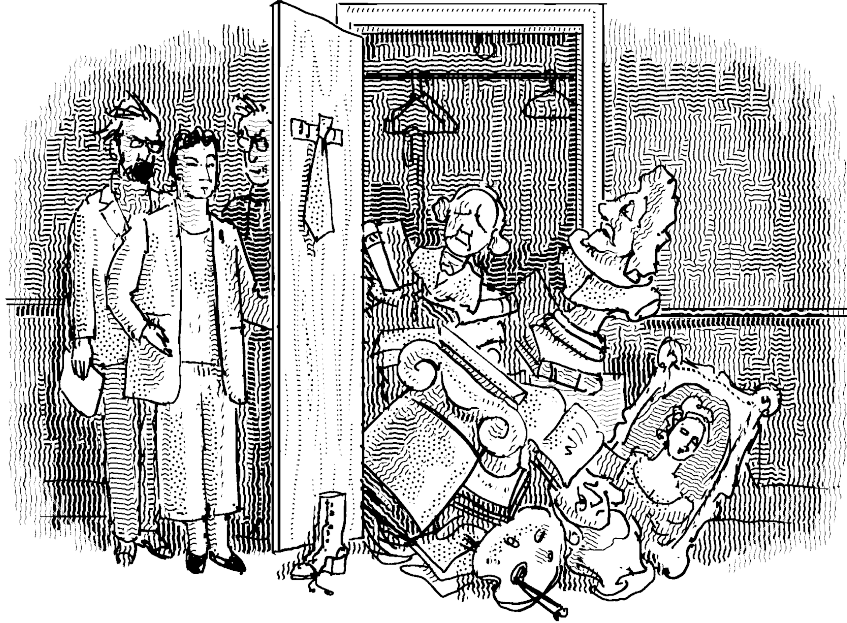


QUEER TO STAY



WHY ARE MY COLLEAGUES SO CAUGHT up in same-sex matters?

Few of them are gay, but they have made “queer theory,” gender studies, and other schools of thought opposed to what they call “heteronormativity” central to the humanities ever since the subjects blossomed in book lists, periodicals, conferences, and hirings in the late 1980s and early ’90s. Of course, it isn’t hard to understand why same-sex attraction draws political support. The professoriate is uniformly liberal on social issues. To them, the case for anti-discrimination is a no-brainer, and conservative resistance to same-sex marriage and transgender rights amounts to a lingering Jim Crow. But making LGBT topics into a research field and a professional identity doesn’t make obvious sense.

The demographics don’t support it. According to the 2013 National Health Interview Survey, a project of the Centers for Disease Control, 96.6% of American adults identify as straight, 1.6% gay or lesbian, and 0.7% bisexual. Those numbers fit closely to the fields as they were when I started graduate school in 1983, and same-sex issues were a rare concern. The teacher who taught me the most in those years was gay and offered a course in gay lit

each year for undergrads, but his position was understood as a side interest, not a defining feature. His professional identity was as a Romanticist taking a history-of-ideas approach.

None of the critical anthologies I was assigned around then touched upon same-sex attraction—not David Lodge’s *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, Hazard Adams’s *Critical Theory Since Plato*, or Adams and Leroy Searle’s *Critical Theory Since 1965*. To check my memory, I just pored over one of the flagship scholarly journals, *PMLA* (or, *Publications of the Modern Language Association*), from 1982-83, and found several essays on feminist themes, but nothing on same-sex desire. In five years of *Critical Inquiry*, 1979-83, only four essays out of the more than a hundred broached it. For the same years, I found nothing at all in the avant garde journal *boundary 2*.

Queerness Everywhere

TEN YEARS LATER, EVERYTHING HAD changed. One could now describe gay studies as a “booming field dominated by literary criticism, film criticism, and cultural history,” as Rutgers English professor

Michael Warner did in his 1991 essay “Fear of a Queer Planet.” Series Q, the academic-press series devoted to queer topics (*Barbie’s Queer Accessories*, *Queering the Renaissance*, etc.), had started. Centers had opened at San Francisco City College and City University of New York. *PMLA* in 1995 had essays on “male transvestite theater,” “The Homoerotics of Orientalism,” John Donne’s “Homopoetics,” “Birth of the Cyberqueer,” and “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?” Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Jonathan Dollimore’s *Sexual Dissidence* (1991), Jonathan Goldberg’s *Sodomities* (1992), and many other studies had been published and were cited everywhere. (Google Scholar currently tabulates 34,330 citations of *Gender Trouble*.) What was previously an occasional topic had become a vital theory, and to be unacquainted with it was to be out of sync with your own discipline.

I watched this remarkable emergence of queerness with puzzlement and mild jealousy. I was a liberal in politics ready to take queer themes in the field as I would most other topics of human nature and experience. When I hit the job market in 1988, the

word was that hiring would go to women and minorities—unless you were gay. I was desperate for a post, but didn't object. Gays had a harder time in this world, I believed (with a measure of condescension), and so an extra push was okay.

But the intellectual claims weren't convincing. It wasn't just that gays and lesbians formed such a tiny population. The statements about homosexuality's centrality to the discipline were so overdone. I just received a mass-mailing from Columbia University Press with the heading "Introducing a New Generation to the Book That Changed Humanities Scholarship." The subject of this announcement is the 30th Anniversary edition of Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire*, which, we are told, "challenged old ways of reading." That aim was certainly common in literary studies—everyone in 1985 was after "objective interpretation"—but *Between Men* performed a unique service:

Striking a devastating blow to the hegemony of heteronormative critique, it opened not only literature, but also politics, religion, society, and culture to broader investigations of power, desire, and sex.

Much of this is press hype, of course. But given events that followed the original publication—the explosion of queer publication, the running success of Series Q (co-edited by Sedgwick), and stirring testimonials to her before and after her death in 2009, including a recent puff in the *New Yorker*—much of the praise rings true.

But when I recall looking at *Between Men* back in 1987, I don't remember anything devastating about it. As I glanced back at it after receiving the Columbia ad, I realized why. Sedgwick takes five pages in the Introduction to press a simple observation that same-sex desire between women is continuous with female friendship, while same-sex male desire is discontinuous with male friendship. Male friendship, that is, is anti-gay. That's an empirical contention one can entertain. But when Sedgwick says of male bonding that it "may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuals," it didn't fit my experience at all. Growing up in a middle-class suburb in the east, attending a large public university in the west, playing sports and drinking beer and working with guys in kitchens and fast-food joints, I observed lots of male bonding. Some of it I remember with chagrin, but the fear and hatred Sedgwick highlights just weren't there. A

couple of guys over the years were, in fact, gay, and they got some ribbing now and then, but we all got mocked and pushed around for one reason or another. "Intense" hate—not one bit. One of them we sorely envied because he worked at Hugh Hefner's mansion.

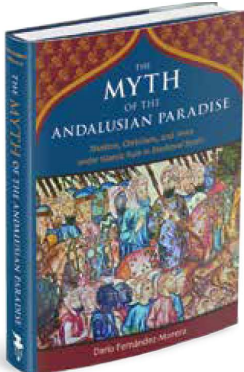
Sedgwick's statement struck me as the kind of hyperbole that breaks a reader's trust, and it wasn't uncommon. In "Fear of a Queer Planet," Warner says,

The dawning realization that themes of homophobia and heterosexism may be read in almost any document of our culture means that we are only beginning to have an idea of how widespread those institutions and accounts are.

"Almost any"? Homophobia everywhere? That's what the editor of *Shakespeare: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare* (2011), one of the last entries in Series Q, says: "this volume also suggests that queerness is everywhere."

This was strange to hear. If theory in all its variations in the 1980s (New Historicism, deconstruction, neopragmatism) had any common thread, it was the denial of universals. Truth and value vary over time and across cultures, people insisted, and to raise one feature

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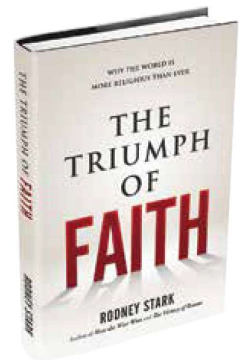
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as definitive, an “everywhere,” was to commit a “mystification,” to be unaware of one’s own conditioning. But this was one universal you had to respect. When queer theorists spoke, you felt obligated to accede. They laid out a new professional rule: if you study poet X and *don’t* remark upon homophobia and heterosexism, you are benighted or irresponsible or worse.

Home of the Gays

AS QUEER THEORY SPREAD THROUGH the departments, literary studies left me behind. I cared about those fading problems of meaning and interpretation, studying Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, and I was shadowed by the dialectics of Jacques Derrida and his antecedents. Such concerns had slipped in the ‘80s, and the exposure of Paul de Man’s wartime writings gave a moral punctuation to the decline. Those of us caught up in old ideas sounded awfully dry when we talked about Martin Heidegger’s ontic-ontological difference and Wallace Stevens on reality. At more than one conference, when I stopped talking and a sexuality theorist rose to speak, heads in the audience lifted and eyes brightened. Uncommon desire, not how-to-read-a-text, was the hot thing (postcolonialism was #2).

I watched it reverberate a few years back at the largest meeting of scholars in the humanities, the Modern Language Association (MLA) Convention. Longtime attendees know how much dour faces and forced enjoyment typify the annual meeting, but on this occasion the conviviality was genuine. I was sitting alone for an hour at the Penguin Press booth, signing books for the occasional passerby and counting the minutes. Across the aisle at the Duke University Press booth, dozens of people crowded the space and spilled past the partitions. They gobbled up wine and cheese, called to new arrivals, smiled and shook hands and joshed. It was the commemorative party for Series Q. At one point, an organizer called for quiet and delivered a brief testimonial. You could sense the meaningfulness in the air. Countenances were solemn and joyous. Queer theory had deeply affected these people professionally and personally.

It was clear from the start that this personal dimension was a crucial feature. From an academic point of view, getting too personal in your research and teaching makes you unprofessional. You can’t argue with someone so invested. Who wants to have that kind of colleague? But this time, it was a strength. I remember one case in the mid-’90s, when a lesbian professor specializing in lesbian literature came up for promotion

in my department. In the tenure meeting, a senior colleague referred to her as a “true believer.” He meant it as a compliment. Lesbian *écriture* wasn’t just an expertise for her. It was her life, and we were supposed to honor her commitment. One elderly professor, however, replied with a traditional rebuke: “This is supposed to be a university, not a monastery.” But nobody picked up on his objection. What did academic distinctions matter in the presence of so passionate a personality? The customary follow-up to the professor’s remark was to ask if her true believing had narrowed her research and teaching to partisan channels, but by 1996 few people had the appetite to dispute practices in the name of LGBT identity. Besides, the magnifications of queer theory didn’t seem so untenable after years of textuality everywhere, ideology everywhere, patriarchy everywhere.... And this time, the theorists bore a trait that my heterosexual brethren couldn’t resist: an illicit, anguished desire shadowed by secrecy and suffering.

For gays and lesbians, the benefits were obvious. The CDC statistics accurately count

If you want to understand art, literature, history, and politics, you better understand queerness.

the rate of homosexuals in the U.S. population, but they undercount the rate in the academy. There are no data on how many gays and lesbians inhabit humanities faculties, but from my experience, I would estimate the rate at more than 10%. The difference from the general population rate is all-important. It makes academia a special place for a population that feels at odds with U.S. society at large. Instead of being 1 out of 60, gays and lesbians are 1 out of 10.

It is logical, then, for gay and lesbian personnel in higher education to create related disciplines and theories, journals and series, courses and research expertise. Given the profundity of sexual desire, we may attribute the passions and overstatements of queer theory precisely to this institution-building purpose, at least in part. Not only does it make professional life meaningful and clarifying for homosexuals; it helps maintain a critical mass of gays and lesbians in the academic population, showing younger ones that the campus is, indeed, a home. The institutionalization of queer theory is a means of keeping it that way.

A New Sexual “Discourse”

AS (MOSTLY) NON-HETEROSEXUAL PROFESSORS published and conferenced queer theory into the professional center, heterosexual professors signed on with dispatch. History appeared to call for it, just as Civil Rights produced Black Studies in the ‘70s and Women’s Liberation inspired Women’s Studies in the ‘80s. Though many of these teachers lived bourgeois lives and had worked in literary studies for years without showing any interest in same-sex desire, they could smoothly broaden their commitment to women and minorities to this smaller marginalized group, especially in light of the horrors of AIDS. The politics and sentiments were especially apt in that gays and lesbians presented themselves as casualties of conservative belief and “family values.” Apart from the pains of being a troubled minority marked off by acts others found distasteful and worse, they had to endure the calumny of Jesse Helms and the Moral Majority.

And they were more convenient sufferers than other groups, too. Supporting African American claims meant altering the demographics of the faculty; you had to introduce uncomfortable procedures in hiring and promotion and pay. But homosexuals were already overrepresented in the humanities. Recognition of them was cost-free.

Queer theory, too, was easily accommodated to existing critical methods. It wasn’t hard to convert the “binaries” of the ‘70s, nature/culture and identity/difference, into normal/queer and heterosexual/homosexual. One could bring back the Dead White Males, too, and avoid multiculturalist objections. Some of those classic writers were gay.

Queer theory had a dramatic immediacy as well, which gave it an edge over other contemporary theories. As they insisted and we acknowledged, theorists were walking illustrations of theory. To listen to a tenured professor at an elite college in New England talk about racism in working-class America or imperialism on the other side of the earth was one thing. People might appreciate the sentiments, but he had no I’ve-walked-the-walk factor. A gay professor in the same department discussing a work in gay studies written by a friend who had died of AIDS the year before did have it. Academics and real life merged, dramatically.

Finally, queer theory invited heterosexuals into the field. Sedgwick and others extended queerness past genital desire so that it incorporated any desire or identity that strayed from heterosexual grooves. True to their Hegelianism (Butler’s first book was on

Hegel), they maintained that heterosexuality was in a dialectical relationship with homosexuality. You couldn't be heterosexual without some assumption of its "other," homosexuality. From there, it took only a small step to say that queer desire lies at the core of heteronormativity, not outside it, just as madness is the necessary "other" of reason. That was the pertinent lesson of Michel Foucault (whose teacher was a renowned Hegel scholar).

This dialectical point is the rejoinder for the tiny 1.6% of the U.S. population that identifies as gay. Size doesn't matter, only difference. Add to that formula a scandalous desire (and a victimized group), and gay identity becomes a special illuminating entry into culture at large. If you want to understand art, literature, history, and politics, you'd better understand queerness, too. In academia, that premise became a daunting institutional mandate. The fervent expressions of LGBT professors and ready echoes by liberal heterosexual professors created in the humanities a new sexual "discourse" in precisely Foucault's sense of norms, values, and ideas with institutional power. At an American Studies conference I attended, after one presenter gave a harsh talk on a distinguished critic, another notable figure rose to observe that the critic under attack was one of the first well-known professors to come out of the closet, and that one might regard the presentation as gay-bashing. The speaker could have responded, "I didn't say anything about that—I don't care if he's gay or not. Can we get back to the substance?" But the situation no longer allowed that. Instead, he bumbled his way through a penitential disavowal. The rest of us took note: to treat queerness as less than ever-relevant was professionally dangerous.

That was the discipline and punishment for non-recognition of LGBT. The opposite was the insistent recognition of it. You could feel its challenge when speakers pushed graphic sexual readings in a way that dared anyone to make a traditionalist objection or point out the poor taste. At another gathering I attend-

ed, a professor showed racy photos of women in bedrooms and amid the sheets, pausing at one to note, "I particularly like this one—look closely and you can see her tampon string hanging down in an inverted question mark." I wasn't sure of the point and she didn't elaborate, but I dared not bring it up in the Q. and A. The mechanisms of surveillance were fully in force, and they were all on the side of the theorists.

Those of us who didn't join the subfield were cowed, and it was a relief to see the coercions detailed in one of the great essays of the time, Camille Paglia's "Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders: Academe in the Hour of the Wolf," published in the Spring 1991 issue of the humanities journal *Arion*. It argued two things that robbed queer theory of intimidating momentum. One, in its zealous embrace of Foucault—in *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick mentions "Foucault's demonstration, whose results I take to be axiomatic"—queer theory overlooked some of the greatest (and contrary) scholarship of modern times. Two, the movement policed members and antagonists ruthlessly, using the powers of hiring, promotion, and peer review. Paglia also delivered her verdict in an irreverent, often hilarious idiom that had a moral purpose—to defend scholarly standards—and provided a different framework for queer theory. Instead of being a breakthrough school of thought opening culture to vital meanings and morally advancing higher education, queer theory was a parochial research field in the service of self-understanding for some and self-promotion for others. As Professor Paglia put it to me recently after I contacted her about this essay, "It was the cutting-edge of the corporatization of the university, not the radical subversion of it."

Back to the Margin

FROM THIS 30-YEAR VANTAGE POINT, the intrepid idiom and bold disclosures that thrilled and emboldened the 1990s faculty look less descriptive than

hortatory. Take away the magnification and we have a more modest and accurate assessment of parts of our culture—and a less thrilling and theoretical one. Only when we define queerness as anything outside simple and straightforward heterosexual behavior, and only when we interpret homophobia as anything less than full political and personal support of homosexuality, do the sweeping contentions of queer theory hold up. Without that extension, queerness slips back into the margin—not by an act of power, but as the consequence of relative lack of interest.

That's what we see today, the fatigue that afflicts any theory once the universal claims lose their emotional force, as inevitably happens over time and with repetition. The enclave of humanities research has always had its rituals and taboos, and they lead inhabitants to think that what holds true and proper within also holds without. Reading queer theory and attending queer lectures is to enter an impassioned universe fraught with sexual complication and risk. But most people don't share the outlook. Representations of sexual variation are common in higher education today, not to mention in movies, TV, and the news, but the vast majority of Americans are firm in their basic sexual aims and selves, and homosexual impulse and homophobic fear and hate aren't part of their condition. We still have heteronormative attitudes. They are the natural result of nearly all Americans having heterosexual feelings. Queerness is part of the human condition, a small part. Queer theory began with an exaggeration, an overestimation of homosexuality and anti-homosexuality, and the emotional and political and institutional contexts of its origination allowed the exaggeration to stand uncorrected. Queer theory is now a part of American intellectual history, but it will be remembered more as an advocacy effort than as a school of thought.

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