

In Queer Street

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Such an unassuming word, and how disproportionate the weight it must carry: the desires it must name, the problems it must solve, the insights it must garner. For some decades now ‘queer’ has enjoyed the dubious honor of carrying the brunt of various scholarly and political claims about the sexual. The word remains central within the humanities not despite, but because of its different uses. Since the term condenses paradoxical and contradictory connotations, many people can find something of value in it, and as many people can find something at fault with it – a predicament that has so far insured the term’s continued currency. Queer is frequently maligned for the lack of clarity that results from its overdetermined status. Yet, to be fair, the same characterized other key terms in the humanities in their heyday – such as textuality, hybridity, the unconscious, alienation, and the sublime – before they, exhausted by frequent use and abuse, receded into the academic vernacular. The productive life of any concept is traced from its emergence as a limited but specific part of theoretical jargon to its eventual entry into the academic *lingua franca*. The moment queer becomes fully transparent, it will cease to be relevant.

For the duration of its productive life, a concept does not supply an answer but insists on a question. It does not offer a generally agreed upon definition, one that can be confidently applied, but traces a problem. Here, the issue entails the precarious relationship between erotic life, identity, and power. Queer condenses at least four different configurations of that relationship. The first entails the increasing

differentiation of sexual identities. In this regard, queer takes the place of the “other (please specify) . . .” option following straight/gay/bi on the sexual questionnaire. For those who cannot or refuse to identify with the limited possibilities social discourse makes available, queer supplies both an opt-out clause and an invitation to come up with alternative descriptors. The second contemporary usage of queer projects a coalition politics that ideally includes all non-normative sexualities and genders, which presently goes under the heading of LGBTQQIA, for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual (or Ally). Thirdly, the term is called upon to celebrate a utopian omni- or pansexuality, conveniently located beyond all categorizations of gender and sexuality.

Of course, those three uses of queer are heavily criticized. The proliferation of identities neatly mirrors the snowballing of lifestyles, markets, niches, and audiences that characterizes ‘postmodern’ capitalism. The expanding acronym LGBTQQIA begs the question whether we will ever have enough capitals to include and represent everyone. In addition, it establishes a ‘remainder’ category that risks reinforcing the normalizing opposition between heterosexuality on the one hand and everything else on the other, pre-empting the scrutiny and internal differentiation of heterosexuality; after all, not all forms of straight sexuality are the same, nor are they all equally normative or normal. The idea of pansexuality, finally, risks ignoring or denying the sociopolitical imposition of sexual categorizations. Nevertheless, what I find striking about the current uses of queer is that they together suggest a complete range of options for relating the erotic to identity: a supplementary sexual identity, an inclusive coalition of identities, and the negation of sexual identity altogether. In that way, queer dramatizes the fact that we don’t know for sure or simply don’t agree whether for sexuality to counter power in an effective way would require *more* identity, *all* identity, or *no* identity to begin with.

Therefore, the fourth deployment of the term questions and problematizes the connection between the variegated feelings, sensations, scenarios, and practices of love, desire, and pleasure on the one hand and nameable identities on the other. The ambivalence of queer as a noun as well as a verb facilitates that kind of inquiry. The noun names, identifies, represents, or describes certain people as ‘off’ or ‘not quite right’ in contradistinction to an implicit norm. Yet the verb ‘to queer’ means ‘to question,’ ‘unsettle’; the expression ‘to queer the pitch’ means ‘to spoil or throw the game.’ Hence, while the noun makes specific people identifiable and recognizable within a certain discourse,

or logic, or social order, the verb disturbs the power of that discourse, logic, or order to name and know its subjects; the way in which it makes available, distributes, and imposes a set of categories, through which individuals become known to others and come to know themselves.

What are the sociopolitical factors and interests that underlie the parceling out of the field of erotic possibility into discrete and limited identifications in specific times and places? While our current sexual questionnaire offers hetero/homo/bi (and perhaps queer) boxes to tick, other periods supplied a different menu, or did not care much for the sexual definition of identity to begin with. And since things used to be different in the past, they might well be different in the future, too.

This strand of queer theory departs from Michel Foucault's dating of the 'birth' of the homosexual around 1870, the event that would trigger our straight/gay/bi triad as the full summation of erotic life. There were certainly people before that date who loved and desired people of the same sex, and 'sodomites' were intermittently condemned and persecuted as criminals and sinners. However, Foucault argues, they were not considered the subject of their desire, crime, or sin in quite the same way as the modern homosexual is considered the subject of his homosexuality, nor did they necessarily consider themselves as such. From the second half of the nineteenth century onward, the homosexual became a "personage," a "life form," a "species." (Foucault 43) The homosexual is internally fully integrated to allow for the maximum external (social) differentiation: he is completely homosexual within, and hence completely different from other people without. In that way, sexuality contributed to the re-imagination of distinctions between people and the political division of the population of states after the waning of the quasi-biological distinctions of class that characterized the feudal age. Homosexuality isn't about homosexuals per se; rather, the homosexual is the figure or cipher through which differences between people were recalibrated and redistributed. 'He' served as the paradigmatic exception through which *all* modern individuals were taught to define themselves on the basis of their sexuality rather than their class position.

Queer responds to the history that Foucault describes in a particular way. To make that clear, I always envision three consecutive dialogues, each indicating a historical period as well as a political and academic perspective. The first is not a real dialogue, but a question and an answer supplied by the same party, which characterize the historical emergence of homosexual identity. The question: "Who are you?" The answer: "*You* are homosexuals." Though the term initially

served to categorize and pathologize a group of people, in time it allowed for the self-identification of homosexuals, who could now reply to the persistent question themselves: “We are gays and lesbians.” The question is answered affirmatively and positively, but the response remains fully caught within the orbit of the disciplinary power that insists that certain loves and pleasures should constitute an identity to begin with. The queer moment does not so much try to answer differently, but rather refuses the question altogether, asking, “By what right do you force me to identity myself and to decide in advance through what terms I should do so?” In the third dialogue, then, the question is relegated back to sender, and no positive answer is offered. Moreover, since queer presently reclaims a term of abuse that accompanied the homosexual past, it qualifies and restricts the emancipatory promise suggested by the second dialogue. Queer questions whether the recognition and inclusion of a lesbian and gay identity would necessarily constitute the only or final goal of a responsible politics.

Today, the three dialogues I have sketched take place simultaneously, so that their terms get inevitably mixed up. Nevertheless, the distinction between the gay and queer perspectives is clear, and roughly analogous to the opposition between liberal and radical politics. While liberals underwrite or accept a given sociopolitical order and strive for the inclusion of marginalized groups in its terms, radicals insist on a fundamental political transformation. The polemic between the two forms of politics has intensified in recent years for two reasons. Firstly, certain lesbian and gay identifications and lives have made relative advances in gaining recognition by governments, legal systems, media, and markets in the West. Depending on your outlook, you’ll celebrate that as successful emancipation, or decry it as insidious mainstreaming or co-optation. Secondly, the economic globalization of the world increasingly facilitates the export of the Western model of sexual identity to places where it may not unequivocally apply. Other understandings and practices of eroticism may sometimes afford less freedom, but sometimes *more*. The West likes to teach the world how to be sexual. It once imposed heteronormativity and the nuclear family; now it does the same with sexual identity and tolerance. Sadly, the implications and consequences of the latter are not necessarily more beneficial than the former. The limited lesbian and gay emancipation within the West and its translation and mistranslation elsewhere have provoked the renewed querying of the very idea of sexual identity that underwrites both.

Here and elsewhere, the danger is the one that Foucault’s history highlights: the isolation of the erotic from other aspects of life to support

an autonomous identity. As Foucault adds, the homosexual was not the only quasi-biological form of life or species that the second half of the nineteenth century produced. The other was based on race, (149) a category since updated (but preserved and reinvented) as ethnicity, culture, or religion. I take Foucault's argument to suggest that modern identity prescribes sex and race as constituting mutually exclusive human species (sex for the West, race for the rest), while both work to avoid identifications in terms of class. Thus, countering that power requires the refusal to autonomize any specific identification and to insist on relational and relative aspects. Such a perspective has been explored for some time under the heading of 'intersectionality.' What might a queer perspective contribute to that debate?

The *locus classicus* is offered by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, who has coined the term in 1989:

Intersectionality is what occurs when a woman from a minority group tries to navigate the main crossing in the city [. . .] The main highway is Racism Road. One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street [. . .] She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, those named as road signs, which link together to make double, a triple, multiple, a many-layered blanket of oppression (quoted in Yuval-Davis, 196).

Crenshaw proposes a topographical, grid-like city map of oppression and resistance. The minority woman in her allegory faces a crowded intersection, but at the very least, one might argue, she knows precisely where her oppression is coming from. She recognizes the names of the streets she is navigating, and she is familiar with their layout and intersections. That knowledge allows for effective political identification and agency: if *this* is where I am slotted into society, then I'll have to march on *this* street and *that* street to forge my emancipation. In that way, Crenshaw allows for the liberal possibility of a future of, say, fully realized pedestrian rights at a time when each minority group, each form of oppression, is finally named, identified, politicized, emancipated, and included on the map. Oppression may be multiple and many-layered, but its road signs are legible and totalizable. The streets add up and link together in a transparent map of power relations.

Crenshaw's model can be criticized and supplemented by a queer critique. It would begin by interrogating the larger contexts that frame the intersections of racism, patriarchy, and colonialism that Crenshaw's work has put on the agenda. Missing from Crenshaw's city map are the High, Main, and Wall Street of capitalism, presumably because the

economy organizes the map as a whole rather than a particular portion of it. Something similar goes for the pervasive authority of nation-states. Hence, capitalist and governmental powers cannot be localized on the map; they *are* the map. Not all forms of power can be situated in the same spatial continuum. To isolate even compounded accounts of sexism, racism, and homophobia from their larger economic and national contexts risks endorsing the market and the state as quasi-neutral arenas, in which the competing claims of different political identifications may be honored and adjudicated, while the market and state themselves remain immune from political contestation.

Remembering the historical contingency of identifications to which Foucault has alerted us, a second approach might question the apparent stability of the road signs in Crenshaw's allegory. Judith Butler has wryly commented on the obligatory "etc." that tends to follow ostensibly comprehensive summaries of politically relevant axes of identity, as in "gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, age, disability, etc." To Butler, the "etc." betrays exhaustion – what will they think of next? – but also indexes the potential for ever new and different politicizations of identity. (202) We can never be quite sure that the identifications we consider pressing today will remain so in the future. At any historical moment, sociopolitical vectors, "those named as road signs," may be renamed, change directions, or link up differently, establishing new constellations of power and contestation. A third and final possibility is offered by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Sedgwick suggests that the map of class, gender, sexual, and other identifications is not entirely smooth or isotopic. Specific portions of it, she claims, are organized *orthogonally*. (15) That is to say, sometimes axes of power are independently or unpredictably variable. To make matters even more complicated, Sedgwick also proposes that the map is filled with unexpected thresholds, places where "qualitative increments along one dimension can suddenly appear as qualitative differences somewhere else on the map entirely." (16) In contrast to Crenshaw's square grid of power, Sedgwick imagines a non-linear environment filled with wormholes. Class might suddenly translate into race, sexuality into gender, race into sexuality.

In a brilliant article called "Punk'd Theory" (2005), Tavia Nyong'o analyzes one peculiarly queer intersection that follows Sedgwick's model rather than Crenshaw's. According to Nyong'o, the word 'punk' indicates an obfuscated connection between the late 1970s British subculture, primarily made up of white working class youth, and the same term, from the 1950s onward, as African-American slang for

‘queer.’ The connection indexes experiential identifications that entangle black homophobia and white anti-capitalism. It is remembered in vernacular – or street – knowledge through the use of the same term and its resonances, but studiously forgotten by the academic forms of knowledge production that are beholden to disciplinary power, insisting on clear road signs and discrete territories. Restoring the connection between the two, Nyong’o argues, allows for a perspective in which the two to some extent start to shift places: the aggressive anti-capitalism of the British punks is *also* about a recuperative masculinity; African-American homophobia *also* expresses defiance in the face of socio-economic domination (‘being punked’ means ‘being fucked’ or ‘outwitted’). Punk gestures at a larger transnational map, on which class, race, and sexuality are unpredictably and unevenly distributed.

In his conclusion, Nyong’o offers an alternative allegory of intersectionality:

An intersection is also a meeting of two streets, and in a landscape long given over to automotivity, it is a place of particular hazard for the pedestrian [. . .] The rights of the pedestrian [. . .] balance the right of the automobile. Yet, as any streetwalker will tell you, enforcing any of these rights against the legal and illegal incursions of car culture requires continuous tactics of everyday resistance [. . .] So, in the practice of everyday life, the vernacularly mobile are required to demand both their rights and more than their rights, simply to preserve a portion of the mobility they had prior to enclosure. Examples proliferate: workers become illegal immigrants; poor mothers become welfare queens; protestors become potential terrorists. All must attack the assumption of their criminality merely to preserve their way of life from the ongoing incursions of disciplinary power. (31)

It may be impossible *not* to claim rights. But obtaining them does not mean to escape from power – far from it. Nyong’o’s tactic suggests an ingenious combination of a gay liberal with a queer radical politics, insisting on one’s rights, more than one’s rights, and perhaps something else than rights.

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SUMMARY

'Queer' continues to carry the brunt of scholarly and political claims about the sexual not despite but because of its different usages. The overburdened term does not so much supply an answer but productively traces a problem: the precarious relationships between erotic life, identity, and power. This introductory article critically considers various contemporary conceptualizations of 'queer.' Subsequently, it revisits Michel Foucault's historic understanding of 'the homosexual' as the figure through which distinctions between people were recalibrated and redistributed after the waning of the feudal age. Finally, this article discusses different takes on compounded or 'intersecting' identifications in relation to the queer problematization of identity.

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