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13. Queer Straits (1993)

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Here is a quote from *Lesbians Talk Queer Notions*, in which Cherry Smyth argues that the new 'radical' Queer movement has brought about a transformation in lesbian politics:

It has been a long haul back to reclaiming the right to call my cunt, my cunt, to celebrating the pleasure in objectifying another body, to fucking women and to admitting that I also love men and need their support. That is what queer is.

Smyth argues that Queer has grown out of AIDS activism in the United States, and from a dissatisfaction with the way lesbians and gay men have previously worked around issues of sexuality and homophobia. Not surprisingly, Queer has been quick to take hold in Britain where the agenda is so often set by what goes on in the US. Queer activism is centred around actions which make gays and (supposedly) lesbians more visible in straight society. Outrage is the most visible of these groups and they have employed a number of 'shocking' tactics, such as staging a mass lesbian and gay wedding, 'Wink-Ins' and 'Kiss-Ins', all of which are designed to highlight the ways in which lesbians and gays are excluded by the British legal system.

Other aspects of Queer activism have been claimed to be somewhat more threatening to both the gay and straight 'mainstream'. Most notable here is the Manchester group Homocult, who have achieved more than an ounce of notoriety through their 'upfront' poster campaigns and sloganeering, including their infamous 'Paki Poof' images. Even the FROCS (Faggots Rooting Out Closeted Sexuality) outing hoax, which turned Queer activism on its head by tempting the homophobic press with its planned revelation of closeted lesbians and gays, only to leave them foaming at the mouth with a statement about homophobia, and none of the promised star names, was hailed as a triumph for Queer tactics.

What becomes clear from reading *Queer Notions*, however, is that the 'In your face radicalism' which is claimed to be its outstanding characteristic, has, in the end, much in common with plain old liberalism. Queer's 'shocking' tactics constitute little more than a plea to be included in straight society, rather than a demand that

we change it. The Queer demand that lesbians and gays should be allowed to get married too, doesn't question the validity of the whole institution. It seems clear that in the wake of the backlash around feminism (and indeed socialism), Queer as a lifestyle has found its audience.

Reclaiming 'Queer'?

So why the term 'Queer'? Queer — that old style homophobic insult — has been 'reclaimed' we are told, as a way to remind ourselves of how we are seen in heterosexual society. Smyth quotes Joan Nestle, proponent of butch-femme, who says,

I need to remember what it was like to fight for sexual territory in the time of McCarthy... to keep alive the memory that in the 1940s doctors measured the clitorises and nipples of Lesbians to prove our biological strangeness.

Recycling terms of hatred has been a method employed by some feminists in the past for our own purposes, and to help illustrate our arguments. *Trouble & Strife* for example. However, this has not been done in a simplistic belief that in so doing we have the power to redefine the term's meaning in a wider context, or indeed remove from it its misogynist associations. Nor would feminists wish to advocate that men should continue to use such terms. Reclaiming 'Queer' as a name is based on the assumption that merely to do so strips it of its homophobic power, that it turns the world against the queer basher, rather than the bashed. It is a direct consequence of post-structuralist arguments around language which claim that the meanings of words are constantly redefined each time they are used by the individuals who use them, and that we can therefore make words mean what we want them to mean. Clearly such arguments remove language from both its historical and social context. In heterosexual society 'queer' cannot be other than abusive, just as in white supremacist society racist insults are statements of hatred, and words like 'bitch' reflect patriarchy's misogyny.

Mixed movement

'Queer' also is a very specific word. It is not just a term of abuse but also a term of abuse for men. Queer betrays its origins in male politics even as it names itself, and despite Smyth's attempts to claim otherwise, the book fails to convince that Queer ever did or could include women, and address their concerns. Queer, just like other attempts at mixed movements, has been plagued with accusations of sexism. Attempts to form a lesbian wing of Outrage — LABIA (Lesbians Answer

Back in Anger) — failed. Indeed, the few lesbian members left in Outrage have consistently had to shout to make themselves heard, and have also been obliged on several occasions to prove their existence in the gay (sic) press, after reports that, exhausted by the misogyny in Outrage, all the women had left.

Radical feminism has long recognised the contradictions of working in mixed movements. Queer, however, tries to make lesbians believe that it is in their interests to ally with gay men. What this fails to comprehend is the way in which patriarchy functions to oppress lesbians. By falsely assuming that lesbians and gay men have identical interests, Queer aims to provide an arena where women and men work together to fight men's battles. One of the major demands of Outrage, for example, has been a change in the age of consent laws. Clearly this is an issue which does not affect lesbians, yet Queer tries to convince women to join a movement based almost solely on a male agenda. Queer is not an attempt to challenge the very basis of the hetero-patriarchal society we live in, but rather a campaign for liberal reform to increase the 'rights' of the vocal few. For lesbians to be really free from oppression it is crucial that we engage in struggle for much more fundamental change.

An alternative to feminism?

Nonetheless, *Queer Notions* tries hard to present Queer as an attractive alternative to feminism in a post-feminist age. Feminism, with its emphasis on fighting patriarchy and heterosexuality as institutions, has — Smyth argues — failed. It has failed because it has not addressed the fact that some women like dominant/subordinate relationships; some women want to be objectified; and hey — and here she really gets to the point — some women want to objectify other women. What can a woman do, if she wants to call herself a feminist, and yet she wants the right to do sexually to women what men have always done? Where can she go? Cherry has the answer — Queer:

The attraction of queer for some lesbians is flavoured by a rebellion against a prescriptive feminism that had led them to feel disenfranchised by the lesbian feminist movement.

Lesbian feminism, it seems, has disenfranchised some lesbians through its very analysis of heterosexuality as an institution and men as a class as oppressors of women. What about women who also want to be fucked by men? What about women who want to act like men? Well, Queer provides a place for them too, by

arguing that it is possible to have sexual relationships with men, yet still call yourself a lesbian. The most integral point seems to be naming oneself (in true postmodern fashion):

... there are times when queers may choose to call themselves heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian or gay, or none of the above. If queer develops into an anti-straight polemic, it will have betrayed its potential for radical pluralism.

One can be Queer, whatever one does, if that's what one chooses to be known as. The concept actually has very little at all to do with lesbian or gay sexuality. As Smyth clearly shows, Queer is about breaking down the 'strict binary Homo-hetero opposition which still tyrannises notions of sexual orientation.'

One of the most bizarre aspects of Queer politics — and one which enables those disenfranchised lesbians who want to do what men do, without feeling guilty — is its emphasis on the importance of 'gender fuck', a concept most vocally coined by pornographer Della Grace. Gender-fuck means to 'play' with gender, and has resulted in 'lesbian boys' and 'daddy dykes' — a direct imitation by women of gay male sexuality. Thus lesbianism becomes the poor copycat cousin of male homosexuality.

In the past two years more lesbians have been discussing their erotic responses to gay male pornography and incorporating gay male iconography into their fantasies, sex play and cultural representations.

Here there is no desire for the female, but rather a worship of the penis, second only to that of many gay men. 'Chick with a dick' is the slogan and image most likely to be adored. For Smyth and her ilk, this is the height of Queerness.

Della Grace's photograph, 'Lesbian Cock', presents two lesbians dressed in leather and biker caps, both sporting moustaches and one holding a life-like dildo protruding from her crotch. *In this delicious parody of phallic power, laced with an envy few feminists feel able to admit*, these women are strong enough to show they're women. [My emphasis]

The theory buys straight into the age old Freudian and homophobic arguments that all women are frantic with penis envy, and that lesbian sexuality cannot possibly exist without a penis substitute. This, of course, is a lie.

Transgression or reversion

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the logical conclusion of Queer politics is a reversion to heterosexuality. The deification of gay men has reached such a peak that the ultimate experience for Queers has been sex between 'lesbians' and 'gay men'. This is yet more gender-fuck, dabbling in what is seen to be naughty and unconventional, but really what could be more boring than men and women sleeping together!

The play around butch-femme and gender roles, however, is not a flippant bit of fun. Smyth attempts to pay dues to her 'feminism' by pointing out that

when lesbians take on behaviour perceived as macho and beat up their femme or lesbian-boy identified lovers in the name of transgression, then it's plain old reactionary chickenshit.

However, it is not 'reactionary chickenshit', Smyth believes, if the partner 'consents' to this abuse. Consent is one of the major focuses of Queer's position, but there is no understanding of the way such a concept may or may not operate in a hetero-patriarchal society. If a person pressurises her or his partner, then it may well be the case that s/he gives her 'consent'. It may also be the case that an individual is threatened into a situation in which the coercive partner can easily claim that s/he agreed to being tied up or beaten. Smyth cannot say that some scenes of abuse are OK if both partners 'agreed', and that others are abusive. It is clear that all situations of power inequality are oppressive and must be challenged, not celebrated as some part of Queer liberation.

Queer represents a violent and forceful attack on women who have spoken out about abuse and degradation. Here sexuality is explicitly about power games. Whereas lesbian feminists have questioned the notion that sex is necessarily about dominance and subordination, Queer chooses to celebrate and deify such forms of behaviour. It is a reversion to the old argument that what consenting adults do in private life is fine — or rather, it is even better if they do it in public shouting 'Fuck You'. Queer politics is the apotheosis of teen rebellion — it's as naughty as we want to be and you can't stop us.

The widespread hysteria around the so-called tyranny of 'political correctness' is a large part of what Smyth has swallowed. Queer claims to be challenging the alleged rampant feminist censorship of the individual right to do just what one likes, as and when one feels like it. Anyone who has been active in radical feminist politics will be painfully aware that radical feminism has never had a stranglehold over any part of our hetero-patriarchal society; and to claim that we are the powerful majority denying the libertarians their chance to fuck who and how they like is astounding! Queer however is providing a powerful voice for the libertarian community, a voice which says 'we do what we like without your permission; in the 'new' lesbian and gay politics, if you're not Queer then you have no credibility, and you might as well not exist.

Queer is a deeply conservative movement. It says that nothing can change, that we've got to stop believing that it can. We've got to accept the inevitability of our situation, not try to pretend that the world can change. For Smyth, the most we can aspire to is minor Parliamentary reform. For her, the burning issue is:

With its anti-assimilationist stance, can the queer agenda help to achieve constitutional reform in Britain?

In the Queer world we learn that power exists and that's all there is to it. Individuals should just choose which side of the power divide they are on and then get on with acting it out. This, Queer argues, is what lesbians and gay men have wanted all along, not the idea that fighting heterosexism ought also to mean fighting the way we oppress people in our own lives. The basic feminist tenet that the personal is political is nothing but an oppressive slogan denying people's right to choose how they have sex, and indeed making them feel guilty about their desires.

In choosing its name, 'Queer' gives its politics away. It fails to recognise the reality of the material world we live in and the fact that neither lesbians nor gay men live in a vacuum. 'Queer' remains a term of abuse for an oppressed group, and as such cannot form the basis for political action to end homophobia. What Queer seems to forget is that we know that there has always been hatred and oppression of lesbian and gay men, and we know that this still thrives in the present. We do not need to remind ourselves by using the language of our oppressors. Revolution requires more than this.

Queer and the backlash

Queer has certainly found a niche for itself, and the movement is in the ascendant, but lesbian feminists should be very wary indeed of a system which fails to acknowledge the role that patriarchy plays in oppressing us and which seems to have rejected feminist arguments almost entirely. Queer fails to address seriously the ways in which men oppress women, and as long as it continues to be a male-led movement there will never be any serious consideration of issues relating specifically to women.

Cherry Smyth tries her hardest to show that Queer can appeal to women, but she fails to convince. Queer is far from the revolutionary movement it would like itself to be, it is little more than a liberal/libertarian alliance. It represents the logical conclusion of 'post-ism'. Post-structuralism suggests that there are no longer clear gender categories: girls will be boys and boys will be girls; and post-feminism

means there's no contradiction in 'feminists' working in a male led movement for male defined goals. We know however that this is not the case. Queer offers us nothing. It is yet one more face of the backlash, trying to pass itself off as something new. We will not be fooled!

References

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