Title:
The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory

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Book Review

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The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory
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Body text:

There are plenty of texts providing introductions to Queer Theory. Indeed, after surveying the field the more passionate student of Queer, the interested researcher and even casually dabbling readers may begin to que(e)ry if this theory extends very much beyond some key ideas in the original works of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick and maybe more recently David Halperin, Judith Halberstam and Lee Edelman… and the plethora of works that (re) introduce them (perhaps in simpler forms). At worst investigation will uncover texts that claim the work of Queer is complete, its definition finite and its allocation strictly under gay, lesbian and bisexual studies. At best the seeker will find that there have also been works that critique, deconstruct or apply Queer ideas in new arenas. But where is the next step? Who is taking it? What is the new *theory* in Queer?

Contrary to appearances, there have been multiple “next steps” of varying kinds in Queer, located not just in North America and Britain, but also in other countries (this book also includes work from such countries as Australia, France, Ireland and Canada). These steps are being taken by a variety of theorists whose names may be initially familiar from their introductory texts (Linda Garber, Michael O’Rourke, Nikki Sullivan, Annabelle Willox, Calvin Thomas and others) but also from their continued attempts within their own interest areas to extend Queer considerations (Jon Binnie in geography, Patrick. E. Johnson in quare/race studies, Patricia MacCormack in film etc). And in combination, these theorists suggest a variety of Queer offerings organised into four “key concerns” within *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*: Identity, Discourse, Normativity and Relationality. These key concerns are reflective of the field and are not new in and of themselves, but presented all together these pieces (re)present some of the latest developments in the field. Overall, this volume combats any (real or perceived) stagnation of Queer in several ways.

Firstly, this anthology is quite consistent in providing a fittingly complex approach to Queer (such that approaches to Queer are enjoyably inconsistent and often develop the field). There have been works under the name of Queer in the past that limit the field’s relevance (and thus their own readership) only to those on the borders of mainstream discourses. Yet it is clear that the editors of this text do not make the mistake of confusing Queer with gay liberation or lesbian studies. This is evident from the very first discussion of the term in Noreen Giffney’s multifarious linguistic and theoretical interrogations on “The ‘q’ Word” (pp.1-13). It carries
through to Linda Garber’s opening question “How come I keep getting invited to represent lesbian studies at queer conferences and in queer volumes like this one?” in “The Curious Persistence of Lesbian Studies” (on p.68).

Queer’s meaning is also appropriately challenged and its academic affiliations are investigated and at times subverted in the text. The relation of Queer to so-called sexual “queers” is directly investigated by Calvin Thomas in “On Being Post-Normal: Heterosexuality after Queer Theory” (pp. 17- 32), who audaciously and with much self-deprecation denies the justification of heterosexual academics’ engagement with this type of theory… in an ironic manner that ultimately queers and justifies straight participation. Similarly, the political obligations for those born with “ambiguous” sexual characteristics to identify as members of third, fourth or fifth sexes are explored by Iain Morland in “Why Five Sexes Are Not Enough” (pp.33-47). Yet it is the “non-intersexed majority” that are finally called upon by the author to unfix the descriptive force of terms such as “male” and “female” (p.44). Jonathan Alexander and Karen Yescavage’s “‘The Scholars Formerly Known as…’: Bisexuality, Queerness and Identity Politics” (pp.49-64) traverses a similar path from critically reflecting on the Queer potentials of bisexuality to declaring the need for “the majority of society” to engage in the same self-reflective process of sexual self-evaluation (p.62). Thus, readers of all kinds of sexual and bodily identifications can read this text without irritation or offense. Or at least, with an equitable amount of potentially productive irritation and offense (Queer has an unapologetic way of being purposely irksome at times).

Secondly, the collection introduces some exciting new ideas in relatively unexplored terrain. These include the concept of queercropping and supercripping in Todd R. Ramlow’s “Queering, Crippling” (pp.129-146), which looks at the queer potentials of disabilities in their challenge to heteronormative/ normate discourses. Ramlow affirms the position of bodies as “mattering” in Queer (theorists are often accused of overlooking or denying them) and provides an enjoyable re-examination of disability and sexuality politics in regards to “X-men” characters. Dinesh Wadiwel’s lubricative ethic in “Sex and the Lubricative Ethic” (pp.491-505) is another rousing advance that is sure to be played with in theory and practice. Relatively new for this kind of collection is Song Hwee Lim’s “Queer Theory Goes to Taiwan” (pp.257-275), and its transliterated conceptions of queer and its key ideas in Taiwan. Steven F. Kruger offers some productive avenues for future scholarship in historical studies through the examples of Queer medievalist work in “Queer Middle Ages” (pp.413-433), as does Garrett P.I. Epp for the sixteenth century in “To ‘play the Sodomites’: A Query in Five Actions” (pp.181-198).

Thirdly, the contributors of this volume are cunning linguists who deliver intelligent appreciations and deprecations of the strangeness of language, discourses and social phenomena. In combination, they seem to offer a sharp new “voice” for the field. Their writing is in general witty, cheeky, at times laugh-out-loud funny, shocking, sexy and always academic enough to challenge general readers. Few puns escape unmentioned, parentheses play with morphemes to reveal words within words, irony abounds and the pages are literally littered with inverted commas that call common terms into question. They are also littered with expletives, which are entirely suited to the subject matter and theory being applied, but if you can’t handle those words you probably won’t like this text anyway (consider yourself warned, Nana). Nikki Sullivan’s “Smacking My Bitch Up: Queer or What?” (pp.435-450) exemplifies the sex, drugs and rock n’ roll cool topography of this text’s Queer writing with its initial journey through one of The Prodigy’s controversial music videos (in all its
offensive, sadomasochistic and queerly arousing glory). This piece illustrates a Queer way of doing academic writing and thinking, wherein the personal, the (pop)cultural, political and theoretical is simultaneously and alternately reflected on, asserted and destabilised. It is this intermingling of the writers’ personal reflections (that engage not so much with one’s labelled identity as one’s inconsistencies and rupturing experiences) with other theory throughout the volume that make it so effective in disrupting socio-cultural expectations and phenomena. My hat goes off to the writers for putting their own “identity” where their mouths are in the academic arena, which is renowned for distant, invisible authors.

However, this is not to say that (re) presenting the current field of Queer is not entirely without its issues. This interdisciplinary volume contains “thirty original essays” that were specially commissioned to explain, develop, celebrate and criticise queer theoretical efforts as the contributors engage with key concepts and debates within the field (p.4). To be fair, this aim does require rehashing some conceptual journeys. But frankly a few of the pieces are overly “familiar territory” to be considered completely original for their writers. This means that the more well-read Queer enthusiast may be a tad disappointed to come across some recognisable excerpts and the occasional sense of theoretical déjà vu. These are (in the main) acknowledged by the end of the sections by the contributors however, and most readers will find the book to contain a vast amount of material new to their eyes. A fan of Queer would be remiss to miss E. Johnson’s work on “Quare” or Sullivan’s work on sadomasochism, for example. But those who have already read most of the works by such writers may not need the re-caps provided here.

On the other hand, readers completely new to the field of Queer Theory may be overwhelmed by the linguistic slipperiness of the metaphorical letter “q” in the very first paragraph and will only be left to “sink or swim” without assistance in the stack of referential and intentionally disruptive material from there. Even Calvin Thomas’ opening background story summarising Queer Theory’s development assumes “You probably already know the story” (p.17), and more poignantly assumes “you” somewhat understand it. So this text speaks to a particular “you”; one versed in the background story of Queer and its main theoretical precepts. Queer can be pretty confusing to grasp at the best of times as it does not fit the common way of thinking about such issues as gender and self (nor does it aim to; that’s very much the point), and additionally these Queer theorists tend to disallow common or basic ways of thinking about Queer. For these reasons a more general and basic introduction to Queer (through a reader, course or some knowledge of its key texts) may be a necessary pre-requisite for some before attempting the works in this anthology.

The book is essential reading for those looking for information beyond the usual Queer Theory 101, yet who have not already exhausted the reading lists for its key contributors. It offers many leads for future theoretical explorations in both official research projects and one’s own private personal ponderings. Importantly, it’s heavy enough to throw at those still claiming Queer hasn’t progressed since Butler.

Final By-/ Bio- line:

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