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# Queer: Good Gay, Bad Gay, Black Gay, White Gay?

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Michigan State University

## Queer: Good Gay, Bad Gay, Black Gay, White Gay?

Ian Barnard

As *Deadline.com* bluntly put it, “Kevin Spacey Apologizes to Anthony Rapp for Alleged Sexual Advances; Chooses to ‘Live As A Gay Man.’” The outraged response of progressive intellectuals, activists, and cultural critics to Spacey’s two-fold tweet has demonstrated, *inter alia*, the resilience of old school assumptions and expectations about coming out and about gay identity and gay identifications. These outraged responses have come especially from younger generations of intellectuals, activists, and critics, but also across generations, genders, and sexual orientations. Despite decades of attacks on models of gay identity that center on teleological narratives of coming out, and critiques of the privileging of coming out as the apotheosis of a triumphalist gay identity as racist and ethnocentric in that privileging’s assumption of identity as coherent and univocal, and the assumption of a safe space to come out into (*#BlackLivesMatter* has served as a forceful reminder of the illusion of such safe spaces for black men, in particular), here we are again at a coming out crossroads, at a coming out as crossroad. Here we are again swept into that narrative expectation of coming out as a crossing from innocence into experience, even when that coming out is compromised and contaminated by decades of denial (on the part of Spacey), by decades of knowingness (on the part of Spacey watchers), and now by the specter of sexual harassment and sexual assault.<sup>1</sup> And despite “queer’s” supposed resistance to utopian or censorious prescriptions for positive representation,<sup>2</sup>

the expectation—indeed, the demand—that queer articulation carries with it a triumphal narrative of gay goodness, or, at least a triumphal narrative of victimhood overcome (“it gets better”) persists.<sup>3</sup> Persistence is not always a good thing. It is as if “queer’s” efforts to decenter heterosexuality and heteronormativity are, in the United States anyway, frantically skidding backward into liberal defensiveness in the wake of the Trump-effect’s jolt back to the culture wars, to a multiculturalism no longer taken as given, to kindness and empathy suddenly embattled. Or proof that the triumph of same-sex marriage across the globe is just more evidence of neoliberalism’s cannibalization of queer antiassimilationism. As if the antisocial turn in queer theory had not happened. Or, at least, possible evidence of its failure to yet make an impact outside of academia.

In the case of his October 29, 2017 tweet, it is apparently the announcement of Spacey’s gayness in concert with his response to being exposed as a sexual predator (at the time, this was a first accusation, but the subsequent snowballing of accusations makes me comfortable using the phrase “sexual predator” now in retrospect)—in addition to his denial of sexual misconduct and/or his ingenuous apology to Anthony Rapp—that caused particular umbrage. It was as if this yoking together were cynically designed to divert attention from Spacey’s sexual predation, to position Spacey as deserving of sympathy (in the new millennium, even in the age of Trump, coming out in the West guarantees an overwhelmingly positive response), and as if it were (unintentionally) confirming homophobic stereotypes of gay men as child molesters—there’s that retrograde turn to the hetero(normative) center again, where gayness can and must always and only be imagined insofar as the response it generates from heterosexuality, inasmuch as it confirms or upends heterosexist stereotypes.<sup>4</sup> However, as I have been suggesting, I think the umbrage taken is not just to the conjunction of sexual predation with coming out/gayness, but also in hostage to the legacy of how the latter part of the conjunction on its own has been allowed to function in the (neo)liberal gay civil rights movement. Gayness, it seems, may only be evoked as a heroic or banally quotidian modifier: I overcame homophobic bullying to become prime minister of Iceland; I’m a teacher who happens to be gay; I’m a gay teacher. Not: I’m a mass murderer who happens to be gay; I’m a gay mass murderer. Of course, “gay” is never uninflected by gender, class, race, and other modifiers. For example, because white supremacist (LGBTQ) culture continues to normalize whiteness and therefore to equate gayness with whiteness (an equation that concomitantly erases queers of color), white Spacey’s coming out into a default white gayness offers a counterintuitive counterpoint to what we might expect about the operations of race and racism: the umbrage taken at Spacey’s coming out can be precisely calibrated to the extent that it signifies a shame for normalized whiteness.<sup>5</sup> It is ironic that here whiteness is a disadvantage. I wrote

in 2004 in the context of Jeffrey Dahmer, “If the hermeneutic manifestation of the slogan ‘gay is good’ allows, by counterpoint, for an articulation and celebration of negativity in academic queer theory, this negativity is nevertheless implicitly taken to enact a progressive political understanding of identity and opposition.”<sup>6</sup> Now, in light of recent scholarly explications of the racialization of neoliberal citizenship, we see how Kevin Spacey’s twofold tweet traumatizes normative fantasmatics of white innocence while it ruptures both the sanitized account of “gay” and the politicized reading of “queer.”

However, Spacey did not identify as “queer” in his October 29, 2017 tweet, but rather explained, “I choose now to live as a *gay* man” (my emphasis). This rather modest claim seemed to strategically/finally settle on, fix, or normalize a not particularly queer sexuality and gender identification with that phrase “gay man,” if we take queerness to signify a nonnormativity that exceeds gayness alone. But it still gestured toward queerness in “choose” and “now” and “live,” markers of sexuality’s contingency, contextuality, temporality, and tracing in terms of practice rather than identity, rhetorics and rhetorical moves that have been associated with the advent of queer theory for over twenty-five years, as against ahistorical, universalizing, essentialist, and identity-based models of sexuality that queer theory often claimed to contest.

But there’s another vacillation here between old and new, between old school and new school, across generations, and it punctuates the larger cultural and political quake that has shifted so many landscapes in 2018 in the wake of the horror of Harvey Weinstein and in the particular homoerotic (and queer and same-sex and homophobic) incarnations that the #MeToo movement has taken. This vacillation asks specific, insistent questions about gay culture and history, about the closet, about archives, about nostalgia, about change, about homonormativity, about race (which is always already intricately in sexuality),<sup>7</sup> and about gender (because one cannot interrogate the discourses of sexual harassment and sexual assault without engaging with the feminist histories and activism that enabled and articulated them, with the important caveat that some feminists discern a depoliticizing of sexual harassment discourse when its original feminist impetus to contest gender inequities is diluted by the claim that a person of any gender may be a harasser or a victim of sexual harassment).<sup>8</sup>

Anthony Rapp explained in October 2017 that when he was fourteen he found himself alone in Kevin Spacey’s Manhattan apartment shortly before Spacey, then twenty-six, carried him to the bed and lay on top of him. Although Rapp’s own recounting of the event, and public and media anger at Spacey, have focused on the unwanted sexual advance (at least before Spacey’s statement explicitly evoked the specter of child molestation in the outrage it unleashed), Rapp’s age at the time, age of consent laws, and the construction of white childhood

innocence in Anglo-American culture necessarily complicate our response to Rapp's revelation (not to mention the complicated relationship among sex radicals, feminism, gay culture, queer history, pederasty, homophobic constructions of child molestation, and age of consent laws).<sup>9</sup> But if we can extricate these two issues from one another (unwanted sexual advance/child predation), then we might say that the unwanted sexual advance might not be such an uncommon occurrence in some gay cultural spaces.

In her scathing, pointed, and also problematic attacks on Title IX protocols in the United States, Laura Kipnis traces the contours of sexual meeting (or not) in the preaffirmative consent era. Describing a sexual harassment workshop she attended on her campus, Kipnis recalls responding to the injunction, "Do not make unwanted sexual advances," with the question "But how do you know they're unwanted until you try?"<sup>10</sup> Kipnis's chronicling of familiar mating games here might take on a cultural specificity in the contexts of particular gay male subcultures, shaped by the legacy of, and in some cases still subsisting/thriving within the closet (itself, at least in part, a reaction to homophobic persecution and prosecution)—and certainly not irrelevant to Spacey's own age, history, and career-specific relationship to it—where anonymity, furtivity, coded signals, silence, and dark rooms are often necessary or traditional or desirable *mise-en-scènes*. Anything but affirmative explicit consent. As one of my gay male friends, about the same age as Spacey (and me), recently put it, "I would be upset if no one tried to touch me in a gay bar or club." How much of this aspect of gay culture is racialized sexual harassment or sexual assault? How much of the current reaction against it is puritanism or sex panic<sup>11</sup> or an accession to what Foucault called the monarchy of sex<sup>12</sup> that privileges sex and, in the current cultural climate, arguably assigns greater social and political significance to sexual assault than to a plethora of other types of assaults that might be equally or more damaging and pernicious at micro and macro levels? The very fact that this epistemological terrain is up for grabs signals seismic shifts both in the conscious votives of identity politics and the unconscious identifications that generate subjectivity.

Certainly, change is afoot. Perhaps not in an older generation's and capitalist machinery's regurgitation of well-worn tropes of sexual consumption: now, suddenly, the scantily clad young men and invitations to enjoy their beauty in the usual ads for local gay bars seem spectacularly out of time, and, for the first time, I squirm when I see them; but they haven't changed—yet. But change is afoot at least in millennials' understanding of how a complete cultural epistemology has been built on the back of misogyny and sexual assault. My college students in California seem eager to comply with California's new "yes means yes" affirmative sexual consent law on college campuses, and when we watch *XXY*, Lucía Puenzo's groundbreaking 2007 feature film about Alex, an intersex teen who

refuses binary gender “normalization,” the scene where Alex fucks a visiting boy who is attracted to Alex makes us all uncomfortable, strikes us all as sexual assault.<sup>13</sup> Even though the film doesn’t present the encounter as an assault. And even though in the many previous incarnations of this course, neither students nor I registered this scene in the film as a sexual assault. Everything must change.

However, despite the apparent evenhandedness with which the recent spate of sexual harassment and sexual assault charges against celebrity perpetrators of all sexual orientations has been treated, panics of all kinds, and here, especially, sex panics and homophobic panics, are resilient. In response to avowedly heterosexual actor Sean Rose’s December 2017 account of being aggressively propositioned by gay Hollywood agent Cade Hudson in 2013, one “Gunner76” opined in response to the *Los Angeles Times*’s online story, “This is a guy coming onto a guy who’s not gay. Imagine what they do to kids who aren’t able to push back. You think Corey Feldman is lying?”<sup>14</sup> In Terry Crews’s December 2017 complaint filed against Hollywood agent Adam Venit and Venit’s employer in response to Venit grabbing his penis and testicles at a 2016 industry event, Crews describes Venit as “leering” at him and asserts that he “has never felt more emasculated and objectified.” Crews’s complaint also mentions his wife several times, and his initial misguided (because Venit’s target was Crews himself) attempt to protect his wife from Venit.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, these are somewhat random snippets of cultural temperature taking in the spaces that have been activated around Kevin Spacey’s downfall, but I see them as symptomatic contours of the continued hold of the old on the new, of the painful difficulty of extricating the past from the present. We see in them necessary concern with sexual assault and sexual harassment and with the recognition and deprivitization of the pain caused by sexual harassment and assault. But they also hold the traces of homophobic and queerphobic panics that find deviance from heteronormativity threatening, predatory, infectious, and dangerous to children; and that embody the toxic/embattled masculinities for whom feminization represents the worst kind of loss and denigration—these masculinities themselves, some would argue, imbricated in and partly shaped by histories of racism.<sup>16</sup>

Deintrinsication isn’t simple, and multiple moving parts sometimes don’t work in concert. Moreover, whether the current lurchings toward change in the wake of #MeToo (themselves surely a reaction to Trump’s throwbacks to the past) will result in real change—quotidian gayness that doesn’t have to be good gayness; good gayness that doesn’t have to be white gayness; the closet destitched from the fabric of queer culture; male power’s deassumption of sexual entitlement; and the enabling contexts in which these apparatuses and dispositions circulate: ordinary male deassumption of sexual entitlement; wider interrogation and

critique of neoliberalism's domestication of queerness; racial, economic, and environmental reckoning; and a disintegration of homonationalism's own investments in toxic nationalisms and their spawn—or the mere displacement and reinvigoration of existing power structures and cultural epistemologies, remains to be seen.<sup>17</sup>

## NOTE

1. Although it's important not to conflate sexual assault with sexual harassment, in most of the celebrity cases that have gathered stem under #MeToo, sexual assault has always also included sexual harassment, because the assailants have been powerful figures with the ability to make and break careers, and unwanted sexual advances have therefore connoted a quid pro quo, whether made explicit or not, and whether intended or not by the harassers. I'm here using the common generic understanding of sexual harassment, though this understanding is contested by some feminists, as I discuss later.
2. See, e.g., Isaac Julien, "We've been excited and intrigued by the whole 'queer' debate . . . where there's been this epistemological break with 'positive representations,' that rallying call to be represented within an assimilationist acceptance." Jon Savage and Isaac Julien, "Queering the Pitch: A Conversation," *Critical Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1994): 1.
3. For a robust critique of the "it gets better" campaign, see "Queer Suicide: A Teach-In," *Social Text*, November 22, 2010, [https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope\\_topic/queer\\_suicide\\_a\\_teach-in/](https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_topic/queer_suicide_a_teach-in/).
4. For discussion of the conflation of gay men with child molesters, see Ian Barnard, "Rhetorical Commonsense and Child Molester Panic—A Queer Intervention," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2017): 3–25.
5. See Ian Barnard, *Queer Race: Cultural Interventions in the Racial Politics of Queer Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).
6. *Ibid.*, 80.
7. *Ibid.*
8. See, e.g., Jane Gallop, *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
9. For discussion of the construction of the innocence of white childhood in Anglo-American cultures, see Kathryn Bond Stockton, "The Queer Child Now and its Paradoxical Global Effects," *GLQ* 22, no. 4 (2016): 505–39. For some critical perspectives on age of consent laws and questions of children's sexuality, see Pat Califia, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* (Pittsburgh, PA: Cleis, 1994); Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), esp. ch. 7 and 8; Roger N. Lancaster, *Sex Panic and the Punitive State* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011); Gayle Rubin, "Blood under the Bridge: Reflections on 'Thinking Sex,'" *GLQ* 17, no. 1



- (2011): 15–48; Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3–44.
10. Laura Kipnis, “Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 27, 2015, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Sexual-Paranoia-Strikes/190351>. See also Laura Kipnis, *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017).
  11. See, e.g., Masha Gessen, “When Does a Watershed Become a Sex Panic?,” *New Yorker*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/when-does-a-watershed-become-a-sex-panic>; Rennie McDougall, “Discussing Consent in Gay Spaces Requires Nuance, Not Sex Panic,” *Slate*, December 19, 2017, [http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2017/12/19/discussing\\_consent\\_in\\_gay\\_spaces\\_requires\\_nuance\\_not\\_sex\\_panic](http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2017/12/19/discussing_consent_in_gay_spaces_requires_nuance_not_sex_panic).
  12. Michel Foucault, “The End of the Monarchy of Sex,” interviewed by Bernard-Henri Lévy, 1977, trans. Dudley M. Marchi, in *Foucault Live: Interviews 1966–84*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 137–55. See also Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, 1976, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980).
  13. *XXY*, directed by Lucía Puenzo (Argentina: Film Movement, 2007; DVD, 2008).
  14. David Ng, “CAA Agent Accused of Offering Sex in Exchange for Access to Directors and a Hollywood Star,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/business/hollywood/la-fi-ct-caa-agent-20171209-story.html>.
  15. *Crews v. Venit et al.*, Complaint for Damages, Superior Court of the State of California for the County of Los Angeles—Central District, December 4, 2017.
  16. For a critical response to the common but contested argument that slavery in the United States “emasculated” black men and led to African American men’s need to reassert dominance over (black) women, see bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).
  17. For some representative accounts and analyses of homonationalism, see May Mik-dashi and Jasbir K. Puar, “Queer Theory and Permanent War,” *GLQ* 22, no. 2 (2016): 215–22; Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Gregory Mitchell, “Evangelical Ecstasy Meets Feminist Fury: Sex Trafficking, Moral Panics, and Homonationalism during Global Sporting Events,” *GLQ* 22, no. 3 (2016): 325–57.

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