

7-5-2012

Prometheus Queer: An Interview With Daniel Allen Cox

Matthew Halse
matthewhalse@gmail.com

Dock Currie
dockcurrie@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard>

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Halse, Matthew and Currie, Dock (2012) "Prometheus Queer: An Interview With Daniel Allen Cox," *The Word Hoard*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 2.
Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard/vol1/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Word Hoard by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact kmarsha1@uwo.ca.

The *Word Hoard*

/wɔrd/hɔrd/ n. 1. A journal open to all Arts and Humanities scholars.

Prometheus Queer: An Interview With Daniel Allen Cox by Matthew Halse and Dock Currie

I: Introduction

The myth of Prometheus has been associated with many concepts and narratives in contemporary life, though normally confined to the perspectives of technology, technics, and tool-being. But if one were to wrest the myth from its solely technical resonances, could the progeny of Prometheus not also be said to be queer? Could the dissent and resistances of queer communities not be said to be promethean? Having stolen fire from the gods, the gift that Prometheus confers to humanity is indeed not simply technical, it is that which is unsanctioned, not authorized, and different. His gift makes us those who, in our very being, lie outside of the count and scope of systematic and theological orders imposed from above. Enter the prose of Montréal novelist Daniel Allen Cox, whose queer conceptual framework grapples with this originary exclusion.

There is fire in Cox's work. Whether in the subtle motif of cigarette burns in his early novella *Tattoo This Madness In*, in the tattooed ring of fire around the Jaeven Marshall's midsection in his sub-sequent novel, *Shuck*, or in the supersaturation of incendiary themes in his more recent work, *Krakow Melt*, it is always there—as Cox notes, “you can see fires and the queers who start them for kilometers, especially at night” (KM 9). Our seeing both the fires and their queer instigators renders *Krakow Melt* as a meditation on optics, on the ability to truly see one another. Cox writes “I was fighting not a man who dis-

liked homos but a whole country that refused to acknowledge we existed” (KM 8). Fire's prevalence throughout the novel becomes the most drastic and dramatic means to inaugurate such visibility; to “win the war of visibility” (KM 9), whatever the cost might be, as Radek notes. Fire saturates Cox's work but in such a way as to always remains indelibly ambiguous, having both the power to incinerate, yet also to cauterize wound, to kill or to cure; as he writes in *Tattoo This Madness In*, “cleansing, burning and healing at the same time” (TTMI 56).

Fire confers upon Cox's characters both an otherwise unachievable autonomy and a sociopolitical mandate; as such, they must work out their relationships to fire, constructing an ethics of when and in which contexts fire is meant to be deployed. Interestingly, this is done in tandem to the engagement of sexuality, a call for each character to confront, or construct, a relationship to the problematics of sexual orientation. Sexuality, too, becomes deployable in a remarkably similar sense: “someday... we're going to need you to fuck openly,” Karol notes, “we might have to fuck in the streets until people get it. No more hiding” (KM 25). The analog is such that the destructive and creative potential of fire is in a certain sense coextensive with the destructive and creative potential of queerness, though both are double-edged, and either might sear in or seal off a wound. In *Krakow Melt*, for example, Cox's protagonist—a practitioner of the “art” of pyromania—argues that “you have to destroy in order to create”

(KM 8), that “all fires have a purpose” (KM 8), but as his incendiary other, Dorota, later questions, “I’m starting to wonder if fire is only regenerative and useful when it happens spontaneously” (KM 127). Indeed even Radek eventually concedes that he must “either...upgrade to real arson or quit fire altogether, because I haven’t done a single thing to change life for queers in Poland” (KM 123). In this sense Cox’s work is consistent with the tensions that run through Greek myth between *prometheia* and *epimethia*, literally foresight and afterthought. And this is to Cox’s credit, for as Bernard Stiegler notes, the figure of Prometheus by itself, “makes no sense” (186).

Prometheus and Epimetheus were brothers, sons of the titan Lapetus, and were tasked by the gods to allocate virtues to the newly formed creatures: speed, strength, sharp claws, sharp teeth, venom and the like. Epimetheus begged his brother to let him do the allocation and Prometheus unwisely consented, returning to find all the creatures provided for except for humanity. In order to correct his brother’s misallocation, Prometheus “stole from Hephaestus and Athena the gift of skill in the arts [*ten enteknen sophian*], together with fire—for without fire there was no means [*amekhanon*] for anyone to possess or use this skill—and bestowed it on man.” For this crime Prometheus was punished by Zeus to be tied to the top of a rock in the Caucasus mountains and to have his liver eaten out every day by a great eagle, only to have it regenerate overnight and eaten again—a punishment hardly lost on Cox, as Dorota, praising Radek’s fire, opines that it might “carve the liver right out of this country” (KM 126). The gods could not recover the stolen gift, however, as it had spread too rapidly, and humanity was itself too diffuse. That is, insofar as our skill in the arts and our capacity to make fire is owed to the perpetration of a crime, our irreconcilability with the order of the

gods would forever be manifest as a fundamental and essential difference, a queering in the sense of difference as the “always outside of the bag” of the divvying up of metaphysical goods or capacities. These are technics, yes, but also pure difference: that which is stolen by Prometheus and given to us is the unsanctioned, and as such, the possibility of our being unsanctioned, the possibility of our being outside of the codified order of the gods. We read fire as queerness, the technology of alterity, the technics of difference. As Cox notes, the gallery in which the character Radek presents his art—scale popsicle models cities created to reenact famously destructive fires—is named *Czlowiek Obcy*, that is, Polish for “outsider.”

Cox’s work follows, and subsequently adds to, a long tradition of work engaged with queer dissent, civil disobedience and the ethics of resistance. The countercultures and counterpublics thus rendered reshape the normative, and disallow commonplace acceptance of inequality and forced similitude: the Radeks and Dorotas of this world are here not only given voice, but opportunity to execute their political and social agendas. In what follows, Cox responds to the nature of dissent, inclusivity within the queer movement, our (queer) promethean focus, and the very role of literature itself within resistance movements. At turns original, funny, and starkly honest, each answer has been left unedited and uncensored.

II: Interview

Matthew Halse and Dock Currie: The discussion of “queer dissent” naturally requires elaboration of your particular understandings of both “queer” and “dissent.” Beginning with the latter, broadly speaking, dissent within your novels exceeds something mere-

ly felt to become something which compels action; for example, where Radek “carve[s] the liver right out of the country” (126) through acts of arson, his motivations appear to stem from an intense belief that dissent must result in publicly manifested actions. To what extent, say, are we (morally, socially) obligated to overtly register dissatisfaction? Where is the divide between private dissatisfaction and public dissent?

Daniel Allen Cox: Hi boys. My politics do not line up neatly with those of the characters in my books. Some match up, but not enough to justify an accurate comparison. If you ask me about activism, I will tell you what I think. If you ask me about the characters, I will tell you what they think, and we will talk about writing. But I don’t know as much about Radek as you think I do. So I will talk about me.

For me, it’s a question of format/medium. These days I’m more inclined to speak up when I can control the context. I’m more likely to sign a petition if there is a clear introductory text and I know who the audience will be. With TV, you don’t know how the footage will be edited, or what it will be juxtaposed against. I have many opinions about social justice issues that don’t get aired because I can’t find the right forum. The answer, of course, is to create our own forums. That way, we won’t have to worry about the private/public split so much.

MH/DC: American theorist Lauren Berlant would potentially refer to Radek’s acts of arson as examples of “non-family based forms of political engagement” (5) both because his actions run counter to—or even seek to destroy—“a familial politics of the national future” (1) and that they would be identified by the generalized mainstream public as “ridiculous and even dangerous to the nation” (5). The

political divide, then, to which Berlant speaks—that is, the normalized political engagement “from the profession of politician” (5) versus an ostensibly renegade activist—is seen by proponents of (dare we say it!) family values as one which undercuts the very nation itself. In this light, your work’s advocacy for this sense of undercutting and the tangible political results of dissent is particularly interesting. Do you see acts of dissent as undermining institutionalized politics, or do you feel it has other aims? Are state-sanctioned politics and dissidence mutually exclusive?

DAC: Yeah, I believe in the subversion of systems. Are you asking me what happens if two people, say Chip and Dale, are fighting for a similar cause, and Chip runs for public office while Dale is an organizer who prefers to work on the fringe, and Chip says, “just stop it, you’re embarrassing me throwing those acorns at the windows,” and Dale responds, “Indubitably, sir, indubitably, but how else are people going to listen?”

Is that the question? If so, then these chipmunks need to think about a few things. Chip and Dale are doing the same work. The only difference is that one is inside and the other outside. Think of the partnership possibilities. Chip just has to unlock the door and distract everyone while Dale comes in and steals the acorns. Dale can say things that Chip could never get away with. Chip is the only one with access to the money. Because they are working toward similar ends, Chip shouldn’t complain about being embarrassed—it’s Dale’s job to embarrass. On the other hand, Chip will blow smoke, obscure the issues, and it will piss Dale off (the last thing you want is a pissed-off chipmunk—trust me, that’s why I had to get a tetanus shot). But in the end, they both need each other. Can Chip and Dale be one person? Of

course. Enter Bridget DePape. I venture to say the best way to rob a house (read: change a power structure) is to have someone on the inside, and someone on the outside. Feel free to make an Xtranormal video out of this.

DC/MH: We'd like to turn to the metaphor of fire, as it appears in your work and as a metaphor for queer dissent. In *Krakow Melt* the role of fire seems to be one in which is both constitutive of us and one that surpasses us, though one in which we are nevertheless deeply implicated, as the discussion of the fire tetrahedron gestures towards. You write that "we're confirmed as the fourth triangle of an inseparable pyramid, yet some will spend their last kilojoule denying it, refusing to see that the only way to grow is to lose what's precious" (19). To what extent is fire an originary and mythological aspect of our makeup and to what extent is fire particular to the cause of queer dissent and resistance?

DAC: Fire is transgressive. It breaks safety codes. For some, fire is a political statement, they use it to announce themselves to peers and allies in the dark. For others, it is read as violent. The arson scenes in the book have gotten strong reactions. BOMBLOG said that the novel "violently acquiesces to the fascist majority." And yet for others, fire is transformative. My 2007 house fire was the most transformative experience of my life, and I'm lucky to have had it. This conversation is making me want to smoke a cigarette. I quit eight years ago. See what I mean about transgression? Water can also be an apt metaphor for transformation in the queer community. Think about what water does these days. And of course fire and water have an interesting relationship, not necessarily oppositional.

MH/DC: Following on the theme of fire in your work, in the myth of Prometheus, Zeus tricks Epimetheus into accepting the "gift" of women, the figure of Pandora—literally meaning "all gifts"—on behalf of humanity. Pandora having been accepted by Epimetheus opens the jar she carried with her, setting loose "evil and grievous toil and sore diseases that bring the fates of men to death" (Hesiod). In *Krakow Melt*, Radek meets a similar fate, one could argue, in light of his filiation with Dorota—the uneasy relationship with women being highlighted by the reticence Radek's friend Tomek displays to her participation in the march for queer solidarity. Where the figure of Pandora asks for redefinition of the relation to 'woman,' Dorota—Radek's friend, sometimes lover, and an active participant in the novel's rendering of queer dissent—asks us to redefine who can speak for queerness itself. We ask this because in many ways Dorota blurs the division between queer and not-queer; that is, she does not self-identify as queer but speaks (and marches, protests, and forms allegiances) with queers. In this light, what limits, if any, do you place upon participation within queer solidarity? Who can dissent on behalf of queers?

DAC: Anyone can dissent about a social justice issue that bothers them and the people they care about. They should make their ally status clear, so it's obvious they're speaking on behalf of themselves, not the people they defend. Allies shouldn't be surprised if the people they defend insist on having enough public space to speak for themselves, so that the issues are articulated by those most affected, whose lives and bodies are at stake, at risk. Instead, allies should proactively help create space for self-representation. Should this, should that. Listen to me on

my high horse. I guess I just mean I'd like to do more co-conspiring with people.

MH/DC: Recent debates within queer theory have sharply divided a gay political agenda for normalcy from a call for queers to “take as their point of departure the perspective of those at the bottom of the scale of respectability: queers, sluts, prostitutes, trannies, club crawlers, and other lowlifes” (Warner ix). In *Krakow Melt* the deployment of fire as a destructive and creative element seems to place you firmly on the political side of the sluts, et al., and yet your characters—Radek not the last of them—wants to advance the cause of ostensibly queer solidarity. How do reconcile this apparent bias towards the spectacular or extreme with your attempts to write and write for the whole of queerness? Is the whole of queerness representable?

DAC: Is this Warner person paraphrasing someone else, or using their own terminology? I doubt a queer theorist would use the word “trannies” these days. That said, I am always on the political side of the sluts! Viva sluthood! No, there is no single queer identity. And within the different identities that find themselves working, partying and fucking together, I find there is less and less consensus on what objectives deserve priority of energy, attention, and funding. That's a good thing. Homogeneity will kill us. But I don't write for the whole of queerness. Did you see any unicorn fetishists in the book? Didn't think so. It's a shame no single piece of work can include all the beautiful people.

The whole of queerness is represented by a bunch of different groups doing important work. In the past few years, I have seen my friends and peers involved in *Queers Against Israeli Apartheid*, *It Could Get Worse*, *We Are Not Just the 99%*, *Queer-*

ing the Occupy Movement, *Against Equality*, the fight against the criminalization of HIV, the fight for better transgender representation in the media and especially queer media, and so much more. These are difficult and critical conversations, and they happen because the people moderating them dare to think differently. No one book, film, album, play or performance can encapsulate all of this. But every work of art can, either overtly or obliquely, mirror the lives of the wonderful folks engaged in these discourses.

MH/DC: Finally, we'd like to turn to the role of dissent vis-à-vis literature itself. You've said in a previous interview that *Krakow Melt* “has nothing to do with Poland” specifically but could instead pertain to any myriad of countries “with flagrant human rights violations.” As such, *Krakow Melt*—like any good activist text, if you'll allow such a term—is both a call to arms relating to a specific social issue and a more generalized representation of imbalances to equity and justice, what you later note in the same interview as a “a cautionary tale that shows what can happen to otherwise calm people when they are forced into extreme situations.” If any, what are your own objectives in creating texts which openly dissent to specific practices? In short, why stir the pot?

DAC: A digression if you don't mind. Never mind dissenting to specific practices—books have their own existence to rescue!

Books are under attack, in Canada and everywhere. Funding to writers at the provincial and the federal levels is being cut and cut. At this very moment, a library or bookstore is removing a book from the shelves in response to a complaint. A school is quietly dropping a book from a curriculum list without anybody noticing. Books are denied entry at the border. Writers, editors, publishers and

translators are tried for obscenity. With the recent Omnibus Crime Bill being made into law, more prisons will be built in Canada. That means there will be more people censoring what Canadians read. Prisons deny books to inmates all the time. My novel *Shuck* was “approved” by the Texas Department of Corrections, while they have denied many others by writers I know. And some of the few remaining queer bookstores in Canada are facing money troubles and closure because they are still paying legal bills for censorship fights with Canadian Border Services Agency. These are bookstores that have been fighting for our freedom to read for decades, at their expense.

The very act of publishing a queer novel in a Conservative regime is an act of resistance, if the regime is also bent on destroying and silencing queers. In this climate, reading is also resisting. This spring, a Canadian publisher [MH/DC: ECW Press] will release the title *The Complete Lockpick Pornography*, a novel about a gay kidnapper who abducts the son of a family-values politician. Great book to have our first year into a Tory majority, no?

Back to your question. The reason we stir the pot is that if we don't fight for our rights—even ones that seem secure—they will be taken away.

University of Western Ontario

Works Cited

- Berlant, Lauren. *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham: Duke U P, 1997. Print.
- Cox, Daniel Allen. *Krakow Melt*. Vancouver, British Columbia: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010. Print.
- . *Shuck*. Vancouver, British Columbia: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2008. Print.
- . *Tattoo This Madness In*. Ottawa, Ontario: Dusty Owl Press, 2006. Print.
- Cynara. “Q&A With Daniel Allen Cox.” *Arsenalia: A Blog from the Arsenal Pulp Press*. April 20, 2011. Web. Accessed January 2, 2012.
- Hesiod. *The Poems and Fragments*. Ed. Alexander William Mair. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908. 4. Print.
- Levi, Rubek. “Review: Krakow Melt.” *BOMBLOG*. 27 January 2011. Web. Accessed 19 January 2012.
- Stiegler, Bernard. *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*. Stanford: Stanford U P, 1998. Print.
- Warner, Michael. *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1999. Print.