

# After sex?

Hallet, Janet & Parker, Andrew (ed.)

*After sex? on writing after queer theory.*

Durham & London: Duke University Press 2011 (336 pages)

**I THINK WE** have all heard the critique from both inside and outside academia, from boards, celebrities, and tenure-tracked assistant professors to full-time faculty at top universities. Part of the politics of the neoliberal university seems to be to claim the death of queer theory, or more generally, feminist, postcolonial, and queer studies – shortly all studies that have any kind of perspective on minorities. As we supposedly know, postcolonialism died with Edward Said, and deconstruction with Jacques Derrida. Or is that really how the story goes? To paraphrase Mark Twain, I believe the rumors of this death have been greatly exaggerated.

However, as the editors of the recent volume *After sex? on writing since queer theory* states: if it's not dead, at least queer theory nowadays has a past. And in the very present that come after that past, there are some – to which I count myself – who consider themselves to have become scholars. We are, simply put, bred post-queer. But what does that mean? This was the question that engaged me with the volume's inviting title. It is also the question it's editors asked of scholars in literary and legal studies to respond to. The contribu-

tors were chosen because their writing and research projects have changed (or not) over the course of their careers, and they were asked to respond both to whether queer theory is dead, or over; what it means that queer theory now has a past; and what about their research they consider most and least queer.

Among the volumes plentiful chapters, one can find more well-known authors such as Elizabeth Freeman, Leo Bersani, Lauren Berlant, Lee Edelman, José Esteban Muñoz, Heather Love, Ann Cvetkovich, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. But the format of the volume also allows for many less widely known names to appear. The pieces are meant to be short enough to be able to be read on a subway or bus ride, or between meetings and research. The shortness of the pieces – lots of personalized stories about how the scholars came into the field, which is especially appealing to a young scholar like myself – makes it hard for me in this review to focus on each and every chapter. It might be more interesting, then, to look at general threads throughout the volume.

Perhaps redundant to state, several of the chapters focus on temporality – on what it means to be “after” queer theory. As Jack Halberstam (who interestingly is not featured in this volume) recently put it in a discussion panel at New York University, the very “notion of a set of ideas that have currency until they are replaced is part of a straight temporality that queer studies has tried to upend and decenter.” (“Bullybloggers on failure and the future of queer studies” <http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2012/04/02/bullybloggers-on-failure-and-the-future-of-queer-studies>). Thus, several authors in the anthology queer the very idea of what it means to be after, or to come after, ideas of queer time and of simultaneity, pointing out the heteronormative assumptions underlying this very conception.

The question of where queer theory is useful today, and where it

came from before is another way that some of the authors re-focus the question about temporality. What's queer about queer theory today? When one opens *After sex*, the very introduction problematizes the project of the volume, as the editors write: "As if we know the meaning of sex. Or after. Or since. Or writing. Or queer theory." And this very uncertainty, which several of the authors point out, has been important to the queer project, and seems to keep it alive still today. The interest in neo-materialism, affect, and radical leftist theory, seem all to me to take their departure in the queer project(s) and ask new and continuously relevant questions.

Another theme in the anthology deals with the object of queer theory. If something has been lost, what did we have in the first place? What could be taken from us? And was it? In fact, the anthology and indeed, perhaps, queer theory as such seem to search for an object *perdu*. Interestingly, the format of the volume allows for some authors to take that object for granted, while others question the very existence of such an object; taking that as being the problem of the assumption that queer (theory) is over.

Perhaps the most interesting theme from the perspective of Nordic LGBT and Queer Studies, however, is the relationship between queer theory and feminism, which seems to still be unresolved. In fact, feminism ghosts in this book, as a strange remainder of something that seems to be lacking in the Anglophone world, and that perhaps is more prevalent in a Nordic – and specifically the Swedish – context: the strange but productive relationship between the two. Some scholars tend to regard the queer project as an extension of feminism, and others as the replacement or development of it. Some are thinking of it in terms of sharing certain underlying premises, certain ways of looking and feeling. Intriguingly then, it is interesting that the question remains without being solved, thus,

perhaps the questioning of what is “after” the queer and feminist project(s) seems problematic.

Summarily, I would recommend the anthology to Nordic scholars and doctoral students interested in where the debate is moving today, while being aware that it has gone through a long production process (the SAQ issue came out in 2007), and thus perhaps can feel somewhat dated in our ever faster-moving world. The personal narratives and the vast array of scholars participating in the volume makes it a good introduction to several important people in the field, but it is important to remember that all of the contributors are researchers working in a primarily American context and the others are all working in Anglophone countries. There seems therefore to be a lack of a discussion about the death of queer theory outside of this limited context, perhaps an interesting question to consider for some of *lambda nordica*'s authors. To end with another paraphrase: to me, queer theory seems to be alive and well – in European cities such as Paris, Linköping, and Copenhagen. Maybe it would be of interest to inquire where queer theory stands in the Nordic countries, to repeat (which, as we know, always happens differently) the well-known issue of *lambda nordica* from 1996?

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