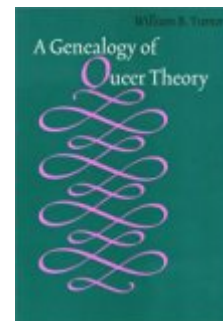


William B. Turner. *A Genealogy of Queer Theory*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000. xv + 200 pp. \$69.50, cloth, ISBN 978-1-56639-787-2.



Reviewed by Steve Wall

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A Genealogy of Queer Theory

William Turner seeks to provide both a history and a justification for what is called "queer theory." He posits that queer theory is difficult to summarize, but it is an outgrowth of the intellectual and social fractures that followed the Second World War including the Civil Rights Movement, the sixties counterculture, feminism, the gay/lesbian movements and studies, the turn to first-person narratives which establish a subjective voice, and the ideas associated with poststructuralism.

Turner states that queer theory's philosophical underpinnings were provided by Teresa de Lauretis, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and, above all, Michel Foucault. Foucault's homosexuality makes him an obvious influence on queer theory, and he provides many of the concepts that Turner seeks to relate to queer theory. These concepts are by now familiar to most readers: attacks on the fixed nature of concepts and identity; assaults on the unitary formulation of man and the knowing subject; the idea that what is accepted as truth is really the change of "epistemes" over time; the view that there are no uni-

versal and timeless truths, but only the interested formulations of those in power; and the desire to see subjugated knowledge revolt. In fact, Turner locates so many overlaps between poststructuralism and queer theory that he writes, "Poststructuralism is queer" (p. 22). (He also states, "identity is queer" [p. 32].) One of the dangers in so heavily predicating a thesis on a single thinker's ideas is that if he or she is refuted, then one's theory is vulnerable to a similar refutation. Over the last few years, poststructuralism and postmodernism have been subjected to a great deal of scrutiny, and in some cases, even refuted. Many of Foucault's empirical claims have been found to be inaccurate, for example.

Lauretis, Sedgwick, and Butler also figure in the genealogy of queer theory. He credits film theorist Lauretis with first using the term in 1991 as a means of describing her intellectual pursuits. Butler, who was also influenced by Foucault, reads gender as a social construct whereby people perform gender roles. Therefore, according to this line of thought, there are no essentialist identities that people must accept. Turner discusses the fa-

mous review that Martha Nussbaum did on Butler's work. Nussbaum found Butler's approach impotent and accused her of "hip defeatism" because of her pessimism about the ability of members of a social order to escape the effects of power relations. She pointed to feminists like Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin who have actually participated in the political process and who have achieved results, and she considers them better models than Butler. Turner's defense of Butler is rather anemic, and consists of reaffirming socially constructed identities and advancing the notion that conventional politics is not sufficient to promote genuine change.

Turner rejects the traditional liberal notion of rights held by rational, free agents as an adequate metaphor for political life. He asserts that no one even intended to implement the "All men are created equal" truism anyway. Queer theorists and some feminists also reject the idea that meaningful change can be introduced into society in a piece-meal fashion. Instead, radical notions of power relations and definitions of persons should be introduced. He writes, "If our rights depend on our common identity as humans, then we all have to look alike, act alike, be alike in order to have rights" (p. 16). Turner misreads his own words here, perhaps because of the very theory he promulgates. According to rights theorists, humans have rights by virtue of being human. Human beings have certain traits that make them human, so if an entity possesses these traits, then he or she is human and is therefore entitled to the same rights as the other members of the society. One source of confusion here is that Turner equivocates on the term "identity." In his theory, "identity" refers to the class to which a person belongs; however, the way he is using the term in this sentence is to demarcate humans from non-humans, not to differentiate humans from each other. To suggest that humans must be carbon copies of each other in order to gain rights seems excessive.

According to Turner, challenges to power relations and identity and the presence of rare phenomena such as hermaphrodites threaten to undermine all of society's laws, knowledge, culture, and mores: "To ask these questions entails placing the entire epistemological edifice of Western culture under question. That edifice rests on the assumption of universality and rationality will typically serve the needs of justice" (p. 184). Turner is a history teacher, and so he must have some encounter with past epochs. During other historical periods, there were moments of skepticism, relativism, and uncertainty. Why he thinks these contemporary differences are so novel in their subversive potential is not made clear.

At this point, I would like to address some of Turner's rhetorical stances that strike me as unfair, as well as look at a few inconsistencies in his polemic. First, he introduces the book by referring to a few recent horrendous and well-publicized murders—James Byrd, Matthew Shepard, and Billy Jack Gaither. He calls recent referenda in Oregon "viciously" antigay, and states that "powerful" conservative members of Congress tried to keep suicide rates for homosexual teenagers quiet. By resorting to such emotional appeals, and by being so selective, Turner risks undermining his project as rhetorical excess. Turner seeks to highlight that the times require and have a mode of thought that addresses these events, but an equally harsh and selective critic might easily point to John Wayne Gacy, Jeffery Dahmer, Eileen Wournos, the black killers of Michael Westerman, and, above all, the homosexual killers of thirteen-year-old Jesse Dirkhising. Such a critic would allude to the contrast between the media's indifferent response to this latter case and their usual approach to child killers and to hate crime victims generally and that this contrast was recently the subject of talk shows and news columns, as was astonishment that the only person initially charged with a hate crime in the Cincinnati race riots was white. The selective and inconsistent application of be-

lief systems does nothing to persuade others to accept one's argument.

Second, Turner patronizingly claims that the women who opposed the Equal Rights Amendment are subjects in two senses: On the one hand, they were being controlled by someone else; and on the other, they were seeking to perpetuate and identify with their own oppression. Turner assumes that they should be rebelling against their situations, and that support for this amendment is the only possible correct position to take.

Third, he takes a swipe at a group of female historians who, having benefited from affirmative action policies, nonetheless suggest that historical standards might have an objective cast. Turner seems to be suggesting that all former "outsiders" are obligated to accept the entire apparatus of the break in "episteme" that he is advancing here.

Fourth, in the conclusion, he states that historical research has the capacity to point out to conservatives who are so "embedded" in culture that they cannot see that their opposition to homosexuality and abortion is due to historical contingencies: Historians are able to "demonstrate" the varying nature of traditions (p. 173). Given his earlier Foucaultian, poststructuralist hostility to the objective nature of historical knowledge, and given Foucault's admission that he was doing fiction, Turner seems to be committing an inconsistency here. Similarly, he subtitles the conclusion, "On the Cost of Telling the Truth," which is somewhat bizarre given his earlier effort to undermine the possibility of truth. One cannot argue that truth does not exist, and then seek to resurrect it when it again becomes a convenient notion.

In sum, Turner's book is valuable when it provides the lineage and background of queer theory. It fails at two other purposes—as a polemic for queer theory and its political agenda, and as a justificatory apology for the ideas that underlie queer theory.

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