Queer Theory: A Review of the differences Special Issue and Wittig's The Straight Mind

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Almost twenty years ago lesbian feminists in the West—among them, Charlotte Bunch, the Furies, the Purple September Staff, and Monique Wittig—called for a critique of heterosexuality. They argued that feminist discourses, including discussions of lesbianism among cultural feminists, dealt with sexuality as a personal or civil rights issue in order to avoid a deeper political analysis of the normative status of heterosexuality. Recently, a spate of conferences, book publications, and special issues of journals have begun to lend prominence to a critique of heterosexuality issuing from a new and different quarter—the lesbian and gay avant-garde. Not only is this critique attracting attention on the academic left but it also is helping to define the cutting edge of lesbian and gay studies, now recast under the signifier "queer theory."

Queer theory calls into question obvious categories (man, woman, latina, jew, butch, femme), oppositions (man vs. woman, heterosexual vs. homosexual), or equations (gender = sex) upon which conventional notions of sexuality and identity rely. In this respect, it shares much in common with contemporary materialist feminism. Like materialist feminism, queer theory's postmodern conception of identity as an ensemble of unstable and multiple positions contests traditional formulations of sexuality as a personal issue. Both share an edge that cuts loose from identity politics by challenging the array of assumptions on which empiricist notions of the person depend. Both see identity politics as a form of expressive pluralism where identity is reified—understood to be represented in a self-evident and authentic way through one's body—and collectivity is reduced to group affiliation defined according to the standard of authentic embodiment.

Challenges to expressive concepts of identity have pushed the analysis of sexuality in postmodern lesbian and gay theory beyond demanding the
right to more sexual freedom to examining how the very structures of intelligibility are organized and regulated by heteronormativity. As the summer 1991 special issue of *differences*, edited by Teresa de Lauretis, titled "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities," makes evident, such inquiry does not issue from any single organizing principle or theoretical discourse but spans a variety of critical frameworks and strategies: Foucauldian historiography, psychoanalysis, narratology, ethnography, experiential narrative. Nonetheless, the terms in which social relations, and sexuality in particular, are imagined by queer theorists do share some common features: an emphasis on queer identities, on the discursive or symbolic dimensions of the social, and on sexuality as erotic pleasure and play.

These characteristics of queer theory distinguish it from materialist feminism's approach to sexuality. While materialist feminists endorse postmodernism's critique of empiricism, they also maintain that the fragmentation of the subject in the age of information and the function of sexuality in the formation of complex, unstable, and multiple subjectivities cannot be theorized very effectively for any sort of fundamental social reconstruction without coming to terms with the systematic operations of capitalism and patriarchy.¹ In other words, for materialist feminists, sexuality, along with those features that often accompany how it is understood in the West (pleasure, consumption, cultural diversity), is part of a given global reality in which these terms have a very specific and privileged address. If these contesting presuppositions pit materialist feminist and avant-garde theories of sexuality against one another, however, they also situate both within the current reconfiguration of postmodernism, an area of critical inquiry loosely referred to as the (post) contemporary.

As postmodernism moves toward establishing itself as the new hegemonic discourse in the West, the terms of discussion surrounding it have shifted from the subversion of humanist and empiricist dichotomies—world and text, self and other, nature and culture—to the limits and possibilities of postmodern critical knowledges themselves as they are tested against political struggles, among them feminism, anticolonialism, and queer activism. One recurrent concern in this testing is the issue of social totalities—the question of whether postmodernism’s critique of the master narratives and stable identities that have undergirded modernity since the Anglo-European renaissance necessarily requires relinquishing attention to the continued, though reconfigured, operation of social structures like capitalism, patriarchy, or heterosexuality. In some

¹ For examples of contemporary materialist feminist work along these lines see Mies 1986; Carby 1987; Smith 1987; Spivak 1987; Ferguson 1989; Ebert 1991; Hennessy 1993.
formulations—U.S. appropriations of deconstruction, or the work of Lyotard, Baudrillard, or Foucault, for example—attention to the larger social totalities organizing social reality has been displaced by an over-riding emphasis upon the local workings of power. Other, contesting, versions of postmodernism—sometimes referred to as resistance postmodernism—argue for analysis that acknowledges the persistence of hierarchical systems and structures—such as neo-imperialism or the international sexual division of labor—even as social relations and subjectivities have become more atomized, fragmented, and porous.

Reading de Lauretis’s special issue of *differences* (1991b) against the recently published collection of Monique Wittig’s *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (1992) brings into relief some of the dimensions of this debate and how it is played out in these two very powerful critiques of heterosexuality: queer theory and materialist feminism. Both of them appropriate postmodern concepts of the subject-in-language to question the limits of identity politics. Wittig’s work has even been claimed and rearticulated by several prominent queer theorists. But the modes of critical practice they offer are quite at odds, particularly in terms of their attention to social totalities. It is this distinction and its implications that needs to be assessed in light of the emancipatory aims of gay and lesbian political work.

"Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities" comprises eight essays that were presented at a conference held at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in February 1990. The opening paragraph of de Lauretis’s introduction announces the speculative premise of the conference and the volume: “that homosexuality is no longer to be seen simply as marginal with regard to a dominant, stable form of sexuality (heterosexuality) against which it would be defined either by opposition or homology” (iii). This critique of heterosexuality’s normative power is echoed in the recent anthology *inside/out*, edited by Diana Fuss (1991). While the prominence of a deconstructive logic in Fuss’s collection insistently fore-stalls any affiliation between queer theory and identity politics, the “Queer Theory” volume is much more interested in reclaiming rather than dismantling identities. In various ways these essays attend to how “male and female homosexualities . . . may be reconceptualized as social and cultural forms in their own right” (de Lauretis 1991a, iii). In doing this work, several of these pieces turn their attention to the multiple histories, assumptions, and conceptual frameworks that constitute the wide range of homosexualities.

The primary objective of queer theory is to write a cultural politics founded on the categories “gay” and “lesbian” in order to produce “another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual” (de Lauretis 1991a, iv). As its focus on homosexualities attests, one of the
features of this alternative discourse is its effort to speak from and to the
differences and silences that have been suppressed by the monolithic
identities “lesbian” and “gay.” Ekua Omosupe’s essay on the black les-
birian buldogger (1991) and Tomás Almaguer’s piece on Chicano men
(1991) both articulate the complex ways lesbian and gay sexuality is
infected by race, gender, and ethnicity. The formation of knowledge and
identity across new discursive lines is also displayed in several essays
(including Almaguer’s and Earl Jackson, Jr.’s) that theorize gay male
subjectivity by way of the insights of lesbian feminists.

While the subtitle “Lesbian and Gay Sexualities” signals attention to
the diversity and complexity of lesbian and gay identities, “Queer The-
ory” also boldly announces its critical distance from this polite formula.
By embracing the category used to shame and cast out sexual deviants,
queer theory defiantly refuses the terms of the dominant discourse. Touting
queerness is a gesture of rebellion against the pressure to be invisible
or apologetically abnormal. It is an in-your-face rejection of the proper
response to heteronormativity, a version of acting up. As Sue-Ellen Case
asserts, in adopting the “idiomatically-proscribed position of same-sex
desire . . . queer revels constitute a kind of activism that attacks the
dominant notion of the natural. The queer is the taboo-breaker, the
monstrous, the uncanny” (1991, 3). In this sense the title of this volume
has already helped to popularize among academics a signifier only re-
cently adopted in gay and lesbian culture and activist work, most publicly
by Queer Nation. Its explicit critique of heteronormativity and of mon-
olitic gay and lesbian identities is both antiaiassimilationist and antipsepa-
ratist. “Queer” signals a coalition politics historically made possible,
at least in part, by the alliances of gay men and lesbians formed in the wake
of the AIDS emergency and the backlash from the right against queers of
all sexes (de Lauretis 1991a, v).

However, the substitution of “queer” for the still-fraught connective
between gay and lesbian, like the effort to explore the specific multiple
and unstable dimensions of sexual identity in very local and particular
sites, is also made possible by other social forces. One of them is the
historicity of subjectivity in the West. If the centered subject’s historical
possibility lay in its relation to the political centrality of the West with its
ideological mandate to make the rest of the world its object, in the
decentered subject of postmodernism lurks the synecdoche of the de-
cline of the great imperial powers, a mark of the shifting hegemony of
the United States and Europe (Kipnis 1988, 158). In an uneasy and com-
plex engagement with the discourses of modernity, including feminism,

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2 For history of Queer Nation’s beginnings, its internal debates over the boundaries
of queer-ness, and critical assessments of its spectacular political logic and effects, see
post-modern theory has critiqued the grand narratives of the Western enlightenment tradition and helped produce new frames of intelligibility and new subjectivities. Confronting the question of whether queer theory is participating in the postmodern reconfiguration of hegemonic culture is not an easy or simple task. But looking at what is excluded from its framework can be instructive.

Take the question of difference, for example. How is difference—that shibboleth of postmodernism—understood in queer theory? The essays in the differences issue explore the complex and often contradictory articulations of lesbian and gay sexualities and so in this respect critique an expressive pluralist notion of sexual identity in which difference (expressed in the bodies of racial, gendered, and sexual others) is a term of value in itself. Nonetheless, difference as discursively constructed is invariably presented as exclusively cultural. One of the issues at stake here is queer theory's implicit conception of the social. Although it draws upon a range of critical frameworks, the social is consistently conceptualized as only a matter of representation, of discursive or symbolic relations.

We see this textual/cultural politics in Samuel Delaney's provocative essay “Street Talk/Straight Talk” (1991). Delaney traces out the relation of discourse to rhetoric as it inflects public disinformation on AIDS along the double axes of life and death and ends up calling for a general effort to “say what we do” no matter what mode we employ. Like Jennifer Terry's argument, “Theorizing Deviant Historiography” (1991), that treats the various strategies homosexuals used to recast or disrupt the discourses in which they were being situated in a medical study of sex variants in New York City in the 1930s, the assumption here is that the social forces shaping sexual subjectivities are exclusively a matter of cultural representation. Almaguer briefly gestures toward another story of sexuality when he asserts that the patriarchal equation between the passive homosexual male and the feminine in Chicano culture has its symbolic roots in the colonial drama that unfolded with the Spanish conquistadors (1991, 79). Likewise, Julia Creel's parenthetical aside that the S/M debates within feminism are very specific to the “first world” (1991, 134) hints that the construction of sexual subjectivities involves more than culture alone. But other than glancing references like these, making connections between sexuality and divisions of labor or between sexuality and imperialism has been abandoned as an important or necessary mode of analysis. From beginning to end, any solid ties between the cultural construction of difference and its consequences for the ways in which work and leisure time are allocated or state powers are exercised—or, indeed, powers in any social register other than the symbolic—evaporate. The first essay in the issue, Case's “Tracking the Vampire,” argues for a transhistorical queer ontology in which even gen-
der as a category of social difference disappears. Creel's closing essay on
lesbian S/M is a paean to the ambivalence of desire that not only limits
the historicity of desire to parental prohibitions but also goes so far as to
substitute feminism (the Symbolic Mother) for patriarchy as the most
notable oppressive force that lesbian sexual politics and eroticism must
contend with.

For feminists this should seem a very disturbing perspective shift, es-
especially when feminism, among young people in particular, is more than
ever a bad word. In a time when lesbian and gay "life-styles" are gaining
more visibility in mainstream culture and when Madison Avenue so suc-
sessfully employs the discourse of gay eroticism to recruit chic consumers
even as persons with AIDS around the globe are held hostage by gov-
ernment neglect and profit-driven medical institutions, we need to be
wary of analyses that assume sexuality is just a cultural issue. Framed so
exclusively in terms of representation—discursive shifts, tropes, rhetori-
cal axes, narrative strategies—difference loses its punch. One effect is
that the construction of sexuality in all of its varied and contradictory
formations threatens to become thematized, isolating preoccupation with
the erotic remapping of the body in the West from any connection to its
structural organization through the global relations of difference. Lesbian
and gay sexualities, even as they claim a marginal status as "queer,"
cannot be divorced from the colonization of the unconscious, the com-
modification of bodies, and the recruitment of pleasure into an informatics
of domination, as well as the reliance of these psychic and corporeal
markets upon a global sexual division of labor and an exploited multi-
national work force. At what cost to the emancipatory aims of a queer
politics is this other narrative of sexuality suppressed?

Although Wittig's essays in The Straight Mind have been read by
several of the leading proponents of queer theory, these readings have not
stressed one of the most significant features of her alter-narrative of
sexuality: the claim that social differences always belong to an economic
and political as well as a cultural/ideological order. Although the nine
essays in her collection span fourteen years, the positions they articulate
consistently make clear that for Wittig difference is entangled in the
struggles that traverse the social order: in the sexual division of labor and
the system of exploitation on which heterosexuality is based as well as in
the discourses that naturalize this struggle and sexualize women in par-
ticular. In other words, for Wittig the category of sex, the mark of gender,
cannot be separated from a wide array of social structures of oppression
and domination.

3 Both Butler (1990) and Fuss (1991) read Wittig's work. De Lauretis has also writ-
ten extensively on Wittig; see de Lauretis 1988, 1990.
Reading Wittig as a materialist feminist is, of course, a reading, and like all readings it is selective and interested. In particular, my reading is interested in how a systemic social logic inflects her way of thinking about sexuality and how this thinking might be useful for materialist feminism now. Because Wittig’s materialism conceptualizes the social as an economic, political, ideological order in which difference is enacted as dominance, sex for Wittig is inextricably bound up with this network of social relations. In an essay first delivered at the Modern Language Association in 1978, Wittig forcefully articulates how sex is naturalized as the straight mind: taken for granted and pervasively unsaid, heterosexuality is a “core of nature” in all of the texts of culture, structuring the categories of sex and stubbornly resisting examination (1992, 27). Queer theorists might contend that Wittig’s insight into the operations of the straight mind is a given in their analysis, even though it has not much affected the cultural mainstream. And yet Wittig’s insistence that heterosexuality is a regime of power and violence on which a broad network of oppressive social arrangements depends has all but disappeared in their work, replaced by a focus on “otherwise desiring subjects” (de Lauretis 1991a, xvi), on “the eroticization of objectification” (Crew 1991, 153), or on the body as “spatialized playground” (Jackson 1991, 124).

Wittig’s critique of heterosexuality is formulated out of her critical engagement with both Marxism and feminism. She appropriates Marxism’s materialist problematic in order to recast liberal feminism’s individualist politics, but at the same time she pressures Marxism’s inability to address the formation of subjectivities and women’s oppression. For Wittig, because orthodox Marxism was unable to treat the problem of the subject, it actually helped to prevent all categories of oppressed peoples, including women, from constituting themselves as agents of social struggle (1992, 17). “For women to answer the question of the individual subject in materialist terms,” she asserts, is to show “that supposedly ‘subjective’, ‘individual,’ ‘private’ problems are in fact social problems, class problems; that sexuality is not for women an individual and subjective expression, but a social institution of violence” (19). As Wittig presents it, the aim of materialist feminism is to elaborate a historical materialist social analytic for feminism, to get beyond the category of sex by destroying heterosexuality as a social system based on the oppression of women by men. The objective is not to eliminate the human potential for sexual relations or sexual pleasure but to produce, as she puts it, “a new subjective definition” (19–20).

While Wittig’s materialism, even in terms of its own aims, also has its limits—often not enacting analysis in the very systemic terms she calls for—the essays collected here still offer a suggestive contradiction to the direction lesbian and gay avant-garde theory is currently pursuing. This
is especially evident in the difference between their respective formulations of resistance. Queer theory presents its resistance as a rebellion against bourgeois culture, a rebellion that flaunts the underside of heteronormativity or reverses its terms. Like the avant-garde decadents of the 1890s, these scandalous transgressions take the form of a counterdiscourse. This is the stance of the "bad subject" who refuses or negates the dominant culture but in so doing does not necessarily address the larger social arrangements in which culture participates. Moreover, as I have already stressed, in presenting its counterculture as "resistance to cultural homogenization, counteracting dominant discourses with other constructions of the subject in culture" (de Lauretis 1991a, iii), queer theory presumes that cultural change is commensurate with social change.

For lesbian and gay avant-garde theory, resistance is a matter of claiming an eroticized, desiring, ambivalent identity as queer; Wittig, however, understands resistance as "cognitive subjectivity" (1992, 19). One becomes a cognitive subject by reevaluating the social world from the point of view of the oppressed, a way of understanding reality that has to be undertaken by every one of us. Wittig's concept of "subjective cognitive practice" is not a counterculture, a stance of refusal or of acting up. It is a disidentifying consciousness that works on the subject in language as it is shaped by multiple social forces—the appropriation of one's labor, for instance, or domination by more powerful others. Wittig calls this disidentifying subject "lesbian." Although Wittig's comments on the lesbian are often ambiguous, her thinking does consistently reiterate that "lesbian" is not a transcendent subject, a subject of same-sex desire or erotic pleasures. "Lesbian," she writes, is "the only concept I know of that is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically" (20). To be lesbian, then, is to refuse "the economic, ideological, political power of a man" in a patriarchal society (13). This way of conceptualizing lesbian implies that the formation of resistant subjectivities will require more than changing discourses and constructions of the subject. In this sense Wittig's resistant subject puts pressure on the overriding emphasis in queer theory on sexuality as discursively constructed and/or as an expression of bodies or pleasures. Rather than dismissing Wittig's conception of lesbian as essentialist because it excludes particular sexual identities—gay men, for example—I think we can look at how her concept of subjective cognitive practice as a class issue can redirect our thinking about sexuality, identity, and resistance. If we understand the prevailing categories of sex as integral to an economic, political, and ideological order, becoming "queer" can be seen as "a new subjective definition" that has to be undertaken by every
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one of us. This is not a subject position based upon biology or sexual object choice or issuing from a utopian "elsewhere" so much as a critical perspective that opens up systemic ways of thinking about sexuality in both straight and gay culture.

Publication of The Straight Mind and Other Essays will no doubt prompt new readings of Wittig's work, and I expect that many of them will demonstrate history's uneven development. For as much as queer theory advances the ideas materialist lesbians have formulated over the past twenty years, some important dimensions of their work have been forgotten or dismissed. A queer politics for the nineties can hone its radical edge by confronting the suppressed alter-narratives in our theoretical history. Without a doubt, queer theory's insistence on the complex and unstable configurations of sexual identity has irrevocably reshaped the critique of heterosexuality. By maintaining that the construction of sexual subjects is more than a cultural event, materialist feminism extends that critique to address the implication of sexuality in other social totalities. Feminist theory in the historical moment of the (post)contemporary, situated across both of these oppositional perspectives, will inevitably have to wrestle with the points of contention and continuity between them. This is especially so for postmodern feminists working to develop critiques of heterosexuality that not only intervene in the formation of subjectivities in all of their contradictory manifestations but also aim to disrupt the structural organization of labor, resources, and power worldwide.

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