Un-queer anti-theory

by Dean Kiley

Responses to this article have been received from Craig Young and Michael Hurley.

Queer Theory continues its fairytale run on the academic and open markets, having pulled over takes as diverse as Antithesis (1992), Melbourne Journal of Politics (1994), Media International Australia (1995), Meanjin (‘Australia Queen’: 1996) and Siglo (1997). It’s set up its own brains trust (in Queerlies) and been garrulously bullish in some usually-straightlaced (e.g. Arena) and unlikely places, from mainstream broadsheet fashion commentary to Mandi Gras theatre, from glossy-glib gay magazines to Radio National, from Sex/Life on TV to queer zines on the net (not to mention fiction, poetry, the conference circuit, classrooms or student activity, which Gary Dowsett would clearly prefer) in his response to Dennis Altman’s AHR article, On Global Queering.

Its Australian stakeholders (working in, from or as, queer theory) would minimally include Steven Angeleidis, Virginia Barrett, Chris Berry, Rebecca Cox, Stephen Dunne, Kathleen Mary Fallon, Melissa Jane Hardie, Michael Hurley, Kate Lilley, Fiona McGregor, Kimberly O’Sullivan, Dorothy Porter, Elspeth Probyn, Leigh Raymond, Robert Reynolds, Robert Schubert, Sam Searle, Christos Tsiolkas, McKenzie Wark, Audrey Yue, the flagship of Annamarie Japase (author of the wittily-titled Queer Theory) and (despite Caesar-ean gestures of refusal and the odd interview disavowal or equivocation) the multinational called Elizabeth Grosz, Dennis Altman would presumably see himself as a prematurely superannuated Company Director of what used to be Gay Lib & Sons Inc, given his AHR jibes and recruitment of Jill Matthews and Garry Wolterspoon to the gay-&-lesbian-factory floor.

However (you knew that was coming surely), while business booms for queer theory, much queer-ed theory, and some theory which queers, we haven’t done much R&D on queer readings, Routledge, Cassell or Duke put out an anthology of cultural studies, textual analysis or whatever faster than a speeding Judy Butler fanzine, and we’ve had Sexy Bodies (edited by Probyn and Grosz, 1995) as an Oz prototype of collected thematic (as opposed to scatter-shot individual journal essay) work, but the very discourse Altman pillories in his Pythonesque Genesis of queer — literary criticism and theory — has been lax, ossified, decorously closeting, bad-faith blind and generally negligible here. Despite the gloriously disproportionate over-representation of queer writers and writing in whatever you might call an OzLit can, the cybernetic industry of Australian literature and its critical machinery (OzLitCriture for short) continues to occlude, defuse, diffuse, evade and domesticate queer issues.

We have Robert Dennis’s Oxford Anthology of Australian Gay and Lesbian Writing (1993) to remind us just how much territory there is to be mapped. Nevertheless, his ‘introduction’ can do little more than stake claims and mark borders, taking a brisk jog through untenable historical phases, broad analytical approaches and fuzzy paradigms (“transgression”, “desiring”, “sensibility”, “gender dislocation”, “quality”, “direction”, etc.). It’s the dilettante (his word) textual excavation that’s valuable, yet such is the state of play that this counts as a major intervention. Individual critics — Damien Barlow, Ken Gelder, Kerryn Goldsworthy, Stephen Kirby, Noel Macainsh, Paul Saltzman and Jagose among them — have supplied cogent takes on individual writers, but there’s little of any more general use besides the invaluable Michael Hurley.

Dessaix’s ‘introduction’ still needed to reassure his readers that not even half of the writers represented in the anthology would call themselves homosexual, gay, lesbian or queer. Sigh. Honours and reviews and publicists are still doing Indian rope tricks with a putative umbilical cord from writer to author to narrator to character. This leads even some writers into enquiring critical inanities of the ‘I’m not a queer writer, I’m just a writer’ special-pleading kind. But now and then the General Reading Public (hello, Aunty Joy!) gets a sudden dyspeptic shock, like when that nice old Jeffrey Smart came out as almost-straight, or that decadent Frank Moorhouse in-ed himself as heterosexual prior to his Grand Establishment Days for when David Malouf moved officially and gracefully from his glass closet via "OutRage" magazine’s November 1996 list of ‘Power Gays’ (sending a generation of OzLit students scrambling back to all those coy medicalised circulations about matries, adolescent crushes, emotional intensity and twany thigos . . . but the inside/out logic of the open secret and hidden codes was, and is, exploited by reviewers and critics to elide homoeroticism and escape analysis. Even where there’s full forced disclosure — as of Hal Porter’s paedophilia by Mary Lord’s 1993 biography, or Patrick White’s homosexuality going the full Marr — there is less, or nil, engaged reconsideration of the work nor, Sedgwick help us, of the tof-soggy criticism and prophylactic interpretive tools attempted in the past.

You’d have thought the explosion of cultural production in response to, and dialogue with, the HIV/AIDS pandemic would have compelled some similar critique from OzLitCriture but no, not till Nigel Krauth’s award-winning JF and Jane (Allen & Unwin, 1990), hailed in an RSL-insular way as the first literary answer to AIDS. As Gary Dunne noted (OutRage Nov. 1993), it’d be more accurate to say Krauth’s book was the first widely-publicised mainstream (cf ‘real’) conventional saleable-unit. Its reception is instructive. The back-cover blur-bit — “the complexity of living outside the boundaries of public approval” — got muted in the media mix to “price paid for living . . . (etc. verbalm)”, Dessaix, however, in his review, is impressed that there’s “not a whining word in the novel” (“Mortality meets mortality”, Sunday Herald, 30.9.93) and praises its questioning of justice, injustice, guilt and blame, while other reviewers are startled at the virtuosity of a straight man climbing into the psyche of a dying do (the ventriloquist figure recurs obsessively in queer-crit). Dunne is also one of the few critics to attack Krauth for his misleading, caricatured or wrong descriptions of HIV/AIDS, yet Dessaix asserts this ignorance allowed Krauth to elude the PC medicalisation and politicisation of AIDS and thus produce ‘real’ art, freeing up thematic dimensions for postcolonial critique and an “intricate symbolic structure”. Nevertheless, his Grand Establishment Days for when David Malouf moved officially and gracefully from his glass closet via "OutRage" magazine’s November 1996 list of ‘Power Gays’ (sending a generation of OzLit students scrambling back to all those coy medicalised circulations about matries, adolescent crushes, emotional intensity and twany thigos . . . but the inside/out logic of the open secret and hidden codes was, and is, exploited by reviewers and critics to elide homoeroticism and escape analysis. Even where there’s full forced disclosure — as of Hal Porter’s paedophilia by Mary Lord’s 1993 biography, or Patrick White’s homosexuality going the full Marr — there is less, or nil, engaged reconsideration of the work nor, Sedgwick help us, of the tof-soggy criticism and prophylactic interpretive tools attempted in the past.

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This process of defusion by diffusion, the abstration of politics to poetics, and the critical evacuation of queer and queering texts into identikit sets of controlling metaphors and thematic hazes, is characteristic of OzLitCriture. But it can also be banally homophobic as well as abstractly heterosexist. Some of the tense gestures are fun. Just in case we’re still in any doubt as to the author’s solid secure heterosexuality, Murray Waldren feels an Oprah need to reassure his readers that not even half of the writers represented in the anthology would call themselves homosexual, gay, lesbian or queer. Sigh.

The slippage between writer and narrator enables a Moebius-strip-tease of critical/aesthetic ‘downgradings’: from fiction to autobiography, from novel to roman a clef (or case we’re still in any doubt as to the author’s solid secure heterosexuality, Murray Waldren feels an Oprah need to reassure his readers that not even half of the writers represented in the anthology would call themselves homosexual, gay, lesbian or queer. Sigh.

If this book had been written by any of the OzLitCriture’s star reviewers, we would clearly prefer Australian literature and its critical machinery (OzLitCriture for short) continues to occlude, defuse, diffuse, evade and domesticate queer issues.
But 50 Ways was hailed as a breakthrough book and was, in queer fiction terms, a bestseller. There's a subcultural whinge-cringe factor which deals with such novels not as text but as event, not even as literary artefact but as a somewhat romantically-communal achievement or community record or as the marketing arm of the sociocultural corporation that is the Gay and Lesbian Community Inc. An attenuated analogue of this process applies to Timothy Conigrave's Holding the Man which is, at one level, a no-more-than-competent unrepresentative treaureker romance but (1) The Book as Icon and Writer as Memorialisation, and (2) the fact that it does for Melbourne pools what David Williamson evidently continues to do for its middleclass means that (3) you can't say that in print or . . . you get death threats (my favourite fan mail). Factional filiations and party-line prescriptions can have the same shut-down-lock-out effect, as Finola Moorhead demonstrated in her Southern (Autumn, 1995) radical-lesbian-feminist Nlle-strength jermadiong against Dorothy Porter's The Monkey's Mask, with subsequent cheers from Denise Thompson and jeers from Kathleen Mary Fallon. So queer communities can sometimes be complicit in the de-queering and un-theorising of OzLitCrite.

Now, with the current wave of publishing — another Atiken novel (Vandit Fierce; Vintage, 1997), Neil Drinnan's Glove Puppet (Penguin, 1997), Phillip Scott's Gay Resort Murder-Shock (Penguin, 1997) and Annamarie Jagose's Lulu: A Romance (Allen & Unwin, 1997) among them — the usual circular limitations of the marketing and reviewing process have already begun to kick in, with presumptions about niche-fiction, gloss-led-kitch-appeal, genre-sellouts and the politics of prima facie-viability (brand recognition?!) gains . . . And there have been some fun bunghts in the gay newspapers about not nice not-positive criticism from the (gay! how could you!) reviewers. Is such writing really queer? And does it, or the earlier vectors of overt gay-&-lesbian or queer writing, obviate the need for reconfiguring un-theorised anti-queer canonical texts?

In OzLit, multicultural writing, ethnos-based historicism, Aboriginal writing and modernist writing have all faced the identity politics problematic, and each has had a hoax to focus it.

Perhaps 'queer fiction' needs a good hoax, so we know what it isn't. We've had more than a few silly jokes in questionable taste, the best-known of which is of course Elizabeth Jolley. Ahh, Liz, dear sweet little old Liz with her public persona a hybrid of everyone's favourite auntie and the Queen Mother, and shap as a punconish in text or in class. Liz has spent almost her entire writing life providing a comprehensive — not to say recycleable — answer to the perennial question "Yes but what do lesbians do in bed?"

And the answer is: nothing of any interest we're just friends, or nurses this is just good clean disingenuous satire and let's not talk about that — have you seen my farm?

Jolley's writing also illustrates on of the major techniques OzLitCrite is still getting away with: deferral. You characterise the text as new and intractably problematic or resistant to standard interpretations and approaches, then you can apply contradictory critical approaches with the justification that one figures or speaks the other. But you claim this is aforead. necessary conflation because there is no "proper" approach to Jolley decided on yet, so you have to opportunistically cobble one together. In reality, these multiplying critical procedures, often not even made explicit let alone formulated, become a fluid relativism and what amounts to an analytical impressionism heading towards an allegedly corporate consensus on readings . . . rather like an estedfod for texts, readings, methods and critics.

But let's see what else is at work, and I'd like to call on a lesbian to help me out on this.

No overview of Jolley or critical writing on her work (let's call it Jolleyism) can escape acknowledgement of The Lesbian as a prime figure. As one critic irascibly, hyperbolically, but accurately, puts it: "Elizabeth Jolley's fiction deals with two subjects — motherhood and lesbianism". It would be equally true to assert that there are no lesbians in Jolley's answer to this riddle — when is a lesbian not a lesbian? — is . . . when she is a capital-L Lesbian, a figure which is always the figure of first, an otherness, then an elsewhere, and finally the figure of figurality itself. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein: a lesbian is never a lesbian is never just a lesbian. She is always also (and already) a figure for something else, operating elsewhere on some other level, some other modality. The Lesbian-as-Jolley trope has been figured as (deep breath: and this is the short-list) two-dimensional (ventriloquised) character, political failure, narrative fragment, narratological structure, thematic matrix, metaphoric lens, ideological grab-bag, topological schema, utopic space and patriarchal counter-discourse. This construction of The Lesbian "naturally" authorises a critical disengagement with the full problematic of same-sex desire or lesbian love, let alone queerness, itself.

The primary displacements, here as with Kathleen Mary Fallan or Susan Hampton, are from style to voice to hermeneutics and/or between genres of writing and reading. The climax of the critical story is always a variant on The Lesbian as a figure for figurality. At its most abstract, the dyke gets fingered as an empty marker of, for example, Jolley-as-textuality (or -as-poetics, or -as-corpus) and Jolley-as-postmodern. Any index of lesbianism can then be diagnosed as Lesbian-ness and treated as an embolism in the circulatory signifying system of the text — but you don't open it up for examination or disarticulation, you just note in on your diagnostic chart and talk in a general way about dysfunctionality, effacing the lesbian as a synonym for play and indeterminacy.

At the other extreme she gets quarantined in overdetermination. Here the name of the game is not just the game of the name (spinster, eccentric women, female friendships, post-menopausal loner, etc) but also the 'game' of licensed, limited, safety-valve carnivalesque transgression ascribed to The Lesbian within, or as, a postmodern poetics. Same thing happened to Patrick White. His 1979 novel The Twyborn Affair has to be the novel Judith Butler would write if she wanted to dramatise queer theory — it's an astonishing bravura play with volatile and mobile gender identities and sex and sexualities, the protagonist lives as a young wife, a cloased gay/bi man and a middleaged female bawd, it features a male rape scene and a male-to-female passing trany in a lesbian scene — yet Dame Leonie Kramer, in an Everage phase, managed to conclude that it was "sad but true". "The problem and mystery of family relationships", she wrote. "That White was just being "evasive". "If only, one feels, White could desert the circus animals and at last be satisfied, as Yeats became, with his heart." 8 Awwwww, innit sweet?

The other critics clearly had no idea what the genderfuck was going on, and characterised White as an existenial ventriloquist, genital mannequin, Jungin rubik's cube, man and a middleaged female bawd, it features a male rape scene and a male-to-female passing trany in a lesbian scene — yet Dame Leonie Kramer, in an Everage phase, managed to conclude that it was "sad but true". "The problem and mystery of family relationships", she wrote. "That White was just being "evasive". "If only, one feels, White could desert the circus animals and at last be satisfied, as Yeats became, with his heart." 8 Awwww, innit sweet?

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PDF | I engage queer theory and the history of the intelligence quotient (IQ) movement in the United States here to re-imagine the critical nature of both projects. Early IQ researchers, such as Terman and Goddard, hypothesised that IQ was necessary for sexual morality and tested... Sexuality, normality, intelligence. What is queer theory up. against? Psychology and Sexuality, 2, 45-57. Peter Hegarty. Department of Psychology, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK. Abstract. I engage queer theory and the history of the intelligence quotient (IQ) movement in the United States here to re-imagine the critical nature of both projects. Early IQ researchers Following a queer theory approach to queerness, Eng, Halberstam & Muñoz’s articulation of queer aligns with O’Rourke in that they see queer as a deconstructionist paradigm with a future that is undecided: The operations of queer critique...can neither be decided on in advance nor be depended on in the future (3). Yet, as Adams writes, the archive of queerness would be rooted in social movements and LGBT political movements that are anti-queer: Gay liberation never thought of itself as a civil rights movement for a particular minority but as a revolutionary struggle to free the homosexuality in everyone, challenging the conventional arrangements that confined sexuality to heterosexual monogamous families. Against queer theory. Jargon and Obscurantism. The apparent unintelligibility of queer theory is often apologized for as being just another example of the difficult concepts and language necessarily employed by high-level abstract thought. For example, one member of the QSTUDIES LIST wrote: “There is a tendency among theorists of all stripes to get lost in the meta-discussion. Levying this criticism specifically at Queer theorists is misdirected.” Another contributor wrote: “You don't have to be anti-theory, though, to be critical of theory that is unnecessarily opaque and j