

ance. Rejecting this fiction, Robinson's philosophy of revolt ultimately sets the trolley itself ablaze and lets it run its course. The least we can do, as philosophers, is to

stop acting like moral magistrates and get the fuck out of the way.

Dominique Routhier

Erotic worldmaking

Alexander Stoffel, *Eros and Empire: The Transnational Struggle for Sexual Freedom in the United States* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2025). 276pp., £50.69 hb., 978 1 50364 166 2

In his rich and generative book *Eros and Empire: The Transnational Struggle for Sexual Freedom in the United States*, Alexander Stoffel offers a new transnational reading of twentieth-century queer activist movements in the United States and develops the concept of *queer worldmaking* based on these analyses. The book is several things at once, which is one of its big strengths: a historical materialist study of queer movements, a queer Marxist engagement with the US state and US empire, an intervention in debates about methods and perspectives in queer studies and a contribution to the study of counterhegemonic global relations. Stoffel studies the gay liberation movement of the sixties, black lesbian feminist movements of the seventies and AIDS activism of the eighties and nineties in the core of empire. He suggests that transnational connections to other movements and organisers, as well as transnational analyses of US interventions abroad and the structures of sexual relations and hierarchies within the US were decisive for these movements. Stoffel convincingly shows that each one of them cannot be fully understood in their radicalness and reach through the domestic frame, which has been the usual frame of analysis thus far.

Stoffel locates the three movements within US empire and understands them as having arisen under 'successive waves of capitalist expansion', as suggested by David Harvey, characterised by post-war Fordism and post-seventies neoliberal capitalism. Specifically, he is concerned with the contradictions of the bourgeois state and the connected nation-state system, the boundaries of which are constantly transgressed by capital. The three movements need to be studied with a transnational perspective not only because the conditions of their emergence were transnational, but also because they 'share

the conviction that the pursuit of sexual pleasure, erotic enjoyment, and bodily self-determination are central to the cause of revolutionary transformation on a *world scale*'. For Stoffel the radical sexual politics of the parts of the gay liberationists, black lesbian feminists and AIDS activists he studies are an intervention against the state's central institutions such as the family, monogamy and the privatisation of social relations. This is what Stoffel understands as erotic worldmaking, the concept at the heart of the project: 'the transnational project of overcoming the bourgeois sexual relations that were central to the reproduction of United States empire through an erotic intervention into its social forms'.

Applying a transnational lens to the gay liberationist movements, as Stoffel does in his first chapter, tells a radically different story about the split within the movement. This counters the common narrative of a split between a more assimilationist fraction, as represented for example by the Gay Activist Alliance, and a more radical fraction, with such groups as the Gay Liberation Front and Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. The latter, according to Stoffel, are too often seen as mere outbursts, which then gradually integrated into the rights-oriented assimilationist projects sidelining transnational connections. Stoffel argues that the more fundamental split was between a gay nationalism and a gay internationalism in the context of and connected to Third World radicalism, the Black Power movement and anti-war protests. Stoffel shows that for the internationalists, struggles at home and abroad that targeted the nuclear household and the position of the homosexual as an outlaw through the nation-state form were connected. Departing from the thought and action of figures such as the Italian activist and theorist Mario Mieli and the Aus-

tralian Dennis Altman, Stoffel asks the reader to rethink the political frame of internationalism by highlighting the contributions of movements for sexual liberation to the broader trajectory of revolutionary formations which often showed up in conflict within them.

Some of these themes, especially the complicating of relations within groups that are perceived to be homogenous, continue in chapter two, which offers a transnational turn in the study of US-based black feminism through analyses of writings and politics of figures such as Audre Lorde, Frances Beal and Pat Parker. Against the assumption of the dominance of race and gender over sexuality in this movement, Stoffel argues that sexuality was central for these thinkers. Moreover, they were not constrained by the nation-state in their thinking and doing, but personally and analytically connected to black internationalisms and Third World anti-colonial struggles. Here is one of several instances where Stoffel is careful not to romanticise the transnational by also showing the failures in establishing transnational solidarity.



For the radical AIDS activists, Stoffel demonstrates how their locus of action was in multiple geopolitical sites with deep connections to the Nicaraguan Revolu-

tion, Guantanamo Bay (where 300 HIV-positive Haitian refugees were detained), struggles against the Gulf War and against exploitation of migrant labour, as well as the neoliberal destruction of social infrastructures. Stoffel argues that the activists' sexual politics of promiscuity and safer sex practices against privatised sexuality were intimately linked with border politics, militarism and public health. This is one example where the demands of the movements Stoffel studies have striking similarities to current-day queer mobilisations with demands to fund health care (for trans people specifically) rather than wars against Palestinians or Iranians. In contrast to the two other chapters where he stays closer to the writing developed within the movements, in this chapter Stoffel turns to queer theory that became institutionalised at the time and argues that it would benefit from being read through the social material conditions in which it emerged. Here he intervenes in debates about the political meaning of queer theory and its attachment to or detachment from queer political struggles. His choice to reread Judith Butler's work on precarity and vulnerability in connection with the AIDS activists' embrace of promiscuity and eroticism for sexual liberation is more convincing than his restorative reading of Lee Edelman.

Overall, Stoffel's methodological choices are an important intervention into queer studies and theory. The historical materialist approach and the focus on movements runs counter to dominant approaches of textual cultural analysis and a lack of historicisation in much of queer studies. Stoffel is careful to reflect on the limits of his approach which consists largely of a periodisation and separation of the movements he studies, but these risks are worth taking as the specific long durée of his analysis – from the sixties to nineties – allows for the carving out of patterns in relation to specific stages of US empire. Stoffel studies scholarly and non-scholarly texts, including different types of activist writing or poetry, not only as archives but as sources of theoretical knowledge, to develop a fascinating social history of theory based on the 'histories of erotic worldmaking as collective theoretical articulations of political struggle'. Different from personal archives or the focus on individual figures in queer history, *Eros and Empire* focuses on movement history. The strength of Stoffel's account of the three movements he centres lies in the way he shines a light on their complexity without burying them in critique. Stof-

Stoffel's method is convincingly placed in conversation with other approaches in queer studies and other disciplines when he develops his understanding and choice of the by now widely used concept of 'worldmaking'. Distinct from Adom Getachew's *Worldmaking after Empire* (2019), which focuses on the writing and thought of elite men, Stoffel looks at movements of women and queers who were more often than not marginalised in several ways. In contrast to more ephemeral notions of disidentification as developed by Muñoz or Berlant and Warner's counterpublics, Stoffel is interested in longer term strategic, materialist and scaled-up queer politics. I wonder if the turn to the state in chapter four, the 'theoretical interlude', limits the analytical and imaginative reach that could be built on the rich material about transnationalism and more-than-nation politics. He puts forward a Marxist analysis of the bourgeois state with a contradiction constitutive for sexual politics: the declaration of equality, liberty and security (albeit only for some) and the simultaneous intensification of processes of exploitation, violence and dispossession. The state with its abstract equality and concrete hierarchisation then is both the condition of possibility of these movements and their limit by way of subsumption of desire under the figures of the consumer, the child and the citizen – erotic arrangements which Eros, as conceptualized by Stoffel, works against but which ultimately also lead to the expansion of US empire. This leads Stoffel to argue that the 'ungovernable nature of desire' can animate 'radical struggles against the social order' but it cannot guarantee success.

Thinking with the transnational queer materialist methodology put forward by Rana Jaleel and Evren Savci and invoked by Stoffel in chapter three, I wonder if a deeper engagement with the transnational could have pushed the reconstructive perspective even further towards a pragmatic transnationalism for movements.

Stoffel's book makes important contributions to queer and trans studies, feminist theory and the study of global politics. The chapters on the movements he studies are highly relevant for historians, theorists or activists. Importantly, Stoffel's findings are an important reminder that methodological nationalism continues to be a powerful restrictive force in the scholarship of politics. This historical study urges us to look for the transnational when studying contemporary phenomena rather than adding it belatedly as a corrective. It also shows critics of queer politics that queer movements were more radical than they are often times made out to be, encompassing comprehensive critiques of capitalist relations. The historical materialist analysis of the imperial state and its institutions that govern sexual life is an important guide for where to look and what to pay attention to when studying counterhegemonic and queer anti-imperial movements. In conversation with Getachew's work and others like Durba Mitra's *The Future that Was* (2025) on Third World Feminist projects and Anne McNevin's *Worldmaking and Border Politics* (2026) on alternative bordering projects, *Eros and Empire* inspires us not only to think against empires but also to reach for queer feminist worlds.

Esther Franke

Avant-garde models

Nicolas Helm-Grovas, *Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen: Towards Counter-Cinema* (Leiden: Brill, 2026). 454pp., €150 hb., 978 90 04 75207 8

In 1974, Peter Bürger first published his *Theorie der Avantgarde*. In his now classic account Bürger proclaimed the inauthenticity of the post-war neo-avant-garde: for Bürger, the art institution subsumed the historic avant-garde's protests as the very autonomous artworks such protests were intended to negate. In the same year, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen completed their first film *Pen-*

thesilea, Queen of the Amazons. This was, as Nicolas Helm-Grovas terms it, a cinematic 'scorched earth' which signalled the coming of an avant-garde, a counter-cinema, perhaps unconstrained by the limits glimpsed and set by Bürger. As Wollen would have it, due to the combined effects of socialist realist and Nazi reaction, Hollywood's dominance and war-time retreats, cinema un-