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Editors' Introduction¹

OLIVER DAVIS AND HECTOR KOLLIAS

Queer theory is now an established term in the Anglo-American academic lexicon, so much so that it has already started to engender the kind of internal criticism which intimates that it may no longer be as avant-garde, as radical, or indeed as queer, as was thought in the heady days of the 1990s.² The impetus behind this special issue is the realization that the same cannot be said about queer theory in Europe in general and in France in particular, where it still connotes that which is radical and avant-garde in thinking about sexuality and sociality.³ While in the US it is already possible to publish a collection of critical essays by eminent writers in the field that explicitly positions itself 'after Queer theory', the adventure of queer theory in France has only just begun.⁴ Queer theory has arrived in France — late.

The title of this issue, 'Queer Theory's Return to France', indicates that this arrival is not that of a total newcomer but a return, the return of a native. It is certainly worth inquiring into the belatedness of queer theory in France, worth asking why it was only in 1997, in a now famous seminar organized by Didier Eribon at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, on 'les études gay et lesbiennes', that France was introduced to such seminal figures as Judith Butler and Leo Bersani. Yet it would be a mistake to forget that one of the participants, Monique Wittig, was herself French and had emigrated to the States, where she was already a celebrated figure in the queer world. Wittig's literal return to France for that event in 1997 suggestively prefigured the broader movement of return 'home' now taking place in the complex international history of queer theory.

The belatedness of queer theory's arrival in France is explained in part by the title Eribon gave to his seminar and subsequent book, 'gay and lesbian studies', and the agenda which this set for research in France in those early years.⁵ For is this not precisely the term which queer theory was meant to supplant when it first took hold in

the States? In the years immediately following that seminar, the most prominent work in France, by Eribon himself and by the sociologist of sexuality Éric Fassin, could most accurately be categorized as 'gay and lesbian studies' rather than 'queer theory'.

Régis Revenin's essay in this volume is an invaluable resource in helping us to understand the history of LGBTQ studies in French academia. But this history, as we have already noted, is neither simple nor linear. Wittig's return home, in 1997, figures the ways in which queer theory itself is a peculiar hybrid primarily of French influences, something with which Hector Kollias's opening article is concerned. The decisive impact on queer theory of protracted struggles in the years of the AIDS crisis has long been acknowledged in the States; Murray Pratt's article here, by demonstrating that these battles have taken a different course in France, shows that the history of queer theory is inevitably inflected by national and contextual differences. Adrian Rifkin's wistful but polemical gesture of thinking 'theory' in conjunction with the lived experience of a queer person also suggests how distorting a linear conception of 'the history of a movement' must be.

Queer theory in France has a complicated past and this can only mean that it also has a complicated present. It could be argued that the first authentically queer (as opposed to 'gay and lesbian studies') voice to be heard from within France was that of Marie-Hélène Bourcier, who introduced an entirely new vocabulary and way of writing, and who, as Lisa Downing explains in her essay, moves away from sociological, historical and psychological methods of understanding sexuality and aligns queer with a frenetic interdisciplinarity. Perhaps this is now the moment when queer theory in France has become truly *queer*, and in so doing, has also migrated into modes of writing that are no longer conventionally academic accounts of sexuality. Some of the queerest thinking to have emerged into publication in France over the last twenty or so years has taken the form of fiction, particularly 'autofiction', or, as in the case of Beatriz Preciado's *Testo Junkie: sexe, drogue et biopolitique* (2008), her exemplary account of an experiment with testosterone, 'an autopolitical fiction or an autotheory', a mixed mode exhibiting simultaneously (more often than alternately) both a highly developed queer-theoretical awareness and an urgent embrace of radical, risky and potentially rewarding forms of desublimation and self-experiment.⁶ Preciado's text explicitly mourns the sudden death of her friend Guillaume Dustan, in 2005, a queer pioneer of precisely this kind of hybridity and a writer whose work was one of the

scholarly preoccupations of the late Larry Schehr, to whom this special issue is dedicated.⁷

Such lapidary manifestations of queer thinking and sensibility as Dustan's and Preciado's may appear to compensate for the still very limited visibility of the queer, as indeed of lesbian and gay studies, within the academy in France, certainly by comparison with Britain and the US. The view one takes of this relative absence may depend on where one stands in relation not just to France and its university system but also, dispositionally, to norms and institutions: Adrian Rifkin asks here why we would want to see the sobering and earnest institutionalization of LGBTQ studies within the French university system for which Didier Eribon and others have seemed, at times, to be calling. For Régis Revenin, who works in that system and testifies here to its belatedness in this regard, the need at least to see an end to what may be termed 'intellectual discrimination' (that is, discrimination by intellectuals) against LGBTQ-focused research and researchers is evident and urgent.

How to understand this relatively limited visibility and this belatedness? It may be helpful to distinguish between (i) LGBTQ researchers themselves; (ii) recognizably LGBTQ objects of intellectual inquiry and (iii) queer modes of inquiry. There are statistically significant correlations between (i) and (ii) but not more than that. Once in post, LGBT researchers in France as elsewhere now benefit from the same legal protection as LGBT workers in any other field, though there are specific structural difficulties in the university system, which come of the remarkably long and potentially vulnerable 'apprenticeship' between starting a first degree and obtaining a post, with plenty of attendant opportunities for tacit discrimination. It is also in this formative period that there is greatest scope for the suppression of recognizably LGBTQ objects of inquiry; often the filtering out of such subjects and the sifting of personnel will go hand in hand.

The loosest but perhaps also the most insightful understanding of the third category, 'queer modes of understanding', would allow us to consider Derrida, Deleuze or indeed Jacques Rancière, for example, as, in non-trivial ways, queer thinkers, not only because, to take Rancière's case, his rethinking of politics and aesthetics can be used to conceptualize and foster both disruption to the heteronormative order and homonormative retrenchment within LGBTQ communities, but also because we can take his intellectual anti-method as an accelerant in our own queer investigations.⁸ And this without Rancière having said anything much, explicitly, about LGBTQ politics as such. By its

very nature and because of the value which most universities still aspire to place on intellectual freedom, queer modes of thinking cannot be in any sense protected within that institution by specific regulatory measures, though they can be fostered by the adjustment of syllabuses and the contagion of example.

Queer theory in France has reached a moment of expansion and diversification which suggests, in France just as in the US or the UK, that it is already in a process of transformation. Marie-Hélène Bourcier's essay here is a key polemical intervention in an ongoing debate around the reception of Judith Butler's work in France, but it also forcefully demonstrates a tendency of queer theory not only to expand its own horizons but to kick against its own historical traditions and canons. Both Claire Boyle's article on 'post-queer' and the implications this may have in the French context and Nina Power's piece, which sees the hallmark of queer in discourses that have not explicitly been associated with it, show how queer theory, with its imbricated past and dispersed present, launches itself towards an uncertain future.

The essay with which this collection closes, Stéphane Nadaud's, is particularly instructive about queer theory's imbricated, non-linear, history. Nadaud reminds us of a moment in French intellectual history which, while it came too early straightforwardly to be called 'queer', it being in the 1970s, witnessed the flourishing, in Paris, of a certain kind of what we would want to call queer theory. It reminds us that names such as Guy Hocquenghem and Tony Duvert are too often excised from histories of the LGBTQ movement in France and that a return is never a simple 'coming back', that the imbricated processes of displacement and dislocation, temporal and geographical, which leave their traces in every essay in this issue, as well as in the problematic it seeks to address, are intrinsic to any movement of thought across time and across cultures. What the story of queer theory's return to France suggests is that rather than unfortunate accidents, appropriation, misconception and forgetting are what fuel the development of queer theory and indeed perhaps of any theory.

NOTES

- 1 We would like to thank Judith Still, Bill Marshall and all of the contributors.
- 2 Seven years ago three eminent American queer theorists were already asking such self-examining questions in another special issue of a humanities

- journal: 'What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?', edited by David Eng, Judith Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz, special issue of *Social Text* 84–5 (2005).
- 3 For an examination of the status and development of queer theory and the queer movement in Europe in general see *Queer in Europe: Contemporary Case Studies*, edited by Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).
- 4 See *After Sex? On Writing Since Queer Theory*, edited by Janet Halley and Andrew Parker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 5 *Les Études gay et lesbiennes*, edited by Didier Eribon (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1997).
- 6 Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: sexe, drogue et biopolitique* (Paris: Grasset, 2008), translation by the editors.
- 7 Larry Schehr was also the editor of an important collection of queer readings of French literary texts. See *Aimez-vous le Queer? Études réunies par Lawrence R. Schehr* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005). For a distinctly French reception of what queer literary criticism means for the study of the French literary canon, see François Cusset, *Queer Critics: La littérature française déshabillée par ses homo-lecteurs* (Paris: PUF, 2002).
- 8 See *Borderlands* 8:2 (October 2009), special issue: *Jacques Rancière on the Shores of Queer Theory*, edited by Samuel Chambers and Michael O'Rourke. What Oliver Davis describes there as Rancière's mode of proceeding by 'irritable attachment', in his 'Rancière and Queer Theory: On Irritable Attachment', would be one such anti-methodical queer intellectual mode.