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Queer Today, Gone Tomorrow

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WHAT'S LEFT OF ENGLISH STUDIES? This is a slippery question for me, on a number of fronts. First, I find it hard these days to imagine something to the left of English Studies; despite the reactionary whimpers we can still detect from the conservative haunts of our departments, our discipline has placed itself so firmly on the left that it has become more or less synonymous with "progressive" politics. There's nothing to the left of English Studies because English Studies *is* left. The second difficulty for me, though, is my position in this political arena: as a queer scholar working in both textual and cultural studies, I assume I have common cause with the other people writing for this forum, but I'm not really sure what that common cause is. You see, a very cursory survey of English departments across the country reveals that most of the major schools in Canada are not doing queer theory or teaching it to their graduate students, and undergraduates fare no better. There is not much left, in Canada at any rate, of the kind of work I've been doing. Queer theory is one of those methodologies (and there are others: phenomenology, psychoanalysis, the new formalism) that have failed to make significant inroads in English Studies as they are practiced in Canada. But why should this be the case? I want in the next few pages to think about queerness in the Canadian academy, its reception,

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and its relative insignificance. My argument, cryptically put, is this: while there is little of queerness left in Canadian English studies, what's to the left of English studies is the queer.

But evidence first. In preparation for writing this essay, I cruised the internet homepages for the major graduate schools in English across Canada to see which ones had full-time faculty who declared queer theory as a primary interest or which offered courses in queer theory. According to the websites (which I admit are never a reliable archive, but they do indicate what is being advertised to the potential grad student) the following departments have queer practitioners, although it doesn't follow that the schools are now or have been offering courses in queer theory: Alberta, UBC, Calgary, Guelph, McMaster, Ottawa, Simon Fraser, Western, Wilfrid Laurier, and York. The following don't: Carleton, Dalhousie, Manitoba, McGill, Memorial, UNB, Queen's, Saskatchewan, Victoria, Waterloo and Windsor. Toronto has someone interested in "Sexual Diversity Studies"—I'm not exactly sure what that is—and someone else interested in "Gay and Lesbian Culture" but the particular resonances of queerness are nowhere to be felt. What's even more interesting to me from these websites is that *all* the graduate schools in this country have people working in feminist studies and post-colonial and race studies. In most cases, there is more than one person in each of these fields. In fact, I once had someone tell me that her department was entirely devoted to materialist political work, yet hers is one of the departments in which no sustained queer work is being done.

What does this tell us? Why are positions in queer theory not being advertised, and why are queer scholars (I still assume we are legion) not indicating themselves as such in their department's public documents? The easy answer is homophobia: department members are still very reluctant to have gay and lesbian colleagues. That's the easy answer, but I don't buy it, at least not on the surface. If anything, gays and lesbians are being saturated with liberal well-wishing from all sectors of the academy today. We are constantly being assured that our work is important, and we are constantly being called upon by departments that can't get around to hiring queer scholars to assist them in the evaluation of queer graduate work. Inch by inch, the wording of university job ads is expanding from the soliciting of "visible minorities" to "sexual minorities" or "gays and lesbians," a move that presumably counters the exclusion of sexuality by creating more "diversified" departments. No, I don't think it's homophobia *tout court*: the problem as I see it is the discrepancy between the gay and lesbian person who works in the field of sexuality and the subject matter and methodology

of queer theory itself. In other words, the Canadian academy may not be homophobic but it is intensely anti-queer.

Let me use an example to illustrate the difference between the anti-homophobic and the anti-queer: I am frequently asked to speak publicly about a collection of essays I'm co-editing called *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*. What people are most keen to hear is how the book might help them and their children to become more accepting of difference and to find positive representations of families with same-sex parents. When it becomes clear that the book is about something else—our culture's obsessive capitalizing upon the erotic image of the child, the ubiquitously disruptive forces of infantile polymorphous perversity, the complexities of children's erotic desire for each other and for the adults in their orbit—the room becomes charged with suspicion. There's still no faster way to clear a lecture hall these days than to talk in any but condemning tones about that greatest of bugaboos, sex between an adult and someone under legal age. This is hardly surprising. What's more noteworthy than the suspicion and condemnation is the way issues of childhood sexuality—and queer issues generally—are constantly made to be about something else. During a recent exchange on the book I found myself being asked to account for the lack of essays in the collection dealing with race, it being obvious to the inquisitor that the book was somehow incomplete without this crucial issue being addressed. I pointed out that it was a collected anthology, that my co-editor Natasha Hurley and I had solicited some essays on race, and that none had been forthcoming. Clearly, this answer did not satisfy: Hurley and I had obviously just not tried hard enough, or did not understand the implications of not including such work in our volume. The hoped-for outcome of this shaming was clear: I was to alter the terms of my work in order to address his interests, to consider the über-significance of race, and to align my project with his particular views on the way race should be codified and presented. That he never once took up the issue of child sexuality with me passed unnoticed, so relieved was the assembled audience that we were now dealing with an issue where their political positions were clearly in place. We had come home.

My experience with talking about the queerness of children—with what can be said, with what must not be said—is to me symptomatic of what is happening in the Canadian academy on a much larger scale. I have now witnessed countless conference papers (some given by me, others given by colleagues) where a speaker's thesis is hijacked by the issues of race (usually), gender (often), and class (much less frequently than it used to be). Regardless of what the essay may have been trying to argue, the speaker is

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sanctimoniously called to task for not addressing the political hot buttons, for not advocating certain kinds of liberationist political programs, or for not promoting the thesis that materialist theories would have that speaker promote: a thesis ranging in possibility from a jeremiad on cultural/racial determinism to the celebration of the empire writing back. Oppression vs. Transgression: one thinks of Dorothy Parker's observation about the acting talents of one Miss Katharine Hepburn, that she ran the gamut of emotion from A to B. Perhaps I'm still Canadian enough to want to be more collegial to people who are speaking on a topic about which I and other members of the audience know little—as opposed to issues of race, class, and gender, the ultimate We Know What That Means—or perhaps I'm still curious enough to want to learn something, academic enough to want a new field opened up to me, queer enough to prefer a dangerous idea to one that fits me like my old, worn slippers. In any event, the issue goes beyond one of good manners or even intellectual curiosity. Queer studies seems to threaten the core of how so many literary critics define themselves.

So what exactly *is* queerness that it has so rattled the practice of English studies as we do it in Canada? Why is the gay or lesbian (less so the transgendered or the bisexual) so frequently invited to feel “at home” in a departmental “safe space” while the queer is shown the door? The answer lies in the comfortable configurations of difference as they are practiced by identity politics, the advocating of an epistemology and political treatment based on a certain claim to identity. In the field of sexuality studies, this identity politics has a long and tortured history. The gay and lesbian intellectual work of the pre-1980s was crucial for contributing to a certain kind of humanist program. This work took as its political *raison d'être* the need to bring gay men and lesbians into representation in a positive and sensitive light, one that would further the cause of equality and human rights. Of course, we don't need to debate whether such rights have been fully realized; that there's a difference between the intellectual questions still needing to be asked and the social work still needing to be done is precisely my point, and is the place where I parted company with the post-colonial colleague I mentioned a moment ago. For on the far side of gay and lesbian criticism there was queer theory, and queer theory, rightly or wrongly, wanted little to do with the humanist premises of gay and lesbian studies. As early as Diana Fuss's 1991 collection, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, queer scholars had taken as given that sexual practices and tastes in no way guarantee political unity; in fact, queer theory has always resisted any move toward totalizing essences, including material determinism, so that any theory based on “identity” was always subjected

to queer critique. Hence queer theory's emphasis on the treacherously shifting grounds of epistemology (in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology*), the performative constructions of identity and its psychic life (in Judith Butler), and the psychoanalytics of (false) consciousness (in Leo Bersani and, opposing him, Gayle Rubin and Pat Califia), all of which quickly took us away from the sociological comforts of cultural determinism into a much more deconstructive, ludic, un-settled and unsettling array of ontological assumptions. (Donald Morton bemoaned this very move and tried to rescue queerness from the play of deconstruction and save it for materialism, but to little avail.) As Eric Savoy wrote in the pages of *ESC*, you can't go homo again. With the rise of a particularly *post*-humanist queer theory, the comfort zones of identity politics had become either camp grounds or battle fields. There was outrage, but there was more outrageousness, not because queers are and have always been politically irresponsible (hardly) but because they had learned the destabilizing and de-transcendentalizing lessons of post-structuralism—that, as Eve Sedgwick would say, one never does well to bet the mortgage money on the stability and authenticity of “self” and its unmediated take on oppression. That one avoids, in short, the totalizing and definitive materialist narratives that ground other kinds of political criticism.

It is the refusal of queer theory to ground “homosexual oppression” in some stable material field from which to denounce it that troubles those academics who prefer the comforting pieties of race and ethnicity criticism and the stabilizing empirical assumptions from which these proceed. James Kincaid, who knows a lot about the slings and arrows of outraged materialists, points out that political cynicism is more than just the flavour of the day: it is the bellwether that now leads our intellectual lives.

What do we teach our graduate students these days? Certainly a lot of good sophisticated material, engines of inquiry that are oiled and road-ready. A healthy skepticism accompanied by a keen moral sense. An ability to spot leaky arguments and, even more readily, complicated ones, arguments that might appear to be subversive but are really, when you look at them through well-trained eyes, hegemonic through and through. Graduate students must be (or we'll know the reason why) quick at learning to mimic super-cops, so alert to the activities of the secret police that they can spot them anywhere and everywhere. That's about all they can spot, maybe, but we are told it's worth it: never have academics been so super-vigilant and unbamboozled, determined not to be taken in.... The secret to

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the stubborn longevity of the policing model is that it not only resists but successfully condemns any questioning. Doubters must, it says, be quislings. (231–2)

This determination not to be bamboozled, not to let an ounce of political implication slip through our fingers, has become the academic *raison d'être*, and has made us as critics the hyper-acknowledged legislators of the world. Eve Sedgwick recasts this hermeneutic of suspicion into a hermeneutic of paranoia and posits its effects this way:

Subversive and demystifying parody, suspicious archaeologies of the present, the detection of hidden patterns of violence and their exposure: ... these infinitely doable and teachable protocols of unveiling have become the common currency of cultural and historical studies. If there is an obvious danger in the triumphalism of a paranoid hermeneutics, it is that the broad consensual sweep of such methodological assumptions, the current near professionwide agreement about what constitutes narrative or explanation or adequate historicization may, if it persists unquestioned, unintentionally impoverish the gene pool of literary-critical historical perspectives and skills. The trouble with a shallow gene-pool, of course, is its diminished ability to respond to environmental (e.g. political) change. (Sedgwick *Touching* 143–44)

Infinitely doable and teachable protocols of unveiling: if the repetition compulsion means anything these days, it is the attempt to shore up through the indulgence in “unpleasure” (the self-congratulating sadness we feel at endlessly cataloguing the plight of the Other) the pleasures of having/knowing the self, of being S/He who is guaranteed identity through the pleasures of high-stimulus outrage. The problem here is one of prediction, of deciding in advance what effect we want our teaching to have. It seems to me that in current practice the agenda of political criticism is clear: we want our students to take up the cause, to see with clarity the workings of power and exploitation and to decry them. We want them to be better, more ethical people, and we consider it nothing more than a fortunate by-product if they become smarter, more creative people in the process.

Queer theory, at least in certain quarters, allows for no such agenda. As Butler made clear in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” (arguably the most salient articulation of her queer project), she did not want to predict in advance how queerness would unfold or what the performative model might produce (14). Rather, as Sedgwick argued, queer theory revelled in “nonce taxonomies” and strategic deployments of identity, argument,

rhetoric (*Epistemology* 23). This is not to say that queer theory lacked rigor. Quite the contrary: queer theory eschewed the kind of intellectual straight-jacket that comes with a system, insisting instead that political effects, aesthetic observations, and configurations of pleasure all took place within context, within the warp and woof of *powers* (the emphasis on the plural), negotiations in which discourses and counterdiscourses were not so easily distinguishable one from the other, as they are in current models of race and gender. Put another way, queer theory does not indulge in that messianic project of creating a better future—the one Michel Foucault distinctly disallows in *The History of Sexuality*—out of a wretched past, or of schooling its children into liberation and clear-thinking. The value—and the threat—of queer theory, then, is precisely that we haven't allowed it to ossify into formulas and programs. There is no singular agenda to queer studies, and that's what makes them queer. For queer theory to continue it must theorize; it must continue to discover itself anew, rather than trading in the truths that, to any thinking person, are irrefutable (racism is bad, discrimination is bad, slavery is bad). Unlike other political criticisms, it will not forget its debts to deconstruction and to psychoanalysis and it will not return to an empiricism masquerading as materialism. To paraphrase Paul de Man (and I assume it's safe now to go back into those waters without being accused of Nazi collaboration), nothing can overcome the resistance to queer theory since queer theory is itself this resistance (20).

What then is “left” of English studies? Certainly not a gay and lesbian humanism: I hope to have made it clear that I am not cruising for an invitation to bring queer theory back into the centre or to rescue it from the margins to which English studies in Canada has banished it. Rather, I am advocating first that we deploy the hermeneutics that queer theory refined, hermeneutics that are suspicious of political programs and platitudes based on identity. And that suspicion might be applied most usefully to the idea of textuality itself, to that idea of text as always and only a battlefield of ideologies. In the current state of affairs, “text” has been colonized into that infinitely damnable Other; it has become a handmaid's tale telling the Political Agenda. What then if I reject the privilege that we have accorded politics over the past 20 years? What if I look to questions of aesthetic formulation, pleasure, invention, newness? What if my critical orientation is toward a future rather than a past, a future that need not be determined by the past, or by the present pleasures of imagining that past? What if I refuse to be caught, like Matthew Arnold, wandering between two worlds, one dead (the inescapable tradition of History), the other powerless to be born (the always already abjected Utopia of political critique)? Ultimately,

if everything is left politically then nothing is; consequently, nothing is left. Perhaps I'm less interested in what is "left" of English studies than I am in what is beside it, within it, beneath it, or any combination of spatial prepositions.

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