

acters had a depth I had never suspected possible of the woman who was my mother" (20). Hugo has clearly arrived at a fuller picture of Walker as mother and writer. One might protest that the fragmentary nature of biographical evidence and dependence on subjective sources and techniques may be misleading even incorrect, generating a distrust of the result. Hugo admits: "But it is my mother the novelist whom I have been asked to write about. The attempt to see her first as a writer and second as a mother has brought back many glimpses of her that I didn't know I had – glimpses that do not form any steady narrative" (xiv). She goes on to explain that her personal memories are rich in emotional and physical sensations; the strength of those images have left indelible traces of recognition of the individual which have re-surfaced during the life writing process. It seems likely that in writing biography, one is often writing autobiography. The intersection between knowing her mother and knowing herself is consolidated: "What I know now as an adult is that my stories remembered about my mother and father are not as much about them as they are about me – my reactions to them" (9). In this work self-knowledge reinforces the biographical purpose.

Hugo does what she sets out to do. She provides the reader with an interpretation of her mother's "writing life on the basis of Walker's journals, quotations of writers who seem to speak to her own writing, and her sense of where her life is going" (xxiii). Hugo succeeds in transforming the numerous biographical resources she relies on into a coherent image of a novelist mother. Those diverse materials contribute to the creation of a valid life history which emerges in clear depictions of a historical past through the narrative. Further, the goal of finding her mother the novelist becomes an exercise in finding one self. The approach is effective in that the narrator mediates between subject and reader in a way which draws the reader close to the story, the people and their place and becomes a voice which enlightens the complex hidden motives of the human personality. The book is well constructed, rich in landscape detail and clear accounts of the real people who became characters in the novels. As a study of a daughter's exploration of her relationship to her mother, what made her mother write and what she wrote, the biography is insightful. Moreover, the scholarship is useful and valuable to the student of American fiction and non-fiction of the West, and it records the account of a noteworthy woman previously hidden from history.

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Lasse Kekki, *From Gay to Queer: Gale Male Identity in Selected Fiction by David Leavitt and in Tony Kushner's Play Angels in America I-II* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003); 427 pp.; ISBN: 3-03910-034-3 hardcover; € 63.80.

What, precisely, is the nature of "gay male identity"; or, can "identity" be said to have any "nature" at all, being produced through and by specific historical, cultural, and/or discursive practices? These questions have, since the early 1990s in the United States,

been the subject of intense debate both within the academy and without, both within the fields of lesbian and gay studies and lesbian and gay activism. Lasse Kekki's 2003 book, *From Gay to Queer*, analyzes what we might call a paradigm shift within scholarship on, as well as literary writing about gay identity. This shift, which Kekki traces both in theoretical texts and in selected literary works by David Leavitt and Tony Kushner, emphasizes the move from understanding identity as presumptively innate, coherent, and trans-historical, to one where identity is radically constructed and contingent: as performed and produced within existing cultural matrices of sexuality, gender, race, class and religion. Indicated already in the title, this shift may be summarized as from "gay" to "queer."

As his introductory first chapter makes clear, Kekki's approach is twofold: on the one hand, he offers his readers a strict historicism, one that will adjudicate the "profound shift from a gay to a queer sensibility which is currently underway in American gay literature."<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, however, he locates himself fully within this shift as "queer"; it is his intention, he writes, not simply to historicize, but, and borrowing a phrase from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "to 'smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled' and make it visible" (53). To do this, he examines the early works of gay American writer David Leavitt, in particular Leavitt's novels from the 1980s and early 1990s – *The Lost Language of Cranes* (1986), *Equal Affections* (1989), and *While England Sleeps* (1993/5). Kekki's argument, as far as Leavitt's early work is concerned, is that it demonstrates a "gay sensibility," one that has been formed and informed through historical discourses on homosexuality operative from the nineteenth century onward. According to Kekki, this gay sensibility is one that repeats these discourses more or less uncritically, and, in so doing, attempts to explain, justify, or reconcile homosexual existence to a larger normatively heterosexual society. This is best exemplified in Leavitt's early works by a gay subject who rigidly adheres to heterosexual gender norms, enacts a compensatory and "hysterical goodness" (particularly with regard to his family), and selectively remembers *either* his own personal past, as a means of connecting to or explaining his homosexuality from an early age, *or* the history of homosexuality in past ages, wherein he may locate, justify himself.

Nevertheless, this "gay sensibility" gives way in the 1990s, notably in Leavitt's later writing such as *Arkansas* (1997) and *The Page Turner* (1998) – as well as in Tony Kushner's two part stage-play *Angels in America* (1992/4), to a sensibility far more "queer." Queer signifies, in this context, *not* a radical "break" from previous discourses on homosexuality. Indeed, a central tenet of queer theory, perhaps best typified in the writing of Judith Butler, is that *all* identities are produced discursively, and that the subject enacts these discourses, performs them, and, reiterating that performance over time, lends them the status of "the real." Queer then signifies and offers a critique: it asks, crucially, how has homosexuality been produced historically, who has produced it, and for whom? It also offers a practice: a critical recitation aimed at

16. Kekki, *From Gay to Queer*, 15. Subsequent page citations will be indicated in the text.



displacing or subverting heterosexual normativity by repeating its discourses *differently*. In terms of Leavitt's later writing and Kushner's drama, this "queer sensibility" is exemplified in a greater sense of "self-reflexivity," in parodic enactments that call attention to themselves and, hence, question themselves, and, finally, in a re-visioning of history, one that "homosexualizes" the past, rather than locating "the homosexual" in an ostensibly "true account" of it.

While Kekki's subsequent chapters develop this argument through textual analyses of both Leavitt's and Kushner's works, this first chapter, numbering nearly one hundred pages, provides a critical overview of discourses on homosexuality. Following the work of Michel Foucault, Kekki traces the modern conception of "the homosexual" to the clinical discourse of sexology arising in the mid to late nineteenth century. As demonstrated by Foucault, it was within this discourse that the concept of a discrete human identity based on sexual acts, practices, and desires first found articulation. At the same time, however, homosexuality was posited by and within this discourse as diseased, deviate, or degenerate, a "problem" requiring if not solution, then at least explanation. Nevertheless, this clinical typology, as well as the vocabulary it used, was adopted by subsequent political and/or social organizations advocating greater social recognition and tolerance. Foucault writes: "homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified."<sup>17</sup>

As demonstrated in *From Gay to Queer*, political, psychological and literary discourses following in the twentieth century would rely on the basic premise of the early sexologists, namely, that homosexuality constituted a distinct "identity" or "class" of the human. Recognizable even today in the form of "identity politics," individuals and organizations still invoke the notion of an innate homosexual identity in the name of greater social awareness and inclusion. If the sexological discourse had posited heterosexuality as "the natural" or "the normal," then the response, from a "gay sensibility," would be to question those categories: natural for whom, normal for whom? In this sense, gay and lesbian people and their advocates seek to expand the meaning of nature and of normalcy by including other experiences of them, experiences assumed to have gone unrecognized previously.

Developing this idea in relation to early works by David Leavitt in chapters two and three, Kekki points out how the parents in *The Lost Language of Cranes*, to take one example, attempt to account for their son's homosexuality and their worry that they may have caused it themselves. As Rose Benjamin, the mother of the gay protagonist wonders to herself: "Did she bear some extra chromosome ... some bizarre, delete-

17. This is Foucault's famous example of "reverse discourse." As such, homosexuality cannot be said to exist independently of the sexological discourse on it, for that discourse provides the terms by which homosexuality names, articulates itself, even when it contests those very terms. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I, 101

rious gene, emit some strange pheromone that made men love other men?"<sup>18</sup> Similarly, her husband, a closeted homosexual himself, fears any closeness with his son, lest his "condition" prove contagious. For their son Philip, however, homosexuality is neither diseased nor unwanted; his coming out to his parents represents his attempt to be included within the charmed circle of normalcy: "I guess I've been scared of disappointing you. I wanted to wait until I felt my life was good enough so that I could show it to you and not be ashamed. I wanted to wait until I could show you that a homosexual life could be a good thing."<sup>19</sup> Yet, and as Kekki makes clear, this desire "to show," to demonstrate, homosexuality's "goodness" or rightness means that Philip reinstates a normative heterosexuality. Accepting heterosexuality as the unquestioned center, Philip attempts to move himself towards it, by refusing negative stereotypes, by enacting a "masculine" gender role, and by developing monogamous, loving relationships that mirror what he presumes to be the ideal. This, for Kekki, represents a "hysterical goodness," the means by which homosexuality attempts to gain heterosexual recognition and approval, but only insofar as it compensates for not *being* heterosexuality itself.

If, as Kekki argues, early works by Leavitt, such as *The Lost Language of Cranes*, demonstrate a "gay sensibility" – one wherein homosexuality attempts to explain and/or justify itself to gain wider recognition and approval, then a different approach is visible in Leavitt's later works, as well as in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. Here, no attempt is made at explaining, justifying, or otherwise "apologizing" for homosexual existence. Nor is heterosexuality itself accepted as the presumptive "center." Indeed, one important aspect of a critical project deemed "queer" is the deconstruction of such structuring binaries as center/margin, inside/out, and hetero/homo. To a "queer sensibility," the attempt on the part of gay writers and activists to explain and/or justify homosexual existence would appear self-defeating in and of itself: such attempts unwittingly re-instate heterosexuality as the center, as the inside, as the privileged position to which they appeal. Moreover, and to the degree that "gay identity" seeks to emulate or conform to heterosexual norms – even as a means of gaining wider social acceptance, it unwittingly begets a new set of exclusions, a new set of marginalized outsiders. Thus, the idealized "straight-acting" gay male couple – typically healthy, wealthy, white, and young – becomes its own kind of normativity, excluding those who do not or cannot fit the bill. Rather than seek inclusion in an expanded definition of "nature" and/or "normalcy," a queer perspective would challenge the use of such terms in the first place: what is meant by "the natural" and "the normal"; who decides; how do they function within any given context; and, more saliently, what exclusions do such categories effect in being posited at all?

18. Leavitt, *The Lost Language of Cranes*, 216. Cf. Kekki, 154-5.

19. Leavitt, *The Lost Language of Cranes*, 169.



In chapters four to seven of *From Gay to Queer*, Kekki demonstrates this queer approach as it appears in Leavitt's later works as well as in Kushner's play. In "The Term Paper Artist," for example, one of the three novellas comprising Leavitt's 1997 collection *Arkansas*, Leavitt breaks with the concept of hysterical goodness. Here, the protagonist writes term papers for undergraduate college students in exchange for having sex with them. Moreover, the protagonist, also named "David Leavitt," calls into question any distinction between autobiography and fiction. As Kekki argues, Leavitt then "transgresses the boundaries of his former moral code, hysterical goodness" (227). In this way, Leavitt collapses the center/margin binary; he both calls attention to and identifies with sexual practices that an idealized gay self-representation would presumably attempt to suppress.

Likewise, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, subtitled *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, displaces a heterosexual "center," by depicting the lives of primarily gay protagonists. Of its six leading characters only one, Harper Pitt, is heterosexual. Moreover, the overt antagonist in the play, based on the historical figure of Roy Cohn, is himself a closeted homosexual suffering from AIDS. As Kekki points out, Kushner's play posits no idealized single "gay identity" with which audiences may identify. Instead, they are presented with protagonists who differ from each other in terms of racial, ethnic, religious, class, and even gendered backgrounds. There is no *one* way, in other words, to be gay. Kushner also focuses on the plight of the excluded, or marginalized. His plot revolves around two characters whose partners have left them for each other – Harper Pitt, an agoraphobic Mormon housewife, and Prior Walter, a former drag artist suffering from AIDS. In the quasi-religious *Angels in America*, Kekki argues, Harper becomes, along with the prophetic Prior Walter, "one of the visionaries of the play" (369). Nor is this attention to the marginalized a simple reversal of positions; the former center does not become, in *Angels in America*, a new margin, a new site of exclusion. Even the McCarthyist Roy Cohn, at his death, receives the traditional *Kaddish*, the Jewish prayer for the dead, channeled through the ghost of his most famous victim: Ethel Rosenberg. This is indeed significant, as Kekki points out, in a play obsessed with blessings (362). The final scene, moreover, accentuates a new form of kinship, wherein the traditional heterosexual family is not excluded, but included only as one aspect of a greater "family" united on such contingent foundations as shared experience.

Perhaps one of the most impressive aspects of *From Gay to Queer* is its attention to intertextual references structuring both Leavitt's and Kushner's works. Kekki contrasts Leavitt's reliance on modernist homosexual fiction, notably that of E. M. Forster and Stephen Spender in *While England Sleeps* for example, with the more postmodern approach adopted by Kushner in *Angels*. In the former, Leavitt recreates a modernist homosexual identity, which, as Kekki's analysis shows, allows the writer and reader to "re-connect" with a presumably true account of a homosexual past. Identity, in this context, is then produced through reading, reiteration, and self-identification. Kushner's postmodernism on the other hand, draws on such diverse sources as, to take two examples, the biblical book of Genesis and *The Wizard of Oz*. Here,

repetition is still in evidence, though it is a repetition with a difference, one that "homosexualizes" or "queers" cultural myths by placing them in a current context of homosexuality and the AIDS crises.

Yet, Kekki's attention to intertextual detail, while certainly relevant, is not without its problems as far as the overall argument is concerned. Combined with the amount of space Kekki devotes to previous scholarship on both Leavitt and Kushner, his primary argument – namely, demonstrating the shift from a gay to queer sensibility – is subject to many detours and, at times, obscurity. A similar problem may be found with regard to Kekki's dual approach, insofar as it, on the one hand, traces the "profound shift from a gay to a queer sensibility" and, on the other, attempts to "smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled" (15, 53). At times it would appear that these two aims compete with, rather than complement each other.

In his analysis of Leavitt's 1989 novel *Equal Affections*, for example, a novel he regards as demonstrative of a "gay sensibility," Kekki analyzes a scene wherein the two gay protagonists, Walter and Danny, attempt to determine who is "the man" in their relationship. After a debate over who has what kind of job, who fulfills what kind of domestic chores, and who "fucks" whom, the issue is settled when Danny asserts that "I stayed home all day last Monday and talked to your mother about Debbie Klinger's divorce."<sup>20</sup> This, comically and definitively, determines the issue for the protagonists: Danny is the "woman" in the relationship. In his explication of this scene, Kekki draws on the concept of gender parody, as advanced by Judith Butler. Butler writes:

The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of 'the original' ... reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, Kekki does not follow through on Butler's argument. Acknowledging that the scene attempts to "ironize stereotypes," Kekki nevertheless argues that it "shows how deeply rooted traditional gender roles are in [Danny and Walter's] gay relationship" (165-6). While this explanation would certainly fit with Kekki's overall approach of demonstrating a "gay sensibility" in this and other early fiction by Leavitt, what it misses is the parodic repetition of gender stereotypes otherwise going on. Given the routine homophobic epithet cast at gay men in relationships – "which one is the woman?" – Leavitt's scene functions not simply as a wry commentary on that epithet, but as a deconstruction of heterosexual gender itself. Who is "the woman" in *any* relationship; how is that determination made in Western post-industrial society? For Leavitt, parodically, the role "woman" in, say, a marriage, is not a question of occu-

20. Leavitt, *Equal Affections*, 25-6. Cf. Kekki, 164.

21. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 31.



pying a certain type of job or a certain function in the house; nor is it a question of an anatomical sexual position, of, in this case, who “gets” fucked. Rather, the role “woman” is determined by who spends how much time talking to “her” mother-in-law. In keeping with Butler’s argument, this scene can then be said to question the presumed “naturalness” of heterosexual gender, as well as the socially constructed role of “the woman” in the first place. In this regard, Kekki does not so much “smuggle queer representation *in* where it needs to be smuggled”; quite the contrary, he very nearly succeeds in smuggling it out.

Nevertheless, the sometimes elusiveness of Kekki’s argument, as well as the, at times, contradictory aspect of its aims, should not dissuade potential readers of *From Gay to Queer*. Its thorough command and careful adjudication of what, for some, remains a difficult discipline, queer theory, is not to be missed. Kekki’s introductory chapter, which goes quite far in tracing the history of discourses on homosexuality, could well function as an introduction to readers unfamiliar with the field. Used as a reference, however, readers will lament the lack of an index. Nor should *From Gay to Queer* be read as a simple recapitulation and application of queer theory. In drawing on the notion of melancholic gender identity as first put forward by Butler, for example, Kekki extends queer theory by developing, through a close examination of Leavitt’s later works, the notion of a “melancholic gay identity.” Briefly, this identity is formed through an unconscious recognition that there is no authentic basis for gay identity, only the historical construction of it. This recognition and its conscious disavowal propels one backward in a nostalgic re-memorization of the past, “a sad yearning for a return [to a] home” (256). As an idealized phantasm, however, that home can never be accomplished, it can only be wished for, and wished for repeatedly. This theorization of gay melancholia or “*tristesse*,” represents a significant step forward in theorizing gay male identity at the turn of the twenty-first century. It also sets the stage for, perhaps, a future comparison with a “queer sensibility,” based here, on the final scene of *Angels in America, part II*. Indeed, could one not say that in a queer sensibility, a sensibility that acknowledges rather than disavows the loss of a “true” or “authentic” identity, one defines as “home” that collection of individuals with whom one finds oneself in the here and now? For his part, Kekki regards this work as only a beginning (389). As such, it is a beginning worth noting, and a beginning his readers will eagerly await the continuation of.

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