

**Coda: Robin Blaser**

To complete this brief survey of some recent works of queer lyric in Canada, I wish to note the publication of *The Recovery of the Public World: Essays on Poetics in Honour of Robin Blaser*. This is a generous and impressive book of essays by well-known poets and literary scholars that focuses on compelling, difficult problems of ethics and aesthetics raised in the work of US-born B.C. poet Robin Blaser. Through his incisive, challenging thinking on poetics and the poet's role in society and, preeminently, because of his brilliant long poem *The Holy Forest* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1993), Blaser ranks as one of Canada's finest poets. As in the case of bill bissett, a gay critical perspective has, to date, remained largely absent from discussions of Blaser's poetry. The reclaiming both of bissett and of Blaser as *gay male* experimental poets is an important task for gay criticism on Canadian poetry in years to come.

Vive La Poesie Queer!

**Works Cited**

- Bayard, Caroline. *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989.
- Jirgens, Karl. *bill bissett and his works*. Toronto: ECW, 1987.
- Marlatt, Daphne. *Readings from the Labyrinth*. Edmonton: NeWest, 1998.
- Mouré, Erin. "On A Frame of the Book". *Tessera* 27 (1999): 25-31.

---

**Peter Dickinson. *Here is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities, and the Literatures of Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. 262pp. \$19.95 ISBN 0-8020-8210-6**

B.J. WRAY (UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS)

**H**ere *Is Queer* contributes a much-needed Canadian presence to a growing body of gay, lesbian, and queer scholarship concerned with the complex relationship between nationalism and sexuality. Many of these existing texts address the

ways in which state-sanctioned nationalism coerces, excludes, and terrorizes “improper” sexualities. I am thinking here of recent books such as David Bell and Jon Binnie’s anthology, *The Sexual Citizen*, Morris Kaplan’s *Sexual Justice*, and Bruce Macdonald’s *Queer Judgments*. More often than not, these works redress the problems of an official (hetero)sexual national identity by insisting upon an expansion of national institutions (legal, cultural, and political) to include diverse sexualities and their various forms of expression. Calls for same-sex marriage, immigration, full and equal citizenship, and so forth, are exemplary of this additive approach. On the other hand, scholars such as Shane Phelan, Carl Stychin, and Michael Warner shift the focus onto the rather vexed and problematic connection that has always existed between minority models of community-building and national models of identity-making. They argue that nationalism – especially the sense of connection, unity, and commonality that its discourses convey – holds a certain appeal for an otherwise amorphous community whose members do not share a single geography, passport, or currency. In the succinct phrasing of legal theorist Carl Stychin, “Social movements ... deploy the language of nation as a means of constituting and reinforcing their own identities” (7). These scholars maintain that one of the dangerous consequences of this linkage is the inscription of national norms onto sexual minorities, thereby upholding certain limited understandings of family, relationships, and identities across national and sexual communities.

If it were not for a few notable and groundbreaking exceptions such as Gary Kinsman’s *The Regulation of Desire* and Becki Ross’s *The House That Jill Built*, Canadian book-length analyses of this intimate connection between nationalism and sexuality would otherwise be nonexistent. Rather predictably, this field is dominated by American and British case studies. The lack of critical resources on our Canadian context means that the nuances of Canadian nationalism are generally absent from larger debates concerning nationalism and sexuality. *Here Is Queer* offers a welcome corrective to this Canadian invisibility, and Dickinson must be commended for his willingness to intervene into these debates by foregrounding the often overlooked contributions of Canadian writers. In doing so, Dickinson accomplishes two distinct, yet overlapping, projects. Firstly, he expands the terrain of queer criticism on national and sexual identities through an attentiveness to the uniquely trinational

(Canadian, Quebecois, and First Nations) composition of “Canadian nation-ness” and our never-ending preoccupation with definitions of national identity. Secondly, he challenges the silence on (homo)sexuality that tends to characterize traditional Can Lit scholarship. Dickinson astutely reminds us that “the discourse of (homo)sexuality, and its role (or non-role) in the formation and organization of a literary tradition in this country, is virtually, non-existent” (4) and, in response, *Here is Queer* intends “to juxtapose against the predominantly nationalist framework of literary criticism in this country an alternative politics, one propelled by questions of sexuality and, more often than not, homosexuality” (3).

In a typically Canadian fashion, Dickinson’s agenda in *Here is Queer* combines the political sensibilities both of the additive and of transformative approaches to nationalism and sexuality. His project simultaneously offers a queer rereading of several canonical Canadian texts and the literary tradition that they have engendered, while he also seeks to expand the parameters of the existing tradition through inclusive canonical and pedagogical strategies. In Dickinson’s own words, “While I firmly believe that ‘que(e)rying’ the canon requires making space for ‘new’ textual voices, I also believe that such a process requires the simultaneous rereading of ‘old’ voices in ‘new’ ways” (29). The most prominent ‘old’ voice in *Here is Queer* is the godfather of Canadian literary criticism, Northrop Frye. In response to “where is here?” – Frye’s famous question on Canadian national identity – Dickinson answers with a resounding “here is queer”. He contends that “here is queer” because “the identificatory lack upon which Canadian literary nationalism has historically been constructed – the ‘where’ of Frye’s ‘here,’ for example – is in large part facilitated by, if not wholly dependent upon, a critical refusal to come to grips with the textual *superabundance* of a destabilizing and counter-normative sexuality” (4). Dickinson skillfully applies his dramatic challenge to this ‘master’ narrative of Can Lit across a range of canonical texts, from John Richardson’s *Wacousta* to Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers*. Dickinson also analyzes the more explicit treatment of nationalism and sexuality in the work of Michel Tremblay, Nicole Brossard, and Daphne Marlatt, and the linkages between race, nation, and sexuality in the texts of Dionne Brand and Tomson Highway. Dickinson’s treatment of these authors deftly weaves together his own close readings with a myriad of interdisciplinary critical materials

(queer identity theories, postcolonial discourses of nationhood, Canadian literary history texts, book reviews, lesbian-feminist political writings, and so forth) to produce an original assessment of the role of sexuality in Can Lit.

Dickinson's intervention into conventional Can Lit studies also speaks to several key definitional debates within gay, lesbian, and queer literary studies. The ongoing engagement of literary studies with the conundrum of nationalism and sexuality is seen in the various historical approaches to defining the fields of lesbian, gay, and queer literature. The composition of these fields, their canons, their authors, their subject matter, and their standing with particular national canons are all frequently contested areas of inquiry. For instance, early lesbian and gay literary critics such as Bonnie Zimmerman, Bertha Harris, and Henry Abelove, insist that the composition of the canon of great literature, and the approaches to analyzing it, are shaped by excision. They argue that traditional literary studies excises, at the very least, three kinds of knowledge: the consideration of same-sex love as a central aspect of human experience, the analysis of the forms of gendered being that go beyond heterosexual norms for masculinity and femininity, and various popular texts and practices that are not 'literary,' but that have helped people express forbidden desires and build resistant communities. National canons, according to this argument, must be opened to a recomposition that includes gay and lesbian authors and texts. Of course, this tactic relies upon a coherent human subject—the gay or lesbian author—whose sexuality, or even whose very existence, was effaced from history but now available to the knowing reader and the diligent researcher. This approach relies on the misconception that what gay and lesbian literary studies is *really* about is playing authorial and textual hunt-the-homosexual. In other words, we run smack into the biographical fallacy in this reductive search for homosexual 'clues.'

It is precisely this tendency that *Here is Queer*, in the spirit of contemporary queer criticism, seeks to avoid. Rather than relying on the 'truth' of authorial lives or the intelligibility of (homo)sexuality in the plot or characters, Dickinson's close readings of canonical texts employ what he terms "my Sedgwickian analysis of Canadian literature" (12) to critically reassess the structuring power of gaps and absences. In Dickinson's words, "I seek to transform what I have been more or less calling the *absent* presence of queerness in

Canadian literature into a more *manifest* or *embodied* presence” (6). Following from Eve Sedgwick’s analysis in *Epistemology of the Closet*, Dickinson argues that a queer sexuality circulates within traditional Can Lit, and it is the ongoing and active critical disavowal of this counter-normative sexuality that enables the aforementioned “identificatory *lack*” (4) at the heart of Canadian literary nationalism. Dickinson’s assessment of canonical Canadian literary texts also draws upon the notion of homosociality that Sedgwick outlines in her earlier work, *Between Men*. There is, according to Dickinson, a “triangulation of male desire in several of this country’s foundational literary texts” (5) and furthermore, “Canadian literature, or at least *English-Canadian* literature is riddled with male couples who displace their love for each other – and frequently their nation – across the ‘body’ of a woman, whom they symbolically share, or else onto a mythically feminized region or landscape, which they symbolically exploit” (5). Dickinson’s close analysis of this phenomenon in his first three chapters is highly convincing and will surely raise the hackles of more than a few Frye devotees. I should also note that Dickinson’s debt to Sedgwick is evidenced in his book’s style; his lucid formalist criticism is frequently framed by personal anecdotes that vary in their effectiveness. Although it is refreshing to escape the minutia of close readings, his confessional style – which Dickinson situates within a wider tendency in current queer criticism in his “Coda” – risks confirming the self-centered, divaesque reputation of queer writing. Perhaps this is exactly what Canadian literature criticism needs!

The focus of *Here is Queer* shifts from English Canada to French Canada in chapter four as Dickinson takes up three Quebecois plays: Michel Tremblay’s *Hosanna*, René-Daniel Dubois’s *Being at home with Claude*, and Michel Marc Bouchard’s *Les Feluettes*. This chapter also signals a shift away from homosociality to an analysis of the explicit links between representations of homosexuality and Quebec nationalism in these plays. Dickinson usefully moves beyond his emphasis on close readings in the first chapters to include a discussion of the plays’ productions and their critical receptions in English Canada. This expanded, cultural studies-like focus continues throughout the second half of the book and it allows Dickinson to engage with contemporary interdisciplinary writings on the intersections of sexuality, nation, gender, and race. Chapter five

examines the collaborations of Brossard and Marlatt and issues of translation within and between Canadian literatures, languages, bodies, and desires. Dickinson argues that lesbian desire in their texts potentially questions the male homosocial and patriarchal configurations of nationalism. Similarly, his analysis of Brand's work in chapter six looks at how race and ethnicity may disrupt conventional constructions of nationalism. Dickinson foregrounds Brand's boundary-crossings (in terms of her textual subjects and her own cross-cultural position as a poet, filmmaker, and activist) to demonstrate the various challenges her work poses to Canadian literary nationalism. Dickinson's textual readings conclude with an evaluation of Tomson Highway's plays. Dickinson argues that Highway's 'First Nation,' two-spirited writings destabilize the bicultural model of Canadian literature at the same time as they re-imagine conventional notions of Indigenous community.

I cannot overstate the importance of *Here Is Queer* within Canadian literary scholarship. Through an innovative focus on the absent presence of queer sexuality in canonical criticism, Dickinson crucially reimagines the legacy of nationalism in Canadian literature. His linkage of contemporary writers to this complex relationship between nationalism and sexuality offers an initial framework for future Canadian queer scholarship. But, *Here is Queer* focuses exclusively (and strategically) on well-known or canonical authors, and the work of emerging or recently established authors, thoroughly steeped in queer identity politics and interdisciplinary artistic practices, also requires our critical attention. Similarly, an expanded discussion on the interconnectedness (and separateness) of Canadian queer politics and queer culture would nicely compliment Dickinson's project. Canadian queer artistic productions and theoretical endeavors deserve an international audience, and I hope that *Here Is Queer* is only the first of many book-length studies on Canadian queer culture.

### Works Cited

- Bell, David and Jon Binnie, eds. *The Sexual Citizen*. Cambridge: Polity, 2000.
- Kaplan, Morris. *Sexual Justice: Democratic Citizenship and the Politics of Desire*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Kinsman, Gary. *The Regulation of Desire: Sexuality in Canada*.

Montreal: Black Rose, 1987.

Macdonald, Bruce. *Queer Judgments: Homosexuality, Expression, and the Courts in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000.

Phelan, Shane. *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians, and dilemmas of Citizenship*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.

Ross, Becki. *The House That Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995.

Sedgwick, Eve. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

—. *Between Men*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

Stychin, Carl. *A Nation by Rights*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998.

Warner, Michael. *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

---

**Christoph Lorey and John L. Plews, eds. *Queering the Canon: Defying Sights in German Literature and Culture*. Columbia: Camden House, 1998. 498 pp. ISBN 1-57113-178-7.**

BRUCE PLOUFFE (UNIVERSITY OF REGINA)

The title of this collection of essays is somewhat cryptic inasmuch as it is unclear what the phrase “defying sights” means, or, if in fact this coinage actually corresponds to standard English usage. A cursory scan of the contents reveals that the scholarship in this anthology investigates textual and visual artefacts in terms of their queer, that is, heterocentrist-defying characteristics which have heretofore remained unelucidated.

In the editors’ introduction to the anthology, “queer” is defined broadly as an expression of identity that is at variance with and marginalized by a dominant sociocultural ideology; more specifically, “queer” are those elements of deviance contained within cultural artefacts that resist the heterocentrisim shaping their contours. Lorey and Plews draw on a Hegelian epistemological model to account for the dynamic and trajectory of the queering process. If one speaks with Hegel, one is claiming that empathetic identification with more