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Michael Lucey, *Someone: The Pragmatics of Misfit Sexualities, from Colette to Hervé Guibert*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 310pp. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-226-60621-7; \$30.00 (pb). ISBN 978-0-226-60618-7; \$10.00-\$30.00 (eb) 978-0-226-60635-4.

Review by Melanie Hawthorne, Texas A&M University.

The history of sexuality might be characterized as a “Flatland” sort of journey, a progress narrative in which people move from being able to think of themselves as existing in space only at single, discrete points (“gay” rather than “straight,” “hetero” not “homo”) to discovering a second dimension of a continuous line that links up the points to form a continuum, a queer spectrum that (potentially) embraces everyone’s position somewhere along it. Michael Lucey’s grand project in *Someone* is nothing short of an attempt to project queer studies into a third, hitherto unseen and unsuspected dimension, that of the (sexual) misfit who does not fit onto a flat line, no matter how long, or how many discreet points it may comprise. How do we process the words of people who can’t easily locate themselves on the queer spectrum, whose subjectivity can’t adequately be expressed with our current vocabulary of binaries, no matter how “non-”? Of course, it is always a stretch to conceive of something for which a language does not yet exist, but this is Lucey’s task here. He posits that “we often *know* more about sexuality [...] than we can actually *say*” (p. 9), and this goes for the individuals in question themselves (authors and the characters in their works). If I could *tell* you where or how I don’t fit, Lucey’s thinking seems to be, I wouldn’t be such a misfit in the first place. And so, to Lucey, it’s the point at which texts about sexuality resist interpretation that they become interesting.

Lucey’s approach to untangling these textual knots draws principally on pragmatics, a subfield of linguistics that focuses on the ways in which context shapes communication. Words alone might be ambiguous if read only in terms of their denotative or semiotic elements; but when read in context, they are often perfectly clear, thanks to the knowledge referred to as pragmatics.

The first extended example Lucey undertakes to explicate flows from a passage in Colette’s *Le pur et l’impur*, a book that has a complicated history not least because it imbricates at least three moments in time: the Belle Époque that Colette purports to “probe” (the language is not without importance), the moment in the 1930s when the essays appeared in serial form as *Ces plaisirs*, and its later revision as the book *Le pur et l’impur*. Lucey zeroes in on a couple of paragraphs toward the end of the book. Colette has been writing about the “Ladies of Llangollen,” two proto-lesbians (as we might call them today, though we also might not) of independent means who settled down together in rural Wales at the end of the eighteenth century and became minor celebrities. Colette imagines what they would look like transposed to contemporary France of 1930:

drinking, smoking, swearing stone butch dykes in boiler suits who enjoy tinkering with cars. Lucey is struck by the awkwardness of Colette's thought experiment and wonders what Colette is really trying to say, especially when she goes on to turn this exercise in imagination into a critique of Proust's depictions of what she calls "Gomorrhah."

At this stage of Lucey's close reading, he quotes Colette entirely in English (though later he gives passages in both the original and in translation). Of course, there are good reasons why English dominates in this kind of academic book: Lucey's work will clearly be of interest to readers who don't speak or read French, for example; and he is clear that what gets his attention in these passages goes beyond simply the denotative meaning of the words, or even their semantics (overlapping but also distinct conceptual attributes). All the more reason, then, one would think, to look carefully at Colette's original words (especially since he refers to Colette's scenario as a kind of translation across time, thus foregrounding translation issues).

So, in the first instance, Colette is performing a sort of thought experiment that we might describe as "alternative history," a popular if problematic genre. What if the weather had been different on D-Day? What if you were suddenly transported to an alternate universe where the Beatles never existed but you can still remember their music (*Yesterday*, anyone?). What if Napoleon had been born in Canada in 1600? And so on. Colette's experiment is a variant on the philosophical problem of identity: suppose your one true soulmate keeps being reincarnated in different times and places. How do you recognize that person, given that they might look completely different on the surface in each incarnation? What is it that remains the same? What does one hold constant in this sort of exercise? And what can that teach us about how Colette sees sexual identity and where she (mis)fits in?

Lucey worries away at this troubling knot in Colette's prose, and it *is* a troubling image, not least because it leads Colette to a criticism of Proust. Colette ends her fast-forward portrait of Eleanor Butler (one of the "Ladies"), by remarking that Proust endowed her with "shocking" desires (the original French says "scandaleux" [1]—is scandal the same as shock? Does it matter?), and that this shows how little Proust "knew her." By "her" here, Colette seems to mean something like "the [generic] lesbian" (cited by Lucey, p. 8). Obviously, he didn't know Eleanor Butler at all in the literal sense; and even figuratively, Colette places the attribution "twenty years earlier," so it's a bit odd that she should accuse him of not knowing in 1910 a figure she only conjures into being in 1930 (cited by Lucey, p. 8). But then two paragraphs later, Colette elaborates on her critique of Proust, challenging his depiction of "depraved [*vicieuses*]" young girls" as a collective (cited by Lucey, p. 9).

As a side issue, in a sentence that Lucey omits in an ellipsis, Colette asserts that while there is a Sodom, "il n'y a pas de Gomorrhah." [2] Lucey is interested in what Colette might mean by such a collective female identity, but not in the contrast being asserting that there *is* a Sodom, but *not* a Gomorrhah. This not what Lucey pursues, but it is germane. What, exactly, Colette means by that biblical invocation is the crux of the matter. In Lucey's gloss, "It seems Colette sees no durable and identity-based solidarity among the diversity of women who might, at one point or another of their lives, take a sexual and/or affective interest in other women, and faults Proust for suggesting otherwise" (p. 9). Colette *did* (apparently) see such a solidarity (sense of community?) among men, but this is not pursued.

From a close reading of one passage, Lucey widens the scope to consider that context of the publication of *Ces plaisirs/Le pur et l'impur*, and to correct a popular, but ultimately wrong anecdote about the publication history: that the serial publication was censored. He argues that it was not so much the topic of Colette's writing that was censored, but her "manner" (p. 33, by which he seems to mean style). For Colette, style and content were not separable, so that while she set out to write about Belle Époque sexuality, she ends up interested in something else: "the quest to render intelligible various sexualities of the belle époque, the quest that seemed to be at the heart of the book's project, has, by the end of the writing, lost some of its urgency" (p. 39). Colette becomes more invested in the experience of producing the book than in the topic itself, leading her to position herself as "unaligned [the Cold War terminology is not uninteresting] with more familiar kinds of identities" (p. 40) so that "the practice of her sexuality is a practice of interdiscursivity" (p. 41). The upshot of Lucey's interrogation of Colette, and the pattern it offers for subsequent chapters, is that talking about literature can be a way of "do[ing] personal identity work" (p. 42). This is where Lucey comes the closest to articulating what he thinks reading (in general) can offer, and his choice of words—that personal identity is a kind of "work" that one can "do"—speaks to his underlying assumptions about (sexual) identity in the twenty-first century. Lucey is clear about the fact that what Colette may be trying to say is hard to pin down. That's the point. The labor in this kind of reading is not to come to an answer, but to try to understand the question.

In the second chapter, "Sexuality and the Literary Field," Lucey articulates the connection between sociology and literature. Literature is more than simply a representation of reality; it constructs it, and Lucey sets forth the way the "interference effect" (p. 50) created by certain stylistic choices (such as the "squeak" in Jean Genet's prose and Robert Pinget's "tone") allows the expression of otherwise inexpressible identities. If the opening chapter on Colette serves as a kind of prelude and sets the pattern, this chapter explains the theoretical underpinnings and an outline of what is to come.

The third chapter focuses on Jean Genet's *Querelle* and his depiction of queer sexuality. Lucey's aim here is to draw attention to "a certain amount of theoretical work going on [...] in all of Genet's novels, on the topic of indexicality (the way both individual statements within interactions and the interactions themselves point to, invoke, valorize, challenge, or rework specific cultural frameworks of intelligibility)" (p. 88). This entails more than just acknowledging something like the fact that there are men who have sex with men (MSM) yet resist labels such as "homosexual." Genet wonders about the difference between *pédé* and *enculé*, for example, a passage Lucey dwells on to bring out the idea of sexuality as "a game everyone plays but with rules no one knows" (p. 92)—or at least can articulate. Any sociolinguist would point out that, at some level, there are no true synonyms in language, so whenever there are two words that seem, at least on the surface, to mean the same thing (*pédé/enculé*), one must dig a little deeper. Lucey does so by invoking pragmatics and metapragmatics (the use of pragmatics itself), underscoring along the way how different his approach to queer sexuality is when compared to dominant paradigms of understanding derived from psychology (see, for example, p. 97). Lucey is less interested in mental events that construct or express an idea of an inner self, and more in what goes on in the choices made around language use in social interactions. That said, his work aims to bring before the conscious mind things that take place at a subconscious level, and therefore this is a sociology that is part philosophy of mind (as one might expect of someone who refers frequently to the work of Pierre Bourdieu). Again, the point is not to arrive at some "truth" about

definitions of words, but to register patterns of usage to achieve some insight into a phenomenon that is “beyond lexicalization” (p. 95).

Issues of translation crop up numerous times in this chapter, which again goes to illustrate the complexity (perhaps even futility) of trying to talk about texts written in one language using another. In the case of Genet, entire passages are untranslated in the published English edition of *Querelle* (and a philosopher might well wonder what it even means to talk about the French and the English as being the same book). But Lucey weaves together background information about the composition of *Querelle* (explaining among other things how a petty criminal might encounter the theoretical linguistics of Saussure), the publication history of the book, and these translation issues in an intriguing way.

Chapter four on Simone de Beauvoir tackles the sense many critics have that Beauvoir’s novel *L’invitée* (English title: *She Came to Stay*) of 1943 somehow has undertones of same-sex eroticism that are difficult to account for (to call them “lesbian” would be to flatten precisely those contours Lucey is attempting to sound). Lucey argues that Beauvoir’s choice to write an autobiographical novel not in the first, but in the third person was influenced by the fiction of American authors she and Sartre were reading at the time, such as John Dos Passos; yet it also stems from her realization that a third-person narrator can know more about a character than the character herself can be allowed to know. This runs counter to a certain commonsense assumption that an individual is the person best placed to speak about themselves with authority (for example, to know what their gender identity or sexual preference is), but this displacement makes perfect sense in the scheme Lucey elaborates. In Lucey’s words, “there are things to be heard in Beauvoir’s technique about which it would be unreasonable to expect her to be fully articulate on the metapragmatic level” (p. 113). Again, Lucey draws more on the sociological insights of theorists such as Erving Goffman that self is a performance than on theories that treat identity as something located inside a mind that sets out to manifest that essence externally.

Lucey pursues this inquiry in the next chapter (chapter five) by interrogating the contexts of what appear to be homophobic remarks on the part of Marguerite Duras. He frames these statements coming from what otherwise would seem to be the progressive left as part of an attempt to resist identity politics (a threat to French *laïcité*) and to clear the way for a new kind of freedom of expression (that would include the sexual). Lucey recounts Duras’s own relationship with the man who came to be known by the (feminized) name of Yann Andréa, and who might be identified as a gay man except that he chose to be in a long-term relationship with a heterosexual woman (Duras). Lucey points out that critics seem repeatedly to overlook the fact that Duras’s *La maladie de l’amour* (English title: *The Malady of Death*) is a text about homosexuality, and they express surprise when this is pointed out, but his own reading of it is lucid on this point.

In chapter six, Lucey reads works by Violette Leduc and Hervé Guibert alongside one another, pairing two highly idiosyncratic authors who illustrate the kind of people Bourdieu has in mind when he refers to “practical analysts,” explained by Lucey as “people whose experience of disequilibrium [...] allows them a certain kind of practical insight into the workings of social structures, an insight they then find ways of using their literary craft to express” (p. 183). Lucey notes that Leduc never used the word “lesbian” to describe herself, for example, only others, and that “her own sexuality never seems to coincide with the sexuality of the people she meets and enters into intimate relationships with” (p. 187), people who include other women, older gay men,

and underage boys. Sexuality, for Leduc, can't be reduced to a single variable, but is always complex when taken in context. In reading Guibert, Lucey homes in on the episode of a trip to Casablanca in *The Compassion Protocol* to illustrate his perception that "throughout Guibert's work and his life, it seems, men have sex together without managing to have any durable relationship to the word 'homosexuality'" (p. 207). For both authors, their relationship to literature and writing is part of the way they make sense of the world as misfits.

In the final chapter, Lucey concentrates on three novels by Robert Pinget, including the novel *Someone* (French title: *Quelqu'un*, 1965) that gives Lucey's own book its title. Pinget writes in the vein of the *nouveau roman*, avoiding narration while allowing characters to speak directly and for readers to draw their own conclusions from the fractures and gaps that open up in what is said. Pinget's characters gossip, for example, about third parties who appear deviant or nonnormative, but the context the speakers seem to assume (and to assume that the narratee assumes) does not seem to present these identities as problematic. What is one to make of such mixed messages? Lucey suggests that we "respond sociologically to what we might call the nonpropositional content of what we are reading, its manner, not its matter" (p. 247). Reading for such moments is what interests Lucey about literature and its uses for sociology: "What kind of critical work would be involved, we might ask, in mapping the social real that is inscribed in language in this way?" (p. 247). Lucey himself does not offer any conclusions, but the textual journey he has taken the reader on might lead one to perceive that once one enters the third dimension, *all* positions on the sexual map are unique. Had we but eyes to read and ears to listen, everyone's sexuality is perhaps a square peg trying to fit into a round hole.

NOTES

[1] Colette, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. III (Paris: Gallimard), p. 628.

[2] Colette, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. III, p. 628.

Melanie Hawthorne
Texas A&M University
m-hawthorne@tamu.edu

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