

**Issue 38, April 2006**    **Australian Humanities Review****Intrusion, or Where to from Queer?**by **Murray Pratt**

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Why is it that there are always these problems and misunderstandings between men and women? Surely it would have been better if God had made only one sort of person, and the children had come by some other means, with the rain perhaps. But if there were only one sort of person, would this person be more like a man than a woman? The answer was obvious, thought Mma Ramotswe. One hardly even had to think about it.

Alexander McCall Smith, *The Kalahari Typing School for Men*<sup>1</sup>

In the preface to this edition of *Inter-Cultural Studies* [Vol 4:1, 2004], Lawrence Schehr wonders whether, however unattainable it might be, "the real goal of queer theory is to queer society, to make everyone, straight and gay alike, queer".<sup>2</sup> A traditional Botswanan lady detective such as Mma Precious Ramotswe, irrespective of whether she is the product of the greatest act of male-to-female literary transvestism since Flaubert, may hardly need to think about whether a world devoid of gender difference would incarnate female or male values. Let us, however, take a moment to ponder whether a queer world would be more like the gay world or the straight world, for the answer to this question, at least to a relatively attraditional Australian-based post-queer academic writing in Quebec, is somewhat less than obvious.

Somewhat schematically, straight worlds could be defined as structured around gender differences, heterosexual desire, the right to reproduction, and assumptions of heteronormativity. Straightness is embodied, as Beatriz Preciado writes, not only in the sexual organs of living people but in their territorial ascription of functionality, which in turn produces gendered identity within the socio-political sphere of the governed polis (Preciado, 2003: 19). In other words, combining Foucauldian understandings of power with Monique Wittig's radical reconfiguration of the gendering of the body, the parameters of the straight world produce, and, in turn, regulate ways of being (beyond

the simply identitarian) which imply heteronorms as a pre-requisite to full participation. Each of these structuring elements can be, and indeed has been, contested, critiqued - queried by queer theory. Queer as theory, but all the more so as the future practice envisaged by Schehr, 'dislocates, defamiliarises and deterritorialises' the basic tenets of this world, as well as destabilising the presumption that they 'matter' to the extent that legal, political, everyday decisions should respect their inherent logic. And yet, to date, the straight world is impervious. Traditional values circulate insidiously: heterosexuality is promoted at every turn. Elections, if the 2004 Australian experience is anything to go by, are won or lost on the number of times candidates can mention the word 'family' in the same sentence and it is still a requirement in French boulangeries to interpellate waiting customers as Messieurs Dames. The might of economico-sexual industry will niche queer at the drop of a back-to-front baseball cap, re-transvaluing the term itself in television titles, as straight reterritorialises its public spaces and discourses whenever it can. Straight wants in on the fast-thought franchises of queer.

How to begin identifying gay worlds? Straight is all around (all you need is straight), all-round - and therefore seldom remarked upon, unremarkable. Identifying gay is more fraught. The logics of heteronormativity, in one sense, dictate its invisibility, the closeting off of the not-straight; while, at the same time, homophobia, as Lee Edelman has demonstrated, has an excellent eye for the details of gay, the better to see its target (Edelman, 1993). Gay rights vectors, too often dismissed by queer as advocating identitarian claims at the cost of changing society, challenge these logics through claims for equality, empowerment and visibility. Yet for queer, the end-product of gay is little more than its ghettoisation - whether physical in the case of the regulated gay city spaces or more holistic, the colonizing mindsets which determine the remit of gayness as lifestyle. Quebec City, perhaps far from typical but conveniently located outside my hotel window as I write, contains (offers permissible outlets for) its gayness in approximately two bars, three saunas and a handful of magazines (one of which, the Montreal-based *La Voix du Village*, by far the glossiest mag in the entire province, promises its readers a special preview of photographs of real firemen and the chance to "discover the most recent trends in preparing your home for the cold spell ahead" [Ratthé, 2004: 16 - my translation]). Around midnight the streets surrounding my hotel in the basse ville pass from the straight to the gay world (in turn jostling with less normative heterofunctions such as prostitution) - either that or lots of drivers get lost and slow down, cyclists are so tired they need to stop a lot, and pedestrians constantly run out of cigarettes. Celebration, queer reclamation of the streets or second-best (to Montreal where the better gay ghettos are located - as if only large cities can host viable gayness) ghettoisation? Maybe I should add that it has been constantly pouring and hovering around zero degrees while I have been here (Shiver and Shake anyone?). And yet same-sex partnership laws in Quebec are among the most egalitarian in the Western world, and, as a friend here assures me, has excellent networking among 'a-class gays' (a

term for which we can thank Armistead Maupin, who also shows us that morality is not just for Africans).

Perhaps asking whether a queer world should be more straight or gay is beside the point - as fanciful as imagining a universe where children come with the rain, or suggesting that "a pink carp and a green rabbit" should be united in marriage as local councilors in south-west France responded to the country's first gay marriage. (Fouché, 2004). It is comfortable, safer, more prestigious to be straight, just as it is to belong to any dominant group. It is no wonder that many lesbians and gays want the same rights, privileges, securities. Gay life and culture, like any sub-culture, can be innovative, fruitful, invigorating, life-enhancing (or it can be none of these things). And the world is changing: Starbucks is everywhere (and in some places, word has it, queerly transvalued) and children now come in a range of delivery formats. Battles affecting homosexuals, over legitimacy, control of representation, legality, health, belonging, and in many parts of the world, basic human rights are waged across new sets of technological and political territories.

To give just one example from an Australian context, the ABC's audacity in featuring a girl with two mothers on Play School was met with outcries by the moral majority, including their spokesperson-in-chief, Prime Minister (for life?) John Howard. Interviewed on the matter, Howard complained that the broadcast was an example of the ABC "intruding" an agenda for a tiny minority. Whilst stating that such matters might be suitable for an adult debate show, he pleaded "don't, for heaven's sake, inject it into a children's program" (Howard, 2004). The borders of the straight televisual world were defended - gayness roundly reprimanded for daring to breach its allocated, regulated ghettofications of 'serious social issue' or straightertainment. Eight days after these comments a group of Australians embarked on a journey to an uninhabited island off the coast of Queensland, occupied it, and proclaimed it to be "Gay Kingdom, the world's first independent sovereign state for homosexuals" (Marx, 2004).<sup>3</sup> 30 One might ask, in the light of the recent prominence of Family First policies in the Australian election, and Howard's own minoritarian agenda of the Marriage Amendment Bill (like, how many people can be that bothered?) who can blame them? At the same time, how long can it be before Gay Kingdom becomes a reality show?

If queer is going anywhere, then it must be able to tackle, rather than sidestep, the ongoing defence of straight by all those Outrageds from Bennelong, occupying a territory whose motivation goes beyond the morality of the hustings. Perhaps intrusion is precisely what is needed. In Alejandro Amenábar's 2001 film *The Others*, Nicole Kidman (for it is she, 'sans-nez') and her photosensitive offspring eventually discover that it is they, rather than the supposed phantoms who inhabit 'their' mansion, who are the "intruders". Learning from their queer triad of ancient retainers, they are confronted

with the fact that their elaborate defences, locked-doors, and justificatory narratives are for naught, and that they will have to share their version of the mansion and the world with others who have as much of a stake as they. Hauntings are inevitable. Sexuality has its economics and its politics, and the preservation of the family-couple-reproductive system is at the forefront of heteronormative ideologies. A truly queer world would be one which implicated itself at the macro-level of national politics, at the same time as it intervened daily on the micro-level of the psychological, haunting in its turn the daily phantomesque teleprojection of family-shaped houses of suburbia, and transvaluing/dismantling systems of sexual currency (disestablishing desire as an economics of the heteronorm). For Preciado, a politics of queer must be multitudinal. Refusing collusion with the 'normalising and disciplinary effects of all identity formation' (Preciado, 2003: 24), she advocates anti-majoritarian practices which are 'monstrous' in their unspeakability, and which operate as a site of disruption to the technologies of the normal. Gays know too what it is to be straight, and it is by dint of the "failure or residue" of "the history of the technologies of the normalization of the body" which we carry within us that we can "intervene in operations of biotechnological production and sexual subjectivisation" (Preciado, 2003: 21). The work of the queer multitude, then, equal to the reach of the heteronormativising machine, must know no limits, deterritorialising "the urban space (so we should talk about deterritorialising the space of the majority rather than ghettos) as well as the space of the body" [my translation].

A long way from McCall Smith's Botswana. Then again maybe queer should start to want it all (although in different ways to the perspective according to which heteronormativity has it all). And rather than the monstrously post-human, perhaps there is an alternative, one which rediscovers the human, faced with a world already bent on the radical dehumanization inherent in capital. A world without problems and misunderstandings is, in so many ways, preferable to a life of contestation and challenge - and perhaps both are needed in different ways and at different times as we move beyond queer towards a practical reterritorialisation of straight space, begin piecing together an alternative economics of desire. Of course the world can never be entirely queer, just as it can't be entirely made of women. However, perhaps the ruses of queer, its inquisitiveness and inventiveness, like those of the clever and nosy detective Mma Ramotswe (who is not, by the way without her queer side as her fantasies about how comfortable it would be to kick the elder apprentice mechanic in the bottom reveal), might also come in handy as we begin to imagine what sort of world we want to inhabit. Sometimes some things need to be said in unusual contexts. Life should be livable, people should be good to each other (if not necessarily always nice), and happiness is not just for people with metal around a particular finger of the left hand. Or the right hand for that matter. Or through their tongue. It's our prerogative (that, according to the

gospel of Britney, for which we "don't need permission").

Gays claiming the same standards of well-being, health, self-respect, normative representation and peace of mind as straights is not necessarily apolitical, nor should it always be considered a capitulation. Instead, the imperative of the queer world is to strategically project territorial and corporeal forms of being, relating, speaking and doing with reference to values and opportunities which go beyond those tired moralities of all normativity enshrined (as if by global/USlandish constitutional decree) within the straight/gay divide. The answer is obvious. One hardly even has to think about it. Let's intrude!

*Murray Pratt is head of European Studies at the University of Technology, Sydney. His current research projects include State Immunity, HIV and Identity in France.*

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#### **FOOTNOTES**

1. McCall Smith, 2002: 203-4.

2. See Lawrence R. Schehr, "Queer Gazes", *Inter-Cultural Studies* Vol 4:1, 2004.

3. Marx, J., 'My World', *Sydney Morning Herald, Radar*, 6 October 2004, p.2.



In *Australian Humanities Review*, see also

- the **Sexualities** archive

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