

# Queer Theory

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## Abstract

Queer theory and ethnography have a productive relationship. Queer theory has questioned the stability of nonnormative sex and gender based identities particularly gay and lesbian. Emerging out of late twentieth century debates on the historicity and contextual nature of sex and gender, queer theory claims that important of power relationships in shaping normative meanings, practices and institutions around sex and gender. Ethnographic studies provide culturally particular illustrations of how nonnormative sex and gender identities are negotiated, evaluated, practiced, and transformed. Ethnographic studies on queer immigrants, uses of the internet and new media, queer activism and the role of race in sex and gender identities have enabled new cutting edge discussions that extend and complicate ideas from queer theory. More ethnographic research is needed to look into the roles of labor and class in sex and gender identities, and how new identity categories such as transgender circulate transnationally and cross-culturally.

## INTRODUCTION

Queer theory in the past 20 years has become institutionalized both as a field of research interest and as set of ideas or theoretical framework in the humanities and social sciences. Its provenance can be traced to the influences of feminist theory and women studies, post-structural theory, and gay and lesbian studies around the late 1980s and early 1990s. Post-structural theory, particularly Michel Foucault, was instrumental in the emergence of queer theory particularly as it hinged on and was fueled by his pivotal ideas about the historicity and nonnaturalness of sexuality. In other words, Foucault more than any scholar promoted the idea that sexuality was a social and cultural product that was labile and highly susceptible to the shifts in the historical contingencies of meaning. Feminist theory and women's studies was particularly buoyed by debates in the 1970s from women of color scholars and activists who questioned the universality of the category "woman" and that this monolithic category has given rise to specific privileges, omissions, and gaps particularly around race, class and sexuality. Queer theory also benefited from the rise of gay and lesbian studies which studied various

Euro-American gay and lesbian subcultures and emerged out of the activism of the homophile movement in America. The field gained ground in the early seventies and then faced its most formidable challenge in the 1980s—the AIDS pandemic.

The pandemic was the turning point and animating force that fused several of the strands of scholarship and activism mentioned above. More than anything, the pandemic brought to bear what essentially was an ironic reality, the disease which was initially labeled GRID or gay related immune deficiency became prevalent in particular populations or communities such as immigrants, racialized minorities and non-Western countries where the labels lesbian or gay did not have any popular currency or semantic traction. One of the foremost lessons of the pandemic was to show the incongruity and incommensurability of sexual and gender behaviors with existing identity categories on the basis of sexual orientation.

This historical event, more than any other existing reality in the 1980s, gave rise to one of the primary stances of queer theory which is *anti*-normativity. The discrepancies between behavior and identity plus the dismal negligence and homophobic disregard for the victims of the pandemic by the US and British government during the 1980s enabled a radical stance that framed the social antipathy, stigma and violence against any sexually and gender non-conforming individual or group with the existence of heteronormativity—a social order of bodies, relations and institutions that had its origins in the nineteenth century and continues to this day in Euro-American contexts.

Queer theory became a way of repositioning normativity and nonnormativity without having to use sexual orientation or sexual object choice as the pivot for analyzing behaviors, institutions and practices that do not fall neatly in the gay/straight divide. Queer theory also constructed normativity as primarily fueled by the necessary, naturalized and hegemonic status of heterosexuality in the modern West. Therefore normativity is established by institutions, rituals, and everyday practices that privilege heterosexuality and the goal of queer theory is to locate the disruptive sites and moments that destabilize the heteronormative structural functioning of society.

## FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Queer theory and ethnography have had a vexed historical relationship with each other. Ethnography of nonnormative sexualities and gender has been part of anthropology and sociology long before the advent of queer theory in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Kath Weston, in what is considered the first major critical survey of gay and lesbian research in anthropology, demonstrated the integral role of ethnography as a crucial medium for

mapping or conducting what she calls an *ethnocartography* of homosexual/gay/lesbian phenomena. However, ethnographic investigations at that time were still entrenched in Euro-American categories of gay and lesbian and were mostly either American or European based. Despite this reality, it was clear that not all ethnographies of nonnormative gender and sexuality were clearly or obviously framed within queer theoretical precepts. At the same time, ethnographies particularly those about the non-West or in the Global South have enriched queer theory because such studies showcase the multiple valuations and discrepant positions of the normal that do not depend on Western historical and cultural contingencies and categories. Ethnographic accounts from places such as Papua New Guinea demonstrated that same-sex behavior in certain cases were part of the accepted and mandated ritualized transition from childhood to manhood. In other words, these ethnographic cases reveal how the normal is not always anchored to Western concept of sexual orientation and the identity categories that supposedly emanate from it. In fact, cross-cultural ethnographies have shown how the “normal” is a moving target—not clearly entrenched in Western liberal and Judeo-Christian notions of individualism, rationality, and ethics.

Ethnographic studies of sexual behavior in the Global South have provided the grist for a more expansive notion of the sexual and the normal in ways that have not been possible in the mainstream gay and lesbian studies and in queer theory which were primarily based on analytical readings of literary, cinematic and performance texts. Ethnographic studies have demonstrated the importance of colonial and neocolonial subjugations as fundamental social frameworks in the creation of meanings around sexual behaviors/practices and identities.

### CUTTING EDGE RESEARCH

The important and inter-related current trends in queer theory and ethnography involve those innovative research strands or intellectual trajectories that involve the following: the study of sexuality and gender within the processes of globalization and transnationalism including that of migration; the study of social movements and activism; the study of transgender issues; the study of race as an intersecting force in sexuality and gender; and the study of affect, emotions, feelings and other bodily practices and experiences in sexuality and gender.

Ethnographic studies about how various queer ideas, images, and bodies travel across space and time involving either migration or the use of telecommunication technologies have emerged in response to the intensification of global flows of cultural ideas, bodies, economic goods, and other phenomena

in the twenty-first century. Mary L. Gray documented and analyzed the use of internet of rural-based American youth as a way to think about how new media technologies have created a space for exploration and expression of alternate sexual and gender identities. At the same time, the internet also provides the medium for the travel and transfer of queer ideas and images and it serves as a meeting ground for new subcultures of and emotional refuge for otherwise isolated individuals and groups.

The transnational reception, mediation, dissemination and negotiation of gender and sexual norms, politics and cultural ideas, practices and institutions are best exemplified by the experiences of queer immigrants. Queer immigrants are often seen in terms of assimilation and integration with the mainstream gay and lesbian practices. However, ethnographic studies by Carlos Decena on Dominican, Suparna Bhaskaran on Indian, Martin Manalansan on Filipino, and Gloria Wekker on Afro-Surinamese queer immigrants illustrate the complicated manner by which such subjects engage with notions of sexual marginalization with among other things, social primarily race-based ostracism in the host country. Therefore such immigrants find it difficult if not impossible to integrate into and participate in the mainstream LGBT communities in their land of settlement. Far from being a contest between tradition and modernity, competing sexual ideologies together with social, political and economic factors germane to immigrants, confound any simplistic attempts at belonging and identification.

With the rise of identity and rights-based awareness of nonnormative sexualities across the world and the increase of queer-related activisms and social movements have given rise to a research agenda on how queer people come together for political and social action. Ethnographies of activisms based on gender and sexual nonnormative behaviors and identities have shown the divergent ways in which rights around sexuality and gender are articulated and what kinds of political ideals are espoused. For example, many international gay and lesbian rights groups based in the Euro-American sites have promoted the idea of "liberating" the Global South through the direct promotion of Western based gay and lesbian rights discourse. Ethnographic studies have shown that such redemptive ideals are not only unrealistic, they are, more importantly, oftentimes inconsistent with the individual and collective aspirations and experiences of sexual and gender deviant subjects in these places. At the same time, studies have also revealed how queer activists also enact and express an ideal of a queer "globality" or an essential notion of commonality of purpose among various queer activist groups across nations.

One of the ways in which such movements and activist practices are ethnographically mapped is through a focus on emotions and affect. Emotions and affect are not just states of individual psychologies but are social formations established through proliferating discourses, ideas and practices.

Part of what has been called the *affective turn* in the humanities and social sciences is the attempt to underscore the crucial role of passionate rhetoric and environments in the creation of political and social movements aimed at transforming the conditions for queer subjects. Ethnographies such as Naisargi Dave's work on Indian lesbian activists reveal the undercurrents of "passions" and other emotions that motivate, drive and fuel Indian lesbian subjects who create these affective bonds and conduct ethically inspired collective action under the sign of "lesbian." Thus instead of seeing such practices as necessarily "rational" or activist groups as "systematic" arrangements of people, political goals and instrumental behavior, activism's core is founded on the coming together and coalescing around the emotional and affective energies that propel the formation of collective thinking and action.

The other important development in the queer theory is the emergence of transgender studies. Scholars of transgender or trans studies sometimes conceive of it as a separate field from queer theory. David Valentine suggests that transgender as a category has emerged as a partial answer to the problematic relationship between gender and sexuality and demonstrates the complexities around desire, gender identity, biology, and the social norms surrounding gender assignments of physical features, embodied behaviors, and experiences. Ethnographic studies have shown that the dissemination and everyday understanding of "transgender" is often uneven and is often engaged in relation to existing categories such as gay, drag, or cross-dressing. However, community organizing around transgender issues has enabled the category "transgender" to become a viable social and political identity. Ongoing ethnographic work range from the development of trans identities within the individual development cycle, to gender re-assignment surgery, to the various modes and phases of transgender experiences to the political economy of transgender issues.

Ethnographic studies about the role of race in the everyday life and the processes of self-making in various countries. Race is never considered either as a single factor or a discreet category but rather, as intrinsically enmeshed in sociocultural processes and is a crucial juncture in the articulation and experience of the gendered and sexual phenomena. American-based studies and scholars have persuasively argued the relevance and necessary intertwining of race in the expression, understanding, and dissemination of sexual desire, identity and practices. For example, recent works such as Jason Ritchie have shown how mainstream post-9/11 discourses have been based on the intertwining of colonial, homophobic and xenophobic ideas and feelings particularly in the understanding and apprehension of Middle Eastern cultures as necessarily *anti*-homosexual and therefore premodern and uncivilized.

Jafari Allen deploys the framework of intersectionality to understand the predicament of Afro-Cuban queers and their multiply marginalized

existence in their country. Intersectionality, coined by critical race studies scholars, argues that the indices of race, class, gender, and sexuality are mutually constitutive of individual subjectivity and collective experience. Queer ethnographic studies have demonstrated the efficacy of this formulation as it locates sexuality and gender within the material and symbolic struggles of individual subjects and collectivities.

### KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Class and labor are important future research topics that still need to be engaged with in a consistent and tenacious ways in queer ethnographic research. Ethnographic studies and queer theory must respond to the global economic crisis and with precarious shifting of social classes across the world especially around the decreasing quality of life and modes of life that teeter on the verge of collapse and oblivion. Future research should not only look at the economic predicament of queer subjects but more importantly, how a queer perspective might help illuminate ongoing precarious neoliberal exigencies by examining how the unequal and uneven deployment of normative concepts, ideals, and expectations promote and reproduce these perilous conditions. In other words, how does a queer theoretical frame enable an ethnographically based critical understanding of political, economic and social sufferings in contemporary times?

The ethnographic function of demonstrating how particular categories such as transgender and gay are negotiated across national and local spaces is still very crucial and much needed in future research. What kinds of ideas and identities travel across space through migration, travel or through virtual communication? For example, transgender has become a universalizing category that seems to include most every practice and behavior that are deemed gender nonconforming. Future ethnographic studies on this matter should include detailed analyses of the viability of this category in specific contexts and how this category from the West may be used or not used in place of specific cultural idioms and practices in specific sites and places. In other words, ethnographic studies around transgender should look into the limits and possibilities of a global geography of transgender subjects, ideologies, and institutions within and across various spatial scales and historical contexts. Going beyond the transgender category, future ethnographic research should look into the ways in which other new kinds of gender and sexual categories and ideas expand or contract their semantic and political landscapes. What kinds of situations and peoples do they include? What do they leave out?

With the increasing visibility of gay agenda issues such as gay marriage, scholars are also looking into the repercussions of mainstreaming of, at least

in the previous century, extremely marginalized positions of queers. Ongoing and future ethnographic research should look into the roles of queers in gentrification, the consequences of the disintegration of so-called gay ghettos or gayborhoods and the increasing “normal” face of the queer as actually re-producing the nuclear family. With the emergence of gay rights in the American landscape, queer theory and ethnography should look in to the material and symbolic effects of the calcification of queerness in terms of rights and the attainment of the markers of the good life primarily around the reproduction—marriage, child-rearing, and family. What is queer with what is happening right now—should be the question that will drive and fuel future research.

The institutionalization of queer theory in the academy has also created new perspectives and questions particularly about its relevance and continued existence. Some scholars have announced the death of queer theory. That said, queer theory still provides a vibrant and robust research agenda. The enduring promise of queer theory is precisely because it is not wedded to a particular object—even with the case of sexuality. Sexuality is seen in terms of an intersection of mutually influencing and affecting nodes of subjectivity and sociality. Queer theory is context-bound and not object-based. As such, queer theory and the notion of queer are amenable to the empirically grounded mission of ethnography. While scholars in the humanistic disciplines such as literary studies, art history and philosophy have heard the death knell of queer theory, the resonance of queer theory can and will be extended and animated by the ethnographic disciplines such as anthropology. Despite their historically strained relationship, queer theory and ethnography have much to offer each other in the terms of future joint intellectual and political ventures.

#### FURTHER READING

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**Martin F. Manalansan** is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Asian American Studies and Conrad Humanities Professorial Scholar at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. He is an affiliate faculty in Gender and Women's Studies, Global Studies and Criticism and Interpretive Theory. He is the Social Science Review Editor for *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*.

He is the author of *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Duke University Press, 2003) which won the Ruth Benedict Prize in 2003. His other publications include three edited collections: *Cultural Compass: Ethnographic Explorations of Asian America* (Temple University Press, 2000), (with Arnaldo Cruz-Malave) *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism* (New York University Press, 2002) and (with Katharine Donato, Donna Gabbacia, Jennifer Holdaway and Patricia Pessar, Jennifer Holdaway) a special issue of the *International Migration Review* (2006) entitled "Gender and Migration Revisited." His essays have appeared in journals such as *Social Text*, *positions: East Asia cultures critique*, and *GLQ*. His current projects include neoliberalism, embodied belonging and LGBTQ politics and culture; Manila's urban modernity; and the cultural politics of space, food, and olfaction in Asian American immigrant communities of New York City.

#### RELATED ESSAYS

- History and Epistemology of Anthropology (*Anthropology*), Arjun Appadurai
- Reconciliation and Peace-Making: Insights from Studies on Nonhuman Animals (*Anthropology*), Sonja E. Koski
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