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Queer Theory

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As an anti-essentialist theory of sexuality, queer theory questions and unravels normative categories of gender and sexuality through its critical practices. Its theoretical articulation owes much to the 1980s third-wave feminist reworking of the concepts of sex and gender in the light of poststructuralist social theories of history, power, and discourse as well as postmodern philosophy. As lesbian and gay studies became queer studies under the influence of queer theory, lesbian and gay activism similarly went queer in order to address noted pitfalls with the earlier formulation of homosexuals as a social movement. Queer theory has informed and continues to guide activism around the politics of sexuality through a variety of cultural practices.

Teresa de Lauretis brought the rubric *queer theory* into academic discourse in her introduction to the published proceedings of a 1990 conference, “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities,” held at the University of California at Santa Cruz. The original intent—to find a theoretical way out of the dilemma between liberal pluralism, on the one hand, and deviance, on the other—has remained queer theory’s conceptual core. De Lauretis, for her part, abandoned the term nearly 3 years later, claiming that it had been reappropriated by the very institutions that it was meant to challenge. Academic presses, for example, exploited *queer theory* as a highly lucrative marketing tool during the 1990s. Nevertheless, much important work has been done in queer theory, as it has evolved and diversified since its inception.

In naming queer theory, its practitioners appropriated *queer* against its long-standing pejorative grain, which lent it an emphatic edge. Many writers have commented on the etymology of the term *queer*, especially in relation to its appropriation as an academic term. Thanks to queer theory and its associated practices, *queer* today has technical senses as an adjective, a verb, and even a noun. Queer theory has in turn spawned *queer readings*, in which a reading is often a critical interpretation of some text, cultural artifact, or performance in which presupposed stable categories of gender and sexuality are opened up and contested. To *queer something* is to give it a new queer interpretation or critique. Moreover, some people prefer to call themselves queers, rather than a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, or inter-sexed (LGBTTI) person, while others object to the term, finding it demeaning. To be a queer, as in a queer person, may also fit into the framework of queer theory. Inasmuch as the person identifies with queer subjectivity, as unstable and fleeting, she respects similarly the flow

of sexualities and multiple allegiances and identities produced in life, in contrast to the stability that identities such as *straight*, *gay*, or *lesbian* purport to have. Lastly, *queer* is sometimes used as an umbrella term that covers the whole span or some combination of LGBTTI; but this usage is largely for convenience and rarely engages any specific tenets of queer theory.

The main tenets of queer theory arose out of a number of distinct theoretical sources within the particular sociopolitical context of the late-1980s United States. In brief, queer theory was a response to the challenges posed to lesbian and gay liberation movements by AIDS, the culture wars, and identity politics. Third-wave feminism takes a radical anti-essentialist position to sexual identity. Gender becomes, for third-wave theorists, a regulatory fiction that needs to be denaturalized and uncovered as such. Borrowing from poststructuralist theories, queer theory recasts gender as fundamentally performative within language and undetermined by biological sex. This new concept of gender broke with the strong biological essentialism of second-wave liberal feminism, which was sex defined in terms of the biological body, and appeared during the heated debates internal and external to feminism over pornography, censorship, sadomasochism, bondage, bisexuality, race, class, lesbianism, and prostitution, among others. Researchers in the history and social formation of sexuality, typically gay men, collaborated with lesbian and bisexual women working within feminist thought, as in de Lauretis's 1990 conference mentioned above. Thus, queer theory became an attempt to resituate and perhaps resolve the several conceptual and practical impasses in feminist thought on sex/gender and identity and correlated problems in lesbian and gay studies, which until then were [p. 1189 ↓] understood within the frame of a biological definition of sex.

Those theories and activists in favor of collective identities, on the one hand, acknowledge and forefront the political efficacy of forming exclusive boundaries delimiting groups to those represented, while certain queer theorists, on the other hand, stand strictly against what they see as the naïve acceptance of the heterosexual-homosexual binary implicit in the adoption of essentialist sexual identities, however oppositional, and seek instead strategies that avoid complicity with social hierarchy, normalization, and its consequent exclusions. Queer theory has been challenged for too strongly emphasizing the cultural and textual while dangerously ignoring the subject as agent and the importance of group action. The ethnic model of lesbians and gay

men, in which gays and lesbians are treated as “natural” groups that deserve political representation, efficiently mirrors the practice of interest politics and the civil rights movements in the United States. Merit has been recognized in both positions, and hybrid theories and practices have been developed, notably following Gayatri Spivak's notion of operational essentialism that allows for provisional alliances and collective action while taking identity as a fiction.

With its origin in the humanities, queer theory has been used mainly as a critical approach to the interpretation of cultural texts and performances. Its application has evolved since its coinage well beyond literary and film interpretation to a range of disciplines, including religious studies, law, and history. Basic tenets of queer theory resonate in other cultural formations, which have, arguably, been in part informed by queer theory and its associated academic debates and activist context, for example, the New Queer Cinema, queercore, ACT UP, and slash fiction.

The renowned New Queer Cinema of the 1990s includes films centered on characters of queer rather than substantive gay or lesbian identities, especially in the films of Gus van Sant and Greg Araki. In accord with queer theory, the films tend to put emphasis on the fluidity of desire and sexual experiences in contrast to fixed sexual identity.

As the anarchist punk music scene of the 1980s became increasingly sexually conservative and homophobic, queercore was born. It was then and is still now centered on the grassroots mobilization and DIY (do-it-yourself) activities. Crucial to queercore culture are publications such as zines like Bruce LaBruce and GB Jones's *JDs*, and now websites and blogging, that circulate their idea of queer throughout North America and beyond. Queercore, in effect, imagined and brought into existence a critical, youth-directed alternative to mainstream gay culture. The queercore scene, through its music, zines, and activism, provides a social critique of what its members perceive as exclusionary identity politics and the conformist capitalist impulse at the center of the lesbian and gay movement.

In 1987, AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was formed as a nonpartisan group of media-savvy activists dedicated to combating AIDS through direct action. They devised many creative interventions and performances to raise public awareness of the social, political, and medical issues of AIDS. One important media campaign employed

their slogan “Silence = Death.” Similarly, its associated group Queer Nation, known for its slogans such as “We're here! We're queer! Get used to it!” was formed by former members of ACT UP in response to an increase in homophobic violence in the United States. The tactics of both groups were direct and considered militant, typically centered on a politics of increased visibility in public spaces, for example, by outing crucial public figures, but also by means of political uses of parody and irony.

In the style of fanzines, slash fiction rewrites characters of popular television anew especially in highly unexpected, campy homoerotic storylines, as in the Kirk-Spock (K/S) buddy relationship in Star Trek. It literalizes the deferred possibilities implicit in the buddy narrative of the television series. While the slash writers certainly queer their popular television series, queer reading need not always be so literal.

Queer theorists concur that the future of queer theory is fundamentally open and uncertain.

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See also

- [ACT UP](#)
- [Butler, Judith](#)
- [Feminism](#)
- [Foucault, Michel](#)
- [Identity Politics](#)
- [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender \(LGBT\) Movement](#)

Further Reading

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