

Queer

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“Queer” has become a ubiquitous term in quotidian, scholarly, mass media, and political discourses to characterize and name things, relationships, situations, practices, and bodies from TV shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* to academic endeavors such as queer studies. Its pervasiveness has resulted in messy contexts and situations as it is deployed in multiple and oftentimes contradictory ways. In its various uses, “queer” is and can be a vernacular word, a political idiom, and an academic field of study. The crux of the contentious nature of “queer” is whether the right question is “what is queer?” or “what does ‘queer’ do?” Is “queer” about ontology, identity, and being, or is it about processes, mechanics, and/or frameworks of analysis? “Queer” is necessarily about both aspects or dimensions.

In everyday usage, “queer” was and is still used as an umbrella term that designates identities, behaviors, and bodies as nonconforming to specific notions of the normal. In more scholarly deployments, “queer” has become a vantage, an approach, and a method that has been productively used to engage with virtually all kinds of phenomena from 17th-century romantic relationships to present-day human-animal relations. While “queer” has had a strong sexual connotation, it is no longer tethered to a monolithic notion of the sexual as it is applied intersectionally to other realms such as race, class, and gender. In other words, “queer” resists the easy partitioning or demarcation of discrete categories. For example, sexuality or, more specifically, the

processes of sexualization (how things get sexualized) can occur coextensively if not jointly with operations of racialization, class formation, and gendering.

"Queer," as a word, has discrepant origins, meanings, and circuits of circulations. During its early use in the 17th century, it was a label for things, people, and situations that were considered renegade, wayward, strange, counterfeit, and/or perverted. By the beginning of the 20th century, with the consolidation of sexual orientation as a cultural identity marker, "queer" had become a derogatory stand-in for "homosexual" and gender insubordination.

The dramatic shift of "queer" as a concept and identity category from its rather denigrating semantic beginnings to a more vigilant and positive frame occurred during the 1980s. During this period, "queer" underwent a political and cultural "makeover." Gay and lesbian activists and organizations such as Queer Nation recuperated, appropriated, and resignified "queer" in a way that retained its nonnormative assignation and politically deployed it against the violent homophobia of the state and the private sector. By so doing, these social agents were responsible for the resurgence of a term that was seen as archaic and derogatory and transformed it into an idiom that engaged with and expressed the prevailing conditions of the times.

From a theoretical point of view, this lexical and structural transformation was aided and abetted by scholarly sources as well as events of the late 20th century. Michel Foucault was perhaps most influential in inspiring several of the crucial scholarly contributions. He vociferously articulated the cultural and historical dimensions of sexuality and was partly responsible for inciting scholarly attempts to denaturalize sexuality and gender.

Researchers in the social sciences, particularly anthropology, conducted cross-cultural mappings of

"homosexual" phenomena through ethnographic studies of various practices, institutions, and bodies that exceeded the parameters of Western notions of sexual orientation. Activists, scholars, and the general public slowly came to realize the parochial and narrow cultural contexts of sexual orientation and identity categories such as gay and lesbian vis-à-vis those of the non-West. Operating in parallel realms, feminist theory and Third World and women-of-color feminism in particular were responsible for a trenchant critique of the universalization and naturalization of the category "woman" and provided situated understandings of racialized and minoritized women. Instead of a global womanhood, Third World and women-of-color feminism suggested multiple contexts and strategies for understanding women's issues. As such, their ideas complemented if not helped animate the thinking around "queer."

Gay and lesbian studies emerged in the 1980s as a product of the gay/lesbian and feminist activisms and early studies on homosexuality of the 1970s. There was consensus among scholars during this period regarding the detachment of sexuality and gender from their natural and biological roots and from their dependence on Euro-American categories and cultural mores. While visibility and rights-based activism were at the core of some of their activities, a significant number of scholars and activists realized, confronted, and engaged with the limitations of identity politics and the struggles for rights. They questioned: Rights for whom? Whose identity?

Part of the impetus for the transformation of "queer" came from activities (policy oriented, scholarly focused, and/or activist based) around the AIDS pandemic. The pandemic was not only a medical crisis but also a major semantic/semiotic one. Meanings of long-held categories such as homosexual, heterosexual, gay, and straight were put into question as policy

makers, epidemiologists, AIDS prevention educators/ community outreach workers, and social workers were confronted with the discrepancy between behavior and available identity categories. People who were seen to be "practicing" homosexual acts or "exhibiting" homosexual behavior were not identifying accordingly. The discordance between identity and behavior was further complicated in the late 1980s by the population shift in the pandemic with the influx of AIDS cases who were nonwhite, nonmainstream, and mostly from immigrant and/or racialized communities. This shift created a muddled and confused atmosphere, dramatically troubling the terrains of sexual orientation and gender as designations such as gay, straight, male, or female often did not neatly adhere to either bodies or practices. This became a source of contention as political efforts around the pandemic, particularly service delivery and activism, were anchored around gay and lesbian political and social visibility and empowerment.

For example, AIDS service agencies found that in immigrant communities as well as communities of color, services and materials with the words "gay" and "lesbian" were met with resistance if not total rejection. While public health officials pointed to "traditional values" they deemed always already "premodern" and homophobic as the primary causes for these kinds of barriers to service delivery, more nuanced analyses by ethnographers, historians, and other humanistic scholars have demonstrated that gay and lesbian identity categories often do not translate and therefore AIDS service and prevention education work are not always effectively framed around such categories. By the 1990s, we see many of these agencies looking at non-Western "queer" categories such as *kathoey* (Thailand) and *bakla* (Philippines) not as antiquated forms of homosexuality but as possible gateways for sensitively and effectively imparting information about AIDS transmission

and for empowering and politicizing communities. In other words, "queer" not only became a fallback umbrella category for the "other" but was deployed to "mess up" and/or—to use a relatively archaic meaning of the term—"spoil" the seemingly cohesive categories of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and straight, thereby breaking down the monolithic understanding of the sexual that has been primarily anchored to sex-object-choice orientation.

Gaining momentum from the various legacies and historical contexts outlined above, the concept "queer" and its academic arm, queer theory/queer studies, "moved" the questions of sex and gender beyond the contexts of biological destiny and Western categories into more thorough engagements with cultural and historical exigencies. With this transformative makeover, "queer" was increasingly used to resist and refuse the coherence and stability of sex and gender and to argue for more capacious and open-ended understandings of these phenomena.

Nowhere are the processes, strategies, and vantage of "queer" more prevalent, productive, and paradigm shifting than in the field of Asian American studies. It is no wonder that there have been grumblings in some sectors about how the "queers" have "taken over the field." While it may be true that queer-identified scholars have emerged and that scholarship about LGBTQ Asian Americans has proliferated, it is shortsighted to see the value of "queer" as merely an identity add-on to "Asian" and "American," since that fails to grasp the substantive value of "queer" as a category of analysis that "does something" within this so-called "takeover" of Asian American studies.

The deployment of "queer" in this field is neither a mere additive measure nor an augmentation or supplement to that imagined totality called "Asian American." It is not just about mixing in the gay and lesbian factors,

but rather aims to consider “queer” as pivotal to and constitutive of a critical understanding of Asian American experiences. “Queer” has remapped and reshaped the contours of Asian American experiences. It has been and is presently being used in Asian American studies scholarship as a theoretical, methodological, and conceptual scaffolding from which to conceptualize and engage with the historical, cultural, economic, and political exigencies, realities, and paradoxes that have beset Asian Americans. The queer approach in Asian American studies has also invigorated enduring fieldwide conversations about the erased/invisible, marginalized, and abject histories and communities of Asian America (Okiihiro 1994).

From the mid-1990s to the present day, the queer approach has gained meaningful traction in Asian American studies through numerous publications (Bao and Yanagihara 2000; Eng and Hom 1998; R. Leong 1996). Far from merely encouraging an archeological excavation of Asian American gays and lesbians in the past, a queer approach enables a serious appreciation of the messy and wayward composition of such things as the law and the workings of the normal through popular culture, and a critical consideration of such issues as varied miscegenation, bachelor societies, failed masculinities, Orientalism, domesticity, and perpetual-foreigner status. For example, bachelor societies such as those of early Chinatowns and Filipino agricultural camps were seen as predominantly male-dominated sites, while a queer perspective renders these sites not so much as a haven for homosexual activity but rather as social stages for the performance of hegemonic understandings of race, gender, and sexuality. Chinese and Filipino men in the early 20th century were seen as failed masculinities or always already criminals, either sexual eunuchs (sexless and gender-insubordinate subjects) or sexual predators (hypermasculine and sexually aggressive subjects).

Such contradictory constructions of Chinese and Filipino men can be productively understood in terms of their queer and recalcitrant locations in the American nation-state at that time, with the Chinese ineligible for citizenship due to a long history of exclusion laws and the Filipinos not deemed or treated as citizens, though as American colonial subjects and American nationals they carried American passports. “Queer” operates as a frame that creatively brings together the practices and institutions of immigration law with the forces of race, class, and gender to help us properly and vitally understand the historical and cultural workings of state power.

While some have heralded the advent of a queer Asian American studies, it was far from becoming a ghettoized and discrete form of inquiry. In fact, the queer approach in the field has created crucial links and enabled new formulations and frameworks through conversations among Asian American scholars. Dana Takagi (1996), in her now canonical essay, called for the necessary braiding or intertwining of race and sexuality not only in the experiences of Asian American gays and lesbians but as a constitutive element of the history of Asians in the United States. She further demonstrated the links between an Asian American-focused gay and lesbian or queer studies and its connection to larger questions in the field through an engagement with the work of Lisa Lowe (1996), who has argued for a serious consideration of heterogeneity and the nonunitary nature of Asian American subjectivity. Both works raised a clarion call for capacious scholarly and political engagements that went beyond essential static identities or political trajectories that lead up to the nation-state as the final destination or telos.

This approach was demonstrated by works that reformulated the idea of Asian American immigration through the lenses of what Gayatri Gopinath (2004) called a “queer diasporic approach” or what David Eng

(2010) termed a “queer diaspora.” By decentering the nation as the primary vehicle for the articulation of global migratory movement in general and Asian American immigration in particular, queer works have laid bare the racial and sexual undercurrents of gender formations (Gopinath 2004; Eng 2001), the inadequacies of gay liberation narratives and Western gay and lesbian categories (Manalansan 2003), the variable cultural expressions of desire, the sexist and racist foundations of the nation, and the virulence of state governmentality.

Various works have also helped elucidate the legal construction of the Asian migrant subject as always already deviant and showcase how legally framed racialized, heteropatriarchal, and heteronormative expectations have authorized mainstream neoliberal agenda and structures that, in turn, have sequestered and given privilege to classed and racialized forms of kinship and intimacies, and fueled violences and social inequalities (Reddy 2011; Eng 2010; N. Shah 2012). In other words, the triumphant emergence of issues such as gay marriage, gays in the military, and gay-focused consumerism have given rise to an increased disregard for and the virulent erasure of race and class. Contemporary images of proper gay and lesbian citizens center on lifestyle choices, including where and how one lives, buys, and consumes products and services. “Queer,” for example, has been used to denote a discerning “eye” and a range of elite, high-end consumptive practices. In *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, the gay man functions as the beacon and arbiter of good taste in the service of the heterosexual man, with the show’s “queer” characters counseling hapless straight men in need of fashion makeovers. In other words, being queer or, more correctly, being gay has become less a matter of sex or even gender and more one of shopping and consuming. However, it is clear that not all gays and lesbians have the means to live fabulous, wealthy lives of Champagne, caviar, and

Prada. Scholars have shown that the mainstreaming and normalization of these aforementioned “gay issues” have resulted in the domestication and tacit acceptance of various forms of social inequality, heteronormative ideals, and structural violence (Manalansan 2005).

At the same time, Asian American scholars have noted that the increased visibility of gay and lesbian issues has been used as evidence of an exceptional American modernity vis-à-vis a non-modern/non-Western sexually deviant “other” such as the figure of the terrorist in the post-9/11 world (Eng 2010; Puar 2007). To put it simply, the proliferation of American gay culture is used to portray the global South or, more specifically, the Middle East as backward, homophobic, and violent and therefore in need of rescue or a kind of “cultural” makeover. Asian American scholars have demonstrated how in a neoliberal America, colorblindness, cultural chauvinism/ethnocentricity, and gay images have gone hand in hand. In sum, Asian American queer scholars have revealed how increased rights and visibility for gay- and lesbian-identified subjects have led to potent yet veiled forms of racist, misogynist, and other phobic forms of structural violence and disparities (Hong and Ferguson 2011).

Critiques of a queer-focused approach in Asian American studies (and of queer studies in general) have pointed to its limitations in terms of its seemingly romanticized middle-class and hip antinormative stance. Many of the condemnations of the queer approach pivot around the ways in which such a stance has no durability or longevity. In other words, some critics say that there is no future for a queer approach to social justice causes or to critical ethnic studies. These reproaches do not take into account the astute critiques of temporality that queer studies scholars, particularly queers of color (R. Ferguson 2004), have put forward. Normality and, for that matter, queerness are moving targets. They

are historically and culturally constituted. The future is not a matter of chronology but one of vantage and privilege. While there may be a need to project and look forward to utopias devoid of such wretched realities, a queer approach is necessary to maintain a healthy suspicion of political ends. This "suspicious" standpoint coupled with a fervent aspirational attitude toward such temporal (im)possibilities is much needed in order to continue unravelling and exfoliating layers of ideological obfuscation and intersecting strands of institutional practices that mask various forms of violent abjections and unjust marginalizations. A relevant queer approach is one that strongly maintains its link to "other" marginal subjects and states of being, empowers an ethical stance that decenters the "America" in "Asian America," and assumes a humble yet vital way of knowing and being in the world (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005, 15).