

Intimacy, vulnerability and post-neoliberalism?

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Thank you for inviting me to be part of this discussion. I'm so pleased to be here to celebrate the publication of Digital Intimacies: Queer Men and Smartphones in Times of Crisis. Congratulations on this wonderful book. It really is an extraordinary book- powerful and important.

It is also a deeply humane, caring and moving book. It's odd how academic books are not meant to move us or to touch us. While fiction books are routinely sold to us as texts that are going to make us cry or change our lives, somehow academic books are supposed to be dry and scholarly and not have any emotional impact. But this book does – it engages every aspect – empathy and compassion, intellect, politics. It feels really alive and connected to the lives of its interviewees, and to all of us. It is a book about feelings- and about feelings that, while intensely personal, are also socially shared and patterned.

The book had me gripped and also feeling choked up, right from page 1. It opens with a quote from Miguel, a white cis Spanish man- who said 'When Brexit happened, I went through a really dark emotional period because... it's like someone opened the doors of hell and suddenly it was ok to be xenophobic'. Miguel talks about the harassment and abuse he got from the Far Right. But then he also describes how someone reached out to him to say 'I'm really, really sorry you are going through this', and how that person ended up becoming a very close friend who he rarely sees but with whom he is in constant touch through his phone.

Miguel's words brilliantly capture so many of the themes of the book – vulnerability and control, crisis and loss, xenophobia and racism, platforms as vehicles for love and but also for hate; friendship, desire - and some of the diverse forms intimacy can take on and off smartphones. I love how Miguel's words underscore the authors' and Shaka McGlotten's (2014) points about not seeing virtual intimacies as failed intimacies. And also how his account resonates with the ways this book is opening up – and queering - ideas of intimacy.

The quote in the book from Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner is really beautiful– it shows us how inclusive and capacious your understanding of queer intimacies is. Berlant and Warner say:

‘We have developed relations and narratives that are only recognised as intimate in queer culture: girlfriends, gal pals, fuck buddies, tricks. Queer culture has learned not only how to sexualise these and other relations, but also how to use them as a context for witnessing and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation. Making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation’ (Berlant & Warner, 1998: 559)

This understanding of queer intimacy is one of the most powerful I have read and it feels as if it is animated beautifully in this work.

I wanted to briefly pick out a few of the other things I really appreciated about the book.

One is how ethical the book is. I felt this operated at multiple levels- in the way you took the care to do justice to your participants' words and to try to engage with them in all their nuance and complexity. The sense of participants as having been listened to in a compassionate and attentive way was really strong in reading this book. I felt you also really took *care* of their words and had thought really care-fully about the ethics and politics of representing people we research. A part of that came through in the clarity with which you write – I had the feeling that you wanted the people who took part in the research also to be able to read and engage with the research- to see themselves and their lives in it. There's been a lot of discussion recently about what public sociology should be or who is our research *for* – for example at Sociological Review's (2024) Undisciplining II event this year. And I felt that this book, in all these ways, really exemplified the best of it.

I also wanted to say something about how you have centred race in this book, which I think is really vital. It is centred theoretically in how you account for the many crises in contemporary Britain – discussing Grenfell, the reanimation of Black Lives Matter activism, the Windrush scandal and other key parts of what we should not forget was *deliberately created* by the Conservative government to make the UK a 'hostile environment' for people of colour. Digital Intimacies also brings out race centrally in discussions about sexual racism and dating app ethnicity filters. The rich, nuanced findings are incredibly important- and often counter-intuitive - as well as the ways you highlight the particular vulnerabilities of queer people of colour.

On my way to the book launch event to celebrate Digital Intimacies I went to see the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square and Mexican artist and forensic pathologist Teresa Margolles's incredible memorial to transgender victims of violence. It feels extremely important to have this marked and memorialised in a central public space. And it resonated with this book which I feel also makes a very important intervention in showing how the figure of the trans woman has become a – if not the - major flashpoint of the culture wars in the UK, and highlighting the particular vulnerabilities associated with that. I also really appreciated the book's attentiveness to non-binary and trans masculine participants – to people who may have been assigned female at birth (AFAB) but who recognised themselves in your call for masculine participants.

It felt vitally important to me that you did not romanticise (the) queer community – or even to characterise it as a singular community, so that some of the pain of feelings of exclusion from *within* the community could be properly acknowledged and spoken- for example exclusions or repudiations that operate along racialised or gendered lines.

A counterpoint came out really strongly later in the book when you discuss safer spaces and collective intimacies. Personally I found this really inspiring- to know that even while so many queer venues have closed down over the past few years, there are other spaces and initiatives that are fostering caring, inclusive and supportive ways of being. It was great to see this being discussed in the framework of your capacious and generous understanding of intimacy.

Before concluding let me end with a question. It centres the book's argument that we have moved into a post-neoliberal conjuncture. As well as your substantive empirical contributions, this is perhaps the most bold and important intervention that the book makes. Essentially, as I read it, you build on other work about this period of 'polycrisis' (Tooze, 2023) or 'perma-crisis' (Turnbull, 2022) in the UK to argue that since 2016 we have moved into a distinctive conjuncture that is 'post-neoliberal'. You draw on the ideas of Will Davies and Nick Gane (2021) in their influential special issue about post-neoliberalism, in which they argue

'a set of emergent rationalities, critiques, movements and reforms' have 'taken root in neoliberal societies and begin to weaken or transform key tenets of neoliberal reason and politics' Davies & Gane, 2021: 4-5)

In the book to you sketch out some of the factors that precipitated this shift and also the contours that characterise it. In discussing multiple crises, your work resonates strongly with my own recent book on young people's lives on social media (Gill, 2023), which is a book, I feel, with a similar sensibility. The sense of contradiction, struggle, and loss feels palpable as John Clarke, Larry Grossberg, Akane Kanai and I and others put it in a set of essays in New Formations about the current conjuncture (Clarke, 2019; Grossberg, 2019; Kanai & Gill, 2020). Yet I do not understand how we get from this very real sense of crisis/crises to the notion that we have moved into a *post-neoliberal* conjuncture. Which are the tenets of neoliberal reason and politics that are so weakened? What is the evidence for this 'rotting' and 'hollowed out body' of neoliberalism that Davies and Gane invoke? After Trump's election a similar case was made by some that it marked a new post-neoliberal era, but others

argued that what we were seeing was less the death of neoliberalism than its intensification – ‘neoliberalism on steroids’ as Catherine Rottenberg (2016) memorably put it.

Following Paul Gilroy (2013), I guess I also wanted to ask *which* neoliberalism have we purportedly moved on from? Gilroy’s work discusses multiple forms of neoliberalism, including ‘vernacular neoliberalism(s)’ that have been taken up in some Black communities. I am interested in whether we might draw distinctions between ‘high’ neoliberalism of the political and economic spheres and more quotidian neoliberalisms that get into the ‘nooks and crannies’ of everyday life (Littler, 2017) and indeed become central to our psychic lives – exhorting optimization, confidence, resilience, positivity (Orgad & Gill, 2022). Is it possible that it is precisely these sedimented forms of neoliberal thinking and, crucially, *neoliberal feeling* that produce the desire for ‘control’ that you discuss so compellingly?

I was reminded of the searching questions asked by Stuart Hall (1996) in his essay ‘when was the post-colonial?’ – questions about time, about place, about complexity, and what it means and what it *does* to invoke a binary- whether colonial and post-colonial or neoliberal and post-neoliberal. I was not clear what made you take such a position – and if, indeed, it was important to your argument- the strength of which, for me, was precisely, in Larry Grossberg’s (2019) terms, to tell ‘better stories’, where ‘better is measured by both the willingness to grapple with empirical complexities, and the ability to open up possible ways of moving forward to a more humane world’.

In my view, Digital Intimacies did this beautifully. It represents cultural studies at its best- nuanced, engaged, ethical, generous and open to all. I imagine myself thinking with and teaching with it for many years to come. I have paired it, on my reading list, with Róisín Ryan-Flood and Amy Tooth Murphy's wonderful collection Queering Desire, also published this year. Digital Intimacies is a marvellous book about struggles and vulnerabilities, and, notwithstanding that, about our unstoppable desire for connection and intimacy and community.

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