

Secular Sacred” and “Sisterwomanchainsaw.” In both of these, the author has layered her love of nature and science to create strong and intimate tales that question our place in this world.

In “Ethics, Earth, and Secular Sacred” the reader is given a sense of the author’s theories about sacredness. Cuomo posits that “sacredness creates a rubric for caretaking and a fundamental sense of moral order.” She moves through religious and secular notions of what is sacred, and weaves in science; “secular conceptions of sacredness stand on firmer scientific ground... scholars don’t like to discuss it, but there is an intimate relationship between passion and knowledge,” she says. And here Cuomo questions the “common ground” we Americans use for our national myths:

“The first amendment articulated a model for the world—a principle that acknowledges the absolute importance of the freedom to believe whatever one chooses, and to enact whatever conception of sacredness truly moves one, as long as others’ freedoms are not infringed upon in the process. Yet the conquest of the Americas was fueled by colonialists’ overwhelming disregard for the sacredness of the lives of indigenous people, and the desecration of the world that native people held to be sacred. It is a tragic irony that a nation that represents religious freedom was founded on a fundamental inability to recognize the legitimacy of Native American conceptions of sacredness.”

In “Sisterwomanchainsaw” the reader is treated to a visual display of sights and sounds: Two women walking in the woods grapple with their sensibility and compassion as they scare the deer and sabotage the hunt. While both realize their efforts were most likely fruitless, they also know that what matters is they were not content to just let it “be”—a lesson to be learned in a world where it has become all too easy to shut a door to a woman’s shouts for help or to walk past the homeless people on the street without really “seeing.”

While it’s impossible at times to put this

book down, Cuomo’s essays can get a bit long. Personally I enjoyed her simpler and shorter musings. They thunder along like a locomotive on a straightaway, building up speed before coming to a head-nodding conclusion that makes the reader think, “aha.” It is here that we get a true look at the complexity of reality and the common values we all share.

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People Are Different

Reviewed by Benjamin Shepard

Queer Theories

Edited by Donald E. Hall
 Palgrave Macmillan
 ISBN 0333775406
 PB, \$21.95, 214 pp.

If sodomy laws are unconstitutional, Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia wrote in his dissent to *Lawrence v. Texas*, then so are “laws against bigamy, same-sex marriage, adult incest, prostitution, masturbation, adultery, fornication... and obscenity.” The next step will be “judicial imposition of homosexual marriage.”

While Scalia may not have heard, different communities do form different types of families. People are different. That’s queer theory’s central axiom. While some want the domestic solitude of marriage, others aspire to participate in far more egalitarian public sexual public cultures than alluded to in the profound Supreme Court victory. Yet tolerance for such true difference plays out on an extraordinarily imbalanced playing field. Therein lies the challenge facing the ongoing project understood as queer theory.

For a broader perspective on diversity,

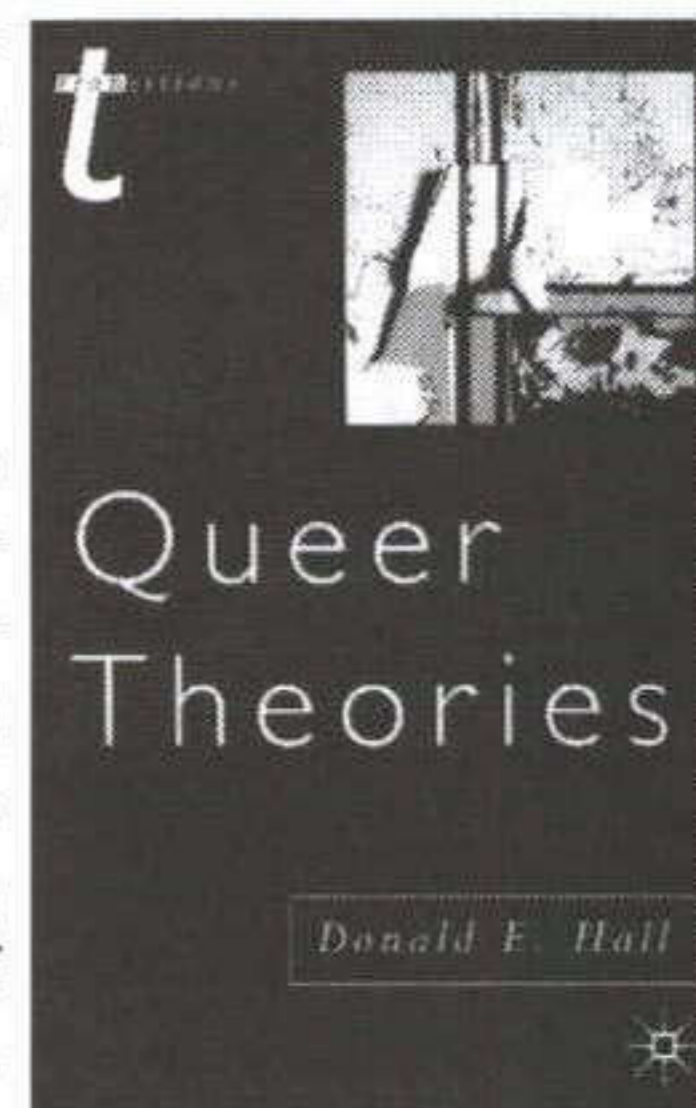
one might refer Scalia to *Queer Theories*, Donald Hall’s excellent new introduction to academic queer theory. The problem is, Scalia probably would not read it. Douglas Crimp and Michael Warner both bemoan queer theory’s failure to speak to the broader public in their new works.

As queer theory has evolved, some of the field’s greatest champions have taken to critically considering the framework’s core assumptions. The experience of parenting, for example, inspired Judith Butler to reassess her position on the socially constructed nature of gender. She explained to me in an e-mail, “raising a child has made me think about the limits of social construction. Whereas I might have asked, in the past, ‘What have I made?’ I now ask ‘Who are you?’ This person who is my son is new to me every day. And I don’t think it matters that he is not my biological child. Even if he were, I would be asking this last question (the fact that it remains open as a question means I’m not an essentialist either).”

Hall departs from a similarly intellectually ambitious and honest standpoint, suggesting no form of knowledge—including the queer theoretical framework he is introducing—is off-limits to critical interrogation. None of this is to say that the framework is less effective or important, yet it does allow for more complexity. As Hall explains:

I will argue that the field itself needs constant critical scrutiny and challenge, from within and without. In fact, its own blind spots, lapses, inconsistencies, and nervous avoidances must be foregrounded if it is to avoid becoming yet another manifestation of the normalizing forces that it claims to critique and to work to undermine.

In the decade since its ascendance in the academy, a number of queer theory’s posi-



tions have met stark opposition in the political arena. Further, many activists have come to reject the vanguardism of academic uses of queer theory:

This "top down" model of intellectuals refining ideas and then generously sharing them with the nonintellectuals needs further complication. It ignores the fact that important intellectual work and activist struggles over processes of change take place all of the time and among many who do not hold PhDs. "Queer" as a sophisticated and energizing concept came from activists and was appropriated by academics, not the other way around.

Hall frankly acknowledges that at its worst, queer theory has become another technocracy of complicated, esoteric language and jargon within the lineage of French structuralism. Yet there remains a place for its lessons and forms of engagement.

Deconstructing historically produced, often oppressive identities is an important task, but so is the deployment of strategic essentialism, an approach that recognizes the importance of working with communities in ways which allow identities—Black, Latino, Gay—to remain fixed for political purposes. These are not either/or propositions. Yet this is a point which Hall does not fully explore. Therein lies the basic limitation of his work, if there is one. It is written with an eye toward the often static arena of queer theory as literary criticism.

From the very beginning Hall compares his work with Annamarie Jagose's 1996 *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. Certainly there are similarities, yet Hall minimizes the crucial contextual discussions of queer theory's roots in the homophile movement, conflicts between gay and women's liberation, lesbian feminism, and the sex wars provided by Jagose, instead incorporating a more detached, even class-based reading.

By locating queer theory in writings on nonconformity from Friedrich Nietzsche to John Stuart Mill to Jacques Derrida—in addition to Michel Foucault and ACT UP—Hall has done as convincing a job as any in making a case that queer theory is a useful framework from which to consider

social, economic and cultural differences, of which sexual orientation is but one component.

Benjamin Shepard is co-editor of *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization* (Verso, 2002) and author of *White Nights and Ascending Shadows: An Oral History of the San Francisco AIDS Epidemic* (Cassell, 1997).

Royal Diversity

Reviewed by Nicole Pool

The Drag King Anthology

Edited by Donna Troka, Kathleen LeBesco and Jean Noble

Harrington Park Press

ISBN 1560233095

PB, \$24.95, 346 pp.

The *Drag King Anthology* is co-published as volume 43, numbers 3 and 4 of the *Journal of Homosexuality*. With this volume, editors Troka, LeBesco and Noble aim to bring the discussion of kinging out of the so-called ivory tower of academia by including essays from drag kings themselves alongside those from scholars, while simultaneously examining the feminist implications of kinging, and expanding drag king research beyond gender and sexual orientation to include race, class and age of the performers. The end result is a mixed bag.

The editors and contributors repeatedly point out a dearth of research on drag kings. Nearly every contributor cites the same sources, mostly work by Judith Butler, Judith Halberstam, and Del LaGrace Volcano, who all wrote in the late 1990s. The voices of the nonacademics—the performers—is a welcome contribution to the existing research. It is my opinion that the nonacademic essays are some of the most readable and entertaining of the collection; for example, the essay by Colleen Ayoup and Julie Podmore, "Making Kings," is almost completely interview material from members of a drag troupe in Montreal called The Mambo Drag Kings.

The editors, in an effort to reveal diversity within kinging, include snapshots of various drag troupes; not only in Montreal, but also Washington, D.C., Columbus, Ohio, and in the United Kingdom and Australia. The effect seems to be that kinging is most prevalent in the English-speaking world. The book also discusses the implications of race: What does it mean, for example, for a black performer to perform a white role on stage, or for a white performer to use a song by a black artist? I noticed most of the contributors (including the drag performers) listed their academic credentials and that many of them had earned graduate degrees. I wonder how indicative that is the class of drag kings and their audiences?

What should strike any reader of this book are the feminist implications of drag kinging. Over and over we are told (to use the words of Jennifer Lynn Patterson) that drag kings "are not imitating men; they are manifesting masculinity in a female body." Likewise, when a lesbian performs a male drag role, she is "challenging a patriarchal gender system by appropriating male power." Or take, for example, K Bradford's comments that "the tools of drag (the accoutrements, the body language, the attitudes) are the very 'flaws' of the straight gender system, and the performance of drag proves what a farce that system is." Many of the writers in the anthology employ techniques borrowed from both semiotics and deconstruction criticism. They can do this because they see kinging as a performance act, one that can be subjected to interpretation.

I had a hard time with this book. The subject is extremely narrow, and I rapidly tired of seeing the same sources cited in each new essay. I found the scholarly essays, while erudite, hard to read and much preferred the contributions of the kings themselves. I'm sure that to a person doing

