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THE IMP OF THE PERVERSE

John Emil Vincent

Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol by Nicholas de Villiers. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. Pp. 224, 1 black-and-white photo. \$75.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

Nicholas de Villiers's fine study *Opacity and the Closet* shows signs of what "ails" Queer studies. It also just might offer some inkling of a "cure." Theoretically, however, De Villiers does not set himself a tall order; in fact, the explicit argument of the book is remarkably limpid for a book on the opaque: Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Andy Warhol all use varieties of performed opacity to stymie the confessional narrative constitutive of the operations of the closet. De Villiers offers careful readings of these deployments as a riposte to remarkably bossy posthumous biographical/critical work. It is now nearly an industry: Foucault, the theorist of the confessional, exposed! Barthes's elegant salvos on the slipperiness of language: repression plain and simple. Warhol's expansive vacuity read as deeply psychological. Each subject was, this chorus of voices insists, too much a subject himself to sally a radical critique of subjectivity.

De Villiers's is a necessary rescue mission, and expertly set examples make it a meaty read. His command of contemporary French popular intellectual culture would alone recommend his discussions of Foucault and Barthes. Obviously, the "intellectual flavors" of Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol are quite different, but de Villiers makes the case that they are tacticians of high-gloss refusal. The implicit argument of the book,

which I discuss in this review, is that identity politics, inimical to Queer theory, is alive and remarkably well at the heart of Queer studies. In a perhaps all-too-familiar brand of institutional irony, Queer theory, one of several important critiques of identity politics, bore Queer studies, now a stronghold for the same.

De Villiers's preface features Bartleby's famous refusal, "I would prefer not to," suggesting that tactics of opacity complicate what has become a rote "Foucauldian" call-and-response. We ought not attempt liberation; it is a ruse. Confession, as a means to this fictive freedom, is a ruse. In the face of the power smog monster, agency itself: ruse! There are enough tired rehearsals of this gory revenge drama. Only someone invested in not theorizing anymore would insist that Foucault's engine either perform a perpetual motion miracle or park itself in a station. Enter de Villiers: what happens when you acknowledge the epistemic force of the closet but refuse showily to come out of it *or* stay in it? What happens when you perform not confessing and not not confessing all at once? The double negative, as with many supercharged doubly-negated performances, clearly doesn't always equal a positive. At the limit, for example, being alive, being not alive, and being undead macramé a curious arabesque out of binary (digital: 1/0) yarn. One

part of Bartleby's locution—when yanked from its Melvillian socket that seems missing from Giorgio Agamben's praise for the scribe who won't scribe and from Gilles Deleuze's description of "I prefer not to" as one of Bacon's imploded heads—is imperiousness. The agent is still in charge of the action. "I'm not particular," the later-story follow-up phrase, which often gets lost in the shuffle, may be a more powerful and involuted version of willful opacity.

Perhaps, for reasons to follow, we might take up "not being particular" rather than "preferring not to" as theorists. First of all, it is an opacity that is at once refusal and invitation, an opacity with tonal range. It can be gracious, even stylish: Give me coffee or tea, I don't mind. Or acid; minding would be far too much trouble. Opacity is interruption of a form—the interview, the conversation, the autobiography, the theory—but it is not always strident. The variety of examples de Villiers teases out—Foucault's explosive laughter when he is introduced to the idea of a cancer that kills only homosexuals, Barthes's more delicate proposition of his "very *queer* desire 'to give imprecise answers to precise questions: this imprecision of the answer, even if it is perceived as weakness, is an indirect way of demystifying the question'" (87), or Warhol's spectacular mumbled or parroted interviews—these are

not really as much about preference per se as particularity and its refusal. They are also, each in their own way, beautiful, impish even, in their fit to occasion. The forthright hitch of first person to not being first person. An estimation of oneself not forceful in any way, possibly passive, not preferring, simply denouncing the agency to announce anything. The not undenounced. The specifically not unspecified. Often less limp handshake than the performance of a gesture you know will interest or please your interlocutor. The ectoplasmic? Camp?

Obviously this butts heads with identity politics. But, you ask, didn't we have this discussion about the nonflush nature of identity and identification? Wasn't this in fact one of the lodestones of queer theory: Queering identity? De Villiers is graceful and respectful, even if you can hear the creak of his finger joints making bunny ears: "I must . . . address this issue of identity politics. I focus on three white gay men as case studies and forecast the critique that their positions (as prominent, 'famous' figures with creative agency) owe a great deal to 'white male privilege'" (9). He rightly acknowledges that white male privilege exists and likely has a whole lot to do with the matter at hand. However, he abjures the proleptic, in a spritely, impish even, start to the paragraph following, the break as a kind of

intake of fresh air: "I also do not want to be too quick to decide that the figures I am treating are matter-of-factly 'male' or 'masculine' in their identifications" (9). We simply can't know in advance what a study of three fascinating, creative, white, gay male subjects will cast helpful light on, until we actually do the study. And emphasizing an important opacity himself, the opacity of his crystal ball, de Villiers allows himself the space to set out on his inquiry. In a sense, his project must remain more archival and curatorial than theoretical because of this limitation. He is, as his subjects do, showily showing what he will not show. The curatorial being both the stylistic and theoretical mode and, as practiced, offering not just exhibits, but Exhibits, in the unongoing discussion and inevitable adjudication of the place of identity politics in Queer studies.

I'm unclear why a "studies" so interested in the vast variety of the operation and experience of categorization isn't just a tad troubled by putting limits on that variety—particularly as it bears on the contours of the field itself. I'm not harkening back to those super stupid, but strangely effective, anti-PC rants of Dinesh D'Souza, Camille Paglia, & co. However, I'm not sure how privilege comes to all white, gay males in a kind of kicking the vending machine way. It in fact seems that Queer "studies" presently is simply recapitulation and without much of

a difference from the early, certainly important but not won nor lost, but perhaps to tweak Butler's fantastic four of melancholy: never won never lost, "canon wars." Where do we go, and with what, from here? Queer theory performed seems to offer some hope.

Queer theory, pretty early on, accepted that like a new, improved Soylent Green, theory is made of people. It is what makes a thrilling theory and gives it its flavor (along often with bespoke style). It is that toggle between the insanely obvious and the genius, between the perfectly grounded and the dizzyingly abstract. Is that the difference between the microscope-wielding studier and swirly-eyed theorist? "People are different," for example, Axiom 1 of Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), serves as a touchpoint for me. But, then, I am not the standard of all people nor all theoretical interests. This: being included in Eve's axiom. The history and present of "gay liberation," "queer lives," "globalization," "trans identification," "radical academics," and so on, are all made of people even if we can have an argument about how people are made. We need new ways to hear people, new styles that tickle or pinch; one thing we don't need to make a business of is shutting people up or down. "Queer studies," such as it is, is made of people. (Note: I'm not humming "Small World After All" under

my breath to myself right now for nothing, however, while also picturing a scene in which I gesticulate wildly, my twisted mouth spitting out "Can't we all just GET ALONG!") The speaker might be assembled, dispersed, barely articulate, constructed, disarticulated, however you want to say it, but the speaker who shuts down, who prefers not to see the tension between *speaker's privilege* and what I will call the proleptic fallacy, does so at the peril of tugging theory from its umbilicus: shared curiosity. Here, I think of Fredric Jameson's "first hominid philosophers" arguing that there was not and there would never be instrumentality. To know best, much like Foucault's own too-obviously power-wielding sovereign, but at the level of the rhetorical, simply isn't that interesting, nor convincing, it turns out. As soon as John Ashbery's faux sigh "You can't say it that way any more" turns to a hiss in the mouth of a queer studier, you know the party is over.

In 1995, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner made the case very convincingly that

AIDS activism forced the issue of translating queerness into the national scene. AIDS made those of us who confronted it realize the deadly stakes of discourse; it made us realize the public and private unvoiceability of so much that

mattered, about anger, mourning, and desire; it made us realize that different frames of reference—science, news, religion, ordinary homophobia—compete and that their disjunction is lethal. . . . AIDS also showed that rhetorics of expertise limit the circulation of knowledge, ultimately authorizing the technocratic administration of peoples' lives.¹

Historically, AIDS is not the only impetus to Queer theoretical discourse, but it is undeniably one very important one. Maybe Feminism invented the tricycle and the AIDS crisis gave it a push. . . . However it happened, and clearly that ought to be an ongoing debate, the cocktail did not turn the crisis into a cocktail party. Nor did the adjective Queer keep Queer studies from becoming a "rhetoric of expertise."

Now it seems the challenge to Queer studies, if it is to remain dynamic, is to acknowledge its own history. Such an activity (see: *Other Fields of Inquiry*) is never simple. Thus might we gain grounds upon which to agree to disagree at least. More and more we read of reinvigorating bad or historical feelings, about feeling optimistic, utopic, backward, futureless, about feeling like or reading like an outsider or an insider—many bright lights are shining on and into our affective, historical, and aesthetic terrain.

Why is Queer studies, as it is held (largely) within academic institutions, booklists, lecture series, and intellectual communities, holding this exciting work apart in a totally awkward way such that one must shake one's head and say, "Not much going on," when, in fact, the foregoing list merely gestures at a bevy of thrilling things that *are going on* in the field? Why doesn't this feel "shared"?

Style perhaps. Any bilious utterance of "you can't say it that way anymore" is using one of our dearest tools as a weapon against others against whom it works only to the extent that they hold the tool dear. Yes, theory is delicate; it is a shared language. Therein its head-rush. If shrill voices are deciding rather than suggesting what we talk with one another about, even before we start talking about it, our talk is doomed to feel, well, bad. Cue the panopticon internalization of authority Gregorian chant. The fundamental readerly cooperation in any writerly project is what Queer theory needs to champion within Queer studies. In part, I believe this comes down to the house where Queer studies, and to a certain extent Queer theory, is living now. Universities have become another sector of the service industry, and undergraduate tastes are running the show on what kind of work gets widely disseminated. Within reason, this is fine. But when my undergraduates,

as they in large numbers have, like good identity politicians, choose the easy vitriol of Judith Halberstam over the stunning stylistic complexity of Eve Sedgwick (from whom most of Halberstam's spare central axioms are trawled), *and the field seems to agree with their "that's more like me" assessment*, I know something signal is missing the field. Is that *something* a sense of our history? Why do I feel squeamish, just now, with having written "our history"? And now with having written "written 'our history'"? If, as a participant in the field of Queer studies, the move toward the first person plural in statements *about Queer studies as a field of inquiry* is, starkly, either the rank appropriation by my gay, white male privilege or the empty placation by my gay, white male privilege, don't we have ourselves a double bind?

But back to the task at hand.

Perhaps I think too much about the footnote (*pace* Anthony Grafton). Especially when there are 51 pages of footnotes in a 218-page book. And all of the footnotes are at the back of the book, and they are salad-style tossed—the deeply discursive, the pleasantly personal, the bow-and-kiss-ground, the tersely citational. In this design choice—likely not the author's—there is no quarter given the now old-fashioned practice of citation mining enabled by not quite Brazilian waxed but certainly slightly less bearlike streamlined end-note

commentary balanced by internal citations and works cited. At times I felt as if I were thrown out of the text as much, in fact, considering that the footnotes are several points smaller than the text, as being coaxed into early blindness. Beside which the constant flipping made me feel at once like a distracted slacker and a little like a "real stickler." The belletristic strokes of the prose churn too often into notational thrashing. I wish the press would reconsider this design.

However, footnotes and all, de Villiers delivers a clear case against clarity's clearness. To take complicated theories and cook them down to biography, he maintains, is not complementary to cooking them up. Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol all have legacies worth surviving their legacies. This is a book to tarry with; it is a knot of questions elegant in its difficulty. We can play with it, even if we can't ever untie it.

John Emil Vincent, who lives in Montreal, is author of Queer Lyrics: Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) and John Ashbery and You: His Later Books (University of Georgia, 2007). He recently edited a collection of criticism about Jack Spicer (Wesleyan University Press). His first book of poems, Excitement Tax, will be published by DC Books in fall 2017.

NOTE

1. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?" *PMLA* 110, no. 3 (1995): 343–49, quotation on 345.