

Around 1990 *queer* emerged into public consciousness. It was a term that challenged the normalizing mechanisms of state power to name its sexual subjects: male or female, married or single, heterosexual or homosexual, natural or perverse. Given its commitment to interrogating the social processes that not only produced and recognized but also normalized and sustained identity, the political promise of the term resided specifically in its broad critique of multiple social antagonisms, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, in addition to sexuality.

**David L. Eng with  
Judith Halberstam  
and José  
Esteban Muñoz**

Fourteen years after *Social Text's* publication of "Fear of a Queer Planet," and eight years after "Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender," this special double issue reassesses the political utility of queer by asking "what's queer about queer studies now?" The contemporary mainstreaming of gay and lesbian identity—as a mass-mediated consumer lifestyle and embattled legal category—demands a renewed queer studies ever vigilant to the fact that sexuality is intersectional, not extraneous to other modes of difference, and calibrated to a firm understanding of queer as a political metaphor without a fixed referent. A renewed queer studies, moreover, insists on a broadened consideration of the late-twentieth-century global crises that have configured historical relations among political economies, the geopolitics of war and terror, and national manifestations of sexual, racial, and gendered hierarchies.

The following sixteen essays—largely authored by a younger generation of queer scholars—map out an urgent intellectual and political terrain for queer studies and the contemporary politics of identity, kinship, and belonging. Insisting on queer studies' intellectual and political relevance to a wide field of social critique, these essays reassess some of the field's most important theoretical insights while realigning its political attentions, historical foci, and disciplinary accounts. Broadly, these scholars examine the limits of queer epistemology, the denaturalizing potentials of queer diasporas, and the emergent assumptions of what could be called queer liberalism. Collectively, they rethink queer critique in relation to a number of historical emergencies, to borrow from Walter Benjamin, of both national and global consequence.

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Such emergencies include the triumph of neoliberalism and the collapse of the welfare state; the Bush administration's infinite "war on terrorism" and the acute militarization of state violence; the escalation of U.S. empire building and the clash of religious fundamentalisms, nationalisms, and patriotisms; the devolution of civil society and the erosion of civil rights; the pathologizing of immigrant communities as "terrorist" and racialized populations as "criminal"; the shifting forms of citizenship and migration in a putatively "postidentity" and "postracial" age; the politics of intimacy and the liberal recoding of freedom as secularization, domesticity, and marriage; and the return to "moral values" and "family values" as a prophylactic against political debate, economic redistribution, and cultural dissent. Indeed, in this intense time of war and death, and of U.S. unilateralism and corporate domination, queer studies now more than ever needs to refocus its critical attentions on public debates about the meaning of democracy and freedom, citizenship and immigration, family and community, and the alien and the human in all their national and their global manifestations.

What does queer studies have to say about empire, globalization, neoliberalism, sovereignty, and terrorism? What does queer studies tell us about immigration, citizenship, prisons, welfare, mourning, and human rights? What is the relationship between *Lawrence v. Texas*, the exalted June 2003 Supreme Court decision decriminalizing gay sex, and the contemporaneous USA PATRIOT Act? If mainstream media attention to queer lives and issues has helped to establish the social and legal foundation for the emergence of gay marriage, family, and domesticity, what are the social costs of this new visibility? And how does the demand for marriage and legal rights affect, run counter to, or in fact converge with conservative promotion of traditional marriage?

While queer studies in the past has rarely addressed such broad social concerns, queer studies in the present offers important insights. In recent years, scholars in the field have produced a significant body of work on theories of race, on problems of transnationalism, on conflicts between global capital and labor, on issues of diaspora and immigration, and on questions of citizenship, national belonging, and necropolitics.<sup>1</sup> The various essays gathered here insist that considerations of empire, race, migration, geography, subaltern communities, activism, and class are central to the continuing critique of queerness, sexuality, sexual subcultures, desire, and recognition. At the same time, these essays also suggest that some of the most innovative and risky work on globalization, neoliberalism, cultural politics, subjectivity, identity, family, and kinship is happening in the realm of queer studies. As a whole, this volume reevaluates the utility of queer as

an engaged mode of critical inquiry. It charts some of the notable historical shifts in the field since its inception while recognizing different pasts, alternative presents, and new futures for queer scholarship.

What's queer about queer studies now?

A lot.

## Queer Epistemology

In her 1993 essay “Critically Queer,” Judith Butler writes that the assertion of “queer” must never purport to “fully describe” those it seeks to represent. “It is necessary to affirm the contingency of the term,” Butler insists, “to let it be vanquished by those who are excluded by the term but who justifiably expect representation by it, to let it take on meanings that cannot now be anticipated by a younger generation whose political vocabulary may well carry a very different set of investments.” That queerness remains open to a continuing critique of its privileged assumptions “ought to be safeguarded not only for the purposes of continuing to democratize queer politics, but also to expose, affirm, and rework the specific historicity of the term.”<sup>2</sup> The operations of queer critique, in other words, can neither be decided on in advance nor be depended on in the future. The reinvention of the term is contingent on its potential obsolescence, one necessarily at odds with any fortification of its critical reach in advance or any static notion of its presumed audience and participants.

That queerness remains open to a continuing critique of its exclusionary operations has always been one of the field's key theoretical and political promises. What might be called the “subjectless” critique of queer studies disallows any positing of a proper subject *of* or object *for* the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent. Such an understanding orients queer epistemology, despite the historical necessities of “strategic essentialism” (Gayatri Spivak's famous term), as a continuous deconstruction of the tenets of positivism at the heart of identity politics. Attention to queer epistemology also insists that sexuality—the organizing rubric of lesbian and gay studies—must be rethought for its positivist assumptions. A subjectless critique establishes, in Michael Warner's phrase, a focus on “a wide field of normalization” as the site of social violence. Attention to those hegemonic social structures by which certain subjects are rendered “normal” and “natural” through the production of “perverse” and “pathological” others, Warner insists, rejects a “minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal.”<sup>3</sup>

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Today, we find ourselves at an ironic historical moment of what might be described as “queer liberalism.” Mechanisms of normalization have endeavored to organize not only gay and lesbian politics but also the internal workings of the field itself, attempting to constitute its governing logic around certain privileged subjects, standards of sexual conduct, and political and intellectual engagements (a subject discussed in greater detail below). At such a historical juncture, it is crucial to insist yet again on the capacity of queer studies to mobilize a broad social critique of race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, as well as sexuality. Such a theoretical project demands that queer epistemologies not only rethink the relationship between intersectionality and normalization from multiple points of view but also, and equally important, consider how gay and lesbian rights are being reconstituted as a type of reactionary (identity) politics of national and global consequence.

Roderick A. Ferguson observes in his contribution to this special issue, “Of Our Normative Strivings: African American Studies and the Histories of Sexuality” that while queer studies “has had the most concentrated engagement with the category of sexuality,” its institutional advances should not convince queer studies that “its engagements with sexuality are the only and most significant pursuits of that formation.” In other words, if interdisciplinary sites such as queer studies isolate sexuality within one epistemic terrain (such as psychoanalysis), or attempt to arrogate the study of sexuality to themselves alone, these “sites prove interdisciplinarity’s complicity with disciplinarity rather than interdisciplinarity’s rebellion against the disciplines.” Ferguson’s observations move us away from an exclusive focus on how sexuality becomes the “propertied” object of queer studies, its privileged site of critical inquiry. Instead, he focuses on normalization and intersectionality at once, by asking “in what ways has the racialized, classed, and gendered discourse known as sexuality dispersed itself to constitute this particular discipline or interdiscipline?” Configuring queer epistemology in such a manner insists on a sustained consideration of what happens to sexuality when it is resituated as the effect not only of queer studies but also other fields of inquiry, such as women of color feminism, queer of color critique, or queer diasporas.<sup>4</sup> Hence critical attentions are drawn to the governing logics of knowledge production, the constitutive assumptions that form the foundation of disciplinary fields, rendering them internally coherent while giving social and political difference their discursive power.

In “Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography,” Elizabeth Freeman expands on Ferguson’s epistemological investigation in a different register. Freeman brings queer studies together with one of the most important epistemological inquiries in postcolonial studies: the disparate mappings of time and space. Nation-states, she observes, “still track and manage their own

denizens through an official time line, effectively shaping the contours of a meaningful life by registering some events like births, marriages, and deaths, and refusing to record others like initiations, friendships, and contact with the dead.” Freeman’s crossing of queer studies with post-colonial concerns of individual and group “development” reformulates certain basic tenets of the field such that “queer subjectivity and collectivity demand, and take as their reward, particularly inventive and time-traveling forms of grief and compensation.” Reconsidering the spatial and temporal dimensions of queer traumas, including AIDS, Freeman suggests that the incorporation of lost others need not be haunted solely by melancholy and depression. In a historical moment of intense political conservatism, residues of “positive affect”—“erotic scenes, utopias, memories of touch”—must become available for queer counterhistories of space and time, alternative narratives of development that have become central to the notion of queer subcultures, counterpublics, and utopias.

Queer epistemology insists that we embark on expanded investigations of normalization and intersectionality. In this regard, Tavia Nyong’o’s opening essay, “Punk’d Theory,” proffers yet another take on “intersectionality,” one interrupting the everyday practices and “litigious process through which subjects petition for admission to queer theoretical attention.” Proffering “Punk’d Theory” as, in the words of Eve Sedgwick, a “nonce taxonomy” full of unrationalized hypotheses about what kinds of people there are to be found in the world, Nyong’o rewrites a now frozen dialectic between black and white, as well as straight and gay. He observes that it is not enough “to take up the simultaneity of race, class, gender, and sexuality, which it is my argument that the vernacular does constantly in keywords like *punk* and *punked*.” Instead, Nyong’o contends, we must investigate “the subject transformed by law that nevertheless exists nowhere within it, the figure of absolute abjection that is, paradoxically, part of our everyday experience.” Here, queer epistemology rethinks intersectionality not just as racial, sexual, or class simultaneity but as “a meeting of two streets, and in a landscape long given over to automotivity . . . a place of particular hazard for the pedestrian.” According to Nyong’o, “punk’d” pedestrians must demand both their “rights and *more* than their rights, simply to preserve a portion of the mobility they had prior to enclosure”: workers become “illegal immigrants”; poor mothers, “welfare queens”; protestors, “potential terrorists.” While all must attack the presumption of their criminality merely to preserve their way of life, intersectionality will become positively hazardous to everyone’s health if we choose to adjudicate among these differences rather than to nurture them all at once.

Extending Nyong’o’s nonce taxonomy of what kinds of people there are to be found in the world, Joon Oluchi Lee’s essay, “The Joy of the Castrated

Boy,” draws our critical attention, along the lines of Freeman, to queer pleasures and desires. Lee suggests that the contemporary mainstreaming of queerness in both popular culture and the social imaginary has resulted in the embracing of a “mainstream ethics of gender” in queer studies. Indeed, like several other contributors to this special issue, Lee insists that certain prevailing epistemological paradigms, such as gay shame, have been implicitly universalized in queer studies to great social and political harm. Refusing the disavowal of castration and effeminacy that underwrites D. A. Miller’s reading of the Broadway musical *Gypsy*, for instance, Lee posits an alternative to the anxious glorification of white masculinity that Miller erects as a defense against the feminine forms of identification that *Gypsy* demands and circulates. “I have always considered myself a castrated boy,” Lee writes in relation to a stereotypical Asian masculinity, “and learned to be happy in that state because that was the only way I could live my life as the girl I knew myself to be.” Simply put, Lee offers an “ecstatic” politics of racial castration in the place of an anxious phallic restoration of whiteness. Suggesting that the “joy” of the castrated boy might abet in the project of “undoing” gender—undoing, that is, the idealization of white masculinity in queer studies—Lee asserts that racial castration preserves a space of alterity to embrace “femininity as race” and “race as femininity.” In this regard, Lee advances the groundbreaking project laid out by Eve Sedgwick in her 1991 essay, “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay.”<sup>5</sup>

Like cultural, postcolonial, and critical race studies, queer studies has been a privileged site for the explicit reconsideration of disciplinarity and knowledge production. All the essays in this special issue contend in some way or another with the question of queer epistemology, reorienting the field’s potential to engage with a wide field of normalization precisely through a critical reengagement with intersectionality in its manifold forms and locations. The social and political potential of such a critique is “precisely calibrated to the degree to which ‘queer’ is deployed as a catachresis,” Amy Villarejo observes in her essay, “Tarrying with the Normative: Queer Theory and *Black History*.” Investigating the 1968 documentary *Black History: Lost, Stolen, or Strayed?* as a counterarchive for queer normalization, Villarejo posits a “queer of color” critique as making “good on the understanding of normativity as variegated, striated, contradictory,” as the persistent tension “between systematization and desire, between reason and affect, between the literal and the figurative, between philosophy and literature.” In these interstitial spaces, Villarejo discovers yet another caveat to the practice of queer intersectionality, encouraging us to abandon “a certain literal understanding of the role of abstraction as enforcing a logic of equivalence in the production of the symptom.” Social and political differences cannot finally be equalized as analogous values

or commensurate forms of domination; instead, they must be considered in and through their supplemental deployments.<sup>6</sup>

## Queer Diasporas

Attention to queer epistemology generates alternate critical genealogies for queer studies outside its conventional relationship to francophone and Anglo-American literatures and literary studies, as well as its presumed white masculine subjects. “Women of color feminism” and “queer of color critique” collectively explored by Nyong’o, Lee, Ferguson, and Villarejo mark two such alternate critical genealogies for the investigation of normalization and difference. Queer diaspora is a third.

In their 1997 introduction to “Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender,” the editors note that the “theorization of divergent sexualities offered by contemporary queer critique and the interrogation of race and ethnicity undertaken within postcolonial studies and critical race theory are among the most significant recent developments in social analysis and cultural criticism. While the best work in these fields have emphasized that their objects of study cannot be understood in isolation from one another, the critical ramifications of this fact have nevertheless gone largely unexplored.”<sup>7</sup> Eight years later, the critical ramifications of such a project have become part of our intellectual consciousness largely because of a critical mass of scholarship in queer of color critique as well as queer diasporas. Collectively, these two fields have systematically rethought critical race theory (which takes the U.S. nation-state as its conceptual frame) and postcolonial studies alongside scattered deployments of sexuality—its uneven mappings of time and space across domestic as well as diasporic landscapes.

For instance, in its denaturalizing of various origin narratives, such as “home” and “nation,” queer diasporas “investigates what might be gained politically by reconceptualizing diaspora not in conventional terms of ethnic dispersion, filiation, and biological traceability, but rather in terms of queerness, affiliation, and social contingency.” By doing so, queer diasporas emerges as a critical site “providing new ways of contesting traditional family and kinship structures—of reorganizing national and transnational communities based not on origin, filiation, and genetics but on destination, affiliation, and the assumption of a common set of social practices or political commitments.”<sup>8</sup>

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It has examined the numerous ways in which racialized heteropatriarchy has been universalized as a Western discourse of (sexual) development, as a project of modernity and modernization, as a colonial and civilizing mission, as an index of political and social advancement, and as a story of human liberty and freedom. In this regard, the concerns of queer diasporas have worked, borrowing Dipesh Chakrabarty's term, to "provincialize" queer studies, bringing problems of citizenship, sovereignty, migration, asylum, welfare, the public sphere, and civil society to questions of sexuality and sexual development at the heart of the modern liberal nation-state. In the process, queer diasporas brings to conceptual crisis contradictions of global and domestic politics, as it broadens studies of migration in the Black Atlantic to consider other areas such as South Asia, East Asia, and Latin America. It shifts critical attention to the incommensurabilities of sexuality and national belonging while marking the false equivalences of the nation-state as well as the constitutive limits of "Queer Nation."

In her contribution to this special issue, "Bollywood Spectacles: Queer Diasporic Critique in the Aftermath of 9/11," Gayatri Gopinath delineates the methodology of queer diasporic critique through figurations of the impure, the inauthentic, and the nonreproductive. If queer diasporic critique, Gopinath observes, takes to task the "implicit heteronormativity within some strands of area studies," it also powerfully challenges "the parochialism of some strands of queer studies by making the study of sexuality central to an anti-imperialist, antiracist project." Reading the ascension and global circulation of Bollywood cinema as a spectacle to be safely consumed in a post-9/11 U.S. national imaginary, Gopinath posits the queer South Asian female diasporic subject as an impossible figure, one who stands in contradistinction to the neoliberal citizen-subject. The incommensurability of these two figures, Gopinath contends, creates a conceptual space for challenging the binary construction of South Asian bodies as either "terrorists" or "model minorities," as "inherently criminal and antinational or multicultural and assimilationist."

In similar regard, Jasbir K. Puar examines the "queer" figures of Sikh and Muslim terrorists. In "Queer Times, Queer Assemblages," Puar explores how the Bush administration's "war on terrorism" reconciles queerness to the liberal demands of rational subject formation, employing a rhetoric of sexual modernization that constructs the imperialist center as "tolerant" while castigating the backward other as "homophobic" and "perverse." In our contemporary political moment, exceptionalist discourses on sexual freedom all too easily conspire with U.S. nationalism and patriotism in the service of empire. Queer nationalism, Puar observes, "colludes with U.S. exceptionalisms embedded in nationalist foreign policy via the articulation and production of whiteness as a queer norm and



the tacit acceptance of U.S. imperialist expansion.” In short, nationalist debates on marriage and gays in the military come to replace any and all principled objections to state violence and torture, exemplified by Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, on the global stage. Examining the figure of the suicide bomber as a “queer assemblage” resisting the demands of rational subject formation—the sanctioned binaries of subject and object—in favor of affective “temporal, spatial, and corporeal schisms,” Puar suggests that the ontologies of such figures reorient a diasporic imaginary that queers the habitus of the nation-state, its geopolitical mandates and imperialist ambitions.

In “Asian Diasporas, Neoliberalism, and Family: Reviewing the Case for Homosexual Asylum in the Context of Family Rights,” Chandan Reddy extends Puar’s notion of “tolerance,” queer nationalism, and U.S. exceptionalisms in a different direction. Reddy explores how the figure of the gay Pakistani asylum seeker works to challenge any contemporary understanding of the U.S. nation-state as the central guarantor of “freedom, destigmatization, and normality” in the global context of human rights or in the national arena of gay marriage political debate. Noting how recent U.S. immigration policy has worked to produce a racialized and gendered low-wage workforce precisely through the rubric of “family reunification” and its idealization of the heteropatriarchal family unit, he investigates how the state codes this migration as produced by the petitioning families themselves. In the process, the state projects itself as “a benevolent actor reuniting broken families or an overburdened and effete agent unable to prevent immigrants’ manipulation of its (mandatory) democratic and fair laws.” Either way, Reddy points out, the state gets to have its cake and eat it, too: such policies satisfy capital’s need for an ever-expanding low-wage workforce while exacerbating the conditions of noncitizen life through the dismantling of economic and social resources for immigrant communities. In an ever-shrinking civil society, Reddy concludes, family reunification enables state power to “create heteropatriarchal relations for the recruitment and socialization of labor while justifying the exclusion of immigrant communities from state power through a liberal language of U.S. citizenship as the guarantor of individual liberty and sexual freedom.”

Such guarantees to individual liberty and sexual freedom provide little security for undocumented queers, as well as queers of color, in urban metropolises, an issue Martin F. Manalansan takes up in his essay “Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Spatial Politics in the Global City.” Manalansan explores the decimation of queer diasporic immigrant space in Jackson Heights, Queens. He notes how the disappearance of Arab as well as Muslim communities from neighborhood streets after the events of 9/11 coincided with the simultaneous gentrification of Jackson Heights

as a “new exotic gay mecca” for Manhattanites to visit and to consume as aestheticized commodity. Speculating that the (de)politicizing of nationalist politics about terrorism and race is in part shored up through the neoliberal recoding of queer life and lifestyle as the freedom to travel, tour, and consume safely in various settings and locales, Manalansan delineates the urban processes by which global politics in a post-9/11 world come to be embedded into the built environment. Neoliberalism short-circuits the politics of queer diaspora precisely through the “stabilizing and normalizing of specific forms of capitalist inequalities” in the guise of economic opportunity and similitude. In the process, queer diasporics, queers of color, the feminized, the foreign, the colored, and the poor are left with the short end of the political stick, as discourses of “personal responsibility” serve to excuse state obligation toward collective, public caretaking.

If Manalansan focuses on how neoliberal and nationalist U.S. politics post-9/11 eviscerate queer diasporic spaces in the urban metropole, Karen Tongson’s attention to the suburban and rural periphery in her essay “JJ Chinois’s Oriental Express, or, How a Suburban Heartthrob Seduced Red America” relocates queer diasporic critique in the “heartland” of America. Tongson notes how queerness as hip metrosexuality configures these other areas as spaces of either departure or bypass. She examines the performance art of Lynne Chan, a second-generation Asian American artist, whose transgendered alter ego JJ Chinois denaturalizes a normative trajectory of queer development as the unidirectional migration from suburban to urban space by relocating his heartland adventures in the indeterminate zone of cyberspace. Through his domain name and virtual space, Tongson tracks JJ Chinois’s exploits in “Red America,” observing how this “dykeaspora” explodes “sentimental narratives” of longing inherent in not just heteronormative but certain queer renderings of diaspora.

## Queer Liberalism

Is “queer liberalism” no longer a paradox?

As numerous essays in this special issue point out, the emergence of “queer liberalism” marks an unsettling though perhaps not entirely unexpected attempt to reconcile the radical political aspirations of queer studies’ subjectless critique with the contemporary liberal demands of a nationalist gay and lesbian U.S. citizen-subject petitioning for rights and recognition before the law. Indeed, our current historical moment is marked by a particular coming together of economic and political spheres that form the basis for liberal inclusion: the merging of a certain queer consumer lifestyle first established in the 1980s (and now typified by Bravo’s *Queer*

*Eye for the Straight Guy*) with recent juridical protections for gay and lesbian domesticity established by the landmark 2003 U.S. Supreme Court decision *Lawrence v. Texas* decriminalizing gay sodomy as well as the Commonwealth of Massachusetts's legalizing of same-sex marriage in the same year. While in prior decades gays and lesbians sustained a radical critique of family and marriage, today many members of these groups have largely abandoned such critical positions, demanding access to the nuclear family and its associated rights, recognitions, and privileges from the state. That such queer liberalism comes at a historical moment of extreme right-wing nationalist politics should give us immediate pause.

Given the negative referendum on gay marriage in the 2004 presidential election that witnessed George W. Bush's "reelection" on a platform of "moral values," such rights, recognitions, and privileges might indeed be, to borrow from Gayatri Spivak, something gays and lesbians "cannot not want." At the same time, queer intellectuals must untangle national forms of homophobia from the Republicans' wholesale economic assault on the poor. Doing so would help to clarify the meaning of anti-gay marriage votes. For instance, Lisa Duggan's recent work on the politics of gay marriage suggests that most people in the United States are in favor of limited domestic partnership rights. However, they oppose gay marriage because traditional marriage is increasingly the only way to access federal welfare benefits in the United States. What Duggan has aptly labeled "homonormativity," the gay and lesbian liberal platform advocating for gay marriage while rhetorically remapping and recoding freedom and liberation in narrow terms of privacy, domesticity, and the unfettered ability to consume in the "free" market, collaborates with a mainstreamed nationalist politics of identity, entitlement, inclusion, and personal responsibility, while abandoning a more global critique of capitalist exploitation and domination, state violence and expansion, and religious fundamentalisms and hate.<sup>9</sup>

The turning away from a sustained examination of the vast inequalities in civil society and commercial life that mark the paradoxes of queer liberalism find an unwitting accomplice in certain strands of contemporary queer studies. As numerous essays in this special issue emphasize, the problems of political economy cannot be abstracted away from the racial, gendered, and sexual hierarchies of the nation-state but must in fact be understood as operating in and through them. Yet the current return to an unapologetic and rapacious white masculine heteropatriarchy in a putatively "postidentity" and "postracial" U.S. nation-state finds some odd bedfellows in mainstream queer studies.

For instance, both Hiram Perez and Judith Halberstam take the occasion of an international "Gay Shame" conference at the University of Michigan in March 2003 to analyze how queer studies has evolved over

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the last fifteen years to produce, and to reproduce, its own canonical set of proper subjects and objects, as well as intellectual methods and institutional spaces. In “You Can Have My Brown Body and Eat It, Too!” Perez resists queer liberalism’s demand for the “active untroubling” of race in queer studies. He notes that the conference occurred within a week of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and in the midst of the *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) and *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003) affirmative action cases involving the University of Michigan, yet it was a conference that included only one queer person of color out of forty invited participants. Perez speculates that our conservative historical moment finds an unfortunate parallel in the attempts to entrench a “transparent white subject” at the heart of queer studies: “Queer theorists who can invoke that transparent subject, and choose to do so,” Perez writes, “reap the dividends of whiteness.” “Brown” is what needs to be exploited and maintained for a weak multiculturalism to inhere, the “fixity” of race providing the ground for queer theory’s performative sexuality, the ground against which the figure of complex (white) gay male sexuality and shame unfolded. “The chronic failure of establishmentarian queer theory to revisit its fundamental collusions with American liberalism,” Perez concludes, “consolidates indivisibilities—white, patriarchal, heteronormative—contrary to any professed anti-identity.”

Like Perez, Halberstam recognizes the political and intellectual promises of queer studies as yet unfulfilled to the extent that queer too quickly collapses back into “gay and lesbian” and, more often than not, a “possessive individualism” that simply connotes “gay,” “white,” and “male.” In “Shame and White Gay Masculinity,” Halberstam contends that the future of queer studies “depends absolutely on moving away from white gay male identity politics and learning from the radical critiques offered by a younger generation of queer scholars who draw their intellectual inspiration from feminism and ethnic studies rather than white queer studies.” Observing that feminism and queer of color critique offer a rich critical vocabulary for female and racialized subjects to respond to the politics of shame and neoliberal claims to rights, Halberstam notes that “the only people really lacking a politically urgent language with which to describe and counter shame are gay white men.” Indeed, it is gay white male shame, Halberstam concludes, “that has proposed ‘pride’ as the appropriate remedy and that focuses its libidinal and other energies on simply rebuilding the self that shame dismantled rather than taking apart the social processes that project shame onto queer subjects in the first place.”

Much of queer theory nowadays sounds like a metanarrative about the domestic affairs of white homosexuals. Surely, queer studies promises more than a history of gay men, a sociology of gay male sex clubs, an anthropology of gay male tourism, a survey of gay male aesthetics. The

emergence of queer liberalism challenges us to reconsider some of the canonical ideas of the field—shame and intimacy, normal and antinormal, publics and counterpublics—for their contemporary liberal deployments. As crucial as these intellectual paradigms have been to the establishment of queer studies, it is important to insist on their continuing reevaluation in both their historical applications and their contemporary contexts. The discourse of publics and counterpublics, for instance, traces itself to a Habermasian analysis of the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere and the rise of liberal society in eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought. The homogeneity of Habermas’s public sphere—its assumptions of an abstract citizen-subject who inhabits and moves with ease through civil society—reprises the universalizing tendencies of “gay shame” as well as progress narratives of Western modernity and development that postcolonial, feminist, and critical race studies have effectively deconstructed.

The dialectic of public and counterpublic loses any critical edge to account for “perverse” modernities, those queer bodies and knowledges that exist outside the boundaries of sanctioned time and space, legal status, citizen-subjecthood, and liberal humanism. In this regard, Nayan Shah’s contribution, “Policing Privacy, Migrants, and the Limits of Freedom,” rethinks the liberation narrative of *Lawrence v. Texas* in the context of early-twentieth-century sodomy cases involving racialized migrant workers in the rural West. Shah contends that, historically, “sexual identity is not the determining factor in prosecuting sodomy, but, rather, differentials of class, age, and race shape the policing that leads to sodomy and public morals arrests.” Finding a contemporary parallel in the mixed-race “couple” of John Lawrence (who is white) and Tyrone Garner (who is black), petitioners in the *Lawrence v. Texas* case, Shah asks where and for whom does privacy, mobility, and freedom of intimate contact apply historically and legally. He observes that the gay male subject assumed by contemporary queer theorists in public-counterpublic debates “has both free access to participate in the public world of the intimate and may also retreat to a private realm of intimacy.” In turn, Shah posits Samuel Delany’s queer ethnography of the radical transformation of Times Square beginning in the mid-1980s as situating “inequality and interclass and interethnic contact at the center of his analysis of public sex and sexual publics.”<sup>10</sup>

Tackling the liberatory assumptions of *Lawrence v. Texas* from another angle, Teemu Ruskola’s “Gay Rights versus Queer Theory: What Is Left of Sodomy after *Lawrence v. Texas*?” asks to “what extent are commitments to queerness and liberal rights compatible?” Noting how *Lawrence v. Texas* anxiously inscribes a discourse of “dignity” and “respect” to gay and lesbian relationships rather than to gay and lesbian sex, Ruskola insists that an “intimate personal relationship should not be a requirement for

having a constitutionally protected sex life.” The insistent analogizing of homosexual intimacy to heterosexual marriage in Justice Kennedy’s majority decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* belies the resilience of compulsory heterosexuality in its “new, second-generation form.” Gay liberation and rights do not connote “freedom,” however useful or politically necessary they might be. Instead, *Lawrence v. Texas* leaves queer subjects in an under-regulated and nebulous space between “criminalization and legitimization through marriage.”

Both Michael Cobb’s and Janet R. Jakobsen’s essays round out the issue by exploring queer liberation in the context of religion and regulation. In “Uncivil Wrongs: Race, Religion, Hate, and Incest in Queer Politics,” Cobb investigates religious hate speech as the “limits of liberalism.” Exploring the various religious arguments against homosexuality as the “horror of incest” and the “decline of the traditional, heterosexual family,” he observes that the alignment of homosexuality with “like race” analogies provides a political opportunity to expose the liberal limits of tolerance and free speech.

Extending Cobb’s insights, Jakobsen’s essay, “Sex + Freedom = Regulation: Why?” offers a careful genealogy of “freedom” in relation to the institution of marriage. Jakobsen traces how the Protestant Reformation linked the idea of individual freedom to the institution of marriage. “Marriage, then, like the market,” she writes, “is part of the freedom from the church that marks the beginning of modernity.” Yet it would be foolish to think that in the capitalist marketplace freedom is the antithesis of sexual regulation and that the marketplace is “value-free.” The incitement to matrimony and reproductive sexuality—the option to wed a partner of one’s own “choosing”—becomes the *only* expression of sexual freedom in the secular age and is thus “constitutive of freedom as we know it.” In the era of queer liberalism, it would be a mistake to believe that, since sexual regulation seems to be based in religious intolerance and hate, the answer would be to defend secular freedom. “Our problem,” Jakobsen concludes, “is as much secular freedom as it is religious regulation.” That gay identity, which starts with freedom from the family, has led us so inexorably and vehemently back to the institution of same-sex marriage ironically symptomizes this confusion. It is through marriage that gay people fully become individuals, and this discourse of individualism is precisely the point at which sexual regulation and gay “liberation” meet.

## Where Now?

In her closing comments at the “Gay Shame” conference at the University of Michigan, Gayle Rubin suggested that the event’s participants might shift for a moment their attentions from “gay shame” to “gay humility.” In an age of queer liberalism, Rubin’s call for “gay humility” serves as heuristic device for a return to what a desirably queer world might look like. In our putatively “postidentity” and “postracial” age such a turn is urgent. In this regard, our attention to queer epistemology, queer diasporas, and queer liberalism might be considered one modest attempt to frame queer studies more insistently and productively within a politics of epistemological humility.

Such a politics must also recognize that much of contemporary queer scholarship emerges from U.S. institutions and is largely written in English. This fact indicates a problematic dynamic between U.S. scholars whose work in queer studies is read in numerous sites around the world. Scholars writing in other languages and from other political and cultural perspectives read but are not, in turn, read. These uneven exchanges replicate in uncomfortable ways the rise and consolidation of U.S. empire, as well as the insistent positing of a U.S. nationalist identity and political agenda globally. We propose epistemological humility as one form of knowledge production that recognizes these dangers.

From a similar perspective, and in regard to a virulent post-9/11 U.S. militarism that dominates contemporary politics, Judith Butler observes that the “very fact that we live with others whose values are not the same as our own, or who set a limit to what we can know, or who are opaque to us, or who are strange, or are partially understood, that just means we live with a kind of humility.”<sup>11</sup> Butler suggests that that to take responsibility in democratic polity does not mean to take responsibility for “the entirety of the world” but to place ourselves “in a vividly de-centered way” in a world marked by the differences of others. An ethical attachment to others insists that we cannot be the center of the world or act unilaterally on its behalf. It demands a world in which we must sometimes relinquish not only our epistemological but also our political certitude. Suffice it to say that to appreciate “what’s queer about queer studies now” is to embrace such a critical perspective and to honor such an ethics of humility.

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1. See, for instance, Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Licia Fiol-Matta, *A Queer Mother for the Nation: The State and Gabriela Mistral* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Desire and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Martin F. Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); José Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Robert Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man: Essays* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Juana Maria Rodriguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); and Mary Pat Brady, *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

2. Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 230.

3. Michael Warner, introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxvi.

4. In his book *Aberrations in Black*, for instance, Ferguson explores how both Marxist and liberal theories of social power implicitly configure subject formation through their reliance on an “organic” distinction between adult heterosexuality and “immature” and “deviant” forces of aberrant sexual practices. It is on the terrain of heteropatriarchy that these seemingly divergent theories of social power in fact converge. “Put plainly,” Ferguson writes, “racialization has helped to articulate heteropatriarchy as universal” (6).

5. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys,” *Social Text*, no. 29 (1991): 18–27.

6. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Scattered Speculations on the Theory of Value,” in her *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 154–75.

7. Phillip Brian Harper, Anne McClintock, José Esteban Muñoz, and Trish Rosen, “Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender: An Introduction,” *Social Text*, nos. 52/53 (1997): 1.

8. David L. Eng, “Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas,” *Social Text*, no. 76 (2003): 4.

9. See Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2003).



10. Ground-level sites of queer belonging are theory-generating spaces. Thus we think of the collective political organizing of groups like the Audre Lorde Project and the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association in New York City as offering us valuable knowledge that queer intimacy in a diasporic setting may have considerable theoretical heft.

11. European Graduate School Faculty, "Judith Butler: Quotes," [www.egs.edu/faculty/butler-resources.html](http://www.egs.edu/faculty/butler-resources.html).

