

Warner's Counterpublics

Analyzing the Depictions of Social Media Within Contemporary Gay Literature

Robert Bitsko

This piece serves as the introduction to my senior honors thesis.

The late 20th century represented an intersection in terms of spaces of gay sociality. On the one hand, starting in the 1970's, queer spaces in New York City epitomized not just an avenue for sexual exploration but spaces of community. In this time venues such as the adult bookstore of Christopher Street in Greenwich Village and the cruising zones of the docks by the Hudson River exemplify these queer social spaces that primarily were used for sex yet affected the community around them. These venues produced at first a heightened sense of queer visibility and then a sense of specific community around them-- hubs of activism, commerce and sociality. On the other hand, as Michael Warner argues in *The Trouble With Normal*, major metropolitan areas began to adopt new re-zoning laws in the 1980s and early 1990s, moving these queer spaces of sociality or eradicating them altogether. Traditional arenas of gay socialization—the bathhouse and the sex club – were being zoned out of urban areas such as New York City. Warner argues that this rezoning had an economic and sociological effect upon the queer community. For example, moving traditionally queer adult bookstores – which on the inside constituted a venue for exploration of queer sex, and on the outside produced economic viability for their surrounding neighborhoods – to mixed-use spaces had a detrimental effect in regards to queer safety, sexuality and community-building.

Michael Warner's and Lauren Berlant's "Sex In Public" argues that the loss of these spaces had an ossification effect upon queer life, both in regards to physical community-building and to the ability to relate and connect to fellow queers.

However, as these embodied sites of community were disappearing from physical spaces, social media, in its infancy at the late 20th century, began to

allow for a sense of communication between individuals through chat rooms and message boards. In the early days of internet sociality, the Web was anticipated to become a platform where physical space was no longer a necessity for connecting with fellow queers. This platform served as a forum for a new type of communication, where the sender and the receiver were no longer tethered to physical space.

This new form of interactivity was mentioned in Warner's next work, "Publics and Counterpublics". In this essay, first published in 2002, Warner begins by reviewing how the word "public" is used in our contemporary times. Warner then differentiates between "the" public and "a" public as it pertains to the creation of an audience and the circulatory nature of discourse—the interactivity between the sender and receiver. After establishing his definitions of what constitutes "a" public, he introduces his notion of "counterpublics". Warner states that counterpublics not only exemplify subordinate status to a public, but also have their own specific circulatory nature and mode of discourse—address specific in its speech, topic and theme that could conceivably be met with possible hostility outside of its counterpublic. Warner describes queer individuals as a counterpublic, exemplifying the need for specific spaces as a means of socialization and world making.

Given his descriptions of publics and counterpublics, and of the age in which Warner writes – that of the dawn of Internet sociality – Warner speculates how queer reflexive discourses will be reflected online. Warner shrewdly seeks no conclusion; instead, he questions how this specifically temporal and circulatory discourse will be manifested on the internet. Warner asks how community building, which at first was dependent heavily on physical spaces, self-organization and temporality, manifests itself on the Internet. How can public address, dependent on the temporal episodes and flows of weekly and daily publications, manifest itself in the constantly "erase history" aspect of the Internet?

It goes without saying that Internet culture has drastically changed from the time of Warner's initial questions in regards to Internet sociality in 2002. The idea of having to physically "log on" via a dial-up connection via a phone line, itself a notion of physicality, has since become virtually extinct in our era of Wi-Fi, 3G and smart phone data plans. It is no longer a question of "going on" the internet inasmuch as merely diverting our attention from the physical to electronic, often at the same time.

This diversion, between a physical public and an electronic public, has slowly been depicted within literature. Classically, gay literature has centered around traditional "brick and mortar" establishments: the hedonistic bathhouses in Kramer's *Faggots* and the clubs in Holleran's *Dancer From The Dance* served to exemplify the embodied sociality that Warner speaks of in "Sex In Public" and *The Trouble With Normal*. However, Edmund White, one of the authors that represented the embodied sociality of 1970's gay literature, has written a novella, entitled *Chaos*, that explores this new world on online sociality through fiction. In its title story, White creates a *roman a clef* featuring a "semi-famous" gay author named Jack who navigates life in his sixties in the 21st century. Jack's life is influenced both by past relationships and by current sexual liaisons, and his main sexual and romantic contacts in the novella take the form of Seth, whom he meets via Craig's List, and Giuseppe, whom he meets by more traditional means via the adult bookstore. This trio personifies the rapidly changing world of sociality within the realm of gay literature.

As White's *Chaos* shows through its emphasis on these swiftly changing modes of sociality, it is critical for queer theory at this contemporary moment to readdress the concepts of counterpublics in social media that Warner suggested in 2002. Given Warner's definitions of publics and counterpublics, I will use his frameworks to analyze two works of literature concerned with emerging modes of gay sociality, Andrew Holleran's *Dancer From The Dance* and Edmund White's *Chaos*. I will focus on the manifestations of counterpublics in each and address whether social media can in fact constitute a counterpublic in Warner's sense of the word.

Works Cited

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