MAP-ping Queerness? Philadelphia’s Mural Arts Program

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Résumé

With its origins in the "City Beautiful" movement of the 1890s and early 1900s (Webster and Rohr 2016), American muralism emerged from a project combining the idea of national self-improvement with normatively feminine ideal of the city as an object that should be "beautiful". This rehearses the modernist narrative of the city space as a feminized object of aesthetic pleasure for the male eye, a visual regime that contributed to the production of normative "conceptualizations of what is feminine and what is masculine" (Massey 1994: 233). Nowhere would this seem to be truer than in the "City of Murals", Philadelphia. Since 1984, Executive Director of the Mural Arts Program (MAP) and artist Jane Golden has overseen the job of "cleaning up"—typically a woman’s job—the city streets by promising graffiti taggers the chance of formal artistic training in exchange for the reinvestment of their energies into producing murals for the community.

This paper reflects on the extent to which Philadelphia’s MAP may be deemed a queer re-appropriation of an artform historically rooted in the production of the city space as a site of feminised beauty and domesticising cleanliness. America’s sixth city has been re-branded in recent years as the country’s “original” Stonewall (e.g. Bianco), hosting the first LGBT sit-in in 1965, the first LGBT march in 1966, and the first “AIDS library” in 1987. MAP has been a major actor in marketing the city as a site of queer history: “Pride and Progress” (2003) and ”A Tribute to Gloria Casarez” (2015) (in hommage to the city’s first director of LGBT affairs) are central focal points of the “Gaybourhood”, a popular nickname for the city centre. Since queer geography is not simply about LGBT visibility, but also about challenging the heteronormativity of space (Browne et al, 2007), these two examples have limited potential: they are “homonormative” variants on the hetero-norm in their representation of gender-conforming lesbian and gay couples. Nor does the racial diversity on display in these works produce actual queer spaces of colour; they are situated in the city’s most affluent neighbourhood where over 75% of residents are white, remarkable given that the city’s dominant ethnic group is African American (Lala 2015). This paper thus turns to reflect on the re-appropriation of territories, both actual and virtual, by queers of colour via the use of street art that ”transcends [the] straightforward civil rights claims” (Browne et al. 2007: 12) of Philadelphia’s best-known LGBT murals. The paper considers queer women of colour re-appropriations of the city’s murals in the online zine The Middle of the Night, as well as the use of graffiti tagging to queer the black respectability politics on display in MAP’s dedication to Bill Cosby. Indeed, taggers’ defacement of the Cosby mural may be symptomatic of a queered black masculinity that can be found in other, not explicitly LGBT, MAP murals, such as ”Philadelphia Muses” (1999), ”Colourful Legacy” (2015), and ”Aspire: No Limits” (2014). Rather than producing actually existing queer-men-of-colour
communities, some MAP murals may serve as a figurative "map"-or an "imaginative geography" (Driver 1999)-to navigate a dialogue on the norm of hypermasculinity bearing down on African American men.

Bibliography:


Mots-Clés: art