

Queer Theory

Transgression and/or Regression?

by Louise Turcotte

L'auteure critique les éléments fondamentaux de la théorie «Queer» (homosexuelle) utilisant le lesbianisme radical comme théorie plus inclusive pour les politiques actuelles.

Radical lesbians have carried their analysis to its logical conclusion in asking for an affirmative independent lesbian movement separate from the feminist and the gay movement.

For the "Queer Question Committee" of the Montréal Lesbian Political Brunch¹

From the slogan "We're here, We're queer" of the Act Up Movement in the '80s to the appearance of Queer Studies in the '90s, the use of the term "queer" has developed in many directions. One of its common grounds is the notion of a new transgressive identity. This identity is not based on a political definition of the social being in relation to the larger human society but on a post-modernist philosophy which argues that transgressing taboos around sexual identity is the way to resolve conflicts in social relationships. This idea of a transgressive identity is at odds with the historical political positions of both the gay and lesbian movements. This article will critique key aspects of "queer theory" and attempt to offer a global reflection of the current political trend.

Radical lesbianism

Radical lesbianism did not directly emerge from a theory. It first appeared in France in the '80s at the time when the issue of lesbian identity and concepts such as woman/lesbian were developed by Monique Wittig in her articles "The Straight Mind" and "One Is Not Born a Woman." Radical lesbianism has also been influenced by several concepts of materialist feminism which include "the class of men" and "the class of women" (Editors Collective), as well as Colette Guillaumin's theory of the appropriation of women. For Guillaumin, the system of the appropriation of women operates on two levels—the private and the collective. This materialist theory of the appropriation of women is very significant for radical lesbianism since it provides the fundamental principle for analyzing the basis of heterosexuality.

Therefore, heterosexuality is not analyzed as a sexual principle that allows space for the notion of choice but rather as a social system. In this sense, it is the foundation of the appropriation of women. Lesbians partially escape this system because on the private level they are not appropriated by a man. But they are, at the collective level, included in this system because they are part of "the class of women" and through this appropriation remain victims of the same oppression (e.g., lower wages, sexual harassment, etc.)

Radical lesbianism is then a theory about the appropriation of women that differs from feminism because of the difference in its analysis of heterosexuality. According to radical lesbianism, heterosexual sexual relationships should be questioned more on the "why" and less on the "how." This means, in other words, that even if sexual relationships can change in their individual forms, their underlying social goal is first and foremost a means to maintain women in their state of appropriation, be it by bribe, rape, or the ideological hegemony of heterosexuality. At this level, sexuality is only a part of heterosexuality. As Monique Wittig says, heterosexuality is the "political regime"² for the appropriation of women, a political regime where no free heterosexual sexual relationship is possible for women. This is why we cannot pretend that equal social relations can exist unless this heterosexual political regime is abolished.

If we look now at the general history of lesbian political trends—be they feminist, separatist, or radical—they do not separate their analysis from the issue of the oppression of women. In Quebec and in Francophone Europe, radical lesbians have carried their analysis to its logical conclusion in asking for an affirmative independent lesbian movement separate from the feminist and the gay movement. Gay men don't have the same political agenda and history as lesbians. In having as a principal issue a different sexual orientation, the gay man's questioning of heterosexuality is made more on the basis of a social norm than on questioning the social system.

If, as radical lesbianism affirms, lesbians represent the flaw in the heterosocial system, gay men who demand the same social rights as heterosexuals consolidate a system that creates and maintains the appropriation of women. By not being reduced to the same low level of the social hierarchy as women and as lesbians, gay men profit from the privileges that collective appropriation gives to all men. We can demonstrate this fact simply by comparing the large office space allocated for gay social services in the Montreal gay village to the run-down school, since closed, where the lesbian community assembled. Government grants are easily obtained by gay men, while the govern-

ment refuses to finance lesbians.³ Another good example which shows the effect of this power differential has been the loss of lesbians from the gay movement because of their experiences of gay domination. Certainly, the heterosexual regime also suppresses gay men. However, for

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gay men, the cause of this repression lies in the fact of a difference of sexual orientation; whereas, for lesbians it is because they have escaped from private appropriation, i.e. individual male ownership.

In its history, heterosexuality has repressed gay men as well as lesbians, but the means of this repression was never the same. We know, for example, that the Nazis locked up gays and lesbians in concentration camps, but, worse than wearing the gay pink triangle, lesbians had to wear the black triangle assigned to asocial women and were used for prostitution. In the former Yugoslavia war, women and lesbians have been collectively raped. Where is the support from the gay and queer movements with regard to such violence against women and lesbians?

Critiquing queer

Of course, it is from the materialist perspective of these distinct places in the social hierarchy that we have questioned the queer trend. Naturally, we do not pretend to have fully studied what has been said, written, and thought on this political trend. Since it is too broad and recent a phenomenon to be fully understood, the following analysis will draw on a few key articles and books by Cherry Smyth, Diana Fuss, Judith Butler, and Teresa de Lauretis.

Queer theory seems to evolve around two fundamental principles: sexuality and identity. Cherry Smyth talks about “a new separation between sexual practice and sexual identity” (1992b, 14); “Queer sex,” she says, “is any sex that calls itself queer; it’s consensual sex” (1992b, 14). But it is not only a sexual practice for Linda Semple, quoted in *Queer Notions*, who associates the word “queer” with a new definition of her lesbian feminism:

I also use it externally to describe a political

inclusivity—a new move towards a celebration of difference across sexualities, across genders, across sexual preference and object choice. The two link. (Smyth 1992a, 21)

Therefore, it seems to be an answer to the way that historically, the gay and lesbian movements have evolved. To continue with *Queer Notions*, Tessa Baffin says it clearly: “Queer was one way of identifying with a mixed movement and challenging both separatism and misogyny at the same time” (21). It seems here to be a politics of sexual identity that lays the ground for developing political strength, and to quote Smyth: “it’s trying to bring together lesbian and gay energy to work in different ways” (1992a, 12). But this new allegiance articulates itself nevertheless principally around the question of sexual practices developed by the struggle of gays, as we understand it in Tori Smith’s vision:

Queer gives me politics for things I’ve always been interested in—like how I feel as a woman who’s mistaken for a man, who’s intrigued by men and gay male sexuality and as a lesbian and a feminist connecting to my affinities with men’s struggle around sexuality. (Smyth 1992a, 21)

Of course, this issue involves a questioning of society, because for Cherry Smyth: “Both in culture and politics, queer articulates a radical questioning of a social and cultural norm, notions of gender, reproductive sexuality, and the family” since as she later says, this normal society, “posit[s] the homo perspective as bad and annihilat[es] the spectrum of sexualities that exist” (1992a, 20). Hence, queer theory implies that “we could then go on to recast or reinvent the terms of our sexualities, to construct another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual” (Teresa de Lauretis iv). But to construct “this new discursive horizon,” we must question also the way that lesbian and gay identities have been analyzed historically. For Diana Fuss this cannot be done unless we put an end to “the emergence of a lesbian/gay binarism within homosexual theory and politics” (110). She elaborates:

I believe it is imperative to begin the hard work of investigating some of these structuring tensions within the general field of gay and lesbian theory if we are to progress beyond the present state of adversarial relations where each side persistently plays out the erasure of the other. (111)

In fact, the political mechanism of the queer trend can be

summed up with Judith Butler's thought: "the deconstruction of identity (that) is not the deconstruction of politics; rather it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated" (148).

It appears that the queer trend is both a desire to reunite all of those who want the deconstruction of gender by new sexual practices other than heterosexual. It is the affirmation of a sexual identity that differs from the dominant sexuality of heterosexuality. This affirmation creates new relations between gay men and lesbians based this time on their similarities on the basis of a different sexuality and a desire to deconstruct and to question gender. For Cherry Smyth, the queer trend seems to be an answer to a historical past too charged with political differences between gays and lesbians. The orthodoxy of lesbian feminists and the misogyny of gay men are two of the main reasons given by Cherry Smyth to explain the conditions under which the queer trend emerged.

For radical lesbianism, the queer trend raises several fundamental issues, not only in the concept of queer, but also in the way it sees society. Here are the political stakes that the queer trend raises for radical lesbianism from the point of view of a materialist analysis. The queer trend's focus more on a personal identity than on a collective identity raises an important problem. In fact, the way in which we conceive ourselves and the way in which societies conceive us are not the same. Ethnologist Nicole-Claude Mathieu demonstrates through the analysis of different phenomena such as the *berdaches* (men who took the feminine gender and women who took the masculine gender, among North American Indian tribes), modern transsexualism, lesbianism, transvestitism etc., that societies always bring these phenomena of transgression down to binary categories and hence to hierarchical systems. She goes on to say that "transgression of a norm does not necessarily equate to the subversion of a system of thought" (230; author's translation). It seems that on this level, the queer trend, in aspiring to the pattern of transgressive identities does not necessarily question the system of the classes of sex mentioned above. In queer theory, sexuality is made into the basis for social relations of sex when in reality, it is social relations that define sexuality. In other words, the affirmation of many forms of sexual practices is not likely to endanger the relations of power since it allows heterosexuality to pass as only a form of normative sexuality without foregrounding its connections to the social organization of power.

In fact it is gender that sociologically constructs the concept of sex and not the reverse and there is no way of avoiding the connection between these two terms when we analyze contemporary societies. For example, Judith Butler's theories on gender trouble and the parody of genders hide the fact that societies work on the political level of domination which one class of sex holds over another. To give a clear example, even if a woman looks "butch," she is neither safe from rape nor collective rape, nor does she escape from receiving the lower wages that

maintain women in a state of economic inferiority. Therefore, femininity and virility do not depend merely on "gender" but are maintained by institutionalized acts of violence that construct them into social categories of subjects and rulers. Social change is not possible unless there is a change in the material conditions that help to maintain a situation of power, be it of race, of class, or of sex. Not to recognize this fact has extreme consequences not only on the very concept of social change but also on the ways our struggle can bring about change. Analysis cannot isolate symbolic meaning from concrete practices that are the grounds for power relationships. In this sense, the transgression of gender only displaces the question, it does not question "the categories of sex" on which the political regime of heterosexuality is based.

We think that the queer trend can cause a political setback by substituting symbolic change for change in material conditions. It is not only a question of methodology but also a question of divergent political points of view between the two analyses. Lesbianism cannot be reduced to the simple question of a sexuality. Lesbianism must be located in relation to the appropriation of women because, as Monique Wittig says, "lesbians are runaway slaves to their class of sex" (20). Of course not everything is resolved by radical lesbian theory but it can "que(e)ry" the current queer political trend.

Future reflections

To conclude, it is true that queer theory takes into consideration racism and classism in its analysis, and that this consciousness was absent for a very long time from the feminist and lesbian movements that were made up mostly of white middle-class women and lesbians. However now that we are listening to the most oppressed amongst us a new inclusive consciousness is emerging. We shouldn't forget that it is due to the vigilance and the hard work of those who have suffered even greater oppression that we are able to trace the subtleties of the dominant discourse.

In queer theory little space is left for the analysis of social relations of the sexes. For example, we only have to look at the queer "fanzines" (small independently published magazines devoted to popular actors or music personalities) to realize that virility dominates, notably by the pictorial representation of triumphant penises, the same weapon that heterosexual men use to terrorize women. This is one example among many others which argues against the genuine diffusion of identities that queer theory promises to deliver. It becomes increasingly difficult to believe that queer theory really has much to offer given today's harsh political climate. For example, we see in many countries today that politics are becoming more and more coercive; nationalism and racism are coupled together; disastrous economic conditions are facilitating the rise of neo-nazi groups and right-wing political parties; the political murder of women such as the Montreal Massacre goes unchallenged. The list is long and it does not stop here. How then

can we believe that the diffused identities promised to us by queer politics could address the social reality that they attempt to forget? Such subjectivity can taint our vision and our political allegiance by treating materialistic approaches as obsolete. Queer theory can thus contribute to reinforcing the social categories it denies. Oppression has to be confronted directly, or it will result in the appearance of new fascist regimes. Minimizing objective reality makes us into non-social and non-historical beings who could end up back where we were before we acquired a political conscience. This is not another history, it is our own history, and it is a history of political struggle against real oppression. At this level, we must not think of queer deconstructing but rather of destroying hierarchical sex, class, and race power relationships.

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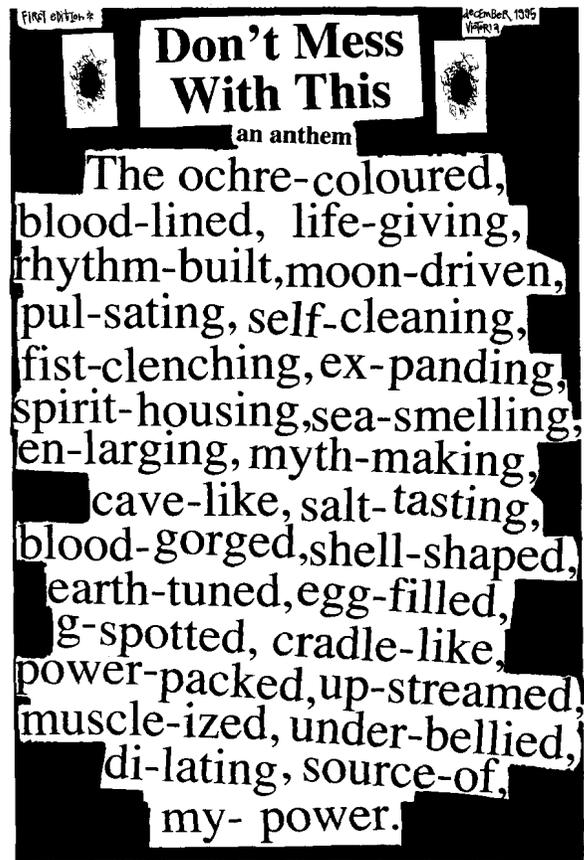
¹The Montréal Lesbian Political Brunch is a group of lesbians which has been meeting every month for several years to discuss a number of political issues. In March 1993 I asked some members of this group to join me in a special committee to discuss the queer issue since I was accepted to give a paper at the "Queer Sites Conference" at the University of Toronto, on May 14th, 1993. This article is the result of the work and thoughts of five lesbians who are: Diane Heffernan, Manon Lamontage, Christine Serra, Danièle Tessier, and myself. We have all been activists for a number of years in the Quebec francophone lesbian community. Our political identities range from political lesbianism, radical lesbianism, and separatist lesbianism. We wanted to understand more specifically the political undercurrent of queer theory because we feel that queer theory is appealing more and more to lesbians, and it will certainly have an influence on the survival of the independent lesbian movement in Quebec.

²I would like to see more references to her work when this term is used!

³Another good example of this differential treatment took place in 1987. In June of that year, the Women's Program of the Secretary of State refused a grant for the conference of The Canadians Feminist Periodicals Association because several workshops involved lesbian issues. But in October of the same year, the Secretary of State gave money for a conference on homosexuality and societies at the University of Moncton. See the *Bulletin of the Canadian Feminist Periodicals Association* of that period and the program of the Conference "Homosexualités et Tolérance sociale," Moncton, October 1987.

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