QUEER THEORY

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STEPHANIE SPOTO
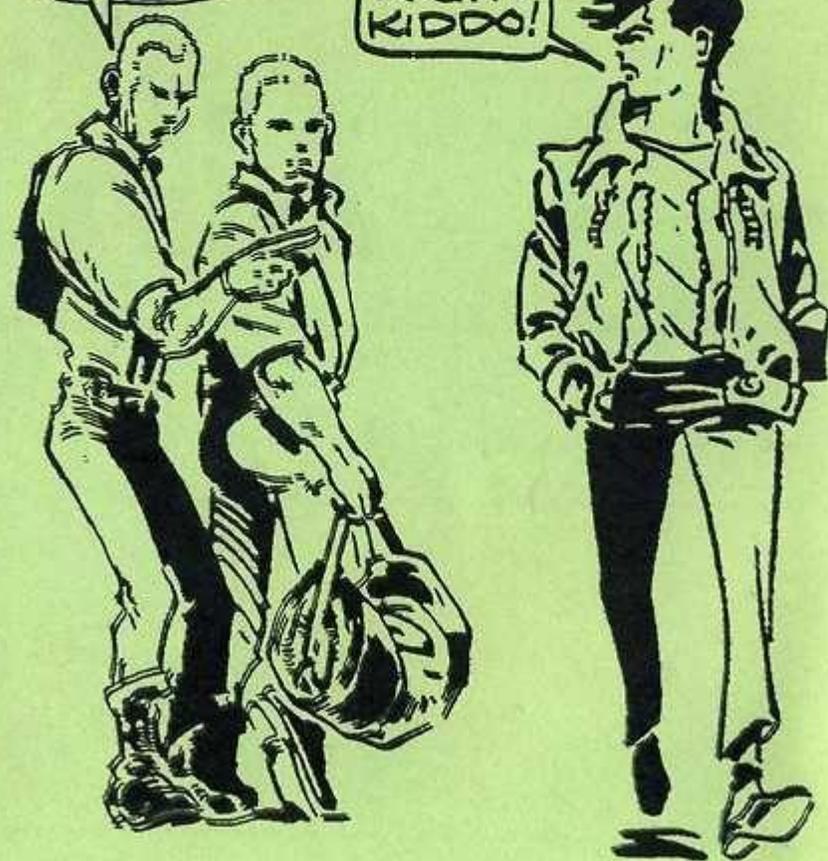
What is Queer Theory?

- Emerged from post-structuralist tradition (1990s) out of women's studies and LGBTQ studies.
  - Queer readings of texts: looking at overt or hidden queer tendencies or subplots
  - Theorizing 'queerness' as a form of *difference*

- Feminist/women's studies provided the critique of gender essentialism (e.g. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, esp. "One is not born but becomes a woman")

- LGBTQ studies (Gay and Lesbian Studies) examines the socially construction of sexuality and sexual acts and sexual identities
  - LGBTQ studies centered mostly on behavior (what was considered 'natural' or 'unnatural') → queer theory looks also at identity and deviant or normative identity categories

Defining "queer"

LESBIAN
GAY
BISEXUAL
TRANSGENDER
QUEER
INTERSEX
ASEXUAL

- Definition 1: an umbrella term which is meant to encompass LGBTQIA+ identities
  - Contentious among some communities, esp. lesbians, because said to erase the distinctions and differences between various sexual/gender identities

- Definition 2: a homophobic slur

- Definition 3: something odd, out of the ordinary, peculiar

- Gay and Lesbian Studies focused on behavior and homosexuality, queer theory expands this examination.

- Queer theory – political critique of the construction of normative and deviant categories → esp. sexual categories

The Genderbread Person v2.0

by it's pronounced METRO sexual .com

Gender is one of those things everyone thinks they understand, but most people don't. Like *Inception*. Gender isn't binary. It's not either/or. In many cases it's both/and. A bit of this, a dash of that. This tasty little guide is meant to be an appetizer for understanding. It's okay if you're hungry for more.

-Identity

-Attraction

Expression

-Sex
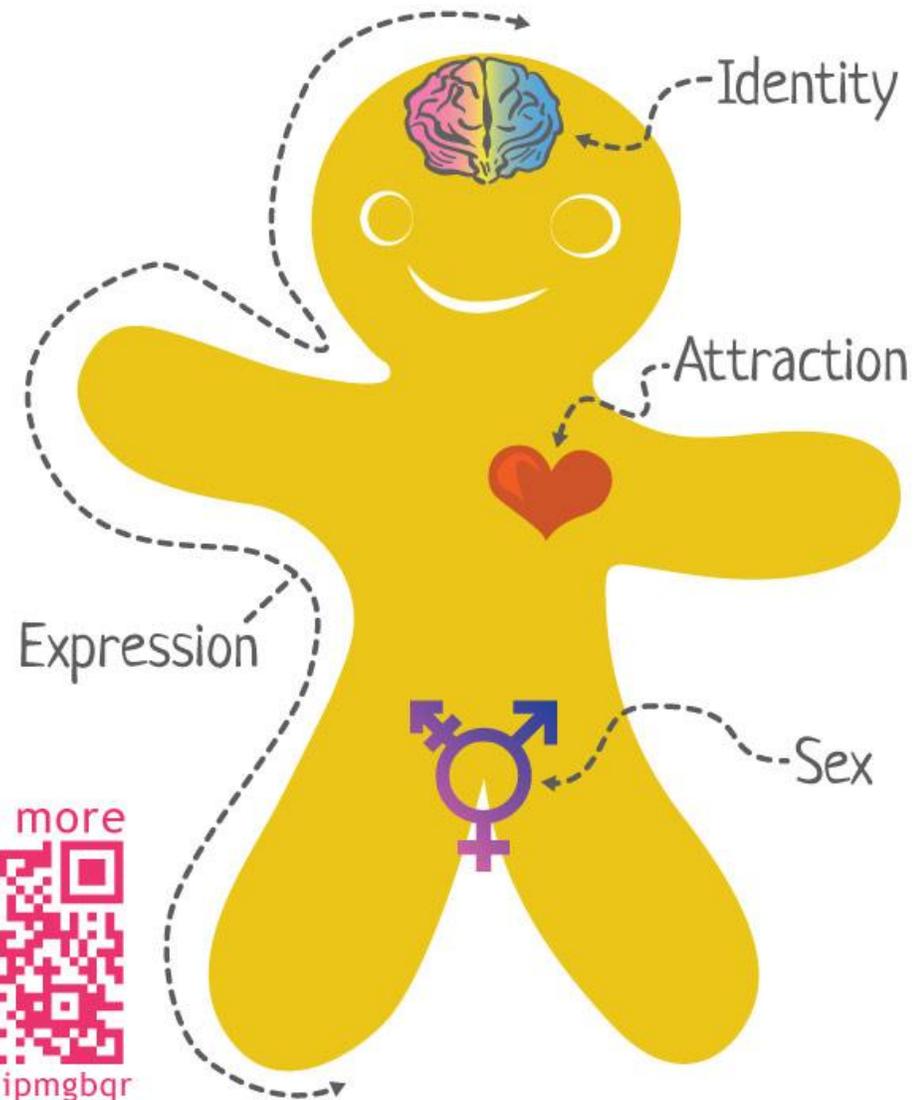
Gender Identity

Nongendered → Woman-ness

Nongendered → Man-ness

5 (of infinite) possible plot and label combos: "woman" | "man" | "two-spirit" | "genderqueer" | "genderless"

Gender Expression

Agender → Masculine

Agender → Feminine

5 (of infinite) possible plot and label combos: "butch" | "femme" | "androgynous" | "gender neutral" | "hyper-masculine"

Biological Sex

Asex → Female-ness

Asex → Male-ness

5 (of infinite) possible plot and label combos: "male" | "female" | "intersex" | "female self ID" | "male self ID"

Attracted to

Nobody → (Men/Males/Masculinity)

Nobody → (Women/Females/Femininity)

5 (of infinite) possible plot and label combos: "straight" | "gay" | "pansexual" | "asexual" | "bisexual"

Against identity

- Queer theorists posit that the identity categories of gay or lesbian are limiting → critique the constraints of traditional identity politics
  - Ascribing to a particular identity and forming one's sense of self in relation to this pre-existing category, e.g. gay man, bisexual woman, etc.
  - These categories become reified and then policed (a lesbian woman who has sex with a cisman or a transman could be excluded from the category of 'lesbian')
  - Queerness rejects the stability of identities
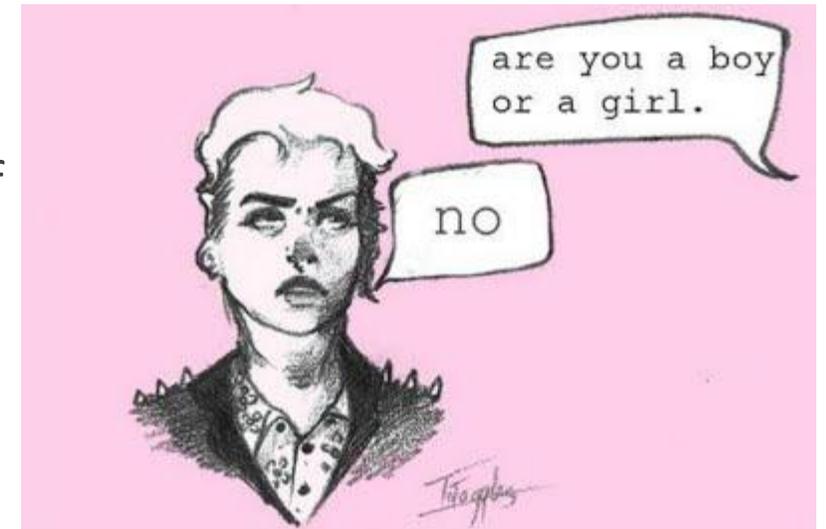
Anti-normativity
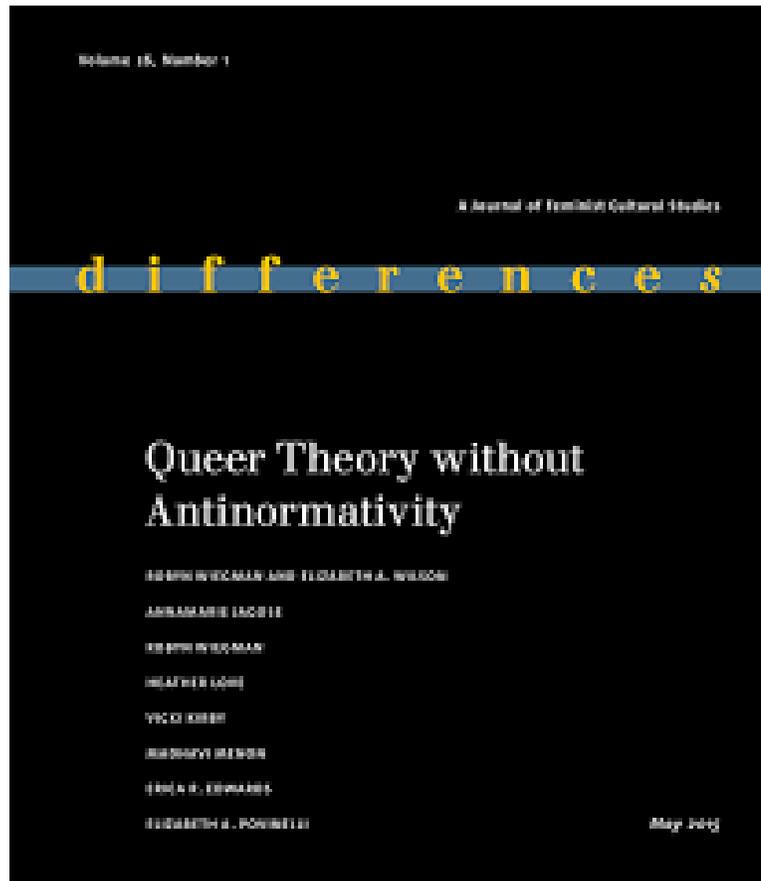
Queer theory does not attempt to recognize the center or norm in order to move towards it, but in order to critique it.

"The history of queer theorizing has been shaped by anti-normative sensibility, one that unites the multiple and at times discordant analyses that comprise the queer theoretical archive into a field-forming synthesis. We call this synthesis queer studies, and we read its interdisciplinary consolidation around anti-normativity as its most productive field-defining rule" (Weigman & Wilson, "Antinormativity's Queer Conventions")

Queer theory and the challenge to normativity

Robyn Wiegman

- Queer theory:
  - Challenges norms
  - Undermines normativity
  - Interrupts the process of normalization (including the norms produced by queer theory itself)

Elizabeth Wilson

Why should we be like you?

- Current LGBTQ civil rights struggles are often critiqued by radical queers

- Mainstream LGBTQ discourse suggests that gays, lesbians, trans people, etc. have as their deepest desire to be like straight people
  - Fighting to join the military:
    - So they can support foreign and domestic powers/regimes which brutalize queer people?
  - Fighting for marriage:
    - A hierarchical patriarchal institution?
    - Monogamous?
    - Legitimating relationship in the eyes of the state?

- Mads Ananda Lodahl: "Ending the Straight World Order" → the world and systems of hierarchies created by normative society is rotten. We don't want a piece of that pie.

Queers against homonationalism and homonormativity

- **Homonormativity:** support for heterosexual ideals, lifestyles, and worldviews and imposing them on LGBTQ communities

- **Homonationalism:** the link between LGBTQ identities and nationalism
  - USA is the best country because gay marriage is legal (ignoring the continued brutalization and marginalization of LGBTQ people in the USA)
  - Gays and lesbians should fight for their right to serve in the military
  - Often engages in Islamophobic and xenophobic rhetoric
  - Trump is pro-LGBTQ because he's restricting immigration → immigrants are homophobic

Nonnormativity and critiques of Cisnormativity

- Transgender – someone who does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth

- Cisgender – someone who does identify with the gender they were
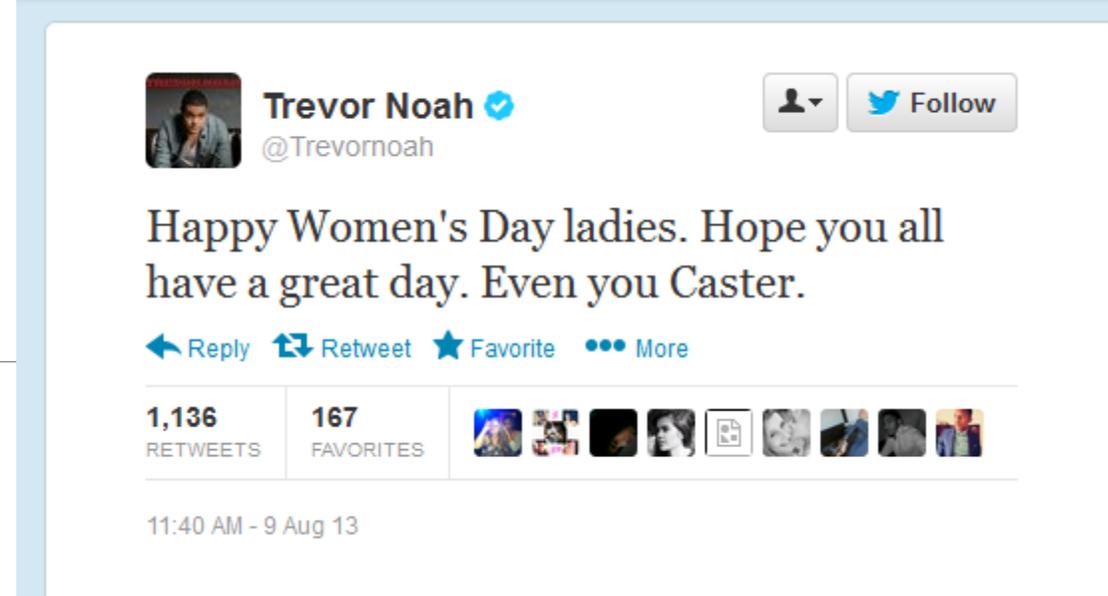
"More recent scholarship has extended this analysis by forwarding the concept of cisnormativity to mark ongoing assumptions about the psychic and social congruence between birth assignment and sex/gender identifications, reframing the well-known feminist distinction between the raw material for sex and the social construction of gender by approaching issues of embodiment, materiality, and psychic life in 'nonnormative' terms. Building on the concepts of cisgender and cissexual, cisnormativity has become increasingly important for parsing, in ways akin to the use of heteronormativity, how the 'expectation that those assigned male at birth always grow up to be men and those assigned female at birth always grow up to be women, and how this shapes social activity such as child rearing, the policies and practices of individuals and institutions, and the organization of the broader social world" (Wiegman & Wilson)

Judith Butler (b. 1956)

Judith Butler

- American philosopher and gender theorist.

- Two important works:
  - *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990)
  - *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993)

- In each of these works she challenges normative assumptions of gender and develops her own approach, gender performativity.

- Criticizes dominant gender discourse which labels and polices gender as binary

- Gender is performative: "gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (*Gender Trouble*)

Gender Performance

- Gender performance is different than gender performativity.

- Butler, interview: "When we say that gender is performed, we usually mean that we've taken on a role; we're acting in some way…To say that gender is performative is a little different…For something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman…we act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or simply something that is true about us. Actually, it is a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time."
  - Gender constructed through acts that adhere to dominant social gender norms
  - Performer not in control of performance --> cannot terminate the act
  - Performance not produced by individual/performer → individual/performer produced by the performance

- Butler quotes Nietzsche: "there is no 'being' behind doing… 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything.

Sources & Resources

▪ Mari Mikkola, "Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-gender/

▪Mads Ananda Lodahl, "Ending the Straight World Order," TEDxCopenhagen: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eosTHMwVhyk

▪Allen Brizee, J. Case Tompkins, Libby Chernouski. "Gender Studies and Queer Theory (1970s-present)": https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/12/

▪Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson. "Antinormativity's Queer Conventions." Differences (2015): https://oldcapitolbooks.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/differences-2015-wiegman-1-25.pdf

▪Annamarie Jagose. "Queer Theory" : http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-Dec-1996/jagose.html