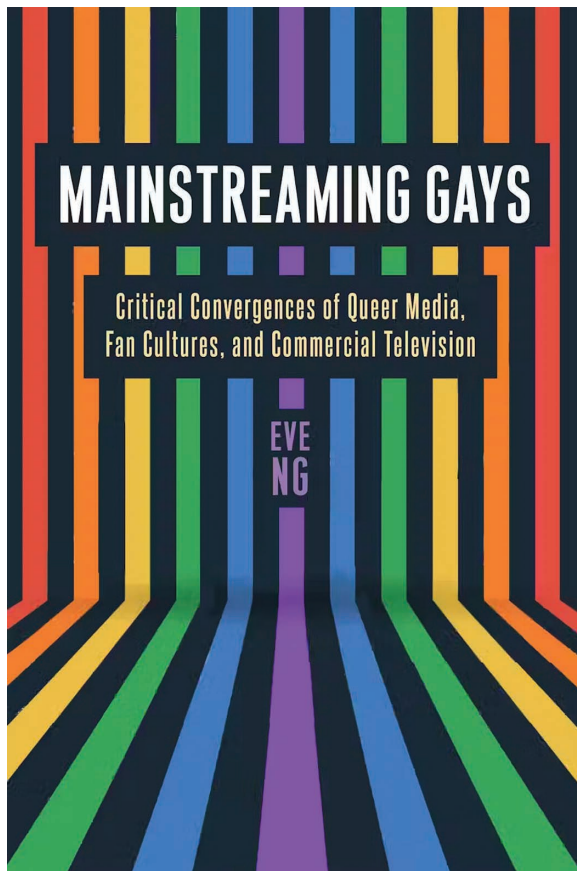


Book Review:

Ng, Eve. *Mainstreaming Gays: Critical Convergences of Queer Media, Fan Cultures, and Commercial Television* (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, New Jersey, 2023)

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Mainstreaming Gays is an important contribution to the study of queer media industries and the forces shaping queer media and cultural production. Ng's book belongs on the bookshelf next to other major recent titles such as Julia Himberg's *The New Gay for Pay: The Sexual Politics of American Television Production* (Texas, 2018) and Alfred L. Martin, Jr.'s *The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-Cast Sit-com* (Indiana, 2021), books that have helped popularize a subfield of queer media industry studies. Ng develops a new model of Pierre Bourdieu's cultural field that considers queer cultural production and new forms of symbolic and economic value that have been created in the convergent media marketplace. She considers what is gained and what is lost, by the increasing proliferation, fragmentation, commercialization, and commodification of forms of queerness.

Between 2008 and 2011, Ng interviewed over fifty people, including interns and executives at Bravo and Logo, editors at AfterEllen and

AfterElton, recappers at Television Without Pity, and site founders (e.g., the founders of DowneLink and AfterEllen). Ng also attended industry events such as NewFest, the New York LGBTQ film festival; the New York Television Festival; the TV of Tomorrow show; a panel on “Out Trailblazers in Media” in 2010; and a New York City party for Logo’s reality show *The A-List*. Ng deftly weaves between queer theory and queer cultural studies, interview extracts, observations from her attendance at numerous industry events, trade sources and publications, and textual analysis of television programs and online video.

In Chapter one, “New Convergences in LGBTQ Media Production: Digital Pathways into Commercial Media,” Ng examines opportunities for new queer entrants to paid, professional media production in the early days after Bravo and Logo purchased websites primarily dedicated to fandom such as Television Without Pity, AfterEllen, and AfterElton. Ng adds critical depth, historical contextualization, and a queer perspective to industrial debates, especially around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, around the “pipeline” problem, arguing that “the new digital pathways into mainstream media did not end up lasting at Bravo and Logo, as the increasing commercialization and professionalization of the websites ultimately closed off more informal or fan-based routes into the networks.”¹ Ng stresses how professionalization proved to be a double-edged sword, as “professionalization both placed former industry outsiders into important gatekeeper roles *and* ended up largely shutting out the fans and consumer content creators who had provided the initial lifeblood of the sites that Bravo and Logo acquired.”² Ng addresses debates among site workers and content creators about what constituted “good” LGBTQ representation, examining different perspectives on the role or relevance of academic feminism or queer theory and debates about the appropriateness of commenting on women’s bodies (e.g., beauty) and how to represent sexuality (and how far to go in representing queer sexualities). Disagreements among website contributors and interview comments illustrate that while LGBTQ media content become more commonplace, “there remained tensions around overtly appealing to queer desire versus either a more analytical stance or providing other kinds of community connection and validation of LGBTQ identity.”³

In Chapter two, “The New Queer Digital Spaces,” Ng chronicles how the “trajectories” of Bravo- and Logo-acquired sites “illustrate specific intersecting historical moments: how legacy media got into digital, how independent queer production became entwined with mainstream media, and how popular culture became a queer water cooler, the crux of new digital spaces for LGBTQ interactivity.”⁴ Ng addresses the “growth of outlets” and how that the shutdown of most of Logo’s sites meant “a loss of free-to-user content centrally located on a website known for LGBTQ content.”⁵ She argues, “Logo’s acquired websites . . . demonstrated the demand for original LGBTQ digital content, especially scripted shows.”⁶ Logo always struggled to deliver on queer consumer demand; it could never match the diversity of queer identities in terms of gender or race that the website content could. Ng explores the reasons behind some founder, worker, and contributor departures. For example, Sarah Warn left AfterEllen due to burnout from accusations from site visitors and the changing tone and tenor of site participation. I was particularly struck by how some of the interview extracts in this chapter communicate that the move from queer “legacy” media (e.g., print newspapers and magazines) to free-to-access online publications and online video led to an increase in

homonormative content production, as media makers were addressing a queer community but were increasingly afraid of unknown, invisible, and perhaps even hostile potential audiences (e.g., right-wing groups).

Much of this chapter is a decline and fall narrative, as Bravo and Logo shut down or sold off what they had acquired. Ng notes that “the landscape of a few major digital water coolers about LGBTQ entertainment that emerged during the peak of user activity at Bravo’s and Logo’s websites has yielded to a much greater number of interactional spaces,” including apps, sites, social media platforms, and streaming services. But she wonders and worries, as should we all, about what is gained, and what is lost, in the industrial, technological, and textual dispersal of queerness and the loss of heavily trafficked queer digital spaces centered on and run by queer folks.

Chapter three, “Gaystreaming, Dualcasting, and Changing Queer Alignments,” builds on long-standing critiques of LGBTQ market and audience constructions. Bravo rebranded after its purchase by NBC Universal, beginning with *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and reaching the apotheosis of its dual casting approach to gay men and straight women in *The Real Housewives* franchise. Like most cable networks, the bulk of Logo’s programming was always syndicated shows and licensed content. But Logo also started out with more potential for direct and varied queer programming. *Noah’s Arc* was a groundbreaking Black gay sitcom, and one of Logo’s first original series; however, Logo canceled it after two seasons and produced a theatrically released wrap up movie in 2008. Shows such as *Alien Boot Camp* (2007–2009) and *The Click List: Best in Short Film* (2006–2010) provided a commercial distribution outlet for queer short film. But as Logo developed and implemented its “gaystreaming” strategy, the window of opportunity for queer media makers and for new queer stories began to close. Gaystreaming involved programming “lighter fare versus narratives about coming out and homophobia,”⁷ a “distancing from agendas critical of dominant commercial culture,” “a move away from explicit categories of gender or sexual identity,”⁸ a collapse [of] “rural and working-class spaces into a hinterland of conservatism, sexism, homophobia, and racism,”⁹ and “a shift away from addressing persistent inequalities.”¹⁰ Gaystreaming first impacted decision-making on content acquisitions. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (RPDR, 2009–) was Logo’s most successful original series before the show moved to VH1, also in the MTV Networks family, in 2017. Ng claims that “to a certain extent, RPDR straddled the transition between Logo’s earlier programming, which sought to present a spectrum of LGBTQ experience, and the shift to gaystreaming.”¹¹ In the 2012 season, there was no new show on Logo with a gay or lesbian lead.¹² Gaystreaming affected Logo’s websites, with “shorter and lighter content” becoming dominant and the removal of “explicit references to sexual identities” in the taglines for *AfterEllen* and *AfterElton*.¹³

Ng pays special attention to the effects of leadership changes and transitions at Bravo and Logo. For example, when Chris McCarthy became the general manager of Logo in 2015, he “recommitted Logo to LGBTQ-centered programming, including acquiring the British comedy-drama series *Cucumber and Banana*,” written by Russell T. Davies, who wrote the original UK *Queer as Folk*. But “a return to the kind of distinctive scripted programming that Logo had begun with” never occurred.¹⁴ Logo returned to reality television production

briefly, but by fall 2017, Logo did not have any series centering on LGBTQ characters/people or any original series at all.¹⁵

Bravo and Logo's strategies largely erased queer women from the picture. Black media makers criticized Logo for its overwhelming whiteness in terms of content and personnel. Neither Bravo nor Logo was perfect. But one of my favorite sentences in the book highlights what was lost in Logo's embrace of gaystreaming as strategy. Ng writes,

The well-groomed, urban gay man, entertainingly flamboyant queen, and attractive lipstick or fitness lesbian sidelined other forms of queer identity and bodies that had had a better shot at being seen especially on Logo pre-gaystreaming, even if they never enjoyed equal exposure.¹⁶

In the end, dualcasting and gaystreaming pushed Bravo and Logo "away from the production of LGBTQ content, resulting in a decrease in even homonormative programming."¹⁷

"Beyond Queer Niche: Remaking the Mainstream," the fourth chapter, is the chapter that may be of most interest to a broad spectrum of readers of this journal. This chapter examines what changes when "queer is no longer niche but still retains the cultural and political charge of independent and subcultural domains."¹⁸ Ng complicates narratives of queer commercialization and appropriation, examining how workers at Bravo and Logo (and their associated websites) dealt with mainstream/independent and mainstream/subcultural tensions and distinctions as well as negotiated the overlaps and disjunctures between commercial media work and the political work of representation. Logo needed "independently produced queer media for the network's programming and subcultural capital," but some staff "deromanticize[d] its cachet"¹⁹; the work of unknown and/or emerging artists "graced Logo with a measure of subcultural prestige that its corporate status with otherwise make it hard to claim."²⁰ Ng examines how Bravo and Logo executives frequently talked about Bravo and Logo as "small" in relation to their parent companies or other conglomerate divisions, although she queries the rhetoric of smallness by noting both Bravo and Logo's reliance on interns and their resources. Ng argues that the growing pervasiveness of LGBTQ content and series in network and cable television and on streaming services meant that queer content could "no longer serve as a hallmark of distinction" for any cable network; furthermore, Bravo and Logo's repertoires of reality television series could not compete with the "number of scripted series with strong queer narratives in the 'quality TV' ilk" that emerged elsewhere.²¹

Ng revises Pierre Bourdieu's model of cultural production. Ng is interested in "how to rethink the character of major commercial media itself when it cannot simply be defined as monolithically 'large scale,' and the role of digital technologies in these changes."²² She focuses on low and high symbolic capital, and symbolic capital's relationship to economic capital and audience size, with "low economic capital, small audience," "low economic capital, large audience," and "high economic capital, large audience" being the possibilities.²³ She then uses the revised model to map out Bravo and Logo's websites and content types as well as Bravo and Logo's programs and series.

Ng's conclusion, "Legacies and Futures for Mainstreaming Gays," briefly examines the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time during which production shutdowns disproportionately affected marginalized groups with fewer archival and back catalog texts that could be

programmed as a form of replacement; how the contraction in television production, especially in streaming, will affect LGBTQ media workers and audiences; and how “the increasing dependence of U.S. media production on international demand” has led to Netflix’s acquisition of several Asian “boys love” (BL) series and local/national productions of increasingly globalized franchises such as *Queer Eye* and *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.²⁴ Ng leaves us with a question that needs further elaboration, analysis, and scrutiny: “What does it mean for LGBTQ media to go mainstream, both as it happened at Bravo and Logo, and for the current and future conditions of a mainstream arena more complexly layered than ever in terms of producers, platforms, and distribution?”²⁵ Ng’s book encourages LGBTQ media scholars to continue to chronicle the opportunities for and challenges facing LGBT labor in creative industries, especially in relation to the production of content that is for us.

¹ Eve Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays: Critical Convergences of Queer Media, Fan Cultures, and Commercial Television* (Rutgers University Press, 2024), 24–5.

² Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 43.

³ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 49.

⁴ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 53.

⁵ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 56.

⁶ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 62.

⁷ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 89.

⁸ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 90.

⁹ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 93.

¹⁰ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 101.

¹¹ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 94.

¹² Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 95.

¹³ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 98.

¹⁴ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 103.

¹⁵ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 104.

¹⁶ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 98–9.

¹⁷ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 102.

¹⁸ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 109.

¹⁹ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 111.

²⁰ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 113.

²¹ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 116.

²² Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 110.

²³ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 123.

²⁴ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 134.

²⁵ Ng, *Mainstreaming Gays*, 139.

