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Christopher W. Clark is an Associate Tutor at the University of East Anglia and a Visiting Lecturer in Humanities at the University of Hertfordshire. They are currently working on a book with Palgrave Macmillan, titled *Queer Transcultural Memory: U.S. Culture and the Global Context*. Their research considers depictions of queerness and deviance in world literature and visual cultures, and the use of digital platforms and affect in the classroom. Previously, they have published articles on the writing of Jesmyn Ward (*Mississippi Quarterly*) as well as having reviewed several monographs. They have an upcoming article on the queer topographics of 9/11 as part of a special issue of the *Journal of American Studies*, and feature as part of an edited collection on Queer Horror with University of Wales Press, both due out in 2020.

## **Introduction: Queer Subjectivities and the Contemporary United States**

According to the Human Rights Campaign, less than two hours after being sworn into office, the Trump administration removed all mention of LTBQIA+ issues were removed from the White House webpages.<sup>1</sup> This reignited what has turned out to be a systematic erasure of the subjecthood of queer individuals living both within the borders of the United States and in countries all over the world. Despite acts of resistance ranging from the Women's March and activism by the HRC and Black Lives Matter, the contemporary moment has become increasingly precarious for those who identify, or are identified, as queer. Faced with an administration that is actively hostile towards those who do not fit into the increasingly restrained confines of the heteronormative, the politically disruptive focus of queerness has become even more prescient. The articles contained within this special issue therefore investigate the ways in which queerness is a mode of being and resistance, exploring a range of identifications and subjectivities from different theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary perspectives. Indeed, it is the variety of these perspectives on US queerness that is foregrounded and celebrated. The expansive nature of the queer subject also validates how queer studies can be incorporated into other theoretical arenas, whilst the particularity of this historical juncture highlights how queerness can be understood in specific times and places—demonstrative of how static norms can no longer function yet continue to exert culture force.

This special issue argues for the legitimacy and importance of developing queerness to incorporate a range of political identities and social positions that exist outside of the normative core of contemporary society. This builds on the long history of queer studies exemplified by Cathy J. Cohen's 1997 essay, "Punks, Bulldykes, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?", that identifies queerness as not simply a marker of gender and/or sexuality but one that considers the wider intersections of those sublimated by

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<sup>1</sup> See "Trump's Timeline of Hate," accessible via <https://www.hrc.org/timelines/trump>.

the forces of heteronormativity. One might consider this as a form of antinormativity that includes, for instance, children and people of color within what Jack Halberstam indicates is “the excess” of queerness that disrupts “identity and the violence of power and the power of representation” (1993: 193). The political figure of the queer, then, becomes limited by political discourse in Lee Edelman’s terms (2004), or demonstrates how the present becomes what José Esteban Muñoz calls a prison house for queerness (2009). Given that theorists have argued for the purpose of queer studies to consider the relationship between sexuality, race, and gender (Harper et al, 1997; Johnson and Henderson, 2005; Adbur-Rahman, 2012; Pérez, 2015) in addition to disability (McRuer, 2003; Puar, 2017) and class (Goldman, 1996) within a transnational framework, it becomes crucial to continuously examine how heteronormativity functions across a variety of intersectional identities and social positions.

Given the multivalence of identities encompassed by the United States, and the country’s transnational status within the context of globalization, it becomes imperative to not only consider the how the US nation functions within that network but to do so in a way that encompasses the diversity of its population. Given the rise of populism, particularly since the 2016 election, the need to do so is more important than ever. In the last two years alone, the Trump administration has seen numerous rollbacks of progressive initiatives that have sought to shore up anti-discrimination practices. This has included the installation of right-wing Supreme Court judge Brett Kavanaugh, in spite of testimony about his prior conduct towards women by Christine Blasey Ford; ending the Department of Education policy of hearing complaints from transgender students about bathroom access as well as the prevention of transgender people serving in the military; and the detainment and separation of families at the US-Mexico border, to name but a few. All of this has occurred in the same decade as the attainment of marriage equality, albeit with a problematic shoring up of homonormativity that excluded certain groups based on race and ethnicity and perceived as a

“terrorist” threat to the nation’s wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> This dramatic shift in acceptance demonstrates the continuous flux that the norms of the United States are in, and how a continued interrogation of them is necessary. It is the intention of this special issue to provide such interrogation through the representations of the subjectivity of queerness in this contemporary moment in a variety of cultural forms.

The importance of literature and cultural representation to understand the dimensions of queerness has long been held invaluable. As Ramzi Fawaz and Shanté Paradigm Smalls suggest, the activist group Queer Nation in 1991 compiled an exemplary manifesto of overlapping voices that demonstrated the “necessity of embracing a revolutionary view of queer existence” (“Queers Read This!”, 2018, 170). The transformative and productive act of reading queerness “indexes a range of creative and intellectual capabilities,” that makes reference to, deconstructs, renovates, interprets, and challenges queerness to not only “gain pleasure, develop knowledge” but to “make a mark on the world” (171). Reading queerness, then, is to not only consider texts that might appear queer at first glance: it is to identify the embedded logic of cultural forms that contain the wider processes of queering that exist within the political and social landscape. Thus, analyzing the function of queerness within a literary context becomes another node through which cultural theorists and practitioners can understand the ironically central role that queers play within the cultural history and political phenomenon of areas such as the United States. It is worth repeating here that the specificity of national belonging to a country such as the US does not just bear down on those in proximity to its borders but spans outward to consider the global scale and logic of its geopolitical operations.

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, this also recalls the more recent Muslim travel-ban by the Trump administration that refused entry to those from, and travelling between, seven Muslim-majority countries that included Iran, Yemen, and Syria. The Executive Order, 13769, was also known by the title “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,” the wording of which creates a parallel between Muslim populations and terrorism.

The seven articles in this special issue present a diverse range of topics yet demonstrate the breadth of queer subjectivities that can be seen in, and around, the United States today. The wide scope of cultural texts between each contributor and article should not be surprising given the present danger to those who are imagined, conceptualized, and denoted as queer. The return to a closer examination of texts might also be seen to invoke a turning or looking back that is reminiscent of theorists such as Heather Love (2009), one that this special issue suggests is especially required in this particular moment. Not only does this feeling back offer a reformulation of what is constituted as visible but indicates the multiplicity of contemporary cultural forms that can be read as queer. The range of materials that the authors examine move from books to poetry, to documentary and television, demonstrating a range of cultural texts that despite their differences—or perhaps, *because* of their difference—share sets of characteristics and commonalities. Across the readings set out here, there is a preoccupation with embodiment, precarity, and resistance that leads back to the work of those such as Puar, David Eng, and even Judith Butler.

In “American Queeroes: Coming-Out Narratives in the *Captain America* Fandom,” Sarah E. Beyvers and Florian Zitzelsberger examine the fan and social responses to the cinematic representations of Captain America as part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In doing so, they engage with the heteronormative framing of the character and how this can be undermined through the creation of fanfiction. Jon Ward’s “Serving Reality TV ‘Realness’: Reading *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and its Construction of Reality” explores constructed reality television and drag, analyzing how they can operate as a disjuncture from the violences that are enacted against queer bodies. Investigating how reality is portrayed within the confines of a prescribed format, Ward uncovers how the popular competition format of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* shifts between knowing artifice and the suggestion of authenticity as a way to rearticulate particular notions of hegemonic power. In “Queer Densities in Garth Greenwell’s

*What Belongs to You: Narrative, Memory, Corporeality,*” Christopher Lloyd discusses Greenwell’s novel to draw attention toward the density of texts as a queer form of resistance. The article considers embodiment, narrative form, and cultural memory to rethink queerness from its more recent preoccupation with temporality. Moving from the novel to poetry, Aimee Merrydew’s “Reflecting (on) the Body: Trans self-representation and resistance in the poetry of Ely Shipley” traces the markers of trans\* identity in Shipley’s *Boy with Flowers* to consider the use of first-person perspective in the poems that offer readers a subversive means of self-representation that works to undermine how trans\* bodies are conceptualized in wider culture. Jacob Breslow’s “‘Flirting with the Islamic State’: Queer Childhood with a Touch of Contemporary Sexual Politics” looks at the intersections of the queer child, homonationalism, desire, and the #MeToo movement, examining the documentary form to analyze the ways that a failure of accountability leads to a lack of cultural recognition of childhood desire and abuse that is subsequently rendered as exceptionalist. Incorporating creative and artistic elements into an academic exploration of temporality in the United States since 2016, D Mortimer’s “The Heart-Sink and The Hood-Wink: A Creative-Critical Assessment of Temporal Queerness in the year 2016” examines the queer ruptures that took place in a time inextricably linked to the rise of populism, turning to an ethnographic examination of time and affect as a way of comprehending the conditionality of living in a post-truth world. Finally, Sam McBean’s coda ties together the work of, and between, each of the articles featured as part of this special issue by exploring the use of queer form and networking, drawing comparisons between their exploration in each of the articles with an analysis of the television show *The L Word*. In so doing, McBean raises the pertinent questions around aesthetic and political possibilities.

It should be evident that the wide-ranging and exciting work featured here is forward-thinking, rigorous, and concerned with current cultural paradigms of queerness. From the

inception of this special issue that followed the inaugural conference of the Queer Studies Network in August 2017 at the University of East Anglia, UK, the authors have sought to push the ways that queer studies can be imagined. Moving away from clearly theoretical considerations of queerness (Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz, 2005) or more specific investigations into the inhuman (Chen and Luciano, 2015), the Child (Gill-Peterson et al, 2016), the future (Edelman, 2004; Muñoz, 2009) or the body (Holland et al, 2015), this special issue foregrounds its exploration of queerness from a variety of perspectives. Moreover, rather than being exhaustive, this issue points to a selection of approaches that are just some at the forefront of queer studies. Each of the scholars represents a different stage of their career, from the academic community and beyond, to lend an international perspective to how queer subjectivities can be understood at this particular moment. Offering new routes into the study of queerness, cultural texts, and political conditionality the articles create an intersectional approach that demonstrates the provocative and productive power of textual analysis with a queer-centric focus. It is my hope that this special issue offers an indispensable intervention into the field and extends the analysis of political subjecthood in the United States today.

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