

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

TERRY GOLDIE (Ed.), *In a Queer Country: Gay and Lesbian Studies in the Canadian Context*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001, 313 p. Index.

In a Queer Country, evolved from a 1997 conference held at York University, a conference that editor Terry Goldie organized while holding the Robarts Chair of Canadian Studies. As such, the essays cover a broad range of disciplines tracing the intersections of lesbian and gay studies and Canadian cultural studies, and are a welcome addition to an area of research that too often assumes the U.S. experience as universal -- or at minimum, able to speak for all of North America.

The disciplinary breadth of the collection succeeds in putting forward the central question of how queer and Canadian identity formations are linked to one another in a number of ways -- both in different realms (race and racism, geography, film, urban space, etc.) and as parallel constructions of identity that deny monolithic certainty.

Despite the subtitle of the book, Canadian-ness is not here deemed a solid context within which sexually diverse identities are created and maintained. Instead, the thrust of the collection is found in the possibility that Canada itself is rather a queer place. After all, Canadian identity is rooted in negation -- we are NOT American. It is rooted in the plurality of claiming to be a cultural mosaic and in the near-invisibility of Canadian culture in the U.S. dominated North American context. Indeed, spotting Canadians in a U.S. city involves much of the same attention to nuance, body language, and style as identifying lesbians and gay men in mainstream, heterosexual contexts.

However, noting a parallel is not sufficient. To make an argument one must show how that resemblance has meaning or implications that amount to more than an intellectual curiosity. In other words, this collection leads to the question of what can be gained, either for queer studies or Canadian cultural studies, in stitching together the curious similarities between Canadian and queer identities.

While the book focuses on those parallels, not all write in favour of their connection. Gary Kinsman compellingly argues that grouping queer and Canadian identities together is rooted in a naïveté about the racist, classist, homophobic and heterocentric base of the Canadian state since its inception. The irony Kinsman points to is that in highlighting Queer

Canada, or Canada as Queer, an antidote to U.S. queer cultural imperialism is offered -- but only if one maintains a blind innocence, ignorance or arrogance about Canadian history.

Even so, the attempt to use sexuality and national identity as mutually interrogatory is worth following through. Using sexual diversity as a lens for analysis, rather than sexuality being only an object of study, helps move beyond the distancing work that too often assigns sexuality a room of its own, neglecting to realize how the institutions of sexuality (whether dominant or marginal) inflect vast areas of our social world, beyond the realms of sexual behaviours, identities and communities. This is something that we, as sociologists, have had shown to us before as accounting for gender has moved beyond an “add women and stir” model to the rich possibilities that come from using gender as an analytic lens to highlight patterns and practices too often obfuscated or neutralized by business-as-usual relations of power, relations more insidious because of their banality.

As might be expected with an interdisciplinary collection, those from different disciplines will likely have differing opinions on the value of the collection, or of specific pieces within it. For sociologists (or at least for *this* sociologist), the theoretical discussion of connections between place, identity and nationalism too often floated free of the material aspects of everyday practice, interactions, and institutions and I was left wondering what the implications of the work might be, or craving more discussion of the observations and interviews that led the authors to their conclusions.

Nonetheless, many of these essays would be helpful in sexuality courses in Canadian universities -- to provide a balance to U.S.-focused queer cultural studies, and thereby emphasize how forms of sexuality are influenced by more than individual longing, desire or identity. Indeed, Goldie’s interview with Lynn Fernie (the only piece that is not a product of the conference that spawned the rest) is a must for those who assign Fernie’s now-classic NFB film, *Forbidden Love*, to their undergraduate classes.

The conference from which this book was born was the first of its kind, and the book bears the mark of that status -- its strengths are in the vigour with which it poses questions to fuel future work, and in its ability to serve as an introduction to issues of national queer identities and practices.

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