

## THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

## Queer and Then?



By Michael Warner | JANUARY 01, 2012

Duke University Press ends its influential Series Q this month. It has been an impressive ride since the first book in the series: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's landmark 1993 collection of essays, *Tendencies*. Rereading her introduction, "Queer and Now," I am reminded of the potent sense of possibility

opened up 20 years ago by the idea of queer theory. The sense of a historical moment is strong in the essay, as its title underscores. Sedgwick's optimism was far from naïve; the same introduction disclosed her diagnosis of breast cancer, which she lived with and against until her death in 2009. Fittingly, the last volume released by Series Q is a posthumous collection of her remaining essays, *The Weather in Proust*.

Taken together, Sedgwick's death, the passage of time, and the news from Duke all seem to be occasions for taking stock. Even before the press's decision, many in the field were already in a retrospective mood. A recent book in the same series, *After Sex? On Writing Since Queer Theory*, asked leading queer theorists to look back on the great ferment of the last two decades. The title of the book seems to place queer theory firmly in the past, though the editors, Janet Halley and Andrew Parker, generously shift the emphasis in their introduction: "What has queer theory become now that it has a past?"

The answer depends on how much queer theory is defined by the speculative energy that the phrase itself generated in the 1990s. The label, after all, came into circulation only after the major theoretical innovations that defined it—in the work of Michel Foucault, Gayle Rubin, Leo Bersani, the early Sedgwick, Judith Butler, as well as many others. Those writers had already developed an analysis of sexuality that looked to relations of power rather than to individual psychology or "orientation." And they had already shown that sex, pleasure, and the formation of sexual cultures posed deep challenges to the normative frameworks by which some kinds of sex are legitimated and institutionalized as the proper form of sexuality. As several contributors to *After Sex?* point out, queer theory's intellectual concerns have given rise to newer kinds of work, and are continued under other rubrics.

When Teresa de Lauretis and her colleagues at the University of California at Santa Cruz organized a conference called "Queer Theory" in 1990, it was manifestly provocative. The term "queer" in those days was not yet a cable-TV synonym for gay; it carried a high-voltage charge of insult and stigma. The term caught on because it seemed to catalyze many of the

key insights of previous years and connect them to a range of politics and constituencies that were already developing outside academe, in a way that looked unpredictable from the start. At the 1991 Lesbian and Gay Studies Conference at Rutgers University at New Brunswick—the fifth to be held since John Boswell started the meetings at Yale University in 1987 and exponentially larger than its predecessors—the informal talk about "queer" was almost as frisky as the cruising.

Most of us were using the term in those years with not entirely straight faces. Many early theoretical expositions, including the collection I edited titled *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993), cautioned (briefly, at least) about its potential utopianism—as though "queer" were a happy umbrella term for the rainbow coalition that would exclude no one—and its American bias. By 1994, de Lauretis was already complaining that the term had "very quickly become a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry."

A look at the subsequent history of Series Q shows that judgment premature. Far from being conceptually vacuous, queer theory now has the shape of a searching and still largely undigested conversation, rich enough to have many branches, some different enough to be incommensurate with one another. Still, one knows what de Lauretis meant. A kind of hype had set in, and looking back at the writing from the period now, what strikes me is how many people were on guard about it, even as they found it intellectually generative.

What is often forgotten about that moment is that the term came from grass-roots politics before it became theory. Act Up had already made possible a politics directed against shame and normalization, and aiming at a complex mobilization of people beyond sexual identity. It in turn gave rise to other groups, including Queer Nation—whose name seemed, as I recall, mainly hilarious to all of us who heard it.

The emblematic example of that kind of street politics, for me, was an anonymous, photocopied broadside that was handed around during the 1992 primary season. (Its author, the artist Zoe Leonard, was a member of Fierce Pussy, a lesbian feminist group with roots in Act Up.) It began with a simple declaration that looked like a familiar kind of lesbian politics: "I want a dyke for president." (In queer studies, that would now be called "homonationalism.") But very quickly, the prose morphed into a set of wishes that, from clause to clause, gained in evocative power as they moved away from anything that might be imagined within legitimate politics. I quote the remainder in full, because it is not widely remembered or reprinted:

I want a person with aids for president and I want a fag for vice president and I want someone with no health insurance and I want someone who grew up in a place where the earth is so saturated with toxic waste that they didn't have a choice about getting leukemia. I want a president that had an abortion at sixteen and I want a candidate who isn't the lesser of two evils and I want a president who lost their last lover to aids, who still sees that in their eyes every time they lay down to rest, who held their lover in their arms and knew they were dying. I want a president with no airconditioning, a president who has stood on line at the clinic, at the dmv, at the welfare office and has been unemployed and layed off and sexually harassed and gaybashed and deported. I want someone who has spent the night in the

tombs and had a cross burned on their lawn and survived rape. I want someone who has been in love and been hurt, who respects sex, who has made mistakes and learned from them. I want a Black woman for president. I want someone with bad teeth and an attitude, someone who has eaten that nasty hospital food, someone who crossdresses and has done drugs and been in therapy. I want someone who has committed civil disobedience. And I want to know why this isn't possible. I want to know why we started learning somewhere down the line that a president is always a clown: always a john and never a hooker. Always a boss and never a worker, always a liar, always a thief and never caught.

Here, in a text that obviously did not come across the desk of an English professor before it hit the copier, were many of the basic impulses from which queer theory took its point of departure: a broadening of minority politics to question the framework of the sayable; attention to the hierarchies of respectability that saturate the world; movement across overlapping but widely disparate structures of violence and power in order to conjure a series of margins that have no identity core; an oddly melancholy utopianism; a speculative and prophetic stance outside politics—not to mention an ability to do much of that—through the play of its own style.

Almost 20 years later, the resonance with the Occupy Wall Street movement is unmistakable. Like Occupy Wall Street, queer theory worked by magnetizing attention, at the right moment, to problems that existed before it, and which it could not fix. Like OWS, it maintained a skeptical distance from legitimate political processes in order to cast light on their distortions. Like OWS, its moment in the spotlight was only a strobelike illumination of a lingering state of affairs, in which a lot of people felt that we would all be happier keeping that damn light off, thank you very much.

From the moment of the first reports of queer politics and queer theory, many gay men and lesbians hated the idea. For using the term positively, I was denounced by *The New York Native* as "the gay Lyndon LaRouche." Lo these many years later, straight and gay people alike continue to deride queer theory as the ultimate joke of a debased and fraudulent academy. The playwright Larry Kramer, without showing much sign of understanding queer theory, nevertheless bewails that "gay people are the victims of an enormous con job, a tragic heist." In his view, people throughout history have been gay in exactly the way we understand the term today, and the purpose of gay studies should be to celebrate them. Queer theory's attention to the historical variety and complexity of sexual cultures is, for Kramer, a betrayal of gay people and common sense alike.

One thing that language registers is that queer theory opened up a conceptual divergence from lesbian and gay studies (ironically at a time when that field was just coming into its own), as well as a political divergence from the lesbian and gay movement (which also burst into mainstream politics with the 1992 presidential campaign of Bill Clinton).

The intellectual part of queer theory had in fact begun long before, at least with Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (first published in French in 1976). Foucault's book was clearly unassimilable to movement politics. Early debates about it within gay studies focused on its critique of psychoanalysis and its turn to a constructionist account of gay identity.

Foucault's remark that "the nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage" became the most famous phrase in the book. But the bigger challenge, one that took longer to digest, was the way Foucault had flipped the lens on the whole project of studying sexuality. Instead of starting with sexual identities, he wanted to think about the prior structuring of sexuality by several techniques distinctive to modern societies. He drew attention to the way sexuality is stabilized for us by secular expert knowledge and anchored in individuals both by genres of therapy and self-representation. In his account, sexuality became visible as a field of regulation, therapy, and liberation simultaneously. He opened new questions about the deep ties between modern knowledge of sexuality and various forms of what he called "state racism," including colonialism and, in the extreme forms, genocide and eugenics; the process by which the categories of experts can be taken up as mobilizations by the individuals to whom they are applied; the kinds of normalization specific to modern societies; and the variety of alternative formations throughout history in which the pleasures of the body have been developed within entirely different purposes and imperatives.

The politics of sexuality, in Foucault's treatment, led not just to an affirmative study of sexual minorities, but to a thorough and radical re-evaluation of the techniques of defining modernity. Lesbian and gay studies quickly took on board Foucault's constructionist account of the hetero-homo opposition, but the rest of his argument necessarily lay beyond the study of same-sex attraction, and indeed beyond the study of sexuality as a stable object.

Eve Sedgwick accomplished something similar in her early work. Her 1985 book *Between Men* was a watershed, for me at least. Published just when I was completing graduate school, it approached homophobia—the organizing problematic of lesbian and gay studies—as a constitutive byproduct of modern styles of straight-male homosociality. Sedgwick was envisioning a way for gay studies and feminism to find a common perspective on straightness, masculinity, and the dynamics of domination in modern culture. Like Foucault's, her analysis flipped the lens: The real problem, for her, was the mechanism of male sociability that, in envisioning the domination of women, made its own homoerotic dimensions abject, projecting the homosexual as a failed but dangerous and repudiated version of itself.

In that turn, Sedgwick was already beginning to imagine what she

would boldly declare in the first paragraph of her 1990 *Epistemology of the Closet*: "An understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition." If anything, subsequent queer theory has tended to argue an even stronger version of that claim, suggesting that the normative field of sexuality is so dispersed that it requires us to understand such things as racialization, the dynamic between developed countries and colonies or postcolonies, the stabilization of sex biomorphism, and so on.

Those last questions had also been raised by Judith Butler before they had come to be called queer theory. Butler's 1990 *Gender Trouble*, in addition to its well-known (but still widely misunderstood) arguments about performativity of gender, had its deepest impact through

the same kind of shift in perspective. Instead of starting with the nature of sex, she urged us to analyze the normative frameworks by which gender and sexuality are constituted and inhabited in the first place. Fusing insights from phenomenology and Pierre Bourdieu's practice theory together with a long history of feminist thought, Butler foregrounded a problem that has still not been fully grasped in most philosophy or the social sciences. Where most accounts of norms imagine an agent who acts on the basis of beliefs or desires and reflects on what ought to be done, Butler called attention to the ways we find ourselves already normatively organized as certain kinds of agents, for example by having gender in ways that must be intelligible to others. The problem, she said, was the "regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence," which "disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe."

That approach immediately opened up new problems, occasioning, for example, a debate about "antinormativity" within queer theory. (Does the embrace of queerness entail a romantic opposition to all normativity whatsoever? Is there something inherently antisocial in the experience of sexuality?) But it also gave a vocabulary for a kind of analysis that the disciplines otherwise lacked.

In all these ways, the tremendous intellectual energy of what would come to be called queer theory was already casting a much broader net than lesbian and gay studies. One result over the years has been a succession of movements in which the critical project is joined and adapted by those who have different constituencies in view: trans studies, postcolonial queer studies, queer race studies. Each of those—like the parallel development of queer affect studies, which was not as closely tied to any political constituency—often begin by distancing themselves from what they take to be a narrower version of queer theory. Thus queer theory has often seemed, from its very inception, to be elsewhere or in the past. (Lauren Berlant and I noted that pattern in a 1995 *PMLA* essay called "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?")

A good example of queer theory's ambivalence about itself is Jasbir K. Puar's influential 2007 book *Terrorist Assemblages*. Puar does battle with a succession of polemical opponents: queer liberalism, queer neoliberalism, queer exceptionalism, etc. If all of one's identities "must be constantly troubled," she points out, one imagines "an impossible transcendent subject who is always already conscious of the normativizing forces of power and always ready and able to subvert, resist, or transgress them." That seems undeniable as far as it goes, but it also restates one of the generative problems in Butler's early work. So while Puar seems to want to associate queer theory with a liberal imperial imagination, she does so in terms that she takes from queer theory itself. Despite its criticisms of (some) queer theory, then, Puar's book is itself an example of the kind of vital work that queer theory enables, with or without the rubric. *Terrorist Assemblages* would very likely sit on any queer-theory syllabus today.

Queer theory in this broader sense now has so many branches, and has developed in so many disciplines, that it resists synthesis. The differences have often enough become bitter, sometimes occasioning the kind of queerer-than-thou competitiveness that is the telltale sign of scarcity in resources and recognition. That impulse can be seen, for example, in the

title of a special issue of *Social Text* called "What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?" And given queer theory's strong suspicion of any politics of purity, it is ironic that queer theorists can often strike postures of righteous purity in denouncing one another. The Gay Shame Conference at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in 2003, for instance—to discuss aspects of lesbian and gay male sexuality, history, and culture that "gay pride" had suppressed—featured a remarkable amount of mutual shaming, as though everyone had missed the point.

The scarcity of resources that feeds such a dynamic has a lot to do with university structure. At many colleges, queer theory is now institutionalized as a minor subfield of LGBT studies. Some projects, such as queer ethnography, flourish in this structure better than others. The broader provocation to the disciplines has been neatly compartmentalized, with the consequence that many of queer theory's greatest challenges—for example, in the analysis of normativity, which should have become central to philosophy and the social sciences, but has been scrupulously ignored by them, or the connections between sexuality and secularism that are central to so many kinds of conflict around the world—remain undeveloped. Thus to my mind, the widespread impression that queer theory is a thing of the past, that we are now at some point "After Sex," seems tragically mistaken.

At its best, queer theory has always also been something else—something that will be left out of any purely intellectual history of the movement. Like "I want a dyke for president," it has created a kind of social space. Queer people of various kinds, both inside and outside academe, continue to find their way to it, and find each other through it. In varying degrees, they share in it as a counterpublic. In this far-too-limited zone, it has been possible to keep alive a political imagination of sexuality that is otherwise closed down by the dominant direction of gay and lesbian politics, which increasingly reduces its agenda to military service and marriage, and tends to remain locked in a national and even nationalist frame, leading gay people to present themselves as worthy of dignity because they are "all-American," and thus to forget or disavow the estrangements that they have in common with diasporic or postcolonial queers.

That effect has been possible not just because of the theories themselves, but because of the space of belonging and talk in which theory interacts with ways of life. Much of the social effervescence is only indirectly felt on the page. But it has always been also there on the page, in the work of writing.

That might seem like an odd thing to say, since for mainstream journalists (as for Larry Kramer) queer theory is the extreme case of "difficult" academic prose, and Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick were both singled out for mockery by the self-appointed guardians of accessibility. We are often told that queer theory lacks "clarity." But technical clarity and journalistic accessibility are not the same, and the attack on difficult style has often been a means to reassert the very standards of common sense that queer theory rightly challenged. Moreover, even the most difficult prose has given people room for being serious in ways sanctioned nowhere else.

And so much of the writing is remarkable. Think of Sedgwick's bristling, coiled paragraphs; or Berlant's ability to work so unpredictably across registers to produce a knowledge that is both live and speculative (as in "Beyonding is a rhetoric people use when they have a desire not to be stuck"); or all those astonishing shoes-on-the-table moments like the opening sentence of Bersani's still-controversial essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?": "There is a big secret about sex: most people don't like it."

Sex, as Bersani astutely observed, distresses people, and they don't like to be reminded of it. Perhaps he had already noticed, at a moment when "queer theory" was not yet the name for what he was doing, the very reason why people seem to long for a present in which they can be postqueer.

*Michael Warner is a professor and chair of the department of English, and a professor of American studies, at Yale University. Among his books is *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Free Press, 1999).*

1255 Twenty-Third St., N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037

Copyright © 2016 The Chronicle of Higher Education