

Radical Queers

A Pop Culture Assessment of Montréal's Anti-Capitalist Ass Pirates, the Panthères roses, and Lesbians on Ecstasy

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Cet article nous explique comment des artistes montréalaises « queer » radicales, “Anti-Capitalists Ass Pirates”, les Panthères roses et “Lesbians on Ecstasy” ont transformé la sphère publique en intégrant politique et célébrations dans leurs importants messages à la population.

The focus of this paper is on the radical and activist work of several “queer” groups—a term borrowed in part from Queer Nation. I look at the New York-born activist group renowned for using direct action in fighting for gay rights in the early 1990s (Rand)—based in Montreal. In particular, I will look at the Anti-Capitalist Ass Pirates, the Panthères roses and Lesbians on Ecstasy, all of which offer good examples of the ways in which resistance and the creation of an independent culture work in a push-and-pull fashion, showing the ambiguities of the queer movement. Queer culture is dynamic, contradictory, and diverse in its representations, and sometimes overlaps with its so-called opposition. Comparing the ways in which entertainment has worked in the past to transform social spaces, I want to extend this idea to radical queer groups, and assess their relative impacts on social life, and specifically, on spaces of celebration and protest. I have broken down this paper into three sections to delineate a clear path from “queer” as a concept to “queer” as a community rooted in resistance, to “queer” as a culture of its own.

What is Queer/Who is Queer?

Social categories are born of societal forces; forces “felt by individuals and groups that emanate from the actions and demands of other individuals and groups” (Sundstrom 84). These forces are at work in various ways. A Gramscian approach (Bodroghkozy) suggests complications between normative pressures and individuals, while the Frankfurt School of thought (Cook) proposes a dominant ideology imposed from above. Radical and subversive initiatives purport to be a force from below. According to Michael

Root (cited in Sundstrom), the forces from above label, and the forces from below work within those labels. I will show how queer is labeled, maintained, subverted, and/or re-appropriated in popular culture. According to Aniko Bodroghkozy, popular culture is “one of the crucial fields upon which dominant or elite groups attempt to organize and naturalize consent to their dominance. But paradoxically, popular culture, in order to be popular, must negotiate both the interests of the dominant discourse and the discourse of the subordinate” (Bodroghkozy 218). As such, “queer,” as a word and as a concept, is commonly used, but ambiguously defined.

I can think of four usages of “queer” that are prominent, yet significantly different in meaning: One, popular media such as queer television shows like *Queer as Folk*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* feature gay content and signal that content by using the word “queer” in the title. Second, community-based organizations that are defeated by the necessity of ever-expanding acronyms to include all sexual fringe groups use “queer” as an all-encompassing term. Third, radical activist groups use “queer” to reclaim its original definition (odd/unusual/eccentric/unconventional) and subvert it. And, fourth, “queer” is also used in a pejorative way to denounce and discourage homosexual behaviour and culture, and so is still resisted by certain people who feel it cannot be appropriated, subverted or used to connote freedom and pride. Each of these usages of “queer” differs considerably in terms of underlying politics, but each impacts mainstream culture’s representations of gender identity and sexuality, in particular.

The reclaiming of the term “queer”—though broadened to include various other aspects of identity and community formation, namely race, gender, ability, and class—will be explored throughout this paper. So why use “queer”? Because as this paper will demonstrate, queer politics are predicated on the celebration and valuing of difference(s), while “conventional gay politics are predicated on the assumption that lesbians and gay men

represent a stable and recognizable minority population” (Carrico n.p.). However, the ways in which “queer” works in other segments of the mainstream is interesting and worth noting because the malleability of the word itself. So too is the difficult translation of the word “queer” to French (*allosexuel*), as the radical queer movement is in Montréal predominantly anglophone.

Community-based organizations that cater to the needs of gay, lesbian, bi, trans, two-spirited, and questioning folk use the word “queer” to avoid excluding any other identity-based category. The September issue of *Concordia*

watered-down versions of “acceptable gayness,” which has been heavily critiqued by various radical queer activist groups and academics (Jonet), and in a sense, has become the reason for existence of radical queers, wishing to show a more diverse, if not more realistic representation of queer lives and identities. Radical queers today follow a similar model to that of Queer Nation and various other activist groups from the early 1990s (Rand). The idea is to provoke and subvert the norm by all means possible. In a way, queer identity is (or should be) inherently subversive—that by *being*, a sort of *queering* of social spaces

The queer movement distinguishes itself from mainstream gay movements in that it is less about identity-based politics and more about anti-oppression political actions, less about individuality and more about building community.

University’s student paper, *The Link*, deals specifically with this issue:

using one word to reference communities that encompass a multitude of sexual and gender identities doesn’t really cut it.... Regardless, for the sake of clarity within the Queer Issue, *The Link* will continue to use the word “queer” to describe in general terms the growing body of people who do not identify with mainstream heterosexual norms. (14)

Acknowledging that some people (hetero and homo alike) do not like the term “queer,” it is nevertheless becoming part of mainstream language, unlike “dyke” and “faggot” which are still only acceptable between friends in a community sharing a common understanding of the subversive nature in appropriating the potentially violent act of name-calling.

Popular television shows like *Queer as Folk* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* which use the term queer mostly to connote male homosexuality have had a big part in bringing “queer” to common lingo (Allatson). Shows that provide entertainment for the general public are formulaic, and contend with an audience who ultimately determines its survival. Mainstream usage of “queer” is associated not only with male, but also with white and middle-class. *Queer Eye* is essentially a show that reaffirms capitalist values and encourages heterosexuality by preparing men to find a woman and hold a job through fashion and style. As Paul Allatson writes: “such programming marks the defeat of queer desire’s radical potential to re-territorialize capitalism’s structural ally, the heterosexual economy” (209).

These prime time television shows, as well as others like *Will and Grace* and *The L-Word* are said to represent

incurs. This transformation of public spaces through radical queer *being* and *doing* will be the focus of this portion of my paper.

The groups I have chosen to demonstrate the phenomenon of *queering* space range from the overtly political Panthères Roses, to the more covertly subversive Lesbians on Ecstasy, with the Anti-Capitalist Ass Pirates, somewhere in the middle. The Anti-Capitalist Ass Pirates (ACAP) are a Montréal-based group, “enraged by the profound lack of radical anti-poverty, anti-racists, feminist and pro-trans content in mainstream struggles for inclusion” (Hewings). The Panthères Roses is a “militant group of bilingual queers who have been fighting since 2002, to confront the mainstream GLBT agenda of “assimilation, consumption and conformation to narrow definitions of bodily beauty” (Panthères Roses, CMAQ.net). *Lesbians on Ecstasy* is a Montréal-based music band, recycling lesbian folk anthems and transforming them into techno party hits. Through protest and parties these three radical queer groups transform social spaces—especially those of the protest and the party as we know them.

The queer movement distinguishes itself from mainstream gay movements in that it is less about identity-based politics and more about anti-oppression political actions, less about individuality and more about building community. On their website, the Panthères roses explain the importance of a separate queer community engaged in radical social transformations:

Revolting against all confused categories, and in particular binary divisions woman/man and homo/hetero, queers considered that the pseudo sexual liberation of the 20th century engendered new mechanisms of social control, much more subtle than

before, for example sexual and gender identities, that alienate individuals and impede them from becoming authentic and free.

Queer is radical by virtue of not labeling a part of someone's identity, in the way "lesbian" or "bisexual" does. Furthermore, "radical" implies getting at the root of the problems of homophobia and heterosexism, and their interdependence, rather than a fundamental or fanatical approach aiming to shock which is often associated with radical politics, queer or not.

identical trajectories after all), but rather helps explain the likelihood of the reproduction of these social groupings, via the people who embody certain external and internal similarities. Because space and identity are inextricably tied, and because sexual orientation has become a huge part of identity-based politics, it can be argued that space based on sexual orientation constitutes a real and distinct space, within or outside mainstream culture. With a quick glance at queer spaces, I'm hoping to show that *queering* spaces works differently than a static location or label, and in such, the ways in which radical queers resist is the key

Radical queers work to expand the boundaries of safe spaces and thereby expand the range of acceptable identity categories. The blurring of the lines is an attempt to deconstruct the oversimplification of an identity based on sexual orientation alone.

Without going further into categories of identification and identity politics, I want to examine the concrete ways in which instances of radical queer activity and activism transform spaces and highlight the subtle differences between queer spaces and the *queering* of space.

Queer Spaces or Queering Spaces?

Various theorists have written about the transformation of social spaces, which can apply to the radical queer movement's queering of spaces. Lewis A. Erenberg's article, "Women Out of Control," addresses the transformation of social spaces in the entertainment realm, and the relative impacts of these changes on gendered interactions, class, race, and social structures. Parallels can be drawn between Erenberg's analysis of the transformations of social spaces, and radical queer movements' *queering* of social spaces. But, what is the difference between *queering* spaces and queer spaces?

In Ronald R. Sundstrom's article, "Race and Place: Social Space in the Production of Human Kinds," the idea that social transformation is the product of a deliberate attempt at transforming social space concurrently with social categories is explored. Sundstrom explains that the social production of groups creates a group-specific spatial experience. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu offers the *habitus* as the socially conditioned structures that appear normal and natural in the organizing of our lives (cited in Whitlock). Our social background, and thus our first experiences and social trajectory, shape (in part) unconsciously the components that are comprised in identity. The *habitus* works as system because it unifies various facets of one's identity, and determines the way one is and thinks, which then establishes the social space to which one belongs. The *habitus* does not work in a mechanical manner (no one has

to understanding transformation and transition into a culture that works both to resist and to create itself. Typically, mainstream-queer spaces include The Gay Games (a gay Olympics of sorts), Pride Celebrations/Divers/Cité (a corporately-sponsored celebration of gay life, gay businesses and organizations in the city), and the Village (a clearly demarked area of the city where most commerce is geared to gay (male) consumers) as the most obvious examples of organized mainstream-queer events and locations.

However, radical queers argue that the Village does not serve the needs of the community at large, but rather works as an extension of the closet. In a sense, remaining within the safe walls of the community is understandable due to reasons of safety, comfort, and convenience, but also sets the geographical boundaries whereby being visibly queer is acceptable. Furthermore, radical tactics are used to show how hierarchies reproduce themselves within oppressed groups, and work to put these structures into question. Radical queers work to expand the boundaries of safe spaces and thereby expand the range of acceptable behaviour and identity categories. The intentional blurring of the lines is an attempt to deconstruct the oversimplification of an identity based on sexual orientation alone, by fighting against homophobia along with racism, trans-activism, poverty issues and so on.

In a call-out on friendster.com—a popular website for networking and (re)connecting "friends"—to explicitly *queer* public spaces, the Anti-Capitalist Ass Pirates urged "all queen bees, buggers, ass hoppers and fruity flies" to come out to "get your buzz on and help spread Gay Nile disease with our swarm of gay stingers ... thriving and multiplying in moist environments. Bring bug costumes and portable battery-powered radios, the louder the better. Come out for some public cock (roach) sucking."

As explained on the ACAP website:

Through creating queer spaces outside the officially sanctioned *Village*, the *Ass Pirates* offer a radical alternative for queer resistance, one that works by subverting the pervasive imagery of “straight” urban space into a site for queer perversion. We reject ghettoization in favour of queer mobility and we will sting anyone who gets in our way.

Jujube Molotov, a member of the *Panthères roses*, attributes the renewed sense of struggle to “a younger generation’s disgust with the de-emphasis on politics and the overconsumptive nature of a gay movement that’s leaving many marginalized queers in the dust” (qtd. in Hewings). Dick Hebdige’s work on youth sub-cultures points to the ways in which deviant cultural forms are almost always used by marginal communities (youth, ethnic, women, queers, etc.). According to Dick Hebdige, counter-cultures challenge and change the social order that puts people in positions of authority and power, and unsettles the existing social order.

Pride Celebrations are criticized widely by radical queers who believe that Pride should be equal part protest and party, rather than just a parade. The *Panthères roses* protested Montréal’s DIVERS/Cité Pride Celebrations this past summer with a “die-in” inspired by the tactics used by ACT UP to protest the thousands of gay men dying of AIDS in the 1980s:

Aujourd’hui 1er août, nous nous sommes effondrés en plein village gai à l’occasion de la Semaine de la fierté gaie et lesbienne, en mémoire de toutes les réalités dissimulées et/ou cachées de cette grande nation gaie. Pourquoi évitons-nous de parler de violence conjugale chez les couples de même sexe? Le suicide chez les jeunes gais? La sous-représentation des femmes et des non-blancs au sein de ladite communauté arc-en-ciel? L’homophobie encore très présente auprès des jeunes? Le capitalisme rose de plus en plus sauvage et ancré comme modèle dominant? L’homme blanc professionnel immaculé, incarnant la figure patriarcale? etc. Est-ce que tout cela vous fait danser? (*Panthères roses*)¹

Furthermore, the commodification of the celebration points to the commodification of a culture:

What pisses us off about the parade,” says Emma, “is that, if you look at all the floats, you’ll see Coca-Cola, you’ll see Molson Dry—there are more corporate floats in that parade than ones from community groups. They’re commodifying my sexuality, and I refuse to become a target market. (Pourtavaf)

Instead of a Pride Parade, the Anti-Capitalist Ass Pirates



Lesbians on Ecstasy, Reprinted with permission.



Panthères roses, Reprinted with permission.

held a Shame Parade in which protestors adorned in black clothing biked downtown after the parade with placards stating, “Skip the corporate sponsors and grab the booty.”

The Gay Games are also parodied by the Anti-Capitalist Ass Pirates in one of their themed parties (the gay shame games) and costume requirements. The Anti-Capitalist Ass Pirates host a range of parties that are decidedly political, dealing with a range of issues affecting the mainstream gay community:

this is not a gay marriage party ... think of it more as a debauchorous queer wake in honour of those we’re losing. cause while members of the gayegeoisie are ploughing ahead with their so-called struggle (to win the same rights and privileges that other yuppies have), and lining up at the altar to celebrate being just like all the straight people, people who can’t or won’t hide their diversity, are still getting killed.... (ACAP)

Expulsed from the *Salon du mariage gai et lesbien* (the gay and lesbian marriage expo), The *Panthères roses*

launched their «*Moi, j'appuie le divorce gai!*» (I support gay divorce), campaign. With humour and wit, radical queers are trying to make the point that there are various valid relationships (not just marriage and monogamy, whether they be sanctioned by the state or not (Panthères roses). Forming a Pink Bloc (a play on the International faction “Black Bloc” of anarchist protesters) for the International Women’s Day in March, the Panthères roses, “determined as ever to fight the heterosexist powers choking our society and the gay powers which prefer basking in their privileges instead of confronting global injustices (namely sexism and heterosexism).” The Panthères roses were calling on all queers and allies to join the radical queer block. Media coverage of the story reported youth in ski masks pretending to make-out with each other during the march:

Queering [public space], is an enunciative act, a moment of transgression, when the pseudo-public realm gets reinscribed as a site of possibility.... This possibility has been seized upon by activists intent on destabilizing the assumed heteronormativity of urban public space with the theatrical displays of queer affection, desire and community (Bell 131)

Perhaps they’re most extravagant action on the commodification of love was the St-Valentine’s *L’Opération Pepto-bismol SVP!* (Operation “Pepto-Bismol Please).

pour dénoncer la Saint-Valentin ultra-commerciale s’est déroulée comme prévu en fin d’après-midi dans le Village gai. Après s’être appliqué à vomir dans les magasins et bars des hommes d’affaires gais les plus prospères du village, les membres de ce groupe queer radical ont inondé le secteur de faux coupons-rabais, symbolisant le règne du dollar rose et la mise au pas des gais et lesbiennes dans la société actuelle. (act-mtl.listserv)²

Lesbians on Ecstasy are another radical queer group that promotes a highly political analysis of culture within and without queer environments. Much like the Anti-Capitalist Ass Pirates and the Panthères roses, Lesbians on Ecstasy use pastiche and parody in their reconstruction of old lesbian anthems. Interviewed on CKUT Radio’s *Dykes on Mykes*, Fruity Frankie and Jackie the Jackhammer said that their music allowed them to promote lesbian musicians and educate younger audiences on their roots, yet transform the “vibe” from tame folk to upbeat techno hits. Dressed in matching sports jackets or leather from head to toe, Lesbians on Ecstasy uses costumes to parody lesbian-jock stereotypes, or subvert the notion by dressing up in chaps and camping it up! Nevertheless, the concerts are always a party, and people are dancing to highly politicized lyrics dealing with the commodification of culture and the freedom to love. These three groups, among many

others around the world, use parody, camp styles, pastiche, art, performance, politics, political action, and activism, to *queer* space. In doing so, a radical queer community creates itself, and in working to resist mainstream ideals, a queer culture constructs its own meanings, representations and locations. Community and culture come together in a queer sphere as a space where representation is more diverse in terms of race, body-type as well as sexual orientation and gender identification.

Queer Representation, Community and Culture

Despite the impossibility of assessing the direct impact of radical queer actions on society as a whole, it is possible to note changes that are in line with sexuality and gender identities.

Certain branches of feminism react adversely to a postmodern movement such as these radical queer movements in Montréal because they potentially deny the importance of “women” and “lesbian” in understanding inequality specific to these components of identity (Jeffreys). Nonetheless, the debate over sexuality, gender and identity has been brought to the forefront in unprecedented ways.

What is less talked about, and perhaps more important to note, is that way queers represent themselves; a radical queer culture is created, with its own artifacts, meanings, symbols and spaces. Queer culture, as we have seen in the various examples in this paper, is rooted in politics and action, yet is manifested through performances, costumes and parties. As argued by Rictor Norton, “there has been much specious theorizing to the effect that a queer identity cannot possibly arise in the absence of a queer subculture, which is usually seen as a ‘modern’ phenomenon,” and thus “... queers are not ‘pushed to the margins’ of society, as social constructionists would have it.” (n.p.). Despite being a culture that resists many mainstream ideals, radical queers belong to a community based on its own cultural reference points, jokes, aesthetics, etc. In *Cool Places*, Gill Valentine, Tracey Skelton and Deborah Chambers discuss the ways in which young people find power in resisting adult definitions of their lives, and in doing so, new spaces and ways of living are created—much like the radical queer movement in Montréal aims to. Parties and protests are sites of choice because “the space of the street is often the only autonomous space that young people are able to carve out for themselves” (Skelton and Valentine 19) and bars are public spaces that are already deemed deviant to a certain extent (Ingram, Bouthillette and Retter), *queered* by the presence of the patrons.

Radical queers transform social spaces, especially the spaces of protest, by adding humour in their militancy, and transforming parades and celebration by injecting a dosage of politics. Perhaps they can be said to be a movement merging politics with parties, in order to convey important political messages to the masses, with

free spaces to party and have access to information and meet people sharing similar attitudes and ideas.

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"Today, we swallowed down pink and black pills. Sadly, the dark overtook the pink, at the edge of the gay pride parade. Our lights burnt out in a moment of protest, but also in a moment of questioning. If we fell one by one in the middle of the party, it is in the memory of all the forgotten or hidden realities in this big gay nation: why do we avoid talking about conjugal violence in same sex couples? Suicide among queer youth? The under-representation of women and people of colour in the so-called rainbow community? Homophobia that is still very present among youth? How pink capitalism is becoming more and more rabid and enrooted as the dominant model? Immaculate white male professionals, representing the patriarchal figure incarnate, etc.? Does all of this make you dance?"

"To denounce the commercialization of Valentines Day, took place as planned late this afternoon in Montreal's Gay Village. After puking on the doorsteps of the Village's most prosperous shops and bars catering to gay businessmen, members of this radical queer group flooded the neighbourhood with counterfeit coupons, symbolizing the reign of the pink dollar and the capitalist compliance of today's average gays and lesbians."

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