Reviews


As representations of queer sexuality and identity in mainstream media continue to focus on a white, upper-middle-class identity, large segments of the queer community have been relegated to the margins of the margin. That's Revolting: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation is a collection of pro-queer, genderfuck, activist articles that focus on resisting the hetero-normative and capitalist assimilation of queer identity. It is a response to the current mainstreaming of wealthy gay communities while impoverished segments of queer culture continue to face widespread discrimination. Part “how-to” book and part history book, it looks at and critically analyzes the queer civil rights movement from Stonewall to modern fights about gay marriage. A blend of activist essays and interview transcripts, the book looks at the mainstreaming of queer identity and fights back. It is a shot across the bow for Log Cabin Republicans and those who view television shows such as Will and Grace as groundbreaking. The book looks at “how assimilation robs queer identity of anything meaningful, relevant, or challenging—and calls it progress” (p. 3).

Each essay in the volume acts as a site in the larger argument of resisting institutional oppression. Although the book cites queer American experience and memory, it remains a salient text for Canadian readers, specifically because the writers do not focus on American political oppression but choose to look at how mainstream queers (read “gay and lesbian”) have isolated the less “desirable” segments of queer society. In seeking to uncover how gay and lesbian popular culture has shelved its resistance and activist position, the book looks at queer identity through a harsh lens: the critical narrative examines how “by the twisted priorities of this mainstream, it’s okay to oppose a queer youth shelter because it might interfere with ‘community’ property values, or to enact neighbourhood ‘beautification’ programs that require the wholesale arrest of homeless people, transgendered people, sex workers, youth, people of color, and anyone else who might get in the way of a whitewashed gayborhood” (p. 3).

As I was reading the text I couldn’t help but draw comparisons to Rosemary Hennessy’s “Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture” (1994), an article that

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looks at the mainstreaming and commodification of queer identity. Hennessy
argues (much like the text) that representations of queerness in media have more
to do with the bottom line than with liberation. Unlike Hennessy, however, That's
Revolting does not make the connection between gender and queer politics.
While the book cites the transgender experience and activist memory, it fails to
link any criticism of transgender representation and mistreatment to larger dis-
courses around the politics of gender construction. The text does not mince
words about the appropriation of queer identity. In its attempt to reclaim queer,
however, I think it actually isolates members of the community who are not
actively engaged in advocacy work. The testimonials of the activists/writers of
the text provides the reader with a sense of the evidence that the book uses to
form the arguments against queer assimilation. However, by casting those queers
who do not agree with the text as cultural impediments to queer liberation, it cre-
ates a discourse of exclusion. Although this breaks the myth of the queer mon-
lith and acknowledges the divisions in the queer community, it simultaneously
excludes “mainstreamed” gays and lesbians from the discourse, something that
the text seeks to protest.

As the text examines the mainstreaming of queer and the death of resistant
queer culture, it identifies and examines sites of resistance where the battle lines
to reclaim queer have been drawn. Although the book is persuasive, I’m not sure
to what end, because while advocating a more inclusive definition of the queer
community, it also attacks those who engage in any way with mainstream gay and
lesbian culture. Rather than acknowledge the omnipresent nature of mass media,
the onus is placed on the viewer to completely disengage. Part of the problem with
the book’s line of argument is that it completely disengages from popular gay and
lesbian culture. The editor acknowledges that television is little more than “back-
ground noise” (p. 1). I’m uncomfortable with the uncoupling between the site of
critique and the critic, and I question how queers can protest mainstream assimi-
lation of queer culture without first being aware of and familiar with the current
representations of queerness in the mainstream media.

As a growing number of members of the queer community consider the
implications of the assimilation of queer, the text joins a growing chorus that
identifies the synchronous assimilation of White middle-class gay communities
while isolating queers of colour, transgendered peoples and the queer working
poor. It blurs the line between advocacy and academic text as it seeks to engage
readers on both levels. Although it is successful in its intent to raise awareness of
the growing cultural assimilation practices, it does little to provide the reader
with a theoretical analysis of the mainstreaming of queer, nor does it attempt to
provide strategies for avoiding current media representations. Contrary to its
title, the book provides no strategy for resisting hetero-normative assimilation
outside of its suggestion that HBO’s representations of lesbians and gays should
be boycotted. It therefore fails to educate the reader about real strategies for
resisting assimilation.

Although That's Revolting is an interesting read and full of insightful and
discourse-provoking essays, I believe the book falls short of my original expecta-
tions. It does not give the reader a deeper understanding of the crisis facing
mainstream queer identity, nor does it objectively analyze how representations in mass media have influenced or affected queer identity. Is the book useful? While I remain skeptical of the text’s academic merit, it has collected a series of advocacy articles and interviews from an impressive group of contributors. For no other reason than its contribution to queer activist work, the text’s attempt to provide a space of discourse is noble, if nothing else.

**Reference**

*Marcos Moldes*
*York University*