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Queer Complacency without Empire

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When I teach undergraduate Queer Studies, we begin by listing all the meanings that students can generate for the term *queer*. Then we group them into three categories: (1) Identity, or *queer* as a synonym for LGBT populations; (2) Practice, or *queer* as a broad umbrella term for dissenting sexual practices and gender expressions, and (3) Politics, or *queer* as a designation similar to *feminist* that appears quite independently of an advocate's identity or sexual/gender practices. Our discussion of these divergent meanings usually leads us to understand that they all exist simultaneously, often used by the same individual at different moments. Though I prefer the third usage, I often find myself unselfconsciously using the first two. In the context of Queer Studies, it's important to sort these meanings out in our readings and conversations. Each has different resonances and implications.

The most recent special issue of *differences*, "Queer Theory without Antinormativity," volume 26, number 2 (May 2015) edited by Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson, runs through all these meanings without much attention to the distinctions among them. In the introduction to the volume, Wiegman and Wilson alternatively refer to *queer theory*, *queer studies*, *queer inquiry* and *queer critique*, also without any noted distinctions. But perhaps most fatally for this issue's project, they use the terms *norm*, *normalizing* and *normativity* also with little effort to map the historically shifting and overlapping meanings of the terms.

It's not that they make no effort to historicize. They do point out, via Foucault and others, that the juridical meaning of norms as rules that order and restrict shifts to a biopolitical, statistical meaning of norms as averages at the beginning of the 19th century. Their critique of queer theory (or studies, critique, inquiry etc) rests on the arguments that (1) queer theory is universally underpinned by a foundational antinormativity, and that (2) this antinormativity is dyadic and oppositional, based on the earlier notion of norms as rules, rather than on the more generative, expansive, individualizing concept of norms as averages that **require** variation.

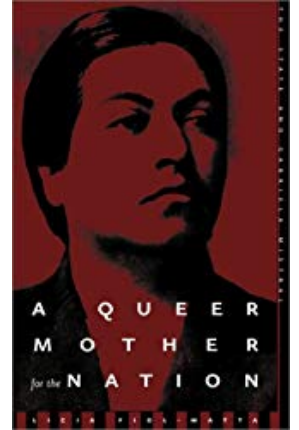


What is wrong with these arguments? Everything. Though the editors' introduction provides a wide-ranging and inclusive survey of work in queer theory, their grasp of what underlies the scholarship published after 2000, especially in the field of queer of color critique, is faulty. They seem deeply familiar with work published in the 1990s, but when they extend their critique of that work forward in time they run rapidly off the rails. For instance, beginning with Licia Fiol-Matta's *Queer Mother*

for the Nation, published in 2002, much new work in queer studies abandoned the notion that queer identities or practices are somehow inherently radical, or that queer politics is necessarily oppositional to historical forms of political and economic power.

Fiol-Matta's study of the deployment of the queer figure of Gabriela Mistral as a **support** for the dominant forms of racial capitalism and nationalism in Latin America decimated those assumptions of inherent queer subversiveness, and deeply influenced the flood of work to come in queer of color critique and transnational queer and feminist studies. Wiegman and Wilson's readings of that post 2000 work are flattening and distorting; in describing it all as underpinned by a dyadic antinormativity they are blind to the major developments in queer thinking that emerged with this work over the past 15 years.

But that isn't the only stream of queer publication that they get wrong. They also search out instances of dyadic oppositional antinormativity in work that they otherwise acknowledge does not fit that frame. In discussing Lee Edelman's *NoFuture*, after acknowledging that he generally evades the oppositional framing they argue underpins the whole field, they find **one footnote** where he appears to fall into that trap. Via that footnote they include him in their survey of the field united in their version of antinormative error.



In addition to misdescribing "the field" that they variously name as queer something, Wiegman and Wilson also offer a narrow and ahistorical definition of *norms* and *normativity* by which to measure the adequacy of those terms in the work of queer writers. They hew to the Foucauldian definition, and chide queer authors for using a "wrong" notion of norms as restrictive rules. In this they are wrong on two counts: (1) There is no historical supersession of statistical norms over rule based norms, both are in wide current use in the social and political world, and (2) They totally neglect the civilizational, imperial history of norms as racial ideals used to measure the "development" of inferior races. Developmental norms are pervasive in the history of empire and settler colonialism, and they appear in psychology also as "developmental" norms drawn from the highest racial "achievements" of prosperous male Europeans. Queer work that engages with racial capitalism, empire, transnationalism, and decolonial movements invokes these kinds of norms as ideals—the nuclear monogamous family, the "democratic" capitalist state, the rise of rationalist science, etc. These of course include sexual ideals as norms, appearing as the very logic of racial, class, gender and religious hierarchies. This work does not propose any simple, dyadic form of queer antinormativity as opposition. Nayan Shah, Roderick Ferguson and so many others map complex forms of aspiration for inclusion as well as modes of exclusion in a constantly shifting historical political economy.

(My own use of the term *homonormativity* does not focus on dyadic opposition to dominant norms, but rather maps a complex set of changing historical relations to an unstable political economy—homonormativity only becomes possible during the 1990s in the capitalist "democracies." It takes an unsympathetic, even hostile reading to reduce this term to one pole in the abstract dyad norm/antinorm.)

So far I have concentrated on the introduction to the special issue. (For more, see Jack Halberstam's [previous Bully Bloggers post](https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2015/09/12/straight-eye-for-the-queer-theorist-a-review-of-queer-theory-without-antinormativity-by-jack-halberstam/) (<https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2015/09/12/straight-eye-for-the-queer-theorist-a-review-of-queer-theory-without-antinormativity-by-jack-halberstam/>)). Only a few of the other essays in the issue actually echo or support the framing offered there. Essays by Annamarie Jagose on

Judith Butler and Wiegman on Eve Sedgwick continue the stuck-in-time 1990s focus of the issue. Heather Love provides a historical frame, offering post WWII sociology of sexual deviance literature as a site for productive excavation for queer scholars. She seems to be addressing scholars in the literary humanities only, as those of us trained in history, anthropology, sociology or the interdisciplinary fields are generally quite familiar with this literature—and perhaps more critical of it than Love? Rod Ferguson’s *Aberrations in Black* draws from his PhD training in sociology to offer a critical framing that brings together sociology of racial and sexual deviance to produce a wide ranging critique of the normalizing work of sociological knowledge production—normalizing in the racial imperialist, developmental sense, not the dyadic rule bound or statistical sense. Anthropologist David Valentine’s *Imagining Transgender* provides an observational, empirically based ethnographic study that probes the racial and class meanings of language shifts in political context. Love’s isolation of the work on sexual deviance, and her largely uncritical observational stance, give her article an unintended overall tone of political, especially racial complacency compared to the vigorous critical lens provided by Ferguson. And when she cites Sharon Marcus to critique the “dominant” deviance paradigm in queer studies, and argues that the field is invested in the idea of an impossible absolute withdrawal from the social (p. 89), I honestly have no idea what work she could be talking about? That paradigm went out by 2002 (in the queer studies “field” that I read), and the withdrawal from the social characterizes only a tiny archive at this point.

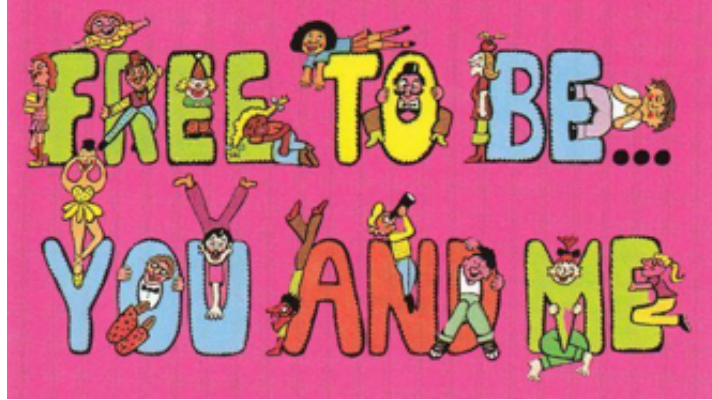


The last three essays, by Madhavi Menon, Erica Edwards and Elizabeth Povinelli, seem not to belong in this issue at all. These three essays are confined to the section on “Case Studies” in the issue, perhaps because they bring in the political economy and the state? They position their discussions of normativity within a complex historical, racial and imperial frame that cannot be reduced to the abstract framing norm/antinorm. In “Sex After the Black Normal,” Erica Edwards draws upon and extends the long bibliography in black feminism and queer of color critique to make an important contribution from within those fields. In her richly documented article, she argues that black

women’s sexuality has been used to facilitate neoliberalism in the U.S., and also to support collective alternatives that expose its instabilities. This is precisely in line with the arguments that Rod Ferguson and others make, and does not flatten those contributions, or elevate her own as somehow so much more complex as to be different in foundation.

Elizabeth Povinelli’s article “Transgender Creeks and the Three Figures of Power in Late Liberalism,” is in my humble opinion outright brilliant—original, provocative and important. Drawing on new work on the nonhuman world and the active environment, Povinelli extends the possible meanings of “queer studies” in hugely productive ways. But in doing so, she also draws upon, incorporates and extends earlier work, and invokes the *normalizing* force of neoliberal markets and extractive capitalism, via a discourse of sexual pathology and *normalization* in a settler colonial context. In these usages of the notion of the norm, she blends the Foucauldian meaning with the imperial one. She is working **from** the complex multidimensional work on norms, that Wiegman and Wilson reduce to simple dyadic oppositional antinormativity.

It's hard to understand the motivation behind this issue that works so hard to diminish work in queer studies through reductive readings and via a singular definition invoked as an abstract standard. I have the uneasy feeling that the motives are political, that the work being reduced to unrecognizable simplicity is somehow too left, too committed to the critique of racial capitalism for these editors. They don't seem to be offering renewed vitality or renovated methods and approaches in their return to the work of the 1990s in particular. They seem to be calling for a new queer complacency, where we revel in the norms that, in averaging differences, reflect our beautiful diversities (cough, gag):



.....more Queer Theory without Empire than without antinormativity.

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