

Gay bombs: exploding, remapping topologies of queerness

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On January 15, 2005, *BBC News*' website featured an article entitled 'US military pondered love not war.'¹ This news brief publicly announced US Air Force research on the now supposedly defunct development of a 'gay bomb.'² Proposed in 1994 at the Wright Laboratory in Dayton, Ohio, the gay bomb is defined as an aphrodisiac chemical that 'would make enemy soldiers "sexually irresistible" to each other.'³ Indeed, the gay bomb, which was designed to be a six-year development project costing \$7.5 million, 'would provoke widespread homosexual behaviour among troops, causing what the military called a "distasteful but completely non-lethal" blow to morale.'⁴ That the gay bomb would explode into immorality, detonating a public shaming upon its victims, pre-supposes rampant homophobia, for the act of homosexual sex in and of itself does not promise defeat or surrender. Yet, given the US military's conflation of gay (here, defined as homosexual sex) with weapon, it seems that the *military pondered war not love*. Indeed, the image chosen to accompany this text of a military aircraft dropping a multitude of missiles assures us that this bomb is a loveless act of sovereign dominance and destruction.

Perhaps more importantly than its allusive exegesis of the gay bomb, the *BBC News* article encapsulates all the contradictions that have come to be embodied within medial representations of this military proposal. As the BBC shifts between the use of 'gay bomb' and 'love bomb' freely, suggesting that these two descriptors are equally suitable for what the military has proposed, the conflation of the performance of a sexual act with 'love' confuses and displaces how 'gay' operates to signify 'bomb'. The production of love as a possible result of the gay bomb's detonation reads as a failure: the military wants homosexual sex to shame and disgrace. Still more perplexing is the BBC's use of citations, identifying 'gay bomb', 'love bomb', and 'sexually irresistible' in their text to be directly extracted from military documents. Yet, these quoted phrases do not derive from any source; functioning here as definitions, the citations present a conflicting gap between the military's sketchy textual explication of this

¹ BBC News America. "US Military Pondered Love Not War." BBC News, 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4174519.stm> (accessed October 20, 2008).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

weapon as a 'strong aphrodisiac'⁵ and BBC's rhetorical move to visualize this text within the materiality of a bomb. The BBC article and the military proposal network the homosexual within grids of relationality that connect gay, love, weapon, bomb, and explosion. In fact, this new topology of relations maps a genealogy of what has come to be known as the gay bomb in visual culture, dialectically located, I will argue, within a war bomb, bound by the military and media, and a queer bomb, manufactured by the labours of love outside heteronormativity. Unlike the BBC's implication, love and war here are found to explode in two very different ways.

While today medial representations of the gay bomb proliferate in popular culture on YouTube music videos, television shows, movie spoofs, and pornography, this contemporary union of homosexuality and bomb returns us to another type of gay bomb that has existed in queer culture, a bomb that does not use homosexuality as a weapon of shame but rather explodes *queer* life into the world. This queer bomb of the past unites homosexuals with the threat - or at the moment of - explosion. Historically, the homosexual has built a gay bomb but is now blown up by another.

This paper reads the 1994 US Air Force document 'Harassing, Annoying, and "Bad Guy" Identifying Chemicals' in which the military proposes the development of a chemical weapon to enact homosexual behaviour on combatants of war, through two visualizations of the gay bomb. These visualizations fall into two separate timeframes, divided by the release of the military document. First, I will discuss a current representation of the gay bomb: the gay bomb's 2008 appearance on the television show *30 Rock*. Next, I will turn to an older example of the queer bomb (or love bomb): the playful bomb-as-beach-ball in The Smith's 1986 music video *Ask*. I will ask how current formations of the gay bomb affect our readings and interpretations of these older visualizations that notably did not embody the words 'gay bomb' in their visuality and were not necessarily subordinated to military power. Specifically, how did the military document, which never mentions a 'gay bomb', produce an explosion of gay bombs in contemporary media, and in turn, how does this shape our reflections upon queer bombs?

The dialectic of the gay bomb, comprised of the war bomb and the queer bomb, poses a complex positionality of homosexual existence and agency, for before and after the US military proposal, the gay bomb aims toward different targets, and the directionalities of these aims are controlled by different forces. As I inquire into the ways the homosexual targets and is targeted, I will use a topological framework to analyze these networked grids of warfare within which the homosexual has become inextricably encrypted. A network topology is the mapping of elements in a network, including the physical connections between points and the

⁵ US Air Force Wright Laboratory. "Harassing, Annoying, and 'Bad Guy' Identifying Chemicals." (Ohio: June 1994). <http://www.sunshineproject.org/incapacitants/jnlwdpdf/wpafbchem.pdf> (accessed October 14, 2008).

logistical flows of data between these nodes. I will employ such a topology to structure my analysis of the gay bomb. To think topologically⁶, as suggested by Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker, calls for interpreting the rules and relations structuring the diagrams of the war bomb and queer bomb, that is, the ways they each structure political conflict. The gay bomb topologically fuses, in a radical horizontality, to warfare, weaponry, and mass destruction as well as queer affect, community, and love. McKenzie Wark writes, 'Topology begins when the topical ceases to have autonomy, when the line along which communication flows closes the gap between map and territory.'⁷ With this proclamation at hand, the gay bomb appears to us as the harbinger of topological weaponry, for the force and violence of the bomb encompasses the military blueprint and the boundless territory of visibility, each flattened together by the perpetuations of mass media.

Samuel Weber notes that each target is positioned to exploit an opportunity. If the bomb is always a target that aims to manipulate - as its opportunity - network topologies that are links between bodies, weapons, life, death, power, and subordination, I would like to conclude this paper with a consideration of the productive possibilities that the gay bomb might still have for LGBTIQ communities. If the queer bomb of the past internalizes an explosion predicated on the historically specific risks of HIV/AIDS, gay bashing, closetedness, and general societal exclusion, all of these threats still remain painfully present and unrelentingly intensified. Has this externalization of the gay bomb - a production outside of queerness and into the mainstream, within and beyond homosexuality - eclipsed the performative power the bomb once held? Or can the gay bomb explode once again, with the weight of its history, as a political tactic to unite those it embodies - as well as those it aims to destroy - in love?

Exceptionalism, or the gay bomb as war bomb

Puar defines US sexual exceptionalism as 'a narrative claiming the successful management of life in regard to a *people* [. . . as] national recognition and inclusion, here signalled as the annexation of homosexual jargon . . . contingent upon the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary.'⁸ This simultaneous inclusion/exclusion generates a homonormativity, fostered by nationalism, that expels non-normative homosexuality. Unique to this formation is that now 'an exceptional form of national heteronormativity is now joined by an exceptional form of national homonormativity, in other words, homonationalism.'⁹ Today, the gay bomb, as the vision of homonationalism, a weapon of the state, includes the homosexual body while excluding this body's behaviour as a condition only fit for the enemy, never the nation.

⁶ Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker. *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007: 13.

⁷ McKenzie Wark. *Gamer Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007: 56.

⁸ Puar. *Terrorist Assemblages*, 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*

The gay bomb makes its debut on *30 Rock*, a NBC primetime sitcom centred around the production of a sketch comedy show at 30 Rockefeller Plaza in New York City, on an episode titled 'Cooter', originally aired as the second season's finale on May 8, 2008.¹⁰ While it juggles a variety of plot twists and turns, I would like to focus on the subplot concerning characters Jack Donaghy, played by Alec Baldwin, and Cooter Burger, Matthew Broderick's role. Both currently employed at a financially humbled Homeland Security, Jack and Cooter decide to manufacture the Gay Bomb, a top-secret Pentagon proposal, to get fired.

30 Rock's gay bomb, emblem of US sexual exceptionalism, satisfies Puar's exposition on homonationalism. While the show espouses a liberal rhetoric, the pathologization of homosexuality as a condition so shockable it would lead the military to expel its creators, reassures viewers that heterosexuality is reserved as the normative, nationalist position. Yet, this shock confuses because it is divergent: there is the double shock of excluding the homosexual as non-national enemy (manufacturing the gay bomb) and of including the homosexual in the nation (and thus, not developing the gay bomb). In this episode, however, the military opts for the former, and therefore, the nationalist homosexual is the one that exhibits no homosexual behaviour. It is through the absence of any such homosexual on *30 Rock*, that permits any homosexual to imagine existing as such - an impossibility. This phantom homosexual as ideal excludes nonnormative US homosexuality and all non-white, non-US persons as one unit - their behaviour is collectively targeted as the same. We turn to Rey Chow's ruminations on the target: 'the truth of the continual targeting of the world as fundamental form of knowledge production is xenophobia, the inability to handle the otherness of the other beyond the orbit that is the bomber's own visual path.' To use homosexuality as the US military weapon always pointed at the other, produces a visual form of sexual exceptionalism. For those targeted, homosexuality delivers the sovereign force of war, always excluding as something less than nation, less than human.

Love, or the gay bomb as queer bomb

As current gay bombs in media emerge from the 1994 US Air Force text, the logic of militarism seems to solely permit the visualization of such a chemical as sovereign bomb. Yet, moving backwards in time, before 1994, reveals a different type of bond between homosexuality and bomb - a bomb implicated by war but fostering a type of political love. As the topology of the gay bomb stretches out, linking to its histories, what I have named the 'war bomb' (but what is called the 'gay bomb' in media), one network in the gay bomb's topology becomes mutually implicated with this older, unnamed bomb, what I will refer to as the 'queer bomb.' Importantly, the Air Force document and the war bomb locate and situate the 'queer bomb' for us - each an interface to shape meaning; they inflect and influence our readings and understandings. If the gay bomb is comprised of a war bomb and a queer bomb, the

¹⁰ "*30 Rock*" *Cooter* (200). <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1001579/> (accessed December 3, 2008).

future of the gay bomb's impact is inconclusive. As I turn to consider the queer bomb in two works by filmmaker Derek Jarman, the 'No Future!' bombing in his 1977 film *Jubilee* and the bomb-as-beach-ball in The Smiths' 1986 music video *Ask*, the queer bomb reveals an alternate explosive trajectory for the gay bomb.

To claim political love as the explosive potentiality of the queer bomb, I would like to briefly set out a sketch of what such a love could be, apart from love as we would (hetero)normally know it. As Michael Hardt has said, love as a political concept binds us to forms of reason that are not excluded from passions, that is, love in its types of reasoning extends beyond rationality yet holds us within a training or disciplining.¹¹ Hardt calls for a political love that refuses the separation of the personal and the political, operating as an open sociality and an affirmation of difference.¹² To call the queer bomb a bomb of political love implores a trepidatious set of skills - at once the ability to play into the logic of militarism but also the resisting to not lose oneself in such logics before one loses to love.

Derek Jarman returned to the theme of the queer bomb once again (the 'No Future!' bombing in the 1977 film *Jubilee* being his first) in the music video *Ask* that he directed for The Smiths in 1986. A joyful, euphoric video, *Ask* features a group of motley teens dancing in costume on the docks of a riverbank, playfully tossing a bomb about. Over this track, Morrissey croons in whimsical wisps of Brit Pop finesse, 'If it's not love then it's the bomb that will bring us together.'¹³ Almost a decade apart from *Jubilee*, *Ask* marks the end of punk, the advent of new wave, and the continuing reign of Thatcherism and the AIDS pandemic. The pairing of Jarman with The Smiths - a gay activist filmmaker and an allusively homoerotic pop band notably attracting queer audiences - produces a queer bomb as embodied subjectivity, visually displayed within a parodic logic of warfare and heteronormativity. In *Ask*, the bomb is literally a black spherical bomb labelled 'BOMB'. Rather than the failed, externalized violence of *Jubilee*, the teens of *Ask* internalize the violence of their world - a continuous bombing of exclusion, unacceptance, and contagion - and externalize their affect within the logic of a different bomb, a queer bomb, that ignites a hopeful possibility of providing a present that will give way to a viable, sustainable future. As their lives struggle within the influence and control of the sovereign bombing of subjectivity, they are able to invert this target (their own precarious lives): the queer bomb is at once a bomb of refusal - the disavowal of sovereignty's absolute control ('love', specifically heteronormative love), but also a bomb of compassionate dismantling - an acceptance of an always impending dissolution of self by the sovereign ('bomb') and the joy to disregard that threat, living fully, bound by the shared affect of political love, in a suspended moment of destruction. For these teens, all that matters is that they have 'stopped worrying and learned to love the bomb.'

¹¹ Michael Hardt. "About Love." European Graduate School Lecture Series (2007) http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=D3501DB6E18F2A74 (accessed December 7, 2008).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The Smiths. *The Smiths: The Complete Picture*. Warner Brothers, 1992.

Toward an ethics of weaponized knowledge and affect

The topological violence of the gay bomb resides within the larger stratum of total global war and targeting. As its visions of war spider across the spectrums of networked media, it enacts an exceptional weaponization of knowledge and affect. A logic of humour as a logic of militarization, the gay bomb permits the inclusion of the sovereign's laugh while displacing all other affect as anathema. This laughter, resounding over the aged laughter of the queer bomb, denies the gay bomb's previous history of queer struggle and survival. Yet, the inextricability of the queer bomb from the gay bomb as war bomb offers the possibilities and potentialities of a democratic targeting, exploding the consumption and production of exceptional knowledge and affect.

Entrenched in violence, the gay bomb oscillates between the pathways of love and war, silently instigating the question of its efficacy as an ethical weapon once more. Can the gay bomb's tautology of targeting fracture into a form of political love? Hardt and Negri importantly note that the forces of democracy today find themselves 'in a context of violence that they cannot simply ignore or wish away.'¹⁴ For them, forms of democratic violence 'can only defend society, not create it.'¹⁵ Thus, in the persistent violence of the gay bomb, can we reformulate an ethical politics of destruction? Not an explosion of sovereignty but a new form of weaponization that opens to affects and knowledge of care and love. Or do the circuits of violence bound within the gay bomb forever encrypt it as the weapon reserved for the subsumption of homosexuality into the state of exception? Where is love to be located in the logic of sovereign destruction? Is the promise of the gay bomb's topology the locatability of a political diagram of love?

In 2001, during the US War on Terror, the US military dropped a bomb on Afghanistan that was tagged by a fellow soldier with the phrase, 'High Jack This Fags'. The military, in creating a very real gay bomb of war, fills the gap between their original plan of an aphrodisiac weapon and media's desire for this to be seen as a bomb. A self-reflexive hi-jacking of military and media, this de-faced bomb of terror offers a gesture toward the military's invigorated desire to fulfil the halted destruction that their blighted homosexual weapon wants to explode into the world. In turn, the media seizes the image of this bomb and proliferates yet another visuality of US sexual exceptionalism. Undoubtedly, the gay bomb will materialize in new and unforeseen ways as it travels, links out, expands within the networks of militarization, which extend into the social, political, and commercial. A project committed to the gay bomb of love must seek out the mutually implicated ethical limits of weaponization, homosexuality, and technologies of mass destruction (which are also technologies of seeing, perceiving, and

¹⁴ Hardt and Negri. *Multitude*, 2005: 341.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 344.

disrupting). This project is both a queer labour of love and a democratic quest for the defence against sovereign destruction.

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