Roxana and Other Feminist (Hi)stories

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The Queer Turn in Feminism: Identities, Sexualities, and the Theater of Gender by Anne Emmanuelle Berger, translated by Catherine Porter. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014. 240 pages. $29.00 paperback, $110 hardcover.

While many U.S. scholars have turned their attention away from gender and queer theory, those working in other parts of the world—such as France or Spain—have only recently recognized and welcomed these discursive frameworks. The fact that Anne Emmanuelle Berger is active in both American and French academic contexts allows her to examine the "dislocated scene" of gender and queer theory and to perform a series of analytical gestures that provide novel insights into current feminist and postfeminist debates. Berger thus manages to challenge the reductive narratives and assumptions that are unfortunately still reiterated in most of the discourses on "gender," "queer," and "feminism" in the West.

One of these analytical gestures is Berger's insistence that gender and queer theory should be understood as heterogeneous and productively inconsistent fields. This approach underlines arguments presented in the second chapter (11–82) in which she traces a genealogy of the "theatre of gender" and the "'queering' of feminist thought." More specifically, Berger challenges

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the narrative that "gender theory" arose in the United States in the 1980s as a provocation by the so-called French thought of the 1970s and has subsequently returned to Europe after its "American invention." According to Berger, the conception of gender as performance most famously articulated by Judith Butler does not stem solely from the latter's rereadings of Foucault's analytics of power. Rather, gender has been theorized *as performance* since the 1950s both in the United States (by John Money and later by Robert Stoller, Esther Newton, and Erving Goffman) and in France by Jacques Lacan, who drew on Joan Riviere's notion of the feminine masquerade.

Throughout the second chapter, Berger also contests the conventional and chronological distinction between gender and queer theory. First, she argues that American gender theory has always been "queer." This is because, as she illustrates with her readings, gender theory evolved in close proximity to what normative discourses call "sexual deviance" and because without "drag" (i.e., the theatricality of gender) there is no possibility of erotic relation and sexuality. Second, Berger contends that gay and lesbian studies cannot do without gender and its (feminist) theory. She supports this claim with her analysis of "Sexual Traffic," the famous interview between Butler and Gayle Rubin, in which Rubin rejects gender as both a tool and an object of her analysis and leans instead toward a "postfeminist" study of sex and sexuality.[1] As Berger shows, gender, however, continues to haunt Rubin's wishfully gender-free discourse.

The decision to challenge dominant narratives also characterizes the third chapter of the book, "Paradoxes of Visibility in/and Contemporary Identity Politics." Here, Berger discusses how the couples of "gender and performance" and "gender and queer theory," as introduced and analyzed in the previous chapter, relate to current identity politics. Berger identifies what she calls the "demand for visibility" to be a major feature of the struggles of "minority identities and sexualities" and their analytical appropriations (83–106). She further claims that the "demand for visibility" cannot be explained solely as an attempt to complete the typical program of "Enlightenment." Rather, the desire to be "visible" is inscribed in the theatrical structure of gender as well as its theoretization. According to Berger, this "demand for visibility" is also perpetuated by its "avatar," queer theory. "Queer" questioning of gender does not simply imply a way out of the "paradigm of visibility": "As soon as there is theatre, there are roles, and as soon as there are roles, gender tends to reconstitute itself visibly, even in a queer fashion" (88).

The second key feature of *The Queer Turn in Feminism* is that it not only unfolds the instability and inconsistency of dominant narratives and theoretical discourses; it also points toward the "constitutive instability" of central terms within feminist thought toward which Berger remains rigorously attentive (122). The productive potential of this approach takes center stage when she examines the motif of power in the work of Joan W. Scott, Newton, Rubin, and Butler. Although the notion of power has clearly played a significant role in the discourses surrounding gender and queer theory, Berger's point is that the term has not been "traced as the—or a—problem but as a given, or the 'datum' of the problem" (70).

The book also persuasively underscores the constitutive instability of discursive terms in the fourth chapter in which Berger traces the "travel of sexual difference" (107–25). Indeed, she insists on treating "sexual difference" as an "idiom" rather than a universal and abstract concept. This approach will appeal to readers who seek to analyze the commonalities and divergences of the discourses on "sexual difference(s)" articulated by Sigmund Freud, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, Rubin, and Butler.

Despite Berger's rhetorical and theoretical precision in the analyses of the inconsistencies and ambiguities between and within gender and queer theories and their lexicons, *The Queer Turn in Feminism* does not aim to set things "straight." Instead, Berger seeks to trace the genealogy and construction of current feminist and postfeminist debates without taking sides. This approach is perhaps best demonstrated by the book's last chapter, "Roxana's Legacy: Feminism and Capitalism in the West." In this chapter, she critically pursues the "historical affinity between the structural and cultural effects of 'capitalism' and a certain (post)feminist position" (134). Through a close reading of Rubin and Gail Pheterson, Berger illustrates that the "critical queering of feminism . . . is accompanied by the 'heroizing' of the prostitute figure" while pointing out that "the idea of the prostitute disobeying the rules of gender is actually not a new one" (137). Berger weaves her argument through the works of Karl Marx and Georg Simmel but also Emile Zola, Marcel Proust, and, most important given the title of the chapter, Daniel Defoe. This analysis offers an alternative genealogy to these debates and concludes that many so-called postfeminist and "queer" scholars (such as Rubin and Pheterson) harbor an affinity with the protofeminist and businesswoman Roxana, the heroine of Defoe's early 18th-century novel.

Thanks to this analysis in the last chapter of the book, which amplifies the interconnection between certain postfeminist positions and "the material and cultural triumph of capitalism" (134),

it becomes possible to identify another "dislocated" perspective that challenges current feminist and postfeminist debates. Keeping in mind Berger's analysis, readers of the book may share a suspicion that the supposed "turn away" from gender and queer theory within contemporary American scholarship does not necessarily imply a detachment of feminism from capitalism. Indeed, this recent "turn" can be interpreted as the newest (and thus most irresistible) "American" offer to the feminist and postfeminist global market. And so, rather than being a radical break, this trend seems to share a similar heritage with Rubin and Pheterson and thus perpetuates "Roxana's legacy" as well as the ongoing crisis of the alliance between feminism and anticapitalism.

Note

1. Gail Rubin with Judith Butler, "Sexual Traffic: An Interview with Judith Butler," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6 (1994): 62–99