

## Queer Theory

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**abstract:** What is queer theory? What is its history? What concepts have predominated? What controversies have animated the field? Do lesbians and gay men disappear in queer studies? Does “queer” include race and education? What is its future? This entry provides a portal to answering these questions.

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Queer theory originated during the 1980s AIDS crisis and functioned first as a socially and politically mobilizing phrase to fight intensifying homophobia as well as government and medical inaction regarding the disease (Jagose 1996, 93-94). For Leo Bersani (1995, 72) “queer” incorporated “the inextricability of the sexual and the political.” The very concept of “queer,” then, has embedded within it, as Ann Cvetkovich (2003, 174) notes, “histories of suffering and resistance,” including the “crucial presence of lesbian activists, so many of whom came to ACT UP with previous political experience and contributed organizing skills.” The

theorizing of “queer” has for some threatened to erase that founding lesbian presence, replacing women with a generic abstraction (“queer”), despite the fact “many” of the most prominent queer theorists were “undoubtedly feminist”: queer theory itself was “an interdisciplinary formation ... developed out of – and continues to be understandable in terms of – feminist knowledges” (Jagose 1996, 119).

The publication of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (1985) *Between Men* may have initiated queer theory as an intellectual discipline but by the early 1990s, this specialized academic field had become, Annamarie Jagose (1996, 109) concludes, a “movement,” even as it was being criticized as white, middle-class and capitalistic, too attentive to whatever was *au courant* (Jagose 1996, 114-115), even “elitist” and “inaccessible” (Jagose 1996, 110). That critique has been repeated, most recently and perhaps most emphatically, by James Penney (2014, 1), who has endorsed “a critical return to Marxism and psychoanalysis (Freud and Lacan),” by means of which he advocates “abandon[ing] the exhausted project of sexuality’s politicization.” The theorist often credited with inaugurating the phrase “queer theory” - Teresa de Lauretis – famously abandoned it on the

grounds that it had been co-opted (Jagose 1996, 127). “[N]ormalizing the queer,” Judith Butler (1994, 21) acknowledged, would be “a sad finish.”

Despite demands for its dismantling, contemporary queer theory suggests to Jen Gilbert (2014, xxii) “that the study of queerness, at least, pulls people into networks of belonging.” So queer theory continues, even intensifies, both in terms of the temperature of its internal debates but its reach as well, now including (as well as informed by) *race* and *education* while referencing *psychoanalysis* as both thematic and methodology. Race, education, and psychoanalysis in queer theory – and its future – are the topics discussed in this entry.

## Race

For some the concept of “queer” had “race” incorporated within it from the outset, if negatively. In “the [homophobic] popular imagination,” Richard Dyer (1997, 216) recalls, “uncontrolled African heterosexual appetite” combined with “white sexual decadence” to produce the “disease, death, and danger.” Homophobia, then, and perhaps not only in the United States, has been informed not only by racism but by misogyny too, since (straight) men loathe detecting in men they demand to see in

women (Hocquenghem 1978). Constructed as analogous to an ethnic minority – that is, as a distinct and identifiable population, rather than as a radical potentiality for all – “queer” demands recognition and equal rights within the existing social system (Jagose 1996, 61; Warner 1993, xxvi). Ironically, given the analogy to a race-based politics, the ethnic model’s subject was often “white” (Jagose 1996, 62). Despite bell hooks (1994, 128) crediting of “feminist and/or queer theory” as enabling “a broader context for discussions of black body politics,” Phillip Brian Harper (2005, 110) condemned “queer studies [as] unacceptably Euro-American in orientation.”

To alter that orientation, E. Patrick Johnson (2005, 125) replaced “queer” with “quare” from the African American vernacular in a project of “recapitulation and recuperation” (2005, 127). Marlon B. Ross (2005, 176) embedded “racial ideology as integral to the invention of homosexual identity,” a move inverted by Stokes (2001, 188), who insisted that “whiteness” is “itself queer.” Black queer studies represented, Walcott (2005, 98) explained, “both the edge and the cutting edge of a reinvigorated black studies project” (see also Mercer 1994). Allied with black queer studies was Michael Awkward’s (1995, 48) theorization of a

“black male feminism,” “heterosexual” in this theorist’s self-positioning (Awkward 1995, 56). Is, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2003, 34) asked, “heteronormativity contained within the ‘queer’?” These binaries blur in psychoanalytic treatments of gender and sexuality.

## Psychoanalysis

On “Planet Queer” (Watney 1996, 24) – now relocated online (Bryson 2004) - sexuality is separated from gender, itself, Judith Butler (2004, 54) emphasized, “internally unstable ... transgendered lives are evidence of the breakdown of any lines of causal determinism between sexuality and gender.” Not only theorizations of that relationship have been informed by psychoanalysis, so have the relationships among gender studies (Silverman 1992), race (Lane 1998), and education (Britzman 1998; Taubman 2011). Psychoanalysis also informs the most recent rejection of queer theory (Penney 2014).

Queer theory has also rejected psychoanalysis. David Halperin (2009, 8) asserts that “sexual subjectivity “requires “neither psychology or psychoanalysis,” as it is “shaped by originary social experiences of rejection and shame, and bristling with impulses to transgression.” Halperin (2009,

78) asserts that “abjection ... describes a dynamic social process constitutive of the subjectivity of gay men and other inferiorized groups.” Focused on Genet, Halperin (2009, 84) underscores its potential: “Humiliation turns into defiance.” Such “reversals” are, he acknowledges, “miraculous,” especially so, one would add, given that, in Halperin’s view, they occur without “agency,” at least as this term is typically defined (2009, 85). Indeed, with its “transformative power” (2009, 88), “abjection is not the problem ... but the solution” (2009, 87). “For groups constituted by historical injury,” Love (2007, 1) acknowledges, “the challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it.”

Halperin – whose scholarship (see Halperin 1990) is canonical – is almost alone in his repudiation of psychoanalysis in queer theory. Queer theory’s “temporal turn” (Dinshaw 2012, 34) is informed by psychoanalytic preoccupations with injury, trauma, and reparation. “Queer history has been an education in absence,” Love (2007, 52) reminds, as “the queer past is even more remote, more deeply marked by power’s claw,” claiming that the queer “community [is] not as constituted by a shared set of identity traits, but rather as emerging from a shared experience of social violence” (2007, 51). In queer theory, the “quest for history” becomes, Cvetkovich

(2003, 268) suggests, a “psychic need rather than a science.” Is education is also a “psychic need rather than a science”?

## Education

Queer theory informs the study and practice of education (see Britzman 1998). The relationship between education and queer theory is, however, an ambivalent one, Gilbert (2014, xix) explains, as “sexuality is ... the source of curiosity ... so central to learning ... [but it] also threatens the aims of education,” namely “mastery” and “knowledge” (2014, xxiii), themselves defenses, she offers, against “the helplessness that learning introduces.” Such psychoanalytic insight follows others, including Madeleine R. Grumet’s (1988) analysis of women’s complicity in curriculum for patriarchy.

“There can be no education without the charge of sexuality,” Gilbert (2014, x) appreciates, as “love, curiosity, and aggression fuel our engagements with knowledge.” She (2014, x) adds: “And yet education – its practices, procedures, rules, structures, and relations – can be undone by the wildness of sexuality.” Gilbert asserts that “sex education is larger than information, affirmation, or prohibition,” as it inevitably addresses “the most intimate aspects of life – love, loss, vulnerability, power, friendship,

aggression” (2014, 28). Sex education, she emphasizes, “is necessarily entangled in the youth’s efforts to construct a self, find love outside the family, and enjoy a newly adult body” (2014, 28). Gilbert concludes with a “manifesto” for a queer sex education (see 2014, 96-100).

Education is embedded in racial sexual politics and psychic life, a psychoanalytic insight that remains obscure, Kobena Mercer (1994, 122) appreciates, given humanity’s “stubborn resistance to the recognition of unconscious fantasy as a structuring principle of our social, emotional, and political life.” Given the “existential complexity” of the “lived” experience of “real existing racialized subjects,” Cameron McCarthy (2014, 42) and his colleagues conclude, “our research imaginations on race are in sore need of rebooting.” So, perhaps, are our research imaginations on education and queer theory.

Is its Future Past?

Queer theory represents both a rupture and a “continuity” of “previous gay liberationist and lesbian feminist models” (Jagose 1996, 5) liberationist models that began, by one account, among World War II veterans (Bérubé 1990). Queer theory’s history is, however, located



centuries earlier (Halperin 1990). Matt Brim (2014, 52) cautions that “neither ... ‘gay’ and “queer” ... is always accurate [;] the supposed trajectory from the first to the second employs a potentially dangerous teleology of progress and liberation.” Gilbert (2014, xvi) acknowledges that “LGBTQ is a fragile construction ... freighted by a false sense of political unity.” That fragility may provide a point of continuity, as queer theory has claimed to be an anti-social theory (Bersani 1995), a claim also clear in Edelman’s (2004, 3) assertion of “resistance” to “the social.”

It had been Bersani (1995, 32) who cautioned that social recognition and political inclusion could be annihilating; he worried that “gays have been de-gaying themselves in the very process of making themselves visible.” Moreover, “once we agreed to be seen,” Bersani (1995, 12) continued, “we also agree to being policed,” a sequence confirmed by contemporary and not only queer concerns over surveillance, security, and privacy in the age of the Internet. In an age of terrorism, others – perhaps most prominently Puar (2007) - assert that queer has been incorporated within nationalist, imperialist, xenophobic, and capitalist complicities, the last allegation made before (see, for instance, Case 2000, 31).

Is there a future for queer theory? While racialization continues -

Including the incorporation of non-North American and mix-raced theorizations of sexual orientation, spatiality, and temporality (see, for instance, Ahmed 2006, 24, 66) – the first phase of identity politics may be coming to a close, and not only due to the expansion of the extant “heterosexual” order that gay marriage, the legalized adoption of children, and social inclusion accomplishes. Determined to “wrest sexuality discourse from its various minoritarianisms,” Penney aligns the queer with what he terms “a genuinely universal emancipatory struggle beyond the reach of capitalism’s complicity with the continuing proliferation and deconstruction of sexual and gender identities” (2014, 1-2; see also Cohen 2005).

Pronouncing “queer studies and queer theory are intellectual dead discourses” (2014, 3) – “*All the valuable points queer theory has made about human sexuality were previously made by Freud and developed in (aspects of) the psychoanalytic tradition*” (2014, 5) - Penney asserts “the strong, if not absolute, determination of sexual identities by economically structured social relations” (2014, 4). Can socialism replace sexuality?

That is an old question, and not only theoretically. Almost fifty years ago Pier Paolo Pasolini proclaimed that homosexual liberation would achieve its own annihilation as, at the same time, he condemned the

student rebellions of 1968 as bourgeois violence against the sons of the poor (e.g. the police), asserting – despite his expulsion from the Italian Communist Party – the primacy of the economic, however mediated this domain is, he insisted (after Gramsci) by culture, desire, and religion. Like contemporary queer theorists Heather Love and Carolyn Dinshaw, Pasolini pined for the past; for him too “feeling backward” (Love 2007, 4) represented a political protest against the enforced futurism of compulsory capitalism. As Angelo Restivo (2002, 149-150) points out, Pasolini shared with Marcuse a deep distress over how capitalism substituted “lifestyle” for the historicity of “lived experience,” thereby making morally mandatory – Pasolini insisted - that “homosexuality remain an alterity.” Restivo (2002, 150) concludes: “Pasolini remains central to any theorization of ‘queerness’.”

Does remaining an alterity mean refusing marriage, declining to raise children, disrespecting heterosexist identities? Does it mean the intellectual evacuation of a desolate present wherein queer theory can be imagined *sans* “anti-normativity”? Can the past be reactivated as a psychoanalytic practice in the educational service of working through the present to a future we cannot foresee? Is the future of queer theory in its past?

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**For further study:** See above: Butler, Gilbert, Jagose, Johnson, Love, Mercer, Sedgwick, Silverman, Walcott.