Qualifying Field Examinations – November 9, 2020

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Written Exam #1 – Josef Nguyen

Queer Theory

Question #2

In a thesis-driven essay, discuss how queer theory has investigated how queerness (writ large) is constituted and negotiated through at least three of the following four social institutions and systems of knowledge/power: medical-scientific, juridical-governmental, religious, and cultural/mass media. How have these different social institutions and systems cohered and conflicted in their engagements with queerness? Pay attention to geographically and historically specific understandings of queerness, particularly how intersections of gender, race, class, nation, and (dis)ability factor into the social constitution of queerness. Be sure to refer to specific texts and to cite examples to support your analysis.

Queerness is a socially constructed identity that is constantly shifting from but always in conversation with medical, scientific, governmental, and cultural configurations of sex, sexuality, gender, and ways of living. Any definition of queerness is quickly dated, as the ever-expanding LGBTQ acronym now regularly ends with a "+" to acknowledge the growing terminologies and identities for those who do not align with patriarchal gender roles or with the monogamous, heterosexual ideal. In many respects, queerness can be better summarized by explaining what it is not—not straight, not male, not female, not monogamous, not static, not endorsed, not legal, not safe. The contrarian identity of queer folk nonetheless exists in opposition to systems and institutions that work in tandem to limit what lives can be lived and under what circumstances, restrictions, and regulations we can be allowed to exist.

Queer theorists work within academia to make queerness legible for non-queer audiences and for the newly minted queers who do not know the words to describe their feelings, experiences, and lives. This is not to say that queer theory has "sold out," but it must be known that much of the work queer theorists have done has been a product of White Patriarchal Capitalism and generated within the context of the Global North. This has historically suppressed the queer lives of people of color, indigenous populations, women and non-binary individuals, the working class, rural populaces, non-Western peoples, and many other alternatives of living that are devalued and rendered unlivable by those who benefit from their silence (often wealthy, white, cisgender men in positions of political, economic, and institutional power). My knowledge of queerness is influenced by my lived experience as a white, American, cisgender man who grew up in an environment that was incredibly hostile to queer identities, who has only recently begun to articulate his queerness, and who is learning about queer living in a time where economic, social, and political factors highlight the precariousness inherent to those who live against the grain. As such, my exploration of what queerness is and how it is expressed, oppressed, and repressed by modern society is by no means complete and will be full of gaps. Queerness changes faster than theory can describe it, and every queer life is lived radically different based on how it intersects with race, class, gender, (dis)ability, geography, and nationality. This is not an imperfection on the part of queer theory; instead, it is perhaps its primary feature of what Donna Haraway calls "situated knowledges": "The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another" (193, original emphasis). My examination of queerness will illuminate my partial understanding of the intertwined circumstances, policies, social constructs, and lived realities that shape queerness today, an understanding that may in turn resonate with someone else in the future.

As I was growing into my queer identity, the current, public discourse was that we were simply "Born This Way." This naturalist viewpoint argued that gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and other queer identities were set from birth to be the way they are and to love who they love and that one only needed to "come out of the closet" and be recognized as their true self. Religious pundits and moral entrepreneurs rebuked such claims, countering that homosexuality was merely a "lifestyle choice" that conversion therapy or adhering to religious tenets could correct, that the deeper truth was that queers were straight all along. The focus on the "truth," Michel Foucault suggests, stems from the medieval Christian practice of confession which today "plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites" (59). The confession frames our exit from "the closet" as well as the "deeper" truth on both ends of the naturalist argument as we circle the question of if we know what truth looks like. Although religious belief characterizes much of our interpretations of the world, there is perhaps nowhere that the confession and the search for truth have taken hold better than as the basis of modern scientific (especially medical) study.

As industrialization was accelerating in Europe and America in the mid-19th century, medicine and medical science started to eclipse its history of bloodletting and leeches as it worked in tandem with burgeoning corporations and nation-states to better manage its exploding urban working class. Medical institutions, still piecing together how the human body worked, sought to rationalize the sovereignty of Western white men and justify the oppression of everyone else, conceiving that the human race was, in fact, separate races, that one's sex determined their mental capacities, and that homosexual men were "inverted" women (Somerville 22; Wollstonecraft 500; Stryker 34). Anyone who was deemed "abnormal" in the eyes of medical science was subject to objectification and invasive study, an ideology that Susan Stryker describes as transforming "potentially neutral forms of human difference into unjust and oppressive social hierarchies" (36). Nothing was too small a detail or too obvious a fact that could not be reexamined by the medical field, and sex, as Foucault recounts, was of particular interest: "The most discrete event in one's sexual behavior—whether an accident or a deviation, a deficit or excess—was deemed capable of entailing the most varied consequences throughout one's existence; there was scarcely a malady or physical disturbance to which the nineteenth century did not impute at least some degree of sexual etiology." (65) Siobhan Somerville's research finds that these medical "truths" about race, gender, and sexuality intersected most strongly in the field of eugenics, as early sexology tried "to position the 'homosexual' body as anatomically distinguishable from the 'normal' body" in much the same way as White and Black bodies were seen as not only different but incompatible (37). This was, ultimately, science—the search for truth (that coincidentally confirmed the superiority of those in power).

Scientists of the 19th and 20th centuries proposed multiple scientific arguments over why and how homosexuality and transsexuality come into being, but nearly all were connected to or complimentary of White supremacy and cisgender male domination. Even biological studies of the rest of the natural world reflected an ideology that "did not violate, but actually reinforced, the important doctrine of the autonomy of biological and social science, of animal and human order," which positioned men at the top of the pecking order and conveniently found patriarchy to be the most natural formulation in nearly every species (Haraway 30). Although some researchers argued against the persecution of human peoples for their differences, these scientific "discoveries" fueled both public opinion and the rule of law. Two significant examples: Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science (*Institut für Sexualwissenschaft*), a pioneering locus of gay, lesbian, and transgender advocacy and study in Germany, was ransacked, and his library was burned in a Nazi book burning; on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, the eugenics movement led to the formation of the Jim Crow South and was used to defend segregation and miscegenation laws (Stryker 40; Somerville 34). The legacies of these misogynistic, racist, and homophobic beliefs are still felt today in arguments over whether children should undergo gender confirmation therapy, whether transgender people can be allowed to use the bathroom of their chosen gender, and whether gay and bisexual men can donate blood while in sexual relationships. Early scientific emphasis on the supremacy of White European heterosexual men over all else has led to our current obsession with what Alison Kafer calls "curative" science, where anyone who doesn't fit into the mold—people of color, women and non-binary individuals, disabled persons—"have been and continue to be framed as sick, as pathological, as contagious" and whose problems are instead deferred until they can be made able-bodied (32). Ability, here, means the capability of a person to interact and participate with the society they live in, but what disables is not internal but systemic. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) may have struck homosexuality off of their list of mental illnesses in 1973, removing that barrier for many in the gay community, but Stryker emphasizes that other forms of queerness (like transgender and transsexual peoples) continued to be treated as a disease afterward, leaving them dis-abled (84). Even though the APA and the World Health Organization have recently removed "gender identity disorder" from their list of mental illnesses, resources for trans and queer people are still scarce, particularly so for queer people of color.

What continues to keep these resources scarce are the laws built on prejudice and faulty science and the nations that enshrine them. These laws can range from hyper-specific (such as the ones used to oppress people of color in the Jim Crow South) to more general ones that are selectively applied to minority groups. Consent, for instance, is imagined to be established between two or more adults, clearly presented, and easily revoked. However, many countries including the US criminalized or continue to criminalize same-sex relations regardless of consent. Under the eyes of such sodomy laws, no one is capable of consenting to same-sex relationships, and guilty parties are subject to fines or imprisonment. Gayle Rubin in "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" thus describes the legalistic view of consent as "a privilege enjoyed only by those who engage in the highest-status sexual behaviour" (168). High-status sex (characterized by Rubin as heterosexual, married, monogamous, reproductive, and performed at home) and those who exclusively participate in it are therefore protected by the full force of the law, whereas any sexual conduct that steps outside those narrow boundaries, such as sex work, same-sex relations, and cross-dressing, is punishable by those same forces (154). Those who engage in public sex—that is, sex conducted in bars, alleyways, parks, beaches, and other areas outside of the home—have regularly been arrested and assaulted by police in violation of decency laws and ordinances. Queer sex of any kind is frequently relegated to the margins and forced to play by different rules. Worse still, this precarious position allowed the state to exploit queer folk monetarily and otherwise. Both the Compton's Cafeteria Riot and the more notorious Stonewall Riots occurred after years of police extortion, blackmail, and abuse (Stryker 58-68, 74). The rule of law not only allowed such abuses but actively encouraged them to suppress and make unlivable queer existence.

Attempts to change these laws have had varying success in recent years and have succeeded in large part due to the passion of LGBTQ+ activists around the world. Thanks to their efforts, the US Supreme Court outlawed all sodomy laws in 2003 and legalized gay marriage in 2015. Yet many non-binary, non-monogamous, and queer of color critics have noted how these piecemeal changes have done little to improve their quality of life. In *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Jasbir Puar describes the assimilation of (White) gays and lesbians as part of a project of homonationalism, or "the concomitant rise in the legal, consumer, and representative recognition of LGBTQ subjects and the curtailing of welfare provisions, immigrant rights, and the expansion of state power to surveil, detain, and deport" those that do not match the nation-state's conception of the ideal citizen (228). One could describe homonationalism as part of an even larger project of homonormativity, which Tim Dean likens to a "Faustian bargain" where queer people abandon their more oppositional or transgressive elements (public sex, cross-dressing, polyamory, etc.) for "the rights and protections enjoyed by heterosexuals" (20, 197). But even as the fight for queer rights accelerated post-Stonewall, urban centers like New York City were "redeveloped" with new rules and regulations that forced out lower class and public queer spaces like the porn theaters of Times Square to the fringes (Dean 192). This wanton destruction of public queer inhabitance, Hiram Pérez laments in *A Taste for Brown Bodies*, "ironically reifies the closet, in this case not only as the space of shamed (internalized) gay sexuality but also as an exclusionary space that defends a privileged and particularized homosexuality from consideration of its interdependency with class, race, and gender formations, hence inhibiting a more totalizing analysis and the political possibilities of coalition building" (12). As some members of the LGBTQ+ community find greater economic and social opportunities thanks to the color of their skin, their wealth bracket, and their compliance to the political regime, those who don't pass are left with nothing. The sacrifices and courage of the LGBTQ+ movement should be commended, but the movement must also expand its scope beyond the needs of urban, White, middle-class gay and lesbian communities. Attempts to appeal to those in power only reify the laws, systems, and institutions that sustain them and will continue to do so, Audre Lorde warns, for "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (105). Rather, Mary Gray, Eli Clare, and other queer theorists argue that we must fight against single-issue politics and instead embrace radical propositions whose effects encompass more than the LGBTQ+ coalition. Gray insists in *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility* that:

> if we want to make a difference in the lives of people queering desire and embodiment in places beyond the benefits of supportive infrastructures (people disenfranchised by class, location, race, ability), then we must push for something other than their right to visibility and recognition. Collective rights to access information, health care, and spaces to gather safe from harassment and public spaces available to all regardless of age and other social identities are issues arguably more worthy of our political rage. (174-175)

Meanwhile, Clare points out that the prominence of single-issue politics divides us because it "ignores the matrix of class, race, sexual orientation, gender, and disability" that enforce the state-sponsored hegemonic suppression of Others (132).

The combination of medical and scientific discourse and the legal institutions that utilize them has long since influenced the ways everyone else, including marginalized populations, conceives of “straight” culture and “gay” culture. Indeed, any framing of queerness must be done with the building blocks of the dominant culture, as Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture,” but she is wary of that “Culture is made by those in power—men” (16). Likewise, Rubin contends that culture may be a better basis for understanding conceptions of sex and sexuality than we expect it to be:

> Human organisms with human brains are necessary for human cultures, but no examination of the body or its parts can explain the nature and variety of human social systems. The belly’s hunger gives no clues as to the complexities of cuisine. The body, the brain, the genitalia, and the capacity for language are necessary for human sexuality. But they do not determine its content, its experiences, or its institutional forms. (149)

This is not to say that biology does not affect our lives, but the complexity of human culture (including but not limited to our laws, religions, and media) and the vast circumstances, stimuli, and resources we find ourselves in play an extraordinarily important role in our day-to-day. Heterosexuality, according to some queer theorists, is an extreme example of the messy concepts that have arisen from the intersection of medical-scientific discourse, governmental regulation, and cultural conceptions of sex and gender.

The concept of heterosexuality formed in opposition to that of homosexuality as both rose to prominence in sociological and biological debate. While homosexuality has little trouble being defined and rallied against, defining heterosexuality has been under intense debate. As noted earlier, scientific institutions and nation-states operate under the assumption that the ideal family structure in nature and in terms of productivity as the marriage of one (biological) man and one (biological) woman. "Pure" heterosexuality, however, does not exist, and neither does pure homosexuality or pure queerness. Lauren Berland and Michael Warner instead conceptualize the hegemony of heterosexuality as an "elastic alliance" that "never has more than a provisional unity" (552). Sara Ahmed endorses this view of heterosexuality as a temporarily constructed object, aligning it within the dynamics of sexual orientation and adding that heterosexuality is "…not simply an orientation towards others, it is also something we are oriented around" (86). What heterosexuality is now relies heavily on assumptions about sex, gender, and sexuality that have changed radically since the term's coinage and will continue to change as those assumptions evolve and contest one another.

To start, many heterosexuals would argue that there are two genders: male and female. Asking them to define what gender *is* may find them conflating gender with biological sex, much like how early theories of homosexuality posited that gay men possessed female souls. Judith Butler rejects this conflation in her work *Gender Trouble* by stressing the sheer variance of gender roles around the world and denying their claim of coherence, countering, "The construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender—indeed, where none of these dimensions of significant corporeality express or reflect one another" (172-173). Butler instead argues for a view of gender as a performance, one that must be performed to exist. Ahmed uses the metaphor of lines to underline this, noting that lines, like well-trodden paths, "are both created by being followed and are followed by being created" (16). How our ancestors performed gender roles influenced how we perform masculinity and femininity in addition to intersex and non-binary genders, but those roles only persist because we continue to practice them.

Other arguments around gender concern the ways masculinity is considered the dominant role. Anzaldúa relates that masculine culture “professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles. It keeps the girlchild from other men—don’t poach on my preserves, only I can touch my child’s body” (17). Wittig takes an even stronger approach, claiming that “indeed there are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the ‘masculine’ not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine but the general” (60). Both Anzaldúa and Wittig lament how women have been constrained by coverture laws that tied women’s rights to her husband, effectively making her his property—shackled “in the name of protection” (Anzaldúa 21). “Protection” of women justifies legislators’ attempts to pass draconian laws restricting access of public restrooms to people who align with assigned biological sex, commonly referred to as bathroom bills. The fear of transwomen stoked by moral entrepreneurs and conservative pundits reinforces the masculine “need” to police and monitor the private affairs of women, even as no attempts were made to regulate the “invasion” of transmen into male restrooms and as cisgender women were forced out of those same restrooms for not being “convincing” enough to please the gatekeepers.

The proliferation of genders, sexes, and sexualities does seem to be happening at an unprecedented rate, and this rapid assault on conventional norms brings a wealth of confusion, hand-wringing, and rage to any discussion of which genders and sexualities are valid. Stryker remarks that we find comfort in the familiar, so encountering someone so wildly different as a transgender person “can evoke in others a primordial fear of monstrosity, or loss of humanness. That gut-level fear can manifest itself as hatred, outrage, panic, or disgust, which may then translate into physical or emotional violence directed against the person who is perceived as not-quite-human" (12). At the same time, the *in*ability (disability?) to describe one's gender or sexuality in a society that places so much weight on being able to name oneself can drastically limit what lives are livable. Rob Cover welcomes the pluralization of gender, writing that this emergent taxonomy "give, on the one hand, a new set of terms that might 'catch' those who fell through the gaps of liveability and identity coherence previously and, on the other, a means of giving agency to young people, including the very vulnerable, to develop and articulate identity labels that might have a greater 'fit' with whatever disjuncture from normativity one might feel is going on in the practice of selfhood" (6). Contrary to the idea of queerness as "born this way," many queer communities encourage the exploration of gender and sexual identities and recognize the social construction of sexual preference and selfhood. Queerness here isn't put up against "natural" heterosexuality or homosexuality, Shaka McGlotten asserts, because both are constructed identities: "We don't exist in a vacuum and our tastes, desires, and the like aren't simply things we put on like a pair of socks. They are cultural. The tricky part is how we come to view preferences as natural and personal rather than as the effects of our cultural upbringing, larger societal mores, and many deeply engrained prejudices" (133). The proliferation of terms for one's sexuality, sex, and gender works against attempts by some LGBTQ+ communities to consolidate queer identities into a "liberal model of minority tolerance and inclusion—sometimes amounting to little more than a 'politically correct' gesture of token inclusion for transgender people" and other non-normative identities as well as against racist, sexist, classist, and ableist constructions of queerness as just a preference (Stryker 120).

If heterosexuality is the dominant culture, what does queer culture look like? In some respects, queerness is the inverse of straightness. Alexander Doty in *Making Things Perfectly*

Queer suggests that popular culture—which is generally considered to be manufactured for an alleged straight, monosexual audience—inherently contains queer elements and that queer readings of said texts "result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along" (16). Butler uses drag balls as an example of how femininity can be subverted, as the outlandish dress and the tongue-in-cheek, hyper-feminine mannerisms of the performers "subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (186). Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris is Burning* accentuates this reading by showing not just the material cost of the clothes, makeup, and bodily modifications necessary to perform femininity but also the struggle of finding little spaces of happiness in a world that rejects queer solidarity. Similarly, many queer fans of television shows, blockbuster movies, and other darlings of fandom read into the closeness of characters and bodies and revel in the potential, possible queer alternatives proposed by these media works by making fan art, fan fiction, and edits of these popular texts to reflect new possibilities. These queer readings are always possible when read from a queer perspective, as Doty amusingly quips that "The day someone can establish without a doubt that images and other representations of men and women getting married, with their children, or even having sex, undeniably depict 'straightness,' is the day someone can say no lesbian or gay has ever been married, had children from heterosexual intercourse, or had sex with someone of the other gender for any reason" (xii).

Doty's humor reflects another celebrated aspect of queer culture: its irreverence to the "seriousness" of sex and gender. The balls of *Paris is Burning* toy with the "realness" of masculinity, femininity, class, and race, and queer fan fiction is overflowing with silly what-if scenarios that depict characters falling in love with alternative versions of themselves or little-used side characters having a meet-cute in a coffee shop. Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure* speculates that the popularity of children's animated films by Disney/Pixar, Dreamworks, and other media industry giants reflects the wild creativity and possible worlds that elide (most) adults, "an animated world of triumph for the little guys, a revolution against the business world of the father and the domestic sphere of the mother" where "gender…is shifty and ambiguous," "sexualities are amorphous and polymorphous," and "bodily ability is quite often at issue" (47-48). These "Pixarvolt films" defy the demands of "mature" audiences that "demand sentiment, progress, and closure" and instead revel in the unexpected and (im)possibilities of the imagination (119). Even the overwhelming emphasis on sex and sexuality is up for grabs in queer critique. Bersani leads his article "Is the Rectum a Grave?" with a simple statement: "There is a big secret about sex: most people don't like it" (197). He later questions if "*the value of sexuality itself is to demean the seriousness of efforts to redeem it*" (222, original emphasis). Rubin goes even further, writing, "In Western culture, sex is taken all too seriously," and then exclaiming, "Ultimately, of what possible social significance is it if a person likes to masturbate over a shoe?" (171). These questions are only half-joking, as their authors know full well that there are people in positions of power that take extreme interest in the sexual practices of the general populace, but their wry humor betrays any attempt to make heterosexuality's obscene obsession with who is fucking who a "natural" occurrence.

But if any one word summarizes the popular perception and interpretation of queer identity, it is "pride." In the US, the entire month of June is dedicated to pride, typically thought of as a celebration of LGBTQ+ individuals and the struggles that queer communities continue to face. Rainbows of many shapes, sizes, colorations, and configurations get plastered everywhere from flags to corporate Twitter profile pictures every June, and many of those that attempt to commercialize pride have rightly been criticized for supporting queer communities in name only, leading some within the queer community to question whether pride is even worth it if the symbols of queer identity are going to be sold as merchandise. Eli Clare, author of *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation,* offers a more individualistic view of pride:

> Pride works in direct opposition to internalized oppression. The latter provides fertile ground for shame, denial, self-hatred, and fear. The former encourages anger, strength, and joy. To transform self-hatred into pride is a fundamental act of resistance. In many communities, language becomes one of the arenas for this transformation. Sometimes the words of hatred and violence can be neutralized or even turned into the words of pride. To stare down the bully calling *cripple,* the basher swinging the word *queer* like a baseball bat, to say “Yeah, you're right. I'm queer, I'm a crip. So what?” undercuts the power of those who want us dead. (109)

With pride as the power as the act of resistance, Clare declares that our communal responsibility is to take pride in our identity and our resistance to oppression, but that we must also witness the sacrifices and the history of those who fight alongside us (115). As the Black Lives Matter movement surged throughout the US and the world, many queer artists and communities supported their fellows-in-arms, unofficially declaring July “Wrath Month” in honor of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others who have died at the hands of police brutality. This act brought witness to the pain felt by another minority population and pride in the activism and political force of the protesters who took to the streets.

Queerness is not all rainbows and political progressivism, however, and the cultural norms embedded within it can reflect the ideologies of the nations and cultures they were established in. Urban gay culture in the US idolizes the figures of the cowboy, sailor, and soldier, which Hiram Pérez accuses of being “the rough trade of U.S. imperialism” (3). These figures remain popular due to their associations with the hypermasculine ideal—in other words, of straight passing. Tan Hoang Nguyen recalls that this obsession with gay masculinity occasionally leads to the “gay clone” phenomenon and that men who aren’t able to “pass” (especially if they don't have the income or ethnicity) are viewed as closer to women than men (13-14). The rise of the gay clone confirms Leo Bersani's critique of an "authentic gay male political identity" that wants to rebel against heterosexual norms but carries "those very same definitions so seductively and so faithfully reflected by those (in large part culturally invented and elaborated) male bodies that we carry within us as permanently renewable sources of excitement" (208-209). Queerness as a world-making project suffers when the world being made looks familiar to the one we're already in. Queerness also suffers from its strong connections to urban capital. Rural queer communities may not be as heavily supported, but it is hard to say that, for instance, rural Texas is any less homophobic than urban Texas. Gray takes umbrage with rural America's conceptualization as "endemically hostile," as it naturalizes the city as the center of queer living all the while putting "all those not able, or inclined, to migrate to the city…at a notable disadvantage" both economically and politically (18). Though Berlant and Warner vouch for the consolidation of queer communities in this manner— "If we could not concentrate a publicly accessible culture somewhere, we would always be outnumbered and overwhelmed" —urban living arguably makes it easier to police and control queer populations. Between zoning restrictions, city ordinances, and intimidation by police, queer city life can be *more* restrictive than the countryside, especially as one discovers how expensive it is to live in San Francisco, New York City, Berlin, Tokyo, or any major metropolitan area. Dean's recollection of the transformation of the cruise bar My Place into a high-class cocktail parlor as well as Berlant and Warner's recounting of the relocation and shutting down of multiple Christopher Street businesses emphasize the rapid gentrification of queer culture and how many marginalized groups are being forced out of urban public life entirely (Dean 200-201; Berland and Warner

551-552). And when a city full of people cannot mingle, Dean laments, “everyone’s pleasure diminishes,” an unfortunate fact that everyone in the COVID era feels quite strongly (193).

There is also the question of how queerness is performed in daily life. Most expressions of queerness are rooted in a US-centric viewpoint. The nearly required act of “coming out of the closet,” Pérez argues, promotes a self-identification and self-categorization as queer, the capacity to practice queerness as recognized by both the queer community and straight culture, and a self-subjugation of oneself as a minority via this confession, making coming out an extraordinarily taxing act (107). Coming out also brings with it a responsibility to maintain that identity’s coherency. Where some queer theorists argue for the fluidity of gender and sexuality, many queers are locked into a biopolitical framework that demands to know if they are sexually active, what genitalia they possess and how they use it, if they are “clear” to donate blood by not having sex with men for extended periods. Identifying as non-binary, heteroflexible, genderfluid, asexual, or any number of genders and sexualities, Cover writes, requires that such identities remain static in exchange for “stray[ing] from the norm, but only by a certain amount” (5). As an example, bisexuals (though representing one-sixth of the LGBTQ+ acronym) have frequently been accused of being an “immature” stage of sexual exploration or a transition between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Clare Hemmings chalks up this rejection of bisexuality by both straight and queer communities on the sheer range of desires bisexuals can feel and the refusal to classify their sexual preferences to a single sex or gender, adding, “Without a normal aim (both sexed and gendered), and without due process of repudiation in the formation of a gendered and sexual self, bisexuals fail to become proper *sexual* and proper *gendered* subjects” (25). This failure to “choose a side” renders bisexuals as an impossible identity in the eyes of the public.

The "impossibility" of queer identities is equally dependent on where one practices them. Gayatri Gopinath's work *Impossible Desire: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* notes that a "nonheterosexual Indian woman," though very much a flesh-and-blood physical reality throughout the world, cannot exist:

> Within patriarchal diasporic and nationalist logic, the 'lesbian' can only exist outside the 'home' as household, community, and nation of origin, whereas the 'woman' can only exist within it. Indeed the 'lesbian' is seen as 'foreign,' as a product of being too long in the West, and therefore is annexed to the 'host' nation where she may further be elided—particularly if undocumented—as a nonwhite immigrant within both a mainstream (white) lesbian and gay movement and the larger body of the nation-state. (18-19)

Gopinath here mirrors Wittig's assertion that "lesbians are not women," in that the gender identity of women was constructed to be subservient to men and patriarchy and that choosing to refute that identity makes one illegible, impossible to read or understand (Wittig 14). Halberstam follows this argument, noting that men who fail to perform masculinity are still considered men to some degree; when even the most butch women cannot attain the ideals of masculinity, "all ideal masculinity by its very nature is just out of reach, but it is only in the butch, the masculine woman, that we notice its impossibility" (100). This illegibility makes it disturbingly easy for others to mislabel or completely overwrite those identities and lives. Pérez writes that "the gay cosmopolitan spectator" with no knowledge of or desire to understand other possibilities of queer living "projects himself into the life of another nation, displacing and obscuring local histories," reenacting the colonizing gaze of the White patriarchal nation-state (95).

With the consistent erasure of queer possibility within heterosexual, patriarchal nations and under unjust laws, queer communities live under constant threat of violence from people who actively dispute their very existence, yet one question continues to haunt theories of sex and sexuality as people are dragged from their homes, run out of town, or gunned down in the street: why does it even matter in the first place if two men love each other, that three women decide to rent an apartment together, or that a gaggle of queer folk is shagging in the back of a bar? What is at stake for heterosexuality, for the concept of the nation-state, and for the scientific establishment that people are willing to restrict bathroom access only to women who are "feminine" enough, to hide on-screen queerness under obtuse clues only to deny such readings after the fact, to ignore the AIDS pandemic that predominantly affected queer lives until it began to kill off straight people as well, and to murder transmen and transwomen of color for the crime of existing while trans and black? Lee Edelman in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* saw the utter apathy given towards LGBTQ+ people during the AIDS crisis, and he—rightly so, I would add—wonders if we are wrong to even *try* to find acceptance in a society that finds our very lives worthy of death:

> We might like to believe that with patience, with work, with generous contributions to lobbying groups or generous participation in activist groups or generous doses of legal savvy and electoral sophistication, the future will hold a place for us—a place at the political table that won't have to come at the cost of the places we seek in the bed or the bar or the baths. But there are not *queers* in that future as there can be no future for queers, chosen as they are to bear the bad tidings that there can be no future at all… (29-30)

The future, as Edelman postulates it, only exists as a dream "deferred by time itself" that only can come about through the physical reproduction of bodies and the ideological reproduction of the present society; there can be no future for queers because queers don't even belong in straight culture's ideation of the present (30). To take a seat at the table is to acquiesce to the demands of heteronormativity, to the rightness of the nation-state's drive for economic growth, and to the correctness of medical-scientific research that claims anyone who isn't a straight White cisgender male is mentally and physically ill. The fury of the anti-social thesis that Edelman argues for cannot be dismissed as trivial or too hyperbolic. This is a pain that can be felt in one's soul, a pain that has endured untold loss, unparalleled apathy towards queer causes, and even more virulent rage hurled from people with the privilege and power to back up their death threats. As nearly half of the US tries in vain to find a way for the 45th president to hold onto power, as autocratic leaders continue to shore up their armies and excise those that they declare don't belong, and as more and more people give in to comfortable narratives of the holy "us" versus the inhuman "them," perhaps there can be no future for queers.

Nevertheless, we are here and queer now. So what if there is no future, no one to carry the family name, no one to swear into office, no universe capable of escaping entropy? We are here *now*, and every day we announce our presence makes it that much harder for those in power to ignore us. The Women's Suffrage movement did not want the right to vote in ten, twenty, thirty years but *now,* and it certainly doesn't want to wait to be treated as equals to the men that keep them legally bound. The Black Lives Matter movement does not want police to stop incarcerating and massacring innocent people of color soon but *now*. Everyone fighting for better wages, better infrastructure, governmental reform, healthcare access, and a more just justice system wants to see those things happen within their lifetimes because they, like José Muñoz, know that "the present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and 'rational' expectations" (27). We cannot turn a blind eye to the troubles of the people around us nor can we find solace just within our communities. If queer theory is to be of any use, we must find ways to expose the cracks in the systems that oppress us all. We must find ways to bring *all* marginalized people along with us, especially when the best the Powers That Be can do to purchase our compliance is marriage rights and a Netflix series or two. Our future utopia may always be on the horizon where we may never reach, mired as we are by in-fighting, suffering, oppression, and strife, but we must keep trying to get there. We can't stay here any longer.

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