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Avoiding epistemic imperialism: Queerness, contingency, and translation in postcolonial scholarship

An Interview with Neville Hoad, *University of Texas at Austin*

Interviewers: Jacob Saindon and Kirsten Corneilson, *University of Kentucky*

Neville Hoad is Associate Professor of English and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, and affiliated faculty with the Center for Women's and Gender Studies, the Center for African and African American Studies, and the Bernard and Audre Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice. He authored African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality and Globalization (Minnesota, 2007) and co-edits (with Karen Martin and Graeme Reid) Sex & Politics in South Africa (Double Storey, 2005). He is writing a book on the literary and cultural representations of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Jacob Saindon (JS) & Kirsten Corneilson (KC): *We put you on the spot and asked you to describe queer theory, to which you responded that it involves three essential elements: “anti-definitionalism,” an “anti-normative logic” and a “coalitional dream.” We all found this to be powerful! Given this definition, how do you apply queer theory in your work, and how has that changed over the years? Who have you read that excites you in the ways they are using queer theory, both in the past and today?*

Neville Hoad (NH): These are great questions. Thank you. Some of them I can attempt to answer and some of them I can only elaborate.

“Three essential elements:” My unconscious is clearly attached to a trinity formula. “Essential” and “essentialism” were key words, antonyms even, in my imagined origin of “queer theory” in the mostly U.S. academy of the 1990s as “queer theory” attempted to sublimate strands of feminist and lesbian and gay studies in its self-production, and sublimation is a very different concept-metaphor to essence. Consequently, the term “essential” makes me theoretically nervous. What if we called them three contingent or three mutually determining elements?

On the anti-definitionalism/anti-essentialism element: Judith Butler's now classic *Gender Trouble* (1990) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) can be produced as inaugural texts in that sublimation, though the term “queer” is not central to either text, and while they make powerful anti-essentialist arguments, neither of them explicitly engage the social movement emergence of the term growing out of the North Atlantic HIV/AIDS crisis. ACT UP (founded 1987) and Queer Nation (founded 1990) are arguably the central organizations here, but there were others. Two key texts from what came to be known as “the affective turn” – arguably itself partially spun out of queer theory – Deborah Gould's *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (2009) and Ann Cvetokovic's *Archive of Feelings*, particularly the chapter on ACT UP's lesbians provide the historical ballast to queer theory's theory. Though as early as 1995, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner warned that “Queer Theory is not a theory of anything in particular and has no precise bibliographic shape.” I think that is where I find the “anti-definitional” most cogently expressed, and it is a warning that my genealogical desire for an origin or a description forgets at its peril.

The “anti-normative logic” is similarly difficult because of terrifying manifestations of anti-normativity. I write about those manifestations in a 2014 article “Back in the Mythology of the Missionary Position: Queer theory as Neoliberal Symptom and Critique.” Moreover, the queer theory I admire has strong normative commitments to ideas of justice and more problematically self-fashioning and freedom.

The “coalitional dream” repeatedly fails to materialize. Jose Munoz’s injunction in *Cruising Utopia* (2009) that “We must vacate the here and now for a then and there” is the best redemptive response to those failures alongside Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). I think it is important to keep the aspirational future of queerness open.

Broadly speaking, I think queer theory allows me to think in multiple registers: abstract, historical, embodied and affectively saturated, though I have reservations. Thinking the going global of queer theory without the deployment of imperial rhetorics and tropes is an extraordinarily difficult task, and thinking that going global is impossible without taking the imperial histories of knowledge production into account. I ponder those difficulties further in the preface to “Arrested Development or the Queerness of Savages Redux” in 2018. Rahul Rao’s meticulously researched and argued *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality* (2020) is the best attempt I know to theorize the relationship/s between queerness and postcoloniality. Rao argues persuasively for a historically contingent relationship. Under colonialism “queerness” was seen as indigenous and potentially anti-imperial. Under postcoloniality, queerness is seen as imperial and homophobia as indigenous. The book’s sophisticated and nuanced theorizing of temporality and memory complicates my brutal summary here, but that is the gist of the argument. The most forceful counterargument that those relationships are epistemic rather than contingent is made by Joseph Massad most thoroughly in *Desiring Arabs* (2007), and Rao does not engage Massad’s work at all.

JS & KC: *Your work engages with literary fiction and nonfiction texts, and you described in your talk that your work uses a relatively narrow method of literary analysis. Could you tell us more about how your disciplinary methods enable and/or limit your engagements with queer theory? Conversely, what do you see as the strengths and limitations of interdisciplinary methods in relation to queer theory? Are there any particular methods or disciplines that you think are producing exciting contributions to queer theory?*

NH: In short, one works with what one has, which is a monosyllabic English translation of Levi-Strauss’s notion of bricolage. I was an English major as an undergraduate. My PhD was in English and Comparative Literature and my career has been primarily in an English department. I remain attached to some version of close reading, though that version of close reading must extend to context, methodology, and theoretical and political commitments and framing. Since Queer Theory can be vague, insurgent, and imperial, many disciplines are fair game.

JS & KC: *Who are some other scholars (or non-scholars!) whose work is inspiring your own, and who people interested in ‘queer Africa’ should be reading?*

NH: There is a wide range of field-transforming academic work and cultural production emerging, both within African national contexts and in the generative but sometimes tense

encounters between what Paul Gilroy called the Black Atlantic and the continent. Recent highlights for me would include Keguro Macharia's *Frottage* (2019), which shows just how generative that encounter can be. I think the conceptual and experiential dialectic between "diaspora" and "indigeneity" in the thinking of "queer Africa" is the defining question of the moment. T.J. Tallie's *Queering Colonial Natal* (2019) is the best piece of historical writing on that question that I know, and while Tiffany King's *The Black Shoals* (2019) does not consider continental specificities, there is so much to be learnt from it methodologically. The problem of the archive is central here too: how can we imagine/conjure/concatenate a usable past without collapsing back into the tradition/modernity split so central to the received wisdom of African studies as a field, when the historical archive as we find it was invested in writing blackness/queerness out of existence. An earlier postcolonial criticism urged us to read the colonial archive against the grain. I think Saidiya Hartman's praxis of "critical fabulation" sublates that injunction. The recent South African film *Inxeba* (2017) (*The Wound* in English) does similar kinds of work.

JS & KC: *In our discussion after your talk, you described an intellectual practice of "being able to imagine what you can't know and being responsible to that." Could you expand on how you've held to this idea in your work, and more generally how you envision this responsibility in relation to queer theory and its 'subjectless critique'?*

NH: This is a super-tough question. One is caught between the Scylla of a kind of nativism that asserts you have to be X to know X which renders all knowledge either solipsistic cultural property or a version of native informancy and the Charybdis of an epistemic imperialism – "I can go anywhere, know everything because my intellect/imagination is powerful and universal." I find neither of those options acceptable. An example might help to clarify here. When I was writing about Wole Soyinka's 1966 novel *The Interpreters*, I had a strong sense that the novel was deeply engaged with figures and ideas in Yoruba cosmology – to call it cosmology is already to have embraced sufficient distance to make a mistake, so I read a few books on the topic (as one does) following Gayatri Spivak's enabling "Do your homework in language and history. But I did not have the time nor the energy and maybe not even the capacity to learn Yoruba, and even if I did, because of my own life and reading experience. I could never reach the kind of mother-tongueness that I intuited to be going on, and we all know what happens when white people try to go native. At the same time, I did not want to give up and not write about the novel at all. Joe Golder in that novel is a kind of inaugural figure in the representation of homosexuality in African literature and for the wider argument of my book, I needed to work out what he was doing. So, mark your limit, acknowledge that there is something to know here, but I cannot know it, so then when you get it wrong, you won't have got it confidently, smugly, insultingly wrong and if you are lucky, you will have left the space open, perhaps even invited a reader whom you cannot even imagine yet to come in and do that imaginative or explanatory work. To do that without deploying a kind of Romantic exoticism is the challenge for a reader/writer in my position. There are many other positions. In the talk I shared with you, I can know something about what it feels like to be a lesbian Zulu sangoma because of Nkabinde's book, and even when a text wants to divulge its secrets, which I think that book does, so much gets lost in translation – with translation as both a practice and a metaphor. To put it simply – a blind spot is a paradoxical thing – you cannot see where you cannot see, but you can retroactively see where that blind spot was. So, if I were to translate "being able to imagine what

you can't know and being responsible to that," into advice, it would be get to know your blind spots and delineate them when you can. And now I see the ableism of blind spot as another "blind spot" here...

JS & KC: *Closer question: Who gets to write about queer Africa? How do issues of power and identity shape the field?*

NH: I think I half-answered this question above, but I would add that although issues of identity can both enable and disqualify, one can also take positions against the positions that identities can imply. In terms of the field of "African Queer or Queer African scholarship," I need to hang onto the possible delusion that despite the institutional and market determinants by everything from intellectual property regimes to dissertation defenses to promotion and tenure decisions that strive to produce a singular author, scholarship remains a collaborative and communal endeavor. You authorize yourself by how you engage the thoughts of others in and around your question. Now to get back into that problem of the archive gestured to earlier, that body of scholarship is often constituted by a set of vicious exclusions. You need to engage those too. How do you produce/engage your intellectual inheritance: what do you want to reproduce, block, love, annihilate?

I sometimes say to my students that the life experience in this classroom may be staggeringly diverse and the power dynamics within the room are not remotely egalitarian, and our levels of comfort in that room are not the same, but the fact that we are all in this particular room reveals a non-trivial commonality in global geopolitics. (The force of this statement is attenuated on Zoom, but still holds.) A classroom in a PWI U.S. research university is historically and structurally a place of quite spectacular privilege, while precarity and security are distributed massively unevenly within it. In those terms, I would analogize the classroom to scholarship, though in other ways they are very different kinds of assemblages.

There can never be a meritocracy under conditions of globalized racial capitalism, and neoliberal rhetorics of excellence and diversity have saturated the university, but how to use your privilege to undo privilege remains a key question – even as I think the word "privilege" is currently being used to name and obscure a vast range of inequalities. I would prefer to partially depersonalize the question: while the who writes and what gets written are inseparable, in the last instance I need to hang onto assessments around thoughtfulness, care, range of engagement, smarts etc. I would like to see identity enabling and not identity policing, but some of the latter may be unavoidable.

JS & KC: *You mentioned your commitment to the project of critique, which you discussed in relation (and perhaps in contrast) to the role of activism in the academy. Could you tell us more about how you see the role of critique, and how that role complements scholar-activism (or vice-versa)?*

NH: This answer will be idiosyncratic. I get defensive about critique, because I think a strand in affect theory largely produced out of a simplistic reading of Eve Sedgwick's incredibly generative essay on reparative reading thinks we can dispense with critique altogether, and all we need is weak theory, if that. I say simplistic because the Sedgwick essay is in many ways a

Kleinian essay and for Klein, reparative work can only happen in the depressive position, so it is painful and difficult and self-destabilizing. That intellectual and emotional difficulty makes me suspicious of any claim about reparative reading that thinks it is an easy answer to the intransigent problems that continue to lurk in the vicinity of queer. And to show my own fraught allegiance to weak theory, I am generally more of a “both/and” than an “either/or” person, so I think we need both weak theory and attention to determinative structures, both critique and nuanced attention to affective domains...