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Afterword: queering beyond queer theory

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ABSTRACT

My comment addresses a theme in several of the papers in this collection that gestures to the limits of queer theory, as a body of scholarship developed mainly from within Euro-American feminist frameworks. I will ask if perhaps groundedness in place and historical specificity might suggest registers of 'queerness' that exceed the potentials of queer theory. Particularly considering precarity - a sense of embodied vulnerability to each other - this piece will examine the potentials of frameworks that are rooted in place-based ideas about reciprocity, kinship, and intimacy as integral to understanding queer precarities. Indeed, such a view might suggest that what is 'queer' is often framed through a normatively modern and often colonial rendering of binary gender, and sexuality as fixed in sexual identity. It will ask what an archive of queer precarity might look like, and what geographies it might suggest if we decentred queer theory. Simultaneously, the essay will ask how forms of reciprocity, indebtedness, kinship, and homemaking that exceed the limits of coloniality might open up registers for queerness.

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Introduction

Satya¹ found me before I had started looking for research participants, when I first began fieldwork on girlhood and sexual risk in Chennai in 2012. Then a nineteen-year-old College student, they found me on Facebook, where I had posted about my doctoral research. When we met, Satya told me that they had been in search of a tangible touchstone – someone in flesh and blood – for the profusion of queerness they had found online. This moment in itself suggests a tangle of questions for queer studies' 'archival turn'. On the one hand, queerness is profusely available in the materials that non-academics encounter as 'archives' – email, social media, internet browsing

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histories – in their everyday lives (Arondekar et al. 2015). Simultaneously, as I learned, Satya's search to meet in person with someone who might share their way of seeing the world was a search for witness in their less tangible, more ephemeral encounters with queerness in the city: 'as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances' (Muñoz 1996, 6). Then identifying as butch, and coming from a non-elite caste, Satya felt keenly their sense of being on the outside of the narrative of girl culture in the college life of the city. They worried about whether they would be desired, desirable, as a body marked non-upper caste. Would they be seen as they saw? Queerness ran through all these aspects of their identity – it wasn't only gender that was queered in Satya's desire, but also their positioning within a caste patriarchal order, and a geopolitical location. This need for witness indicates in some ways the political potentials of precarity, as a sense of vulnerability to another (Butler 2006), that is simultaneously a site of recognition and a potential location of violence. It is the desire for the risk of being seen. Is it an archive, we wondered together as we gathered in our conversations and time together the everyday queerness of Satya's life, if no one else sees it?

I begin with this reflection not because Satya and I arrived at any answers but because I learned through that encounter how the practice of building queer archives is always ongoing, necessarily fragmentary, and an exercise in exposure and vulnerability to another. I want to use this experience – of what we might call 'precarity' – as a generative point to reflect on the essays in this collection, which returned me to some of the questions that Satya and I began thinking about years ago. How do some precarities accrue upon formations of queerness? How can queering as a framework help us make sense of and unpick experiences of precarity that also index dynamics of race, caste, ability, geopolitical location, and relations to settler coloniality?

All the papers in this collection are, in different ways, concerned with the question of how to write queer precarity, whilst accounting for the situatedness and multi-dimensionality of vulnerabilities. In this, they draw attention to a familiar problem for the study of sexuality. Queer subjects, that is, are simultaneously everywhere, and difficult to account for. Their precarities both scream from the rooftops in their hypervisibility and emerge from complex positionings that exceed sexuality. My comment looks to Black feminist thinking on critical fabulation (Hartman 2019; Nyong'o 2018) to ask how we might account for queer precarity without materialising projects of rescue and rehabilitation that inevitably reiterate imperial logics of archival accumulation: retrieving queer subjects for a liberal project of emancipation. For Nyong'o (2018, 8), fabulation enables racialised and economically precarious queers 'to be seen, heard, and felt, while resisting the temptation to accept visibility under dominative constraints.' In making this argument, I return to the practice I cultivated with Satya years ago, of queering as witness-bearing. Fabulation, I argue, entails the bearing of witness to precarious antinormative

potentials – ways of being that might be – without the burdens of piecing together the fragments; without demanding futurity from the ephemera that attest to moments of joy, solidarity, and everyday queer living.

Queering beyond queer theory

In framing my comments this way, I do not dismiss the variegated body of scholarship that is queer theory. Rather, I wonder, with the essays in this themed section, if we might arrive at queering from precarities that are not straightforwardly or singularly sexual, and without seeking to engage in a 'search and rescue' conceit of writing queer subjectivity. The papers in this collection demonstrate that forms of vulnerability that accrue to queerness come out of the multifarious 'accumulations of dispossession' (Giesekeing 2023) under racial capitalism that emerge from experiences of migration, apartheid, and labour.

'Queering' is here not only the practice of sexual resignification, but also enables the telling of non-heteronormative stories of antiracist and anticapitalist struggle. In this conceptual move, I follow Alqaisiya (2020) in seeking to draw queering away from liberal projects of sexual emancipation, to centre instead its potential to destabilise the geopolitical moorings of sexual subjectivity to racial capitalist and imperial formations. There is, of course, a rich scholarship that draws attention to the civilisational role that 'homonationalism' – the nationalist, and global capitalist deployment of LGBT rights – plays in contemporary geopolitical discourse (Massad 2008; Puar 2007; Morgensen 2010). However, accounts of queering as a practice that challenges heteronormativity within subaltern life, whilst refusing imperial assimilation as the only path to sexual emancipation, remain to be elaborated (Alqaisiya 2020).

In April 2023, as I began writing this, the Supreme Court in India heard arguments on same-gender marriage. On the one hand, the battle for gay marriage is everywhere a bedfellow of neoliberal assimilationism and homonormativity – in the UK, it was a conservative government that legalised it; in the US, a very wealthy woman's contestation of inheritance tax. To give teeth to queering within this context, is the work of asking what, for instance, the struggle for same-gender marriage in India shares with the fight against the conspiracy theory of 'Love Jihad': the Hindu nationalist claim that Muslim men are waging a religious war by converting and marrying unsuspecting Hindu women (Krishnan 2023). Can queering build common cause for struggles – within LGBTQ communities, and by caste-marginalised, indigenous, and racialised communities – to make kin, build family, and make home that unsettle the intimate geopolitics (Smith 2020) of the upper-caste Hindu family in India, or the white middle-class family in the US? Linking to the question of writing queer subjects, whether from historical archives or in research on contemporary questions: how can we tell stories that materialise the shared stakes of these struggles? What practices of reading and attention do such countertopographies (Katz 2001) demand?

These are not questions that are new to queer theory, but they demand urgent attention for scholars of queer life whose work is centrally driven by decolonial, abolitionist, and anti-caste projects.

The papers in this volume indicate ways to think with these questions. Reading across them, they enable questions about how emotional labour circulates within racial capitalist structures – as a site of queer community making, as an exploitable resource for diversity and inclusion initiatives, and as invested in practices of kin-making that find no legibility within state structures (Ramsden-Karelse). The papers also draw attention to a familiar intersection between home, nation, and family that feminist geographers have richly examined, here focusing on the ways in which nation-states territorialise the body in the iteration of subjects between categories at the moment of border crossing, and how ‘home’ and ‘kin’ accrue in an archive of Black queerness (Cammenga). They elaborate both on the violence of contemporary neoliberal structures, as well as on the practices of negotiation that Global South queers engage in, both to make themselves visible within registers of LGBTQ rights and diversity, and to engage in practices of resignification (Aaberg). And they centre the body as a site where both experiences of, and resistance to racial capitalist, and cis-heteronormative power play out (McCann).

In this, the authors are all concerned on the one hand with how their interlocutors engage with queerness as a site where anti-normative potentials accrue, enacting subjectivities whose queerness is necessarily shaped by their position in relation to geopolitical structures, and experiences of labour. At the same time, the papers also grapple with writing as a site in which the practice of academic curation constructs subjectivity. How to write queer life without reading liberal emancipatory potential into every trace of sexual dissidence? While not all the papers are historical or concerned with archives in the strict sense of the word, they all engage in a practice of gathering and collating traces of queerness out of encounters with lives that are voluminously multidimensional.

Together, these papers draw attention to precarious worlds of queerness – contingently constructed, and often lacking in structural legitimacy – that exceed the disciplining practices of global capitalism, nations, and development discourse. The papers ask how to write subjectivity in ways that account for this complexity, without bluntly drawing their interlocutors into fixed identity formations that reiterate the violence of universalising categories, and practices of classification. Several of the authors draw attention to potentials that remain in the interstices of what is rendered possible within the terms of normativising discourse.

Towards fabulation

In their collective considering of how queer worldmaking is materialised alongside antiracist and class-resistant practices of reimagining social relations,

the papers in this collection all attend to the inventive labour entailed in making queer futurity possible. For Tavia Nyong'o (2018), the practice of fabulation – the invention of selfhood, of stories of origin and belonging – necessarily emerges out of Black queer precarity. The fabulist, Nyong'o (2018) clarifies, is not a liar, rather fabulation is 'the tactical fictionalising of a world that is, from the point of view of Black social life, already false' (5). That is, in telling stories about oneself, whose provenance may be unverifiable, which do not necessarily leave traces for the historian to gather as incontrovertible evidence, the fabulist is not so much lying as shoring up the terms of power on which they are constituted in the world as a Black queer subject. Saidiya Hartman's scholarship (2019) on Black girlhood in US history picks up on this thread to ask how storytelling that is critically aware of the limiting terms of archives might allow the historian to write expansive subjectivities for figures who otherwise appear as subjects of rescue, surveillance, or reform. Nyong'o's work draws from Hartman, for whom, fabulation simultaneously functions as a kind of diagnostic that reveals the terms on which liveable life is circumscribed by the epistemic practices that condition the terms on which lived experience registers in archives. Framed as problem figures of excess, Hartman writes that official archives often elide working class Black girls' experiences of joy, of experimentation, of friendship, community, defiance, and solidarity, instead persistently representing them as objects of rehabilitation and civilisation: the 'controlling images' of Hill Collins (1990) writing.

Within such structural constraints for subjectivity, Nyong'o (2018) writes that fabulation lends itself to the precarity of Black queer life because the register of the fabulous – of flamboyant storytelling – allows for the expression of attachment and feeling that otherwise find no place within America's racial capitalist landscape. Fabulation, that is, allows the subjects of Nyong'o's book to be unapologetically queer *and* Black, albeit in a mode of playful self-invention that allows them to simultaneously reveal and protect themselves. It also allows them to sidestep, if in a jouissant mode, the constraints of liveable futurity within a liberal polity, where silliness, fun, and unproductive joy are often placed out of reach for communities engaged in existential striving. Through a practice of fabulation, Nyong'o's queer subjects claim practices of imagination, as well as of pleasure, locating them at the heart of their politics of community and belonging. Practices of dissident documentation, in Hartman and Nyong'o's readings of fabulation, militate against the narrow horizon of liveability within which queer and Black futures register in liberal imperialist polities.

The work of 'queering', in this context, is one of seeing – as does the fabulist – the terms on which sexual subalternity is rendered legible within global scripts of sexuality. The question of liveability within a biopolitical framework – the terms on which life in Foucault's dyad of making live and letting die is rendered possible – has been richly elaborated by scholars of

queer life. Indeed, in the framing of scholars like Butler, queering is the opening of possible worlds – present and future – that widen a collective experience of the types of affects, relation, and social reproduction that can be lived (Butler 1993). A rich scholarship that writes against queer assimilation within cis-heteropatriarchal institutions further draws attention to how queer communities further make sense of liveability and futurity within frameworks of failure and refusals of growing up (Halberstam 2011; Freeman 2010).

In this collection, for Camminga's trans interlocutors, their gender-queer precarity is undergirded by their incapacity to assimilate within narratives of South African nationhood, as well as within categories of refugee and transgender. They are always excessive – too much of one for another. In Ramsden-Karelse's archive, the meanings of 'gay', of 'family', and of 'happiness' are all reimagined through inventive practices of documentation. The making of the archive, in Ramsden-Karelse's reading, is a practice of making liveable queer life, in the absence of structures that render such forms of life possible, or legible. In MacNeil-Taylor's work, which also picks up on questions of home and family, the labour of queer kin-making remains unassimilable within a neoliberal project of domesticity. In Aaberg's writing, queer potentials that do not conform to NGO narratives hover at the margins of a development narrative of LGBTQ sexuality, drawing our attention to the forms of power at play in the exclusions of diversity and inclusion regimes. Labour is framed from a different perspective in McCann's work, where a queer salon functions as a site of labour for the resignification of standards of beauty: marking bodies otherwise illegible within normative ideals as attractive.

Conclusion

This essay has drawn attention to queering as the assembling of affects, practices, and modes of being in the world that resist heteropatriarchal and homonormative formations of sexuality that are integral to contemporary imperialisms and racial capitalisms. 'Precarity', in this volume, opens up the space in which to arrive at queer theory from vulnerabilities that emerge from a location within this imperial and capitalist order that is not necessarily primarily sexual, but which iterate the terms of liveable intimacy.

In pushing the conceptual envelope somewhat further in this afterword, I have sought to suggest that a queer practice of archiving is witness-bearing to dissident registers of affect and desire that accrue within systems of racial and economic vulnerability. This practice of archival attention is not a 'hydraulic' (Stoler and Strassler 2000) and recuperative search for fully formed sexual subjectivities (Arondekar 2005). Queering as a political project here seeks to shore up and disrupt the everyday – unhidden, in broad day light – ways in which a global colonial and capitalist order consolidates itself through the governance of intimate life.

The papers in this volume open the space for such a contribution, in arriving at queering from locations beyond that of LGBT politics, raising questions to do with housing, with social reproduction, immigration and asylum-seeking, economic precarity, and apartheid. In her essay in this volume, Ruth Ramsden-Karelse discusses the Kewpie collection as inscribing a counterhistory, whose dissemination often occludes an experience of racialised and gendered precarity, for a narrative of joyful freedom. Ramsden-Karelse's piece, in bearing witness to the everyday violence of Kewpie and her peers' experience, alongside its narrative of community, solidarity, and survival models a practice of archival reading that does not seek to fix the collection within liberal narratives of agency. On the contrary, like the other essays in this volume, Ramsden-Karelse's contribution draws attention to the tensions between struggle and joy that emerge from an ephemeral archive. In this, the piece presents the political potentials of queering as a politics of abundance and invention: of taking up space within dissident worlds.

Note

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