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BOOK REVIEWS / *COMPTES RENDUS*

**PETER DICKINSON, *Here is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities and the Literatures of Canada*. (Toronto: U of Toronto P) \$19.95**

**PIET DEFRAEYE**

Peter Dickinson's *Here is Queer* is an important book because it is a pioneering study. It is the first book, to my knowledge, that combines three foci of critical investigation within a Canadian context: identity, nationality, and sexuality. Dickinson problematizes assumptions of 'Canadianess' (English, French, Native) by looking at notions of sexual identity as alternative indications of Canadianess or dissidence—hence "nationalisms" as a plural noun found in the subtitle. The title of the book is a clever answer to Northrop Frye's speculations on what ties Canadian literature together. If Canadianess is a given in the fact that the writing is from and/or about a place that situates itself within the geopolitical borders of Canada—a place, in other words, that is "here"—where, then, is "here"?

Dickinson's point of departure is his own journey of self-discovery in his interaction and engagement with the literature he chose to study. In this sense, the book fits in the growing genre of personalist academic writing, a quality which is elegantly addressed in a Coda to the book. Referring to the proactive ideology of the radical action group Queer Nation at the end of the previous century, the author of *Here is Queer* is in search of literary traces of the experience of body that, in their alterity to a perceived orthodoxy—heterosexuality—become the ground for another sort of "us"—the sort of thing on which nationhood is based. While the biographical motivations may be sufficient incentive for the author to embark on his study, the theoretical underpinnings of his focus are only summarily dealt with in the monograph. The issue of identity and how that translates itself in performative terms in the realm of sexuality may well play a crucial role in the experience and definition of nationality.

George Mosse's *Nationalism and Sexuality*, an exploration of the convergence of European nationalisms and bourgeois sexuality in the nineteenth century, is an early source of inspiration for Dickinson's book. A remarkable absence in Dickinson's theoretical argument of sexuality as a determinant of nationality is the school of Eros philosophy (Marcuse, Jankelevitch, Flamm, Dethier). A recurrent theoretical category is the concept of performativity; however, one is never sure what exactly is meant by this. The author goes to great lengths to point out that his notion of performativity is not necessarily linked to theatricality (and, he stresses, is particularly distinct from drag performance). It is an odd effort, especially in a book on otherness, considering that theatre itself has been celebrated since the Dionysian Festivals as an ideal place to experience alterity. The theoretical underpinnings of what performance/performativity means for the construction of sexual dissidence and national ambivalence remain quite vague. Some more recent developments in Performance Studies, like the performance of memory (Jill Lane), performative writing (Randy Martin, Peggy Phelan), and mimicry and masquerade theory (Elin Diamond, Sue Ellen Case) are not mentioned, while they might have been useful in mapping the theoretical argument of the book.

"Que(e)rying the canon requires making space for 'new' textual voices," but it also means "the simultaneous rereading of 'old' voices in 'new' ways" (29). The book offers some exciting re-readings of a number of authors and critical writing, and aims to cover the varied cargo of queer Canadian writing and (even "queerer"—in the other sense of the word) Canadian criticism: Timothy Findley's *The Wars* and *Not Wanted on the Voyage*; the homophobic critical reception of Montreal poet Patrick Anderson and novelist Scott Symons; "the Montreal theatre scene" of Michel Tremblay, René-Daniel Dubois, and



Michel Marc Bouchard; the lesbian writing, translations, and collaborations of Nicole Brossard and Daphne Marlatt; the poetry of Dionne Brand; and, in a final chapter, Tomson Highway's trickster plays (8).

The re-evaluation of the critical reception of British-Canadian Patrick Anderson is perhaps the single most urgent contribution of the book. The Montreal poet was systematically omitted from or marginalized in what Dickinson calls the "aggressively masculinist and heterosexist canon of Canadian Literature" (75) on the grounds of a conspicuous lack of virility in his poetry. Critic and poet John Sutherland initiated the long tradition of attacks on Anderson's poetry as lacking honesty or manliness. Anderson's poetry was critiqued as being (femininely) un-Canadian, which turns the poet into "other" or foreigner. Apart from its critique on the emergence and canonization of a Canadian aesthetic, this section in the book offers a unique perspective for anyone who is interested in the role of Little Magazines in the establishment of a Canadian poetic tradition. Dickinson goes on with his critique of Anderson and Symons as travel writers whose fascination with otherness (Quebec/Malaya/Greece/Morocco) may have its origins in a desire to find or recover a structure for unscripted sexual identity. The issue of misogyny in Symons's novels and in the critical reception of Anderson is pointed out, but not satisfactorily addressed.

While Dickinson often claims to engage in reception theory, the chapter on Anderson and Symons is perhaps the only one where he does so with sound credibility. His chapter on the theatre of Tremblay, Dubois, and Bouchard skirts the concrete reception of the plays, which is discussed only summarily. It is a pity because the argument that there is a notable difference between these playwrights' reception in Quebec, as opposed to English Canada (which often seems to mean Ontario), is a fascinating one.

Dickinson identifies a similar critical problem in each playwright: homosexual identity in their plays "is at once part of and separate from a cultural narrative of nationalist over-determination" (107). In Tremblay's cycle of *Belles-Soeurs* plays, Quebec is represented by the image of the dysfunctional family, of which homosexual neurosis is its sign. In Dubois's *Being at Home with Claude*, "the conflict between homosexual desire and national (be)longing" results in a murder of sameness (120). In Bouchard's *Lilies* and *The Coronation Voyage* the central trope is of Quebec as a fatherless and, therefore, orphaned people.

While I agree with Dickinson that Dubois chooses for himself an unpopular position as someone who resists the narrow confines of programmatic national cultural politics that are solely based on language—sameness leads unavoidably to obliteration—the Tremblay and Bouchard critiques require more development. What are we to do, for instance, with the motif of (heterosexual) incest in Tremblay's *La Maison Suspense*, or the image of Timothée as the lacerating father in Bouchard's *Lilies*? The main problem, however, lies in the fact that the argument is based on a comparison of a handful of English-Canadian and Quebec reviews, without a clear appreciation for issues of privilege and/or territory so prevalent in theatrical performance and criticism. Moreover, apart from a few scattered references in the reviews themselves, there is hardly any allusion to the performance text or *mise en scène* of the various productions of these plays. Perhaps performance has nothing to do with performativity? It is quite striking, in this context, that there is no reference at all to the Canadian Stage adaptation of Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage*. It is, in fact, remarkable, that we have to wait till the last chapter to have performance become part of the critical argument—in the form of stage directions and stage design—as Dickinson takes issue with Susan Bennett's misogynist reading of Tomson Highway's representation of Native women.

The last chapter is arguably one of the most lucid sections in the book because there is considerably less jargon on these final pages. The hysterical Po-Mo urge for apposition and super-, sub-, hyphenated-, and "unfinalizable" (!) (b)racketed writing (the PhD Dissertation constantly looms in the background) seems



to have died down considerably. If we are to produce critical writing so it can be part of a wider critical argument and have its impact on cultural practice, then this book is not a good example. There is too much "sophisticated theoretical postering" in it for major political or cultural fallout (101). However, if the main quality of good critical writing lies in its potential to find new windows and doors to look at cultural production, and to come up with new perspectives and potential for innovative critical journeys, then this challenging study may offer its readers numerous important signposts to follow-up.



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George Mosser's *Nationalism and Sexuality*, an exploration of the convergence of European nationalisms and bourgeois sexuality in the nineteenth century, is an early source of inspiration for Dickinson's book. A noticeable absence in Dickinson's theoretical argument of sexuality as a determinant of nationality is the subject of Foucault's philosophy (Marcus, Jackall, Pinar, Deleuze). A recurrent theoretical category is the concept of performativity, however, one is never sure what exactly it means by this. The author acknowledges Foucault's work in sex and that his notion of performativity is not necessarily linked to the drag performance, but stresses, in particular, that drag performance is not an effort, that it is a kind of otherness, considering that theatre itself has been acknowledged since the Dionysian festival as a place to experience otherness. The theoretical underpinnings of what might be called performativity in the construction of sexual identities and national ambivalence are perhaps most clearly seen in the developments in Performance Studies, like the performance of nationality (Julia), performative writing (Randy Martin, Peggy Popham, and others), and masquerade (Barry, Peter Diamond, See Ellen Case) are not mentioned, while they might have been useful in mapping the theoretical argument of the book.

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