

# INTRODUCTION

## Queering "Queering": A Way of Seeing/ Experiencing/Knowing

*Queer Studies: Beyond Binaries* is designed as an introductory textbook for undergraduate courses in this rapidly growing field; it is also a product of my own experiences as a teacher of a semester-long course in this subject over a series of years. Such courses are often developed as part of a call for a broader spectrum of classes that address **identity** issues or diversity education, and students are enrolled for any number of reasons. Some identify as queer (or use a parallel term, such as *gay* or *LGBTQ+*) and are looking for opportunities to study in a systematic way how their own experiences are connected to broader histories and issues of "queerness" in general. Other students wish to expand their toolkit of diversity knowledge, adding to the kinds of education they have often received in courses on race and gender (and, less frequently, class). Still others, when asked why they have enrolled in such a class, may mention that a friend or family member has recently come out, and the students wish to develop ways of understanding experiences of people who are important to them and, in some cases, to work with them as advocates, whether within the domestic sphere of the family (particularly for siblings) or in larger social and political contexts.

My hope is that this book will be of value to each and all of these students. So, readers, whatever your reasons for picking up this book (no doubt most often as a class requirement), I trust that it will speak to you and provide you both with information and perspectives that will enrich and enlarge your ways of thinking about and understanding queerness, both as a way of being and as a way of experiencing and knowing. My goal is to make the material accessible enough so that those who have not studied sexuality in any academic or scholarly way will be able to navigate the myriad perspectives and concepts, while those of you who, either because you have done previous coursework in gender studies or because you "live the life," will find much that is new and illuminating here as well.

Chapter 1 focuses exclusively and in-depth on the language scholars and others use to talk about queerness, but it is useful, in framing the book, to break down some of the central terms of the title, to clarify the basic assumptions of the book and its organization.

## BINARIES

The phrase in the subtitle, “beyond binaries,” invokes the term **binary**, which readers may have encountered previously, though perhaps in other disciplines or contexts. In our digital world, most are familiar with the use of the binary pairing of 0 and 1 in computer coding; the electronic transmission of information and language would be very different without this technology. Similarly, if you have studied languages or speech science, you may have learned about “cognate pairs,” sounds that share many of the same characteristics but which are distinguished by a single feature. The discovery and study of such binaries has been of great use for those working with people on their spoken language.

The expansion of the search for binaries beyond such microscopic levels led, in the mid-twentieth century, to an intellectual movement called structuralism, in which such writers as the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss and the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure identified binary pairs that helped organize analysis of social and cultural phenomena: one of Levi-Strauss’s most famous binaries was “the raw and the cooked,” which he used to examine food and purity codes and rituals within different cultures. Critics of structuralism, who were often known as poststructuralists or deconstructionists, argued that too rigid an imposition of binary ways of thinking tended to reduce the complexity of the world, in everything from social structures to individual experiences of identities. They looked to “deconstruct” such binaries, remove their “givenness,” to get at the ways in which “either-or” categories limit understanding.

This challenge to binaries has more than academic implications, and the relationship between academic perspectives and real-world experiences and structures is at the heart of the use of this alternative to binaries in this book. It was quite common, during much of the twentieth century, to divide human sexual identity and experience into a neat binary: heterosexual-homosexual; in the case of gender there have been and continue to be binaries clustered around such oppositional terms as “male-female” or “masculine-feminine,” pairs that trans people and their allies contest and interrogate. Aside from the fact that such a binary omits even the possibility of bisexuality as a genuine axis of identity, it flattens the complex, rich experiences of people who don’t find their experiences of attraction, activity, social identity, or embodiment so easily wrapped up in a single word. To

put it less academically, binaries can run the risk of forcing people to “pick a side,” or, in the case of trans people, to be what the writer Michel Foucault called “docile bodies,” to “stay on the side” assigned them either at birth or throughout childhood and adolescent development by medical professionals, family members, or society at large. Human experience is just not that easily categorized.

Indeed, in developing the book, the people at Harrington Park Press and I have had valuable conversations about the title of the book — whether it would be better to use the word **queer** or the term **LGBT**. Ultimately, we have gone with the former, as being more inclusive. While *LGBT* may seem more neutral and, depending on where and when you experience the terms, less negative in its history and connotations than *queer*, the presence of four categories (LGBT) nevertheless continues the spirit of binaries — of asking people to contain their experience of self and others into boxes. And, in fact, as we will discuss at more length, even *LGBT* has become somewhat outmoded, as various, more specific ways of describing sexual identity have come into existence.

One of the most searching and thoughtful discussions of the tensions and possibilities for productive dialogue between LGBT and queer perspectives is that of the late scholar R. Tony Slagle. In his essay “Ferment in LGBT Studies and Queer Theory: Personal Ruminations on Contested Terrain,” listed in the Works Cited section of this book, Slagle writes about his own career in the field of communication studies, which he began when the discipline’s scholarly and professional association, the National Communication Association (previously the Speech Communication Association), had established, a few years back, a caucus (similar to an interest group, originally designed to raise awareness and do professional activism in the association) for “Gay and Lesbian Concerns”: the word “queer” had not yet really or fully entered the lexicon as anything but a slur.

Slagle was one of a new generation of scholars who were reading queer theory and introducing it into their teaching, scholarship, and everyday lives. In the essay, Slagle notes the opposition he faced, sometimes in the form of ad hominem (personal) attacks, for his attraction to queer theory (and for his use of the word *queer* in and of itself, which to the previous generation was both unwelcome and, to their minds, unscholarly), and the essay charts both the personal costs, psychological and professional, that his commitment to *queer* enacted on him, and more recent developments: as of this writing, the association now has a Caucus on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns, as well as a Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Communication Studies Group, which focus on scholarship on those identity groups. Slagle’s “personal ruminations” articulate with eloquence and honesty the challenges of navigating the waters even (perhaps

especially) in scholarly and intellectual contexts. They point not simply to generational differences, but to political commitments, in which those opposed to Slagle's use of *queer* either reject the term as mired in historical offense or view the primary work of their group as dealing with sexual orientation, not gender identity and expression. So, understanding of different people's use of (and preference for) such terms as *LGBT* and *queer* will probably lead to better communication and more productive discussion.

## QUEER STUDIES AND QUEER THEORY

In setting out to develop this textbook, both the publishers and I have agreed from the outset about how we hoped this book might add to the relatively small number of books designed specifically for bright undergraduate students interested both in gaining ways of thinking about queerness (theory) and in applying such thinking to the experiences of people who either identify as queer or have meaningful interactions with queer people (in other words, everyone!). *Queer theory* as a scholarly concept has a history that is typically traced back to the coining of the phrase by the film and literary theorist Teresa de Lauretis and to a central set of scholars, such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Alexander Doty, and Michael Warner, who drew on various philosophers and other thinkers to develop a distinctive methodology and set of assumptions in carrying out their work. There are a number of accessible, relatively brief surveys of queer theory already in print (a few are listed at the end of this introduction) and this book does not seek to duplicate or compete with such books.

Queer theory, though it varies in scope and approach, is predicated on the concept of *nonnormativity* as a legitimate, nonpathologized variation in human existence and in its centrality to viewing and acting in the world. It argues, as others have said of critical race theory and feminist theory (with which it shares many points of contact), that the "margins may define the center" as much as the other way around; in simpler terms, the assumed centrality of the "norm" is as much a social construct as the "othering" of those who, by social construction and history of such features as race (usually marked by skin color and assumed geographical point of origin), gender, or sexual orientation, as well as disability and class, have been viewed and treated as "nonnormative." Queer theory, as its name suggests, tends to focus most on sexual orientation and gender identity. It also differs from LGB (or LGBTQ+) studies in that it typically views sexual or gender issues not as static (though an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity may be experienced as continuous and consistent), but as open to change and variation over the course of a lifetime or in different social and cultural contexts. Queer theory also argues for the epistemological (i.e., knowledge-

producing) value of, in Alexander Doty's phrase, "seeing things queerly," that is, as opening different and valuable perspectives from the dynamism that *queerness* as a concept encourages.

This book uses the overarching concept of *queering*, drawn from queer theory, as a way of looking at the lives of queer people across a range of concepts and in light of different academic and scholarly disciplines. At its simplest level, we might say that what queer theory brings to the book is a conviction that thinking beyond **normativity** (assumptions that there is a "natural" or "normal" state of being or way of experiencing) yields useful and equally valid knowledge about the world. In a sense, what *queering* (as a gerund or verb) does is to challenge what might be considered the figure-ground proportions usually unchecked or uncritiqued. In this sense, *to queer* is to ask all of us to consider or reconsider what gets emphasized and how seeing from what are often marked as the "margins" may make it possible to produce better, more inclusive knowledge.

As a textbook in queer studies, its scope is somewhat ambitious. *Queer Studies: Beyond Binaries* provides a survey of what cannot be completely inclusive, but nonetheless is a broad span of scholarly disciplines and human experiences, from the foundational study of language with which the book begins to social institutions, psychological experiences, and pedagogical approaches with which we all have experiences — if not as scholars, then as people who make our way in the world, from earliest education to the rituals of marriage, facing the end of life, and advocating for justice. Queer theory informs this book, but the emphasis is on asking readers to engage with all manner of experiences in the world at large.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK AND SUGGESTIONS FOR ITS USE

The book is divided into twelve chapters (in addition to this introduction and a brief conclusion) and four parts. Each chapter, as the Contents indicates, takes a different topic or area of inquiry and engages in ways of queering the traditional ways of approaching the knowledge associated with the topic. Part I focuses exclusively on issues of language, and it stands alone. To achieve common ground among class members, it is recommended that all classes study and discuss this chapter. Part II consists of five chapters, each examining either a category or categories of queer identity or a facet of queer experience, ranging from such local social units as the family and school to global considerations, such as health and citizenship. While each chapter is relatively self-contained, the recommendation is to have students read and discuss all these chapters, as they are intended to be

inclusive of the range of categories of queerness (with the understanding that some of the categories overlap).

Part III, comprising five chapters, takes queerness and brings it into contact with larger contexts—again, with the understanding that many aspects of identity cannot be separated from and indeed emerge from such contexts. These contexts and their associated scholarly disciplines range from education to psychology to health studies to religion and theology to political science and government. While all the chapters can be covered in a standard semester (quarter courses may find themselves rushed if all chapters are required), this is where individual instructors may wish to make their own judgments, based on the goals of their particular class, their own areas of expertise and knowledge, and their institutional characteristics. If an instructor chooses to be more selective about inclusion of various chapters in Part III, this may allow each instructor to spend more than a week's time on the topics and perhaps add supplemental readings, drawn either from the Suggestions for Further Reading and Viewing at the end of each chapter or from their own knowledge base. Part IV, like Part I, stands alone, as it considers how queer artists (thought of broadly) have imagined the worlds in which they live and continue to imagine futures. It serves as a kind of epilogue, a "leading out" beyond the confines of the book and the span of the course.

Each chapter also contains one or more "Spotlights," sections that focus on specific individuals or moments in queer history, which provide opportunities to get a closer look at the people who were and are part of broader movements or moments in queer life. Similarly, each chapter offers a number of "Issues for Investigation," either a series of questions for discussion or suggestions for individual or group activities, to help instructors and students make application of the material in the chapter's body. No doubt teachers will develop their own sets of questions and activities as well. Whether a class addresses these issues, the instructor may find them useful as a way to review the material contained in each chapter.

## QUEERNESS AS A WAY OF INCLUSION, NOT AS A BARRIER

A book of this nature often deals, by necessity, with statements about large groups of people and a certain degree of generalization; needless to say, the experiences of individuals vary considerably, depending not only on when and where they live, but on the complex intersectionalities of the other facets of their lives. As you will see, the term *queer*, which will be the overarching term of the book, is not one all people discussed here would necessarily

use to describe themselves or embrace for historical or political reasons. When feasible and when logical, I have endeavored to use the language that individuals would have used, though *queer* remains the default term as a rule when there is no reason to use another. So, it is a delicate balance, and one to remain aware of as you navigate through the book. Similarly, assumptions about the lives and identities of scholars, writers, artists, and other individuals should be suppressed, unless there is historical or autobiographical material to lead to a conclusion. The author Jane Hamilton, for example, whose gay-centered (perhaps even queer) novel, *The Short History of a Prince*, is included, identifies as **heterosexual**, though she has had deep friendships and important relationships with queer folk. The same is true for work on trans issues: the musician David Bowie, who identified as cisgender and, for most of his life, either heterosexual or bisexual, popularized a style of appearance and rock music that built on a complicated resistance to gender binaries. In some cases, individual artists' (or other workers') life narratives have shifted over time. The British comedian-actor Eddie Izzard, who frequently performs in what is marked as traditionally feminine clothing and makeup, has moved, over the course of decades, from describing himself as a heterosexual "drag artist" (they also have appeared and acted in male roles onstage and in film, as well as in stand-up comedy) to now preferring nonbinary pronouns and identity. Izzard may be seen as having always done queer work, especially in terms of trans issues, and their own journey suggests the kind of fluidity *queer* can signify.

At the same time, the question may be complicated in different ways in other contexts or for other individuals. In corresponding with the contemporary New York-based sculptor Peter Lane, who identifies as a gay man (perhaps he would use the word *queer*), I posed the question whether his art is queer (you can find examples of his magnificent — "monumental," to use his own descriptive term — pieces online). He responded to my question with the following statement:

I don't think there is any connection between my sexual nature and my work, but at the same time, my sexual nature is an important part of who I am. . . . But I digress. Sexual expression is separated from sexual nature by culture and situation. Straight guys *become* gay in prison . . . and flaming queens go ultra-but<sup>ch</sup> under repressive regimes. And I'm lucky enough to remember when, in the immortal words of Jonathan Winters, "the Gideon Bible only gets you so far, and then you gotta go downstairs." Well, we've reached a time when, for better and for worse, you don't have to go downstairs. (personal correspondence)

Lane's statement is an honest description of his own complex sense of how his sexual identity and his art are inextricably entwined, but not necessarily overtly, programmatically, or intentionally "driven" by a desire to make something that could be identified as queer. Is his art queer? Viewers and critics might say yes; he might say the question is not an important one to him.

Take a few minutes and look at this book's cover; its principal image is drawn from Lane's sculptural work. Lane's work is not figurative, as a rule, depicting representations of things; he has used the word *monumental* to describe his style and motivations. While he, as he suggested, does not see himself as overtly or intentionally queer in his aesthetics or in the political implications of his work, consider how the image might be seen as pushing boundaries of the kinds of normativity we might associate with "fine art." In what way, whether overtly or not, does the image lend itself to a queer reading or understanding?

All this is to say that *queer*, as a descriptor, as an experience, as an academic method, requires that we adopt a fluidity of approach and an openness to difference and variation that do not constrain us, any more than we would want to be constrained by a too rigid, formulaic, or prescriptive imposition of a binary such as queer-non-queer. Queer should be a place that allows for exploration, disagreement, and discovery, for honoring of individuals' experience and naming of their own lives and experiences, and for ongoing conversations about possibilities.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Jagose, Annamarie. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.

Stryker, Susan, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*. 2nd ed. New York: Seal Press, 2017.

Sullivan, Nikki. *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. New York: New York University Press, 2003.

Wilchins, Riki. *Queer Theory, Gender Theory*. Bronx, NY: Riverdale Avenue Books, 2014.