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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/8453>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.8453

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

"Evi Haggipavlu on Margaret Sonser Breen's *Narratives of Queer Desire*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], Book reviews, document 16, Online since 03 June 2010, connection on 31 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/8453> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.8453>

This text was automatically generated on 31 August 2022.



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Evi Haggipavlu on Margaret Sonser Breen's *Narratives of Queer Desire*

¹ Margaret Sönser Breen, *Narratives of Queer Desire: Deserts of the Heart*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Pp. 216. ISBN: 978-0-230-22388-2

Margaret Sönser Breen's *Narratives of Queer Desire: Deserts of the Heart* seeks to explore literature's potential to act as an agent of activism and social change by offering authors/readers viable strategies of resistance against oppression. More specifically it asks whether literature can offer the means for discerning and validating queer subjectivity providing thus the space for authors and readers alike to claim their humanity; when that very humanity is missed in all other realms of existence, the political, religious, cultural and medical to name a few. Ultimately what this book asks is how literature of a specific kind answers the question of what it means to be human.

In chapter one, Sönser Breen shows how lesbian authors by engaging Bunyan's progress narrative structure with its happy ending, either fall into its logic, as in the case of Hall's *Well of Loneliness* whose failure to adequately challenge Bunyan's prescriptions results in a failure to offer its (lesbian) characters the possibility of a happy life, or do not as in the case of Jane Rule. By presenting lesbianism as more fluid—a direct challenge of Bunyan's presentation of existence as teleological—Rule's *Deserts of the Heart* shows the possibility of multiple interpretations on the question of human happiness making in this way, Bunyan's interpretation of the same question one of many.

Sönser Breen's second chapter focuses on the real question behind the same sex marriage debate namely the question of what it means to be human—or rather who gets to be human and who does not through legal marriage. Such a focus exposes marriage as a discriminatory practice and reveals its inherent logic of exclusion. As part of the American democratic discourse the debate centers on the assumption that by expanding marriage to include gays and lesbians there will inevitably be an expansion of democracy. That some will always be left out lingering in the margins of society is what those in favor of legalizing same sex marriage miss, however. Their position privileges marriage as the preferred lifestyle and does not allow one to think about alternative lifestyles that may reflect the needs of those living in difference.

Legalizing same sex marriage legitimizes at the same time an ideal with a history of exclusion which always stands as an answer to its negative other-- "sexual disorder." Especially powerful in this excellent chapter is her critique of Andrew Sullivan's homophobia—or better still queerphobia—evident in his haste to adopt a same sex marriage stance as a way of distancing himself from those others not like him.

In chapter three, Sönser Breen invites us to *read for fantasy*—reading that is for renewal and transformation. She rethinks the term melancholia and shifts the emphasis away from sadness and pathology to a "politicized melancholia" as an act of resistance—mourning of a past access to which is denied when the nation as a whole allows certain of its more painful aspects (i.e. the AIDS crisis) to be lost from the collective consciousness into oblivion. Through melancholic engagements, the epistemological limits of an oppressive "reality" that treats some as better suited for inclusion in its collective memory than others, is challenged. This takes place in the realm of fantasy—the realm of possibility—which allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise. Chapter four focuses on *writing for renewal* and posits storytelling as transformative for the lives of lesbians who experienced sexual abuse as children. Art is presented in this chapter as a site of visibility and truth telling.

The final chapter focuses on the ways in which monstrous otherness can exist in the mode of translation in empowering ways as both something "awfully perverse" and at the same time as something "desirable." "Monstrous translation" for Sönser Breen "is deeply implicated in the making of human community and the community's understanding of humanity" (117). Translation serves as a gatekeeper of values and it exposes the codes through which people "identify communities of meaning and their inhabitants" (118). What becomes culturally appropriate for national or international transmission is part of translation's selective process which always involves a loss. Because of the possibility of multiple meanings translation has the potential to destabilize those very norms/values that people of a given cultural community take for granted and by extension identify with. In destabilizing thus communities of meaning and their inhabitants, monstrous translation can be seen as a figure of agency for queer bodies. In her reading of Almodovar's *All About my mother*, Sönser Breen suggests that the film in translation for an American audience embraces the "deserts of the heart" and rethinks the question of what it means to be human as it effectively challenges the policing of all human borders taking place in the US. Ultimately the film offers a new vision of community with "various members, no matter how foreign, how alien either their bodies or their languages might seem" (144).

- 7 Although the book almost exclusively concentrates on literature's potential to politicize queer issues and not that of the other arts, references to other art forms are made that allow one to extend Sönser Breen's point about literature's potential to transform ways of thinking to other art forms as well—or at least consider such a possibility. In chapter five Pedro Almodovar's *All About My Mother*'s ability to translate "monstrous ways of being" into human for an English speaking audience dominated in their ways of thinking by the Hollywood industry is considered. Interestingly Sönser Breen discusses the film as a form of literature and not as cinema—a different art form. In chapter one she attributes Jane Rule's title of her book *Desert of the Heart* to W.H. Auden's *In Memory of W.B. Yeats* and briefly considers poetry's potential for political and social change. Finally in chapter three she uses first Thomas Cole's art to show how oil painting focusing on nature ultimately reveals the need to retreat from traditional

conceptions of time and space—to the realm of fantasy?—where melancholic yearnings become possible; but also contemporary US activist art that exposes the homophobia, racism and sexism that provided the ground for the AIDS crisis in the 80's. Can art, Sönser Breen asks, provide legitimacy by revealing the humanity of those occupying the social margins or to use the book's subtitle, of those occupying the “deserts of the heart”?

- 8 We could think of Sönser Breen's book as a call to *read for queerness*, if by that we understand reading as way to challenge ossified ways of thinking that de-realize—to use Butler's term—certain groups of people by relegating them to the shadows. Taking her lead from the theorizing done by women of color, Sönser Breen shows an understanding of oppression as multiply experienced. Her analysis reveals that queerness designates a term that acknowledges that it is not enough to understand oppression from any one perspective alone but only in the way these (gender, sexuality, class and race) intersect with one another. It is the complexity of multiplication and not of simple addition that makes queerness in Sönser Breen's sense a powerful force of resistance. *Reading for queerness* reveals the interlocking “isms” at play in the life of the oppressed in the novels she analyzes and allows their shadow-existence to come to the fore in a community of human monsters speaking in many languages.

9 One wonders, however, whether reading for queerness can go beyond the classroom or academia. Analyses such as the author's disclose such a possibility as through translation more and more of our taken for granted “democratic” world comes under question and we begin to hear the plight of other people speaking of their differential but very human world in their language.

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