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A Provocation: Queer is Not a Substitute for Gay/Lesbian

Aneil Rallin

I mull over the increasing interchangeability of queer with lesbian/gay (which ends up domesticating queer's radical potential) and call for queer to be liberated from the mainstream forces and institutional structures that have appropriated it.

An anecdote

I am on a campus visit at an MA-granting university on the West Coast, interviewing for a position in composition and rhetoric. Included on the agenda is the obligatory meeting with the entire search committee. Members of the committee, most of whom I haven't met before, have various specializations, with research agendas that look dauntingly impressive in terms of their commitments to radical politics. I'm looking forward to the opportunity of engaging with what appear to be such progressive minds. Alas, the usual tensions surface quickly among committee members—on the one side are those who conflate the work of rhetoric and composition with the teaching of first-year writing generally and grammar instruction specifically, and on the other side are those who have a less reductive but not specially enlightened view of the work of rhetoric and composition. I try not to show my dismay as I respond to yet another mundane question about clarity and comma splices.

Perhaps noticing my distress, the Chair of the search committee tries to steer the conversation in a different direction. She says that the committee is also interested and impressed by my work in queer theory. She wonders if I could talk about the class I'm teaching that semester in queer film and video. She asks, how is the class going? I know what I should say, but because I am bored and perverse I find it impossible to resist mentioning what I really think about how my class is going.

Looking directly at as many members of the search committee as I can, I exclaim "disastrously!" and sigh for dramatic effect. This revelation is greeted with much nervous laughter and confusion about how to react. I

explain that we are early into the semester, but that at the moment all the students are angry with each other and with me. Many of the heterosexual students are angry that the gay and lesbian students are antagonistic. They are upset by their and my refusal to make the heterosexual students' lack of understanding of gay issues the center of class discussion. Many of the self-identified lesbian and gay students are angry at the heterosexual students because the former think the class should revolve round them and their desires. The gay and lesbian students are angry at me for challenging their stable notions of their (often hard-won) gay and lesbian identities and for not celebrating them and their identities. They are also angry at me for opening queer up so that queer is not a substitute for lesbian and gay. The students with queer politics are angry at me for engaging the other students and their normative desires. Most of the students are angry at me for the films and videos I've selected, which are not at all "gay-positive" or life-affirming or celebratory. I explain to the

"I know what I should say, but because I am bored and perverse I find it impossible to resist mentioning what I really think about how my class is going."

search committee that while my class is a mess, it's a productive mess—that the process of working through these issues is both frustrating and rewarding (even though I have my own doubts), that I think everyone in the class is benefiting from working through the frictions—but no one on the search committee looks like they believe me. They seem frightened by my attitude toward students, frightened by the divisions I've described, unsure of the distinctions I'm making between gay and queer. Why are these distinctions necessary, these ask? Aren't they counter-productive? Students at my university, I am told, unlike at their university, appear unduly divisive. Their students, I am told, are much more civil and open to cordial discussions about difference.

The Chair reminds me that I'll have a chance to determine this for myself when I meet with "our gay students" for lunch. I wonder to myself why they think it's only the gay students I'd be interested in meeting (this thought I don't share with them). Instead, I exclaim with what I hope sounds like enormous enthusiasm that I'm looking forward to meeting their gay students very much.



In any case, a follow-up comment and question from one very earnest search committee member clarifies some assumptions. He mentions the importance of having gay faculty as role models for the gay students. He asks, how would you feel about serving as a role model? And, would you be willing to mentor the gay students? I recognize that this may be my chance to get out of the mess I've created and that all it may take is a very enthusiastic "yes" on my part. But it's now an hour and a half later. I'm hungry, I'm irritable, and I find such earnestness patronizing. I say, yes, of course, I'll be happy to work with gay students but that I also think it's important to resist such

essential notions that only gay faculty can serve as role models for gay students or that gay faculty can serve as role models for only gay students. I'm thinking how I really would not want to serve as a mentor for gay conservative students, as if sexuality trumps politics and everything else in accounting for identity. And I'm thinking that it's just as problematic to construct me as a role model for students of color as it is to construct me as a role model for gay students. I mention that I hope I could be a role model and mentor for all progressive students. Ignoring the looks on their faces, I drone on about growing up in Bombay with an African American woman (Angela Davis) as one of my role models, blah, blah, blah. By the time I realize I've lost them completely, it's time for lunch.

The gay students turn out to be a very queer bunch. Rebellious, deviant, anti-assimilationist, gender-fucking, stymied by the narrow confines of lesbian and gay, they tell me they've been agitating to start a queer student group on campus, but have run into considerable opposition from the administration and faculty who are encouraging them to reconstitute their group as the LGBT group, thus forcing an(other) erasure of queer and foreclosing its radical political potential. We are having a fabulous time exchanging ideas, resources, and gossip, when the Chair shows up to escort me to my next meeting. She looks relieved to find me getting along with the students. (Or, is this my imagination?)

A question

"The gay students turn out to be a very queer bunch."

Who is queer? The gay man who has vanilla sex but is a radical anti-globalization activist or the "straight" man who likes his girlfriend to fuck him in the ass with a dildo? Or, the women with the dildos? See, it's complicated.

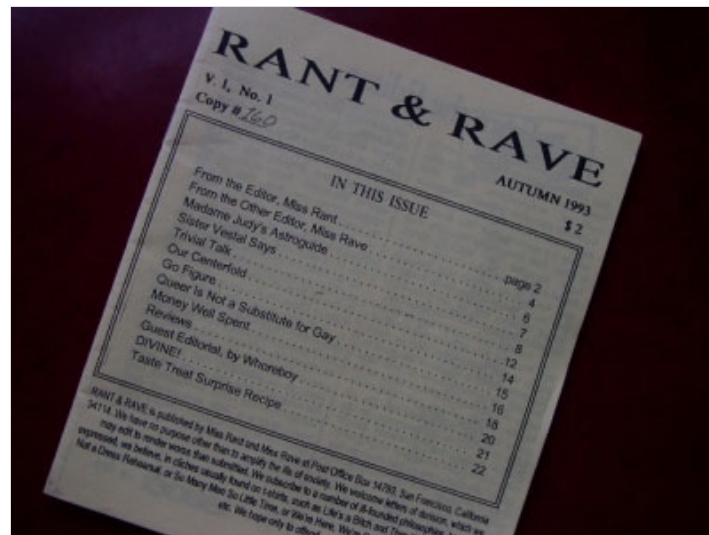
An other question

So, what is the difference between gay and queer?

Answer: "There are no queer Republicans" Andrew Parker proclaims in a 1994 issue of *Radical Teacher* (55).

A manifesto from the zine *Rant and Rave*

QUEER IS NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR GAY! Queers are not trying to impose a new word for homosexuals. We're not trying to reclaim gay culture. Queer has very little, almost nothing, to do with gay ... If you're not queer, then don't identify yourself as queer. Identify yourself as gay, or homo, or bisexual, or straight, or whatever you feel like. QUEERS DON'T WANT TO BE GAY! Queer is a separate subcultural identity and movement that spans many subcultures, some of it from the gay movement, some from dyke culture, some from punk rock, death rock, avant-gardism, fashion rebellion, drag, gender bending, and general kookiness/quirkiness. But more than these lineages, queer culture is its own phenomenon. One need not be specifically "homosexual" to be queer. There are so called "HETS" WHO ARE WAY QUEER ... I don't want to be gay-which means assimilationist, normal, homosexual ... I don't want my personality, behaviour, beliefs, and desires to be cut up like a pie into neat little categories from which I'm not supposed to stray ... I want to be different, odd, strange ...



(Un)Definitions

Unfolding queer in a way that opens up its potential, Ian Barnard, in his book *Queer Race*, suggests that

1. queer understands sexuality as fluid, open ended, constructed, thus those organizers (of conferences, organizations, marches) who take queer to be the (provocative or convenient) shorthand for "gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender," or some other such inclusive formulation of minority sexualities are as misguided as are their less thoughtful counterparts who use queer as a modish synonym for lesbian and gay...
2. it follows that queer is not the Other of straight; in fact, its deconstructive position outside of the hetero/homosexual binary makes its relationship to concepts like straight and gay oblique, and its definitional slipperiness means that some straight people might be thought of as queer, whereas some gay people might be thought of as not queer.

3. queer has an uneasy relationship with male/female gender binaries: in that queer is nominally ungendered (unlike, usually, the terms lesbian, and increasingly, gay) it can be said not only not to assume gender as the primary axis of difference ... but also to leave unspecified the number and scope of possible gender categories and identifications ... (10-11)

Thus, if queer does not have a fixed ontology, if, as Eve Sedgwick illustrates so compellingly, queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender, and desire; locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilize heterosexuality (and homosexuality); ruptures traditional models; and finds pleasure in radical politics and unsettlings, then certainly much of the work that has been produced in my own field under the rubric "queer" is not really queer.

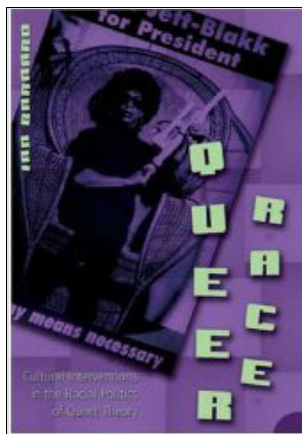
Just how unqueer is queer composition studies?

Rather unqueer, as it turns out.

Preparing to attend the annual convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the world's largest professional organization for researchers and teachers of rhetoric and composition, I peruse the convention program online. A cursory examination of the online program for the 2007 convention confirms the slippage between queer and lesbian/gay or between queer and gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender in many of the panels and presentations.

A typical case is the proposal for a panel presentation titled "How Queer Can Writing Program Administration Be? New Research from the Field." The project starts out with what I consider to be particularly commendable goals—a comprehensive study of the following four types of data:

1. representations of queerness in first-year composition textbooks
2. the role of queer issues/texts/practices in first-year composition as reported by WPAs
3. the role of queer issues/texts/practices in first-year composition as reported by first-year composition instructors, and
4. the presence or absence of queer issues/texts/practices in teaching materials and workshops



But it turns out that the project's motivation comes from the panel organizers' realization that they were unable to answer the following question: "How are LGBT people/issues /concerns addressed in our curricula, textbooks, and teacher-training practices?" Thereafter, the focus of the panel settles upon an examination of "the presence or absence of LGBT issues/texts in curricular decision and professional development." Here, once again, queer gets conflated not only with lesbian and gay but also bisexual and transgender, leading to yet another erasure of queer unsettlings and unmakings.

While most queer theorists would probably agree that queer carries no fixed ontological implications, the deployment of queer in composition studies usually suggests specific ontologies and connotations that are restrictive, essentialist, and unqueer. Even the editors of the vital 2004 "special cluster: queer theory" issue of *JAC* Jonathan Alexander and Michelle Gibson ultimately resort to equating queer with "lesbian and gay" despite their important if intermittent initial efforts to define queer differently. Though they recognize "the fluidity of identity and experience" (8), understand that "queer theory moves us *beyond* the multicultural task of accepting and validating identity and moves us *toward* the more difficult process of understanding how

identity, even the most intimate perceptions of the self, arise out of a complex matrix of shifting social power" (3), and accept the fragmentariness, unpredictability, and multiplicity of queer, Alexander and Gibson are unable to resist the temptation to reconstitute queer into a sovereign subjectivity like lesbian or gay. This inability or unwillingness, characteristic of much "queer" work in composition studies, confirms that the space that queer has come to inhabit in recent articulations of composition studies is akin to the space that queer has come to occupy in popular parlance (*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, for instance).

"Queer agendas aim to disrupt dominant systems"

While I certainly don't expect the uses and meanings of words to remain static, I do find it troubling that the increasing interchangeability of queer with lesbian and gay ends up domesticating queer's radical potential and reifying the myth of a stable gay/lesbian identity (and community) that queer in fact seeks to disavow. The work of queer theory goes far beyond the mere "inclusion" of so-called sexual and gender minorities to de-essentialize sexuality and gender, and unsettle sexual and gender identity. In addition, this de-essentialization of sexuality and gender is accompanied by a recognition of and attention to the intersections of multiple axes of power, and a radical politics that contests powers in these inter-related domains. As Jacqui Alexander insists, queer theorists in the contemporary US, in particular, have a duty to denounce a state that is producing ever-increasing global misery, and to interrogate the complicity of the academy with US imperialism. On the contrary, the goal of contemporary LGBT agendas, however useful, are usually geared toward inclusivity within dominant systems (for example, recent struggles for gay marriage, gays in the military, etc.). Queer agendas aim to disrupt dominant systems (for example, putting the institution of marriage out of business, disbanding military structures, critiquing capitalism, etc.). LGBT frequently produces assimilationist epistemologies. Queer produces politically radical and disruptive epistemologies.

The right to marry, at last, but at what cost?

A few days after gay marriage is legalized in California, I read a report in the *Los Angeles Times* that gay couples getting married are being advised to tone down their marriage celebrations, to avoid flamboyance.

Images from gay weddings, said Lorri L. Jean, chief executive of the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center, could be used by opponents in a campaign designed to persuade California voters that gays and lesbians should not have the right to marry. Those getting married, she cautioned, should never lose sight of what they might be supplying to the other side. Sitting close to his husband-to-be in the audience, hairstylist Kendall Hamilton nodded and said he knew just what she meant. No "guys showing up in gowns," he said.

Ah, yes, the spectacle of gay men in gowns is the great threat to that great institution of marriage, and so to save the right of gays and lesbians to marry, of course, it's the gay men in gowns who must retreat to the closet. Regretting that our "activism has become very modest," J. Purcell wonders how it has come to pass that "we don't want to change the systems of power and exclusion—we want to be integrated within them." While not against "fight[ing] people who oppose same-sex marriage," Purcell argues that "we should not have, nor should we continue, to prioritize symbolic 'rights' of few over the broad-based advancement of the many." Purcell advocates that "it's time to rein in the movement's 'leaders' and demand that they stop fighting for the best off."

"Ah, yes, the spectacle of gay men in gowns is the great threat to that great institution of marriage."

Purcell's demands remind me of Johnny Noxzema and Rex Boy's often quoted characterization of their zine BIMBOX:

You are entering a gay and lesbian free zone ... Effective immediately BIMBOX is at war against lesbians and gays. A war in which modern queer boys and queer girls are united against the prehistoric thinking and demented self-serving politics of the above-mentioned scum. BIMBOX hereby renounces its past use of gay and/or lesbian in a positive manner ... So, dear lesbian womom or gay man ... prepare to pay dearly for the way you and your kind have fucked things up. (31)

Lesbian and gay is indeed queer's nightmare, a relationship that underscores the familiar opposition in political and cultural arenas between lesbian and gay activists and queer militants, and in academic circles between lesbian and gay studies and queer theory.

A call



More than just a terminological quibble, my insistence on casting queer as oppositional, fragmentary, transgressive, multiply perverse is about refusing the normativizing of bodies/desires/identities and claiming the radical potential of queer to disrupt the assimilationist agendas of gay and lesbian cultural and political monopolies —especially worthwhile given the value that lesbian and gay movements place on fitting in and respectability. Queer is not predicated on desires for legitimacy and respectability. Queer is not about legitimizing gay and lesbian. Queer is not about seeking acceptance within and acquiescence to dominant systems. Unlike "we

are normal, we are just like everybody else" lesbian and gay, queer challenges the idea of normal and resists normalizing regimes. Respectability is anathema to queer. Normal is anathema to queer. Fixidity is anathema to queer.

Substituting queer for lesbian/gay stabilizes queer so that it loses its multidimensionality, open-endedness, and ephemerality, and consequently its potential for ever-mutating radical imaginings, interventions, and transformations. Substituting queer for gay/lesbian co-opts queer, disciplines queer, depoliticizes queer. I reject the co-opting/disciplining /depoliticizing of queer to insist that queer must always be multitudinously perverse, unpredictable, playful, and refuse assimilation into hetero- or homo- normative machineries of power. When queer loses its potential for radical reinventions, transformations, and interventions it loses its relevance and becomes meaningless. To preclude queer from becoming irrelevant, let's act up to reclaim queer from the mainstream forces and institutional structures that have appropriated it, and reinvigorate queer in ways that strain the limits of conventional imaginings and are always perverse.

Time (again) to smash the myth

As a flyer that queer filmmaker Derek Jarman picks up in the London club *Heaven* in October 1991 proclaims,

"Fixidity is anathema to queer."

IT'S TIME TO FIGHT Time to take our anger ... onto the streets ...

It's time to put our COCKS & CUNTS on the line, smash once and

for all the lie that we're all the same, that we want to be like the gay and lesbian zombies out there who watch

PROPAGANDA TV, who believe the lies in the *Sun* & the *Guardian*, who think they've a right to judge us, our

bodies, our lovers, our lives, who think they hold some moral highground! They're selling us out. Confining us to monogamy, marriage, & mortgage!

It's time to SMASH once and for all the myth of the 'gay' community ... Queers, start speaking for yourself ...Free yourself from the lie that we're all the same ...

QUEER means to fuck with gender ... It's not about whether you fuck with boys or girls ... LIBERATE YOUR MINDS ... (129)

* * *

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