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The English word *queer*, from the German *quer*, cross, oblique, athwart, has been in use since the early 16th century, meaning odd, strange, unusual. At the end of the 19th century queer was first used to refer to homosexuality, and during the greater part of the 20th century it has been a derogatory designation for homosexual men. In the 1980s, though, queer was reclaimed by the homosexual community and became widespread as a positive identity marker; then, in the early 90s, queer studies was introduced as an academic field of study in American colleges, with Michel Foucault as inspirer and Judith Butler as leading theorist. Today, usage of the term queer indicates that it has developed into an antonym for heteronormative; you can be homosexual and not queer, as well as queer and heterosexual. In this conceptual uncertainty, scholars from various disciplines are investigating the multifaceted phenomenon as well as the all-to-encompassing concept of queer. One such attempt with relevance for sports is the anthology *Sport, Sexualities and Queer/Theory* (Routledge), edited by Jayne Caudwell. We sent the book to Terry Goldie, Professor of English at York University, Toronto, and leading queer theorist, whose latest book, *queersexlife: Autobiographical Notes on Sexuality, Gender & Identity* (Arsenal Pulp Press) was published in June 2008. Goldie has reservations concerning the empirical basis for some claims and theorizing, and to some extent he questions the process of queering; Caudwell's own contributions, however, enkindle but admiration and respect.

## A queer concept?

Terry Goldie

Faculty of Arts, York University, Toronto

Jayne Caudwell (ed)

### **Sport, Sexualities and Queer/Theory**

180 pages, pb.

Abingdon, Oxon: [Routledge](http://Routledge) 2007

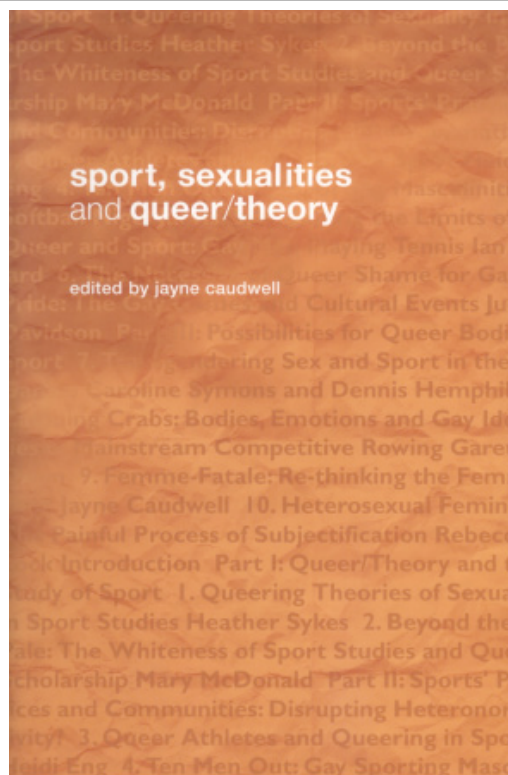
(Routledge Critical Studies in Sport)

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Identities are about intersections. Someone reading this is a German doctor. In Germany, she is not a German doctor, she is just a doctor. In Hannover her ethnicity is not a topic of discussion but someone might rather discuss her specialization: is she a radiologist? An obstetrician? But I didn't say she is a woman doctor because I decided that wasn't important: in this moment of taxonomy it is not an identity marker.

This has been the game for gays and lesbians throughout culture. In most aspects of western culture sexual orientation is a primary but not the primary marker. There are some situations where it might be taken for granted (I am sure there must be a male cosmetician who is not gay but I have not met one) and in others it is mentioned constantly (can Rupert Everett be recognized as "an actor" rather than "a gay actor?" One Canadian politician suggested he should just change his name to "The Openly Gay"). Sexual orientation is generally regarded to be important but the nature of that importance is always in flux.

To refer to another game—or rather games—sexual orientation is a relatively recent point of discussion in sport. Even the existence of gays and lesbians remains problematic in professional sport. I could be slightly out of date but I believe there are no men who have come out as gay who are presently playing professionally in any of the top



leagues of major team sports in North America, in NFL football, NHL hockey or major league baseball. The significance of lesbians in professional tennis has vexed a number of homophobic commentators and players. The significance of lesbians in professional golf has become a bit of a joke, as the executives of the LPGA try to keep a lid on this bit of dangerous information. One of the articles in the present volume, "Heterosexual Femininity: The Painful Processes of Subjectification," by Rebecca Lock, considers this lid-keeping on the Canadian women's hockey team.

But what does it mean? Is it just a question of homophobia and liberation? In other words, homosexuals need to be allowed to play, in a game that allows them to be open about their sexual orientation. But does that participation change anything for the surrounding culture? Does it change the other participants or the game itself? It does not seem a primary marker, not the equivalent of gender, which decides who can play a sport, or nationality, which often decides who can be on what team.

This collection begins with an essay on "queer theory" by Heather Sykes. Her ability to synopsise most aspects of a broad field in fourteen pages is quite amazing (and she follows this with an equally amazing five page bibliography). She touches on all the aspects a reader might expect plus a few some might find surprising, such as postcolonial studies. She ends with the rather expansive claim that "Queering sport studies has the potential to alter how we think about sexualities, desires and bodies."(26) This process of queering seems to be Mary G. Macdonald's aim in "Beyond the Pale: The Whiteness of Sport Studies and Queer Scholarship." She carefully and accurately traces the whiteness of queer theory and the absence of race in many academic analyses of sport. But where are the actual people? Her sole example is Basquiat's "Famous Negro Athlete," which has little to do with gay or lesbian athletes of any colour.

I hate to seem old-fashioned but when it comes to a topic such as this I prefer a strong base of empiricism. At its best there should be an intelligent and perceptive theorizing built on that base. Heidi Eng's "Queer Athletes and Queering in Sport" does that but expands her observations to offer some insights that she briefly applies more generally. First, do strident forms of division by sex, such as most sport, create more strident forms of homophobia? It might seem counter-intuitive that removing the opposite sex makes same sex attraction less acceptable but this seems to be the case. Second, Eng finds that lesbians seek more community in sport than gay men. Is this a more general comment on men and women?

Nigel Jarvis on a gay men's softball league, "Ten men Out: Gay Sporting Masculinities in Softball," and Ian Wellard's "Exploring the Limits of Queer and Sport: Gay Men Playing Tennis" follow traditional sociological models very successfully. In "Transgendering Sex and Sport in the Gay games," Caroline Symons and Dennis Hemphill look at a problem that arises in anything called "queer:" whether contexts of sexual orientation offer a comfortable space for gender variance. Gareth Owen's "Catching Crabs: Bodies, emotions and gay identities in mainstream competitive rowing" is an exemplary voyage into participant observation in ethnography. The editor, Jayne Caudwell, contributes "Femme-fatale: Re-thinking the femme-inine", which offers an insightful consideration of the butch/femme dichotomy on a sports team, with a similarly insightful glance at race. This is a superb piece of work.

At the end, however, I am left wondering a bit about this process of "queering." It refers to the many forms of poststructuralist theory and how they can use the inflections of sexual diversity to destabilize assumptions about identity. In many cases it is dependent on the theories of Judith Butler and her descendents. In this volume Butlerification appears again and again, with various deferential notes to her predecessor Michel Foucault. This certainly destabilizes but it also can hide the object of the argument. At the same time, most of the theorization is not new, operating in ways long common in literary, film and cultural studies.

At present I am writing a piece tentatively titled "Queering Islamophobia." In other words anything can be "queered" and I clearly am not opposed to the process. It needs to be done with an attention to efficacy, however. As we all know, all sports have rules. Some can be stretched, some can be changed, but we lose some essence of the game if we break too many, and especially if our eye on the goal makes us forget the playing field.

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