

Introduction: The 'q' Word

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The title of this chapter raises more questions than it answers. What does 'The "q" Word' refer to? Why use 'q', which is more properly a letter, rather than spell out the word in full? Is there a reason for employing a lower case 'q' rather than a capital letter to represent this particular word? Are the quotation marks significant? Does the appearance of the term 'the' and the singular form 'word' mean that 'q' refers to one and only one term? Is 'q' operating here as an adjective (is there something 'q' about 'the word?') or a noun (is 'q' *the* word that we should take note of)? If I am to offer the information that I intend for 'q' in this instance to stand in for 'queer', are we any closer to discovering what 'The "q" Word' signifies? Let us focus more closely on 'The "queer" Word' for a moment: am I intending for queer to represent a noun ('x' is queer, queerness), adjective (queer 'x'), verb (to queer 'x', queering 'x') or adverb ('x-ing' queerly)? Each question leads, not to a resolution, but to another series of questions, thus continually frustrating our will to know, opening up a space of and for desire:

The minute you say 'queer' ... you are necessarily calling into question exactly what you mean when you say it ... Queer includes within it a necessarily expansive impulse that allows us to think about potential differences within that rubric. (Harper, White and Cerullo 1990, 30)

This mode of questioning while simultaneously interrogating the structural formation of such questions, at the same time as being self-reflexive about the process of interrogative thinking, is a central tenet of queer theory (Butler 2004 [1991], 122–4; Giffney and O'Rourke 2007, 7–11). It is an attempt to resist being made a slave to the discourses one is operating within at any one moment by peeling back the multitudinous layers of meaning contained within each and every pronouncement. 'The "q" Word' is neither a statement nor a question yet it functions metonymically as both because its opacity encourages us to search for possible meanings within it, prompts us to ask questions about what those meanings might be and compels us to reflect on why we are driven to conduct a search for such meanings in the first

place. When Lee Edelman remarks that 'queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one' (2004, 17), he could very well be writing about what I will refer to here as the 'queer statement', which may or may not (in the case of this chapter's title) be a grammatically-defined statement. The queer statement creates a space for reflection. It demands self-reflexivity and personal engagement. It refers beyond and outside of itself. It is a question without a question mark. As Thomas Dowson reminds us: 'Queer theory does not provide a positivity, rather it is a way of producing reflection, a way of taking a stand *vis à vis* the authoritative standard' (2000, 163).

Queer is a contentious term and one that encompasses defiance, celebration and refusal within its remit. It is, according to Mary McIntosh, 'defined more by what it is not than what it is for' (1997, 365). Genealogies of its academic manifestation can be identified in psychoanalysis, sexology, feminism, lesbian and gay studies, postmodernism and poststructuralism, HIV/AIDS activism and the black civil rights movement. Queer loosely describes a diverse, often conflicting set of interdisciplinary approaches to desire, subjectivity, identity, relationality, ethics and norms:

... 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 a rubric, most of which are not theory ... It cannot be assimilated to a single discourse, let alone a propositional program. (Berlant and Warner 1995, 343)

Debates continue between practitioners about the extent to which queer signifies an identity category, an anti-identitarian position, a politics, a methodology and an academic discipline, prompting Donald Hall to insist that 'there is no "queer theory" in the singular, only many different voices and sometimes overlapping, sometimes divergent perspectives that can loosely be called "queer theories"' (2003, 5). Originally adopted to mark the appearance of something or someone 'odd' or 'strange' and later exercised as a slur predominantly for gay men, queer has been reclaimed in recent decades with anger and pride to signal an activist insurgence against homophobia and other forms of oppression, especially those relating to gender and sexuality. In fact, Judith Butler argues that queer 'derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult' (1993, 226).

Queer can function as a synonym for 'lesbian and gay' or as shorthand for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community more generally; what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as a needed but 'false unifying umbrella' (1991, 250). Queer is more often embraced to point to fluidity in identity, recognising identity as a historically-contingent and socially-constructed fiction that prescribes and proscribes against certain feelings and actions. It signifies the messiness of identity, the fact that desire and thus desiring subjects cannot be placed into discrete identity categories, which remain static for the duration of people's lives. Queer thus denotes a resistance to identity categories or easy categorisation, marking a

disidentification from the rigidity with which identity categories continue to be enforced and from beliefs that such categories are immovable. Queer is championed by people both to reveal and revel in their differences in, what Cherry Smyth terms, its 'potential for radical pluralism' (1992, 25). It functions to designate a political persuasion, which aggressively challenges hegemonies, exclusions, norms and assumptions. In the words of David Halperin:

... 'queer' does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.
(1995, 62)

When signalling an unapologetic, anti-assimilationist stance, queer champions those who refuse to be defined in the terms of, and by the (moral) codes of behaviour and identification set down by, the dominant society.¹

While many queer theorists forward a fluid definition for queer and boast a capacious understanding of its epistemological and methodological potential, all too often the term is collapsed in its praxis into a synonym for lesbian and gay studies (Giffney 2004). In addition, a growing body of criticism has developed around the 'arrogant certainty' of queer (Khayatt 2002, 499) and the misrepresentation or silencing of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender issues and viewpoints by certain queer theorists. Many point to queer theorists' failure to deal adequately with how sexuality and gender intersect with other facets of our identities: race, ethnicity, nationality, (dis)ability, age, class and religious affiliation. This has had the positive effect of spurring on intersectional analyses, which attempt to answer E. Patrick Johnson's call for 'an epistemology of the body' (2005 [2001]). A variety of people within the university, in addition to activists and members of the LGBT community, have levelled charges of elitism at some queer theorists who bear the hallmarks of poststructuralism by employing jargon-laden prose in their explication of ideas. Despite the proliferation of queer theoretical work in locations as diverse as Ireland, Poland, the Netherlands, Germany, Russia, Africa, New Zealand and India, an unvoiced assumption circulates within LGBT studies that queer theory is produced in North America and to a lesser extent Britain, and then exported as a form of neo-imperialist rhetoric to other parts of the world. A 'star system' continues to underpin many queer writings, with the result that certain individuals, locations and disciplines have become conflated with producing theory while others are seen as simply applying it, as if colonised by its ideological effects.²

This interdisciplinary volume of 30 original essays provides an up-to-the-minute snapshot of queer scholarship from the past two decades, identifies many current directions queer theorising is taking, while also signposting several fruitful

1 An earlier version of this paragraph and the one preceding it appeared in Giffney and O'Rourke (2007).

2 An earlier version of this paragraph appeared in Giffney (2007a).

avenues for future research. The contributors, all specially commissioned, explain, develop, celebrate and criticise queer theoretical efforts as they engage with key concepts and debates within the field. In their chapters, the authors reflect on their personal, political and theoretical motivations while undertaking pioneering work in their individual areas of specialisation. The chapters gathered together here, by distinguished and emerging scholars who are based in a wide range of international locations, put the terms 'queer' and 'theory' under interrogation in an effort to map the relations and disjunctions between them. The contributors are especially attendant to the many theoretical discourses intersecting with queer theory: feminist theory, LGBT studies, postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis, disability studies, Marxism, poststructuralism, critical race studies and posthumanism to name a few. This research companion engages with four key concerns of queer theoretical work: identity, discourse, normativity and relationality. Although there is considerable overlap between the chapters in each part, we have grouped together essays which speak (sometimes at cross purposes) to one another across a range of disciplines and from a variety of personal, political and theoretical positions. Every chapter includes five suggested readings because this book is intended to facilitate discussion, debate and further study rather than acting as a so-called 'authoritative' endpoint in itself.

Identity and Normativity

I worry when 'queer' becomes an identity. It was never an identity. It was always a critique of identity. I think if it ceases to be a critique of identity, it's lost its critical edge. (Butler 2008, 32)

Queer theory began with a concern for identity. Coined by Teresa de Lauretis at a conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1990, queer theory was used there for 'theorizing lesbian and gay sexualities' (1991, iii).³ According to de Lauretis, its coinage 'convey[ed] a double emphasis – on the conceptual and speculative work involved in discourse production, and on the necessary critical work of deconstructing our own [lesbian and gay] discourses and their constructed silences' (1991, iv). Thus, queer theory has functioned as an analytical tool for unpacking the ways in which the identities lesbian and gay are formed both from the (sometimes hostile) discourses propounded by people not aligned with those categories while also being constructed by self-identified lesbians and gays themselves. This linking of queer theory with lesbian and gay was (and continues to be) considered by many to be self-evident and unquestionable because, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick pointed out: 'given the historical and contemporary force of the prohibitions against *every* same-sex sexual expression, for anyone to disavow

3 De Lauretis distanced herself from the term shortly after, labelling it 'a vacuous creature of the publishing industry' (1997, 316).

those meanings, or to displace them from the term's definitional center, would be to dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself' (1993, 8). In this, queer theory has become somewhat of an epistemological extension of an ontological position, with queer theory a theory for, about and by 'queers'. Queers' theory in other words. Queers have pitted themselves against heteronormativity, a broad-based system privileging heterosexuality and the main benefactors of that system – straights – on the one hand (Anonymous 1997 [1990]), while critiquing homonormativity, lesbian and gay assimilationism to the so-called heteronorm on the other; what Gay Shame activist Mattilda calls 'the violence of a monolithic gay identity' (Bernstein Sycamore 2008, 238).

The critique of lesbian and gay discourses came from pressure within lesbian and gay circles but also from bisexuals and transgender people who were often denigrated when not elided altogether by lesbian and gay communities. The oppositional stance of lesbians and gays, enacted by their concentration on the homo/hetero binary (Roseneil 2002) left little room for identities, desires, practices and relationships that fell in between or outside of such categories, or challenged the premise upon which those identities were formulated. Bisexual theorists, such as Clare Hemmings, saw the bisexual as 'a figure of subversion and disruption' and argued for 'the need for a bisexual theory, which not only sheds new light on bisexual behaviour, but also has the potential for challenging the traditional boundaries of heterosexual and homosexual relations' (1993, 118).⁴ Thus, bisexuality was posited as central to the deconstructive enterprise being forwarded by some lesbian and gay theorists and activists at that time. De Lauretis' sentiment of a critical practice for 'another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual' (1991, iv), was echoed by Diana Fuss who urged:

Perhaps what we need most urgently in gay and lesbian theory right now is a theory of marginality, subversion, dissidence, and othering. What we need is a theory of sexual borders that will help us to come to terms with and to organize around the new cultural and sexual arrangements occasioned by the movements and transmutations of pleasure in the social field. (1991, 5)

A desire for inclusivity and the move towards issue-based coalitional activism rather than identity politics has led practitioners of queer theory to concentrate on the exclusions through which identity-based movements come into being while endeavouring to keep the category queer provisional enough to allow for the inclusion of anyone who wants or needs it: 'Queer is not an "instead of", it's an "inclusive of"' (Adele Morrison, quoted in Duggan 1995, 165). This has led to the criticism that while trying to be all things to all people, queer actually elides differences and becomes a meaningless melange of competing aims and beliefs in the process. It is more usual to read queer writings with the underlying philosophy,

4 The so-called transgressive and subversive potential foisted upon transgender people in some quarters of queer theory has led to the exploitation of transgender as another meaning-laden category that polices those who can occupy it (Stryker 2004).

expounded by Lee Edelman, that 'queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one' (2004, 17). Queer is set up here as something, a tool perhaps, that produces self-reflection and feelings of uncomfotability; a troublesome agent of rebellion (Butler 2004 [1991], 121). Queer has, for some theorists, provided a framework for approaching, what Tim Dean terms, 'the radical impersonality of desire' and for thinking about 'sexuality outside the realm of individuals – indeed, outside, the realm of persons' (2000, 17).⁵ 'Becoming', a concept borrowed from the lexicon of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, has become useful for facilitating an exploration of desire outside of identity categories. Becoming signifies not the movement through identification from one category to another – being via becoming to being – but the understanding that change is all there is. Becoming involves the shedding of the chimera of stability and certainty wrought through our attachments to objects towards an awareness and acceptance of the unrelenting dynamism that underpins the act of living itself (see Giffney and O'Rourke 2008, viii).

Identity persists because of a will to meaning. The 'will to meaning' is, according to Victor Frankl, 'the primary motivation in [a person's] life' (1959 [1946]: 121). I have experienced this will to meaning that Frankl talks about in my own life. The drive towards trying to make sense of my desires has led me to fixate on certain discursive categories at different times; terms such as 'heterosexual', 'bisexual' or 'lesbian', which I thought, in the past, facilitated me in understanding why I was drawn to particular people while assisting me in accessing other individuals clustering around such identities (O'Rourke 2005; Giffney 2007b). The sporting of identities always entails acts of faith; ones that have left me sorely disappointed for a set of linguistic signs can never exemplify that which is unrepresentable. Guy Hocquenghem's words are particularly pertinent here: 'Properly speaking, desire is no more homosexual than heterosexual. Desire emerges in a multiple form, whose components are only divisible *a posteriori*, according to how we manipulate it' (1993 [1972], 49). This is because desire is, as James Penney reminds us, 'essentially perverse' (2006: 1). It is here between desire and discourse that queer theory is situated, not to reveal desire so much as to revel in its extra-discursive leakages. Gloria Anzaldúa's words are instructive: 'Identity is not a bunch of little cubbyholes stuffed respectively with intellect, race, sex, class, vocation, gender. Identity flows between, over, aspects of a person. Identity is a river – a process' (1991, 252–3). This is not to suggest that the queer project's aim is to rid the world of identity, rather queer theory seeks ways in which to think about the following question posed by Judith Butler: 'how to use [the identity-sign] in such a way that its futural significations are not *foreclosed*?' (2004 [1991], 126).⁶ There is something intensely personal in the queer project because of its imbrication in the mores of identity, braided as it is into the crevices of desire and its objects. Identities become not so

5 Dean (2000) turns to the work of Jacques Lacan, while Patricia MacCormack (2008) draws on the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. See also Giffney and Hird (2008) and O'Rourke (2005/2006).

6 Butler is writing here with reference to the category lesbian.

much categories to be occupied, owned, protected or rejected, but spaces to be navigated, revisited, revised and elided on a moment-to-moment basis.

Discourse and Relationality

... how we talk about sex profoundly affects how we experience it. We live in a world of sexually transmitted diseases, a viral world where sexual intercourse can be lethal; but we also live in a symbolic world, where words can be medicinal as they can be deadly. (Dean 2000, 20)

Queer theory is an exercise in discourse analysis. It takes very seriously the significance of words and the power of language. If we take a look at some of, what have become enshrined later as, the earliest queer theoretical writings – *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (1993), *Homographesis* (1994), *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993), *Inside/Out* (1991), *Saint Foucault* (1995) – we witness close readings of literary, cultural, philosophical and political texts.⁷ There is a careful attention to detail, not just to what is being said, but also to the context within which narratives unfold. Queer becomes, in these works, either a tool to decipher texts, a facilitative environment within which the reader's relationship with a text develops or an ontological property waiting to be uncovered within the text itself. It is here that queer theory's investment in the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault and the broader areas of psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and literary theory becomes most evident. Theorists seek out the ways in which texts are constructed by interrogating and denaturalising the text's manifold assumptions, and exposing the text's internal contradictions and reliance upon excluded properties to evoke a sense of unity. What is not said – slips, silences and unfinished thoughts – garner as much interest as that which is verbalised; unpicking the latent content becomes as important a task as understanding that which is stated directly. A good deal of queer research has been dedicated to silences and secrets for, as Michel Foucault put it, 'There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses' (1978 [1976], 27).

'Queer theory' is a misnomer. It is more properly 'queer theories' rather than 'queer theory'; pluralities rather than singularity. As Donald Hall puts it:

... the concept 'queer' emphasizes the disruptive, the fractured, the tactical and contingent ... any implication that queer theorization is itself a simple monolith would be hypocritical. Simply put there is no 'queer' theory in the

7 The term 'text' can refer here to, for example, fictional or non-fictional writings, films, artworks, performance pieces, situations, verbal or non-verbal communications. This list is not exhaustive.

singular, only many different voices and sometimes overlapping, sometimes divergent perspectives that can loosely be called 'queer theories'. (2003: 5)

While sympathising with Hall, I like the term 'queer theory'. It is precisely its inaccuracy that attracts me. Queer is all about excess, pushing the boundaries of the possible, showing up language and discursive categories more specifically for their inadequacies. Queer theory exposes in its very figuration the way in which discourse flattens out phenomena in an attempt to make them into palatable, digestible sound bites. It exemplifies the contradictions nestling within concepts, the way in which meanings proliferate and spill out of terms the more we try to contain them; the impossibility of owning, or securing so-called proper definitions for, words and phrases. While being interested in both what is and is not said, queer theorists are also excited by what cannot be said. There is an unremitting emphasis in queer theoretical work on fluidity, über-inclusivity, indeterminacy, indefinability, unknowability, the preposterous, impossibility, unthinkability, unintelligibility, meaninglessness and that which is unrepresentable or uncommunicable.⁸ This theoretical emphasis points to the excess which cannot be categorised, that which is not or cannot be expressed through language; the queer remainder. There is an underlying belief permeating the field that sometimes things cannot be explained and that is okay. In this, queer theory seeks to allow for complexity and the holding of uncertainties by encouraging the experiencing of states without necessarily trying to understand, dissect or categorise them. Queer's 'strategic usefulness' rests, according to Carla Freccero, in its slipperiness and ability to 'elude definition' (2006, 5). Thus, queer itself becomes, in some writings, a signifier for that which cannot be clearly or concisely defined, or for that which resists definition altogether.

Despite its slipperiness, its unremitting resistance to categorisation and theorists' insistence that queer is a 'doing' rather than a 'being', queer theory has been described recently as 'a tradition that has managed somehow to have acquired a past' (Halley and Parker 2007, 428). While there may be a reluctance to say what queer 'is', there are assuredly assumptions circulating about what queer 'does'. These concern genealogies, aims, priorities, interconnections with activism and other theories and fields, and the thorny issue of who gets to decide on all of this.⁹ As queer has developed into a field, however resistant practitioners might be about its institutionalisation – through university programmes, courses, book series, journals, conferences and so on – a number of beliefs (we might even say assumptions) have begun to circulate in writings aligning themselves with queer. These include a focus on transgression, radicalism, inclusion and difference. A number of streams have become identifiable within queer theory as people present intersectional work, which draws on other fields and theoretical discourses (McRuer 2006; Johnson and Henderson 2005; Boyarin, Itzkovitz and Pellegrini 2004). This

8 See Epps (2001); Smyth (1992); Freccero (2006, 6); Stacey and Street (2007, 1); Morland and Willox (2005, 5); Burger and Kruger (2001); Edelman (2004); Dowson (2000, 165); Haver (1997); Winnubst (2007); Noble (2006, 3); MacCormack (2008) respectively.

9 The early part of this paragraph appeared in Giffney and Hird (2008).

has meant that queer theory has become, not just a subject which speaks, but an object that is spoken about, evaluated and critiqued. The slipperiness so celebrated by queer theory – which Brad Epps (2001) has labelled its fetish – is sometimes lost in meta-theoretical analyses that seek to pin queer theory down as it were and examine the exclusions through which it comes into being. A queering of queer theory we might say. There have been stirrings in recent years towards a discussion of what it might mean to inaugurate the term 'postqueer' (Noble 2006; Giffney and Hird 2008, 5–6), and the impact such a move might have on queer theory. Talk of postqueer brings back memories of what now seem like prophetic words enunciated by Judith Butler in the early 1990s when urging that 'queer must remain that which it is, in the present, never fully owned', which 'also means that it will doubtless have to be yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively' (1993, 228).

Queer discourses touch us, move us and leave us unsettled, troubled, confused. In an essay on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's approach to subjectivity, Paul Bains writes: 'What is disturbing about their endeavour is that it attempts to think that which cannot be thought and to write the unreadable' (2002, 102). There is something of this sentiment evident within queer writings, some of which aim, in William Haver's estimation, 'to practise invention to the brink of intelligibility'. Queer theory is often difficult to read (and write). There is a valuing of difficulty because of the concerted effort made by theorists not to make things easy or palatable but to challenge the reader to work through concepts with the same expenditure of energy exerted by the writer; to use the text as a tool to open up and provoke further thinking about the theme in question. This process is not without its pleasures. Haver asks: 'what if, indeed, thinking were always also the surplus or supplement of conceptuality – an erotics, for example?' (1997, 278). The erotics of thinking, speaking, writing, listening and reading is a chief concern for those of us who engage in an intensely personal and self-reflexive relationship with the discourses we (en)counter and (re)produce. The *jouissance* we achieve from the effort we exert in establishing and disentangling relationships with texts is a momentary gesture of liberation from discourse: it entails a loss of the self we think we know (Barthes 1990 [1973]; MacCormack 2008; Thomas 2008). This is why we keep returning again and again to queer theory: for the promise of a future not defined in terms of the past, for the possibility of becoming other to ourselves.

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