

Dr. Benjamin Cheung

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Thresholding: Simplification and Erasure in Queer Politics

Thresholding is a traditional animation that serves as a visual representation of the flattening of multidimensional queer social movements, history, and politics into a single-issue ideology/politics only considering issues of sexuality, pointing to the erasure and harm done on both an individual level and a broader, community level. This erasure includes but is not limited to dimensions of race, class, and gender identity, and is motivated by politics of assimilation/respectability for the purpose of increased inclusion in capitalist and state institutions.

Animation Overview

The first two frames of the animation serve to highlight the two levels at which erasure takes place: the individual, and the community, respectively. Frame 1 depicts a painted portrait of a Chinese girl¹ with a simple background of field flowers. This depiction of flora continues in the following frame, which features a stylized illustration of several tree trunks in a forest and their tree rings from a bird's eye view. The trunks themselves are interconnected with the use of lines that emulate a plant's root structure. I opted to utilize the image of a forest to express the complex, diverse, interconnectedness nature of the queer community; in particular, the choice to showcase the tree rings reflects the significance of queer history. The following frames of the animation quickly lose complexity and dimensionality until all that remains is a figure in one-

¹ The subject is my sister, whose likeness has been reproduced with consent.

dimension: a singular horizontal white line. The animation takes inspiration from gender and sexuality scholar Roderick Ferguson's book *One-Dimensional Queer*, which posits that for queer politics, "multidimensional and intersectional interests were overtaken by single-issue formulations of queer politics, formulations that would promote liberal capitalist ideologies" (8). *Thresholding* as a title refers to the image processing technique of thresholding, which is used to simplify images for later computations, transforming them into binary images (images that comprise only two colour values). The transformation that the animation undergoes can be thought of thresholding in a sense, as the initial multi-coloured illustration in frame 1 ends with a frame consisting of only blue and white. In this, the animation is flattened not only in a geometric context, but in a colour value context; this dual-layered simplification represents the oversimplification of queer politics when approached as only a single-issue ideology.

Historical Erasure

Ferguson posits that "divorcing queer liberation from political struggles around race, poverty, capitalism, and colonization helped to conceal the historical and political complexity of queer liberation itself" and "renew racial, ethnic, class, gender, and sexual exclusions" (13). This concealment of history is reflected in *Thresholding's* transition from frame 3 to 4, as the tree rings of each tree—which are indicative of a tree's history—are erased. Gay liberation certainly did not begin as a single-issue movement, as demonstrated by trans activist Sylvia Rivera's remarks about the participants of the Stonewall riots in an interview: "All of us were working for so many movements at that time. Everyone was involved with the women's movement, the peace movement, the civil-rights movement" (13). Asian American lesbian activist Merle Woo's writing further illustrates the multidimensionality of the Stonewall riots as she writes about the motivations of the activists' opposition to the oppression they faced: "Did they say 'No' to

racism because they were Black and Puerto Rican? Or ‘No’ because of their gender or sexual orientation? Was it ‘No’ because they were poor and working class? It was all those things” (qtd. in Ferguson 49).

However, in the years following, a single-issue formulation would be pushed in the interest of mainstreaming and assimilation, often to acquire more capital and upwards mobility in a capitalist system. This is demonstrated by the editorial changes following entrepreneur David Goodstein’s acquisition of the LGBT magazine the *Advocate* in 1974. Under Goodstein, the publication underwent depoliticization and was rebranded to appeal to a reader who was described by Goodstein as “the upwardly mobile homosexual who has a home in the hills, drives a luxury car, and orders alcohol by brand” (qtd. in Highleyman). The function of this is to formulate respectable queer individuals as those associated with wealth, consumerism, functionally distancing this image from lower-class radical left activists. He actively pushed for a single-issue approach to gay liberation, stating that “gay men and women do not believe achievement of gay civil rights has anything to do with fascism, imperialism, socialism or other aspects of Marxist rhetoric” (qtd. in Ferguson 64). Thus, not only did the changes to the *Advocate* demonstrate a mainstreaming of a queer publication for the purposes of increasing readership and profits, but it also “was a way of producing and capturing a white gay niche market and alienating anti-racist and anti-imperialist concerns” (Ferguson 65). Comparably, a modern-day revisionist history about Stonewall for a white gay market that removes much of the multidimensionality Rivera and Woo speak of can be located in Roland Emmerich’s 2015 historical drama film *Stonewall*, which features a white cisgender gay male as the main character. The film has been criticized for its whitewashed, inaccurate, and reductive portrayal of the riots (Smith). This instance of historical revisionism aligns with queer activist Ehn Nothing’s

remarks on how assimilationists have treated the history of the Stonewall riots: “The presence of gender-variant people, people of color, poor people, and street people at Stonewall and in the gay liberation movement that followed has been erased or minimized by assimilationists who wish to present a respectable movement of reformist white gays seeking inclusion in capitalism and state institutions” (6).

Coalitional Erasure

“So, what did nice conservative gay white men do? They sell a community that liberated them down the river”

- Sylvia Rivera, on the exclusion of trans activists from political discussions on the New York Gay Rights Bill in a 2001 Talk at

LGMNY

One function of reducing queer politics to that of a single-issue formulation is that it works to dissuade formulations of coalitional politics, much like the coalitional nature of the activist work that Rivera spoke of, how many involved in Stonewall “were working for so many movements at that time” (13). This is directly illustrated by the formation of the activist group Gay Activists Alliance (GAA), whose founders left the Gay Liberation Front in 1969 in part due to its “its involvement in radical causes unrelated to gay rights,” setting out to form a group “exclusively devoted to the liberation of homosexuals” (Lauritsen). This intentional separation from coalitional politics is made evident in one of GAA’s own bylaws, which states: “The Gay Activists Alliance will not endorse, ally with, or otherwise support any political party, candidate for public office and/or organization not directly related to the homosexual cause” (GAA 5).

This single-issue paradigm works to effectively reduce the power and efficacy of these radical movements. Sociologist Stuart Hall’s writing on depoliticization is particularly fitting

here, where he describes depoliticization as “the experiencing of issues which are public in character as an unrelated series of private grouses”; he later notes that a consequence of this is that “the general discontent becomes sectional discontents, and sectional discontents are by their nature conservative in temper, in that they seek to advance one section against another” (qtd. in Ferguson 53).

This coalitional erasure is demonstrated in the animation mainly through two transitions. The first of which is the transition from frame 2 to 3, in which the root system connecting each of the trees is removed. In this, this visually symbolizes the shift of viewing oppression as a complex, interconnected set of issues and systems related to multiple facets of identity into what Hall calls an “unrelated series of private grouses” or “sectional discontents” (qtd. in Ferguson 53). This individual, segmented approach to politics is emphasized even further in the transition from frame 4 to 5, in which the frame of many trees reduces to a frame of only one tree. This transition serves to visually represent the isolating and reductive nature of approaching queer politics as a single-issue framing, as well as the amount of complexity and community one cuts out by doing so.

Individual Erasure

The section title “Individual Erasure” indicates that I wish to comment on the erasure that racialized queer people face at an interpersonal level in the queer community as individuals; I do not mean to imply that such erasure and marginalization begins and ends at an individual level, having no broader connections to a racist system/society. This is reflected in the animation by the ephemeral nature of the initial portrait in frame 1; in this, both the multidimensional individual and community are erased in favour of a one-dimensional paradigm.

As multidimensional communities and issues are rendered invisible by assimilationist white gay groups and movements, the consequences of this erasure can indeed be seen and felt at the interpersonal level. When cis, moderate, whiteness is upheld as not only a default but as a respectable ideal, any individual who does not follow such definitions of ideal is seen as undesirable to the community and its image on account of their identity alone. Nothing cites historian and gay rights activist Martin Duberman's *Stonewall* to illustrate the racism and transphobia Rivera experienced from GAA members: "If someone was not shunning [Sylvia's] darker skin or sniggering at her passionate, fractured English, they were deploring her rude anarchism as inimical to order or denouncing her sashaying ways as offensive to womanhood" (qtd. in Nothing 6). Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson were seen as detrimental to the objectives of assimilationist white gay groups just by existing as non-white trans radicals: the "nature of their very identities [were] resistant to the goals of the increasingly-assimilationist gay movement" (Nothing 6).

Participants in Richard Fung's films *Orientalisms* (1986) and *Re:Orientalisms* (2016) touch on issues of in-community visibility on an interpersonal level being predicated on one's proximity to whiteness (i.e. conforming to white gay expectations on appearance) for Asian individuals. In *Orientalisms*, Tony Souza notes how there was an expectation that "you've got to dress this way, you've got to cut your hair this way," adding that "the kinds of style of style that [he is] comfortable with are not acceptable in the gay community; in order to be accepted as being gay [he] had to meet these kinds of stereotypes" (23:00-23:20). In *Re:Orientalisms*, Ponni Arasu explains how when they have a "dyke" haircut, they will not be treated like another "Punjabi auntie" by white people (32:32); they also recalled how her friends who were POC have told her "being queer makes them more recognizable to white people" (32:19-32:25). In

this, Asian individuals are no more exempt from being subjected to ostracizing notions of being an Other, a perpetual foreigner in mainstream white queer spaces than in straight spaces. Only when they conform to narrow white ideals of what “queer” looks like do they get to conditionally access white queer acceptance and recognition.

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