

Introduction
Thinking Sideways, or an Untoward Genealogy
of Queer Reading

E. L. McCallum and Tyler Bradway

Queer studies' inception is canonically marked by two philosophical books: Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1* (1976) and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990).¹ Foucault recounts how a "Victorian" view of sexuality rose to predominance in Europe and North America. Its defining formation is confinement: in the home, within a monogamous heterosexual couple, legitimized by the state and religious authorities through marriage. Forms of sexual practice other than heterosexually monogamous domestic reproduction, not to mention the pleasures and cultural understandings that emerge from such alternative engagements, were considered illegitimate or worse. Yet, humans being who they are – pleasure-seekers who emerge from an infantile polymorphous perversity – many stray from this ideal.

Through this model, which Foucault termed the "repressive hypothesis," sexuality came to be aligned with privacy, secrecy, and purely utilitarian – reproductive – aims. Yet Foucault demonstrated that sexuality is nonetheless imbricated with public, political, and social spheres. In other words, Western understandings and experiences of sexuality are fundamentally bound up with the liberal nation-state and the dominance of the bourgeoisie. This social, economic, and political formation of the liberal capitalist nation-state emerged from the Enlightenment (a period roughly from the middle of the seventeenth century to end of the eighteenth century) and came to full fruition in the period Foucault nominates "Victorian" – the nineteenth century. While the Victorian era shaped much of the thinking in our contemporary world, its "repressive hypothesis" also generated counteractions. Foucault showed that repression produced sexuality rather than simply contained it, and sketched how sexuality's perverse pleasures might be deployed by other forms of power. Thus, as political, scientific, and economic forms evolve – from liberalism to neoliberalism, from colonial capitalism to globalization, from national

governments to multinational corporations, from industrial power to bio-power – so too do forms of sexuality evolve. New norms emerge to regulate sexuality even as some communities experiment with how their bodies and pleasures may contest those norms.

Commonly understood as an expression of our innermost self, sexuality turns out to be implanted from outside of us. Butler's *Gender Trouble* develops this Foucauldian insight. Butler integrated Foucault's social constructionism with the psychoanalytic model of how the subject comes to be and the deconstructive model of how language works. Rather than being a static or absolute essence, identity is a performance that we are compelled to repeat; its performance gains meaning within social discourse, in reference to other performances going on simultaneously.

Butler builds on Sigmund Freud, who, despite Foucault's criticisms, also complicated heteronormativity's repressive hypothesis. Butler transposes Freud's notion of melancholia to describe how heterosexuality and gender identity emerge from the twin taboos of homosexuality and incest. Melancholia, Freud suggests, is a perverse reaction to the loss of a desired object. In melancholia, someone has become unavailable to our desire and attachment. When we absorb the prohibitions against incest and homosexuality, Butler argued, the same-sex parent becomes lost to us. Thus, we internalize that person inside our minds. We *become* them, perhaps only unconsciously, taking on the characteristics of the same-sex parent to preserve our forbidden love for them.

Becoming that lost object of desire is not a one-time event, nor is it merely psychological. Rather, identity has to be asserted in the social world. Here Butler drew on philosophers J. L. Austin and Jacques Derrida, who showed that language does not have an anchored meaning that refers to things outside of itself. Words, phrases, sentences act in the world, and their meaning relies on contexts that make their actions felicitous or effective. A promise, a bet, a marriage vow – these are what Austin called performative speech acts. Performative speech acts only take place in language and under the right circumstances; there is always a risk of failure. You can name a child "Sue," but if Sue comes to understand that his name does not align with his gender, then he may want to change it. Or, he may, as in Johnny Cash's song, redefine how others understand the name "Sue." Butler argues that identity itself is in this sense performative: an action that requires constant reassertion and interpretation within language. It can succeed – and will succeed to the degree that it is socially intelligible – but our performative expression always risks failure and incoherence.

Thinking Sideways, or an Untoward Genealogy of Queer Reading 3

As we strive to assert an identity that others recognize as coherent, we inevitably fail to perform that identity perfectly. One is never as feminine, straight, Black, or middle-class as the ideal. In part, this is because we are never simply performing one identity but are operating at the intersection of many: gender, race, class, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, disability, among so many others. We might be fluent in certain gestures, habits, and ways of speaking, but not all of these fluencies match the ones preferred by dominant culture. Indeed, our identity performances may not be compatible with one another, producing disturbances in one's social intelligibility that might be called . . . queer. As José Esteban Muñoz observes, "We can understand queerness itself as being filled with the intention to be lost. Queerness is illegible and therefore lost in relation to the straight minds' mapping of space. . . [O]ne's queerness will always render one lost to a world of heterosexual imperatives, codes, and laws."² To queer is to distance oneself from norms, and to embrace that distance.

Yet while queer is a glitch in the matrix – a disturbance in how smoothly one's cultural or social intelligibility operates – it can also be a skillful subversion of intelligibility. Through irony, parody, camp, and other deployments of language, some people *queer* identities and other social practices. Queer marks an opportunity for reinterpretation. In this sense, queer is not an identity, a thing, or an entity but an *activity*. Queer names a practice, an approach, a way of relating. Scholars and activists seized on the term "queer" as a way to describe not fitting in, not being fully intelligible to mainstream demands for comportment, and even to question those demands for normativity in our desires, pleasures, bodies. As queer, we may be able to articulate how we are not fitting in – to confess to or fear, for instance, being too much of a sissy compared to masculine norms. Or we might resist specifying our queerness – as some people do in affirming nonbinary gender fluidity. While queer offers elasticity, it always hinges on bodies, pleasures, relations, or desires at cross-purposes with heteronormativity. It is a mode of thinking, but also a mode of recognizing the unconscious commitments we find ourselves in because of our desires. In fact, a crucial lesson of queer is that thinking – which might seem to be disembodied – is inherently a bodily practice.

Insofar as queer is a mode of thinking, it is a mode of thinking sideways, of turning around a question in unexpected ways.³ When we reflect on that sideways thinking, we have theory. Theory is a second-order mode of investigation: if literature is creative expression in the world, literary theory is *about* literature's creative expression; in other words, it reflects on how

literature works. Queer studies looks at a range of ways of being queer – in this volume, specifically literary ways – while queer theory hinges on how we think about queer. Queer theory is thus inseparable from queer studies. Indeed, Ramzi Fawaz and Shanté Paradigm Smalls have noted the irony that the major scholarly texts of queer theory tend to be more widely read than the actual literary works queer theorists analyze.⁴

Although the term emerged in the 1990s, queer theory predates its canonical inception in Foucault and Butler. Two movements define this convergence: feminism and gay liberation. In the feminist stream, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's 1981 anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* marks a watershed moment in the thinking of feminism, race, class, and sexuality.⁵ Another landmark essay, Gayle Rubin's "Thinking Sex" (1984), joins the ongoing conversation in the radical feminist philosophy of the 1970s and 1980s, exemplified by Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Marilyn Frye, to reconsider what "counts" as sexuality and how sexuality can be wielded against people in oppressive ways.⁶ Similarly, Anzaldúa's *Borderlands | La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) explored the intersectional limits of identity through a Chicana feminist lens we now recognize as queer, because it reflects on the unintelligibility of being in the world in relation to various communities – within her family and her community of origin on the Texas border, within the white-dominated academy, and among a non-hispanophone Latinx/Chicana feminist community in the San Francisco Bay area, among others.⁷ Importantly, Anzaldúa's experiments with form subverted the norms of serious philosophical writing, anticipating the intimacy of literature and theory in queer studies.

Parallel to the feminist movement, and contemporaneous with Foucault, writers such as Dennis Altman, Guy Hocquenghem, and Leo Bersani grappled with the possibilities of gay liberation in the 1970s and 1980s, presciently laying groundwork for the emergence of queer theory in the 1990s. John D'Emilio's important essay "Capitalism and Gay Identity" appeared in 1983, charting a path for future intersections of queer and Marxist theory.⁸ D'Emilio tied the emergence of urban homosexual enclaves to socioeconomic changes, such as the ability of individuals to support themselves financially rather than rely on family. D'Emilio's work connects the social formation of individualism to the development of gay liberation, instigated by the 1969 Stonewall rebellion. He provides a Marxist view of sexuality to counter the psychoanalytic model predominant in the mid-twentieth century.

Feminism and gay liberation shared some common intellectual roots in psychoanalytic theory's radical reconsideration of gender and sexuality

Thinking Sideways, or an Untoward Genealogy of Queer Reading 5

as polymorphously perverse, not fixed from birth. Both also launched important critiques of psychoanalytic institutions and discourses, which often imposed and naturalized oppressive sexual norms. Feminist and gay liberationist scholars were also influenced by post-structuralist theory – thinkers like Derrida, Foucault, and Roland Barthes – who gained ascendancy in US intellectual circles in the 1980s. Arguably, the convergence of these two strands – feminism and gay liberation – can be seen in the appearance of *Gender Trouble* and its significant intervention in the feminist debates around essentialism and social constructionism.

Yet queer theory's seemingly ivory-tower thinking was deeply embedded in activist movements. Indeed, Butler's conceptions of desire and loss were particularly resonant in gay and lesbian communities devastated by the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. From the identification of the earliest victims of the epidemic in 1981 through the mid-1990s, HIV/AIDS was a death sentence. Only in 1995, when the FDA approved the first protease inhibitors, was HIV+ transformed into a chronic, but not unmanageable, condition. This era is marked by the catastrophic loss of lovers and friends, but it is also a moment of radical mobilization. "Silence = Death" became a rallying cry in a nation where the President refused to discuss AIDS publicly until 1985, and where normative institutions – the government and the medical-industrial establishment – failed to intervene in the crisis. HIV+ people and their allies responded to this silence in a powerful explosion of creative work – prose, drama, poetry, essay, art, performance, film, and television. The untimeliness of AIDS deaths – among a population that was just coming into its own socially, politically, artistically, and professionally – exacerbated the sense of urgency felt by queer communities. The scholarly profession was not without its losses: John Boswell, author of *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, a pioneering treatise on gay history;⁹ Craig Owens, noted art scholar and editor of *Art in America*; Essex Hemphill, African-American poet and essayist; and Foucault himself. AIDS casts a shadow over the development of queer studies that cannot be forgotten; indeed, the crisis crystallized the political and performative stakes of coming out, reading queerly, and queering identity.

We have been tracing a certain origin story without tracing the origin itself. The etymology of the term "queer" shows, rather fittingly, that its origins are somewhat obscure. Origins are suspect in queer studies, for they reinscribe a sense of propriety, lineage, norms; as Robert McRuer notes, "Any myth of origin suggests a linear (or might we say 'straight') path of development and implies a pure and singular starting point."¹⁰ The origin is often mistaken for authority, when really an origin just encapsulates a

few potentialities of a term. Yet if we understand an origin as a trajectory, rather than a beginning or essence, it can be useful to chart queer's "before" as we turn to its "after." Of queer's etymology, the OED notes:

Origin uncertain; perhaps (or perhaps even cognate with) German *quer* transverse, oblique, crosswise, at right angles, obstructive, (of things) going wrong (now rare), (of a person) peculiar (now obsolete in this sense), (of a glance) directed sideways, especially in a surreptitious or hostile manner (now rare), (of opinion and behaviour) at odds with others (see *thwart adv.*), but the semantic correspondence is not exact.¹¹

We cite this origin story because of its vivid spatial designation for queer: "transverse, oblique, obstructive," which resonates with our description of queer theory as thinking sideways. The dictionary now acknowledges queer as a formerly derogatory term for homosexual that denoted an "identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms." Yet, recalling Austin and Butler, the simplicity of this definition should become complicated by how the term is used. Because it puts identity into question, queer undoes subjects and objects – their limits, relations, formations, and modes of operation. For this reason, queer comes to be used in seemingly undisciplined ways. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes queer as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically."¹² Although she acknowledges that queer sometimes serves "to denote, almost simply, same-sex sexual object choice, lesbian or gay, whether or not it is organized around multiple criss-crossings of definitional lines," Sedgwick also locates in queer "experimental linguistic, epistemological, representational, political adventures." The vast range between simple "same-sex object choice" and experimental "adventures" captures the inherent slipperiness in defining "queer" as well as the opportunities such slipperiness affords.

Queer's slipperiness bears on the "after" in our title. Recently, queer literary studies has become particularly focused on queering temporality, a move that troubles the linear genealogy we have presented thus far. We see this turn in Lee Edelman's influential polemic *No Future* (2004) as well as Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009), Valerie Rohy's *Anachronism and Its Others* (2009), Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds* (2010), Peter Coviello's *Tomorrow's Parties* (2013), and Juana María Rodríguez's *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (2014).¹³ Despite their differences, these works evince

Thinking Sideways, or an Untoward Genealogy of Queer Reading 7

queer studies' ongoing reconceptualization of past, present, and future – as well as of the modes of periodization, genealogy, history, linearity, and causality that we use to think about queer time.

Alongside the temporal turn, queer studies has begun to ask: Whither queer studies now? In their pathbreaking issue of *Social Text*, "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" (2005), David L. Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz answered this question by contextualizing queer theory alongside the War on Terror, US imperialism, neoliberalism, and "queer liberalism," which forsakes the radicalism of the AIDS era and embraces assimilation to existing norms of the state, exemplified by the marriage equality movement.¹⁴ Insisting on its political and social relevance, Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz called for queer theory to adopt a "politics of epistemological humility" (15). By humbly approaching the question of "what a desirably queer world might look like?" queer theory becomes more ethically and politically responsive to global forms of otherness that continue to be marginalized. While Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz looked ahead, others looked back to reflect on the disciplinary legacies of queer theory, including Janet Halley and Andrew Parker's "After Sex? On Writing since Queer Theory," a 2007 special issue of *SAQ* (expanded and published as a book in 2011), Michael Warner's essay "Queer and Then?" (2012), and Matt Brim and Amin Ghaziani's "Queer Methods" (2016), a special issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly*.¹⁵ In Brim and Ghaziani's words, our moment is marked by a "reframing [of] the endlessly rehearsed question 'what is queer theory?' as the nascent 'how is queer theory done?'"¹⁶

As our title suggests, we see genealogy itself as a promisingly queer method – a way of thinking queer as well as thinking queerly. In this respect, our book resonates with recent work by scholars such as Rohy, David M. Halperin, and Kevin Ohi, who focus on the passage or transmission of queer knowledge and culture.¹⁷ Rohy critiques the homophobic fantasy of how homosexuals and their cultures reproduce – "through seduction, influence, recruitment, pedagogy, predation, and contagion" – offering an insightful perspective from which to reflect on how queer studies has an "after." Rohy argues that such homophobic fantasies led lesbian and gay advocates to counter such fears by appealing to biological determinism – that we are "born this way," as Lady Gaga says. Yet even the question – *what causes homosexuality?* – is a pernicious one, whose insistence on being asked presumes that finding a cause is necessary – as if homosexuality is in need of explanation. Such investigations share a retrospective form that produces the origin as an effect of their investigations.

Queer theory teaches us to be suspicious of backward glances that look for causes, so any genealogy of queer studies – even the limited and partial one posed above – is itself rather a perverse move.

Instead of looking for a beginning or end, the “after” of queer studies might be thought through *Nachträglichkeit*, a concept Freud used to describe deferred realization. The term literally means “afterwardsness,” and although it stems from Freud’s earliest work, *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), the term only came to full fruition in Freud’s case study of the Wolf Man (1918), where the subject belatedly realizes that his parents’ seeming violence, which he witnessed as a toddler, was actually sexual congress.¹⁸ Later in the twentieth century, French psychoanalysts Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis and then queer theorist Leo Bersani located this concept at the core of sexual development. A belated realization often seems to emphasize an impotent or tragic sense of “too late!” – especially as it is used in classical melodrama, like the films of Douglas Sirk. Yet *Nachträglichkeit* can also bestow power. As Laplanche and Pontalis observe, the term is “frequently used by Freud in connection with his view of psychical temporality and causality: experiences, impressions, and memory traces may be revised at a later date to fit in with fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development. They may in that event be endowed not only with a new meaning but also with psychical effectiveness.”¹⁹ What now is possible?

The afterglow of *Nachträglichkeit*’s illumination clarifies how we understand the “after” of queer studies as an empowering new stage of development in the field. Our provisional genealogical emphasis on “after” initiates a new discussion on the influences of queer theory, or, rather, what we can only now realize as the catalysts that queer studies has set in motion. If queer theory is a lapidary moment at the end of the twentieth century, it is timely now to trace some of the changes that it initiated in the field of literary studies. We may find that, as Muñoz has admonished us, “we are not yet queer.”²⁰ For this very reason, *After Queer Studies* weaves its retrospective reflections alongside a consideration of queer thinking and analysis that remains urgently to be done.

The “after” of our title, then, might be understood less as a look backward than a queer mode of looking forward. Of course, the stories we tell about a future often rely on a reproduction of the past and an investment in the persistence of social order itself. Even as it claims to imagine a radical break from the past, reproductive futurism, as Edelman argues, denies difference. By contrast, a desire to think a future for queer studies does not stem from a denial of radical difference. We do not

Thinking Sideways, or an Untoward Genealogy of Queer Reading 9

imagine a grand telos for queer studies, nor do we assume its unchanged persistence into the future. Rather, we reckon strange, circuitous, proliferating, and looping temporalities will generate friction and stimulate new potentialities, which may or may not continue under the signifier “queer.”

Precisely because queer is a problem of legibility and interpretation, *After Queer Studies* centers on literary studies, for this is the discipline that has tackled the queerness of reading, writing, and language. Moreover, literature has been an archive for queer theorizing from the start. Despite its predominately philosophical and psychoanalytical roots, in its formative years queer studies was driven largely by literary scholars. Even when landmark collections like Michael Warner’s *Fear of a Queer Planet* appear in non-literary journals (in 1990 as a volume of the journal *Social Text*), queer thinking remains marked by Warner’s training as an early American literature scholar.²¹ Similarly, Bersani’s first book was a study of Marcel Proust.²² Sedgwick’s foundational contribution to the field, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), was deeply engaged in literary analysis, while her more widely read and field-defining texts, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and *Tendencies* (1993), both exhibit polished skills in close reading born of a deeply literary approach to texts.²³ Moreover, her paradigm-shifting essay on paranoid reading and reparative reading in queer and literary criticism initially appeared as an introduction to the anthology *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (1997), which itself grew out of “Queerer than Fiction,” a 1996 special issue of *Studies in the Novel*.²⁴ In this important essay, Sedgwick gave queer scholars a new matrix for articulating how affect motivates compelling new interpretive methods and aims. Although the very distinction of paranoid and reparative emerged from Sedgwick’s work on shame, sexuality, and psychoanalysis, its literary context is often forgotten.

If the intimacy of queer and literary studies has been overlooked – perhaps because it seemed unremarkable or given – so too has the centrality of literature to queer theory and queer communities alike. D. A. Miller elegantly charts this relation in *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style*.²⁵ Sedgwick likewise describes a childhood attachment by queers to “a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us” (*Tendencies* 3). These objects become a “prime resource for survival.” Reparative work, as Sedgwick notes, fears that “the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer an inchoate self.”²⁶ This affective dynamic might also be said to

underlie the desires that many LGBTQ readers bring to literature. Indeed, there is a profound need for marginalized readers to discover selves reflected in a world that otherwise denies their very existence. At the same time, seeking this identification may fuel a hope, or demand, that literature should accurately, clearly, and positively represent queer lives and experiences. While queer studies by no means discounts the power or value of such representations, it extends its destabilization of identity to literary meaning. As Ohi argues, literature's failures to cohere – its ruptures in meaning, its thwarted moments of understanding – *are* the place where it preserves and transmits queerness as potentiality. By defining queerness in terms of a depersonalized, desubjectivized negativity, Ohi follows in the anti-identitarian tradition inaugurated by Bersani. However, in an important twist, Ohi reframes “queer theory as a mode of literary reading” and identifies close reading as a queer mode to “access the potentiality of a literary work – not to settle it, once and for all, in a meaning that masters it, but to rewrite it, perpetually.”²⁷ In short, queer turns to literature not for legible reflections of a self but for moments when the self becomes ecstatically illegible.

In a related move, we do not assume a coherent or privileged identity for “literature.” Our chapters move from William Shakespeare, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, and Henry James to queer commix, camp performance, and science fiction. This movement is, itself, a queer one – not simply because of the disruption of the boundaries between high and low culture but also because queer reading has historically been marked by its capacious attachment to and appreciation of a range of aesthetic forms. As Sedgwick notes, queer readers “have invented for themselves, in the spontaneity of great need, the tools for a formalist apprehension of other less prestigious, more ubiquitous kinds of text: genre movies, advertising, comic strips” (*Tendencies* 4). *After Queer Studies* questions the “spontaneity” of this invention by acknowledging the historical forces that gave rise to the practices we now think of as “queer reading” as well as the role that literature plays in soliciting queer interpretative practices from its readers. Still, Sedgwick's observation underlines the importance of *form* – as an aesthetic and social concept – for queer readers. After all, we need only to think of how drag aesthetics, Jamesian and Steinian sentences, or the lines in Assyrian sculpture (to name just a few examples) have galvanized queer thinking.

The refusal to choose between aesthetics and politics is precisely why queer studies is so crucially oriented around literary studies. In “Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social,” Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez call for a new thinking of