

Reification of desire into classes of sexuality and their implications  
in the sexual advertising industrial complex

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Politics of Sexuality

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7 Apr 2024

Prompt: In our first unit, we defined sexuality as socially constructed. In this part of the course, we examine how desire itself is socially constructed. Compare two case studies from our readings to explain how desire and desirability are shaped by the world we live in.

A frequent lax in judgement of academic, theoretic and moral investigations into human sexuality is that it fails to dissect desire in its full complexity; it is easier to leave desire as a black box of human nature, unexamined and untouched, focussing merely on how—as most queer studies do—society acts upon an individual action, and individual action on society. It is unfortunate that these perspectives fail to realize the conditioning of personal desire by society, the construction of sexuality and even our own perception and identification of oneself—though we may forgive them on the basis that this mapping of human desire is uncharted territory, and paths often lead to capricious questions of personal identity, the breakdown of which is both uncomfortable and possibly emotionally unhealthy. We have a need to classify ourselves by what we want, and the discomfort of questioning ourselves is also directly against the phenomenological, existential mindset much of queer studies adopts; but we must also acknowledge that queer studies have a responsibility to reject reductionistic, reifying ways of reasoning, and thus desire must also be investigated in this way. It would be more prudent, then, to examine desire under a more sterile framework, applying the tools and perspectives we have advanced in our historical dissection of first sexuality, then gender, as social constructs, into sexuality as well. In doing this, I argue in this essay that the instantiation or actions of sexual desire are mostly—if not fully—a socially constructed phenomenon, based on the accusations and advancements made by Srinivasan in *Right to Sex* and the commercialization of queer subjects outlined in Part 3 of Schulman's *Stagestruck*, on the framework of reification of the

visceral and authentic desires by societal forces, into neatly packaged identities of hetero- and homosexuality, gay and lesbian, and further race, gender, class, and beauty.

Society is adept at circumscribing and reifying what one desires into a category of classes, in this case of sexuality. A heterosexual man desires a woman, a lesbian woman desires other women, etc.; indeed "it is patriarchy that makes [heterosexual] sex" (Srinivasan, 36), and equally that "lesbianism [is] 'a woman-identified woman who does not fuck men'" (Srinivasan, 77). Society mandates the classification of desire into comprehensible, neatly packaged forms that are communicable and understandable to others, for example in how heterosexual desire is "marked by male domination and female submission [...] 'hostility and contempt, or arousal of master to slave'" (Srinivasan, 77). These are delineations of desire by the classes of one's sexuality; one is a lesbian, therefore one has sex with women, but also *desires* women. Through these processes human desire is first packaged into classes of sexuality that are clarified through various definitions and then the boundaries are circumscribed through political discourse, tradition, and formal law.

This delineation of groups of sexuality, in combination with the other modes of socially constructed tribalism, namely "racism, classism, ableism, heteronormativity shapes whom we do and do not desire and love, and who does and does not desire and love us" (Srinivasan, 95). It is indeed through this emergence of desire classification or the *taxonomies of desire* that "makes even supposedly unattractive categories of men attractive: geeks, nerds, effete men, old men, men with 'dad bods'" as well as for women: "sexy schoolgirls and sexy teachers, manic pixie dream girls and MILFs" (Srinivasan, 76). Furthermore, our desire, conditioned by social classes,

is further reinforced by the economics of social status, of "fuckability [being] precisely a product of the 'differences in how society rewards you for [for example] fucking blondes v. black women'" (Srinivasan, 103).

Adopting the lens of capitalism, this sexuality and economics of status is further commodified and industrialized into production; theatre, as a form of industrial mass-produced media, converges to a "social trend of artifice," of "props [that are] the commodification of ideas about aids, homosexuality, neighborhood, artistic production" (Schulman, 2), and the "Creation of a Fake, Public Homosexuality" (Schulman, 145). The mass media industrial complex enforces a list of rules and guidelines on the public-facing, marketing department of the homosexual class, which Schulman elucidates: "Homophobia is unmentionable. [...] Gay people are rarely allowed to be the heroes" (Schulman, 147), etc. Nowhere is this more evident than "the rendering of homosexuality into more socially acceptable privatized family units on the reproductive model" (Schulman, 113), where, instead of the often polygamous reality of gay relationships, one is "[promoted] homosexual monogamy [and] offered a traditional consumer image: two cars, home ownership, and keeping up with the Jones-Smiths", within the "gay marriage bandwagon [and the] normative consumer box being promised by [it]" (Schulman, 114, 115)—another packaged desirability class, offered to targeted individuals, and with it the acceptable forms of economic and through it emotional desires within the group.

It is not my argument that an innate, pre-existing *desire* is classified into taxonomies, but that preexisting *ideologies* of patriarchy, ableism, and beauty standards, construct categories of acceptable desire, and assign them to classes. One can, limited and conditioned greatly by these ideologies, identify with and adopt a *desirability class* offered by this system: heterosexual,

white, lesbian, Asian, "dad bods", "manic pixie dream girl"; and accept and identify with a subset of these classes. In turn, one has no choice but to accept the subjective desire (who one desires) and object of desire (who one is desired by) that comes with it, enforced by the status hierarchy of "fuckability." Capitalism further enhances this separation of groups through the construction of consumer classes and targeted marketing: hairdressing, outfits, media consumption, lifestyle products, etc. (that is recently enhanced by algorithmic advertising to "demographics"—these socially constructed demographics—of consumers.) Living in this hyperreality of the desirability economy—both the capitalist economy and the status economy—one inherits the subjective and objective desire of their identified class, while capitalism builds impenetrable walls around these "consumer demographics,"—while the subject themselves perceives these desires as their own, pre-existing, and natural.

Scrutinizing desire through the prism of social construction is uncomfortable in that it defies our instinctual desires to maintain that our private and individual experiences as wholly self-directed. While recognizing the reductive forces at play assists our attempts to question the veracity of our desires, it is equally important to identify and limit the reach a deconstructive analysis can have into something so private. As much as it is clarifying to establish the reifying process of taxonomies and economies of desire, it also erases the tractable, understandable "consent model" of sexuality. The opaque and often inscrutable nature of human desire must again be examined, not only through the methodologies of queer studies but of psychoanalysis, neurobiology, ethics and economics, with a clear understanding of cultural and racial intersections involved in each. But through this collective effort of understanding and dissecting human desire, we may uncover

the nature of processes that govern what I treated in this essay as inherent to the human condition, of tribalism, desire for belonging and identification, and form alternative relations of society where these desires are more fully met, and their complexities flourish.

Schulman, Sarah. *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America*.  
Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.

Srinivasan, Amia. *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*. New York:  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021.