODAY*, May 18, 2005

[xx] Judith Butler, p. 21

[xxi] Judith Butler, p. 20

[xxii] Judith Butler, p. 23