

that this limitation is intellectually and politically unacceptable. The concept of the public as a zone of causal connectedness—those actions relevant to or significant for the welfare of a given group, whether or not the group is in conversation with itself or with the begetters of the actions—is much vaster. In the era of the world market, not to speak of official and unofficial violence across borders, this zone has become increasingly international. Thus the restrictively national scale of public (in the sense of conversation and control) is seen to be stretching, and at the same time to need *further* stretching. Enlarging the scale of international attention, conversation, and opinion so as to match the scale of international causal connectedness—that is, bringing these two senses of public into congruence with each other—means resetting the boundaries of the relevant moral community so that those likely to be affected by a course of action, wherever they live, are among those invited to debate it. The United Nations, so-called Non-Governmental Organizations, transnational television stations like CNN and Al-Jazeera, and the Internet are among the socio-technical institutions whose impact on the possible constituting of a global public now ought to be under hopeful and suspicious examination.

49

## Queer

Siobhan B. Somerville

“Queer” causes confusion, perhaps because two of its current meanings seem to be at odds. In both popular and academic usage in the United States, “queer” is sometimes used interchangeably with the terms “gay” and “lesbian” or occasionally “transgender” and “bisexual.” In this sense, it is understood as an umbrella term that refers to a range of sexual identities that are “not straight.” But in some political and theoretical contexts, “queer” is used in a seemingly contradictory way: as a term that calls into question the stability of any categories of identity based on sexual orientation. In this second sense, “queer” is a *critique* of the tendency to organize political or theoretical questions around sexual orientation per se. To “queer” becomes a way to denaturalize categories such as “lesbian” and “gay” (not to mention “straight” and “heterosexual”), revealing them as socially and historically constructed identities that have often worked to establish and police the line between the “normal” and the “abnormal.”

Fittingly, the word “queer” itself has refused to leave a clear trace of its own origins; its etymology is unknown. It may have been derived from the German word *quer* or the Middle High German *twer*, which meant “cross,” “oblique,” “squint,” “perverse,” or “wrongheaded,” but these origins have been contested. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that, while “queer” seems to have entered English in the sixteenth

century, there are few examples of the word before 1700. From that time until the mid-twentieth century, “queer” tended to refer to anything “strange,” “odd,” or “peculiar,” with additional negative connotations that suggested something “bad,” “worthless,” or even “counterfeit.” In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the word “queer” began to be used also as a verb, meaning “to quiz or ridicule,” “to puzzle,” “to cheat,” or “to spoil.” During this time, the adjectival form also began to refer to a condition that was “not normal,” “out of sorts,” “giddy, faint, or ill.”

By the first two decades of the twentieth century, “queer” became linked to sexual practice and identity in the United States, particularly in urban sexual cultures. During the 1910s and 1920s in New York City, for example, men who called themselves “queer” used the term to refer to their sexual interest in other men (Chauncey 1994). Contemporaneous literary works by African American writers such as Nella Larsen (1929) and Jean Toomer (1923/1969) suggest that the term could also carry racialized meanings, particularly in the context of mixed-race identities that exposed the instability of divisions between “black” and “white.” But it was not until the 1940s that “queer” began to be used in mainstream U.S. culture primarily to refer to “sexual perverts” or “homosexuals,” most often in a pejorative, stigmatizing way, a usage that reached its height during the Cold War era and that continues to some extent today. In the early twenty-first century, “queer” remains a volatile term; the *American Heritage Dictionary* even appends a warning label advising that the use of “queer” by “heterosexuals is often consid-

ered offensive” and therefore “extreme caution must be taken concerning [its] use when one is not a member of the group.” The term has also carried specific class connotations in some periods and contexts. On the one hand, as one participant in a recent online forum put it, “‘Queer’ is a rebellion against those posh middle-class business owners who want to define gaydom as being their right to enjoy all the privileges denied them just cos they like cock” (Isambard 2004). On the other hand, these class connotations are unstable. “If I have to pick an identity label in the English language,” wrote poet and critic Gloria Anzaldúa, “I pick ‘dyke’ or ‘queer,’ though these working-class words . . . have been taken over by white middle-class lesbian theorists in the academy” (1998, 263–64).

The use of “queer” in academic and political contexts beginning in the late 1980s represented an attempt to reclaim this stigmatizing word and to defy those who have wielded it as a weapon. This usage is often traced to the context of AIDS activism that responded to the epidemic’s devastating toll on gay men in U.S. urban areas during the 1980s and 1990s. An outgrowth of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power), a powerful AIDS activist group, Queer Nation became one of the most visible sites of a new politics that was “meant to be confrontational—opposed to gay assimilationists and straight oppressors while inclusive of people who have been marginalized by anyone in power” (Escoffier and Bérubé 1991, 14–16). Queer political groups have not always achieved this goal of inclusiveness in practice, but they have sought to transform the homophobic ideologies of dominant

U.S. culture, as well as strategies used by existing lesbian and gay rights movements, many of which have tended to construct lesbian and gay people as a viable “minority” group and to appeal to liberal rights of privacy and formal equality (Duggan 1992).

The more recent movement to gain the legal right to same-sex marriage demonstrates some of the salient differences between a lesbian/gay rights approach and a queer activist strategy. While advocates for same-sex marriage argue that lesbians and gay men should not be excluded from the privileges of marriage accorded to straight couples, many queer activists and theorists question why marriage and the nuclear family should be the sites of legal and social privilege in the first place. Because same-sex marriage would leave intact a structure that disadvantages those who either cannot or choose not to marry (regardless of their sexual orientation), a more ethical project, queer activists argue, would seek to detach material and social privileges from the institution of marriage altogether (Ettelbrick 1989; Duggan 2004b).

Sometimes in conversation with these activist efforts and sometimes not, queer theory emerged as an academic field during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, scholars who are now referred to as queer theorists argued that sexuality, especially the binary system of “homosexual” and “heterosexual” orientations, is a relatively modern production. As Foucault (1978) argued, although illicit acts between two people of the same sex had long been punishable through legal and religious sanctions, these practices did not necessarily define individuals as

“homosexual” until the late nineteenth century. While historians have disagreed about the precise periods and historical contexts in which the notion of sexual identity emerged, Foucault’s insistence that sexuality “must not be thought of as a kind of natural given” has been transformative, yielding an understanding of sexuality not as a psychic or physical drive, but as a “set of effects produced in bodies, behavior, and social relations by a certain deployment” of power (127). Moving away from the underlying assumptions of identity politics and its tendency to locate stable sexual subjects, queer theory has focused on the very process of sexual subject formation. If much of the early work in lesbian and gay studies tended to be organized around an opposition of homosexuality and heterosexuality, the primary axis of queer studies shifted toward the distinction between normative and non-normative sexualities as they have been produced in a range of historical and cultural contexts.

For this reason, a key concept in queer theory is the notion of “heteronormativity,” a term that refers to “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged” (Berlant and Warner 1998, 548 n. 2). Heteronormativity, it is important to stress, is not the same thing as heterosexuality (though the two are not entirely separable); indeed, various forms of heterosexuality (adultery, polygamy, and interracial marriage, among others) have historically been proscribed rather than privileged (Rubin 1984; C. Cohen 1997; Burgett 2005). Rather, heteronormativity is a form of

power that exerts its effects on both gay and straight individuals, often through unspoken practices and institutional structures.

Because queer critique has the potential to destabilize the ground upon which any particular claim to identity can be made (though, importantly, not destroying or abandoning identity categories altogether), a significant body of queer scholarship has warned against anchoring the field primarily or exclusively to questions of sexuality. Instead, these scholars have argued, we should dislodge “the status of sexual orientation itself as the authentic and centrally governing category of queer practice, thus freeing up queer theory as a way of reconceiving not just the sexual, but the social in general” (Harper et al. 1997). In local, national, and transnational contexts, such a formulation allows us to contest constructions of certain issues as “sexual” and others as “non-sexual,” a distinction that has often been deployed by U.S. neoconservatives and neoliberals alike to separate “lesbian and gay” movements from a whole range of interconnected struggles for social justice.

The field of queer studies has increasingly challenged this tendency by using “intersectional” approaches that begin from the assumption that sexuality cannot be separated from other categories of identity and social status. Whereas some early queer theorists found it necessary to insist upon understanding sexuality as a distinct category of analysis, one that could not be fully accounted for by feminist theories of gender, it is now clear that sexuality and gender can never be completely isolated from one another (Rubin

1984; Sedgwick 1990). Indeed, Judith Butler (1990, 5) has shown that our very notions of sexual difference (male/female) are an effect of a “heterosexual matrix.” A significant body of scholarship, largely generated out of questions raised by transgender identity and politics, has insisted on the pressing need to revisit and scrutinize the relationships among sex, gender, and sexuality, with an emphasis on recalibrating theories of performativity in light of materialist accounts of gender (Stone 1991; Prosser 1998).

If queer theory’s project is characterized, in part, as an attempt to challenge identity categories that are presented as stable, transhistorical, or authentic, then critiques of naturalized racial categories are also crucial to its antinormative project. As a number of critics have shown, heteronormativity derives much of its power from the ways in which it (often silently) shores up as well as depends on naturalized categories of racial difference in contexts ranging from sexology and psychoanalysis to fiction and cinema (Somerville 2000; Eng 2001). Heteronormativity itself must be understood, then, as a racialized concept since “[racially] marginal group members, lacking power and privilege although engaged in heterosexual behavior, have often found themselves defined as outside the norms and values of dominant society” (C. Cohen 1997, 454). This insistence on putting questions of race at the center of queer approaches has been vigorously argued most recently in a body of scholarship identified as “queer of color critique” (Ferguson 2004).

At the same time that intersectional approaches have become more central to queer studies, the field

has also increasingly turned to the specificities of nation-based models and the dynamics of globalization and imperialism. Scholars have begun to interrogate both the possibilities and the limitations of queer theory for understanding the movement of desires and identities within a transnational frame, as well as the necessity of attending to the relationship between the methods of queer theory and colonial structures of knowledge and power (Povinelli and Chauncey 1999; Manalansan 2003; Gopinath 2005). The resulting interest in the “nation” and its constitutive role in processes of racialization and sexualization has raised new questions about the ways that queer theory might usefully interrogate the nation’s less charismatic companion—the state. Jacqueline Stevens (2004, 225), for instance, has envisioned queer theory and activism as a site for articulating “a revolution against all forms of state boundaries . . . the unhindered movement and full-fledged development of capacities regardless of one’s birthplace or parentage.”

If the origins of the term “queer” are elusive, its future horizons might be even more so. While the term itself has a contested and perhaps confusing history, one of the points of consensus among queer theorists has been that its parameters should not be prematurely (or ever) delimited (Sedgwick 1993; Berlant and Warner 1995). The field of queer studies is relatively young, but as it has made inroads in a number of different academic fields and debates, some critics have asserted that the term is no longer useful, that it has become passé, that it has lost its ability to create productive friction. Pointing to its seeming ubiquity in

popular-cultural venues such as the recent television shows *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* or *Queer as Folk*, others criticize the ways that the greater circulation of “queer” and its appropriation by the mainstream entertainment industries have emptied out its oppositional political potential. Whether we should be optimistic or pessimistic about the increasingly visibility of “queer” culture remains an open question. Meanwhile, scholars continue to carefully interrogate the shortcomings and the untapped possibilities of “queer” approaches to a range of diverse issues, such as migration (Luibhéid and Cantú 2005) or temporality (Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2005). Whatever the future uses and contradictions of “queer,” it seems likely that the word will productively refuse to settle down, demanding critical reflection in order to be understood in its varied and specific cultural, political, and historical contexts.

## 50

### Race

Roderick A. Ferguson

The study of race incorporates a set of wide-ranging analyses of freedom and power. The scope of those analyses has much to do with the broad application of racial difference to academic and popular notions of epistemology, community, identity, and the body. With regard to economic and political formations, race has shaped the meaning and profile of citizenship