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Nicholas de Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. xii +218 pp. Notes and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8166-7570-8; \$25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8166-7571-5.

Review by David A. Powell, Hofstra University.

In *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol*, Nicholas de Villiers ambitiously takes on the current question of the utility of the closet metaphor. I say “ambitious” because Villiers tackles the problem through the writings and self-representations of three renowned mid-twentieth-century personalities, two French and one American. Villiers takes on a dual challenge: to identify and explore the opaque nature of the apparent closetedness of Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol, and then to explore the significance of the opacity of said closet. In Villiers’s words, the book “interrogates the viability of the metaphor of the closet when applied to these three important queer figures in postwar American and French culture.”<sup>[1]</sup> While investigating how the closet metaphor functions with these celebrities has undeniable value in the overall question of secrecy and homophobia, not to mention internalized homophobia and the posturing that naturally goes along with celebrity, the study remains on the level of high-profile figures, all deceased, and the documentation they have left behind.

The book is divided more or less as the title indicates, with a discussion of Foucault, then Barthes, and finally Warhol—although Warhol’s share considerably outweighs the others’. The short preface introduces the reader to what Villiers calls the “queer formula” through a short story by Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street.”<sup>[2]</sup> Deleuze’s reading of this story, as Villiers presents it, explains the formula as something that “drives everyone crazy” (Deleuze, quoted by Villiers, p. x): the way Melville’s protagonist insistently responds to his employer’s question as to why he won’t give him any information about himself with the phrase “I would prefer not to.” The employer sees withholding information as an assault against social convention; he demands a confession of sorts. Villiers identifies the ubiquity of this compulsory confession as the focus of his three protagonists’ concern regarding their perceived secrecy surrounding their sexuality. Reading concealment as queer has become a common methodology in queer theory, and Villiers displays excellent skills in this area, although one does frequently get the impression that he is claiming this methodology if not as his innovation at least as his newly-tweaked version of same. Villiers presents the precepts of his book, referencing Foucault, Sedgwick, Eribon, Butler, Barthes, Halperin—the usual sources for a queer argument—plus Warhol. Laying out the foundations of his argument through painstaking review of the many arguments that have come before him, Villiers’s introduction reads somewhat like a dissertation—in fact, the book is a revision of his doctoral thesis.

In *Opacity and the Closet*, Villiers wants to examine “questions about cultural memory, collecting, and queer art history” (p. 1). The introduction, “Opacities: Queer Strategies,” reviews the current debate about the metaphor of the closet and the attendant obligation to speak the “truth,” which orbits around the quandary of the public/private structure. This structure, while certainly critical for celebrities of all kinds anywhere on the planet, has more mundane and totally assimilated currency in France that far outweighs its significance for most non-celebrity Americans. Typically Americans’ sense of privacy is focused on information that could damage the family or the individual; it does not usually fixate on a

constant set of notions and can change, i.e., become public, depending on circumstances. The French sense of the public/private dichotomy, on the contrary, tends to assume first that all information not related to the workplace is private and not to be talked about, asked about, or wondered about. This principle is so engrained that French people tend not to often think about others' private lives, and if it ever comes up, the reflex response is, "not my business." Consequently the question of coming out of the closet responds to appreciably different factors and degrees of considerations in French and American contexts. I would have appreciated more discussion of the disconnects this factor causes for any study that combines French and American artists/writers in a discussion on coming out versus silence.

Citing Sedgwick, Villiers confronts the issue of the disclosure that is "at once compulsory and forbidden" (*Epistemology*, quoted by Villiers, p. 3), bolstered by Barthes's 1989 discussion of the insignificance of coming out, the homophobic logic of erasure and absence (*Rustle of Language*, quoted by Villiers, p. 3). It is this interstice that Villiers characterizes as opaque, and the strategy of consciously "playing" (my word) this locus of willful ambiguity in order to "shake off" the closet and the epistemological, ontological and political presuppositions on which it is based constitutes his "queer tactics." (See Villiers's subtle treatment of Barthes's and Harai's distinctions between "tactics" and "strategies," pp. 19-21.) This is the current-day status of "closet" discussions, even more so the discussions that are presently in play between France and the United States, alongside the "quarrel" over the use of the term queer in France. This tension—or is it an unwilling entente?—could have been presented with more emphasis on French resistance (the queer one, not the World War Two variety) to what is perceived in Paris as another American invasion.

Villiers discusses the confessional mandate, where it comes from and what that presupposes, and in particular how it functions to make the subject choose, not between staying in the closet or coming out, but rather between that dichotomy and the tactic of opacity. The author advances the benefits of this tactic to explain how it works for these three celebrities, and by extension for anyone; for these artists/celebrities, however the tactic allows them to produce creative and political statements that go beyond the dictum of generating "the truth." Villiers posits that Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol in fact use a variety of tactics, "a set of productive strategies for the creation of public personas that in fact resist homophobia and heteronormativity" (p. 11). The next three chapters lay out the tactics of Villier's three secretive personalities (as he tends to describe them).

In chapter one, "Confessions of a Masked Philosopher: Anonymity and identification in Foucault and Guibert," Villier's discussion nicely links the strategic postures of Michel Foucault and Hervé Guibert, with the help of arguments from Genet, Bersani, and less so Blanchot. Negotiating issues such as shame, secrecy, and betrayal, Villiers's arguments flow well and, for the most part, convincingly. It is to my mind a symptom of the American slant of the book that Guibert's name does not figure in the book's title alongside Foucault's: in France, Guibert remains, along with Guy Hocquenghem, one of the important figures in considerations of the state of the "gay community" in French society today. Relegating Guibert to a chapter title, as well as totally ignoring Hocquenghem tilts Villiers's argument toward the American erstwhile adoration of Foucault—currently in flux—and emphasizes the gap between French and American gay experiences. This would, in part, explain the addition of Warhol to the mix.

Chapter two, "Matte Figures: Roland Barthes's Ethics of Meaning," discusses Barthes's notion of silence, literary and otherwise, a kind of "first-person opacity" (p. 64). Villiers evokes D.A. Miller's problematic treatment of Barthes's silence—i.e., calling Barthes's act of gay nomination "phobic" (quoted by Villiers, p. 64)—and makes very good points about Miller's exaggerated interpretations. (Michael Lucey's recent book, *Never Say I*, would have been most instructive in this argument.[3]) Villiers takes up Barthes's term "matte" as corollary to his own opacity. In this discussion he serves up an enlightening analysis of Barthes's use of "inessential" and "insignificant" as terms that reinforce the (French) private/public dichotomy as well Villiers's own notion of opacity. These are, to my eyes, some

of the most useful pages of the book. Similarly sensitive is Villiers's treatment of the significant nuances between memoir, confession, and autobiography, mostly concerning Barthes's posthumously published *Incidents*; this then leads to thoughtful comments surrounding the public discomfort (and often disapproval) of Barthes's and Foucault's "failure" to come out. In this chapter Barthes's use of "neutral" and "silence" receives deserved attention; once again, rather than the dichotomy of "out" and "in," Villiers privileges Barthes's insistence on dedicated and attentively matte (opaque) expression.

Then begins the Warhol section, which takes us to the end of the book.<sup>[4]</sup> Division titles in chapter three, "What Do You Have to Say for Yourself? Warhol's Opacity," lead the reader lucidly through the various aspects of Warhol that are widely known; some examples are: "The Magic 8 Ball"; "Impersonation"; "That was the way he really talked?" Villiers's numerous and accurate citations support his discussion of these earmark characteristics of Warhol which have made him famous despite his apparent lack of enthusiasm to talk about himself. But Villiers is careful to question the pose of silence and not to allow it to be mistaken as being closeted (p. 91 and passim). The question of the interview—whether to grant one; how one "performs" it; who should be allowed "in" and when—with Warhol, but also with Barthes receives fair treatment, even though some of this discussion is repetitive of earlier passages in the book.

Chapter four, "Unseen Warhol/Seeing Barthes," continues the association of the artist/writer duo in a way that recognizes the differences in media that could otherwise separate them. Villiers's ability to interpret these various media should not be underappreciated. It is precisely this interpretive skill that brings out the differences between Barthes and Warhol, which, up until this point in the book, seem so similar. But make no mistake, there is similarity; the nuances, however, strengthen the explication of the various shades of opacity.

Chapter five, "Andy Warhol Up-Tight: Warhol's Effects," especially the sections titled "A Queer Reading" and "The Empty Closet," serve as a satisfying conclusion. Villiers examines here the role of archives, memory, and history. Warhol of course provides an exemplary opportunity for such an inquiry given his penchant for recording his observations—cassette recording as well as Polaroid and 8 mm film—but also his taste for collecting art and artifacts. Warhol's well-known "time capsules" offer a slightly more eccentric example (pp. 134-137), but Villiers does make some effort to address the issue on a more general scale that implicates a sense of "gay history" or what Simon Watney calls "obliterative homophobia" (p. 133), whereby elements of gay experience are omitted, intentionally or not, from historical accounts as a symptom of homophobia.

Establishing and interpreting archival work again brings Villiers to ask how people distinguish private life from secretive behavior. Unsurprisingly Barthes provides the material with which to explore this topic. The distinction between Barthes's (French) jealousy of his right to a private life, notwithstanding his own celebrity, and Warhol's quirky (posturing?) timidity and secrecy deserves, perhaps, a deeper examination, and this on two points: the consideration of the difference of cultural attitudes towards private and public life on the one hand, and on the other, the radical changes that celebrity makes on the scale, in both (or any) cultures. In addition, the different nature of Barthes's restricted public and, thus, limited celebrity and Warhol's media-fuelled celebrity that fed off the curiosity of the general public adds to the difficulty of comparison. Villiers strives, in chapter five and elsewhere in the book, to temper the problems inherent in this aspect of his study. I would have hoped, though, for a more concerted, conscious, and articulated treatment of this matter. What is of particular interest, however, is the study Villiers makes of the "empty closet" (pp. 144-145), where he focuses on Warhol's play on "left-overs" (p. 144). An extrapolation of the conclusions applied to the general population would have suggested a useful direction of inquiry and heightened relevance for all readers.

In sum, Nicholas de Villiers's *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* is a must-read for multiple disciplines, including various cross-disciplinary endeavors. The author's ability

to present theory, teasing out the nuances that logically lead to new and insightful questions, makes this book a pleasure to read. Its drawbacks are the attempts at exhaustive documentation that stem from the dissertation format that engendered the book, and the intermittent lack of sensitivity to how the matters of the closet and the public/private dichotomy differ radically in France and in the U.S. Finally, I feel that the Barthes-Warhol connection (aside from the insufficient transatlantic distinctions) is the strongest quality of the book. Foucault will always be an undercurrent to such discussions, but devoting the importance of a place in the title to him, especially excluding Guibert and Hocquenghem, rather compromises the originality of Villiers's fine study. To come back to Melville's *Bartleby*, a noticeably common-man type of character, Villiers eschews discussion of how the various tactics of silence, of whatever sort, might affect the general population, either in the US or in France—or elsewhere.

It seems that the valuable conclusions to which Villiers comes could have led him to suggest substantially useful tools for addressing issues of the closet in everyone's life, not just for those of high profile individuals—all men noticeably—who reflect intellectual expressions of the choices of celebrities as opposed to the choices that all of us must make. The consequence of Villiers's study could have been strengthened with a developed comparison of the differences between the three celebrities. That Villiers sees similarities is clear, but the distinctions—cultures, media, public—offer considerable material for comment which could have had greater presence. That said, Nicholas de Villiers's *Opacity and the Closet* advances our critical background for the indispensable need to examine the function and utility of the closet metaphor.

#### NOTES

[1] [http://blogs.citypages.com/dressingroom/2012/12/nicholas\\_de\\_villiers\\_on\\_queer\\_art\\_history\\_maep\\_artist\\_bloc\\_blegen.php](http://blogs.citypages.com/dressingroom/2012/12/nicholas_de_villiers_on_queer_art_history_maep_artist_bloc_blegen.php). Consulted January 13, 2013.

[2] Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street," *Putnam's Magazine* (November and December 1853); republished in Melville, *The Piazza Tales* (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856).

[3] Michael Lucey, *Never Say I* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).

[4] Without irony, Villiers gives a nod to all those who have written on Warhol's performance of silence: "I find that others have already said almost what I want to say (often going to press as I was working on this project)" (p. 91).

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