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Denis Provencher, *Queer French: Globalization, Language, and Sexual Citizenship in France*. Burlington, UK: Ashgate, 2007. 225 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, footnotes, index. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-754-64795-1.

Review by Scott Gunther, Wellesley College.

France is an exceptional place for gay people. French homosexuals have largely escaped the kind of legal repression seen in other countries over the last two hundred years--in fact, France was the first country in Europe to legalize homosexuality as early as 1791. Yet in recent decades, French gay people have also tended to live their homosexuality more discretely and to embrace identity politics with less enthusiasm than their Anglo-American counterparts. Indeed, the values of the French Republic have served both to protect and to restrain its gay citizens. The Republic has protected its gay citizens primarily through the core values of secularism, separation between public and private spheres, and universalism; together these values have been responsible for keeping homosexuality legal in France and for limiting the possibilities for more overt forms of homophobia, like those seen in the United States. But French republicanism has also created restraints. The strong separation between public and private spheres in particular means that the American notion that "the personal is political" has resonated differently in the context of France. In the words of the French writer, Jean Genet, "I'm homosexual.... How and why are idle questions--like wanting to know why my eyes are green." [1]

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the ways in which the French republican model, along with other cultural influences, produces distinctly French articulations of sexuality; with several books appearing on the topic. Enda McCaffrey's *The Gay Republic: Sexuality, Citizenship and Subversion in France* [2] looks at how in the 1990s, uniquely French rhetorical strategies in debates over the *pacte civil de solidarité* (or PACS), a form of civil union available to homosexual and heterosexual couples alike, were shaped by the French republican model. My own book, *The Elastic Closet: A History of Homosexuality, 1942-present* [3] examines the ways in which the republican model has produced distinctly French representations of homosexuality across time, in the interconnected realms of law, politics and the media. Finally, Denis Provencher's *Queer French*, examines how the influence of globalized Anglo-American gay culture is mitigated in France through a specifically French understanding of sexuality and the universalistic discourse of French republicanism.

Provencher provides a much needed analysis of the influence in France of Anglo-American understandings of homosexuality, and in particular, the ways in which the Anglo-American notions of "coming-out" and "the closet" resonate differently in a French context. His book is divided into two parts. The first is more theoretical than the second and examines the ways in which certain deeply ingrained aspects of French culture serve to resist "Americanization" of French gay and lesbian cultures. The second part is based on Provencher's ethnographic study of French narratives of "coming out" experiences and of Parisians' conceptions of their own gay and lesbian urban geographies.

Provencher begins the first part with an analysis of the gay magazine *Têtu*, where he locates evidence of gay-French "cooperative discourse," which allows for such globalized Anglo-American references as the globalized gay capital of New York, the globalized gay writer Edmund White, and the globalized queer

icon Madonna, to appear side-by-side on the magazine's pages with Franco-French references, like the French gay capital of the Marais neighborhood, the French writer André Gide, and the French queer icon Mylène Farmer. According to Provencher:

[This] gay French cooperative discourse is not simply a "vague English creole." It may call upon a select English lexicon and other elements of gay English cooperative discourse, yet there are underlying, "French" ways of articulating this gay "way of being".... The rhetoric found in the French gay press is based on a French language that shows signs of an English influence, not a creole of English simply tinged with a French accent (p. 50).

Thus Provencher argues against the notion that contemporary French homosexuals are merely speaking some kind of broken globalized gay English. He argues convincingly instead that while superficially, French gays and lesbians may appear Americanized through their occasional use of "Queer English" to define their sexual identities, if we look deeper, we will see that the meanings they assign to these borrowed terms frequently rely on a series of distinctly French tropes.

The most significant of the French tropes shaping French understandings of sexual identity is that of the sexual outlaw, which is embodied in the provocative figure of Jean Genet. Provencher locates tacit allusions to Genet in a range of French gay cultural productions, including popular French AIDS fiction, advertisements for Jean-Paul Gaultier's *Le Mâle* perfume, advertisements for the Parisian *Le Palace* nightclub, and the imagery of the pop artists Pierre and Gilles.

After the theoretical framework laid out in part one, Provencher presents the results of his ethnographic study of French gays and lesbians in the second part of the book. His methodology consisted of interviewing thirty French gay men and ten lesbians with questions that focused primarily on their experience of coming to terms with their homosexuality and their decision to tell their friends and family. During these interviews he also asked the informants if they would be willing to draw maps of "the gay city," which could be used by foreign visitors to the city, and twenty-three of the gay men and five of the lesbians agreed to do so.

Provencher uses the information from these interviews and maps as a prism, through which he adeptly brings the distinctly French forces that shape French understandings of sexual identities and urban gay geographies to light. First, with regard to the Anglo-American notion of "coming out of the closet," he isolates several specifically French influences in these individuals' narratives. For example, according to Provencher one French force that would encourage individuals to "come out" stems, consciously or not, from existentialist notions of rejecting bad faith and inauthenticity in the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. Consequently, a French person may explain the motivation for coming out more in terms of a private, moral obligation to oneself to reject self-deception than in terms of a political responsibility to make one's sexuality public, as might be the case in the American context.

Provencher locates several influences at work in the forces that would encourage French gays to stay "in the closet" or that would cause the notion of "coming out" to appear awkward in the French context. For one thing, the interviewees' narratives "draw from a larger French system of semiosis that does not allow the 'homosexual closet' to emerge in meaningful ways" (p. 115). Hence, without a closet to come out of, gays and lesbians in France may not see the purpose of an Anglo-American "coming out" experience and might concur with the quote from Genet mentioned earlier in this review, that questions related to one's sexuality are "idle" or as significant to public discussion as the color of one's eyes. As Provencher points out, this "missing homosexual closet" in the French context stems from broader differences in the ways in which French people conceptualize various social categories generally (including nationality, race, gender, class, religion) differently from Americans:

French gays and lesbians are first and foremost French, and not "homosexual," and therefore do

not systematically distinguish themselves from their fellow citizens solely on the basis of sexuality. It is also impossible for the “closet” to function with a French republican model that erases marginal sexualities and other signs of difference and does not incite “strategies of resistance” against “Frenchness” per se (p. 125).

Other factors appearing in these interviews that would discourage someone from coming out à l'américaine include the stronger separation between public and private spheres, the greater presence of the family, the stronger ties between parents and children, and finally, the greater attention paid to the symbolic order of gender difference in France than in the United States. The strong separation between public and private spheres in France has meant that French people have been inclined to express sexual identity more discretely and to embrace identity politics with less enthusiasm than their American counterparts. With regard to the presence of the family, Provencher explains that:

[In France] the goals and interests of the family always take precedence over those of the individual, who accumulates knowledge and learns cultural practices from the group. In this regard, the collective or “universal” nature of the family resembles the universalistic approach of the French Republic where the social body overtakes any individual expressions of identity (p. 121).

The specific rhetorical strategies employed by French people who do decide to come out to their friends or family are subtly different from the globalized Anglo-American forms. In particular, Provencher points out how the French informants demonstrated a need to replicate certain aspects of the normative French discourse on romantic love, commonly expressed in heterosexual contexts, in the coming out narratives they provided to friends and family. Thus, a French male homosexual who says “I love Jacques” rather than “I am gay,” is able to “reinscribe [himself] into a tradition of universalism that highlights normative love. In other words, love and sexuality remain normative conversation topics in France, whereas discussions of homosex are generally taboo” (p.125).

Finally, the role of Genet’s sexual outlaw reappears in this second part of the book as one more reason why the experience of “coming out” resonates differently in the context of France, since an appreciation of the status of sexual outlaw can mean that the Anglo-American experience of coming out implies a move toward becoming a “good sexual citizen,” which could cause an individual in the French context to regret his or her loss of sexual outlaw status.

In the end, Provencher’s argument that French gays and lesbians are shaping their own “queer French”—and that in relation to their Anglo-American counterparts, French gays are not caught in some sort of retarded development on their way to becoming global gay citizens—is not only intriguing, but also entirely compelling, making an important contribution to the study of queer cultures in France certainly, but also to our understanding of the ways in which cultures generally may be resisting or reshaping globalizing Anglo-American ideas. Though the ideas presented in *Queer French* are at times complex, the book reads easily, avoiding the abstruse prose sometimes found in queer theory texts. Provencher’s book should be on the shelves of anyone interested in queer studies, contemporary France, or the cultural effects of globalization.

NOTES

[1] Dalyn A. Miller and Minnie Van Pileup, *The Quotable Queer: Fabulous Wit and Wisdom from the Gays, the Straight, and Everybody In-Between* (Gloucester, MA: Fair Winds, 2005), 156.

[2] Enda McCaffrey, *The Gay Republic: Sexuality, Citizenship and Subversion in France* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007).

[3] Scott E. Gunther, *The Elastic Closet: A History of Homosexuality, 1942-present* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009).

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