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Que(e)rying Here

JASON WIENS

Dickinson, Peter. *Here Is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities, and the Literatures of Canada*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1999.

NEAR THE END of his introduction to *Here Is Queer*, Peter Dickinson confesses that he "came late to the study of Canadian literature" and "[e]ven later to postcolonial and queer theory" (10). I would never have suspected had Dickinson not offered this admission: *Here Is Queer* is an imaginative, erudite, and well-researched contribution to all three fields. The title arises out of a conflation of Northrop Frye's famous question "Where is here?" and Queer Nation's slogan "We're here, we're queer, get used to it!" That these two pieces of discourse converge so nicely should come as no surprise to those familiar with debates in the fields of Canadian literature and queer theory over the past few decades. As Dickinson explains, Frye's "speculations on national ennui . . . amount to a failure of imagination, a refusal to conceive of 'Canada' . . . in anything other than geopolitical terms," whereas Queer Nation's "declaration of sexual anomie . . . reveals a surfeit of imagination, and extension of the notions of citizenship and community beyond the borderlines of current legal and juridical discourse" (4). Both "Canadian literature" and "queer theory" have been characterized in recent years by a certain critical ambivalence, an ambivalence embraced more enthusiastically by those culturally and politically committed to the continued interrogation of sexual identities and the advancement of the concerns of queer communities than by literary critics invested in the growth of a national literature and, by extension, a coherent national identity.

The title also offers an example of Dickinson's theoretical methodology throughout the book — namely, a mapping of the discourses of queer theory and postcolonial theory onto one another, producing a sort of hybrid vocabulary whose overlaps Dickinson productively

interrogates through considerations of Anglo-Canadian, Franco-Québécois(e), and First Nations texts. For instance, in the context of a discussion of three Timothy Findley novels, Dickinson notes an analogy between Homi Bhabha's concept of "national ambivalence" and Jonathan Dollimore's term "sexual dissidence" (44), an analogy that he develops through a comparison of similar lexicons and temporal/spatial economies in both theorists' thinking, specifically their emphases on a "dissident dialectic" operating 'betwixt and between' . . . dominant and subordinate cultures, groups, and identities" and producing a series of displacements that are repressively discriminatory but that also expose enabling contradictions (44). Similarly, in his chapter on Dionne Brand, Dickinson explores the equivalencies and differences between Homi Bhabha's and Judith Butler's notions of "performativity" through a collision of the concept of "location" as developed by thinkers such as Bhabha and Adrienne Rich with J.L. Austin's use of the term "locution." Through this overlap, Dickinson develops a methodology for approaching Brand's poetry that is grounded in speech-act theory but that also takes into account the situatedness of the speaker, the location of the locuter: "the *location* in which it is spoken impacts significantly on the production of meaning put into play by a given *locution*" (164). As this example demonstrates, Dickinson often uses italics to foreground wordplay. His book demonstrates an eclectic range of reading in the fields of queer theory and postcoloniality: in addition to the names cited above, theorists whose work he draws on include Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Benedict Anderson, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Sue-Ellen Case, Jacques Derrida, Frantz Fanon, Diana Fuss, Elspeth Probyn, and Robert K. Martin. The scholarship is sound, perhaps too sound: occasionally, I found myself losing Dickinson's voice in the cacophony of theorists cited either to support his claims or to develop his methodology. However, this apparently excessive reliance on citations from established scholars is understandable given that the book grew out of Dickinson's doctoral dissertation at the University of British Columbia, a project in which one is expected, probably more than at any other point in one's career, to demonstrate extensive reading in a number of fields.

The catholicity of theoretical sources Dickinson draws on is mirrored by the literature he addresses and, by extension, the Canada he constructs. Although he warns the reader early that he has "deliberately sacrificed comprehensiveness in favour of focused attention

on specific key texts" (5), his study addresses a plurality of genres (novel, poetry, drama), languages (French and English), and historical periods. Moreover, his work reflects a somewhat traditional (which is not to say inaccurate) federalist view of Canada as the collision of British, French, and First Nations cultures (Dickinson repeatedly divides the "literatures of Canada" into Canadian, Québécois, and First Nations literatures), with some attention paid to "writers of colour" — namely, Dionne Brand. Despite his claim that he is "less concerned with retracing linearly the familiar Canadian cultural emplotments of chronology and geography than with examining *interdiscursively* the temporal gaps and spatial fissures that make up the discontinuous national and sexual storylines of this plot" (6), the organization of his chapters, roughly chronological, develops a familiar narrative that first investigates texts and contributions by white male writers (John Richardson, Sinclair Ross, Leonard Cohen, Hubert Aquin, Oscar Wilde, Timothy Findley, Patrick Anderson, Scott Symons, Michel Tremblay, René-Daniel Dubois, and Michel Marc Bouchard) and then pays attention to two female writers (Daphne Marlatt and Nicole Brossard), a female writer of colour (Dionne Brand), and a male First Nations writer (Tomson Highway). Despite Dickinson's careful attention to difference within as well as between the works of each of these writers, and allowing for his particular interest in "queering" a Canadian canon, such a narrative almost inevitably figures a white male normativity that is subsequently interrogated by subaltern difference. Dickinson would of course replace "normativity" with "homosociality," and early in the book he offers a brief caveat:

While my own focus in these early pages remains, for the most part, strategically oriented towards the *occlusions* of homosocial desire within canonical texts by white men in this country, I am nevertheless sensitive to the *exclusions* of gender, race, and class which these texts also perform, exclusions which subsequent chapters attempt to address, if not remedy. (12)

One wonders whether such a remedy would be necessary if the book were structured in the less diachronic manner that Dickinson describes early in his introduction.

Having said that, I found Dickinson's comprehensiveness, and his willingness to address Franco-Québécois(e) texts in particular, re-

freshing in a time when literary scholarship often demands an increasingly narrow focus of investigation. Few critics of Canadian literature today seem to be willing (or able) to discuss francophone texts alongside anglophone texts — a refusal that is justified, for the most part, given that the "two solitudes" have been especially isolated historically in the development of their literatures. However, Dickinson accounts for this parallel development repeatedly, comparing and contrasting the ways in which homosexuality has been refused, absorbed, or situated in the construction of both French and English literatures in Canada. However, he does not simply read the Québécois(e) texts in isolation; although their relation to Franco-Quebec nationalism is a primary concern in his book, he also addresses their reception and influence in and on Anglo-Canada. In the chapter on Tremblay, Dubois, and Bouchard in particular, Dickinson provides a rather meticulous overview of the production and reception of their plays on Toronto as well as Montreal stages, not to mention those in New York. Similarly, his chapter on Marlatt and Brossard focuses on what he terms "an explicitly *female* homosocial configuration" in their collaborative affiliations and translations (9). One complaint I have is the translations into English of almost all the French passages in the chapters addressing Franco-Québécois(e) texts, resulting in extremely long citations that at times become a little distracting and confusing. I'm not sure how these translational detours can be avoided, however: not providing translations would assume, perhaps incorrectly, a reader's competence in French, while simply translating French passages into English and providing original citations in endnotes would attenuate the precision of Dickinson's textual exegeses, not to mention perform an act of linguistic and cultural effacement.

As I mentioned above, *Here Is Queer* is a thoroughly researched book, and Dickinson's readings offer important contributions to ongoing critical discussions. Not surprisingly, my occasional disagreements with his arguments increased the closer Dickinson moved to my own fields of expertise. For instance, in his discussion of Marlatt's work, he includes among "the Black Mountain poets" Jack Spicer and Allen Ginsberg (136), writers whose poetics, not to mention relations, were often at odds with the poets more traditionally associated with Black Mountain (Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan). Dickinson also claims that critics of Dionne Brand's work "frequently erase Brand's lesbianism, at the

same time as they ignore her substantial contributions as a short story writer, novelist, documentary filmmaker, scholar, archivist, and cultural activist" (9), claims that are not only demonstrably false but also surprising, especially given his wide reading of criticism on Brand. Still, I found his work on Marlatt and Brand, as well as on Brossard, to be among the most creative, timely, and illuminating in his book. In the chapter on Marlatt and Brossard, Dickinson cleverly discusses the parallel development of their careers (and, metonymically, of experimental feminist writing in Anglo-Canada and Franco-Quebec) by dividing the page itself into parallel columns. His readings of Marlatt and Brossard's translational dialogue in "Character/Jeu de lettres" from Marlatt's *Salvage* (1991) productively explores the way in which, "Building upon the spirit of excess signaled by Marlatt's 'original' source text, Brossard . . . provides an occasion for further linguistic experimentation and polysemic play" (151) and offers one of those rare moments when criticism expands rather than contracts the polysemy of contemporary poetic texts. And Dickinson's conflation of "location" and "locution" in his examination of Brand's *No Language Is Neutral* (which I describe above) results in one of the more productive and timely readings of her work I have read and offers a most convincing attempt to "make some sense of the 'local' languages of race, gender, class, and sexuality, and the role each plays in the construction of Canada and its national literatures" (172).

Dickinson's primary contention throughout *Here Is Queer* is that alternative, queer readings of the Canadian literary canon and of individual texts disrupt and destabilize cozy, airtight constructions of the Canadian literary field. I have to question (or query) this claim with two main observations. The first is that few people in Canada now regard the country's literary field as closed and corresponding to the country's geopolitical boundaries. The second observation is perhaps best demonstrated by a quotation from the first chapter of *Here Is Queer* in the context of a discussion of *Wacousta*:

... I would like to suggest an alternative reading of *Wacousta*, one which thoroughly disrupts and destabilizes the nationalist paradigm invoked by [Gaile] McGregor, one which interprets the pervasive undercurrent of male homosexual desire in the text as "symptomatic" of a completely different "syndrome" in Canadian literature, where readily

/ writerly panic is induced as much by a terror of the unknown nature of same-sex and mixed race attachments as it is by the unknowable in nature itself. (13)

While such a reading of *Wacousta* does disrupt and destabilize McGregor's nationalist paradigm of "the Wacousta syndrome," Dickinson here simply replaces that syndrome with an equally thematizing (and totalizing) paradigm of his own. That is, the point of destabilizing such nationalist paradigms is not, to my mind, to replace them immediately with more "current" paradigms or ones more suited to contemporary political circumstances; it is, rather, to imagine the nation as a more elusive, wavering, and differentiated space, one continually open to resignifications and articulations of difference.

Perhaps Dickinson's insistence on developing new thematic paradigms, not to mention his more traditional, comprehensive imagining of the Canadian literary field, is related to his "confession" at the beginning of chapter 4: "Despite all my sophisticated posturing in the previous chapters, we now arrive at that point in the book where I must come out as a closet Canadian nationalist" (102): a Canadian nationalism that is, as Dickinson goes on to describe, largely British inflected, eastern oriented, and hostile to the sovereignist aspirations of Quebec. While Dickinson readily admits his eastern roots and continued investments in the Anglo-Canadian community in Montreal, the British-European inflection of his understanding of Canada can be further extrapolated from his selection of representative writers and texts (Richardson, Wilde, Findley, Anderson, Symons) as well as his comments on those texts. In the aforementioned discussion of *Wacousta* and McGregor's readings of that novel, for example, he disputes her central claim regarding "the cross-border connection between Richardson and his American literary counterpart, James Fenimore Cooper," arguing that it is Sir Walter Scott "to whom Richardson owes his greatest authorial debt" (13). Indeed, while Jane Rule's *The Desert of the Heart* is addressed briefly in the context of his discussion of Brossard's *Le Désert mauve*, and Stan Persky's *Buddy's: Meditations on Desire* is compared with Barthes's *Incidents* at the beginning of his chapter on Tomson Highway, there might have been more discussion of the U.S. influence on Canadian letters, especially considering the number of expatriate Queer writers from the United States besides Rule and Persky who have made Canada

home (Robin Blaser and George Stanley come to mind). However, it would be unfair of me to make too much of these elisions in a book demonstrating such comprehensiveness.

At the end of his introduction, Dickinson warns the reader that "there is a lot of *me* scattered throughout the ensuing pages" (10), and indeed there is. The sort of self-situating that he engages in here can, if not done well, come off as clumsy, self-indulgent autobiography when the intent is rather to account for one's social positioning so as to provide a contextual frame for the intellectual practice. Gladly, his tactics in *Here Is Queer* result in more of the latter. And, despite the lofty rhetorical tone Dickinson maintains throughout the text, he finds plenty of room for humour, and not only to provide light moments: witness the thought-provoking puns on "tricks" in the chapter on Highway, for instance. The "Coda" addresses the "trendiness" of his study, situating it in both the broad context of developments within the intellectual queer community throughout North America in the 1990s (Dickinson discusses the Jane Gallop affair, for instance) and the more local context of mid-1990s Vancouver and the countercensorship struggles of Little Sister's gay and lesbian bookstore. He notes that *Here Is Queer* is "a product of a specific historical juncture in the disciplines of queer and postcolonial studies" (192), and as such it makes the sort of self-situating he engages in all the more necessary, despite the disapproval he expects of "some members of the scholarly community, not to mention my own individual 'cringe factor' in looking back on this book several years hence" (193). As I have mentioned, Dickinson's book is a timely and topical intervention; timeliness, however, can often be mistaken for trendiness. Fortunately, *Here Is Queer* offers more of the former: if Dickinson is cringing in a few years, then it will be because the humour is a little too cute, the personal interventions a little too indulgent, and not because the book is lacking in imaginative criticism, original research, and provocative arguments.

The Work's Solitude

JAKE KENNEDY

Coles, Don. *Kurgan*. Erin, ON: Porcupine's Quill, 2000.

The work is solitary: this does not mean that it remains uncommunicable, that it has no reader. But whoever reads it enters into the affirmation of the work's solitude, just as he who writes it belongs to the risk of solitude.

— Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (22)

OVER THE PAST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS, "someones" and "sometimes" and "somewheres" have haunted the poetry of Don Coles. I am thinking not only of collection titles — *Sometimes All Over* (1975) and *Someone Has Stayed in Stockholm* (1994) — but also of numerous Coles poems, and lines within poems, in which these "unspeccified" adverbs and "unknown" pronouns accrue a strangely intimate and precise power. In the hands of a more hurried writer, such phrases might read as indifference or as too-easy generalizations. But *somehow* Coles can convince a reader that these held-back specificities are in fact spaces, or solitudes, in which to set his or her own private histories and names. In Coles's poetry, readers often find themselves standing in a transitional, past-invoking landscape: near water; in empty houses; or, as in the title poem of the recently published *Kurgan*, on a burial-mounded plain.

Coles, as W.J. Keith pointed out in this journal some five years ago, is an indisputably major poet whose reputation, especially in the wake of his 1993 Governor General's Literary Award-winning *Forests of the Medieval World*, appears to be slowly but steadily growing. His literary oeuvre is accomplished and diverse. He has not only consistently published some of the finest lyric and narrative poetry collections in the country but has also excelled in the use of rhyming forms — not to mention more than proving himself as a grand experimenter in the long-poem genre. I have in mind K. in