**Article for Interalia Sep 30, 2023**

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**Is Queer’s Future Queer?**

Queer Studies is more than thirty years old today. As it gets older, however, it further jeopardizes its core premise of deconstructing the centre because it centralizes itself around the LGBTI+ discourse. For this very reason, it has a curious place within the academy.

In 2005, fifteen years after Teresa de Lauretis put forward the first theoretical articulation of queer/ness at a conference held in Santa Cruz, *Social Text* published an issue about the “life” of Queer Theory that had a striking title: “What’s queer about queer studies now?” The editors David Eng, Jack/Judith Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz were emphasizing that the “contemporary mainstreaming of gay and lesbian identity—as a mass-mediated consumer lifestyle and embattled legal category—demand[ed] a renewed queer studies” (2005: 1). To them, this “renewed” queer studies would be “ever vigilant to the fact that sexuality is intersectional, not extraneous to other modes of difference, and calibrated to a firm understanding of queer as a political metaphor without a fixed referent” (ibid.). What constituted the crux of the matter of their statement was the word “fixed,” which was a direct reference to the field’s ossified state. Thus, they were emphasizing Queer Studies’ fixation or centralization around “sexuality” that went against the field’s initial premise of deconstructing the *centre*.

Two years later, in 2007, Jasbir Puar raised a homologous question: “What does queer theory offer now?” (228), she asked. With this simple yet provoking prompt, she was inviting hermeneutics workers working with *queer* frames to think “in the way of political sustenance, anti-racist modes of addressing disintegrating public spheres of speech, and challenges to the fake news industry, post-structuralism gone haywire and a post-fact world where concentrations camps become concentration centers” (ibid.). Simply put, Puar was urging us to ask ourselves the following question: “How can queer theory help us?” (ibid.). Four years later, in 2011, Janet Halley and Andrew Parker put forward a similar inquiry: “what has queer theory become now that it has a past?” (*After Sex? On Writing Since Queer Theory* 8). They were also questioning the field’s “purview,” asking questions to further problematize their *queer*’s status quo: “does ‘sexuality’ comprise [*queer*’s] inside? If so, then does queer theory have an outside?” (ibid.). By the time Queer Studies had turned fifteen, *queer* theorists had already started to question the field’s “utility” and tackle the scholarly debate on whether queer theory has become passé or not.

Around this time, thinkers like Heather Love, Ann Cvetkovic, Erica Rand, and Neville Hoad—who all contributed to *After Sex?*—proposed that *queer* theory should be having an “outside.” This meant that they wanted to “avoid universalizing political formations generally” (2005: 6) or stand aloof what Love calls the “queer universal.” In fact, this stance is best epitomized by Sharon Marcus’ striking dixit “if everyone is queer, then no one is.” I echo these theorists’ self-positioning by adding that a persisting problem that has the power to turn Queer Studies into a passé field is its perpetual emphasis on the verb “to be.” Put differently, queer thinkers’ reluctance to cut their umbilical cord with identitarian politics informed by a doxa of *being* (see, for example, still common expressions like “I *am/*we *are* here, queer, get used to it”) endangers the field’s longevity and sustainability. Where does this take us, then? A possible approach that helps us break the unsustainable stability of Queer Studies today is a slight shift towards *doing*, rather than *being*.

Harking back to Butler who proposes that we should “let [queer] take on meanings” (1993: 228), I contend that there is an urgent need to queer the current, fixed understanding of queerness in a way which is “redeployed, twisted, queered from [its] prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (ibid.). In the pages that follow, I try to “queer the queer” by tracing “the political” in it and going back to the term’s earliest articulations in the 1990s through theorists such as Nikki Sullivan, Lee Edelman, Cathy Cohen, Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam. My approach, in turn, allows me to question whether finding oneself “after” Queer Studies “differs in terms of desire, location, temporality, loyalty, antagonism, comradeship, or competence” (2011:10) from finding oneself “after” a political conviction, a traditional academic discipline, a religious orientation, a revised feminism or lesbian and gay studies. While this inquiry tries to transform today’s ossified understanding of queerness into an occasion of elasticity for the future of Queer Studies itself, it perpetuates thinking upon broadening the remit of queerness and to re-open a timely discussion about whether the field has become passé or not.

Even though in contemporary academic parlance, the word “queer” is generally perceived as referring to LGBTI+ identities, communities and subjectivities, the term emerged in the early 1990s as a political positionality with an understanding overarching the boundaries of gender and sexuality. According to Judith Butler, feminism then was reinforcing a binary opposition between men and women rather than opening up possibilities for more flexible and less binaristically opposed practices of gender. In turn, she proposed that “there [was] no gender identity behind the expressions of gender” and that “identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (1990: 25). Butler, therefore, theorised gender as a set of performative actions that is something a subject would “do” rather than “be.” This paved way for a (re)reading of sexual identity as a dramatic outcome our every-day performances rather than an expression of our inner, quintessential selves.

Drawing on Michel Foucault and his theorisation of human sexuality as a history, what Butler emphasized was the non-naturalness of gender categories while she laid bare the political modus operandi behind what is called gender. Departing from the idea that there is no *centre*, she asserted that “the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin” (188). Having deconstructed the supposed links between sex, gender and desire, Butler reconceptualised gender as rather flexible and malleable, while providing confirmatory evidence that the exclusion of any non-heterosexual individual was based on power, not nature. In the following years corresponding to *queer*’s theoretical articulation, early *queer* theorists like Michael Warner, Nikki Sullivan, David Halperin and Lee Edelman built upon Butler’s stance by underlining the term’s anti-normative foundations and the politics innate within it.

Warner was one of the first theorists to focus on queer’s anti-normative dimension by arguing that the preference for using the term “represents an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects toleration or simple political interest-representation through resistance to regimes of the normal” (1991: 26). For him, *queer* was to get “a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual” (ibid.). Even though Warner’s argument has been challenged by some scholars on the grounds that anything may be defined as *queer* as long as it is contra the norm, its importance was in its positioning of Queer Theory as a new form of (cultural) criticism capable of addressing ways in which literature, film and cultural products have resisted, challenged or subverted the widespread belief that all people fall into distinct and complementary binaries of gender and sexuality. Along similar lines, David Halperin argued that “queer [was] by definition whatever [was] at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (1995: 65). As an identity “without an essence,” it was “not just a view on sexuality, or gender” but rather a thinking system that suggested that “the confines of any identity can potentially be reinvented by its owner” (ibid.). By underlining the term’s creative potential, Halperin’s statement hinted at the way Queer Theory was not *meant to* function as way of solely reading sexual subjectivities.

Concomitantly, Queer Theory flourished as a non-essentialist, creative practice with a strong post-structuralist vein. Nikki Sullivan emphasized queerness as “a deconstructive practice that is not undertaken by an already constituted subject [which] in turn does not furnish the subject with a nameable identity” (2003: 50). Her argument, together with Warner’s aforementioned point, showed that *queerness* was a deconstructive “act” deeply rooted to post-structuralism. This is because the term’s impulse was mainly grounded in the active breaking down of binary oppositions akin to the signifier-signified opposition of the structuralist thought. Hence, *queerness* became a new positionality rather than a positivity within the context of post-structuralist identity politics, and it offered an anti-essentialist way of thinking not only about sexuality but also subjectivity.

Though Queer Theory meant “to challenge and break apart conventional categories” (Doty, 1993: 15), it became one itself. Despite *queerness* allegedly signifying what Lee Edelman describes as “a site of permanent becoming” (1995: 348), many *queer* theorists “have [rather] sought to limit the discourse to examinations of gay male and lesbian genders and sexualities alone or primarily” (Giffney, 2004: 73). Therefore, it became a new site for LGBTI+ studies with *queer* theorists in line with Eve Sedgwick who summoned a turning to “the term’s definitional center” (1993: 8). Yet Sedgewick’s appeal seemed and still seems contradictory since she was trying to attribute a single, unified *centre* to the discipline regardless of the fact that Queer Theory, as Butler asserted, was aiming to “reveal the arbitrary relation between the signifier and the signified, and to destabilize and mobilize the sign” (1990: 167). Despite its deconstructive core which takes the assumption of any *centre* as its main target, Queer Theory contradictorily moved toward a fixed *centre* where its focal point became the sexual marginalization of non-heterosexual people or groups.

Consequently, Queer Studies, today, has become a centralized discourse that is jeopardizing its very own premise of destabilizing the assumed binary opposition. In fact, as early as 1995, Edelman had warned *queer* hermeneutics workers about the dangers of doing so in the opening of a conference in Iowa. He noted: “Whatever queer studies have become, then, we have reason to hope that for now, at least, it defies any effort to reduce it to the singularity of a ‘state’ that would be subject to any conceptual or methodological totalization” (1995: 343). A decade after Edelman, Cathy Cohen made a parallel point, arguing that Queer Studies is “serving to reinforce simple dichotomies between the heterosexual and every-thing ‘queer’” (2005: 22), instead of destabilizing them. Yet, “anchoring queer approaches exclusively or primarily to sexual orientation,” as Siobhan Somerville underlines, “does not do justice to the potential reach of queer critique, which would destabilize the ground upon which any particular claim to identity can be made” (2002: 787).

Therefore, there is a greater need for Queer Studies to examine the ways in which the-ever growing sexual identity categories and pre-defined demarcations of gender are also identitarian mechanisms that help marginalize and privilege individuals. In other words, Queer Studies needs to move away from an understanding of *queerness* weaved around knowability and nameability. What would this focal shift bring to *queer* thinking? I contend that this approach would meet the demand of a renewed *queer* studies which is “vigilant to the fact that sexuality is intersectional, not extraneous to other modes of difference,” and “calibrated to a firm understanding of queer as a political metaphor without a fixed referent” (Eng, Halberstam et al., 2012: 3).

Therefore, Queer Studies, as an ossified and stabilized field of study today, needs to be reimagined as a system of critical thinking that involves yet is not limited to gender and sexuality. In this frame, there should be no identity, entity or entry to *queerness*. Rather than thinking of *queerness* as a *being*, there is an urgent need to move toward envisioning it as a *doing* that necessitates and thus perpetuates the questioning of social and cultural norm(alitie)s. Doing so has certain advantages. Firstly, it would enable us to break the current, fixed understandings of *queerness*. Secondly, it would help Queer Theory avoid what the feminist discourse once suffered from, which is, to unwillingly turn into a centralized theory and a self-limiting quagmire because of naming, categorization and essentialization. Thirdly, it would help us envision different forms of queerness (or *queernesses*) “outside” of sexuality and thus discover the antinormative angles in, say, even canonic novels, or cultural productions that do not necessarily tackle non-heterosexuality. Carla Freccero is a scholar who pays particular attention to this subtle nuance by “advocating for queer’s verbally and adjectivally unsettling force against claims for its definitional stability” (2005: 17). She notes that “queer is the name of a certain unsettling in relation to heteronormativity” (ibid.). She manages to use *queer* as a tool for doing and undoing, allied with an understanding of queer that does the work of *différance.*

Though more than fifteen years have passed since Freccero, Butler, Eng, Halberstam, Puar, Halley and Parker shared their concerns about *queer*(*ness)*, their calls for action are still timely. Inheriting the commonly held assumptions and preoccupations of a Queer Theory informed by feminist sex wars, white-male-centric gay politics, a crescendo AIDS activism in the US or a populist identitarian politics is risky concerning today’s morphed social dynamics. Anchoring *queer* approaches exclusively or primarily to sexual orientation simply does not do justice to the potential reach of *queer* critique.

Unless the current stability of Queer Studies is destabilized, we are likely to find ourselves thrown into “single-axis frameworks, either/or models of thought, or measures of rationality that could not account for multiplicity” (2011: 157). In order for Queer Theory to be sustainable, I contend that it needs to undress itself from its opaque and conforming vest of LGBTI+ discourse and turn its focus proactively on anti-identitarian politics (rather than identitarian), which will organically result in a meticulous understanding of how *-isms* like sexism, racism, capitalism, normativism as well as quotidian and legislative forms of marginalization based on difference are interlocking. Such a queer political potentiality can only be achieved by queer(ing) hermeneutics workers who are willing to mind this nuance and thus collectively build an intellectual realm of openness resembling to what José Esteban Muñoz once called “the queer horizon of possibilities.”

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