

Queer Theory:

A Feminist Philosophical Commentary

AF ROBIN MAY SCHOTT

This piece was originally presented as a commentary to Dag Heede's lecture, "En køn historie. Queer teori og en ny mærkelig litteraturhistorie", at the seminar "De skæve køn". I am not a queer theorist, but a feminist theorist who will make some critical comments about queer theory – criticisms that in part already have been expressed by lesbian feminist writers such as Suzanna Danuta Walters and Rosemary Hennessy. My task is not to discuss Dag Heede's literary interpretations, which I take to be creative and interesting. Rather, I will look at the conceptual presuppositions to his claim that queer theory is "a" or even "the" new philosophical paradigm.

First let me begin with some personal comments. When Dag Heede sent me his lecture addressing me as a worthy opponent – strong, potent, beautiful and castrating with a penetrating and phallic look – well, I admit to being flattered. It was like the birthday card I received years ago from

REPLIK

a close friend of mine (a black, gay philosopher, now deceased). On the front of the card I read “To someone who is beautiful, brilliant, classy, sexy...” and thoroughly gratified I opened the card to read on the inside, “You’re eating this up, aren’t you?”

Remembering this birthday card experience, I figured that I ought to pause to think about the position in which Dag’s address put me. In the opening of his lecture, he sets up a playful teasing between sexed bodies and gendered identities – a tension that gets carried through in the lecture. Who has the male body? He does. And who has the male intellectual identity? I do. Who has the female body? I do. Who has the female intellectual identity? He does.

This teasing raises the serious question about how to analyze and negotiate relations between sexed bodies and gendered identities – a question to which I will return below.

In this short piece, I am particularly interested in looking at the discourse which sets up queer theory as hip, fun, and transgressive, while feminist theory is placed as being angry, old-fashioned, and lacking sex appeal. Dag Heede locates this narrative in the popular perception of young people. He notes that this narrative does, however, reflect the entrenched cultural view that men’s relations to men have more “drama, desire, energy, publicness, and hullabaloo” than women’s relation to women have.¹ Nevertheless, he does not cast a critical eye on this popular perception.

In what exactly does the newness of the paradigm offered by queer theory consist? Is it new because it generates critical views about the practice of taking heterosexuality as the norm for human sexual relations? Heede notes that the commonality for queers is minimally a critical attitude to heteronormativity.²

As a point of historical reference, I want to point out that in 1976 the Brussels Tribunal on Crimes against Women denounced compulsory heterosexuality as a crime

against women. And Adrienne Rich’s article, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, published in *Signs* in 1980, defined heterosexuality as a political institution that effects every aspect of our professions, our curriculums, our social arrangements (Rich 1980, 653, 657). So the critique of heteronormativity, or of heterosexual hegemony, is a central concept in feminist theory. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, published ten years after Rich’s article, supplied a different theoretical framework for the analysis of heteronormativity. But Butler clearly situated her work as the continuation of a project within feminist philosophy.

So if the newness of the queer paradigm vis a vis feminist theory is not found in the critique of hegemonic heterosexuality, is it found in its queer’s openness and inclusiveness? Dag Heede notes that you do not need to have sex with a person of the same sex to identify as queer. He writes: “Queer is fluid and diffuse.” (Incidentally, his phrase echoes the words used by Rich to describe lesbianism as a broad spectrum of women-women relations (Rich 1980, 650).) Heede continues, queer can indicate all sorts of “erotic and existential variations which in some way depart from the norm or normality.”³ And many so-called heterosexuals identify themselves with the concept of queer. In fact, after one semester almost all of his students have become queer.

I would like to raise a couple of questions to this open characterization of queer. First is the question about the value and limits of deviations. Queer theorists seem to presume that all deviations from heteronormativity are subversive. But are all forms of subversions playful or emancipatory acts? Do the deviations validated by queerness include acts of incest and pedophilia? Such acts are indeed subversive, but what they subvert is the psychic health of boys who become victims. These questions are relevant to the public debates in the gay and

lesbian movements in North America over the status of the "North American Man-Boy Association" (Walters 1996, 838). Without further clarification, this come-ye-all-to-me approach to queerness risks making the identification with queerness either dangerous or meaningless, and hence this approach undermines any claim that queer theory makes about being subversive of the institutions of heterosexuality. Instead, I might look for the subversion of heteronormativity in practices that effectively undermine the rampant sexualization and objectification of women in advertising and in the heinous modern slave trade in women for prostitution.

Moreover, if queer really has nothing to do with specific sexual practices, can one criticize the phenomena appearing in the U.S. of straight academics theoretically "passing" as queer? The problem of "passing" is well-known in the U.S. with its history of racial discrimination. Many artists (e.g., the philosopher-artist Adrian Piper) have seathingly denounced the phenomenon of racial "passing", which not only effects a separation of physical from social identity, but which allows persons who "pass" to accrue benefits from their adopted identity at the price of deception and alienation from their culture and community. "Passing" as queer seems to work in the reverse direction: members of the privileged group of heterosexuals adopt the identity of the group that suffers discrimination. But since academics are not entirely stupid, this phenomena only occurs because it accrues certain advantages, i.e. in getting the theoretical limelight and promoting career advancement. And of course, theoretical queers (but practicing heterosexuals) do not have to pay the price of struggling for health insurance and adoption rights that their gay and lesbian colleagues in the U.S. have to pay.

Dag Heede's come-ye-all-to-me approach to queerness, with its implicit separation between physical and social identity, also

raises the question of whether the specificity of bodies (e.g., sexual and racial differences) are relevant to queer theorists. If not, then queer theory marks a dramatic departure from the analysis of bodies that has been a central component of feminist theory. If the newness of queerness lies in this split between physical and social identity, then it is hardly an advance for social and cultural theory.

The purportedly open-ended scope of queerness is also troubling to a feminist sensibility that has a fine-honed scepticism about claims to inclusiveness in Western culture (e.g., feminist philosophers have contributed substantial critical analysis about the inclusiveness of the concepts of man, humanity, rationality.). This scepticism leads me to wonder whether queer theory in fact gives primacy to gay male identity and practices *vis a vis* lesbian identity and practices. This suspicion is heightened by Dag Heede's not-so-subtle imagery of a strange new literary history which turns the bottom of texts up in the air and takes them from behind.⁴ This concern is voiced by lesbian writers who see gay male sex and its history becoming the model of radical chic. Donna Minkowitz writing for the *Village Voice* in 1992 lamented: "I have a girlfriend, not a transgressive erotic world where I can do it with five strangers in an evening, or suck off girl upon girl in the darkness of the meat district." (Walters 1996, 850) And I must confess, the fact that male sexual desire is given primacy over female sexual desire does not strike me as a radically new creation of the late 20th and early 21st century.

If the inclusiveness of the queer paradigm can be problematized, is it the aestheticization of identity which constitutes its major contribution? Dag Heede describes queer as a festive oasis in the desert wandering of compulsory heterosexuality,⁵ and thereby underlines its aesthetic attraction. An aestheticization of identity is evident in the popular view that gender is performan-

ce, a question of gender shopping. Here I want to underline that Judith Butler has disavowed the voluntaristic interpretation of the concept of performativity that was spawned by *Gender Trouble*. She noted in an interview in *Radical Philosophy* in 1993: "I felt that the popularization of *Gender Trouble*, even though it was interesting culturally to see what it tapped into, to see what was out there, longing to be tapped into – ended up being a terrible misrepresentation of what I wanted to say!" (Osborne & Segal 1994, 3). That she is opposed to a voluntaristic interpretation of performativity is evidenced in the difficulties she has in trying to work through concepts of agency, resignification and subversion in *Feminist Contentions* and *Bodies that Matter*. But perhaps the really interesting question is whether Butler herself contributes to a misreading of her work because of the limitations of her own theory. Butler treats the social as the discursive and does not treat material relations that shape the social order, with its distribution of wealth, resources, and power (Hennessy, 1995, 153). The insufficient attention Butler gives to institutional and historical analysis may well contribute to the popular perception of gender identity as a strictly aesthetic choice.

If it is the aestheticization of identity that characterizes the contribution of queer theory, what are its political ramifications? Does it call for a coalition of all those who seek to be "non-heterosexually-normative"? If so, does this contribute to a mono-causal analysis of subordination and subjectification? Here I would like to underline that feminist theory has over the last 20 years undergone a profound and productive self-critique, with the consequence that issues of race, class, ethnicity, and nationality become crucial in analyses of gender and sexuality. Queer theory should learn from feminism the importance of analyzing queer practices in relation to these complex factors of social identity. As Jacquelyn Zita

writes, "To construct a new field of queer studies without addressing misogyny, gender, male supremacy, race, and class as these are differently experienced by a wide diversity of female and male queers, is to seal the happy marriage of gay and lesbian studies with a Hallmark card and a Falwellian blessing."⁶

I would argue for a more modest placing of queer theory than Dag Heede does. Queer is not "new", as opposed to feminism's retro-character. It does not offer a new optic through which to view the world that displaces the previous optics of sexuality, gender, race, class. But queer theorists like Dag Heede do offer productive strategies for reading texts in relation to the on-going definitional crisis about the pair heterosexual/homosexual, and for analyzing how textual interpretations can de-stabilize the economy of desire based on heteronormativity⁷. This work deserves a place in the academy because it makes new and compelling textual interpretations, not because it sells itself as the hottest new item in the intellectual-erotic market-place.

Instead of viewing queer as the new paradigm, I am more inclined to agree with Suzanna Walters that we should look for a "creative renegotiation of the relationship between feminism and queer theory and politics" (Walters 1996, 864) Feminism takes as one of its goals the analysis of the material realities that shape men's and women's lives and put them sometimes similarly at risk – but sometimes also very differently at risk (think of the specific oppression of women of Afghanistan under the Taliban regime).⁸ Thus, feminist theory does not try to understand sexuality as separate from an analysis gender. It is one thing for Dag Heede to tease with this separation of sexed bodies and gendered identities e.g., his male body/female identity, my female body/male identity. It is quite another to presume that this playfulness counts as an intervention in the political and institutional dimensions that pro-

vide the frames in which men and women live their lives. Queer theory needs feminist theory. Jocular attempts to treat feminism as the old maid who turns out really to have been in drag the whole time, and who requires solicitous but not serious treatment, are sadly misguided. As Walters writes: "a queer theory that posits feminism (or lesbian theory) as the transcended enemy is a queer that will really be a drag." (Walters 1996, 866)

FODNOTER

1. Heede writes: "også fordi der i vores kultur nu engang – på godt og ondt – er mere drama, begær, energi, offentlighed og hurlumhei omkring mænds relationer til mænd end om kvinders forhold til kvinder." "En køn historie", p. 2.
2. Heede writes: "Man behøver altså ikke have sex med en person af det samme køn for at identificere sig som 'queer'... Den fælles minimalplatform er vel blot en kritisk indstilling til det, der med et fint ord hedder 'heteronormativiteten'...." *Ibid.*, p. 5.
3. Heede writes: "'Queer' betegner ikke længere kun, udelukkende eller entydigt personer, der har sex med personer af eget køn, det er en langt mere flydende og diffus størrelse.... 'queer' kan, efter min mening, betegne alle mulige erotiske og eksistentielle varianter, der i en eller anden form afviger fra normen eller normaliteten" pp. 4-5.
4. Heede writes: "Jeg drømmer om en mærkelig litteraturhistorie, der vender bunden i vejret på teksterne og tager dem bagfra...." p. 7.
5. He writes: "Flere og flere personer med en såkaldt 'heteroseksuel' praksis identificerer sig eller leger med queer-begrebet som et eksperimentelt frirum for identitetsprøvning eller måske blot en festlig oase i normallivets tvangsheteroseksuelle ørkenvandring." p. 5
6. Jacqueline Zita: "Gay and Lesbian Studies: Yet Another Unhappy Marriage?", p. 271, cited in Walters, p. 864.
7. P.6, Heede refers to the methodological provocation put forth by Eve Sedgwick in *The Epistemology of the Closet*.
8. See Mary Anne Franks: "Woman Does Not

Exist: Fantasy, Otherness, and the Taliban Regime in Afghanistan."

LITTERATUR

- Benhabib, Seyla, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, Nancy Fraser; Introduction by Linda Nicholson (1995): *Feminist Contentions; A Philosophical Exchange*. Routledge, N.Y. and London.
 - Butler, Judith (1993): *Bodies that Matter*. Routledge, N.Y. and London.
 - Butler, Judith (1990): *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, N.Y. and London.
 - Franks, Mary Anne (2003): "Woman Does Not Exist: Fantasy, Otherness, and the Taliban Regime in Afghanistan", in *Hypatia; A Journal of Feminist Philosophy; Special Issue on Feminist Philosophy and the Problem of Evil*, Robin May Schott, Guest Editor, 2003/18.
 - Heede, Dag (2002): "En køn historie; Queer teori og en ny mærkelig litteraturhistorie", manuskript.
 - Hennessy, Rosemary (1995): "Queer visibility in commodity culture", in Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman (eds.): *Social postmodernism; Beyond identity politics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
 - Osborne, Peter and Lynne Segal (1994): "Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler", in *Radical Philosophy* 1994/67.
 - Rich, Adrienne (1980): "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", in *Signs; Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1980/4.
 - Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky (1990): *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
 - Walters, Suzanna Danuta (1996): "From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace (Or, Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Fag?)", in *Signs; Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1996/4.
 - Zita, Jacqueline (1994): "Gay and Lesbian Studies: Yet Another Unhappy Marriage?", in *Tilting the Tower: Lesbians Teaching Queer Subjects*, Linda Garber, ed. Routledge, N.Y.
- Robin May Schott, ph.d., forskningslektor
Institut for Filosofi, Pædagogik og Retorik
Københavns Universitet