Max Schnepf

Back Home to Normal?

Emerging Spaces of Queer Intimacy and Ethnographic Pathways.

When Dorothy Gale is thrown into the magical Land of Oz, the Good Witch of the North tells her to follow the yellow brick road to Emerald City where the Wizard of Oz would help her to get home. Following Dorothy on her journey, viewers of the iconic movie are perpetually reminded of the puzzles and oddities accompanying such a quest for "back home". With the new coronavirus spreading over the globe like the tornado over Dorothy's home in Kansas, the quest and nostalgia for such a "back home", often articulated as a yearning for "normalcy" as it used to be, occupies discourses around the globe. At the same time, people had to find their way around in an unfamiliar world – and so did anthropologists who are used to immerse themselves in the lives of their interlocutors. For my doctoral research, I will engage with the biomedical HIV-prevention PrEP ("Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis") and how it reconfigures intimate encounters of gay men in Berlin. Intimacy is at stake – both as a methodological prerequisite of most fieldwork endeavors and as a topic.

This blog post presents a speculative engagement with the new roads taken by the "friends of Dorothy" in post-Tornado Berlin – and the anthropologist upon their ruby slipper heels. More precisely, I ask how gay men have sex and engage intimately, and which spaces of queer intimacy are emerging along their quest for habitable presents and futures. Which pathways will and could anthropology take in these disturbing times and will the yellow brick road lead us back to where we started, to the familial home in Kansas? Dorothy does not take the journey to Emerald City by herself but meets three figures who become her companions. A tin man missing a heart, a lion hoping to find courage and a scarecrow looking for a brain shall serve as queer guides in this exploration of sex and intimacy in Berlin.



Dorothy and her queer friends on their way to Emerald City. Source: Flickr, in compliance with the CC BY-SA 2.0 license.

The Tin Man without a heart: No sex in public?

Beyond those bodies infected by SARS-CoV-2 and developing symptoms of COVID-19, the pandemic has had far-reaching consequences for the organization of social life in general – sometimes giving off the impression that we are thrown into an unfamiliar world whose workings and logics we still have to figure out as we wander its roads. In the realm of sex and physical intimacy, insecurities about if and how to engage with one another have been especially pronounced, with non-normative forms of sex – i.e. non-monogamous, non-domestic, gay, and commercial sex – being moralized and stigmatized once again (Schnepf & Probst 2020).

After a crackdown on "adult businesses" in New York City in 1995, Berlant and

Warner (1998: 551) identify two options for gay men to find sex: “the privatized virtual public of phone sex and the internet” or “small, inaccessible, little-trafficked, badly lit areas, remote from public transportation and from any residences”. While the arrangement of sexual encounters has changed tremendously in the past 20 years, these two options do not seem too far-fetched in these pandemic times. Berlant and Warner contend that heteronormative society delegates intimacy to reproduction and romanticized notions of love in the privacy of the household and the home. However, since queer folk are often deprived of these private institutions of intimacy, they depend on public venues to create counter-publics of queer sociality. As in many other places around the world, these venues – clubs, saunas, community spaces and bars where queers meet kindred spirits to talk to, dance with and fuck – had to close down in Berlin due to the current pandemic.

The Lion looking for courage: Creating spaces and practices

After public venues shut down, the “friends of Dorothy” – a code word used among gay men and queers, inspired by the 1939-film version of *The Wizard of Oz* – found new ways of getting in contact both socially and sexually. In Berlin, the public park Hasenheide hit national headlines for its illegal parties and the sexual activities taking place in the bushes (Mannes/as 2020). Through this relocation of Berlin club life, the gay practice of cruising – that is, meeting people in public places for anonymous sex – enjoyed a revival.

Not everybody joined the parties at Hasenheide. The majority of queer folk adhered to the corona measures and tried to explore other ways of building a community and having “corona safe” sex. Drawing on experiences of the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, prevention organizations and activists advised people to stay at home and have sex online (e.g. The Cranky Queer 2020). Their advice encompassed a variety of practices ranging from masturbation with sex toys to using webcams for cybersex.

Additionally, clubs, organizations and performers established virtual parties, online streams, workshops, hangouts and conferences, creating new spaces for queers to come together while physically staying at their homes. Such virtual spaces have the potential of what Berlant and Warner termed a queer counter-public – a space that, beyond the pleasures of sex and partying, "nurtures solidarity and acceptance, and builds queer interactions and identities in a global crisis" (Altay 2020).

The Scarecrow in search of a brain: Where to go from here?

With the arrival of the new coronavirus, not only the gays are thrown into a new world, but anthropologists, too – not to mention gay anthropologists. Exploring emerging spaces of queer intimacy by ethnographically following the gays to the parks and into cyberspace provokes questions and considerations. One is concerned with the social and material conditions for intimacy to *take place* in the literal sense of the word. An attention to the "infrastructure of intimacy" asks for the contexts and conduits of intimacy – that is, "how intimate relations are shaped by, and shape, materializations of power" (Wilson 2016: 263). Apart from nurturing solidarities and providing the possibility of exploring one's sexuality, neither parks nor the internet are places devoid of power relations. For instance, the widely used video-conferencing tool Zoom started deploying machine learning to detect nudity and thus banned sex from their platform (Harris 2020). Especially online, the conjunction of technology, morality and corporate interests can produce new forms of surveilling and controlling queer intimacies. How do these infrastructures reconfigure what intimacy is, how it is lived and experienced? What will be the effects on sexual and intimate encounters in a post-corona future? Will some of these spaces of queer intimacy remain or will everything go "back to normal"?

The transformation of queer spaces and intimate encounters also gives rise to methodological and ethical concerns about sexual ethnographies (Bolton 1995). How

can one conduct research among already marginalized sexual groups in semi-legal and semi-public spaces in way that does not bring harm to the people involved? Does the topic demand the anthropologist's own intimate participation in the field? And how is such an "intimately impure ethnography" (Hall 2020) possible, when the physical co-presence bears the risk of infection for anthropologist and interlocutors? In how far does the migration into virtual spaces facilitate or complicate ethnographic fieldwork? As anthropologists follow the gays along the yellow brick road, not only are the presents and futures of intimacy being redone, but also the ethnographic engagement with emerging spaces of queer intimacy. Will it lead us, like Dorothy, to Emerald City and then straight back into the familial home? I hope not.

Written on 4 October 2020

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