

**JANET HALLEY & ANDREW PARKER
(EDS) (2011) *AFTER SEX? ON WRITING SINCE
QUEER THEORY.***

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Dara Blumenthal

The rearing of queer theory since the 1990's has resulted in an expansive and expressive field of study; a field that is marked not by its cohesiveness but by its fissures. Like Marxism, queer theory promised a revolution, but this time in terms of new ways of living and 'doing' identity and *being* in the (Western) world. This is, as yet, an unrealized vision for it was immediately usurped by the overarching individualistic culture of North American capitalism. Perhaps that is why *After Sex? On Writing Since Queer Theory*, edited by Janet Halley and Andrew Parker, is at once a timely and confusing addition to the conversation. In many ways, this volume highlights how fragmented queer theory has become and seems to ask if it is time to move on. There are countless ways to answer this question, with more than a few starting with the interrogation of the temporal and spatial aspects implicated in the specific phrasing of the question itself -- not unlike the manner that at least a handful of essays in this volume question the appearance and role of the word 'After' in the title of this book.

The twenty-two single-authored essays in this volume address a group of questions posed by the two editors. The introduction, in which we learn that there is indeed a 'rumor' that 'queer theory, [is] if not already passe, rapidly approaching its expiration date' (1), asks:

What has queer theory become now that it has a past? What, if anything, does it not include within its purview? Does "sexuality" comprise its inside? If so, then does queer theory have an outside? (1)

In addition, the contributors were asked 'to reflect on, among other things, what in their work *isn't* queer' (1). This is a curious question the utility of which never fully reveals itself and remains unaddressed by a number of the contributors. A more direct question, that at least a few contributors explore is: 'What can work that is "non-sexual" tell us about work that is "sexual" in nature?'. The chapters in which this question is the main focus are poised between journal entry and academic biography -- they are (necessarily) self-reflexive and self-conscious pieces of work about work, which veer toward narrative explanation and away from academic or theoretical substance. While they may give a good sense of where and what queer theory is to one scholar (but not necessarily others) they more importantly constitute good examples of the rigid fragmentation that permeates both this text specifically and queer theory, where it remains firmly tied to binary opposition (e.g. inside/outside, open/closed, sexual/non-sexual, psychoanalysis/materialism, discourse/embodiment), generally. Reading this text without at least a working knowledge of queer theory and the work done by many of the contributors to this volume, would result in confusion about not only how queer theory is employed, but also the register of the text itself. The register swings between the narrative and scholarly with very few essays able to employ both. The essays are generally short and lack theoretical discussion, depth or development.

The majority of individuals who had a hand in producing this volume (including the editors) teach in English language or literature departments. There are no contributions from some of the fields that have provided so much life to queer theory such as sociology, cultural studies, media studies, cultural geography, or science studies. For this reason many of the chapters are abstracted from lived experience, everyday life, and ways of being. They are instead about words, language, linguistics, discourse, identity, agency, geopolitics, performativity, temporality, and history. That is to say they are tied to the discursive as a starting point for thinking through the everyday. The everyday is therefore presented as an effect of discourse. Just as Foucault's interest in docile bodies is about social power structures working on the materiality of the body but not on how the materiality of everyday (social) embodiment constructs and impacts upon power relations, the essays in *After Sex* maintain a unidirectional momentum fixed in a dis-embodied framework. Bodies are both the site and the source of power dynamics, we both *have* and *are* bodies, but materiality as a source of

theoretical and philosophical understanding, *as lived*, not merely described or understood through discourse has been largely neglected by queer theorists in these disciplines, and that is apparent in this text. As Karen Barad asserts, 'it seems that at every turn lately every 'thing'—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation' (2008, p. 120).

While attention to language is useful for understanding queer theory's present and past, it may no longer be the key to its future. Instead of a binary opposition between theory and the lived, it would be refreshing to explore how queer theory has been used to productively bridge the imagined boundaries of epistemology and ontology, of identity and the body; how the materiality of the body is not passive and how knowing explicitly (not implicitly) happens through being and doing. Other theorists -- not included in this volume, but which I invoke below -- have pulled these issues together in recent years through new theoretical frameworks. They have moved debates on by valuing knowledge outside of theories of discourse and psychoanalytic paradigms. Moving through and beyond postmodern fragmentation, which has threatened queer theory with individualistic over-categorization and thus easier inculcation into hegemonic power dynamics, a process of coming together is more compelling at this stage. Instead of a queer theory that values individuality and multiple identities with many different ways of being, a cohesive understanding of how the self-body is not necessarily experienced as purely individual in the first instance and fragmented in the second, has been made possible by the history of queer theory. However, this proposition is not explored in this volume.

Two other recent edited volumes that focus on and work from queer theory are able to move beyond static discursive representation and fragmentation: *Queering the Non/Human* (Giffney & Hird 2008) and *Material Feminisms* (Alaimo & Hekman 2009). While they are not nearly as beautiful (objects) as *After Sex?* -- which is, aesthetically, a beautiful book -- they are both deeper, with greater breadth, and more experimentation. *After Sex?* may have more chapters, but it has less to say. These other volumes are able to work from queer theory, to push it in new directions because they commit to understanding how people live their daily lives through discussion and integration of binary oppositions. The contributors to *Queering the Non/Human* and *Material Feminisms* work beyond disciplinary limits and challenge the construction of binaries and fundamental dualisms. They bridge matter and ideas -- ontologies and

epistemologies -- and work toward a new understanding of agency beyond the *individual*. In order to enliven a new theoretical moment they seek to understand where theory went wrong by working together old dualisms and refusing to create new ones in the process. The energy of queer theory is extended in new ways through, for example, posthumanism and ecology, that is not possible through overworked postmodern understandings of fragmentation, discourse, and the primacy of individual (dis-embodied) identity. In this vein, there are at least a handful of queer theorists (at various stages of their careers) that were not included in this collection who could have contributed the type of work that moves away from the discourse of individuality and the inscription of power dynamics onto passive material bodies. Those include (but are not limited to) Sara Ahmed, Karen Barad, Judith Halberstam, Elizabeth Grosz, and Donna Haraway. These are theorists who, for example, are able to problematize and play with dualisms, failure, shame, the need for rigid identity, and value the experience and constant reality of the fleshy material body as inherently integral to daily life.

The most effective and affecting chapters in *After Sex?* are concerned with bodies -- not bodies of work, or bodies of knowledge -- but bodies that live, sleep, feel, create, dance, fuck and struggle beyond contrived political identity categories or non-normative sexual experiences. These include (in order of appearance) Michael Moon's chapter 'Do You Smoke? Or, Is There Life? After Sex?', which is a playful, keen, and compassionate reading of artist Henry Darger's work and the way it has been largely mistreated and narrowly (and harmfully) read in the past; Lauren Berlant's take on irrationality, celibacy, and the sexual impasse in 'Starved'; Lee Edelman's chapter, 'Ever After: History, Negativity, and the Social', which exposes the contradiction inherent in the desire to place queer theory "after" sex by unpacking the way that 'the entry into history coincides with the entry into social narratives that work to domesticate the incoherence' (2011: 111); Neville Hoad's 'Queer Theory Addiction', an excellent, sharp, and exuberant look at the life of queer theory beyond a limiting conception of exhaustion to one of continuation; and José Esteban Muñoz's 'The Sense of Watching Tony Sleep', which beautifully brings together queer art, queer living, and the desire to shift away from flat, epistemological ways of labeling and understanding.

Other than these, many chapters follow a repetitive form (e.g. my work has been about x; now it is about y; I think queer theory should be about z) which limits the readers' experience of them as varied,

singular explorations; or alternatively, are based on polar opposite views (i.e. one side of a binary or another). For example, in Heather Love's chapter, 'Queers _____ This', we see a deep commitment to the notion of identity politics, and yet in the very next, Richard Rambuss' 'After Male Sex', is energized by anti-identitarianism, yet unable to move beyond gender (à la Donna Haraway) to a postgender space because he thinks it sounds erotically unappealing (perhaps this is ironic). While juxtaposing these ideas can be interesting, it does very little in terms of theoretical development or insight since they are not brought into dialogue but instead allowed to exist in their neat, discrete, bounded forms. Merely accepting and presenting polar opposite views results in a static representation of fragmented discourse, not a dynamic bringing together and pulling apart -- not a queering.

These sorts of binary oppositions between chapters also coalesce around whether queer theory is decidedly not about gayness/homosexuality and instead about the grey area in between the hetero and homo. Some chapters include gay and lesbian identity and practices as a primary aspect of queer theory, whereas others believe homosexuality should be left out. For example Leo Bersani's essay, 'Shame on You' focuses explicitly on barebacking (unprotected anal sex between men) and moralistically (and disappointingly) ends up criticizing the most queer aspect of barebacking -- which is not the practice itself but instead the confrontation of AIDS (death) and enjoying pleasures of the flesh *beyond* the rational mind. Rather than irresponsible, this practice could be read as markedly queer because it goes against the heteronormative obsession with progression and the capitalistic notion of individuality. The essay begins with a fresh perspective but feels tired, overwrought, and overly psychoanalytical by the end; an approach that ultimately reifies the importance of the individual rational mind rather than the collective lived experience which is the topic of his essay: group sex.

While Bersani has been groundbreaking in his time, this insistence on the psychoanalytic is too Cartesian and too linguistic. Why the incessant need for embodied experience to be analyzed via the workings of a mind that exists within the imagined borders of an individual's brain? Sometimes pleasure isn't rational and sometimes it leads to new forms of sense-making, of knowing. This essay could be reworked in ways that value lived experience and potentially reveal an opportunity for theory that isn't steeped in top down psychoanalytical understandings of mere individuality amongst

other individuals, but rather what it means and how it feels to have and be an open, sensorial, porous body with other open, sensorial, porous bodies. It left me wondering if, now in his 80s, he is confronting death not just rationally, but viscerally -- he is *living* it -- and thus in attempting to thrust his brand of rationality (and morality) onto how other people who unapologetically confront death (through their 'risky' bodily behavior), he is trying to make sense of the limits of his own embodiment. The men in his essay value pleasure and sensory experience in ways that may not always make rational 'sense' but that does not mean those experiences are devoid of meaning or ways of understanding. For queer theory to go anywhere, before or after sex, the individual with a firmly situated rational mind must be relinquished from the imagined sealed borders of the body. We must learn to value irrationality, failure, shame and even death in order to move toward new ways of doing and understanding being.

Similarly, if a reliance on disembodied discourse is what marks queer theory in North America, particularly in the disciplines to which the contributors to *After Sex?* belong, it is unsurprising that it is becoming passé. (I think we need to resist labeling that fragmentation as queer in itself.) This text points not only to how queer theory has acquired a history, a past, but *why* it is becoming a thing of the past. Perhaps the issue is that scholars in these disciplines have run out of ways to push queer beyond their own disciplinary limits. They are stuck within the confines of focusing on identity or not, or contemplating sexuality or not, in a way that has lost sight of empiricism via discourse. A similar situation led Latour to ask: "What if explanations resorting automatically to power, society, discourse had outlived their usefulness and deteriorated to the point of now feeding the most gullible sort of critique?" (2005: 229). Latour's advocacy of empiricism could help address the state of queer theory and lead to a way of practicing critique that isn't devoid of experience, materiality, and realism. Maybe the question should be not 'Is queer theory over?', nor 'What is after queer theory?', but, 'Has queer theory been too rigidly employed?' Is it too focused on binaries, on letting everyone have their own box? Can it let go of discourse, individuality, identity? Can queer theory let the experiential and the sensorial remain in the realm of embodiment? Consider the phrasing of the questions (and the title) that have been asked of the contributors and the oppositional framework they impose. Despite queer theory being the tool for the disruption of binaries and normative structure, this text is rife with new and old examples; the title of the text itself relies on the implicitly

hierarchical, progression-oriented before/after binary, which a few contributors interrogate, deconstruct, or ultimately refuse (e.g. Lee Edelman's chapter to which I refer above) though many take it as a diving off point. This is also immediately apparent on the first page of the volume where the editors seek a framework for an "inside" and an "outside" of queer theory. Why situate the text within such narrow limits of understanding, of being? Are the possibilities for queer theory inherently limited because of these types of questions? It may at first seem antithetical to queer theory and the disruption of normative binaries to want to construct more dualisms and more permutations of identity that would have to be queered in turn. But perhaps this is exactly what queer theory would need (at least in these academic disciplines) -- new and old binaries not in order to define its death or merely describe its history, but rather to enable its life (albeit a severely atrophied one). Queer theory, it seems, in these disciplines is utterly useless without (hetero or homo) normativity from which it can be mobilized to do its queering. It stiffly retains its umbilical cord, however twisted it may be, to straightness, which ultimately limits its development.

Endemic to postmodern queer theory generally and *After Sex?* specifically, is the loss of the body. That is, the loss of people (whole people beyond mere treatments of identity and language) with real material lives. Even chapters that talk about feelings and embodied experiences leave out the body. For example, when Kate Thomas writes about *feeling* 'stupid' and 'late' in her chapter 'Post Sex: On Being Too Slow, Too Stupid, Too Soon', she misses out the bodily experience -- *her* bodily experience -- and instead turns back to other people's words for elucidation. The chapter comes so close to being about embodiment, about *knowing through being*, but remains enthralled to flat, tired discourse. Queer theory, as much as it developed from literary tradition in the North American academy, also has its roots in people's everyday lives (hence the binary of sexual/non-sexual central to this text and LGBTQ politics) and it is clear from *After Sex?*, that this tradition of critical thought is divorced from its roots in struggle and activism -- of people working to change or better understand their material conditions. It is stuck within the discursive, the referential, the citational, the linguistic to an extent that it can now be labeled as passé. Latour's argument is valid here too, his concern being:

that a certain form of critical spirit has sent us down the wrong path, encouraging us to fight the wrong enemies and, worst of all, to be

considered as friends by the wrong sort of allies because of a little mistake in the definition of its main target. (Latour 2005: 231)

It seems queer theory's evolution, at least according to this text, has been stunted by the very discipline from which it developed. It has lost the empirical in favor of the discursive and instead of seeking new ways of doing critical theory that speak to and feed into one another, this text highlights their continued, stoic, separateness. Isn't this sort of inculcation into systems of power exactly what queer theory was trying to highlight and work to disrupt in the first place? Choosing the path of literary tradition over active, material lives has perhaps been the wrong path.

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