

## *Introduction*

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This *Companion* provides a guide to queer inquiry in literary and cultural studies, a wide-ranging and porous area of study that has been especially generative for the larger interdisciplinary field of queer studies over the last three decades. The essays gathered here represent work in queer literary and cultural studies in the vital present, generated with an impulse to suggest new and emerging areas of inquiry, including trans studies as it is entangled with and adjacent to queer studies. All of the essays are original, written expressly for this publication by both established and newer voices in the field. Rather than being organized around a set of literary texts defined by a particular theme, literary movement, or demographic, this *Companion* foregrounds a queer critical approach that moves across a wide array of literary traditions, genres, historical periods, national contexts, and media including print, tv/film/video, digital media, and performance.

At this point in the history of the field, no single book could hope to provide an exhaustive account of the capacious project that is queer literary and cultural studies. Instead, this *Companion* familiarizes readers with some of the field's the most salient debates, concepts, and interpretive strategies, with special emphasis on those that have shaped current critical practices within the field, along with suggestions for further study for those who want to deepen their understanding beyond this collection of essays. Most broadly, this text has four key, often overlapping, aims: (1) to represent the diversity of approaches, scholars, and contexts that have shaped the field, both theoretically and demographically; (2) to familiarize readers with the history of queer literary and cultural studies, as well as the most current debates and emerging areas of study; (3) to provide examples of queer approaches in action, through each contributor's readings of cultural texts from different historical periods, genres, and national contexts; and (4) to highlight areas of particularly dynamic queer inquiry, rather than to draw clear boundaries around a coherent theoretical framework, set of textual objects, or single critical approach.

But what is queer literary and cultural studies? Introducing the field is a daunting task, not only because such a varied array of scholarship has been pursued, debated, and published in this area of study over the last thirty years or so, but also because the field has been characterized by two fundamental aspects of queer critical practice that thwart any attempt to define its parameters: a deep, as yet unresolved (and probably unresolvable) contradiction in the meanings of “queer” itself, and a determined refusal to decide ahead of time what does or does not fall within the purview of queer studies. This Introduction briefly discusses these aspects of the field and then provides an overview of the essays themselves, suggesting their shared interests and diverging viewpoints.

### Queer Subjects/Queer Critique

Two distinct (and seemingly contradictory) ways of thinking about the “queer” in queer studies have emerged in productive tension over the past few decades. In one use of the word, queer works as an umbrella term for a range of sexual and gender identities that are not “straight,” or at least not normative. In a second sense, queer functions more as a verb than a noun, signaling a critical stance – productively corrosive at times – that is skeptical of existing identity categories and more interested in understanding the production of normativity and its queer companion, nonnormativity, than in delineating any particular population. Although queer critiques of normativity have often been tethered to sexuality and gender in some way (hetero- or homonormativity), some of the most powerful work in the field argues that queer approaches help us understand normativity in *any* sense, based on interlocking categories of difference and power, including race, caste, indigeneity, gender, class, nation, and religion.<sup>1</sup> This *Companion* does not resolve these tensions within the field and, as you read the essays, you will encounter multiple senses of queer, whether as an umbrella term, as a critique, or otherwise.

By now, in the early decades of the twenty-first century, the term “queer” has become a familiar one, widely circulating in popular culture and in everyday speech and typically carrying some sense of inclinations that are linked to sexuality or gender. The current familiarity and ubiquity of “queer” – its friendliness for some – mark a dramatic shift from the late 1980s and early 1990s, when what we now call queer studies began to emerge as an academic field. At that time, the term still carried a stinging sense of stigma, built on several previous decades of wide use as a homophobic slur. Public discourse was characterized by pervasive

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homophobia and racism fueled by fear, at a time when the Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS/HIV) epidemic was killing tens of thousands per year in the United States alone and devastating communities across the world. (In 1994, more than 3 million people were diagnosed with HIV globally. Since 1996, every year, more than 1 million people in the world have died from HIV/AIDS.<sup>2</sup>) In the face of the stigmatizing power of “queer,” the term began to be used in the late 1980s and early 1990s to signal a political stance of both solidarity and defiance, disrupting polite discourse and refusing to be shamed into silence. Grieving, angry, and frustrated by the hostile political climate, while simultaneously insistent on the public value of pleasure and sexuality, those who self-identified as “queer” often felt that they had little to lose and everything to gain by reclaiming the term and, thereby, defusing its power to injure. As Jeffrey Escoffier and Allan Berubé wrote in 1991, “queer” signaled a politics that was “meant to be confrontational – opposed to gay assimilationists and straight oppressors while inclusive of people who have been marginalized by anyone in power.”<sup>3</sup>

As the term began to circulate more widely in the 1980s and 1990s, something called “queer studies” began to glimmer on the horizon. Queer became attached to the field of lesbian and gay studies, which had already emerged, still in its nascent form, in the 1970s, often through the work of independent scholars who pursued groundbreaking research with little institutional support or recognition.<sup>4</sup> “Queer,” as an umbrella term, was often used interchangeably with lesbian and gay, but it seemed to offer a more elastic container that could capture a range of variations in sexual practices and identities that did not conform to legible heterosexuality, as well as those that did not necessarily line up with “lesbian” or “gay” identities, either. As Gloria Anzaldúa wrote in 1991, “The new mestiza queers have the ability, the flexibility, the malleability, the amorphous quality of being able to stretch this way and that way. We can add new labels, names, and identities as we mix with others.”<sup>5</sup> Echoing this emphasis on suppleness and variation, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick noted, in a now widely quoted passage from her 1993 essay “Queer and Now,” that “queer” could refer to:

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. The experimental linguistic, epistemological, representational, political adventures attaching to the very many of us who may at times be moved to describe ourselves as (among many other possibilities)

pushy femmes, radical faeries, fantasists, drags, clones, leatherfolk, ladies in tuxedos, feminist women or feminist men, masturbators, bulldaggers, divas, Snap! Queens, butch bottoms, storytellers, transsexuals, aunts, wannabes, lesbian-identified men or lesbians who sleep with men, or ... people able to relish, learn from, or identify with such.<sup>6</sup>

As both Anzaldúa and Sedgwick's comments suggest, the sheer pleasure in proliferating new sexual names and subjects was something valuable and newly possible in the space cleared by the word "queer."

In literary and cultural studies, queer approaches have focused not only on the authors, characters, or formal aspects of various texts, but also, importantly, on the reader. Drawing from and critiquing reception studies and theories of spectatorship, a significant body of lesbian/gay/queer/trans scholarship has asked what difference the gendered sexuality of the reader or spectator – a "queer eye," perhaps – makes to the meaning and significance of any particular text. Sedgwick, for instance, situated herself as "a perverse reader," whereas Anzaldúa reflected on the way that sexual, racial, gender, and class identity might significantly shape her readers' experiences of her own texts. But Anzaldúa refused any simple correspondence between social or sexual identity and readerly position:

[A]s a reader, I usually have more in common with the Chicana dyke than I do with the white, middle-class feminist. I am in possession of both ways of reading – Chicana working-class, dyke ways of reading, and white middle-class heterosexual and male ways of reading. I have had more training in reading as a white, middle-class academic than I do reading as a Chicana. Just like we have more training reading as men.<sup>7</sup>

In film studies, scholars such as Patricia White considered the complex interactions of fantasy, desire, and identification that might account for a lesbian spectator in studies of classical Hollywood cinema, whereas other critics, like Alexander Doty, explored both how "self-identified gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and queers" read and use popular cultural texts and how anyone, regardless of "a person's declared sexual and gender allegiances" might adopt "reception positions that can be considered 'queer' in some way."<sup>8</sup> By 2005, J. Jack Halberstam explored the possibility of a "transgender gaze" that allows film audiences "to look *with* the transgender character instead of *at* him."<sup>9</sup> Another body of scholarship has studied how reading, listening, or watching can be understood as queer when the desires and pleasures they enact are deemed excessive, as in the case of fandom.<sup>10</sup>

Theories of identification have been central to these accounts of reception and spectatorship, along with the concept of disidentification

developed by performance studies scholar, José Esteban Muñoz, whose widely influential work has been especially generative for queer of color critique. For Muñoz, disidentification describes a process by which the “phobic object, through a campy over-the-top performance, is reconfigured as sexy and glamorous, and not as the pathetic and abject spectacle that it appears to be in the dominant eyes of heteronormative culture.”<sup>11</sup> Notably, Muñoz described disidentification as “a survival strategy” for queers of color and other minority subjects, one that was “*not always* an adequate act of resistance” per se.<sup>12</sup>

As versatile as “queer” can be as an umbrella term, this use also has its drawbacks. In particular, it can produce too reductive an account of the normative category(ies) against which it is posed. In her now-classic essay, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?,” first published in 1997 and widely reprinted since, political scientist Cathy Cohen challenged the tendency to understand “queer” in opposition to “straight.”<sup>13</sup> This binary, she argued, overlooked the fact that not all heterosexualities historically have been afforded the privilege of normative status. Cohen urged her readers to consider how race has functioned to mark some heterosexualities as suspect, even criminal, pointing to the examples of the US history of legal prohibitions against interracial heterosexuality, and the stigmatization of unmarried women of color who receive public assistance to support their children. Cohen cautioned readers not to rely on sexual identity or practice alone for understanding how power is distributed. Instead, drawing on intersectional analysis from women of color feminisms, she argued for the importance of distinguishing heterosexuality from *heteronormativity*, which she understood to be as much a racialized concept as a sexual or gendered one.

Describing a historically specific relation to power, rather than an identity per se, “queer” has been deployed in this way by a broad array of interdisciplinary queer studies scholars (such as Cohen) to challenge identitarian frameworks. Such approaches have been central, for instance, in the study of periods and contexts in which sexuality and desire cannot be described according to the “modern” regime of sexuality described in *The History of Sexuality* by Michel Foucault, who asserted that the notion of sexual identity (or orientation) is a relatively recent invention.<sup>14</sup> Dislodging the presumption that “lesbian” or “gay” are the primary objects of study, queer approaches make visible broad variations of sexual practice and self-understanding in various historical and cultural contexts in which such concepts of sexual identity have no equivalent or would be anachronistic. As Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon write,

“To queer the Renaissance would thus mean not only looking for alternative sexualities in the past but also challenging the methodological orthodoxy by which past and present are constrained and straitened.”<sup>15</sup> In turn, across various historical periods and cultural contexts, including nonwestern contexts, a range of work in literary and cultural studies has used queer approaches to investigate temporality and history itself and has sought to account for “queer ways of being in time,” in the words of medievalist Carolyn Dinshaw.<sup>16</sup>

As the field has deepened its skepticism toward identitarian models over the past three decades, a frequent refrain has been a refusal to delineate the “proper objects” of queer analysis.<sup>17</sup> In their 1995 essay, “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about *X*?” for instance, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner challenged an emerging tendency to assume that queer theory could be systematized and applied across an array of interchangeable objects of study (the “*X*” of their title).<sup>18</sup> Instead, they considered the openness and uncontainable aspects of queer commentary as its strengths:

The failure to systematize the world in queer theory does not mean a commitment to irrelevance; it means resistance to being an apparatus for falsely translating systematic and random violences into normal states, administrative problems, or minor constituencies.<sup>19</sup>

In a related argument, Roderick Ferguson has cautioned against a “will to institutionality” that would contain the field within disciplinary norms “founded on divisions between legitimacy and illegitimacy.”<sup>20</sup> Any attempt to introduce the “field” of queer studies here will thus be inherently partial, given this recurring refrain not to presume ahead of time what methods or objects might constitute a queer project.

### The Essays

This companion is organized into four sections – Genealogies, Confluences, Representation, and Key Words – that situate queer literary and cultural studies within broader interdisciplinary queer studies contexts, as well as within the specificities of the fields of literary and cultural studies. Although this organization aims to provide some possible paths through the essays, they are also meant to be undone and reorganized according to the reader’s interests and desires.

The first section, “Genealogies,” includes two essays that trace the intellectual and political conditions of possibility for the emergence of what we now call “queer studies,” describing the theoretical and activist

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influences that shaped the development of the field. In “Genealogies of Queer Theory,” Kadji Amin advocates a “promiscuous understanding of genealogy” (25) to make visible the heterogeneity of the field that we now understand as “queer theory.” Outlining the contributions of three theorists – Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Michel Foucault – whose work is frequently invoked as foundational to the field, Amin then offers a panorama of alternative genealogies of the field, primarily through histories of deviance studies, queer of color critique, and more recent developments such as black antihumanism. Keguro Macharia’s essay on “Queer Writing, Queer Politics: Working across Difference” brings attention to the emergence of queer collectivities during the same period, focusing on organizing efforts and writing by queer people of color, especially feminists, during the early years of the HIV/AIDS crisis. As he argues, through writing and filmmaking, lesbian/feminist women of color and black gay men forged models of working across differences that were crucial to political organizing during this period and that point to the ongoing need for new scholarship and activism focused on the labor of care.

The second section, “Confluences,” takes up a set of critical intersections that have produced new and distinct areas of inquiry in their own right, including queer of color critique, queer indigenous studies, queer disability studies, trans studies, and queer ecologies, each of which has shaped and been significantly shaped by scholarship in literary and cultural studies. In “Convergence, Dissymmetry, Duplicities: Enactments of Queer of Color Critique,” Chandan Reddy notes that, if queer theory can be understood to turn on the axis of normativity, then queer of color critique takes up investigations of power that foreground *both* normalization and domination. He posits queer of color critique as the “critique of critique,” which is an effort that produces new practices of social theory and that “works parasitically to undermine our inherited division of knowledges” (60). Reflecting on the emergence of the distinct field of queer indigenous studies, June Scudeler’s essay on “Queer Indigenous Studies, or Thirza Cuthand’s Indigequeer Film” traces a genealogy of queer indigenous studies through the work of Thirza Cuthand, a Plains Cree lesbian who has been making self-described “indigequeer” films and videos since the early 1990s. Foregrounding Cree concepts in her analysis, Scudeler highlights how Cuthand uses humor and experimental techniques in her films to create a sense of community for queer indigenous people. In her overview of “Queer Disability Studies,” Alison Kafer focuses on the performances of artist

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, a participant in *Sins Invalid*, an activist organization focusing on disability arts and justice. Exploring the key word “crip” and its relationship to “queer,” Kafer examines how artists and scholars have put disability at the center of queer studies and, in turn, have brought a queer-critical lens to understandings of disability as both identity formation and critical practice. In “Transgender Studies, or How to Do Things With Trans\*,” Cael Keegan traces the history of transgender studies and its relationship to the field of queer studies. Drawing on the work of Janet Halley and Susan Stryker, Keegan traces key points of congruence and tension between the two methods, showing how each problematizes and sharpens the other’s claims. Keegan concludes the essay with a trans\* reading of John Carpenter’s science fiction horror film, *The Thing* (1982). Nicole Seymour’s essay on “Queer Ecologies” reflects on the uneven development and critical recognition of work that has brought queer theory together with ecological concerns and asks what new possibilities trans ecology might offer. Reading Edward Abbey’s now now-classic novel of the environmental movement, *The Monkeywrench Gang* (1975), against a more recent poem by Latinx trans poet Oliver Baez Bendorf, Seymour investigates the productive instability of “nature” in these textual representations of gender and race.

“Representation,” a word that has both the aesthetic and political meanings, is the title of the third section, in which the essays foreground queer approaches to genres and topics that are specific to literary and cultural studies: poetics, narrative studies, popular culture, performance, and digital media. In “Queer Poetics: *Deviant Swerves*, in Three,” Ren Ellis Neyra plays on the sharp turns of desire that often propel queer poetics, leading the reader through a zigzagging landscape of rhythm, sound, pleasure, and desire. Enacting their own queer poetics, Ellis Neyra moves through and is moved by the theory and poetry of writers including Lucretius, Drake, Lisa Cohen, Tommy Pico, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, José Esteban Muñoz, Fred Moten, carl phillips, and Renee Gladman. Writing on “Queer Narrative,” Anne Mulhall surveys queer narrative theory, focusing not only on specific genres familiar to LGBTQ representation, such as the transition autobiography and the coming-out narrative, but also on the broader narrative arcs – such as “progress” – that shape and are shaped at different scales of storytelling, whether focused on the individual, the “community,” or the nation. Drawing from the recent political example of the 2015 campaign for the legalization of same-sex marriage in the Republic of Ireland, Mulhall considers the staying power of certain



narratives of lesbian and gay identity in contemporary neoliberal contexts. In “Trace a Vanishing: or, Queer Performance Study,” Nadia Ellis reflects on queer performance studies and the particular weight and meaning of disappearance in the context of queer of color performance. Modeling an expansive method of reading queer of color performance in a variety of texts, Ellis traces the long history of enactments of vanishing, from the nineteenth-century fugitive slave narrative of Ellen and William Craft, through twentieth-century films such as Shirley Clarke’s *Portrait of Jason* (1963) and Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning* (1990), to more recent queer “sound makers” like Mykki Blanco and Frank Ocean. In her essay on “Queer and Trans Studies in Pop Culture: Transgender Tripping Points in the Carceral State,” Erica Rand foregrounds queer popular culture through a case study of the television soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful* and its portrayal of a transwoman of color. Enacting the theoretical labor and pleasure that fans often perform, Rand plays with this televisual text at the overlaps between transfeminist politics and queer reading, rewriting it to align more fully with a vision of her own desire: “consistent attention to gender and sexuality as always formed, presented, and apprehended in relation to race, class, economic status, nationality, ethnicity, ability, and other matters, in ways both obvious and subtle” (179). In “Queer Digital Cultures,” Kate O’Riordan traces the convergence of queer and digital culture since the 1980s, by highlighting a series of major shifts that have occurred over the last few decades: from textual to audiovisual interfaces, from subcultural to mainstream LGBTQ representation, from utopian political and aesthetic aspirations to increasingly commercialized ventures, and from open-ended identity play to consumer authentication and cultures of surveillance. The historical emergence of intertwined queer and digital cultures, O’Riordan suggests, has been characterized by the oscillation between desires for utopian alternatives and anxieties about predefined relations of power.

The fourth section, “Key Words,” highlights three critical terms – diaspora, kinship, and region – that have been particularly useful rubrics in queer literary and cultural studies in recent years. Essays in this section explain how these concepts have been deployed in queer studies scholarship, as well as how queer approaches have transformed understandings of these terms in the broader fields of literary and cultural studies. Martin Joseph Ponce’s essay on “Queer Diasporic Crossings and the Persistence of Desire in *The Book of Salt*” explores the spatial and temporal dynamics of Monique Truong’s 2003 novel, which reimagines expatriate modernism through the eyes of Binh, a character based on a Vietnamese cook who worked in the

household of the well-known modernist couple, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, in Paris in the 1920s. Ponce focuses on the significance of *The Book of Salt's* speculative literary approach to the past and its emphasis on the subjective self-representation of this queer diasporic figure, whose desire suspends any linear narrative of migration and return. In his essay on “Diaspora, Displacement, and Belonging: The Politics of the Family and the Future of Queer Kinship,” Richard T. Rodríguez explores contemporary understandings of “translatina kinship” in the 2010 film documentary, *I Am the Queen*, which documents Puerto Rican trans beauty contestants in a Chicago neighborhood whose community is under constant threat of displacement through the forces of gentrification. Noting that the idea of a “kinship” relation is often distinguished from that of the genealogical notion of “family,” Rodríguez insists that there is significant overlap between the two, particularly in queer of color contexts. In her essay on “Queer Critical Regionalism,” J. Samaine Lockwood focuses on a short story in which a character fixates on a queen of a different sort, Queen Victoria. Providing an overview of the emergence of critical queer regionalism over the past few decades, Lockwood enacts a comparative and transnational approach to region that focuses not only on sexuality but also race and imperialism. She reads nineteenth-century writer Sarah Orne Jewett’s curious short story, “The Queen’s Twin,” emphasizing the story’s ways of imagining queer possibility and mobility for white women in an age of US urbanization and imperial expansion.

As these wide-ranging essays demonstrate, there is no single way to “do” queer studies. Reflecting existing asymmetries in the field and, of course, my own scholarly location (and the vagaries of the editing process), this *Companion* is admittedly largely focused on the United States, but not exclusively so. When I approached different authors to invite them to contribute, I gave them a broad sense of how they might shape their essays around specific topics, but I also left them a great deal of autonomy in determining the direction of their work. As a result, their ideas have organically generated new connections that exceeded my expectations and readers may easily discover alternative groupings. For instance, although Reddy’s essay announces its topic as queer of color critique, this approach is prominent throughout the volume and one could build a large section of the book around essays that focus on queer of color and trans of color representation. Likewise, a significant number of essays in this volume foreground the authors’ investigations of the relationship between queer and transgender studies, focusing on trans as both an identity and a critical mode.