

Diane Richardson and Steven Seidman (eds.): *Handbook of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. London: Sage Publications, 2003

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1 What is normal? This question, or rather, the challenge to traditional notions of what qualifies as normal, healthy, and natural in regard to sexuality is at the core of a thriving area of study known as gay, lesbian and queer studies (GLQ). With the *Handbook of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, edited by Diane Richardson and Steven Seidman, at long last a much needed and welcome introduction to GLQ Studies has been published. Twenty-six review essays provide a guideline through this complex and intriguing area. In the best sense of a handbook, this collection both introduces the student to the theory and research done over the last thirty years and serves as a reference book for the general reader already acquainted with the basics and interested in exploring the diverse aspects of GLQ studies.

2 Opened by a lucid, easy to read introduction by the editors, the Handbook is divided into four larger parts, "History and Theory," "Identity and Community," "Institutions," and "Politics." The introduction is directed at a student audience and well deserves its name. On a mere 11 pages, it succeeds in presenting the key debates and positions of GLQ studies from a historical perspective, starting with the early 20th century. It also serves as a general introduction to the four main parts which cover as diverse aspects as politics, health, education, cyber-queers, concepts of space and gender, the queer diaspora, age, queer families, religious views of homosexuality, globalization and national identity from a queer perspective.

3 I would recommend reading the first six essays under the heading "History and Theory" first, since it provides the reader with some of the basic concepts, historical developments and recurrent questions helpful to the understanding of the complex issues and individual aspects discussed in the remaining three sections. Barry D. Adam's essay on the state of GLQ studies at the turn of the twenty-first century, for example, gives an account of "the rise of queer theory" and its productive if at times problematic relationship with gay and lesbian activism. Charting the past, present and future of "The Heterosexual/Homosexual Binary," Sasha Roseneil gives an excellent overview over both modern and postmodern conceptions of sexual identity and the impact queer theory has had in this respect. This impact is manifest in what she calls "queer tendencies" that include an "auto-critique" within lesbian and gay communities, which produce a fracturing of modern homosexual/lesbian/gay identities, a decentering of heterorelations and the emergence of a "hetero-reflexivity," i.e. the fact that heterosexuality increasingly becomes "a conscious state which has to be produced,

self-monitored, thought about and, for some, defended." (35) Peter M. Nardi's contribution on "The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Studies?" engages in a meta-debate about the effects GLQ studies can have on the mainstream (mainstream culture, mainstream sociology) without becoming assimilated. This essay might be of special interest to the student because Nardi examines several introductory sociology textbooks and the ways in which they address or ignore queer theory and the issue of sexuality. Lynda Birke's foray into the ways homosexuality is conceptualized in science, especially biology, is both fun to read and equips one with all the arguments needed to defy the stereotype that homosexuality is "unnatural" or some defect in the genes.

4 The approach of the *Handbook* is predominantly sociological, but reaches out into other disciplines and thus provides a map of the intersecting discourses on GLQ in the academia. The contributions inquire into a wide range of issues from, for example, politics, cultural studies, human geography, biology, theology, education, social work, law and criminology. This shows the extent to which GLQ studies are an interdisciplinary field that can serve as a valuable interface and forum for discussion between the disciplines. Even under this restriction to a predominantly sociological focus, the volume extends well over 450 pages. Given this fact, it is perhaps pedantic or utopian to complain about the relative absence of the humanities, but I will risk incurring both charges. While Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick are quoted throughout, the main body of research and theory done in the fields of literature, drama, film, philosophy, cultural history etc. is largely ignored or enters the discussion only obliquely as discursive traces. A complementary project from this perspective would certainly be very welcome to students and scholars alike.

5 The collection is assembled by two leading scholars in the sociology of sexuality and the list of contributors reads like a roll call of eminent UK and US scholars. Some contributors, however, are only just embarked on their academic career or have avoided the structures of academia altogether and come to GLQ studies from an activist's or journalist's perspective. I mention this not in order to belittle their contributions - on the contrary, their essays are outstanding in scope and extremely well written - but because this deliberate disregard of institutional hierarchies is typical of GLQ studies.

6 To sum up, the *Handbook of Gay and Lesbian Studies* offers an up-to-date portrait of the latest state of GLQ studies, its theoretical aspects as well as its political agendas. The essays function as an introduction to individual areas of research and, bolstered by at times extensive bibliographies, as an incentive to further reading and research. The concise overview over historical developments in the field, which some of the essays provide, endows

GLQ studies with a tradition (always important for a relatively young, and highly contested area of study). Moreover, they highlight the interconnectedness and contingencies of the field, a perspective very much characteristic of queer discourse itself. In keeping with this, most essays also suggest future agendas to be explored and self-critically point out blind spots that need to be addressed. What makes this volume so intriguing, then, is not only the outstanding quality and accessibility of the individual essays, but the constant crossing of lines between disciplines, within the academic hierarchies, between scholarly research and activism which deconstructs these categories and show the extent to which the concerns of GLQ studies are at the core of contemporary social dynamics.

7 All in all, if you wish to study the sociology of sexuality from a queer perspective, the *Handbook of Gay and Lesbian Studies* is the volume you will want to work with. The price of £ 85.00 for the hardcover is a bit daunting, though, and the *Handbook* will probably be found on a library shelf rather than at the student's bedside.