

MARTY HUBER

REVISITING PLACES OF QUEER CRISIS

Nyx McLean's text *Considering the Internet as Enabling Queer Publics /Counter Publics* explores the possibilities for underrepresented groups to work through conflicts and create a safer space for discussion within LGBTIAQ communities. Her striking example is what happened during Gay Pride in Johannesburg (Joburg Pride) 2012, where members of the One in Nine campaign protested against sexual violence and corrective rape, by interrupting the parade by staging a 'die-in'. They were threatened and delegitimised by the organisers of Joburg Pride. This "disturbance of the peace" stirred further conflicts and showed how fragmented the South African LGBTIAQ community in fact is, and how questions of class and race are being suppressed within this major public event.

Especially regarding this question of fragmentation it could be helpful to revisit the history of the Stonewall riots, an uprising in which those who had been pushed to the fringes of society – queer people of color, trans- and dragfolks, sex workers and homeless youth – were the ones to start the riots. Remembering one's own history could be helpful in arguing the necessity of putting the finger in the recent wounds of the community.

But in this contemporary version of 'display parades' – where the pride events have to have a certain marketability – the productiveness of formerly unwanted bodies, ongoing traumas and self-organised resistance are not welcome within the broader picture. Such a broader picture would have to include the collective overcoming of shame, would be festive and (dead) serious at the same time, it would celebrate life and survival, and remember those who are no longer able to be present and participate in this broader picture. Nyx McLean points to a moment of collectiveness that is crucial to many LGBTIAQ and to pride events as an annual occasion where this collectivity gets a boost in visibility. But in fact it is worrying, that the ways of 'going public' are increasingly being determined by formal organising committees. It is a visibility of normalisation within capitalist markets, which is not really interested in social change and emancipation. Instead, the aim of

attaining liberation is replaced by the aim of obtaining equal rights, no matter how racist or classist they might be, for example, within the legal and economic systems. And yes, the urge to fit into this normalisation is so high, that a minor deviance from the course is a violent threat. The One in Nine activists' call for a moment of silence for those who were raped and murdered crossed a line that, from the perspective of the organisers, should not have been crossed. McLean states that this incident is not an isolated moment and that it would be too easy to explain such events by simply pointing to the fragmentation of the community. What McLean completely misses is the aspect of what Gloria Anzaldúa has called the "Borderland", a zone of encounters, a viral spot of life where differences can exist without necessarily being opposed to each other.¹ To call the community fragmented is an easy way out when we find ourselves in a zone of conflict that has always been present.

Maybe we can also recognise the similarities between the bars and clubs of the earlier days of LGBTIAQ communal spaces, where a bouncer was there to keep out strangers, where people would give themselves other names and use other codes of gender performances. Like with the anonymity of today's social media, these places were obscure and obscene, people tried to gain safety through masquerade and create spaces beside the centre stages of the public sphere. As always, there are special dependencies and vulnerabilities that become interlinked with those spaces. In the case of the Stonewall Inn, the bar where the Stonewall riots started, it was a Mafia-run bar regularly subjected to police raids. Within social media, like Facebook and Google+, anonymity is in fact not tolerated, even though Google+ later apologised for enforcing such rigid policies on its users.² Some believe that an upright citizen is someone who is transparent in terms of their visibility and openness about one's identity. I do not share the overall positive depiction of social media by the author, as it misses out on a critique of surveillance and capitalist exploitation of the data that is collected by these companies. On the other hand, it is true that more and more people have access to this form of publicity, and a rising number of voices can be heard. Especially in times of crisis and conflict, comments, posts, links etc., can gather different viewpoints of an event and build a counter public. Reconsidering what has happened,

1 "We are the queer groups, the people that don't belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely in our own respective cultures. [...] We do not have the same ideology, nor do we derive similar solutions. [...] But these different affinities are not opposed to each other." Gloria Anzaldúa, "La Prieta", in Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (eds.), *This Bridge Called My Back. Writings of Radical Women of Color*, New York NY, Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983, p. 209.

2 "Google Plus Stops Requiring Real Names and Apologizes", *CBC News*, July 16, 2014.

how public space is divided, and who takes on the organisational power to manage an event like pride, are very important questions, which need to be discussed in different communities. After controversial events like those of Joburg Pride 2012, it is important to find this space to ventilate some of the emotions. Since I have not been a member of any of these discussion groups and Nyx McLean does not go into detail about how the emotions, regroupings, and exchange was dealt with, we might want to refer to the words of Gloria Anzaldúa – can Facebook be used as a virtual landscape where our differences can fully appear, be acknowledged, respected, not stand in opposition to each other? One shall not underestimate the meaning of new counter publics, new formations of social movements through social media but like Nyx McLean, I am also concerned with the integration of online and offline encounters. How can we perceive these moments of collective bodies in the streets as important moments for building a strong, solidary community? And with acceptance and respect can we – without shame – sense and acknowledge the pain that is part of our community and, in the end, celebrate life? Revisiting these places of crisis can inform us but it can also keep us in the same bubble if we do not wisely choose our conversations. In this sense, it is crucial to go deeper into the question of how we organise this spaces where it is possible to share our differences and break down the barriers between us.