
H-France Review Vol. 15 (January 2015), No. 2

David Caron, *The Nearness of Others: Searching for Tact and Contact in the Age of HIV*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. 352 pp. Notes and bibliography. \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8166-9179-1; \$69.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8166-9175-3.

Review by William J. Poulin-Deltour, Middlebury College.

David Caron's new work, *The Nearness of Others*, might seem an unusual choice to be reviewed by *H-France*. Indeed, France appears at times to be rather peripheral to the author's primary narrative, that of being diagnosed with HIV in 2006 and the fraught situations that arise from being HIV positive and gay today. While HIV no longer represents a "death sentence" but a chronic malady, it remains starkly distinct from most other manageable illnesses given society's continuing opprobrium for those infected and the HIV positive individual's obligation to disclose, reveal and confess his status to others, both near and far. On the other hand, many of the sources that Caron uses to illustrate the peculiarly difficult situation in which he finds himself are drawn from France. From Jacques Rancière, Roland Barthes and Hervé Guibert to *le voile islamique* and the discrimination facing French Muslims today, Caron's literary and cultural repertoire, both scholarly and popular, is replete with examples taken from France. And yet the overall premise of the book lies elsewhere: that of relating what it is like being an HIV positive gay man living primarily in the United States and in the context of today's world, "with its endless procession of catastrophes, wars, and acts of brutality and humiliation" (p. 4). As Caron puts it a few pages later, "One is not HIV positive in a cultural and political vacuum. In fact, there is no other experience of HIV that one that is saturated with politics and culture" (p. 24).

As it happens, those who work on France and French history may be initially disappointed with Caron's somewhat truncated construal of contemporary French society. While rightfully deploring the French obsession with Muslim women's headscarves, for example, Caron does not engage with those French scholars writing today about the issue. He relies on two American texts (by the historian Joan W. Scott and the anthropologist John R. Bowen) to back up his analysis.[1] This might give the uninformed reader the impression that there was—or remains—little or no debate *in France* over the matter. While Scott's and Bowen's books are excellent, one wishes that Caron at least acknowledge the work of one or more of the many French intellectuals who spoke out eloquently against the 2004 law banning headscarves in public schools.[2] Moreover, the same could be said for the history of HIV, AIDS and the gay community in France presented in the book. Aside from fleeting references to Christophe Broqua's and his own work on AIDS in France, Caron's French references on the topic date, for the most part, no later than the mid-1990s.[3]

However, Caron does not claim to be writing a book about contemporary France and he has already given us a work on AIDS in France. Rather, along with being a moving memoir, rich in cultural and literary analysis, the book currently under review allows Caron the opportunity to use "the personal as an anecdotal springboard for theorizing" (p. 40). The text is composed of fragmentary, relatively short, pieces arranged around six major themes: Diagnosis, Others, Disclosure, Taste, Tact, and Contact. As Caron makes clear, there is something aberrant in being diagnosed with HIV at least twenty-five years after the virus's arrival in the gay community. What particularly seems lost today is both the campy resistance and confrontational political struggle that characterized this community's reaction to AIDS

up until 1996, when new treatments became available. Camp, he writes, “no longer seems so operational three decades into the epidemic,” this especially at a time “when gay culture has by and large shoved aside the HIV question and discarded the very people who embody it” (p. 40). Caron sees the mainstreaming, normalization and subsequent “toning down” of gayness as sapping the community’s “lifestyle” that “could, in fact, provide us with the collective dynamism necessary to fight back, infusing our struggle with the power of collective self-creation” (p. 40). He moreover laments the demise of groups such as ACT UP following 1996’s discovery of the life-prolonging treatments, remarking, “Silence, once equated with death in ACT UP’s most famous slogan, had returned, and coming out—the breaking of silence—became fraught with a whole new set of difficulties” (p. 140).

Caron especially sets out to debunk the myth that disclosure of one’s sexuality or HIV status is necessarily liberatory. Rather, and following Foucault, he contends that such disclosure leads to greater policing: “Disclosure is thus not the end of enclosure but the beginning of a spiral of policing and control” (p. 181). He creates as an alternative to disclosure the notion of *dysclosure* that, all the while “expos(ing) the inherent dysfunction of confessional disclosure...might help us think of ways to harness some of the emancipatory potential of speaking out” (p. 181). In myriad ways, *dysclosure* avoids the pitfalls of enclosure by allowing the speaker (the individual *dysclosing*) the possibility of creating “an ongoing redefinition of the self-with-others, plural, a self beside itself, in a situation of nearness to itself—close but never fully there” (p. 186).

Beyond *dysclosure*, though, is Caron’s ultimate attempt to rehabilitate *tact* as a potential innovative and communicative mode with the potential for creating “a form of relationality bringing nearness and distance together” (p. 250). Caron is perhaps at his best when using personal narrative here to explain *tact*’s potential to suspend time and power relations in a given fleeting moment. At the very beginning of the section on *tact*, he illustrates these properties by relating his experience with his elderly father in Paris’s underground. Walking very slowly, the two encounter head on, in a staircase, a young man who appears to be in a rush. Wielding physical power over Caron and, most especially, his father, the young man, rather than holding his ground or pushing his way through, “surrendered graciously and without a word, and his physical avoidance of us was in fact an odd mark of small social recognition” (p. 235). Caron’s own sentiment for the potential “attacker” transforms itself almost immediately, from one of “anger” to one of “respect” (p. 236). The situation allows Caron to detail *tact*’s qualities when coming into *tactful* contact with others: an instant suspension of power, “...a certain meeting with the other that...momentarily circumvents the dynamics of power, and restores equality downward, as if power differences, and thus power itself, did not exist” (p. 236). The other requirement for *tactfulness* in this case lies in the fact that “the scene and whatever happened in it had no existence outside itself” (p. 237). As Caron succinctly sums it up: “You can only react *tactfully*, that is, in relation to a specific context that will never recur in exactly identical terms” (p. 237).

Poignant too are his references to French memoirs of the Holocaust, most especially Hélène Berr’s *Journal*, when talking about HIV and AIDS.^[4] Prior to his discussion of Berr, Caron argues against those critics of comparisons between HIV and the Holocaust who read them as little more than “the trivialization of the Holocaust” (p. 248). In order for such comparisons to be effective, *tact* comes into play, a “relational play of differences” that acknowledges “proximity and distance at the same time” (p. 248). Indeed, it is *tact*’s “indirectness” that “allows AIDS and the Holocaust to be brought into proximity, if of an uneasy sort, and form something like a community of the traumatic” (p. 249). Caron eventually looks to Berr and her own recounting of what it was like to first wear the yellow star in Paris “for pointers on how to move from distress and anger to more subtle ways of engaging the world” (p. 285).

Caron does recognize *tact*’s reliance on social convention and its overwhelming potential to be used to reinforce social domination: “...*tact* is really designed to establish social hierarchies and enforce something like class privilege—reframing social proximity as distance” (p. 260). Later, he adds, using

Bourdieuian imagery, “[t]he perception of tact’s unteachability and elusiveness seeks to naturalize a certain social system, discipline people, and perpetuate the allegedly undisputable superiority of one group” (p. 262).

In fact, given all that is socially problematic with tact, I am not sure I completely share Caron’s belief in its ultimate emancipatory capacity to create “a way to deal with difficult situations by making do with what’s handy for the immediate and mutual relief of all involved” (p. 307). But *peu importe*. *The Nearness of Others* presents an imaginative and provocative case for tact, via a rich and most erudite analysis of culture—in all its forms.

NOTES

[1] Joan W. Scott, *Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007); and John R. Bowen, *Why the French Don’t Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[2] See for example Charlotte Nordmann, ed., *Le foulard islamique en questions* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2004). Contributions to the volume come from a wide variety of French intellectuals, including Étienne Balibar, Christine Delphy, Françoise Gaspard, and Nacira Guénif-Soulimas.

[3] Christophe Broqua, *Agir pour ne pas mourir! Act Up, les homosexuels et le sida* (Paris: Les Presses de Sciences Po, 2005); and David Caron, *AIDS in French Culture: Social Ills, Literary Cures* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

[4] Hélène Berr, *Journal* (Paris: Tallandier, 2008). Caron cites from the English translation, *The Journal of Hélène Berr*, trans. by David Bellos (New York: Weinstein Books, 2008).

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ISSN 1553-9172