

## BOOK REVIEW

**Guy Davidson. 2012. *Queer Commodities: Contemporary US Fiction, Consumer Capitalism, and Gay and Lesbian Subcultures***

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For many years during the American gay liberation era, the American gay community was divided as to whether consumerist capitalism should be its identity marker. This conflict is the premise of Guy Davidson's *Queer Commodities*, a book that presents an economic approach to understanding queer anthropology and, ultimately, queer activism. Davidson analyses five novels published in the post-liberation era that foreground the dynamic link between queer commodification and queer characteristics as depicted in fictional subcultures. He demonstrates that, despite the ongoing debate pervading gay culture, there is in fact insufficient reason to fully approve or disapprove of this association of commodity cultures with same-sex identities. He suggests further that queer identities and desires are historically and meaningfully entangled with commodification, giving rise to urban subcultures that repudiate some of capitalism's detrimental effects.

Because of this complex and contentious connection between queer commodities and queer activism, Davidson's opening chapter expatiates on the long and vexing arguments of both 'mainstream' and 'activist' gays on the subject of commodification. Whereas the former assert that commodified gay cultures allow the gay community to express themselves fully and pursue same-sex relations, the latter warn that these cultures perpetuate anonymous promiscuity, thereby reducing gay identity to sexual activity and impeding the quest for acceptance and equality.

Promiscuity becomes the central theme in the subsequent chapter, which highlights the gay 'lifestyle', signified by the rise of gay commodities such as the gay ghetto, glory holes, sex clubs, and bathhouses. Focusing on Edmund White's *The Farewell Symphony*, Davidson points out that its narrator is sceptical of such overly-sexualised cultures and wonders if these reflect his "self-hatred and inability to form bonds" (45), but unexpectedly discovers a more romantic and lasting relationship amid this promiscuity. At the same time, Davidson argues that the common preference for promiscuity over coupledness serves to equate sexual freedom with same-sex liberation, thus rejecting heteronormativity.

In Chapter 3 raunchier commodities such as hustler bars and sex cinemas take centre stage and are shown to be pivotal in Samuel Delany's *The Mad Man*. Delany's work is perhaps the most fascinating of the five novels examined here because its protagonist, a doctoral student, fraternizes with the homeless, who are the antithesis of the stereotypically affluent and glamorous gay community. The chapter is also Davidson's most lucid, as he argues that sexual contact between different classes in sex cinemas is "not only a kind of compensation for the inequities of capitalism, but also produced by capitalism" (67).

In the last two chapters, Davidson turns his focus to lesbianism. Chapter 4 compares *Don Juan in the Village* and *Leash*, two novels by lesser-known author Jane DeLynn. Davidson's reading centers on narcissistic characters who are frequent but unhappy customers at lesbian cruising bars, the banality of these bars eventually leading them to feel more than ever that love and desire are inexpressible. Davidson proposes that this is one way in which urban subcultures propagate "a sense of a sameness that unites differentiated individuals" as "communicated through commodities" (101). Since consumer capitalism typically thrives on customer satisfaction, the chapter demonstrates how and why some urban subcultures actually reflect the former. The final chapter provides a fuller picture of metropolitan subcultures which reject capitalism altogether, by looking at opposing urban groups which do not trace their origins to commodification. 'Queer grrrr!' or 'riot grrrr!' is cited as an example of a "nominally anti-capitalist" (132)

and politically charged group, in that it defies male-dominated hardcore punk and other highly sexualised and repressive subcultural elements. Davidson then points to two working-class lesbian characters in Michelle Tea's *Valencia* and Lynn Breedlove's *Godspeed*, each of whom embraces 'Queer grrrl' as her identity, thereby boycotting gender stereotypes, class structures, and commodification.

In conclusion, *Queer Commodities* is a welcomed study, which features an innovative approach to American gay fiction and captures a crucial phase of the development of American gay literature. Even as America enters a new era of queer history following the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2015, there has been a shift away from gay narratives revolving around AIDS and coming-out stories to works representing characters who are no longer struggling to find their place in the society, including Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015 Man Booker shortlist) and Andrew Sean Greer's *Less* (2018 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction). It will be fascinating to see how the relationship between commodity cultures and same-sexuality evolves through time, and Davidson's book will likely prove to be a seminal work in discussions of this.