

## Key Term: Queer Theory

In the latter half of the twentieth century, theoretical perspectives in the humanities became increasingly influenced by concerns surrounding gender, sexuality, and the social construction of identity. Feminist criticism, for example, emerged to tackle a host of practical and theoretical concerns related to gender stereotypes, and gay liberation theories provided influential critiques of the heterosexual biases present in mainstream society. Yet some theorists and political activists found these early frameworks to be problematic due to their strict notions of female, gay, and lesbian identity; essentialist articulations of sexuality were increasingly argued to be just as exclusive as the patriarchal and heterosexist norms they aimed to critique. Many scholars, largely influenced by the work of the French theorist Michel Foucault, began to abandon the notion of strict sexual categories and instead claimed that gender and identity are socially constructed properties whose meanings are fluid and can be inflected in numerous ways. Later known as queer theory, these critical developments became highly influential amongst both academics and advocacy groups concerned with such things as combating homophobia and prejudice towards people living with HIV/AIDS.<sup>1</sup> According to David Halperin, the well-known author of *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, “[q]ueer is whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, [and] the dominant” (qtd. in Pickett). Overall, while queer theory concerns itself with the anti-essentialist project of illuminating the ways in which identity does not conform to strict categories and is constructed through complex social processes, further investigation suggests that this

conceptual framework also has strong links with improvisation theory due to a shared emphasis on the political significance of performativity.

The claims of queer theory rely heavily upon post-structuralist understandings of language and subject formation. Judith Butler, a central figure in the field along with writers such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adrienne Rich, uses Jacques Derrida's understanding of performative speech acts<sup>2</sup> to argue that the meanings of gender and sexuality are constructed through the enforced repetition of conventional behaviors. For Derrida, the meaning of the use of any linguistic term is dependent upon its prior uses; speech acts convey information by "citing" other speech acts that have taken place in the past. Yet no use of language is a completely authentic repetition, since each new utterance will cite differently from its forebears based on the ongoing accumulation of prior utterances, and since people frequently use "old words in new contexts" (Leitch et al 2486). As such, Derrida argues that all speech is performative in that it "alters, if always within limits, the meaning" of a particular word or phrase through usage in a new context (Leitch et al 2486). Butler expands on this idea to contend that behaviors that signify gender, such as "masculine" or "feminine" activities, are citational repetitions that function in much the same way as language. She accordingly argues that

gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self,' whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority. (279)

The point here is that language, in keeping with a Derridean understanding of performative speech, is used to *constitute* gender rather than to denote it; words create

rather than report identity. An important consequence of this idea is that discursive power plays an almost totalitarian role in shaping gender since the meanings of gender signifiers are limited by the citations they depend upon: performative acts are constrained, largely predetermined, and effectively “enact or produce that which [they] name” (Butler, *Bodies* 13). Yet because every “social field is traversed by various discourses, none of which ever achieves full domination” (Leitch 2486-87), there is resistance to and deviance from orthodox behaviors and utterances of language; power, in the Foucauldian sense,<sup>3</sup> never results in completely successful and uniform compulsions into orthodoxy. It is in light of these limitations of power that queer theorists articulate a means for resistance against the social production of normative identities.

Butler suggests that illuminating the ways in which identity is a social construction will allow individuals to “resignify” the meanings attached to various acts and utterances (Leitch et al. 2486); she claims that an increased awareness of the role discursive power has in shaping identities can facilitate “a “proliferation” of the “constitutive categories” into which all selves are now constrained to fit” (2486).

Adrienne Rich, another central queer theorist, offers a similar point of view when she writes that “words can help us move or keep us paralyzed...our choices of language and verbal tone have something—a great deal—to do with how we live our lives and whom we end up speaking with and hearing” (Ch. 6). In the context of these claims, the relevance of queer theory to other politically engaged academic fields becomes more apparent: the critique of essentialism can be brought to bear on almost any domain in which the politics of identity are at stake. To give an example, postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha have repeatedly unsettled conventional notions of race by contending

that it is largely a “social phenomenon” whose “continuing force resides not in its existence as meaningful scientific taxonomy but in its undoubted effects on behavior and on policy in many societies” (Ashcroft et al. 211). Overall, one can safely suggest that queer theory and fields in which discourse and identity are examined tend to overlap.

This overlap can also extend to include the theorization of improvisation. Resistance to normative and compulsory ways being in the world has often been associated with improvisational practices, and indeed, a central hypothesis of the ICASP project is that improvisation provides an important model for envisioning new forms of community building and social interaction. In keeping with this hypothesis, one might even suggest that improvised practices can be seen to be somewhat “queer” in their more radical formations, as is illustrated by the following statement from ICASP researchers Ajay Heble and Daniel Fischlin in their book, *The Other Side of Nowhere*:

[Improvisation points to] a mysterious horizon beyond which the potential for thinking alternatives – whether musical, social, communitarian, theoretical, and so forth – is activated as a generative principle of seeking out contrarian knowledges, dissonant social practices, and transgressive uncertainties, all in opposition to human orthodoxies that limit or circumscribe the limits of human potentiality. (10)

The vocabulary here is highly reminiscent of Butler’s: the call for “dissonant social practices,” “contrarian knowledges” and “thinking [of] alternatives” parallels closely her advocacy for “resignifying” conventional and predetermined gender performatives (10, Leitch et al. 2486). As such, queer theory and improvisatory practices are often united by a shared ethos of subversion. To return to Halperin’s comment, both are “at odds with the

normal, the legitimate, [and] the dominant” (qtd. in Pickett). Both can advocate a form of social freedom, and both can strive for alternatives to the status quo.

This theoretical confluence of queer theory and improvisation is also apparent in the work of scholars concerned with gender politics in the context of free jazz and other forms of real-time music making. ICASP researcher Julie Dawn Smith, for instance, argues that the emergence of the Feminist Improvisation Group (FIG) in Britain in the 1970’s resulted in interpretive perspectives and performance spectacles that were decidedly queer: FIG used “drag to critique and parody the institution of compulsory heterosexuality” (235), and performed “humorous parodies of middle-class domesticity” (235). The group even employed “consciousness raising” techniques to move members “beyond the notion of writing the self toward a *rewriting* of the self” (234), thereby suggestively foregrounding the resistance of social performatives that Butler later recommends (Leitch et al. 2486). But while these anecdotes provide strong evidence of the existence of a form of improvisatory queerness, it is also important to recognize that the members of FIG faced considerable struggle in gaining recognition from other (mostly male) musicians. As Smith puts it, “masculinist tendencies, heterosexual expectations...[and] gender anxieties” ran rampant in the free jazz community (239). So despite being openly committed to the “critique of class structures...power networks...[and] racial oppression” (228), improvising musicians in no way extended their non-normative thinking into considerations of women and gender. In all, it seems as though any argument suggesting some degree of equivalency between the queer and the improvisatory would have to be tempered by a recognition of the ways which “queer

sounding that demanded queer listening” was (and perhaps still is) highly unwelcome in the supposedly egalitarian world of real-time collaborative music making (238).

Lastly, it is worth concluding any discussion of the connections between queer theory and improvisation by further highlighting the limits of this relationship. For one thing, queer theory is committed to the critique of naturalized identity, but it is not always explicitly concerned with notions of community and dialogue in the same way that improvisational practices often are. In short, the focus of queer theory is sometimes more upon the individual than the collective (although many queer theorists do in fact discuss identity as a collaborative activity). Second, improvisational practices do not always share in the subversive aims associated with queer and anti-essentialist identity politics. Many improvisatory practices, as Fischlin and Heble point out, are politically inert: classical Indian music, for instance, contains improvisatory elements but is in no way aligned with the development of “critical strategies for alternative community building” (2). The point is that improvisers do “not necessarily exist in opposition to dominant social structures” (2), unlike those queer theorists with strong political commitments. So, while we may conclude that queerness is not always improvisational and improvisation is not always queer, the sum of the arguments outlined here has hopefully attested to the numerous ways in which improvised practice and queer theory *do* overlap and offer a common point of entry into broader concerns surrounding identity, power, discourse, and the possibility of building a better future through the presentation of radical alternatives to the present.

## Notes

1. It would be a mistake to characterize queer theory as a solely academic discourse. Political activism has provided grounding for the field since its inception, and many groups such as [ACT UP](#) and [Outrage!](#) used the term “queer” as a way to refuse conventional gender labels and to more broadly critique the concept of identity itself.
2. The distinction between performative and constative speech acts was first articulated by J.L. Austin. Constative utterances use words to refer to an existing state of affairs; performative utterances bring a state of affairs into existence (ie. naming a newborn child).
3. Foucault’s influence on queer theory comes primarily from his work on the genealogy of sexuality, and from his conceptualization of power as a non-localized “multiplicity of force relations” that procedurally regulates/controls discourse (102), and by corollary, subject formation. In short, power in the Foucauldian sense refers to an understanding of how knowledge is produced and reified on the basis of existing discourses that subjects are inherently and inescapably caught within.

## Works Cited

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