

# **Queer anarchist autonomous zones and publics**

**Direct action vomiting against homonormative consumerism**

Sandra Jeppesen

September 2, 2010

# Contents

Abstract . . . . .	3
From anti-homophobia to anti-heteronormativity . . . . .	3
From anti-heteronormativity to anti-capitalism . . . . .	6
From anti-capitalism to anti-homonormativity . . . . .	8
From anti-homonormativity to anti-oppression politics and alternative value-practices	11
Queer autonomous zones and participatory publics . . . . .	13
Acknowledgement . . . . .	14
References . . . . .	14
On the Author . . . . .	15

## Abstract

Global anarchist movements and queer politics are integrating in mutually informing ways. The characteristics of this synthesis include liberatory theories and practices of embodied genders and sexualities in private and public, direct actions to visibilize and extend queer publics, and queer intersections with capitalism, the environment, race, disability, public space, private property and citizenship, among others. This article will critically analyze three cases of anti-consumerist vomiting, including an erotic performance, a punk zine, and a Pink Panthers direct action, to investigate the politics of queer anarchist autonomous publics that extend the anti-homophobic and anti-heteronormative politics of queer counterpublics toward challenging homonormativity through intersectional anti-oppression and liberatory value-practices.

## From anti-homophobia to anti-heteronormativity

In the 1990s North American queer activism and queer theory shifted from an anti-homophobic position that resisted the heterosexual imperative, with an emphasis on AIDS activism, growing gay villages, and same-sex marriage (particularly in Canada), toward more complex challenges to the heteronormativity of institutions, laws and cultural practices. The term homophobia has fallen out of use by activists, as it contains within it the suggestion that there are legitimate psychological grounds for individuals to fear or have a phobia of homosexuality. Instead we use 'heterosexism' which points to the systemic nature of oppression against queers through cultural, political and economic structures favouring heterosexuality and heterosexuals. Heterosexism is the form of oppression resulting from the ideology of heteronormativity. In *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, Nikki Sullivan argues that heteronormativity does not exist as a discrete and easily identifiable body of thought, of rules and regulations, but rather, informs – albeit ambiguously, in complex ways, and to varying degrees – all kinds of practices, institutions, conceptual systems, and social structures. (2003: 132)

Similarly, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner suggest that 'Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life' reproducing itself systemically in 'nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture' (2000: 318–19). This affects life practices such as parenting, joint bank accounts, hospital or prison visiting rights, travelling, immigrating, movie watching and inheritance. Heteronormativity frames heterosexuality as a universal norm making it publicly invisible, whereas homosexuality is meant to be private and thus becomes visible in public (Duncan, 1996: 137). Furthermore, heteronormativity requires the stabilization of bodies into two cis-gendered categories (male, female), whereas queer bodies may be transgender, transsexual, intersex or otherwise challenge this stabilization.

Two anti-heteronormative strategies that engage publics have been used by activists. Groups such as ACT-UP and Queer Nation challenged cultural norms by making interventions in heteronormative spaces such as shopping malls and bars. Activists 'reterritorialize various public spaces through an assortment of strategies like the policing of neighbourhoods by Pink Panthers dressed in 'Bash Back' T-shirts or Queer Nights Out and Kiss-Ins where groups of gay couples invade straight bars or other public spaces and scandalously make out' (Hennessy, 1994–

95: 51). Interventions announce the presence of queers, interrupting the heteronormative public by challenging the assumption that queer sexuality belongs in private. As Hennessy argues, 'The queer critique of heteronormativity is intensely and aggressively concerned with issues of [queer] visibility' (1994–95: 36) in heteronormative publics. The second strategy is the creation of queer counterpublics engaged in spaces like gay bars and villages that facilitate queer activism, discourses, cruising, and socializing. Berlant and Warner have found that sex-oriented queer commercial spaces such as S/M bars, cafes, porn shops and bookstores are important sites for queer counterpublics: 'there are very few places in the world that have assembled much of a queer population without a base in sex commerce' (2000: 327). In these spaces, the public is predominantly queer, as the spaces create 'nonheteronormative worlds' (2000: 329).

Exhibit A: 'A garden-variety leather bar' that 'hosts a sex performance event'

'A boy, twentyish, very skateboard, comes on the low stage at one end of the bar, wearing lycra shorts and a dog collar. He sits loosely in a restraining chair. His partner comes out and tilts the bottom's head up to the ceiling, stretching out his throat. Behind them is an array of foods. The top begins pouring milk down the boy's throat, then food, then more milk. It spills over, down his chest and onto the floor. A dynamic is established between them in which they carefully keep at the threshold of gagging. The bottom struggles to keep taking in more than he really can. The top is careful to give him just enough to stretch his capacities. From time to time a baby bottle is offered as a respite, but soon the rhythm intensifies. The boy's stomach is beginning to rise and pulse, almost convulsively... the top inserts two, then three fingers in the bottom's throat, insistently offering his own stomach for the repeated climaxes. (Berlant and Warner, 2000: 328–9)

This example of erotic vomiting engages non-heteronormative erotic play thereby creating a queer counterpublic of the audience. 'Counterpublics are, by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment' (Warner, 2002: 63). A queer counterpublic then engages queer sexualities and produces opportunities for the circulation of discourses about them that are in 'conflict with' or resistant to heteronormativity.

Important to this resistance is the liberation of the body from some of its private and public constraints. Theories of privates and publics tend to assign sexualities (homo/hetero), genders (male/female)<sup>1</sup> and races (white/non-white) to private or public domains in ways that re-enact binaries and stereotypes. Specific sexual acts, behaviours, objects, bodies, or spaces, however, are not inherently only either public or private. Warner suggests that the terms public and private 'seem to be preconceptual, almost instinctual, rooted in the orientations of the body and common speech' (2002: 23), whereas it seems that notions of appropriate public and private behaviour are highly socially constructed. The example he gives is not about publics but 'privates': 'A child's earliest education in shame, deportment, and cleaning is an initiation into the prevailing meaning of public and private, as when he or she locates his or her "privates"' (2002: 23). However, there is nothing intrinsically 'private' about one's genitals, rather this is something children learn when they are told to cover up. Spaces where people may experience the pleasure of privates in public include nudity clubs, clothing-optional beaches, naked sports teams, saunas, naked yoga classes, and sex parties. In these spaces the body does not 'naturally' orient itself toward the privacy of sexuality or sex organs. Human sexual parts are not hidden away like our

---

<sup>1</sup> Following Vade's important article (2005) advocating the 'Gender Galaxy' which reveals the falsity of the gender/sex divide and the negative legal impact of this distinction on trans people, I am using the term 'gender' to be comprehensive.

internal organs are (livers, kidneys, spleens), rather they are on the surface of the body. They *are* the surfaces of our bodies: almost every part of the body's surface is potentially sexual in some way. Thus what Warner calls the 'orientations of the body' are not toward privacy as he claims, but rather toward a proliferation of public sensualities and sexualities. Bodies liberated through unlearning can be both private and public at once, or neither, as we choose. The liberation of bodies calls into question not just notions of privates and publics but the entire set of social norms that this binary frames. Part of this includes the liminal spaces of bodies, including clothing and affect, as specific instances in which the public/private distinction is thrown into crisis. Warner suggests that 'Clothing is a language of publicity, folding the body in what is felt as the body's own privacy' (2002: 23). Humans emphasize the privacy of our 'privates' by covering them up. Similarly, feelings are meant to be experienced and expressed in private. 'Some bodily sensations – of pleasure and pain, shame and display, appetite and purgation – come to be felt, in the same way, as privacy' (2002: 23). Sensations emanating from the body and gazes fixed upon the body are thwarted in their attempts to cross the threshold from private to public by our socialized conceptions of propriety: we must cry, vomit, fall in love or have sex behind closed doors. However, if the body's own privacy is intrinsic to it, why do we need clothes to fold the body into privacy? Is it not more liberating for sensations and emotions to be shared rather than to be entirely private? Warner's claim for what is naturally public or private with respect to the body risks the reinscription of norms emanating from heteronormativity.

Queer citizenship has provided another framework for rethinking heteronormativity. Robert Corber and Stephen Valocchi argue that 'sexual and gender norms... serve as prerequisites for membership in the nation' (2003: 15). The nation, through the legal system and its heteronormative capitalist discourses, establishes rules for entry, belonging and success, from which queers are systematically excluded.<sup>2</sup> Belonging in a queer nation can be achieved by transgressions of sexual and gender norms. 'Even as the nation-state establishes and enforces these norms of belonging, spaces open up in which individuals can exercise sexual agency, partly in resistance to these dominant understandings of sexual citizenship' (Corber and Valocchi, 2003: 15). Warner situates agency for the sexual citizen within the queer counterpublic. He argues:

A public, or counterpublic, can do more than represent the interests of gendered or sexualized persons in a public sphere. It can mediate the most private and intimate meanings of gender and sexuality ... It can therefore make possible new forms of gendered or sexual citizenship. (2002: 57)

Non-oppressive queer social relations can be developed through counterpublics creating spaces for queer sexual citizenship yielding the agency to participate in a 'process of world making' (Warner, 2002: 57).

However with increasingly militarized borders, citizenship is a fraught category. A system of sexual citizens and non-citizens, with inferior rights accorded to the latter, entails a hierarchization of sexualities whereby some would have 'sexual citizenship' and others would not. Who would adjudicate such citizenship?

How would national citizenship intersect with sexual citizenship? Are non-citizens of the nation-state able to access sexual citizenship? Bobby Noble has shown that in Toronto same-sex

---

<sup>2</sup> In the USA this is particularly true. In Canada same-sex marriage and human rights are protected by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and immigration processes are beginning to include same-sex partners in sponsorship claims, as well as considering persecution for sexuality as a basis for refugee claims. These processes however remain heteronormative. I'd like to thank Melissa White for sharing her insights and research on this issue.

bath-houses, presumably sites of 'queer citizenship', the current entrance policy is 'show your dick at the door', a trans-phobic white-centric policing of bodies (Noble, 2009). The concept of sexual citizen holds within it a policed border that refuses some people (i.e. non-white, trans or intersex, immigrant, people who do not conform to western beauty standards, people in poverty, people with disabilities and so on) admission into queer counterpublics. Queer activists thus challenge theorists to consider the nation, capitalism and other inter-sectional forms of oppression in their challenges to heteronormativity.

## **From anti-heteronormativity to anti-capitalism**

The vomit performance described earlier can be interpreted as capitalist consumption. The 'top', or the dominant capitalist ideology, force-feeds products to the receptive consumer or 'bottom'. As 'the bottom struggles to keep taking in more than he really can', as in middle-class debt-driven consumerism, and 'the top is careful to give him just enough to stretch his capacities', the same way capitalism stretches our capacities, 'a dynamic is established between them in which they carefully keep at the threshold of gagging' against consuming too much. Berlant and Warner figure this as erotic and the vomiting that follows as a sexualized 'climax', as the top offers his stomach for the stream of ejaculate/ vomit.

Susan Bordo considers vomiting emblematic of the contradictions between capitalist production and consumption:

In advanced consumer capitalism ... an unstable, agonistic construction of personality is produced by the contradictory structure of economic life. On the one hand, as 'producer-selves', we must be capable of sublimating, delaying, repressing desires for immediate gratification; we must cultivate the work ethic. On the other hand, as 'consumer-selves' we serve the system through a boundless capacity to capitulate to desire and indulge in impulse; we must become creatures who hunger for constant and immediate satisfaction. (1990: 96)

Consumerism cultivates the construction of the desire for consumerism itself, which extends beyond the desire for products to encompass the desire for a situation of consumption in which there is a secure assumption that you can have everything you could possibly desire. The body cannot sustain these contradictions, however, even as every queer subject cannot participate in a counterpublic that calls for marginalized quasi-privatized gay-village spaces of consumerism predicated on public displays of perfect (white male) bodies indulging in capitalist excess. Vomiting is a bodily expression of the unsustainability of capitalism. This takes on a gendered dynamic as well, as Bordo has found. Women are supposed to make ourselves so 'slender' that we almost disappear, a disappearance that leads to multiple marginalizations in queer commercial spaces that demand entrance fees (class), are dominated by cis men (sex), are spaces that either reject or exoticize racialized groups (race), and demand specific body images (able-bodiedness). Bordo argues that this 'embodies the unstable 'double-bind' of consumer capitalism' (1990: 99), as well as suggesting the untenability of women's bodies within masculinist, heteronormative, racist, ableist, capitalist systems.

Queer commerce thus cannot empower all subjects. 'Visibility in commodity culture is in this sense a limited victory for gays who are welcome to be visible as consumer subjects but not as social subjects' (Hennessy, 1994-95: 32). It is precisely this social subjectivity that is at stake in anti-capitalist queer social movements.

Exhibit B: *Projectile* zine

In the 1990s my friend Leah and I produced a zine called *Projectile: Stories about Puking*, containing sections called, 'Where to puke in Toronto', 'The Montreal Puke' and 'The Red Puke' partner puke reviews, and 'Colour-code yer puke', with a centerfold depicting one of our friends bent forward projectiling a stream of puke from his mouth. Other punk issues covered included band reviews, condom reviews for sluts, the punk Beer Olympics in New York City, squatting, and police brutality. (Jeppesen and Visser, 1996)

We were always puking so we made a zine about it. For us puking was the fullest expression of an authentic excessiveness in a life lived with the kind of intensity disallowed by polite society. Puking at 7:00am after drinking all night at punk clubs and after-hours bars in a subway train full of commuters was the ultimate catharsis. Your head heated up, your face started sweating, your body trembled, you vibrated from toe to head, and that surge produced something of you, a kind of self-production, a collectively approved explosion against everything. The commuters, staring in disgust, reproduced your disgust at society, as you passed the affect of disaffection back to them.

These moments created and accelerated our passion and self-rebuilding. We were not caught up in surfaces of life, the body, cleanliness, linear time. Instead we lived in urban grit, by crumbling graffitied walls under train bridges, displaying the broken glass edges of our skin, enjoying the feeling of the piercing needle going in welling up our eyes, the tattoo gun drilling down through our skin. Scarification, cutting, branding, vomiting and fucking intensified our lives. Puking was the culmination of a night of fully engaged participation in the most intense gruelling enjoyable expressive living. Fucking was the culmination of an intense connection to another person, a letting go of bodily control, a full-on head-on encounter with another being. Both explosive and expulsive, they gave a sense of finality to the proceedings: Now I'm done. I have lived tonight to the fullest extent of my capacity, exceeding norms on so many fronts. 'Where to puke in Toronto' lists the grittiest corners of the city, back alleys with the stench of French fry vats and dead pigeons, 'behind Sneaky Dee's just outside the kitchen (or just inside)', dark graffitied streets, abandoned houses, gravelly urban parks like the 'junkie park at Dundas and Bathurst' or 'Kensington park in the sex bushes' (Jeppesen and Visser, 1996). These were places we loved, we marked our territory with sex and vomit. Puking and fucking in public spaces and naming those spaces our own created a liberatory underground culture. This piece de'tournes the tourist guide 'Where to dine out in Toronto' turning consumption/dining in public by the privileged classes into production/vomiting in public by the underclasses. Puking was explicitly anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist and anti-spectacle. The two partner puke reviews tell relationship stories through vomit rated by 'colour', 'texture', 'sound', and 'location'. What did it reveal about the relationship? 'I always think of [them] fondly and somewhat pathetically when I'm hungover' (Jeppesen and Visser, 1996), concludes one review. Puking and fucking drew us closer, creating zones of unmediated shared intensities. Vomiting is a sex-like manifestation of the non-normative, the ejaculate/projectile stream is a 'fuck you' on the pedestrian sidewalk of society. It expresses only its own intensities. It is the Deleuze and Guattarian body without organs (1983), literally ejecting its own organs, intensely embracing other bodies without organs. Love and intimacy are created in these moments which would be shameful in consumer culture where intimacy is produced in circumscribed places through consumerism – fancy restaurants, expensive gifts and so on. The excesses of affect and intimacy produced by vomiting and sex in public challenge heteronormativity and its direct ties to capitalism.

Moreover, the boundary between public and private is thrown into crisis, perhaps even evacuated by the eroticized vomit performance and *Projectile's* 'stories about puking', whereby both create non-shaming spaces as the body's *innards* are put on display. Not just the sexualization of the act of vomiting, but the collapse of bourgeois decorum in the act of 'puking' are transgressions of boundaries linked to the public/private divide, including non-normative sexuality, public performance of bodily functions, the reinscription of positive affect onto normatively negative acts, an overshare of expressive personal proclivities, an outward display of punk poverty through the lack of private space in which to vomit and so on. Furthermore, the zine, as a form of autonomous media, creates its own fluid anti-capitalist autonomous public. Queer radicals have thus become anti-capitalist, recognizing 'that heteronormative forms, so central to the accumulation and reproduction of capital, also depend on heavy interventions in the regulation of capital' (Berlant and Warner, 2000: 327). But gay capitalism has been quick to establish norms of homosexuality consistent with consumerism.

## From anti-capitalism to anti-homonormativity

As we have seen, an important part of queer politics is the reclaiming of heteronormative public space for queer public sex and safety. Berlant and Warner's account of queer counterpublics takes recourse to a spatial taxonomy related to capitalist private property rights and commercial development. 'In late 20<sup>th</sup>-century "post-industrial" societies like the United States, the (in)visibility of class divisions continues to be spatially regulated by urban planning' (Hennessey, 1994–95: 67). Ownership and control of space is at stake in queer liberation. 'By letting the language of real-estate development serve queer public intimacy, Berlant and Warner provide a powerful and necessary critique of heteronormative privacy and put forth a compelling defense of the social networks and queer culture created through public sex' (Castiglia, 2000: 156). Spaces mapped out for queer pleasure via communal intimacies are crucial to queer counterpublics. For Warner, 'A counterpublic, against the background of the public sphere, enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power' (Warner, 2002: 56–7). Anti-capitalist queer organizing assumes a critical relation to the new power hierarchies that have been established within queer culture, to unlink queer culture from consumerism, offering critiques of gay villages steeped in commerce, the 'pink dollar', the gay niche market, and corporate sponsorship of Pride marches.

Exhibit C: The Pink Panthers, Montreal, 14 February 2004

Operation 'Pepto-Bismol Please!', designed by the Pink Panthers collective to denounce the commercialization of Valentine's Day, took place as planned late this afternoon in Montreal's Gay Village. After puking on the doorsteps of the Village's most prosperous shops and bars catering to gay businessmen, members of this radical queer group flooded the neighborhood with counterfeit coupons, symbolizing the reign of the pink dollar and the capitalist compliance of today's average gays and lesbians (Les Panthe' res Roses, 2004).

According to Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman: 'The Pink Panthers, initially conceived of at a Queer Nation meeting (they are now a separate organization), provided a searing response to the increased violence that has accompanied the general increase of gay visibility in America' (1992: 161). *Les Panthe' res Roses*, The Pink Panthers, was 'a group of radical queers based in Montreal, who use[d] direct and creative action to confront the established order'. Formed in 2002, *Les Pan-*



*the' res Roses* held their first anti-capitalist action at Montreal Gay Pride in 2003, '[d]istribut[ing] hundreds of Anti-Ad Kits on Rene-Le' vesque Street' (*Les Panthe' res Roses*, 2004). In 2004 they organized an anti-homonormative Valentine's Day vomiting direct action:

A member of the Pink Panthers, before vomiting on the steps of the store Megavideo, revealed that the most infuriating thing for him was the capitalist appropriation of emotions like love and liberty, which have always belonged to everybody and should never have become dependant [sic] on consumption. He feels that multinationals and others who profit off of Valentine's Day are doing something that by its very nature (competition, salary reduction, waste of natural resources) has nothing to do with the love of another person. (*Les Panthe' res Roses*, 2004) The Pink Panthers used their vomit action to denounce capitalist exploitation of gay consumer dollars and 'natural resources' or the environment, linking these two issues. They also noted that, 'businessmen make themselves out to be the most enthusiastic proponents of gay liberation, while at the same time using their phallogocentric power to exclude everyone who is not a white man' (*Les Panthe' res Roses*, 2004). They add masculinity and race to the environment and capitalism as axes of oppression that intersect with and in queer subjectivities and liberation. The Pink Panthers' anti-homonormative action includes a greater diversity of queers who might live in poverty, and/or be women, and/or be bisexual, and/ or be trans, and/or be people of colour, and/or be sex workers, and/or be dis-abled, and/or not conform to the dominant beauty image, and/or otherwise deviate from gay stereotypes. They challenge barriers to participation for doubly or multiply marginalized queers in counterpublic spaces inside urban clubs or shops, where some modes of oppression might be reinforced (e.g. by racism, the 'dick at the door' policy, beauty standards, social class belonging, ageism, ableism and so on). Furthermore, the Panthers' message was created in the streets, accessible to all passers-by, claiming public spaces and moments as queer autonomous zones free of oppression.

Direct action vomiting critiques the homonormativity of the queer counter-public that includes gay villages, corporatized Pride marches and the like. The Pink Panthers' vomit actions make Berlant and Warner's erotic vomit story seem somewhat limited, as does the academic public created by representation in an article such as this one. Sitting in a bar vicariously experiencing someone's intense eroticism positively revalues and simultaneously degrades it, as the performance risks becoming commodified. The Pink Panthers' statement critiques queer counterpublics for commodifying affect through 'the capitalist appropriation of emotions like love and liberty'. While the erotic vomiting scene Berlant and Warner witnessed is hardly a Valentine's Day card, it does participate in the queer consumerism of gay bars that reifies homo-norms, for example that queers all go to leather bars, or that being queer is a hip young urban lifestyle choice. These stereotypes become homo-norms in urban queer counterpublics.

While queer visibility in heteronormative culture is important, Mall Zaps and Kiss-Ins also tend to reinforce queer stereotypes through mainstream practices such as shopping and public kissing. Richard Dyer has found that 'Gay people, whether activists or not, have resented and attacked the images of homosexuality ... The principle line of attack has been on stereotyping' (Dyer, 2006: 353). Gay stereotypes tend to emphasize white middle-class cisgender gay male consumerism. 'Particularly damaging is the fact that many gay people believe [stereotypes], leading on the one hand to the self-oppression so characteristic of gay people's lives, and on the other to behaviour in conformity with the stereotypes which of course only serves to confirm their truth' (2006: 353). Kiss-Ins and Mall Zaps perform the 'truth' of certain stereotypes revealing both internal (within queer groups) and internalized (within the self) oppressions.

Ironically, this tends to both deconstruct and simultaneously reinforce both heteronormativity and homonormativity. 'One of the modes of [maintaining heterosexual hegemony] for gays is casting gay relationships and characters in terms of heterosexual roles' (Dyer, 2006: 356), including kissing in malls or public squares posing as a heteronormative couple. Kevin Michael DeLuca describes a famous gay kiss-in poster by Gran Fury thus: 'One sailor has his arms around his partner's waist. The other sailor's arms are around his partner's neck. In other words, it is a classic kiss' (1999: 18). This image inserts queer subjectivities into the public sphere, demanding access to power. At the same time, it risks becoming a homonormative image, as the men are both beautiful, white, thin, and middle class with matching short haircuts and outfits. Certainly there is also a level of irony in the performance. Nonetheless acts and images like 'these simply bolster heterosexual hegemony, [whereas] the task is to develop our own alternative and challenging definitions of ourselves' (Dyer, 2006: 357). Self-definitions must move past white privilege and other dominant homo-norms. A Kiss-In emphasizes public kissing, not a norm in all ethno-cultural groups. Shopping imagines all queers as middle-class consumers who escalate environmental devastation. 'These stereotypes of wealthy free-spending gay consumers play well with advertisers and are useful to corporations because they make the gay market seem potentially lucrative' (Hennessy, 1994–95: 66). Queer activism, in earnest attempts to challenge heteronormativity, has inadvertently reinscribed a homonormative subject complicit with capitalism, racism, environmental destruction, ableism, patriarchy, beauty myths and so on. Radical queer activists attempt to move beyond this deadlock without abandoning the notion of queer culture altogether.

The Pink Panthers' action of vomiting in public takes it out of a commodified space. The vomit, however, was made of oatmeal not actual vomit, producing a simulated vomiting against the hyper-simulations of capitalism. The action goes into a space it rejects, and replicates that which it rejects. This simulation and rejection is analogous to the disgust shared with commuters, a kind of hyper-affect produced by vomiting in streets or back-alleys or commuter trains. Only these non-regulated, open-ended public spaces can be liberatory; as the body itself becomes the message, the vomit becomes a kind of street-corner text accessible to all. According to DeLuca, the body itself has become an event-image, a text that can shift the discursive mainstream framing of queer politics, as some 'activist groups practice an alternative image politics, performing image events designed for mass media dissemination. Often, image events revolve around images of bodies – vulnerable bodies, dangerous bodies, taboo bodies, ludicrous bodies, transfigured bodies' (DeLuca, 1999: 10). The vomiting body is a 'dangerous body' bringing forth new ideas. 'Their bodies, then, become not merely flags to attract attention for the argument but the site and substance of the argument itself' (1999: 10). Using their bodies, the Pink Panthers' puking action articulated a message against consumerism and other exclusions, the substance of which was the vomit itself. Their 'bodies simultaneously are constructed in discourses and exceed those discourses' (1999: 20) – or in this case, the discourse/vomit exceeded the body – moving beyond 'a class-specific 'bourgeois (homosexual/queer) imaginary' [that] structures our knowledge of sexual identity, pleasure, and emancipation' (Hennessy, 1994–95: 70). Certainly not bourgeois, vomiting on the steps of queer consumerism makes the point that pleasure and emancipation should be available to all subjects, those who go to gay bars, as well as those who are excluded. The public created is a free and fluid autonomous public.

This kind of direct action demonstrates that 'movements around gender and sexuality do not always conform to the bourgeois model of 'rational-critical debate' (Warner, 2002: 51), nor do

they remain legal. Groups such as 'Earth First!', ACT UP and Queer Nation have challenged and changed the meanings of the world not through good reasons but through vulnerable bodies, not through rational arguments but through bodies at risk' (DeLuca, 1999: 11). Engaging in direct action in open public spaces the Pink Panthers risk criminalization. After the action in Montreal, *The Mirror* ran the headline, 'Puking Queers Make Splash!' and featured an interview with a 'self-described anarchist', who used the name "Olivier", – a pseudonym, as he acknowledges his acts are illegal'. The use of pseudonyms is almost ironic as vomiting is not a transgression of the law, but rather signifies a transgression against the digestive system. The context of the action, however – in public, against corporations – renders it 'illegal' and the pseudonym necessary. Often regular behaviour (vomiting, having sex) is criminalized when engaged by queers. Furthermore, there is a link between shame (i.e. the private) and criminalization (i.e. privatization of ownership, space and so on). Warner observes that 'critically relevant styles of publicness in gay male' and, I would add, other queer 'sexual culture[s] are seldom recognized as such but are typically denounced as sleaze and as crime' (2002: 52). Puking punks and queers are sleazy, shameful criminals who are bad for business.

And yet sleaze, perversion, deviance, eccentricity, weirdness, kinkiness, BDSM and smut, although perhaps not openly homo-norms among the new assimilationists advocating same-sex marriage, are central to sex-positive queer anarchist lives. 'Queer and other insurgents have long striven, often dangerously or scandalously, to cultivate what good folks used to call criminal intimacies' (Berlant and Warner, 2000: 322), figured as exciting sites of resistance. 'Nonstandard intimacies would seem less criminal and less fleeting if, as used to be the case, normal intimacies included everything from consorts to courtiers, friends, amours, associates, and co-conspirators' (2000: 323). Here we come up against another binary, however: normal vs. nonstandard. According to Jamie Heckert, 'LGBT politics maintains these categories: it intends to invert their meaning, redefining sexual deviance as sexual identity of which one should be proud and sexual normality as boring/ oppressive' (2004: 106). The desire for certain behaviours to be recategorized as 'normal' is denounced in a queer anarchist world-making project that considers all consensual, non-coerced intimacies and sexualities legitimate, challenging homo-normativity via anti-oppression politics.

## **From anti-homonormativity to anti-oppression politics and alternative value-practices**

Abandoning hierarchized binary categories is one strategy of intersectional anti-oppression politics. As Heckert argues, 'Sexuality is constructed into hierarchies and is interconnected with other forms of social divisions including gender, sexual orientation, class and ethnicity' (2004: 102). The Pink Panthers reveal and critique these hierarchies in their media interviews. *The Gazette*, on 23 February 2004, ran the wordy headline, 'Pink Panthers use fake vomit, phony money to preach in the gay village: non-violent but often bizarre actions aim to encourage activism in gay community'. 'Nathalie' suggests 'The gay (political) strategy is very narrow-minded. They never consider other causes, like women's rights, the environment, globalization'. Similarly, in *The Hour* of 29 July 2004, 'Jubejube Molotov' asks 'What about drag queens, trannies, gays of colour?... What about everyone who doesn't want to be married and have kids?' Also on 29 July 2004, *The Mirror*'s article, 'Radical pink: Queer anarchists take on what they perceive to be the

racism, sexism and materialism of the gay establishment', takes up the Panthers' critique of the 'gay-geoisie'. The article suggests that 'some Montreal homosexuals feel at odds with the mainstreaming of gay and are rebelling against the pigeon-holing of their identity based solely on their sexuality and their supposed disposable income'. Revealing the intersectionality of exclusions has the power to expand queer politics and publics. This media coverage further expands the queer autonomous public to include mainstream (*The Gazette*) and left weekly (*The Hour, The Mirror*) audiences.

An intersectional analysis is considered crucial within queer anarchist culture. Intersectionality, as Leslie McCall argues, is based on the realization that '[s]ocial life is considered too irreducibly complex – overflowing with multiple and fluid determinations of both subjects and structures – to make fixed categories anything but simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences' (2005: 1773). Nikki Sullivan has found that if oppressions are divided into categories and addressed one at a time, enacting other oppressions becomes a risk:

One of the problems with disassociating race, gender, and sexuality and focusing primarily on one of the terms is that such an approach can lead to the production of accounts of race that are (at least implicitly) sexist and/or homophobic, theories of gender that are (at least implicitly) racist and/or homophobic, and analyses of sexuality that are (at least implicitly) racist and/or sexist. (2003: 66)

Accordingly, Hennessy opens out her queer anti-capitalist analysis: 'the racialized and gendered division of labor suggests that there are more lesbians than gay men living in poverty and proportionately more of them are people of color' (1994–95: 69). An anti-categorical intersectional analysis considers oppression on intersecting axes rather than the 'silo model' of unrelated categories. Furthermore, the range of differences within categories of oppression renders categories themselves nearly meaningless (McCall, 2005) whereby a general failure to acknowledge this has entrenched systemic oppressions. 'Any system', as Heckert observes, addressing internal oppression, 'that limits or stigmatises our imaginings of the possible (be it anarchism or same-sex desires)... is oppressive to us all' (Heckert, 2004: 113). An anti-categorical approach moves beyond labels to value individual experiences, and opens up the possible imaginings Heckert advocates.

In fact, both Heckert (2004) and Dyer (2006) argue for the development of a set of alternative values self-defined among our communities. These values are not oppositional to mainstream values, rather they come from a liberatory set of commitments driven by a very different conception of life's possibilities and priorities. This points to the problem with the concept of counterpublics. Once the hegemonic discourse has been established, a counter-discourse may challenge it but any challenges on this terrain, regardless of how indefinite their extent or diffuse their networks, will have difficulty disrupting the power relations that mapped the terrain in the first place. By Warner's own admission, a counterpublic 'maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status' (2002: 56), making lived equal relations among heterosexual publics and queer counterpublics impossible. As Heckert articulates, 'Oppositional politics is based upon the same terms as that which it opposes. Thus, it serves to maintain the definition of the situation imposed by its opposition' (2004: 105). A strategy of counterpublics runs the risk of reinforcing exactly the hegemony it is attempting to crack. 'A successful radical politics... must not rely upon transgression and opposition if its goal is to reconstruct society around a different set of norms (e.g. co-operative, non-hierarchical, comfortable with sexuality, consensual and

so on)' (2004: 108). With alternative values, instead we create and build our own autonomous zones and become our own publics making spaces for participatory engagement. 'The political value of queer and public sex cultures is not in their transgressive nature, but in their development of alternative sexual values that attempt to move beyond sexual shame' (Heckert, 2004: 113). Activists are therefore moving beyond shame and are simultaneously developing a politics of shame (see also Moore, 2004).

Douglas Crimp takes up this deconstructive project, arguing that shame 'is equally and simultaneously identity-defining and identity-erasing' (2002: 64–5). Shame erases queer identities by disallowing them, and simultaneously defines queer identities through emotional relations as it 'appears to construct the singularity and isolation of one's identity through an affective connection to the shaming of another' (2002: 65). Shame produces a moment of intense emotion that creates a bond between two people as their identities are negotiated. 'Just as shame is both productive and corrosive of queer identity... so too is it simultaneously productive and corrosive of queer revaluations of dignity and worth' (2002: 65). Shame can be transformed into dignity in transcendent moments of emotional experience, a transformation that is critical to sex-positive, radically ethical queer sexual practices such as sex play, public nudity, public sex and polyamory.

As Heckert argues, 'sexual ethics are also of central importance. [Warner] criticises sexual identity politics for focusing on identity to the exclusion of sex. For him, sexual shame is the key issue to be addressed in a politics of sexuality' (2004: 113). In raw moments of sexual pleasure, intimacy and disclosure we can make our most intense connections to others, but only if shame is productively transformed into dignity, joy and pleasure. Crimp advocates 'a new slogan of queer politics: For Shame!' (2002: 68), for the shame produced in moments of irresistibly sexy mutual vulnerability. Crimp's conception of shame has the potential to transcend not just shame but also heteronormativity and homonormativity. Moments of sexual and other forms of bodily vulnerability draw us to people, facilitating intimacy through a more honest set of negotiated practices and consensual desires based on and productive of trust, dignity, laughter, and respect for varieties of non-normative practices including vomiting and/or sex in public. Non-authoritarian social relations and value-practices are required for these moments, critical to transcending the painful experiences of normative anti-queer social shaming.

## **Queer autonomous zones and participatory publics**

Bobby Noble points to 'the simultaneity of the relations between gendered embodiment, sex play, and racialization inside homonormative communities, neighbourhoods and venues for cultural production' (Noble, 2009). Similar critiques of the queer community have been taken up by Gay Shame anarchist activists organizing in the late 1990s. In *That's Revolting!* Matt/Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore documents their personal experience in Gay Shame collectives in San Francisco and New York City. 'Gay Shame emerged to create a radical alternative to the conformity of gay neighbourhoods, bars, and institutions – most clearly symbolized by Gay Pride' (Sycamore, 2004: 238). Gay Shame is 'mostly anarchist leaning' (2004: 239), and organizes gatherings, events and direct action protests against capitalism and intersecting oppressions. A San Francisco flyer asks, 'Are you choking on the vomit of consumerist 'gay pride'?' (2004: 239). Another poster entitled 'Gay pride, my ass: It's all about gay shame' (2004: 240) announces an 'autonomous space'

(2004: 240) outdoors on Tire Beach with performances, art-making, bands, installations, DJs, food, kidspace, and ‘politics and play’ (2004: 240). The event hosted ‘speakers on issues including San Francisco gentrification and the US colonization of the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, as well as prison, youth, and trans activism’ (2004: 241). The range of issues and events in the ‘autonomous space’ point to a very different kind of sprawling, engaged public than Berlant and Warner’s indoor, circumscribed, queer counterpublic. ‘We encouraged people to participate in creating their own radical queer space, and people argued about political issues, painted, poured concrete and made a mosaic, dyed hair, and mudwrestled naked’ (Sycamore, 2004: 241). Participation is a key element in the formation of a ‘Queer autonomous space’ (2004: 237) or zone, as are multiplicities of political focus (Puerto Rico, kids, youth, prisons, trans people, art production, gentrification and so on) and an over-arching anti-capitalist practice that includes free entrance, barter and trade, dressing to ‘ragged excess’ (2004: 240), and the provision of ‘free food, T-shirts and various other gifts’ (2004: 241).

Queer autonomous zones thus are open-ended spaces in which participation of all comers is encouraged through a direct (rather than liberal) democracy model. They are facilitated via engagement with a multiplicity of intersectional anti-oppression politics. Interactions in queer autonomous spaces develop sustainable social relations and value-practices, based on mutual respect, consent, sexual liberation, and non-normativity, in which people engage in open-ended processes of developing alternative ways of being, feeling, thinking, engaging, acting and becoming-liberated. The question is – what’s next? How do we continue to expand our movements and theorizing to extend the becoming-liberated of queer?

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the reviewers for their helpful comments, Jamie Heckert for encouragement and patience with my process, and Sydney Neuman for engaged proofreading.

## References

- Berlant L and Freeman E (1992) Queer nationality. *Boundary 2* 19(1): 149–180.
- Berlant L and Warner M (2000) Sex in public. In: Berlant L (ed.) *Intimacy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 311–330.
- Bordo S (1990) Reading the slender body. In: Jacobus M, Fox Keller E, Shuttleworth S (eds) *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*. New York: Routledge, 83–112.
- Castiglia C (2000) Sex panics, sex publics, sex memories. *Boundary 2* 27(2): 149–175.
- Corber RJ, Valocchi S (eds) (2003) *Queer Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Crimp D (2002) Mario montez, for shame. In: Barber SM, Clark DL (eds) *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*. New York: Routledge, 57–70.
- Deleuze G and Guattari F (1983) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia Vol. 1*. 1972. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- DeLuca KM (1999) Unruly arguments: The body rhetoric of EarthFirst!, act up, and queer nation. *Argumentation and Advocacy* 36(Summer): 9–21.

- Duncan N (1996) Renegotiating gender and sexuality in public and private spaces. In: Duncan N (ed.) *Body Space: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*. New York: Routledge, 125–143.
- Dyer R (2006) Stereotyping. In: Durham MG, Kellner DM (eds) *Media and Cultural Studies Key-Works*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 353–365.
- Heckert J (2004) Sexuality/identity/politics. In: Purkis J, Bowen J (eds) *Changing Anarchism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 101–116.
- Hennessy R (1994–95) Queer visibility in commodity culture. *Cultural Critique* 29(Winter): 31–76.
- Jeppesen S and Visser L (Leahfish) (1996) *Projectile: Stories about Puking*. Toronto: self-published.
- Les Panthe´ res Roses (2004) Operation “Pepto-bismol SVP!” URL (accessed 12 July 2008): <http://lespantheresroses.org>.
- McCall L (2005) The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30(3): 1771–1800.
- Noble B (2009) Trans-Culture in the (White) City: Taking a Pass on a Queer Neighbourhood. URL (accessed 8 May 2009): <http://nomorepotlucks.org/article/ego/trans-culture-white-city-taking-pass-queer-neighbourhood>.
- Sullivan N (2003) *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. New York: New York University Press.
- Sycamore M, Berstein M (eds) (2004) *That’s Revolting! Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation*. Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull.
- Vade D (2005) Expanding gender and expanding the law: Toward a social and legal conceptualization of gender that is more inclusive of transgender people. *Michigan Journal of Gender and Law* 11: 253–316.
- Warner M (2002) *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books.

## On the Author

Sandra Jeppesen is an activist, writer, and Assistant Professor in Communication Studies at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. Her research is in guerrilla texts and autonomous media, including analysis of discourses produced through anti-poverty activism, anti-colonial no-border activism, radical feminist and queer collectives, anti-racist pedagogies, and other social movement texts. *Address*: Communication Studies Department, Concordia University, 7141 Sherbrooke Street West, CJ 3.230, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Montreal, Canada H4B 1R6.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Sandra Jeppesen  
Queer anarchist autonomous zones and publics  
Direct action vomiting against homonormative consumerism  
September 2, 2010

Retrieved on May 21, 2020 from [journals.sagepub.com](http://journals.sagepub.com)

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**