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Queer theory, neoliberal homonormativity and social utility for queer writing on youth (suicide)

Abstract:

Contemporary sexual citizenship is governed by neoliberal concepts of selfhood that both encourage subjects to manage their own risk and that establishes risks by creating hierarchies of affluence, self-commodity and belonging. These risks relate to the ways in which LGBT self-harm and sexuality-related suicide are conditioned and normalised, with continuing high rates of suicidality. While neo-liberal formations of sexual selfhood have created the conditions for writing and making sense of fictional and non-fictional narrative accounts in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific for the legalised expression and representation of non-heterosexuality, they continue and exacerbate risks that can lead to the cultural formations associated with youth suicide. The fact that non-heterosexual youth have traditionally made use of the ‘logics’ of non-normative sexuality given in queer writing calls for an ethical approach to the ways in which narratives of non-heteronormative sexuality are written. This article presents a framing account of how contemporary neoliberal forms of ‘homonormative’ queer cultures serve as a backdrop and context for queer creative representations that may be utilised as forms of support, frameworks for identity norms or projections of queer lives that can, arguably, exacerbate risks of suicide. It examines some of the ways in which we can come at the conditions that make queer youth suicide possible and thinkable from a queer culturalist angle, allowing us to consider how suicide risks are creatively represented, produced, or contributed to.

Biographical note:

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The critical concept of queer was complex in its inception and introduction into Australian cultural studies and creative writing in the early 1990s, and that complexity sometimes resulted in claims that it lacked utility, either by virtue of its destabilisation of hard fought-for recognisabilities for minority sexuality and gender identities, particularly lesbian feminist positions (Jeffreys 1990: 162), or for its lack of incorporation of a theory of class and capital (for example, Morton 1996). While the critique of identities that can be deployed in a way which questions how disciplinary and biopolitical regimes shackle or constrain subjectivity while masquerading as forms of liberation (Butler 1997: 27) is valuable in itself, the quarter-century since queer theory became vogue in cultural studies' investigations into gender and sexuality have shown that there is indeed a pragmatic need to demonstrate its usefulness, not least for ensuring the ongoing funding of the area. At the same time, although early Marxian critiques of queer theory were reactionary rather than interdisciplinary (Cover 2004), an attention to materialist and neoliberal consumption formations of contemporary sociality appearing across writing not only adds to queer's potential uses but provides it with a grounding that allows it to advance in responsiveness by continuing to bolster its social critique as society becomes ever-more grounded in the commodification of minorities and at-risk identities. Seeking ways in which to demonstrate the ongoing utility of queer critique for social outcomes after twenty-five years since its conceptualisation, while paying attention to the possibilities and potentialities of a materialist queer theory is something I would like to do in this paper, noting the context of creative writing as that which actively re-circulates information utilised by many vulnerable younger persons as 'saving refugees' to provide a logic for living a particular kind of non-normative life (Gross 1998). In that sense, queer writing and the broader cultural context of contemporary creative media and online communication that depicts stories and narratives of queer lives has the enormous potential to serve as a resource for identity (Cover 2002), whether that be identities of vulnerability and self-harm or of resilience and liveability. Following some of my work on youth suicide (Cover 2012), the conjuncture of queer theory's potential interest in neoliberal identity formation and its usefulness for addressing social problems focuses on the figure of queer youth in the context of sexual citizenship.

I define queer theory here as the deployment of post-structuralist theorisation in the field of sexuality and gender identity. Queer theory takes to task the 'common sense' evidence of classes of sexuality categorised through a hetero/homo binary, understanding that sexualities and sexual behaviours classified in this way are discursively imagined into being. In other words, while there are heterosexual behaviours and identities and homosexual behaviours and identities, they are neither 'natural' nor 'foundational' but are produced in discourse. This does not, of course, mean that they are any less valuable or meaningful to those who practice or self-define by those sexual categories, only that they are contingent and current to a historical/cultural context today. Queer theory is not merely the study of non-heterosexuality or lesbian/gay identities but the deployment of poststructuralist theories in the field of gender and sexuality, regularly represented in creative work, political processes, academic investigation and the creative performance of selves 'writing in' self-identity in marginal and minoritarian contexts. While often confused,

the two uses of the term queer do in fact have separate histories arising in two contexts: academic debate resulting particularly from discussions at Gay and Lesbian Studies conferences in the late 1980s held at UC-Santa Cruz, Yale and other American universities and, without relation, reclaiming a negative term as the banner for a new United States lesbian/gay activist organisation, *Queer Nation*. Teresa de Lauretis stated as early as 1989 that there was in fact very little in common between the advents of both theory and organisation (presuming co-incidental parallels in the use of 'queer'), though queer theory and queer movement/community have frequently been conceived as related 'wings' of the same discursivity (de Lauretis 1989). This ambiguity has been productive for both queer theory and queer creative practices (Jagose 1996: 96-97), although the popularity of the term has involved its up-take as an umbrella term for a range of non-heteronormative sexualities and genders, and it is this to which I refer when I use the term queer writing.

While there have been some improvements in the social situations and environments for younger non-heterosexual persons that had previously been thought to contribute to suicidality, particularly in the areas of media representation (Padva 2004), legal protections against discrimination (Almeida et al. 2009: 1002), protections against homophobic violence and bullying (Espelage and Swearer 2008: 157), the prevalence of suicide among non-heterosexual youth remains high (Almeida et al. 2009: 1001, Ryan et al. 2009: 346, Zhao et al. 2010: 104), and there is a demonstrated and ongoing need to continue theorising the social and cultural factors that make the relationship between sexuality and suicidality intelligible, thinkable and, for some, the logic outcome of non-belonging. (McAndrew and Warne 2010: 93). While popular belief is that the relative tolerance of young same-sex attracted youth and same-sex couples will overcome the disproportionately high-rate of LGBT youth suicide, such a view tends to make invisible the socio-economic conditions that constitute contemporary LGBT identity as well as the substantial differences in LGBT belonging that emerge through the neoliberal conception of non-normative sexualities.

While the above addresses some of the concerns for how queer youth have been represented in both creative and non-fictional accounts, the second concern for queer theory's utility involves questions of neoliberal sexual citizenship that have not to date been well explored in research and literature on queer youth. This involves the extent to which contemporary LGBT community norms, practices, cultures and creative representations that are built on a neoliberal perspective of the queer consumer-citizen might unwittingly be implicated in some of the complex 'unliveabilities' experienced by younger queer persons, particularly in reproducing forms of isolation and exclusion. Problematically, much of this approach has relied on the idea that once a younger queer person is able to access queer life in the form of institutions, recreational venues, nightclubs, bars, support groups or other forms of community, the risk of suicide resulting from a sense of isolation is mitigated. Such queer sites, organisations, spaces and media representations are presented as the 'saving refuges' which provide a stability for lesbian and gay youth 'who have reason to feel that they are living in enemy territory' (Gross 1998: 98); access to LGBT community as a young adult is seen as both a source of hope and aspiration for overcoming a feeling of aloneness. In some ways, this access risks being understood

as a kind of magic solution, such that the ‘problem’ of queer youth suicide is one which is located only within the context of younger persons who are not *yet* in a position to become part of the sociality of queer culture, but will be ‘safe’ and no longer vulnerable once they do so (disregarding the possibility of a distinction between same-sex behaviours and desires and queer identity, or even the possibility that some queer persons may not wish to participate in LGBT culture as part of a queer identity). This has led to something of a vacuum in understanding the ways in which transitioning into sociality in a minority community has its own risks, as well as the ways in which all minority communities depend on exclusions – both symbolic and actual – in order to maintain a sense of community and cultural bounds. Furthermore, it ignores the fact that suicides occur among young men who are indeed already accessing community institutions or social life and, in some cases, are fully entrenched in it. In that sense, creative accounts of queer youth that are built on the common trope of youthful isolation overcome by entry into urban community in young adulthood are, today, not only clichéd stereotypes but continue the re-circulation of a particular cultural narrative that ‘narrows down’ the complexity of queer youth experience and presents an overly-simplistic form of vulnerability and its solution (Cover 2012).

If there is value in investigating ways in which better to utilise queer theory in order to represent queer youth in creative accounts that avoid re-circulating persistent stereotypes and, instead, operate in the service of more nuanced, queer-theoretical frameworks of identity that (and this is, of course, a valuable activity in suicide prevention), then it is necessary to ask if contemporary narratives of LGBT community formations and identities built on neoliberal consumption and affluence might not have their own or additional risks. Primary in understanding the contemporary conditions that continue to keep rates of queer youth suicide disproportionately high is the fact that, within the neoliberalisation of contemporary culture, LGBT communities are *homonormative*. The term homonormativity was first coined by transgender activists to indicate the ways in which gender-nonconformity tended to be excluded from being seen as an issue for queer community politics and inclusivity (Bryant 2008: 456), although it was later used by Lisa Duggan (2002) to refer to the ways in which LGBT community politics had adopted a more conservative and assimilationist political strategy aiming for recognition of rights as a discrete cultural grouping (Epstein 1990:290). This is a different method of political activity from the earlier Gay Liberationist anti-establishmentarian stance (Altman 1971), with the newer rights politics relying heavily on ‘safe’ community representations deemed acceptable to broader society. Representing queerness through affluence, fitness, aesthetically-competent, whiteness and other narrow depictions ultimately required the promotion of queerness through consumption while excluding all that which is deemed undesirable or politically unpalatable. This critique obliges asking what such exclusions – whether actually experienced or perceived from afar – might do for vulnerable queer youth. The perception that one is required to perform and, indeed, conform to a set of narrow stereotypes in order to be ‘coherently queer’ results in forms of non-belonging which, in turn, adds pressures that increase youth vulnerability.

In order to tease out some of the ways in which queer as a point of critique has continuing social value for creatively representing the contemporary conditions of exclusionary practices in relation to youth through a focus on contemporary neoliberal regimes of sexual citizenship, this paper takes to task the neoliberal production of homonormativity in terms of its impact on vulnerable youth through the framework of ‘relative misery’, which is an important notion in suicide theory relating to how perception of the self in comparison with peers in one’s sociality can create greater suicide risks than the ‘absolute misery’ among a shared group. As Margot Weiss put it, the use of homonormativity as a key term in critique

asks us to think through the ways that sexuality structures relationships among individuals, groups and the state. Tropes such as exclusion, erasure, pathology, recognition, or visibility point to shifting understandings of equality, freedom, and difference, and these refigured landscapes must be addressed in our activism and our scholarship (2008: 97).

That is, narratives that assume *all* queer persons are made vulnerable through heteronormativity can be put in question by interrogating the ways in which structures that operate to produce a normalised queer sexuality likewise produce exclusions and erasures. By deploying that call for critique within the context of queer youth suicidality, this paper examines some of the ways in which we can make sense of the conditions that make queer youth suicide possible and thinkable from a culturalist perspective. This framework allows us to consider how suicide risks are represented, narrativised, produced – or contributed to – not only through the forms of marginalisation experienced in heteronormative contexts but by the ‘mainstreaming’ of queer culture itself. The paper begins with a discussion of the concepts of homonormativity and neoliberalism, moves on to consider how homonormativity produces specific affective exclusions for those who do not ‘measure up’ (or perceive themselves to have failed to ‘meet the measure’) and ends by discussing some of the ways in which relative difference and distinction within LGBT representations has implications for understanding queer youth suicide from a queer-theoretical perspective.

Homonormativity, Neoliberalism and queer community representation

When queer theorist Lisa Duggan identified homonormativity as the contemporary framework for queer community and political organising that effectively reduces the ‘gay public sphere’ to consumption spaces and gentrified neighbourhoods, she was criticising not the ways in which queer community has developed as a minority culture, but how the politics of queer culture had begun to operate within neoliberal norms, calling for a queer theory that incorporated the critique of late capitalism into discussions related to marginal sexual and gender identities. She found that homonormativity produces:

A politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption (2002: 179).

That is, the contemporary assimilationist political framework which seeks legislative protections and inclusion in conservative institutions such as marriage and military service invisibilises, for Duggan, the radical political potential of a queerness that actively critiques the dominance of heterosexuality and heteronormative assumptions. This effectively sustains those assumptions that serve only a small minority of queer people who effectively benefit from a politics that upholds neo-liberal norms (Murphy, Ruiz and Surlin 2008: 1). Lesbian/gay politics arose out of Gay Liberationist revolutionary rhetoric based on the Freudian-Marxian stance of Herbert Marcuse and was expected to lead to an 'end of the homosexual' via social transformation to a new society 'based on a 'new human' who is able to accept the multifaceted and varied nature of his or her sexual identity' (Altman 1971: 241). In his later analysis of lesbian/gay politics Altman bemoaned the fact that '[t]he expectation that the growth of gay self-assertion would lead to a much greater degree of androgyny and blurring of sex roles seems, at least for the moment, to have been an illusion' (Altman 1982: 14). The gay assimilationist lobby politics, operating on the 'default model' of the Civil Rights approach in the United States (Sinfield 1996: 271), became the dominant cultural mode of lesbian/gay politics since the early 1980s. It is a politics not of change or resignification of power-relations themselves, but a bourgeois politics that seeks through legislative change, lobbying and policy protections for the inclusion of queer sexuality as a cultural category of rights (Epstein 1990: 290). That is, alternative sexualities are not permitted to question heterosexual dominance; rather they are tolerated. Contemporary culture permits non-heterosexuality and alternative sexual identities, behaviours and representations to exist as a LGBT or queer culture that sits as a category within a 'safe' multiculturalism in which all difference is categorised around labelled subjectivities, based on the idea of fixed and discrete identities that do not question each other or the dominance of one particular category or norm.

Some writers have suggested this came about through the proliferation of neo-conservative opinion in queer political institutions during the 1980s and 1990s influencing a particular brand of contemporary, common queer writing that depicted queer survival through entry into the mainstream normativity of bourgeois urban life (Vaid 1995: 37-38, Doyle 2008: 213) and thereby re-circulating a particularly narrow stereotype of queer selfhood. For Duggan the current political culture of lesbian/gay communities is the result of encroaching neoliberalism as the framework through which minority politics, culture and identity are thought, organised and framed. Neoliberalism applies an economic model and technique of analysis to all non-market domains of social existence, and that includes sexuality, community, identity and belonging. For Foucault, neoliberalism is a governmentality framework through which power mechanisms, subjectivities and ways of thinking are produced in contemporary culture. Reaching its fruition in policy in the late 1970s and 1980s in western nations, it did not suddenly come into being, but is the result of a historical set of developments emerging over time since the eighteenth century and ultimately supporting and providing a rationale for the contemporary neo-liberal state, its politics, governmentality and policies towards economic management and culture (2007: 348). Neoliberalism produces the subject as an 'economic subject' through freedom from state 'interference' in all areas related to the acquisition of wealth, the

role of labour and the market (Terranova 2009: 243). Interwoven with the juridico-legal structures and institutional disciplinary mechanisms (Foucault 2007: 7-8), neoliberalism's power technologies govern the production and constitution of identity and selfhood that is prompted towards behaviour driven by self-interest not only in economic terms but within the economic rationalisation of the social and behavioural (Toscano 2007: 74). That is, self-interest not merely in seeing the self as a participant in the market, but selfhood itself as an *entrepreneurial* activity in which one is responsible for investing in producing one's identity through consumption.

In that sense, sexuality becomes creatively represented in the context of the conservative discursive production of sexual selves, expectations, normativities and minority communities that are fabricated through a conceptualisation of an economic rationalism that expects government intervention only in the conditions of the market and not the mechanisms of the market (Foucault 2008: 138). It thereby rationalises identities, minorities and difference in terms of economic advantage, and within a perspective in which individuals are free to become the *homo oeconomicus* or economic man whose responsibility is to work and to look after his or her own interests (Foucault 2008: 143-44) – not a businessman in the traditional sense but an entrepreneur of the self, building identity through consumption. As a consumer, the *homo oeconomicus* is a producer of one's own satisfaction (Foucault 2008: 226), which includes responsibility for the satisfactory production of one's identity, safety and happiness through economic consumption rather than the expectation that this will be provided by any social, governmental or communitarian activity (even though sometimes it is). Neoliberal homonormativity thereby results in the loss of the radical critique of the heteronormativity of neoliberalism and its institutions. This includes the loss of a queer community of care and responsibility that saw mutual supportive and collective behaviour not only in political activity but in the responsibility towards the newcomer, the vulnerable, the unwell and the young.

Although at times considered problematic, the notion of sexual citizenship has been described as emerging at the interface of the domestic and the public resulting in a de-traditionalisation, greater egalitarianism and increased personal autonomy in sexual choices, behaviours and expressions (Weeks 1999: 36-40). For Attwood, the key factors in the articulation of sexual citizenship are 'autonomy, respect, communication, the negotiation of rights and obligations, and the cultivation of accountability and trust' (2006: 90). The emphasis here on pluralism, participation and choice is often framed as distinct from the more hedonistic or libertarian expressions of non-normative sexualities (Weeks 1999: 44), but nevertheless is articulated through a sense that sexual citizenship is expressed through agency and entitlement to self-representation (Albury and Crawford 2012: 471) rather than rights to political representation and the distillation of diversity into communities of sameness. Put another way, sexual citizenship is a complex theoretical and social concept that emerged from civil rights style struggles defined by dichotomies of difference that emphasised the singularity of that difference. Tensions between this origin and post-rights based claims for sexual difference to be considered 'normal' characterise many of the ongoing debates in the field. Within a cultural concept of sexual citizenship, non-heterosexuality is not considered an issue or an affront but

nevertheless produces ways of living and being that are narrow and normalised in order to be understood as coherent and tolerable (Altman 2013: 148, 170; Berlant and Warner 1998: 547). Neoliberal perspectives of selfhood in the context of formations of sexual citizenship produce a notion of non-heterosexuality that is on the one hand not ‘a major issue’ in terms of distinctions from heteronormativity but, on the other, relies on new perspectives of belonging and the reproduction of norms through security and biopolitical formations.

Because neoliberalism makes use of the power mechanisms Foucault identified as security and the biopolitical rather than the more institutionally-based disciplinarity that maintain norms at more local levels, neoliberalism has, in fact, benefited lesbians and gay men in several ways. Disciplinarity produces the idea of norms and thereby a set of references by which the normal can be distinguished from the abnormal (Foucault 2007: 63). However, biopolitical power – which addresses not individuals or institutions but works as a technology of power that makes whole populations their object while supporting the neoliberal freedom of market exchange – plots normality by establishing an interplay of normativities; that is:

different distributions of normality ... acting to bring the most unfavorable in line with the more favorable. So we have here something that starts from the normal and makes use of certain distributions considered to be, if you like, more normal than the others, or at any rate more favorable than the others. These distributions will serve as the norm. The norm is an interplay of differential normalities (Foucault 2007: 63).

What that has meant for sexuality and for homosexuality in particular is a shift from being identified as wholly, completely and totally abnormal along a normal/abnormal dichotomy of inclusions and exclusions, and instead being rated along a ratio of normativities. The discourse of *tolerance* operates through this framework. However, such neoliberal-induced tolerance impacts negatively on historic and mutually-supportive alliances between radical political intervention and queer politics (Murphy, Ruiz and Surlin 2008: 5). This occurs in addition to the fact that neoliberal strategies do not necessarily allow for *any* particular non-heterosexuality to be considered equitable or as favourable as heterosexuality, leaving open the continuing capacity for discrimination, self-deprecation, and relative codes of superiority and inferiority. This is problematic for, particularly, queer youth for a number of reasons. Homonormativity and the economisation of queer social life results in disproportionate access to both material and immaterial resources (Carter 2009: 583). The idea that queer culture requires the production of a sexual self through domesticity and consumption (Oswin 2008: 92) does not, in other words, necessarily mean queer participation and relative inclusion available to all persons, and particularly not to the young. Thus, the homonormative politics that attempts to sell a ‘safe’ queer culture in order to make legislative, policy and social gains does so only for a select few who fit the homonormative criteria of white, affluent and attractive, thereby reinforcing disadvantages and inequities *within* queer community on the basis of economic capacity; this has the subsequent result of producing an impact on the ability of persons to gain participation and belonging.

In this context, a deployment of queer theory that simultaneously critiques the constructedness of concepts of marginal non-heterosexuality and puts into question the ‘naturalness’ of homonormative and identity-governed perceptions of sexuality is usefully expanded by opening questions as to the economisation of queer sexualities. Here, it permits a discourse that has been drawn upon in queer creative fiction and other creative representations, depicting a ‘safe’ public perception of queer culture that is palatable to legislative, policy and social gains and which inscribes queerness within narrow, albeit stereotypical, patterns and norms of queer whiteness, affluence and (masculine) attractiveness. This thereby reinforces a cross-section of disadvantage and inequity *within* queer representations, self-identifications and identities on the basis of economic capacity. If pre-1990s LGBT studies were focused on the extent of non-heterosexual social participation, and queer theory of the 1990s prompted new ways of considering what might constitute belonging and how belonging is constrained through disciplinary norms and practices, then, a materialist queer theory that takes not heteronormativity but homonormativity as its point of reference opens the capacity to question the intersection of socio-economic demarcations and belonging. This helps point to the incompleteness of LGBT politics and ‘rights’ discourses in the generation of social participation and creative practices of both representation and selfhood.

Homonormativity and exclusion

Neoliberal frameworks of power and culture have, into the twenty-first century, produced new ways of doing and understanding sexual identity. Some of these have, admittedly, had very positive outcomes for the previously-excluded, although this occurs through narrow platforms of rights that understand participation only along narrow multicultural and representational terms outside frameworks of economy and affluence. More problematically, new forms of exclusion thereby emerge in ways that make certain subjects more vulnerable than others by the introduction of new social comparisons and contrasts. Neoliberal homonormative queer culture is implicated in the active production of exclusions utilised to police the borders of queer community such that the community and its representations appear to be palatable, desirable and profitable for wider neoliberal sociality. Conforming to neoliberal formations of minority and a weak multiculturalism (liberal-humanist incorporation of discrete minorities in the New Zealand and Australian contexts in ways which do not put in question colonial norms), contemporary queer politics dislodges the inclusive, communitarian culture and politics of Gay Liberation in favour of iterations of rights and equality, where rights are given as ‘sameness with normativity’ and equality as freedom for economic choice (Weiss 2008: 89, Halperin and Traub 2009: 10). The effect of this for queer culture is the establishment of new sets of norms – homonorms – in which the white, affluent gay male consumer serves as the measure by which queer community membership is determined (Oswin 2005: 81) and by which queer writing is seen to be publicly acceptable as it enters the mainstream, within a broader social framework in which contemporary identity is increasingly ‘felt’ to be that which is self-produced through consumption (Jameson 1985). Queer community, as it emerged in the mid-twentieth century, has always undertaken border-policing,

although this has usually been limited to policing who was truly ‘lesbian/gay’ and who was not. This has often excluded the less-easily categorisable and has frequently rejected bisexuality as a legitimate sexuality that could belong within queer culture (Bryant 1997: 1). As with all minority communities, disciplinary regimes come into play in the form of obligatory ways of being and expressing oneself that act as techniques of normalisation, which can include ways of dressing, ways of undertaking physical exercise, ways of desiring, attitudes and behaviours (Halperin 1995: 32), all of which are elements of subjectivity that can be adopted or adapted, but also include other ways of being which are not so easily developed: racial and ethnic norms, gender conformity, economic affluence, body types and age. For Foucault, the biopolitical and security power technologies of neoliberalism that seek to manage populations for the sake of market freedom are distinct from the disciplinarity that occurs in institutions and minority community formations. However, these do not exclude discipline, surveillance and policing, rather they subsume the sort of disciplinary power technologies that operate in smaller communities to work, through somewhat different mechanisms, on behalf of neoliberalism (Foucault 2007: 107). Thus homonormativity is more than a political accommodation into neoliberalism but, as Susan Stryker points out, something which works also at the micropolitical community level that authorises and legitimates some depictions of queer persons and excludes other who are not seen as representative or aligned with dominant constructions of knowledge and power (Stryker 2008: 155).

There are several forms of exclusion produced through homonormativity that are constituted by a broader neoliberalisation of identity and that have an impact on youth generally, and it is these which intersect with—and add to—a queer theoretical account of identity formation as it intersects with questions of belonging and social participation as necessary factors in living a ‘liveable life’. Firstly, racial and ethnic exclusions: homonormativity’s production of the depiction of the queer citizen as an affluent, white male, queer youth of different racial and ethnic backgrounds become not only under-represented but excluded from a full sense of belonging within queer community. This includes those who are, in wider society, perceived as the ‘threat’ to the nation – increasingly today, that includes those of Arab background, refugees or those perceived to be ‘illegal aliens’ (Agathangelou, Bassichis and Spira 2008: 127). While mainstream film and television has increased its depiction of queer persons, it certainly remains difficult to see non-white queer representation, usually the result of the ways in which contemporary film and television produce queer characters as support, requiring simple and recognisable depictions only (Cover 2000). There has recently been evidence among queer community institutions that bullying and victimisation of particular queer youth who do not conform to racial and sexual norms *by other queer youth* has been occurring (Mishna et al. 2009: 1602), replicating the forms of discrimination and exclusion that the same bullies might have experienced in wider heteronormative contexts. Thus, while queer culture fits within Euro-American formations of multiculturalism, this is a particularly ‘white’ representation of pseudo-ethnic multicultural community.

An additional exclusion emerges in the form of the physical, and relates predominantly to men and fitness. Much has been written on the idealisation and

reification of the fit, masculine, tanned and toned body in LGBT representation (Ayres 1999, Halperin 1995: 32, Mohr 1992: 163-4, Padva 2002). The fit, perfected, idealised body in queer masculine culture operates as spectacle drawn out in creativity, selection and fiction, but also as a measure of a norm: by being one of the major images of gay men available in both mainstream media and community publications as well as in gay pornography, the image of 'what a gay male looks like' is something encountered by youth often long before one may knowingly encounter another queer person. What does that do for those who feel their bodies are not 'fit enough' or 'toned enough'? What, for the younger queer person, who feels it is impossible to produce and discipline a body that would meet the standard, and what if it is felt that this means not only being sexually unattractive but being excluded from the sociality of a queer community? These are pertinent questions around the ways in which the mediated visuality of queer homonormativity operates to exacerbate rather than alleviate a sense of isolation. Indeed, if one considers the site of online visual media as a resource for forging coherent, intelligibility and belonging for younger queer persons, it is useful to look at how a dominant search engine such as Google produces particularly visualities of the gay male body. An image search on Google Australia, for example, will result in pages of young, fit, usually-shirtless, male bodies, dominated on the whole by white bodies (white Australian bodies), with a need to scroll substantially before an Indigenous, Maori, Asian or other body is found. Additionally, it is important to note the context in which fitness, slimness, hair and skin grooming and other elements coterminous the performance of the 'fit body' are achieved through commodified goods and services, further bolstering the triangular linkage between non-heterosexual masculinity, fitness and finance.

Further, there is the obvious exclusion of the non-affluent, who are effectively marginalised in queer culture for a failure to conform to the stereotype of being an avid consumer or for failing to produce a sense of aesthetics through consumption. Much media depiction of queer persons circulates the notion that to be queer means to be an über-consumer, with shopping as a favoured leisure activity and consumer aesthetics as the means by which the self is produced (Papacharissi and Fernback 2008: 363). Gavin Brown has very neatly summed up one of the dominant depictions of LGBT culture, noting that this representation of a gay male consumer typically overrides and stands-in-for queer women through a tendency to subsume all gender diversity as well as womanhood under a masculine moniker:

In representations of urban gay life ... the affluent gay consumer is invariably a man ... assumed to be white (although this is seldom directly remarked upon), well educated, and employed in a professional capacity. He lives in the city centre, probably in a minimalist loft apartment that is largely decorated in a normatively 'masculine' style. He is well dressed, and immaculately groomed – the epitome of metrosexuality ... Much of his social life is spent in gay bars, clubs, and restaurants ... His every consumption choice confirms his identity as an urban gay man (2009: 1506).

While Brown is right to point out that this a marketing image, it is one which dominates depictions of queer masculinity both in 'mainstream' and queer community representations; there is much evidence that the homonormativity of queer

consumption is taken on-board by a large number of queer persons, in very conspicuous ways, as long as they have the financial advantage and capacity to do so. Again, it is important if this has implications for younger persons: ultimately, it presents another norm which, for a great many, cannot be met. Most younger persons (queer or otherwise) do not have an independent income, and certainly not the financial capability to produce a queer sexual selfhood through such heavy consumption. While this fiction of queer affluence, operating as a social norm, might create a certain ideal for which some might intend to strive, for others the financial requirements for being this kind of queer personage will be seen as an impossible goal. Where cohering subjectivity around a stereotype is often a necessary function for gaining recognition, and producing the intelligible self in community or categorisable belonging, the dependence on self-stereotyping is often due to the fact that queer identity is more than simply experience or expressing same-sex attractions – the production of identity in a diverse world involves all these corollaries that depend so much today on consumption. It has been argued by Brown and others that the reification of affluence and commodity consumption are not the only economies that operate in queer community (Brown 2009: 1508), although the sorts of diverse economies and sharing that are found at times in queer communities are not necessarily those which welcome youth, who tend to be excluded from consideration in such critiques. In this context, writing about queer youth broadly produces a domestication and suburbanisation within urban ‘adult’ queer consumption (bars, clubs) being represented as desirable but unattainable for the young.

If queer writing is to have relevance to—and be able to be deployed for addressing—social issues, then one area of its critique must be a focus on the social, economic, and cultural conditions that distribute experiences of vulnerability (and, indeed, risk) undemocratically across those whose identities are produced and demarcated as non-heteronormative. In other words, it is necessary not merely to critique and undo homonormativity but to ask what all forms of normativity do for those who are marginalised in complex ways in relation to gender and sexuality. Indeed, there may well be some value in such a project, noting that among the most significant risk factors for marginal LGBT youth involve concerns around self-esteem (Remafedi, Farrow and Deisher, 1994: 125; Schneider, Farberow and Kruks 1994: 108). The major concern here from the perspective of understanding the conditions of subjectivity for queer youth is that queer political and cultural communities’ act of buying into neoliberal assimilationism in order to achieve ‘rights’ claims has established homonormativities of queer life that make the pinnacle of queerness the affluent, white gender-conforming, fit, straight-mirroring, coupled male. This thereby creates the conditions that (a) make it difficult for many younger persons to transition from queer adolescence into the dominant performative codes of queer identity; (b) excludes those who would be unable to achieve a full sense of participation and belonging because they do not or cannot fulfil the racial, ethnic or body-type criteria; and (c) automatically excludes minors from representation under the LGBT banner, creating an increased gap between the ‘queer haves’ and the younger ‘queer have-nots’. Where this relates to queer youth suicide is in the dispersal of vulnerability. That is to say, rather than viewing queer youth as always-already vulnerable *per se*, different youth will be at different levels of risk related to inclusion, shame, and

available resources for identity coherence depending on the extent to which each is impacted by the range of the above exclusions that are policed by the dominance of homonormativity in contemporary queer culture.

Conclusion: Queer Theory, homonorms and risky relationalities

I would like to use this conclusive section to present an example of some of the ways in which a queer theory in combination with a critique of homonormative neoliberalism, can be better utilised in creative work to help ‘draw out’ not only the kinds of demarcations and exclusions that intersect with the production of queer (and other) identities but, particularly, some of the mechanisms that lead can be understood from the perspective of queer theory that make certain lives less liveable than others in the context of subjects being produced always as social beings in relation to each other. This is not, of course, to disavow the importance of creative fiction in presenting representations that either serve importantly as Gross’ ‘saving refuges’ (Gross 1998), nor to suggest that creative accounts of LGBT life have not depicted sexualities beyond concepts of innate identities or representations that are in the service of heteronormativity. Rather, it is to point out that as LGBT representation moves from being part of a minority literature at the margins of creative production to one which is more commonly represented in the mainstream of writing, media, television, entertainment and the arts, it has by necessity tended towards the replication of homonormativity *as if* a fact rather than a stereotype, and this has served neoliberal ends of inclusive yet narrow non-heterosexual identities. As I have been discussing, neoliberalism establishes distinctions in terms of hierarchies of affluence, wealth, conspicuous consumption, bodies, gender and other sets of norms through which the neoliberal subject is invited to produce oneself in the context of proximities and distances from those norms along a distributional curve. What this dominant framework for contemporary non-heteronormative sexualities results in, then, is a new set of hierarchies, exclusions and isolations for younger non-heterosexual persons who may not be able (or willing) to articulate non-heterosexuality through those neoliberal and homonormative lenses. Where isolation and non-belonging are, alongside shame and identity incoherence, factors in the constitution of youth suicidality (Cover 2012), the role of contemporary LGBT creative work that normalises neoliberal cultural frameworks of queer subjectivity must be questioned. What I am arguing here, then, is that a sense of isolation produced through living in a heteronormative environment (family, home, school, small town, media representations, etc.) is not always best thought of as being overcome when one encounters not only queer homonormative community with its many exclusions, but also the *perception* through media forms and stereotypes of what queer community is and just who it is that might be permitted to belong to it. In that sense, there is an argument that one can be just as isolated within queer community and its representations as one might well have felt as a non-heterosexual young person existing in a heavily heteronormative environment, if not more so. Indeed, the argument here is that in being given the ‘hope’ that queer community is accepting and the ‘answer’ to isolation, anything which works to exclude a person from the promise of belonging and participation can be much worse than the sense of isolation or

exclusion felt in being a young queer person within a heteronormatively-oriented environment, due to the what will be perceived as the failure to belong or to meet the standards required for access to that ‘saving refuge’.

Where upward social comparison is a known factor in psychological adjustment of readers and audiences who may utilise neoliberal queer writing as a resource for identity constitution (Cover 2002), the perception that one is worse off than one’s community or minority peers becomes a problem that needs to be addressed. Queer people are, indeed, doing so much better *if* the narrow homonormative depiction is seen as representative. That is, some queer persons move closer to the broad social definition of normativity and hence acceptability; but it will be the function of community discipline through representation and stereotyping which decides who those persons will be. This, then, has raised the bar for the production of queer selfhood and queer belonging, creating a greater gap and greater difficulties for integrating into queer community than existed prior to the emphasis on homonormative representations in queer politics, culture and media. The privileging of certain sexual minorities over others (Murphy, Ruiz and Surlin 2008: 5), the disciplining of queer masculinity as spectacle (Carter 2009: 605), the marginalisation of non-gender conforming persons (Bryant 2008: 456), the increasing requirement of financial capabilities and affluence for performing queer sexualities through norms of consumption (Papacharissi and Fernback 2008), the dominance of whiteness in depictions of non-heterosexuality (Mishna et al. 2009), the emphasis on fit, toned and idealised bodies (Padva 2002) and the general exclusion of younger persons from queer politics and queer political issues (Cover 2005) establish not just the risk of exclusion or isolation but social comparisons relative to the homonormativity that disciplines queer identity through community formation and that circulates even more strongly through stereotypes in mass media, queer community press and online representations. To put it another way, the gains made by homonormative and neoliberal assimilationist strategies of normative rather than oppositional representation as they are re-circulated in the mainstreaming of the practices of queer writing have a *differential* impact, which increases the likelihood of rising suicide rates for those who do not benefit as much from such change and development (Barber 2001: 53; Cleary and Brannick 2007: 85; Smalley, Scourfield and Greenland 2005: 138).

It is therefore important not to assume that there is a general contentment among LGBT people that has been produced through neoliberal assimilation, nor to assume that all queer youth shift away from risk and vulnerability as such social changes become public and broadly knowable. Rather, it is necessary to see that contentment as the product of certain narratives and stereotypes of queer adulthood can, in fact, establish two elements of comparison or measurement for younger persons that produce relative misery as a causal factor in suicide; effectively a doubling of relativities. Firstly, there is the comparison between themselves and straight peers who are seen to face fewer social problems, less capacity for shame, less likelihood of discrimination and lower risk of being bullied. Secondly, there is the comparison between themselves and queer adults who appear to be doing well or at least are perceived to be happy, well-off and content. Additional to the relative misery this

produces, the construction and representation of queer adults through homonormative depictions establishes norms that subsequently are found to be unrealisable, which is a known factor in the creation of self-deprecation, self-esteem deficits and the manifestation of self-destructive behaviours (Hunter and Harvey 2002: 17). Again, this is not to suggest that queer youth have not benefited from the kinds of changes a rights discourse has brought about in multicultural legislative and policy frameworks. Rather, it is to make queer theory 'do work' to draw attention pragmatically to the lives made vulnerable through less-visible exclusions, damaging hierarchies, marginalisations and productions of non-belonging produced in neoliberal social formations. Such a perspectives gives queer theory a continuing utility as guide for the future practices of creatively 'writing in' queer identities, themes and characterisations.

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