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Driver, Susan. Ed. (2008) *Queer Youth Cultures*. New York: SUNY Press. ISBN: 978-0-7914-7338-2 (paperback). Viii + 307 pp. RRP: \$27.95

Queer youth are too-often denied voice within youth, either through their absence or their stigmatization as an abject other or sympathetic victim. *Queer Youth Cultures* is a challenging and valuable contribution to a growing body of work that seeks to make queer youth visible within mainstream youth research. The book rejects the entrenched tendencies towards pathologising and essentialising methodologies in youth research, seeing these as inadequate for the investigation of queer youth cultures. The diverse range of work collected in the book is unified through a concerted attempt to move beyond long-standing psychologistic approaches and their often concurrent monological and quantitative biases. By doing so, it attempts to foreground both the reflexive capacities of queer youth and the tangled webs of social relations upon which they bring these reflexive capacities to bear. In this sense, *Queer Youth Cultures* follows in the footsteps of a diverse range of writers (Herdt, 1989; Plummer, 1995; Weeks, 1995; Savin-Williams, 2005) who share a concern over giving voice to the lived experience of gay people.

The book stands out because it explicitly recognizes that the highly reflexive life-worlds of queer youth are not insulated from the outcomes of social research and that there are ethical imperatives that follow from it. The book is animated by an awareness of the pernicious and concrete impact that prescriptive and authoritative discourses of youth sexuality have had on the lives of queer youth; both through clinical and educational intermediaries, as well as through popular culture and their own reflexive uptake of these ideas in pursuit of self-clarification. Structurally, the work that forms the main body of the book is presented in three parts. Each section begins with a short introduction written by Driver and is followed immediately by the work of a varied range of academics, educationalists, activists, artists and queer youth (many of whom belong to more than one of these categories).



The first part, “Performative Queer Youth Cultures, Embodiments and Communities”, explores the way queer youth create meanings, as well as the contexts and mediums through which they do so. Particular attention is paid to the do-it-yourself representational practices they engage in. This autonomous and often radical cultural activity is elaborated in Judith Halberstam’s compelling account of queer youth musical subcultures and their complex interrelationship with the lives of those within the scene, as well as the social world beyond it (ch. 1). Additionally, Angela Wilson’s account of lesbian punk rock illustrates the manifold ways in which subcultural involvement can allow meanings and understandings to be produced (relating, in this case, to gender, queerness and the intersections between them) in ways that have both collective and personal significance (ch. 2). The contexts of such practices are not hermetically sealed and the struggles over meanings are partially constitutive and reflective of society’s wider struggles. While such experiences are relatively marginal in relation to wider society and culture, it is this very marginality that often places them at the forefront of cultural change.

The second part of this book, “Desiring Youth and Un/Popular Cultures”, explores the ambiguous status of queer youth within modern mass media. On the one hand, queer youth cultures stand out as nuanced and heterogeneous alternatives to a quasi-monolithic corporate media concerned primarily with increasing economic and cultural homogeneity. On the other hand, queer youth represent a point of openness in terms of their reflexive engagements with corporate media. For example, they are intimately and innovatively queering its cultural artefacts at the same time as their increasing textual inclusion as sympathetic figures leaves them within a deeply polarised order of a heteronormative society. Of particular interest in this section is the critical auto-ethnography, “Queering Pornography”, conducted by a young queer activist and actor in gay porn (ch. 10). It is a fascinating account of the author’s complex trajectory through intersecting worlds of academia, activism, porn and gay culture. His goal resists any easy reduction to politics, academia, art or erotica; that is, “to participate intelligently and critically in the literal production and creation of queer cultures through pornography” (Tortorici, 2008: 214).

The third and final part, “Transforming Political Activism” explores the inseparability of representative and political aspects of queer youth culture. The life-worlds of queer youth are

interwoven with experiences of discrimination, displacement and symbolic erasure, as well as the material inequalities they help fuel and ingrain. The section explores the multiple ways through which the work of queer youth subverts heteronormativity, the practices and critiques that flow from them, and the social and political organizations that allow for these possibilities to be played out.

The main strength of the book lies in the diverse range of contributions that, while distinct, share an over-arching concern with foregrounding queer youth reflexivity, understanding it as, “cultural and political catalysts” (Driver, 2008: 1). The book’s varied accounts not only help to map out the contours of future research, but they also make important theoretical points, as well as illustrating the importance of relating theory to practice. A further strength is the consistent reflexivity of the contributors. As Halberstam explains: “only rarely does the queer theorist stand wholly apart from the subculture examining it with an expert’s gaze” (Halberstam, 2003: 37).

However, the book is not without its faults. An a priori valorisation of queer youth cultures frames the entirety of the book. While this is not, by any means, an inherently damnable quality, it does leave some room for questioning the assessments made of actual queer youth cultural products. It is certainly true that the ambiguous and underdetermined status of queer youth within society and culture creates all manner of possibilities for creative and emancipatory cultural production. However, the notion that sometimes these possibilities may not get put to action is rarely considered. Furthermore, like any cultural producer, queer youth cultural products may at times be uninteresting or unremarkable. Yet, the book maintains that all aspects of queer youth cultural involvement produce political effects, even if these effects may be indirect and contingent. This could be partially explained through the overly-enthusiastic cultural politics that permeate the book. Yet, it doesn’t follow from the interdependence of representative and political aspects of queer youth culture that all representative acts are necessarily political. Suggesting this necessarily elevates the status of queer youth to that of agents of radical cultural change. It misses the fact that, as a matter of contingency, these are similarly situated individuals whose life trajectories may often produce diverse and destabilizing cultural effects. Therefore, it



not only reads the lived experience of queer youth through a previously-established and largely tacit ethico-political project, but it also fails to do justice to the very particularity that *Queer Youth Cultures* aims to give voice to.

To question this aspect of the book doesn't entail some specious and anachronistic demand for value-neutrality within youth research. Instead, it asks that the values that motivate such inquiries be restrained both by a desire for verisimilitude with regards to the actual lives of queer youth and by a concern to utilize research as a basis for political action, rather than allowing itself to be constituted by it. The research project and the political project are analytically distinct realms and this remains so even when we recognise the political and social consequences of youth research, as well as the manifold investments of researchers in the worlds researched.

As Driver argues, the aim of such research should be, “not merely to celebrate the living cultures of queer youth but also to question and theorize the very languages and contexts through which they emerge” (Driver, *ibid.*, 2). Nevertheless, an over- celebration of culture can hinder the project of understanding it. And, while Driver explicitly recognises this, many of the contributions to the book are, to varying degrees, examples of it. Ultimately, *Queer Youth Cultures* offers itself as a provisional analysis.

Still, the possibility of some of the book's practical details being improved upon shouldn't be seen to detract from it, especially given the depth and sophistication of Driver's own approach. Indeed, from the very first page, Driver recognises that the proliferation of queer youth activity and self-organization represents an opportunity to approach queer youth on new terms. As an important contribution to a growing body of work, *Queer Youth Cultures* is an edifying attempt to think through what these new terms may be.



References

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