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## **Book review: the queer turn in feminism: identities, sexualities, and the theater of gender**

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## Book review

### The queer turn in feminism: identities, sexualities, and the theater of gender

Anne Emmanuelle Berger, translated by Catherine Porter, Fordham University Press, New York, 2014, 240pp., ISBN: 978-0-8232-5386-9, \$29.00 (Pbk)

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Anne Emmanuelle Berger's latest book is an invigorating exploration of the intellectual and cultural history of gender theories in the United States. In light of the suspicion of obsolescence that has been lingering over gender and queer theories for the last ten years within American academia, *The Queer Turn in Feminism: Identities, Sexualities, and the Theater of Gender* ought to be read as an attempt at renewing and reactivating queer theory's critical potential through a largely under-explored prism: its Franco-American genealogy. Berger's writing is also marked by a particular French intellectual and political context. As gender studies are currently on the rise within French academia, and in the wake of debates surrounding the legalisation of gay marriage in France in 2013, homophobic discourses articulated within conservative arenas have been remarkably strong. In particular, they have denounced the alleged contamination of French national borders by an idiosyncratic gender theory supposedly imported from the United States.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the transatlantic hybridity of gender and queer theories that is unravelled in *The Queer Turn in Feminism* can be read as engaging with a doubly troubled situation: that of a particular American academic context where queer theory is considered old and reified, and that of a particular French political context where it is considered new and inherently American. As a response, this book is a testimony that 'what is designated as "gender theory" today is thus in more than one respect a "Franco-American invention"' (p. 4), a political and cultural artefact rather than a pure conceptual formulation disconnected from its conditions of emergence.

The book is divided into five sections: one introduction and four chapters. In the introduction, Anne E. Berger, a professor in French Literature and Gender Studies who left France for Cornell University in the United States in 1984 and who returned to France in 2007, describes her 'vantage point' as 'hybrid' and 'dislocated' (p. 5), highlighting how such a 'double vision' (p. 2) caught between 'retrospection and anticipation', the 'already done and barely begun' (p. 4), fostered her critical interest in transatlantic readings of gender and sexuality theories and politics. The subsequent four articles explore what Berger calls 'the queer turn in feminism', that is to say the vexing articulation between gender theory and 'its queer variant' (p. 5) in the light of their shared connection with a politics of performance and visibility. Navigating

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<sup>1</sup> During the French parliamentary debates surrounding the legalisation of homosexual marriage, a right-wing senator defended the adoption of an amendment (no. 272) to the law that entailed the production of a governmental report 'establishing an update of the teaching, the diffusion, the application of gender theory in France and of its consequences'. The same senator added that Judith Butler was the 'thinker' of this (singular) gender theory. Session: 11 April 2013, integral report of the debates available online: <http://www.senat.fr/seances/s201304/s20130411/s20130411020.html>.

between philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology, sociology and literature, Berger's book is an exemplary interdisciplinary and transnational study that crosses academic as well as national borders.

In the first chapter, entitled 'Queens and queers: the theater of gender in "America"', the author interrogates the 'queer' antecedents of American gender theory. Drawing from John Money and Robert Stoller's 'clinics of gender identity' (Fassin, 2008, pp. 377–378), the Lacanian analytics of desire and its use of Joan Riviere's concept of 'masquerade', and the American sociology of interaction, Berger affirms that American gender theory has been a 'theory of performance' (p. 82) since its earliest elaborations through a 'theoretical theatricalizing of gender' (p. 15), and that in this sense it has 'always been queer' (p. 14). This chapter is particularly relevant for complicating the linear framework of a certain mainstream Western feminist intellectual history, which tends to present queer theory as a radical rupture in feminist theory emerging out of post-structuralism and intellectually detached from a feminist genealogy (Hemmings, 2011). In this sense, it proposes an alternative genealogy of queer theory stemming from authors that are less often referred to as having influenced the 'queer turn in feminism' such as Esther Newton and her conceptualisation of 'the scene of lesbian desire' (p. 47). Following this approach, Berger untangles the reasons why the figure of the drag queen (literally, as Berger explains, a 'queen of theater'<sup>2</sup>) 'has imposed itself as the icon of a gender theory constituted from the outset as queer, even before being recognized as such' (p. 6).

In the second chapter, entitled 'paradoxes of visibility in/and contemporary identity politics', Berger examines how the theatrical conception of the American notion of gender stirred up a new principle of visibility in relation to the politics of sexual minorities, replacing a call for being heard—a distinctive feature of the nineteenth century's political mobilisations—with a demand for visibility. Here again, Berger provides a close look at the historical conditions of the emergence of this rhetoric and highlights the crucial influence of the American civil rights movement in its development. The third chapter, 'The ends of an idiom, or sexual difference in translation', interrogates the transatlantic conceptual becoming—and eventually 'queering'—of the psychoanalytical notion of 'sexual difference' through five stops: Sigmund Freud, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, Gayle Rubin and Judith Butler. The last chapter is probably the most politically exhilarating one. In 'Roxana's legacy: feminism and capitalism in the West', Berger addresses the thorny ambiguities between Western feminism and capitalism, as well as their vexed intertwined origins. In particular, she questions Gayle Rubin's appeal for 'the "virtues" of the marketplace to defend the "vices" of sex' (p. 132) and proposes a compelling analysis of Gayle Rubin, Gail Pheterson and Marie-Hélène Bourcier's postfeminist discourses on sex work, that 'conceiv[e] of the market relation as a vector of emancipation' (p. 150). In doing so, she dis-attaches these discourses from a Marxian genealogy and re-attaches them to the vision of another German philosopher of the nineteenth century, Georg Simmel, and to his analyses of monetary relations as enabling the 'autonomization of the individual "person"' (p. 152). From the drag queen in the first chapter to the sex worker in the last one, Berger shrewdly retraces in her book the intellectual and cultural origins and trajectories of these figures as theoretical and political models of queer feminism.

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<sup>2</sup> '[...] while the figure of the "drag queen" appeared as such in England in the mid-nineteenth century, the word "drag", which was used to create the stage name, originally designated, by metonymy, female clothing with a train (cloak or skirt) worn by young actors—"boys"—who traditionally played the female roles in the theater' (p. 19). Berger uses the expression 'queen of theater' (*reine de théâtre*) to describe the drag queen in an interview she gave on the French radio station France Culture (*Le Journal de la philosophie*, 'Le grand théâtre du genre', 28 May 2013. Available online: <http://www.franceculture.fr/emission-le-journal-de-la-philosophie-le-grand-theatre-du-genre-2013-05-28>).

The rich theoretical insights articulated in this book have the merit of unfolding various conceptual and political ‘productive inconsistencies’ (p. 5) that have spanned gender theories over time and space, while providing a renewed and more accomplished understanding of gender theories. One of the greatest successes of this book is to recall how intellectually biased is the strict opposition between ‘the paradigm of sexual difference’ and ‘the paradigm of gender’ (p. 64) and to encourage readers to explore the aporias they both leave open, as well as ‘the diverse origins of an intellectually composite [gender] theory’ (p. 64). Ultimately, the transatlantic dialogue formulated in this book is a political salutary work in a context of ongoing tensions over alleged national identities and fantasies of monolithic cultures. In this sense, it is also a call for surpassing the dominant national paradigms in telling Western feminist histories in general and a celebration of what Paul Gilroy names the ‘inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas’ (Gilroy, 1993, p. xi).

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