

## Guest Column

## What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?

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WORD OF NEW intellectual developments tends to travel indirectly, like gossip. Soon, more and more people feel the need to know what the real story is: they want manifestos, bibliographies, explanations. When a journal does a special issue or commissions an editorial comment, it is often responding to this need.

We have been invited to pin the queer theory tail on the donkey. But here we cannot but stay and make a pause, and stand half amazed at this poor donkey's present condition. Queer theory has already incited a vast labor of metacommentary, a virtual industry: special issues, sections of journals, omnibus reviews, anthologies, and dictionary entries. Yet the term itself is less than five years old. Why do people feel the need to introduce, anatomize, and theorize something that can barely be said yet to exist?

The critical mass of queer work is more a matter of perception than of volume. Queer is hot. This perception arises partly from the distortions of the star system, which allows a small number of names to stand in for an evolving culture. Most practitioners of the new queer commentary are not faculty members but graduate students. The association with the star system and with graduate students makes this work the object of envy, resentment, and suspicion. As often happens, what makes some people queasy others call sexy.

In our view, it is not useful to consider queer theory a thing, especially one dignified by capital letters. We wonder whether *queer commentary* might not more accurately describe the things linked by the rubric, most of which are not theory. The metadiscourse of "queer theory" intends an academic object, but queer commentary has vital precedents and collaborations in aesthetic genres and journalism. It cannot be assimilated to a single discourse, let alone a propositional program. Certainly, recent years have seen much queer criticism that tried to think through theoretical problems rigorously,

often by way of psychoanalysis. But the notion that this work belonged to "queer theory" arose after 1990, when AIDS and queer activism provoked intellectuals to see themselves as bringing a queerer world into being. Narrating the emergence of queer theory was a way to legitimate many experiments, relatively few of which still looked like theory in the sense of rigorous, abstract, metadisciplinary debate.

We do not wish to use this editorial to define, purify, puncture, sanitize, or otherwise entail the emerging queer commentary. Nor are we looking to fix our seal of approval or disapproval on anybody's claim to queerness. We would like to cultivate a rigorous and intellectually generous critical culture without narrowing its field. We want to prevent the reduction of queer theory to a specialty or a metatheory.

We also want to frustrate the already audible assertions that queer theory has only academic—which is to say, dead—politics. Beginnings take a long time, and uneven developments are often experienced as premature deaths, a subject on which queer work is sadly expert. Because almost everything that can be called queer theory has been radically anticipatory, trying to bring a world into being, any effort to summarize it now will be violently partial.

Is this editorial comment, then, queer theory? After all, *PMLA* is not a queer space in any sense. We are not proposing to queer *PMLA*, and we could not perform such a change by willing it. Nor can we act as native informants, telling a presumptively straight assembly of colleagues something about what queers are, do, and think.

What follows is a kind of anti-encyclopedia entry: queer theory is not the theory of anything in particular, and has no precise bibliographic shape.

We can say that queer commentary has been animated by a sense of belonging to a discourse world that only partly exists yet. This work aspires to create publics, publics that can afford sex and intimacy in sustained, unchastening ways; publics that can comprehend their own differences of privilege and struggle; publics whose abstract spaces can also be lived in, remembered, hoped for. By *publics* we do not mean populations of self-identified queers. Nor is the name *queer* an umbrella for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and the transgendered. Queer publics make available different understandings of membership at different times, and membership in them is more a matter of aspiration than it is the expression of an identity or a history. Through a wide range of mongrelized genres and media, queer commentary allows a lot of unpredictability in the culture it brings into being.

Queer commentary takes on varied shapes, risks, ambitions, and ambivalences in various contexts. The word *queer* itself can be a precious source of titillation at a conference; part of ordinary, bland patter in a nightclub; unintelligible noise in the official policy public; a crashing faux pas at a dinner party; or a reminder of half-deadened optimism at a rally. The danger of the label *queer theory* is that it makes its queer and nonqueer audiences forget these differences and imagine a context (theory) in which *queer* has a stable referential content and pragmatic force. The panicky defensiveness that many queer and non-queer-identified humanists express has to do with the

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multiple localities of queer theory and practice. Separately, these localities often seem parochial, or simply local—like little ornaments appliquéd over real politics or real intellectual work. They carry the odor of the luxuriant. And one corpus of work (often Eve Sedgwick's or Judith Butler's) is commonly made a metonym for queer theory or queer culture building itself, exemplary either for good or for bad. But no particular project is metonymic of queer commentary. Part of the point of using the word *queer* in the first place was the wrenching sense of recontextualization it gave, and queer commentary has tried hard to sustain awareness of diverse context boundaries.

For example, queer critics have incited a broad rethinking in cultural studies of the relation between the official policy public and the media public sphere. It is no accident that queer commentary—on mass media, on texts of all kinds, on discourse environments from science to camp—has emerged at a time when United States culture increasingly fetishizes the normal. A fantasized mainstream has been invested with normative force by leaders of both major political parties. The national lesbian and gay organizations have decided to float with the current, arguing that lesbians and gays should be seen just as people next door, well within a mainstream whose highest aspirations are marriage, military patriotism, and protected domesticity. At both national and local levels, lesbians and gays can sometimes enter visibility in the official public sphere. But the idea that queerness can be anything other than a pathology or an evil, let alone a good, cannot even be entertained yet in most public contexts.

AIDS activism forced the issue of translating queerness into the national scene. AIDS made those of us who confronted it realize the deadly stakes of discourse; it made us realize the public and private unvoiceability of so much that mattered, about anger, mourning, and desire; it made us realize that different frames of reference—science, news, religion, ordinary homophobia—compete and that their disjunction is lethal. AIDS also taught us not to assume a social environment of community and of support for legitimate politics. Far from preexisting as sources of activism and critical commentary, communities of support had to be created by a public labor. AIDS also showed that rhetorics of expertise limit the circulation of knowledge, ultimately authorizing the technocratic administration of peoples' lives. Finally, in a way that directly affects critics of polite letters, AIDS taught us the need to be disconcertingly explicit about such things as money and sexual practices, for as long as euphemism and indirection produce harm and privilege.

The labor of bringing sexual practices and desires to articulation has tended to go along with a labor of ambiguitating categories of identity. Just as AIDS activists were defined more by a concern for practice and for risk than by identity, so queer commentary has refused to draw boundaries around its constituency. And without forgetting the importance of the hetero-homo distinction of object choice in modern culture, queer work wants to address the full range of power-ridden normativities of sex. This endeavor has animated a rethinking of both the perverse and the normal: the romantic couple, sex

for money, reproduction, the genres of life narrative. Queer commentary in this sense is not necessarily superior to or more inclusive than conventional lesbian and gay studies; the two have overlapping but different aims and therefore potentially different publics.

There are, of course, many intermediate contexts between the *Congressional Record* and queer studies conferences or "zine" culture. There are even components of the national mass media, such as *Details* and MTV, that have cultivated a language of queerness in their highly capitalized forums. Mostly in youth culture, these forums allow people to be and to talk queer without assimilating queerness to a familiar minority identity like gay. They are reminders that the publics in which queerness becomes articulate are not just made up of queers; most of these publics, in their internal principles and material conditions, are oriented to other ends. In mass youth culture, for example, the process of making queerness imaginable exhibits the ordinary contradictions of capital: the need to acquire one's individuality from a genericizing exchange and to produce one's individuality through acts of consumption that are only indirectly conceived as social.

Given such conditions, the rhetoric of queering identity in mass youth culture can seem like a luxury. There are those who dismiss the rhetoric as consumerist and then trivialize all queer issues as matters of "lifestyle." But even if that perception were true, is lifestyle really unconnected to violence and world transformation? Politics so often turns on competing standards of seriousness that any narrow understanding of violence, need, and interest should be resisted. Queer culture comes into being unevenly, in obliquely cross-referencing publics, and no one scene of importance accounts for its politics—neither hyperabstracted contexts, like "the Symbolic," nor hyperconcrete ones, like civil disobedience.

When we talk about queer theory in *PMLA*, we mean to keep in mind the special character of this discourse context. Academic citation creates its own virtual world. In the 1990s, that world has allowed queer talk to be taken seriously. But it would be wrong to take this provisional seriousness for a fully inhabitable world or to suppose that queer theory has become dominant in any general sphere of endeavor.

It is not unusual for citation to create virtual worlds. Members of Congress routinely refer to the telegrams in their offices as "the American people." The official and mass-media publics produce, by citation, virtual worlds of great potency. Like the academic public, these are spaces that nobody lives in. The burden of translating oneself from one of them into another falls unequally, often violently, on different people; while this burden might produce political rage, the incommensurability of these publics is usually experienced as cognitive dissonance or amnesia—which is to say, hardly experienced except as nameless unhappiness.

No wonder we hear the worry that queer studies promotes both dangerous and silly objects of analysis. Much queer commentary has been on the political environments of sexuality; it sees intimate sex practices and affects as related not just to family, romance, or friendship but also to the public

world governing both policy and everyday life. While to many these spheres are separate, in queer thinking they are one subject. Queer commentary has tried to challenge some major conditions of privacy, so that shame and the closet would be understood no longer as isolation chambers but as the architecture of common culture, so that vernacular performances would no longer stammer with the ineloquence of tacit codes, barely self-acknowledged, and so that questions of propriety and explicitness would no longer be burdened by the invisible normativity of heterosexual culture. Amalgamating politics and feeling in a way that requires constant syncretic gestures and movements, queer commentary has tried to drive into visibility both the cultural production of sexuality and the social context of feeling.

We acknowledge that a lot of work in queer studies has no explicit interest in making publics. Many critics equate the erotic and the political, arguing that power is absorbed into the subject through the Symbolic order. Queerness becomes a question of identification. Much work in queer studies equates cultural politics with politics itself, bracketing or deferring the question of how oppressions and sublimations around sex and sexuality meet up with other kinds of violence and oppression—with exploitation, racial formation, the production of feminine subjectivity or of national culture. We suggest that what brings these different kinds of criticism together as queer theory is a desire to create new contexts, and not just professional ones in which cool work can be performed. Criticism need not have a certain kind of political content to share the aim of making the world queerer. Making these linkages theoretically and politically is difficult. And many of the projects that are driven by queer aspirations may look partial; seen collectively, they are part of a broader and longer-term set of transformations.

If queer commentary were expected either to master or to adjudicate “the politics” of a developing critical culture, it would be condemned to the failure of mere theory or to the resentfulness of a critique that could not usefully be heard. One of the stresses on queer intellectuals in the academy is that there are few queer intellectual publics outside it. Like the mainstream straight press, the organs of the national gay press—in particular, the *Advocate*, *Out*, *Deneuve*, *Ten Percent*—have been either oblivious or hostile to queer theory. (Exceptions to this trend are *On Our Backs* and *Girlfriends*.) And even inside the academy, questions about queer theory’s political utility are occasionally not in the best faith. Sometimes they serve to ward off theory from a model of gay studies that has a more affirmative relation to its imagined constituency. In this context, queer commentary provides exactly what some fear it will: perspectives and archives to challenge the comforts of privilege and unself-consciousness.

Sometimes, though, the questions of political utility arise from a real sense of political need. We have been asked, for example, “What does queer theory teach us about twelve-step programs?” “the power of new markets?” “spirituality?”

What does queer theory teach us about *x*?

When a new thing emerges, people want to know how it is going to solve problems. When it is called theory, it is expected to produce a program, and when the theory addresses the broad issue of queerness, the program is expected to explain queer life. But queer theory has not yet undertaken the kind of general description of the world that would allow it to produce practical solutions. People want to know what costs, risks, and tactics are involved in getting from this order of things to a better one. Asked for these reasons, the question of *x* is both a challenge and a hope. And it is a hard question.

The question of *x* might be more ordinary in disciplines that have long histories of affiliation with the state. Sociology, psychology, anthropology, and political science, for example, have earned much of their funding and expert authority by encouraging questions of utility. Queer theory has flourished in the disciplines where expert service to the state has been least familiar and where theory has consequently meant unsettlement rather than systematization. This failure to systematize the world in queer theory does not mean a commitment to irrelevance; it means resistance to being an apparatus for falsely translating systematic and random violences into normal states, administrative problems, or minor constituencies.

Sometimes the question of what queer theory teaches us about *x* is not about politics in the usual sense but about personal survival. Like feminist, African American, Latina/Latino, and other minority projects, queer work strikes its readers as knowledge central to living. This demand puts tremendous pressure on emerging work, pressure that makes the work simultaneously conventional and unprecedented in the humanities and social sciences—traditional insofar as pedagogy has long involved the formation of identities and subjectivities, radical in the aspiration to live another way now, here.

What does queer theory teach us about *x*? As difficult as it would be to spell out programmatic content for an answer, this simple question still has the power to wrench frames.

What does queer commentary teach us about literature or about the *L* in *PMLA*? How do literary engagements participate in queer world building? This question is not frequently posed, for fear that the answer would be, Nothing.

Queer commentary has involved a certain amount of experimenting, of prancing and squatting on the academic stage. This is partly to remind people that there is an academic stage and that its protocols and proprieties have maintained an invisible heteronormativity, one that infiltrates our profession, our knowledge, and this editorial. This does not mean we embrace, or disavow, the indecorous per se. Indecorum can be a way of bringing some dignity to the abject. But it is also a way of changing the public for academic work, of keeping the door ajar.

In our view, the question of culture building should be the baseline issue for humanists. On this point we might agree with traditionalists who believe that the humanities should not be limited by the present. Historical con-

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sciousness and a resistance to presentism can be indispensable to a critical culture. But unlike some varieties of traditionalism, queer commentary refuses to subordinate emergent cultures to whatever happens to pass for common culture. We want to promote the building not of culture in general but of a culture whose marginal history makes it inevitably controverted, even when it involves authors and themes of the greatest canonical prestige. Many of the critics of queer theory would like to dismiss it as merely particular, the infection of general culture by narrow interest. But the relation between the general and the particular is exactly what is at issue. Queer commentary shows that much of what passes for general culture is riddled with heteronormativity. Conversely, many of the issues of queerness have more general relevance than one is normally encouraged to think.

This is true not only of explicitly general notions of subjectivity—such as the unconscious, abjection, embodiment, knowledge, and performativity—and not only of the prestigious authors who have been so brilliantly queered but also of a range of specifically literary issues. Queer commentary has produced rich analyses of these areas: cultures of reception; the relation of the explicit and the implicit, or the acknowledged and the disavowed; the use and abuse of biography for life; the costs of closure and the pleasure of unruly subplots; vernacular idioms and private knowledge; voicing strategies; gossip; elision and euphemism; jokes; identification and other readerly relations to texts and discourse. Queer commentary has also distinguished itself through experiments in critical voice and in the genre of the critical essay. Along with queer experiments in pedagogy and classroom practice, it marks a transformation of both the object and the practice of criticism.

Of course, we have deferred asking the crucial question: what does queer theory teach us about sex?

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