

○ INTERSECTIONS IN QUEER THEORY AND POSTCOLONIAL THEORY, AND HERMENEUTICAL SPIN-OFFS

Jeremy Punt, University of Stellenbosch
Correspondence to Jeremy Punt: jpunt@sun.ac.za

In the intersection of Postcolonial and Queer theory the focus can be directed towards their sustained interaction with the contemporary politics of identity, including reflection upon the categories and institutions, and the knowledge(s) and the power plays by means of which social dynamics and people are structured and regulated, and how such dimensions impacted upon biblical interpretation. Beyond this, and in focus here, the destabilizing effect of Queer theory, which subverts the self-evident notions of power and marginality, centre and periphery, can be explored, particularly in its intersecting with postcolonial studies. A number of important connections in Queer and Postcolonial theory are emphasised, including epistemological and hermeneutical considerations; difference; marginality; agency; mimicry; and the quest for a new world order.

INTRODUCTION

The ‘convergence of concerns’ (Hawley 2001: 1; cf Campbell 2000) in the areas of postcolonial and queer studies has been investigated in literature studies, but the potentially fruitful interaction between Postcolonial and Queer theories in biblical studies has not attracted much attention.¹ Granted, postcolonial and queer are arguable terms, and broader constellations of (often, remarkably) diverse and conflicted formations and discourses, while as theories both derive their critical focus from uneven relationships of power, relationships of domination and subordination² (cf eg Segovia 2005: 25). The investigation of the intersections between Postcolonial and Queer theories can in itself make for an interesting venture, while a comparative enterprise³ may render further important theoretical and other spin-offs for biblical interpretation.⁴

Queer biblical criticism is used here as ‘umbrella term’ for the variety of critical approaches encapsulated by it,⁵ characterised by their questioning and destabilising of sexual identities⁶ and countering cultural prejudice against sexual minorities (Donovan 2001: 266 n72). More basically, Queer theory challenges the conventional framework⁷ for human sexuality that produces heterosexuality and homosexuality, and considers religious ideas as the cultural means of production for that system (Schneider 2000a: 3; 2000b: 208); in short, Queer theory denounces sexuality as a universal and eternal drive while affirming it as a social construct.⁸ Queer biblical criticism requires that new attention is given not only to the interpretation of the biblical material on corporeality and the body, on sex and sexuality, and on gender and gender performativity (= roles), but also the way that such issues are addressed be considered.

Postcolonial biblical criticism, which has been around slightly longer, is similarly a collective term. It is not about the proliferation of hermeneutical or exegetical methods, since it can and does utilise a variety of different⁹ methodologies – although some traditional scholarly methods are excluded because of their theoretical positions and imperialist stances. In the end, though, postcolonial biblical criticism is about a different focus and purpose, rather than a different

hermeneutical method, and it reserves special attention for ideology criticism and suspicion hermeneutics (cf Punt 2003).

Building on earlier, preliminary work (Punt 2005) on the investigation of postcolonial and queer intersections, the goal of this contribution is to further juxtapose the postcolonial and the queer in order to explore particular theoretical convergences and divergences, and to inquire about possible interaction between the two theoretical paradigms. To be clear, the theoretical and other conflicts between them should not be diminished, or the complex and conflicted, the diverse and hybrid natures of Postcolonial and Queer theories¹⁰ denied. Nevertheless, the affinity between these theories includes their venturing beyond easy (read, conventional) binaries, insisting upon an ideological critical posture, and investigating the sources, nature and scope of power and its exercise.¹¹ Even stronger, both these theoretical approaches try to demystify the conventional, the normal and the traditional – both are intensely interested also in understanding how concepts and categories claiming universality were formed or constructed, their interdependency and often reciprocal convergence, as well as in whose interest and for whose benefit they were constructed. In short, Postcolonial theory alerts and assists Queer theory to move away from and to desist from either homogenising same-sex love in a White, Western, capitalist and male gay model, and from its inverse, of orientalising which is exoticising and othering, ‘that blandly translates the “other” and obliterates all difference’ (Hawley 2001: x).

This essay takes as starting point the concern of Postcolonial and Queer theory with identity, proceeds to investigate the value of a number of essentially postcolonial analytical and heuristic categories for Queer theory, and concludes with a few remarks about the value of comparing Postcolonial and Queer theories.

HEGEMONY, DOMINATION AND GENDER: IDENTITY AND POWER

The most important intersection for Queer and Postcolonial theories is probably situated in their concern for the contemporary politics of identity, regarding the categories and institutions, the knowledges and the power plays by means of which social dynamics and people are structured and regulated (Punt 2005).¹² It was only relatively recently that Foucault and others exposed the embeddedness of bodies in politics and power even if hidden away by moral pretentiousness (LaFleur 1998: 45). Since then scholars such as Butler have also made compelling arguments for the social constructivist nature of gender and sex, as well as the *performativity* of gender¹³ which re-conceptualised human agency.¹⁴

Queer theory renders identity multiple and unstable, celebrating difference for contributing to and not threatening truth,¹⁵ but *queer* also deconstructs identity as much as gender – and its accompaniments such as power, social roles, and hierarchical locations.¹⁶ As theory it critically analyses social dynamics and power structures regarding sexual identity and social power, by challenging and deconstructing normality especially as supported by essentialist notions of identity. Informed by its constructionist agenda, Queer theory has moved ‘from explaining the modern homosexual to questions of the operation of the hetero/homosexual binary, from an exclusive preoccupation with homosexuality to a focus on heterosexuality as a social and political organizing principle, and from a politics of minority interest to a politics of knowledge and difference’ (Seidman 1996a: 9). In this way, Queer theory ends up asking questions many of

which are similar to those of Postcolonial theory, even if the questions resonate differently and within other (aligned?) fields of enquiry.

ELABORATING INTERSECTIONS IN POSTCOLONIAL AND QUEER THEORIES

In contemporary society and certainly in the Two-Thirds World it is at social, economic and political levels that sexuality, gender and related issues converge, and that the lingering effects of colonialism and (increasingly) heavy presence of neo-colonialism have great impact on peoples' lives, affecting society at large but also communities of faith. Even in the global community where the Bible is part of the cultural legacy of many countries and peoples and of course in Christian communities where the Bible assumes the role of Scripture, the investigation of the interconnection between sexuality, the postcolonial and the biblical texts demand increasing attention.

Queer theory is well-positioned for contributing to these investigations with its focus on liminality, marginalisation and exclusion as informed by and constructed according to sexuality,¹⁷ whose particular construction depends on the forms prescribed by certain systems of power, which again reward or punish and encourage or suppress certain practices and identities (Rubin 1993: 34). At least in this way sexuality is already inevitably political, and elicits comparison with the postcolonial condition. Queer theory is about 'a study of those knowledges and social practices that organize "society" as a whole by sexualizing – heterosexualizing or homosexualizing – bodies, desires, acts, identities, social relations, knowledges, culture and social institutions' (Seidman 1996a: 13).¹⁸

In considering theoretical intersections, a number of (often partially overlapping) categories can be offered for analysis, but here a number of concepts generally found in postcolonialism are briefly used for exploring points of contact with Queer theory.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND HERMENEUTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Still another few brief remarks are in order to initially, albeit briefly and selectively, point out some important starting points in queer thinking. Firstly, Queer theory's link with postmodern and postcolonial thought already emerges when it engages the social order from the underside of the society, and necessarily questions patterns which are presented as conventional, normal, traditional, or established.¹⁹ At the same time, Queer theory pursues the lead of feminist and Foucauldian thinking²⁰ about the making of the dominant through erasure of the subjugated and therefore turns the tables on heterosexist thought: 'normative heterosexuality is a social construction that needs homosexuality in order to retain its norm-defining status' (Schneider 2000b: 211). It was Halperin who suggested earlier that since the term heterosexuality enters the English language only after homosexuality,²¹ it means that 'normative heterosexual masculinity is only possible in contrast to a constitutive homosexual other' (Holden and Ruppel 2003: xii).

Another important question in queer theory concerns the conceptualisation of identity,²² even if it entails an ever changing and non-material conceptualisation – an issue referred to earlier. While Wittig in fact considers homosexuality a metaphysical category, Butler claims a link between the fluidity of the term queer and its usefulness, insisting that the term 'can never be fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from previous usage' (Butler 1990: 142). For others *queer* includes all notions of difference, as well as the difference of difference itself, assuming a Derridean-like *différance*.²³ In postcolonial studies with its equally strong

emphasis on identity and social location, the notion of hybridity is invoked by Bhabha and others to refer to the multiple identities that the postcolonial subject accommodate, notwithstanding (apparent) contradictions between some of these identities²⁴ (eg Gallagher 1996: 235).

Thirdly, it is also, as argued above, in the questioning of universals (eg universal standards or universal norms) that postcolonial and queer theories intersect. Various postcolonial authors have pointed out how the language of universalism was employed in the colonialisation of Africa (and elsewhere), but how such appeals constituted no more than the imposition of Western European conventions and values (eg Ngugi wa Thiongo, quoted in Dube 2000: 7). ‘Universals’ do not exist in and of themselves, but are bound to specific contexts and cultures – the notion of universals is nothing else than the successful machination of the imperial forces, in asserting their domination to the extent that the subjugated associate themselves with the imperial and hegemonic norms and values.

The naturalisation of masculine and feminine as categories mostly entailed – according to the well-established, hegemonic pattern – a situation where the centre (read, men and masculinity) is generalised into the universal and that which does not comply (read, women and femininity, not to mention lesbians and transsexuals) is posited as deviant, secondary and inferior. The focus on *queer* is a hermeneutical position and is shorthand for referring to what falls outside the norm,²⁵ and is theoretically related to feminism²⁶ and postcolonialism, ‘all of which denaturalize or de-essentialize formerly stable identities such as homosexuality, heterosexuality, race, nationality, woman, and man’ (Schneider 2000b: 206).²⁷

ON DIFFERENCE

The need for, and yet constant disavowal of an Other, is constitutive not only of the colonial subject but also the heterosexual male subject (Holden and Ruppel 2003: xii).

Questions about gender and sexual difference²⁸ evidently lie at the root of queer theory²⁹ (Schneider 2000a: 3–4), as much as difference is a central feature in postcolonial theory. Queer theory is disruptive and transgressive, since it produces difference through questioning the conventional while postulating other differences. Its disruption of so-called stable and normal but in any case normative sexual identities goes beyond categories such as male and female. In addition to the disruption of the stability and ostensible naturalness or givenness of heterosexuality, it also disturbs homosexuality as stable signifier for particular groups of men and women who consider themselves homosexual or lesbian and transgendered.³⁰ In short, not only is the disruption of (sexual) identity the hallmark of Queer theory (Schneider 2000a: 6), but with that, the celebration of (sexual) difference.

Just as a language sign acquires meaning through its place and participation in a linguistic system of differences (Saussure), the person in his or her bodily existence acquires identity in a social system of differences (Foucault): human identity is as relational as linguistic meaning. Tracing such developments, the role of the Bible and Western culture is pronounced in the design of the social programme of the human body, complete with a sense of individual bodily identity *and* with regard to relations with (the bodies of) other people.³¹ The human body was mapped and sexuality colonised by emphasising difference in the constructs of gender and sexuality,³² as

determined by binary opposites (eg man-woman; virgin-harlot; clean-unclean; heterosexual-homosexual).

The importance of difference for queer thinking is at times understood in the rather obvious sense of variety, or differences among those that refer to themselves as gay, lesbian, transgendered and bisexual, or queer. But difference involves more, and includes the recognition of difference in solidarity. Queer theory acknowledges that black, white, disabled, poor, rich, male, female and transgendered queers are oppressed in different ways – and ironically, oppressing each other at times. It can nevertheless be a constructive view of difference since it is from the outset at odds with most of Western theology and society where difference is viewed as problematic, and addressed through the creation of hierarchies or at least binaries which allow some people's understanding of the world and of God as truth and reject that of others as unimportant and wrong. From a queer perspective, difference is celebrated as an insight into truth rather than as a threat to it (Stuart 1997: 3).³³

The challenge issued to the stereotypical is a challenge to their claimed 'un-difference' in order to highlight the ideological, ingrained thought-patterns on which they are built, which like all others, are not 'natural' or 'normal', 'common-sense' and 'traditional' as they are constructed and imbued with power-interests.³⁴ It does not only question the liberal attempts to bestow normalcy on queerness, but proceeds in queering normalcy itself. The real issue is about the process of normalisation, since the goal of political movement is not assimilation, but deconstruction and disruption, questioning normality itself as well as the normal-queer binary. The very notion of gender dimorphism, the notion that people are either and only male or female, and its normalisation are questioned (Kumashiro 2000: 145). 'Just as the colonized in the colonial narrative must be both acknowledged and disavowed, they must be seen as similar and yet also different, so the homosexual must be excluded within heterosexual masculinity' (Holden and Ruppel 2003: xii).

CENTRE AND MARGINS: ON MARGINALITY (AND EXCLUSION)

Assuming a marginal and marginalized position, Queer theory is capable of perceiving theologically with different lenses and focuses, to re-evaluate and appreciate, often from a position of otherness. 'Queer people are, in one sense, additional 'others' to add to the list of those ostracized by social norms originating in the mists of myth and codified in religious doctrines and traditions' (Schneider 2000b: 209).

Sociologically speaking, Seidman (1996a: 4) explains the social and political dominant position of males and heterosexuals, and 'the naturalness of a male-dominated, normatively heterosexual social order' from the perspective that 'any individual unconsciously assumes as natural those aspects of one's life that confer privilege and power'. As argued above, it is Queer theory's focus on difference that interrogates also other strategies of marginalisation and exclusion, especially those structures using race³⁵ and class in this manner.

But as much as Postcolonial theory is often struggling to accommodate categories of race and class in its analyses (cf Boer 2005: 166–183; Liew 2005: 114–165), Queer theory has been accused of eliding both these categories.³⁶ While Queer theory with its emphasis on difference – also internally between for example gay men and lesbian women – may disrupt the possibility of political solidarity in lesbian movements, it on the other hand offers the possibility to include

and to recognise in their midst the voiceless, the marginalised, the 'subordinates', the very basis of which is often race. The reluctance to take up class as explanatory factor in analyses of sexualities is a complaint frequently lodged against Queer theory, and explained by the unconscious universalising of Western sexualities, cultureless but not atypical Western lesbian communities, and privileging of Western, bourgeois texts (Hawley 2001: 6–7).

It is useful to speak of a hermeneutics of marginalisation to describe the assignment of marginality from the outside, and a hermeneutics of marginality to refer to such instances where marginality is taken up and creatively exploited, redrawing the boundaries, shifting centre and periphery. 'If queer studies remain on the peripheries of both academic and popular discourse, this is also a moment of opportunity' (Dayal 2001: 324).³⁷ Marginality or the living on the outside or periphery, and liminality or the living in between centre and periphery, are positions to be nurtured and taken advantage of but not romanticised in biblical interpretation. To be nurtured, since marginality and liminality challenge conventional interpretation, the official reading, the traditional and proper way of understanding. Not to be romanticised, because it is an imposed condition even when taken up and reconstructed by the affected and it is also messy and as imbued with interests and concerns of readers on the margins and in liminal positions.

AGENCY

Like Postcolonial theory, Queer theory theorises human existence, life and society in ways necessarily different to the contemporary, conventional societal patterns. In fact, rethinking the conventional is partly the motivation for and purpose of their theorising activities. In the process, queer and postcolonial theorists often present positions on behalf of those that were and are 'othered'. Moreover, Queer theory actively theorises and therefore promotes and advocates a specific perception of the world and people, challenging and disrupting conventional heteronormativity. In the words of Butler: 'The shift from an *epistemological* account of identity to one which locates the problematic within practices of *signification* permits an analysis that takes the epistemological mode itself as one possible and contingent signifying practice'. And therefore, 'the question of *agency* is reformulated as a question of how signification and resignification work' (Butler 1990: 144, emphasis in original).

Agency is a crucial category in postcolonial theory and work by Mary Douglas, DC Scott and others are useful in this regard. Bhabha insists that any resistance to a dominant culture requires agency of one or another kind.³⁸ Both Queer theory and Postcolonial theory are revolutionary, challenging and pushing against the boundaries of and within society, occupying the liminal spaces of human existence. Appeals against the conventions of society are not unilaterally directed at the concerns of certain groups, but while the marginalised or the queered are accorded a particular vantage point, it is believed that society as a whole stands to benefit from the efforts of the agency of Queer and Postcolonial theory.³⁹

MIMICRY, AND ITS AVOIDANCE

Mimicry can be traced in the indispensable and many-sided hermeneutical and translational activities through which the transition from colonial vocabulary to its anti-colonial use is achieved, exemplified in postcolonial biblical studies by rereadings that invert the traditional readings and understandings, and which recognise the suppressed voices in and around the texts. While othering is a strategy employed by the colonisers of lands and minds, mimicry as the ambivalent mixture

of deference and disobedience amounts to a counter-strategy brought into play by the colonised or the subalterns, whether consciously or subconsciously. Mimicry can for example be observed in subculture rhetoric which generally tends to mimic the perceptions, standards, dispositions, and normative customs of dominant culture rhetoric (Robbins 1996: 86).

As in postcolonial situations where mimesis often determines people's sense of identity and praxis, Queer theory alerts gay and lesbian liberationists who argue for their inclusion and accommodation in main stream society⁴⁰ – whether in its social, political or religious and spiritual dimensions – to a mimesis which entails homosexual inclusion in 'a heteronormative communion' (Schneider 2000a: 4). On the other hand, Butler's notion of gender as performativity has also been characterised as mimicry although Butler neither uses this concept nor employs a notion of an original to be mimicked (Jeffreys 1996: 365). In the end, however, it seems that regardless of the theoretical perspective on gender, mimesis or at least the struggle against it is involved in the social dynamics of gender as Queer theory shows in its focus on the regulatory and disciplinary aspects of the affirmation of (gender) identity – especially in their non-liberating formats. 'Identity constructions function as templates defining selves and behaviors and therefore excluding a range of possible ways to frame the self, body, desires, actions, and social relations' (Seidman 1996a: 12). Such templates by design have as purpose to present the 'norm', usually also privileging those who adhere to the template, as well as marginalising those who fall foul of it, whether by intention or default.

Mimicry goes beyond the desire of, and enactment by the colonised of the coloniser's identity and actions, to include a subversive element. '[T]he colonized heeds the colonizer's peremptory injunction to imitation, but in a manner that constantly threatens to teeter over into mockery' (Moore 2005: 88). But mimicry is not to be promoted as either postcolonial or queer revenge at epistemological and cultural levels for previously excluded or marginal voices. Postcolonial queer approaches readjust their target to, in the words of Gandhi (1998: x), 'diversify its mode of address and learn to speak more adequately to the world which it speaks for', and to 'acquire the capacity to facilitate a democratic colloquium between the antagonistic inheritors of the colonial aftermath'. Postcolonial and queer studies along with other liberatory approaches will, of course, want to avoid the accusation of enacting the mimetic desire of empire (cf Punt 2003).

Identity, whether assumed or attributed, as basis on which society is structured is important because it can empower or disempower people. People's sense of identity and a politics of identity are refuted in mimetic desire, and co-determine their vision for contemporary society and its structures or what is perceived to be viable alternatives to current structures.

PROPHETIC VISION: INCLUSIVITY OR A NEW WORLD?

Queer and Postcolonial theories entertain what, in biblical studies discourse, can be called a prophetic vision for the world, recognising the stakes involved in common struggles as well in the specificity and partiality of respective histories and realities.⁴¹ It is not only about queer outsiders that are merely accommodated into a heterosexually normative communion, but Queer theory is concerned about a re-visioned or reformulated world.⁴² Also here, the diversity which characterises Queer theory is visible in its underlying theoretical and political differences, and debates around class, which can be summarised with reference to a desire-theory in contrast to a need-theory⁴³ (Morton 1995–6: 3). *Desire-theory* builds on poststructuralism and postmodernism

and is well represented among the more affluent, academic and Western-oriented theorists. It locates the instrument of and stimulus for social change in the unavoidable and purely coincidental and non-teleological effects of the ongoing liberation of (unconscious) desire and the play of the signifier. Desire-theory necessarily avoids all totalities and causalities because it is based on 'a libidinal economy of culture', and therefore 'produces a politics of isolated localities in undecidable relation to each other', which is 'a politics of incommensurate language games' (à la Lyotard; Morton 1995–6: 3). Desire-theory is, at least implicitly, at times believed to have superseded need-theory, which takes its cue from Marxist theory.

Need-theory views social change as a historical and material rather than a textual, representational or semiotic process, and history itself neither as coincidental and playful (à la Derrida) nor as a series of disparate discourses and institutions (à la Foucault), but 'as the history of changing modes of production and of modifications within the prevailing mode of production' (Morton 1995–6: 3). Social change is perceived to be closely related to the objectively existing binary of base (economics) and superstructure (in the form of politics, religion and so forth), and the binary operates in the mode of determinate causality. Need-theory allows for the explanation of social injustice in global context, without eliding geographic localities and local social problems.⁴⁴

Homosexual liberationists posit a radical ethical programme in which fidelity, mutuality and love is refocused, and therefore perceived as more intentional, more open to diversity and more prophetic⁴⁵ (Schneider 2000a: 8). Queer theory's scepticism about a strictly homosexual liberation project is related to the 'ethical grammar' for gay and lesbian theologies which is determined through conscious opposition to a dominating and hostile heterosexual norm,⁴⁶ and in the absence of which categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality, and their related ethical particularities may cease to exist and even become obsolete (Schneider 2000a: 8–9). Queer theory emphasises the importance of re-imagining the world,⁴⁷ going beyond but certainly including homosexual liberation, along with other concerns.⁴⁸

Without trying to dissolve the tensions generated by the opponents of Queer theory, or minimise the challenge for it to assume political responsibility, its overt political commitment in a postcolonial world has to be acknowledged: 'Hope for a queer future is not purely hedonistic, it is also political' (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 31). Amidst accusations of not being specific about any goal in particular, the broader range of Queer theory's political impact also needs to be acknowledged. 'The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated' (Butler 1990: 148).

QUEER POSTCOLONIAL OR POSTCOLONIAL QUEER? ANALOGOUS THINKING? TENSIONS?

The emphasis on liberation through a refocused dynamic between identity and social power is a golden thread running through Queer theory and Postcolonial theory. But since the theme of liberation or emancipation is for all its importance so broad and encompassing, it may lose its distinctive focus(i) in these critical theories and (at times) the social programmes which are derived from them, and is thus a concept which has to be unpacked. While Foucault enabled the emergence of Queer theory with his critique of power and identity as cultural productions, it is the importance of noticing 'a necessary and mutually defining binary relationship between subjugated and dominant identities' (Schneider 2000b: 209), which require more attention.

But tensions remain! While Queer theory critiques the ‘central pillar’ of modern society and contemporary culture – heteronormativity – and is therefore political (Moore 1998: 259), the increasing involvement of a race- and class-consciousness in Queer theory is evident, but with queer too often still seen as an appropriate epithet to White and middle-class.⁵⁰ In fact, ‘Queer theory loses its cutting edge if it fails to take seriously the depth of significance and the inseparability of race, class, ethnicity, and gender to queer theorizing’ (Schneider 2000b: 211; cf Spurlin 2001: 185).

Other tensions also cut down to the analytical bone. The all too comfortable link between globalisation, often the neo-colonisation of our time but also that which blurs borders and renders nation-states irrelevant, and queer thinking can become worrying; on the other hand, nation-states⁵¹ which are affirmed in postcolonial studies amidst the dangers of global and globalising (read, Western) homogenising and universalising are often those which cannot deal with sexual dissidence. In short, Queer and Postcolonial theories at times do not reckon strongly enough with Empire’s ‘inclusionary mechanism’, with its centripetal pull, so that their theorists ‘who advocate a politics of difference, fluidity, and hybridity in order to challenge the binaries and essentialism of modern sovereignty have been outflanked by the strategies of power’ (Hardt and Negri in Hawley 2001: 9).⁵²

CONCLUSION: BEYOND COMPARISONS?

This paper has considered the possible intersections between Queer and Postcolonial theories with their ability for protest and affirmation as being useful for contributing hermeneutical grids, feeding into socio-political awareness, providing tools for analysing patterns of (enduring) hegemony, criticising binary and other methods of identifying and excluding outsiders, and constructively, posing alternative (radical?) visions for thinking about and structuring society in ways characterised by inclusivity and equality. ‘[P]ostcolonial studies have seriously neglected the ways in which heterosexism and homophobia have also shaped the world of hegemonic power’ (Spurlin 2001: 185). Eventually neither Queer nor Postcolonial biblical criticisms are stand-alone exegetical models of some sort,⁵³ but are broader hermeneutical frameworks which provide heuristic epistemologies for interpreting biblical texts.

The emphasis on sexual plurality is not only important for breaking through the stagnancy of heterosexism, for challenging the politics of homophobia in epistemology and practice, but also and probably most importantly, for clearing the ground for critical rethinking of human sexuality. Since it is important that the discourse on human sexuality be conducted also at the geo-political level without exclusion of local contexts,⁵⁴ a connection with postcoloniality presents itself. Of course, since configurations of and within sexuality are still expressed best by domination, the value of postcolonial enquiry and investigation is evident.⁵⁵ The ideological longevity of any normalising regime (such as heteronormativity) is perpetuated as long as certain struggles (such as queer struggles) are posited as less important and deferred (eg. Spurlin 2001: 200).

Maybe there is at least an equal need for arguments on how divergent and non-intersecting Postcolonial and Queer theories are or could/should be? The convergence of the interests in Postcolonial and Queer theories, however, does not make for a comfortable relationship, as some postcolonial work is characterised as homophobic, and certain queer studies are considered biased to race (‘white’) or class (‘elitist’) (Hawley 2001: 1). Then again, postcolonialism presents

a theoretical framework for interpreting human sexuality in the broader, global connection of socio-cultural and colonial politics and in that way cautions against simplicity or singularity in such interpretation. Prevailing aberrant notions regarding human sexuality, such as homophobia, warn against complacency or the romanticising of postcolonialism, or taking the term to imply the end of colonialism – all of which invites hermeneutical cooperation beyond mere theoretical comparison.

ENDNOTES

- 1 A caveat is in order: this contribution is neither about investigating same-sex desire in the colonial world, nor about the queering of colonial relations in and among genders, its ambivalences and desires.
- 2 The ‘explosion of theory’ is related to what Graff calls ‘a climate of radical disagreement’, operative in our modern ‘dissentual culture’ brought about by new forms of knowledge that came about since WWII through the destabilisation of ‘established ways of intellectual enquiry’ and as consequence of the ‘politicizations which have occurred in the wake of postwar demographic shifts in academic institutions and “the students” movements of the 1960s’ (Ahmad 1992: 1).
- 3 Moore (2005: 82) already aligns Queer theory and others with Postcolonial theory as ‘theory-savvy critical movements that all, to a greater or lesser degree, bring critical sensibilities forged in the crucible of an often generic poststructuralism to bear upon assorted “material” domain...’.
- 4 Paper read at the SBL International Meeting, Edinburgh, Scotland, 2–5 July 2006. The paper explores specific conceptual links between postcolonial and queer theories, considering their use in and possible value for biblical interpretation, and follows on a paper read at the 2005 SBL meeting in Singapore (Punt 2005).
- 5 Generalisation is dangerous given the broad spectrum of meanings attributed to and uses of Queer theory, whose variety is connected with the width of its investigation: ‘Because the status of sexual identity itself is part of the question, the scope of queer studies is necessarily diffuse’ (Schneider 2000b: 209). Douglas Hall prefers to speak of queer *theories* (2003).
- 6 ‘The central tenet of queer theory is a resistance to the normativity which demands the binary opposition, hetero/homo’ (Hawley 2001: 3).
- 7 In typical postmodern fashion, Queer theory also sits with a dilemma regarding the use of queer to refer to what lies outside the norm, because as soon as queer is defined, it becomes domesticated, ‘rendering queer no longer outside of anything, and so no longer queer – in theory at least’. In this way Queer theory then also stands to lose its claim to the outsider position in the heteronormative society and its power arrangements, in particular (Schneider 2000b: 206).
- 8 Sexuality and erotic desire in particular only exist within and not above or beyond history, and are therefore always interpreted within history (Stuart 1997: 3; cf Seidman 1996a: 8–9).
- 9 ‘It must be stressed that it [postcolonialism] is not a homogenous project, but a hermeneutical salmagundi, consisting of extremely varied methods, materials, historical entanglements, geographical locations, political affiliations, cultural identities, and economic predicaments’ (Sugirtharajah 1998: 15).
- 10 ‘Definitional indeterminacy and elasticity’ describe Queer theory (Hawley 2001: 4) equally well as Postcolonial theory.
- 11 ‘In the quest for the obliteration of binarisms (such as the bipolar gender system), such openness to multiplicity and challenge to any gay unitary identity may position queer theorists surprisingly near non-Western postcolonial theorists’ (Hawley 2001: 14).
- 12 In a different way, Hawley (2001: 4) refers to how the ‘destabilizing of identity politics’ implied by Queer theory echoes ‘the challenge postcolonial theory offers to ... Westerners’.

13 'Hence, as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly
 14 punitive consequences' and 'Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency
 15 from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted
 16 in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*' (Butler 1990: 139–40). Performativity is not
 17 to be confused with performance, since it is about identity 'performatively articulated as the *effect* of
 18 regulatory regimes – a constraint queer theory attempts to transgress, subvert, and disrupt' (Cover
 19 in Hawley 2001: 3).

20 As characterised by a break with the notion of 'autonomous human actions' (Barvosa-Carter 2005:
 21 175; cf Jeffreys 1996: 362–4).

22 Seidman's (1996a:11) notion of composite identity may be compromised if the different constituent
 23 'elements' (such as race, class, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, age, able-ness, etc)
 24 start to recall essentialist images.

25 This is of particular importance in South Africa, where 'representations of (homo)sexual identity as
 26 a social position that is always already *mediated* by race, gender, social class, and geo-political spa-
 tialization', have to be diversified (Spurlin 2001: 187).

Not to mention the liminality of gender as this already challenges and deconstructs the simplistic
 binaries of heteronormativity (cf Dayal 2001: 309).

'The heterosexual paramourcy actively strives to enforce uniformity and abhors sexual plurality'
 (Carden 2004: 2).

Postmodern thinking and politics rely to a great extent on the conflict between centre and periphery,
 which are also central in Postcolonial and Queer theories (cf Seidman in Hawley 2001: 4).

Other philosophers like Lacan (also) 'theorized that the phallogocentric basis of civilization was
 erected precisely on the repression of the feminine' (Tolbert 2000: 101).

Historically, the term homosexual and its derivatives were a late nineteenth-century invention referring
 to a psychologically defined 'condition distinct from and parallel to heterosexuality ... an abstract
 construct superimposed upon the widely diverse reality of human experience' (Holben 1999: 4). Sex
 reformer Karl Kertbeny coined the term 'homosexual' in 1868, and Swiss medical practitioner Karoly
 Maria Benkert used it in 1869 in opposition to the expansion of anti-sodomy laws in Prussia (Elliott
 2003: 122; cf Holben 1999: 6; Moore 1998: 258).

Gender identity itself is not to be thought of as fixed, but rather as 'an open mesh of possibilities,
 gaps, over-laps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent
 elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify mono-
 lithically' (Sedgwick, in Evans 1997: 147 n29).

However, the stronger (real?) contrasting internal position is from the opponents of Queer theory
 who argue that gay-affirmation and political effectiveness derives from the very specificity of gayness
 (Morton 1995–6: 4).

'[I]ntentional hybridity is a blending of two or more voices, without compositional boundaries being
 evident, such that the voices combine into an unstable chorale – sometimes speaking univocally, but
 more often juxtaposing alternative points of view such that the authority of the dominant voice is
 put into question' (Brett in Boer 2005: 175).

But being more than a 'critique of normativity' (Dayal 2001: 305), the social, cultural and political
 patterns which formulate and in whose interest normativity is defined and held in place, are also in-
 vestigated.

'Queer theory ... enriches and critiques feminist readings by turning attention to the deep constructions
 and performances of gender that shape texts and interpretations' (Schneider 2000b: 211).

However, in the end the danger remains that Queer theory, in a way similar to gay practice which even in 'gay paradise' Amsterdam in the Netherlands is restricted and does not amount to a political gay identity (Duyvendak 1996: 421), can be seen to operate with an emasculated political engagement.

'What queer theory principally provides is an intellectual framework for treating sexuality as a meaningful site of difference that could illuminate texts and traditions in helpful if sometimes unsettling ways' (Schneider 2000b: 212).

'Queerness does not have to mean incommensurate difference, but in current debates it does tend to mean that' (Schneider 2000a: 11).

Gay and lesbian as terms are often seen 'to be clearer markers of a biologically-rooted condition and of a consequent liberatory political movement that invites transnational identification' (Hawley 2001: 3).

'The body is experienced as a source and site of knowledge whose "voice" can break through the epistemology of oppression' (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 96).

'[T]he discursive practices of a community function to persuade the body to subject itself to social control. As such the discursive body functions as a site of political meaning' (Vorster 2000: 111).

However, caution is required in perceiving and (re)presenting difference since popular media often only succeeds in reinforcing heteronormativity in the othering of queer sexuality (Kumashiro 2000: 145).

Such thinking accepts the challenges of constructs such as the notion of woman as 'living gift or donation of herself to the fulfilment of all others' desires and needs – i.e., to make everyone else happy', and recognises it as 'an originary myth that is still in need of deconstruction' (Davies 1994: 28).

To avoid what happens so often in racism where people are lumped together in a 'homogenous and pathologized group', the plurality of gay identities and gay communities has to be emphasised (Dayal 2001: 308).

Such reluctance has been interpreted as oppression, since the abstraction of gay identity from race and class concerns perpetuate the white, middle-class dominance (Hawley 2001: 14).

Dayal later elaborates on the 'productively dissident' nature of lesbian/gay identities which therefore make them into more than minority identifications (2001: 307).

In postcolonial theory the agency of resistance comes from a 'hybrid inter-subjectivity' (Brett in Boer 2005: 175).

In their most radical formats, the colonial and heterosexist positions consciously and forcefully intend changing the status, norms and values of others who do not fit the dominant paradigm, in this way asserting hegemonic power. Postcolonial theorists point out how 'civilising' was one motif interwoven with colonising, Christianising and enslavement (Dube 2000:10), while gay reparative circles manifest the same tendency to absolutise heterosexuality with the aim of imposing it as norm on others.

Tolbert (2000: 104 referring to Butler) cautions that feminism is also prone to taking the heterosexual bias of a simple bipolar system of gender for granted.

'The greatest promise for a postcolonial queer theory may be in participating, at the level of public discourse, in an ongoing reeducation of desire' (Dayal 2001: 306).

Queer theory challenges heteronormativity in all its outfits and at different levels in a systematic and comprehensive way, and beyond the important lesbian/gay resistance against simple intolerance, Queer theory demonstrates how the broader area of normalisation of heterosexuality constitutes a site of alienation, disenfranchisement and violence. Queering means 'a radical reconstitution of the panoply of cultural discourse, including the discourse of sexuality as well as aesthetic or socioeconomic theory of medical (and more generally) scientific discourse' (Dayal 2001: 306).

43 'If we take "desire" to correspond [to] ... the "unnameable yearnings" of the unconscious and "need"
 to correspond to food, clothing, shelter, health care, education...then the confrontational relation of
 these two modes of thought can be clarified by posing the question: What kind [of] subject can afford
 to explain politics and the social world strictly in terms of "desire" except those whose "needs" are
 already met?' (Morton 1995–6: 3). Cf also briefly in Hawley (2001: 6–7).

44 To what extent globalisation can be considered queer in the sense that it makes the borders of nation-
 states irrelevant and blurs their borders (Hawley 2001: 8), is a topic for another discussion.

45 The prophetic vision in much of gay and lesbian theological thinking for a new world and a claim
 for the superiority of their ethical discernment, is at least partly related to their focus on inclusivity.

46 Queering also impacts on patriarchy as consequence of heterosexual domination and its perception
 of homosexuality as a threat, in questioning its requirement of monogamous security to safeguard
 the paternity of children, and women's valuing of the ostensible security of monogamous relationships
 beyond their own interests (cf Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 29).

47 But it is not difficult to understand the lesbian/gay criticism levelled against Queer theory. 'I am suspicious
 that queer theory, with its more fluid notion of human – and sexual – identity, marks a defusion and
 consequent loss of political power in that it supports the generic right to be different rather than
 standing for the right to be different in any specific way. When space is cleared to be different, some
 differences – like same-sex love – may still retain their stigma' (Long 2005: 1191).

48 Caution is advised in considering the options, since it is no simple trade-off: '[L]esbian and gay liber-
 ation may be about intense and intimate needs for inclusion, recognition, and identity that are worth
 the cost of some heteronormativity. Queer theology may be about creative re-imagining of possibilities
 in which we are no longer recognizable, but in which we no longer beg for recognition either'. It is a
 powerful, creative and dynamic, but also devastating, tension (Schneider 2000a: 9).

49 Hawley (2001: 5) reckons that postcolonialism which stays 'a bit queer' offers the best possibilities
 to allow voices from the sexual periphery into the discussion.

50 Including the notion that people from other groups exuding a queer identity are suffering from 'white
 disease' (Kumashiro 2000: 146).

51 'The nation-state is a machine that produces Others, creates racial difference, and raises boundaries
 that delimit and support the modern subject of sovereignty' (Hardt and Negri in Hawley 2001: 9).
 According to Appadurai, 'the modern nation-state ... grows less out of natural facts – such as language,
 blood, soil and race – and more out of a quintessential cultural product, a product of collective ima-
 gination' (in Hawley 2001: 10). The new, post-Apartheid SA has for example been described as the
 'rainbow nation' (Desmond Tutu), and the construction of a 'new' SA as nation building (by former
 president Mandela in particular).

52 The resultant commercialisation, proliferation of target markets and the spreading of corporate cap-
 ital have led to the so-called Americanisation of lesbian/gay lifestyles, by co-opting lesbian/gay consumers
 and thus fixing their lifestyles and where the liberatory potential of postcolonial discourse is limited
 to the wealthy, elite population (Hawley 2001: 10).

53 Cf also the following statement about Queer theory: 'It is still new enough, and contested enough on
 every level, that beyond Foucauldian critiques of naturalized sexuality queer theory has not, and
 perhaps should not yet, resolve into a "discipline" with an absolute priority of theoretical considera-
 tions' (Schneider 2000b: 211).

54

Queer theory's broader address is its constructionist and antiessential theory of the subject, and issues a challenge and alternative to simplistic identity politics. However, 'for many minorities it remains an imperative to assert an ethnic identity grounded in material specificity, in the everyday and the local – an identity firmly historicized' (Dayal 2001: 306).

55

'What is most pressingly at stake ... is how to theorize the broad diversity of postcolonialisms as they manifest themselves in the areas of gender, class, and sexuality' (Hawley 2001: 13, referring to Moore-Gilbert).

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Cite this article as: Punt, Jeremy. 2008. 'Intersections in queer theory and postcolonial theory, and hermeneutical spin-offs' *The Bible and Critical Theory* 4 (2): pp. 24.1–24.16. DOI: 10.2104/bc080024.