

Queer Theory



An Introduction

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Introduction

Once the term 'queer' was, at best, slang for homosexual, at worst, a term of homophobic abuse. In recent years 'queer' has come to be used differently, sometimes as an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications and at other times to describe a nascent theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies. What is clear, even from this brief and partial account of its contemporary deployment, is that queer is very much a category in the process of formation. It is not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics.

Given this situation, it may seem counter-intuitive, even futile, to produce an introductory account of the queer phenomenon. For part of queer's semantic clout, part of its political efficacy, depends on its resistance to definition, and the way in which it refuses to stake its claim, since 'the more it verges on becoming a normative academic discipline, the less queer "queer theory" can plausibly claim to be' (Halperin, 1995:113). Judith Butler (1994:21) likewise cautions that 'normalizing the queer would be, after all, its sad finish', and Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner point out that 'because almost everything that can be called queer theory has been radically anticipatory, trying to bring a world into being, any attempt to summarize it now will be violently partial' (1995:344). To attempt an overview of queer theory and to

identify it as a significant school of thought, which those in pursuit of general knowledge should be familiar with, is to risk domesticating it, and fixing it in ways that queer theory resists fixing itself. However, this book does not attempt to stabilise the mobile field of queer identification. Instead, it maps that very mobility, and situates it within a history of sexual categories which have evolved over the last hundred years or so. While specifying the different political and theoretical work currently being carried out under the rubric of 'queer', this book assumes that queer is 'a zone of possibilities' (Edelman, 1994:114) always inflected by a sense of potentiality that it cannot yet quite articulate.

The rapid development and consolidation of lesbian and gay studies in universities in the 1990s is paralleled by an increasing deployment of the term 'queer'. As queer is unaligned with any specific identity category, it has the potential to be annexed profitably to any number of discussions. Like many critical treatments of queer, however, this study reads it largely in relation to the more stable, more recognisable, categories of 'lesbian' and 'gay'. In the history of disciplinary formations, lesbian and gay studies is itself a relatively recent construction, and queer theory can be seen as its latest institutional transformation. Not only are new journals launched which specialise in the interdisciplinary field of lesbian and gay studies, but periodicals with other concerns bring out special issues on queer theory. Specialist journals include the North American *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, first published in 1993, and the Australian *Critical InQueeries*, whose first issue came out in 1995. Non-specialist periodicals which have each devoted a whole issue to queer theory include *Sociological Theory* (Summer 1994), *Socialist Review* (vol. 22, no. 1, 1992) and *Social Text* (vol. 9, no. 4, 1991), while *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* brought out two queer issues in 1991 and 1994. *Media Information Australia* and *Meanjin* published queer issues in late 1995 and early 1996 respectively. Universities are not only beginning to offer courses in lesbian and gay theory, but many of these courses are organised around notions of queer. This 'queering' of lesbian and gay studies has been the subject of violent debate. Some claim that it radically erodes the last traces

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of an oppressive gender coherence, whereas others criticise its pan-sexuality as reactionary, even unfeminist.

While there is no critical consensus on the definitional limits of queer—indeterminacy being one of its widely promoted charms—its general outlines are frequently sketched and debated. Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability—which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect—queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. Institutionally, queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Whether as transvestite performance or academic deconstruction, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilise heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any 'natural' sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as 'man' and 'woman'.

The recent intervention of this confrontational word 'queer' in altogether politer academic discourses suggests that traditional models have been ruptured. Yet its appearance also marks a continuity. Queer theory's debunking of stable sexes, genders and sexualities develops out of a specifically lesbian and gay reworking of the post-structuralist figuring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions. Queer is not always seen, however, as an acceptable elaboration of or shorthand for 'lesbian and gay'. Although many theorists welcome queer as 'another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual' (de Lauretis, 1991:iv), others question its efficacy. The most commonly voiced anxieties are provoked by such issues as whether a generic masculinity may be reinstalled at the heart of the ostensibly gender-neutral queer; whether queer's transcendent disregard for dominant systems of gender fails to consider the material conditions of the west in the late twentieth century; whether queer simply replicates, with a kind of historical amnesia, the stances and demands of an earlier gay liberation; and whether, because its

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constituency is almost unlimited, queer includes identificatory categories whose politics are less progressive than those of the lesbian and gay populations with which they are aligned.

Whatever ambivalences structure queer, there is no doubt that its recent redeployment is making a substantial impact on lesbian and gay studies. Even the formidable 650-page *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*—whose very title seems to take a stand against queer's recent expansion—closes its introduction with a justification which is less a defence than defensive:

It was difficult to decide what to title this anthology. We have reluctantly chosen not to speak here and in our title of 'queer studies,' despite our own attachment to the term . . . our choice of 'lesbian/gay' indicates no wish on our part to make lesbian/gay studies look less assertive, less unsettling, and less queer than it already does. (Abelove et al., 1993:xvii)

Sticking to their formulation of 'lesbian/gay studies', the editors nevertheless worry that this might seem a conservative gesture. In asserting their wish not to make 'lesbian/gay studies look . . . less queer than it already does', they suggest that the older formation is already queer. This is by no means an idiosyncratic move. Queer's contemporary proliferation is enabled, in part, by claims that it has always already significantly structured the anti-homophobic impulse. Queer's powerful refiguring of lesbian and gay studies is evident in the way in which it is able to install itself retrospectively at the heart of that project. Although queer theory's institutional growth is commonly associated with academic developments in the early 1990s, the tendency to date its moment of origin increasingly earlier suggests an ambivalent figuring of queer as not only a radically new conceptual model but also one already imbricated in and informing existing knowledges of sexuality. In introducing her collection of 'deviant readings', *Perversions*, Mandy Merck (1993:1) describes the book as 'begun in London in the late 1970s, an era of Queer Studies *avant la lettre*'. Wayne Koestenbaum (1993:18) similarly antedates queer when describing Bertha Harris's novel *Lover* as 'a vaudeville version of queer theory; presciently it explains everything theory has come laboriously to know since 1976'. On the back-cover blurb of

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the 1993 edition of Guy Hocquenghem's *Homosexual Desire*, Douglas Crimp argues that while the book was 'written over two decades ago, in the aftermath of May '68 and Stonewall', it 'may well be the first example of what we now call queer theory'.

In a movement simultaneously forwards and backwards, queer is designated as not only the evolutionary extension of a more conventional lesbian and gay studies but also its bent progenitor. This slippage is evidenced in the difference between the first and second editions of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. First published in 1985, and reprinted in 1992 with a new preface, *Between Men* dramatises the evolution of an ambivalent but productive relation between gay and queer. The back cover of the 1992 edition reproduces accounts of the book which situate it within that critical field which its publication significantly consolidated. According to *Rolling Stone*, it is 'universally cited as the text that ignited gay studies', while the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* describes it as 'in many ways, the book that turned queer theory from a latent to a manifest discipline'. If queer and gay seem synonymous here, in her new preface Sedgwick dramatises a historical and disciplinary shift through the mobilising of these terms. She notes that, while 'a growing gay and lesbian studies movement already existed in American academia at the time [1985]', between then and 1992 there emerged a 'highly productive queer community whose explicit basis is the criss-crossing of the lines of identification and desire among genders, races and sexual definitions' (Sedgwick, 1992:x). Yet having identified queer as a new structure whose energy and effectiveness developed out of a more established lesbian and gay model, in her last sentence Sedgwick recasts this developmental narrative by situating queer as the source rather than the destination of lesbian and gay studies. 'The proliferation . . . of so much subsequent work in the field', she writes, 'has vastly more to say for the inveterate, gorgeous generativity, the speculative generosity, the daring, the permeability, and the activism that have long been lodged in the multiple histories of queer *reading*' (ibid.).

Rather than represent queer as unequivocally either progressive or reactionary, this book argues that it does not have any fixed

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value. Simplistic attempts to evaluate this new terminology and conceptual framework ignore the fact that, since the late nineteenth century, knowledge of homosexuality has always been structured by strenuously contested categories (see, for example, Chauncey, 1982). Nor is this kind of classificatory uncertainty characteristic only of an unenlightened and remote historical moment. Similar claims have been made more recently, and specifically in relation to gay and lesbian studies. 'With the recent transformation of gay and lesbian studies from an underground phenomenon to an exciting area of academic discourse', notes Marilyn Farwell (1992:165), 'has come a strange plague: definition'. *Queer Theory* examines the constitutive discourses of homosexuality developed in the last century in order to place queer in its historical context and surveys contemporary arguments both for and against this latest terminology. In deferring any final assessment of queer as a critical term, this book acknowledges that if queer lives up to its radical potential—and does not solidify as merely another acceptable (though oppositional) category—its ongoing evolutions cannot be anticipated: its future is—after all—the future.