Reviews


Reviewed by Sharon Crowley, Arizona State University

A few days after Matthew Shepard was savagely beaten on the outskirts of Laramie, Wyoming, a homecoming float at nearby Colorado State University depicted a scarecrow covered with anti-gay epithets. The scarecrow alluded, of course, to Shepard’s having been tied to a fence by his attackers. The offending student organizations were subsequently disciplined by the University, but the homecoming float might be said to be a spectacularly tasteless representation, nonetheless, of the common sense of Colorado’s citizens. Six years prior to Shepard’s death, they had passed an amendment to the state constitution that denied “minority status, quota preferences, protected status, or claim of discrimination” to gay and bisexual persons (qtd. in Cobb 120).

The connection I have just made might not stand up in court; using traditional means of reasoning, it is hard to draw a direct line between the passage of discriminatory legislation and subsequent events. It is equally difficult to connect these events to anti-gay discourse emanating from the Reverend James Dobson’s Focus on the Family—a conservative religious think-tank located in Colorado Springs. Despite this difficulty, Americans know on some level that all these things are connected. They are welded together by an ideologic—a tight weave of beliefs and emotions that is largely impervious to evidence and reason. Americans easily recognize the affective power of beliefs residing within

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dominant ideologics—racism, sexism, heterosexism—whether these beliefs are actually uttered or not. When we hear that a man has been chained and dragged behind a pickup truck, we recognize immediately that he must be African American, and we know, just as readily, what motivated his murderers. Just as we know, when a jailed serial killer confesses to yet more crimes, that photographs of his victims will depict women’s faces rather than those of men. And when a gay man is beaten and left for dead on a Wyoming prairie, the adjective “gay” signals to us that this was not a robbery or simple assault but a crime motivated by hate.

The term “homophobia” captures only part of the emotional juice on which gay-bashing feeds. “Heterosexism” is more accurate insofar as it captures the dichotomous hierarchy forwarded by this ideologic, while “heteronormativity” captures its authoritarian, coercive bent. In Intimacy, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner coin the phrase “national heterosexuality” in order to articulate the discursive climate in which heterosexism circulates: “National heterosexuality is the mechanism by which a core national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship. A familial model of society displaces the recognition of structural racism and other systemic inequalities” (313). Within this national imaginary, then, American citizenship is located with the heterosexual family, freely granted only to persons who are willing to reproduce such families. The imagined connection of citizenship to heterosexual marriage explains why “gay marriage” appears as such a threat to some straights. It is as though there is only enough American citizenship to go around; if marriage rights are granted to gays, the pool of citizenship will be contaminated, perhaps drained altogether.

Foucault taught us in The History of Sexuality that heteronormativity serves the modern nation-state, and so perhaps it is not entirely fair to say that religious belief is primary among the discourses that nourish hatred of gays. And yet the most ardent and vocal defenders of heteronormativity speak from pulpits and from faith-based political groups such as Focus on the Family and the virulently anti-gay ministry of the Reverend Fred Phelps, whose group brandished signs bearing slogans such as “Fag Dies God Laughs” at Shepard’s funeral:
Michael Cobb takes the title of his book, which explores the affective hold exerted by religious discourse on American beliefs, from Phelps' website. He opens *God Hates Fags* with the claim that American nationalism is tightly woven together with Christian religiosity. Taking note of the religious language that emerged within public discourse after 9/11, for example, he writes: "What these songs and strong words about God and the blessed nation teach us is that powerful expressions of unity are often religious rhetorics... The words of God are conveniently and easily used to express the deep sentiments of an anxiously conservative and collective population of people" (6-7). The rightness of this observation is underscored by the small details of daily life in America: "In God We Trust" is printed on the quarter we put in the parking meter; "under God" appears in the pledge of allegiance made by schoolchildren every weekday morning. America is a Christian nation in the sense that Iraq is an Islamic nation. That is to say, despite the fact that many Iraqis and many Americans are secularist in practice, if not in self-identification, in both countries public life and language are saturated with religious values. The Iraqis' enshrinement of *shari' a* in their constitution is mirrored in the enormous body of American law that regulates sex practices and drug use in accordance with Christian teaching. And these days it's not hard to find examples of political practices that are inflected with religious belief: President Bush vetoes embryonic stem-cell research but funds "faith-based" groups that advocate "abstinence-only" sex education; vocal members of the religious right attempt to banish the teaching of evolution in public schools and pass laws that force women to carry any and all pregnancies to term. And an argument can be made that the American invasion of Iraq was attractive to some movers and shakers because it could appeal to apocalyptist belief in the second coming of Christ.

Cobb's book tracks some more subtle ways in which American nationalism is linked to "the Christian conception of the sacred"; he writes that "this link endures for reasons that are less about sacred devotion and more about being able [to] unify the many into the one" (26). Relying on Kenneth Burke's discussion of "god terms" in *Rhetoric of Religion*, Cobb points out that religious discourse bestows authority, seeks an "ultimate entitlement" (67). Burke noticed that religious lan-
language functions as if it points to eternal and unchanging meaning, and because of this, as Cobb remarks, "religious words thus create an aura of underspecified wholeness that, somehow, points to a significant 'essence'" (68). Religious language "produces value" because it claims authority regardless of its relation to any context. This analysis demystifies a favored tactic of the religious right, whose arguments often seem to consist of ritualized repeated references to Bible verses. Because ritualized invocation is precisely the point of religious language, biblical verses are seldom quoted—they are simply referred to, by number, as if the citation of a passage from Leviticus is sufficient to authorize the truth of whatever it says. Never mind that scholars have raised serious questions about the nature of the proscriptions that appear in Leviticus. It simply does not matter to contemporary conservative Christians that Leviticus’ proscription likely has to do with ancient Jews’ need to maintain ritual and ethnic distinctiveness from other tribes, and that in any case the Old Testament exerted little influence on the moral thought of early Christians (see John Boswell’s Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality). Religious language negates history, defies history, because it must carry the timeless sense of uber-authority required to legitimate whatever its proselytizers want, need, to believe. And believers’ desire that some words convey unquestionable authority is far more important, religiously and politically, than whether religious speech is actually granted such authority by others.

On July 30, 2006, the New York Times featured a story about an evangelical minister named Gregory A. Boyd, who refused his parishioners’ repeated requests to bring political issues to the fore in their church (see Laurie Goodstein’s "Disowning Conservative Politics"). Reverend Boyd told the Times that he had “first become alarmed” about the explicit connection being made between culture and the cross “while visiting another megachurch’s worship service on a Fourth of July years ago. The service finished with the chorus singing ‘God Bless America’ and a video of fighter jets flying over a hill silhouetted with crosses” (21). Subsequently he delivered a series of sermons in his own megachurch, arguing that Christians should not “seek ‘power over’ others—by controlling governments, passing legislation or fighting wars” (21). Apparently a thousand members of the congregation left his church as a result of those
sermons. Unlike Reverend Boyd, departing believers quoted by the *Times* expressed no qualms about articulating an explicit connection between “fighter jets mixed up with the cross” as he put it. The connection between religious belief and nationalism inevitably advantages the state; ritual invocations of nationalist emblems legitimate state decisions by sealing them with the authority of God. This is why flag-burning is an important issue for conservative Christians: an assault on the flag is an affront to God.

Cobb is interested in religious language because he is searching for a way to turn or trope religious expressions of anti-gay hatred into arguments that may be useful to queers and others who want to change the climate of hatred that negatively affects the lives of gay and trans people. He is, in other words, following Aristotle’s advice to take up the available means of persuasion. Cobb harbors no illusions about the argumentative climate in which opponents of anti-gay discourse work; much of his book is devoted to demonstrations that currently there are no very good arguments available to pro-gay activists that will convince an anxiously conservative collective audience. Even though tolerance is built into the disestablishment clause of the Constitution, it does not provide a workable argumentative strategy for gay advocates because the opposition does not wish to tolerate homosexuality. The language of Colorado’s Amendment 2 makes this absolutely clear, as did Justice Scalia’s dissent from the majority opinion when that case was heard by the Supreme Court. Scalia claimed that Coloradans are “entitled to be hostile toward homosexual conduct” (qtd. in Cobb 123). To be entitled is not necessarily to have the law on one’s side, and with Burke’s analysis of religious language ringing in my ears it is difficult for me to read Scalia’s use of “entitled” as a reference to the mere law of the land. Nor is the liberal discourse of “rights” an entirely satisfactory venue for combating hatred and disenfranchise of gays, given that the national heterosexual imaginary does not accord citizenship—the prerequisite for the attainment of rights—to gay people. Cobb’s endnotes pointed me toward Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini’s *Love the Sin*, a fully developed argument about the inadequacy of the notions of rights and tolerance as grounds for claims to sexual freedom, and I heartily recommend their work to anyone who is interested in this issue.
Given the paucity of available alternatives, Cobb reluctantly recommends that queers adopt a "like-race" strategy. This entails that gay advocates analogize the civic situation of gay and trans people to that faced by African Americans in the 1950s. He is not very happy with this recommendation, nor am I. For one thing, "like-race" arguments are dangerous because they may elide important differences between racism and heterosexism, and from some points of view they may seem to diminish the suffering of the disparate groups who are subjected to the nasty affect that infuses these ideologies, not to mention the material effects wrought by their attendant practices. For another, history dictates that a "like-race" argument, to be effective in the current climate, will necessarily stand on the ground of civil rights. And as Cobb points out, advocates who adopt rights-based arguments are actually claiming to have been wronged; "that is, the rights one has in a political culture emerge less as a definable value one protects as much as they become the sign of one's defenselessness. Rights are often at question when they are not available, not allotted" (145). The "like-race" strategy, like it or not, depicts gays as victims. Absent the appalling history of slavery and Jim Crow, this strategy may not achieve even the limited success that it has yielded for African Americans. And the national imaginary to which gays appeal for inclusion is slightly different from that which was in place during the heyday of the modern civil rights movement. Given the current high profile of conservative Christian ideologic, the "like-race" analogy depicts gays as supplicants for inclusion in a family-centered imaginary that is, frankly, not all that attractive to some gays and straights alike.

Despite its limitations, "gay rights" is currently the de facto strategy used by gay advocates; for example, the attorneys who took Amendment 2 to the Supreme Court used precedents set in civil rights cases to get it struck down. And Cobb demonstrates that the analogy is already in circulation among conservative Christians, and it is hard to gainsay him on this point. He notes the historical coincidence of a series of Supreme Court decisions regarding civil rights with the court's rejection of prayer in school, and cites a member of Congress who said at the time: "They put Negroes into the schools and now they have driven God out of them" (qtd. in Cobb 127). Cobb comments:
Somehow the removal of God permitted the entrance of "Negroes" into the national classroom, and indeed into full participation in the national citizenry. Religion was cast as the traditional values that are now threatened in a regrettabley secularizing nation. If there were no longer room for God, if that's what was jettisoned for an increasing devotion to civil rights and tolerance, then the Christian conservatives were given an obligation to maintain, perhaps at extreme costs, the eroding religious values that are part of not only the traditions of the United States, but also part of its sovereign power that makes the nation a "light unto all nations." (127–28)

If Cobb's analysis is correct, then the conservative Christians who backed Amendment 2 may have feared that "affirmative action and other coercive means of acceptance and tolerance would prevent people from freely expressing their disdain for and disapproval of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and trans people" (122). That is, conservative Christians' dislike of these policies stems from a perceived imposition on their beliefs and practices; they are no longer free to demonstrate their hatred of members of these groups, at least in public. And so they furiously police the boundaries of citizenship as this is defined in their national imaginary in order to prevent inclusion of yet another despised group. (This injury—loss of freedom to hate openly—seems like pretty small potatoes when set alongside the history of atrocities suffered by people who are subjected to racism and heterosexism. This is not to deny that the loss is deeply felt.)

And so Cobb recommends that gay advocates exploit the extant analogy between African-American struggles for civil rights and their own. Specifically, he suggests that "queers take on the language of injury that conforms... with an impoverished metaculture legibility that cannot and will not describe too much difference" (146). That is to say, difference can be made legible in the current climate only if that difference is somehow inscribed with suffering or loss. In his reading of James Baldwin's Giovanni's Room, Cobb notes that "people crave representation, regardless how lethal such representations, at the level of representation, may seem to the imagined integrity of a private body" (63). Baldwin used explicitly religious language to make the body of the queer legible, and Cobb argues that gay advocates can follow his lead: "Religious language is a strong language that simultaneously hides and articulates the queer within the more 'normal' and recognizable narra-
tives of racial violence, pleasure, and survival that people understand as constituting the public, however intimate or pathological that public might be” (63–64).

Cobb harbors no illusions about the fictional status of the strong religious language he recommends, language that does not “conform to the actual or accurate description of sexual orientation’s lived experiences” (146). He realizes that this language of victimization is “a form of rhetorical shorthand,” and he is well aware that such deceits are dangerous; however, as he notes, “Living without this shorthand is perhaps just as dangerous” (146). In God Hates Fags, then, Cobb makes an arresting argument for the necessity of sophistry. Sophistry is useful within regimes where dissent is not possible or where counter-arguments to the prevailing orthodoxy are not easily heard. I think we live in such a regime, and if that is so, it may be that Cobb is onto something important.


Reviewed by Julie K. Ward, Loyola University at Chicago

It might seem surprising to some to observe that two and a half decades after critics declared Simone de Beauvoir’s work excessively academic and out of step with current feminism, we should find ourselves in a period of flourishing Beauvoir studies. Much has changed since the period of the 1970s when graduate faculty in philosophy advised would-be Beauvoir scholars to study Sartre instead. To begin with, Sartre’s precedence and philosophical influence over Beauvoir have come increasingly under scrutiny in the 1990s, largely through the work of Beauvoir scholars such as Debra Bergoffen, Edward Fullbrook, Kate Fullbrook, Sonia Kruks, Eva Lundren-Gothlin, Margaret Simons, and Karen Vintges, to name a few leading voices. In general, this earlier, “second wave” of Beauvoir scholarship seeks to describe the unique