Position Paper for Queer Media Studies' Futures Roundtable

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So Many Places For Us: Queer Media Consumption and Twenty-First-Century Life

I am confident that Queer Media Studies has a future, at least for queer media people, and for those we recruit as allies and friends. While I'm attracted to what David M. Halperin and many others have said about "queer subjectivity," that it "expresses itself through a peculiar, dissident way of relating to cultural objects...and cultural forms..." I think that academics can over-emphasize the centrality of this mode of cultural criticism to queer life. (1) Equally, I think that there is a "media subjectivity" (for example, in online fandom), whose membership is not necessarily queer, but whose members do crucial work documenting and innovating queer and queer-adjacent critical practices. Queer Media Studies must derive its critical energy from those who can readily access both of these, that is, those who locate significant explanatory power in media criticism, and also have a significant investment in queer culture and life beyond its representations. The expression of these investments will be forever and by definition various to say the least, but I think that, for the sake of defining a field of inquiry, it's worth insisting upon the sustained presence of both. One can easily imagine a normative critical approach to a media text that depicts queer people or queer sexual practices -- indeed, one needs to look no further than the many hostile responses to Halperin's *How to Be Gay*, which insist, for example, that "any talk of a "gay culture" [is] deeply offensive." (2) (This particular comment came from a self-identified gay man, but operates according to the assumption that the very idea of a queer reading practice is artificial.) Equally, queer approaches to texts lacking explicit depictions of queer people and lives seem to constitute the bulk of widely-circulated queer readings. In this context, there is particular value to work duly committed to interrogating media texts and articulating queer perspectives.

In the Twenty-First Century, the work of interrogating media texts is incontrovertibly tied to interrogating the technologically-mediated structures that enable their production, distribution, and consumption. Thus, the pleasure of Jack Halberstam's queer readings of highly profitable Pixar movies in *The Queer Art of Failure* cannot be decoupled from the theorist's investment in anti-capitalist solidarity in broader contexts, as well. Though the desire for such solidarity among viewers will, one hopes, be *excited* by these films, it is the expressed and potential enactment and articulation of this desire elsewhere that energizes the project and its central claims. But the elsewhere cannot be decoupled from a queer context -- these are not insights that can be transported to an insistently straight context, because that context funnels all desire into heterosexuality, thus leaving too few desirous remainders to effect perceptible transformation.

This is not, of course, to say that all desire funneled into already-existing queer culture, for example, sexual enactments of homosexual desire is on a quick path toward revolutionary enactment. Although now seven years old, Dwight McBride's *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch* still contains what is, to my mind, the most comprehensive and devastating critique of racism in gay online dating spaces. He tracks the history of how, "The Internet freed us even from the PC shackles of the gay bar, a place where we no longer even need to patronize some and pretend to others about the often exclusive and predictably hegemonic nature of our desires on the one hand, or about the problematic fetishistic nature of them on the other." (9-10) McBride then goes on to suggest that, while it may have looked like freedom to some, this freedom to articulate one's sexual desires was unequally distributed, again

according to predictable hegemonic structures. More specifically, the ways in which online dating spaces enabled a semi-public articulation of private queer desires, rather than creating a more accessible sexual culture to gay people, instead created a visible marketplace of gay sex that ended up reproducing many of the dangerous undercurrents of the broader capitalist marketplace, built as it is according to heterosexist ideology, as Halberstam articulates, but also, significantly, on a racist ideology that places significantly more value on white bodies, queer or not, than non-white bodies. Here, rather than expanding imaginative space, the Internet served to reinforce dominant ideologies about sexuality, race, and desire, at best opening these to a more democratic critique, but at worst normalizing them for an audience already accustomed to this marketplace approach.

McBride's argument is significant not because it condemns public articulations of queer desire, or asks that queer subjects once again retreat into silence about their bodies and relationships, but rather because it asks more from them -- can it be that the desires as they are articulated on dating/sex websites are actually lining up with what these users want? (Clearly, sometimes, yes.) What will that look like online, in the queer media future?

Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durhum: Duke University Press, 2011. Print.

Halperin, David M. "How to Be Gay," *The Chronicle Review - The Chronicle of Higher Education*. September 3, 2012. Available Online: http://chronicle.com/article/How-to-Be-Gay/134024/

McBride, Dwight A. *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch: Essays on Race & Sexuality*. New York: New York University Press, 2005. Print.