

“Becoming Rather Than Being”: Queer’s Double-Edged Discourse as Deconstructive Practice

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Abstract

This essay introduces the concept double-edged discourse (an oppositional discourse within another, larger oppositional discourse), relating it to the queer identity discourse that emerged within LGBTQ discourse in the wake of the AIDS crisis. The essay employs Laclau’s logic of equivalence to examine queer’s deployment as an empty signifier for the LGBTQ movement, further analyzing queer discourse in light of Badiou’s concept of the Event and, finally, suggesting that queer’s negotiation of identity is accomplished via its double edge and that queer be re-understood as deconstructive practice rather than as a collective identity per se.

Keywords

queer, empty signifier, LGBTQ, double-edged discourse, *différance*, Laclau, Badiou, Derrida, Biesecker, deconstruction

Metaphysical rebellion is a claim, motivated by the concept of complete unity, against the suffering of life and death and a protest against the human condition. . . . If a mass death sentence defines the human condition, then rebellion, in one sense, is its contemporary.

—Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, 1956

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Wholesale death came calling in the early 1980s when the “gay plague” of AIDS all but destroyed a generation of gay men in major cities. The AIDS crisis was a moment of reckoning—not only for gay men but for anyone of non-normative sexual orientation. For LGBTQ¹ communities, AIDS shattered everything. The crisis forced a reevaluation.

The AIDS crisis was a “moment of radical investment” (Laclau, 2000, pp. 82–83)—the moment when assimilationist tropes of the LGBTQ community gave way to queer discourse, a new strategy of identification, mobilization, and being. The straight world had rendered the queer world opaque, a covert realm of the despised other. And now the selfsame despised other was using this epithet as a point of pride, a means of realizing the possible, enabling coalitions and spurring action.

Gay rights movements made considerable progress in the 20th century. The LGBTQ community accomplished visibility and a degree of tolerance into the late 1970s (Connell, 2005; Levine, 1998; Sullivan, 2003). By the 1980s, however, the LGBTQ community (particularly gay men) saw its status wane as AIDS produced a fear-driven backlash. “Glad to be gay” was an empowering 1970s’ catchphrase. But the 1980s saw dissatisfaction and unrest in the gay liberation movement (Darsey, 1991). Those once claiming to be “liberated” felt the shackles of discrimination, exclusion, and harassment tightening once again. This set the stage for the appropriation of a new empty signifier, a signifier of absent universality functioning as a nodal point around which a new coalition would accrete (Laclau, 2005). This rearticulated aggregation has become embodied in the word “queer.”

An empty signifier is a discursive construct, an identifying word or phrase operating as an umbrella term, coalescing once-disparate parties as any social movement mobilizes. I caution the reader not to be misled by the word “empty” used in the idiom “empty signifier.” To say an empty signifier is “empty” is not to say that it is without consequence. Laclau (2005) asserts that empty signifier is “a place, within the system of signification, which is completely irrepresentable; in that sense that it remains empty, but this is an emptiness which I [Laclau] can signify, because we are dealing with a void *within* signification” (p. 105). Such emptiness empowers an empty signifier by “temporarily giv[ing] to [its] particularisms a function of universal representation” (Laclau, 2007, p. 35). An empty signifier’s malleability is key to its purpose as a unifying linguistic sign. Two excellent examples of empty signifiers are the terms “Solidarity,” employed by Polish revolutionaries in the 1980s, and “change,” from Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign. Likewise, “queer” is a staggeringly consequential, if amorphous, figure, as this essay will explain.

Queer’s appropriation as an empty signifier began with “Queers Read This” (QRT), a manifesto of the LGBTQ splinter group, Queer Nation, first circulated at a parade during New York’s “Pride” weekend of 1990. QRT’s confrontational language rearticulated “queer” as a separate discourse within the larger

LGBTQ/gay discourse, which we will define as a double-edged discourse (DED). Queer functioned as a DED because of its capacity to unite and divide—to empower *and* to alienate. Over two decades since its inception, queer discourse has acquired a degree of acceptance, in the process losing some of its initial particularity as its coalition continues to expand and dilute. This essay argues that queer has functioned as a disruptive identifying discourse operating within the greater discourse of the LGBTQ community, employing Laclau's (2004) logic of equivalence to shape a better understanding of queer discourse's role as a DED, further analyzing queer discourse in light of Badiou's (2005) concept of the Event, and finally employing Biesecker's (1989) revisioning of Derrida's (1982) concept, *différance*, to explain queer's cultural omnipresence as deconstructive practice.

This essay is ordered in four sections to illustrate/elucidate my process of working through applicable concepts and theories toward its conclusion. Each section addresses unanswered questions from the prior section. The essay will (1) examine historical factors leading to the emergence of queer identity as a DED within greater LGBTQ assimilationist discourse, (2) explain the role of the Queer Nation manifesto, "Queers Read This" to mobilize a coalitional queer identity in reaction to the Event of AIDS, (3) examine ways that queer identity discourse has defied cyclic dissipations inevitable in Laclau's (2004, 2005) framework, and (4) reconceptualize queer identity discourse as *différance*.

Double-Edged Discourse

Queer discourse is by no means the first DED. America's 19th century antislavery movement is another paradigmatic example. Caucasian-led and African-American led factions were at loggerheads (Bauer, 1925), while strong women were relegated secondary status, a circumstance that Rycenga (2005) defines as a "double-edged sword" (p. 3). This antislavery discourse is analogous to queer's function as a DED operating within the greater LGBTQ discourse of the early 1990s to the present. DEDs transgress conventions of oppositional discourses that may be becoming staid. In this way, DEDs facilitate the emergence of the new, thereby maintaining the oppositionality of their respective factions.

The descriptor "queer" is inherently problematic. Queer denotes difference. And what behaviors could be more "different" than those that resist/reject the "natural" order of heteronormativity? As an identity designation, queer began its journey as a slangy, derogatory term for homosexual (Sullivan, 2003). Queer is often used (regressively) in street language to denote negativity. In the post-millennial milieu of burgeoning tolerance, the designation has evolved to differentiate among gay men (Poole, 2014). Present-day "orthodox masculinity" includes homosexuality—provided that gay men are straight-acting (Anderson, 2014, p. 113). Granted, the aforementioned explanations of queer concern the term's vernacular use.

Queer is imminently more malleable as a theoretical construct than in its vernacular use. This malleability is key to queer's elasticity as an empty signifier and to its political function. As Lyotard (1988) explains, the elemental unit of communication is the phrase, which marks the linguistic action of naming. Names (such as "queer") are understood in their relation to other names, set in motion by phrases. In this fashion, any identity designation's meaning is fluid. This to say that today's identity designation can be evaluated only in light of today's context. Scholars employ queer to include, more-or-less, *all* non-normative ways of being. Queer is expanded to include disfigured/handicapped bodies (McRuer, 2006), the transgendered (Valentine, 2007), non-monogamous relationships (Warner, 1999b), non-default² representations and behaviors (Jagose, 2013), discontinuous or misaligned subjectivity (Ahmed, 2006), disorientation from normative hierarchies that yields reorientation toward new sets of relations (Halbertsam, 2011), the notion that "marginalized, pathologized, and culturally devalued sexual practices" are "invested with political potential" (Jagose, 2013, p. 179), and even asexuality (Cerankowski & Milks, 2010). To be queer is to be marginalized. To identify as queer is to align oneself with the marginalized. Queer functions as a site for contestation or refusal. Pivotaly, Jagose (1996) asserts that queer is not an identity categorization but a denial of identity, "a negotiation of the very concept of identity itself" (p. 130). Therein lies the proverbial rub. If queer is ever-flexible and ever-permeable, how can it define and mobilize its constituency through naming? Likewise, if queer is *not* an identity designation, how can one *be* queer?

One key to queer's rhetorical power is its resonance in the culture as an expletive. Despite its semantic evolution, queer retains its gut-level standing as a "four-letter word" denoting the unnatural, the repulsive, the perverse. Why is this term so resoundingly negative? Because to be queer is to violate the gendered order on which governments, economic systems, ideologies, religions—everything—is based. All the aforementioned structures are gendered male. "Homophobia is the central organizing principle of our cultural definitions of manhood" (Kimmel, 2001, p. 34). To be queer is to transgress heteromascularity—and thus, to transgress "the order of things," as it were.

The more expansive, post-structural way of understanding queerness as otherness certainly works in theoretical applications. But the average person is probably not that concerned with (or aware of) such abstractions. In street language, queer still means homosexual—or at least non-heteronormative. When queer identity is stretched to encompass *all* oppressed peoples, it becomes too dilute to address particular LGBTQ issues. Hence, expanding definitions of queer beyond non-normative sexuality to "everything and nothing" is not always expedient.

Queer's emergence as DED is a "product of specific cultural and theoretical pressures" (Jagose, 1996, p. 76) of its time. Queer identity is an ethic of finding "dignity in shame" (Warner, 1999b, p. 37). Queer discourse occurred in inverse

reaction to antagonisms spurred by the re-stigmatization of the non-normative. Queer gave voice to a rearticulated alliance of marginalized individuals (Moreland & Willox, 2005). “Both the political language of queerness—and its subcultural style—and these two have become very closely associated—made their first appearance in the context of AIDS organizing” (Warner, 2005, p. 210).

The inherent paradox of queer as empty signifier is that the designation—chosen for its potential to destabilize binarisms—is still subject to the expected dissipations occurring with more inflexible identity classifications. This paradox extends to *all* identities, however—not just queer. Hall (2011) acknowledges that collective identities are both necessary and impossible, inherently problematic constructs best understood as “points of temporary attachment” to subject positions rather than as fixed, static categorizations (pp. 4–6).

Queer provides LGBTQ activists rhetorical tools to destabilize gender and affect social change (Whittle, 2005). Queer discourse impelled the emergence of queer studies and a queer politics with “a strategy positing a shifting, oppositional constituency” (Duggan & Hunter, 2006, p. 175). Wittig (1992) advocates wholesale rejection of binary gender conceptualizations, arguing that the symbolic order that positions heteronormativity as compulsory and “natural” is so inherently corrupt that it cannot be retooled/reclaimed by any marginalized group. Queer identity discourse, by design, creates its own symbolic order—or non-order, as it were. Terminologically, “queer” is possibly as close to ontological perfection as any empty signifier can be: To define a collectivity using a term that defies restriction itself is an almost flawless rhetorical strategy. The very boundlessness of the term presages its dissipation. Queer is imminently flexible, functioning as a noun, verb, adjective, adverb—and as a curiously unrestricted identity designation. The continued pervasiveness of queer as a polysemic word *and* social construct attests to this flexibility. Queer is an ironic term that (ironically) defies petrification of language. By being a thing that cannot be, queer perpetuates its “beingness.”

Understood as an endpoint of a tropological process, irony is the point at which a word is taken to mean the inverse of its original meaning (Burke, 1941). With irony, $A = -A$, which is to say that a term becomes its antithesis. Thus, irony can be seen as a nadir of linguistic evolution, a foreclosure of meaning (Hutcheon, 2005; Scott, 1990). When a collective identity set in motion by an empty signifier reaches a point where its meaning no longer evolves, the signifier can be said to be “non-empty” (as opposed to “full”), which is to say that the empty signifier has reached a point of foreclosure similar to irony—or at least cliché. Examples of such “non-empty” signifiers (arguably) include “family values” for American conservatives or “revolution” for quasi-totalitarian regimes like Mao’s China and the former USSR. These designations function as stopping-points that negate contestation. Crucially, queer identity discourse defies such petrification because queer *never* denoted fixity. A term that never had an exact a priori meaning can never lose its meaning. Likewise, an identity

classification (queer) that functions as a denial or negotiation of identity (Jagose, 1996) can never be diluted through the continued extension of equivalential links. In this way, queer *succeeds* through its ambiguity, remaining what Laclau (2005) terms an “impossible whole” (pp. 80–81, 89).

“Queers Read This” and the Event

Common understandings of non-normative sexual identity continue to evolve. The term “homosexuality” was coined in 1869 in a German pamphlet advocating repeal of sodomy laws (Miller, 1995). Through the 1950s, homosexuality was considered a domain of “perverts” or “sissies” (Plummer, 1981). During this era, the LGBTQ community shared a conspiracy of silence. Being openly queer invited harassment and attack. Still, LGBTQ communities established footholds in bohemian districts of large cities. In literature, gay and lesbian characters were shrouded in metaphor until the late 1940s, when authors such as Gore Vidal, Truman Capote, James Baldwin, and Tennessee Williams offered more overt portrayals (Miller, 1995). Urban entertainment districts served as settings for overt (or at least not exactly hidden) expressions of non-normative sexual identities (Stryker, 2001). The LGBTQ community was a longstanding, covert presence in the performing arts, but cinematic and theatrical portrayals of LGBTQ characters followed the timeworn, inverse-gender template through the 1950s (Miller, 1995). These camp, freakish portrayals created dialectical identity tension: Lesbian and gay actors affected exaggerated “butch” and “femme” personas as a means of either embracing or rejecting stereotypes (Levine, 1998).

Encouraging turning points occurred in the late 1960s. In the summer of 1969, drag queens and butch lesbians rioted against police harassment at New York City’s Stonewall bar, paradoxically spurring the gay (homosexual male) rights movement (Duberman, 1994; Friedman, 2003). Concurrently, health professionals began rejecting “gay as illness” dogmas. Previously, homosexuality was deemed a treatable disorder (Marcus, 2002). Finally, in December 1974, the American Psychiatric Association declared that homosexuality was *not* a mental illness (Miller, 1995). Media visibility soon followed. Positive depictions of gay-identified characters appeared regularly on popular sitcoms like “Barney Miller” and “Alice” (Hart, 2000). “Gay” supplanted “homosexual” in the lexicon, indicating a more upbeat, nuanced understanding (Miller, 1995).

This affirmation, however, was short-lived. The AIDS outbreak produced a backlash re-marginalizing the LGBTQ community. AIDS was understood by many as karmic revenge for wonton lifestyles (Edelman, 2007). AIDS-related hysteria yielded “a reversal of over a decade of gay pride” (Levine, 1998, p. 139). Relabeled pariahs, the queer would retaliate by celebrating the term used to damn them.

Emerging queer identity discourse signaled a paradigm shift. This shift was a spontaneous response to the impossibilities of AIDS. Badiou (2002) defines an

Event³ as an unpredicted moment of rupture that “cannot be reduced to its ordinary inscription in ‘what there is’” (p. 41). The existing order cannot forecast it and has no vocabulary to describe it (Badiou, 2010). An evental site is an “absolutely primary” terrain “on the edge of a void” (Badiou, 2005, p. 175). AIDS came from a void and was in and of itself a void. An Event “comes from beyond, undeserved, unjustified, and unjustifiable” (Hallward, 2003, p. 115). As such, an Event’s origins are outside discourse. An Event shatters meaning, “bring[ing] to light a possibility that was invisible or even unthinkable” (Badiou, 2010, p. 9). The AIDS crisis was certainly such an Event, occurring on a precognitive, viral micro-level akin to the Lacanian Real (Chaitin, 1996) and erupting as affect (infection). There was no predicting AIDS, and there were no words to describe it. Queer discourse delivered a theretofore unimagined vocabulary and subject position. Thus, AIDS and the emergence of queer discourse can be understood as an Event.

Understanding post-AIDS queer discourse as an Event also informs our grasp of why queer identity has proven more flexible than the usual appellations conjoined by an empty signifier. Prior LGBTQ discourse used an assimilationist strategy (Kirsch, 2000; Sullivan, 2003). The Event of AIDS served as a “crash”—or at least a “reboot”—of the meanings or fields of meaning enabled by erstwhile LGBTQ assimilationist discourse. After the Event of AIDS, old vocabularies and political strategies that just didn’t work anymore.

Queer’s double-edge immediately cut both ways. The Queer Nation organization self-destructed within 2 years of inception. Queer Nation “collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions—‘queer,’ after all, meant ‘diversity,’ whereas ‘nation’ implies ‘sameness’” (Stryker, 2007). Queer’s hot-button terminology powered the discourse—yet it became a rhetorical burden for members of the LGBTQ community feeling the term fostered self-hate (Rosenblum & Travis, 2003). As such, queer’s incongruity worked at cross-purposes.

Pre-AIDS, the LGBTQ community established a shaky pluralism of gay men and lesbians as “us.” Charland (1987) posits that creating insider/outsider distinctions is a fundamental function of identification. Constitutive rhetorics yield fictive identities that are then populated by actual people in the lived world. The politicized “civil rights” faction of the LGBTQ community infiltrated the straight world by emphasizing decorum and “respectable” dress (Duggan & Hunter, 2006, pp. 144–145). Contrastingly, the ragtag collectivity consubstantiated by queer was unrepentant, celebrating its alienation.

QRT and the now defunct Queer Nation organization remain crucially important to LGBTQ history. Set in motion by the incendiary provocation of QRT, Queer Nation is important because its inception signaled a decisive move away from prior assimilationist discourse. QRT depicted an LGBTQ community besieged by the assaults of “queer bashing” and through the indifference of the U.S. government and medical community to AIDS’s mortal threat. Sadly, many of these threats and ignominies persist to this day. As such, QRT remains relevant.

QRT used queer as an empty signifier to unify and mobilize its movement. In this way, Queer Nation was devising a “people.” By employing an empty signifier that identified its constituency and then, retroactively, consubstantiated other factions while extending its equivalential chain, queer discourse rhetorically (re)constructed the LGBTQ population, both as a (Queer) “nation” *and* as a people.

Mirroring Laclau’s (2005) model, the mobilization of the queer as a “people” imposed a new structure of identity on the LGBTQ community, thus altering its relation to the outside world. Queer Nation’s construction of a “nation” and “people” correlates with Torfing’s (1999) model explaining nation-building through nationalist discourse. “The homogenization and substantialization of the empty signifier of the nation [in this case, Queer ‘Nation’], which is a defining feature of nationalist discourse, undoubtedly invokes a totalitarian closure, a violent reduction of difference to sameness” (Torfing, 1999, pp. 193–194). As in Torfing’s scheme, QRT reduces differences to mobilize queer’s dogmatist opposition. QRT’s inclusion of disparate groups (all non-normative, despised others) would drive queer’s utility as an empty signifier—*and* its divisiveness.

QRT erases the differentiability of parties encompassed by queer through persuasive means of a life-or-death scenario and a for/against distinction. Burke (1969) explains that the speech act of identification necessarily impels separation from an externalized other. LGBTQ citizens were subjected to a host of debase-ments and neglects that in effect denied their personhood. QRT’s anonymous writer(s) deftly noted these inequities. Reminding readers of their abuse, QRT advocates unity among lesbians, gays, bisexuals, the transgendered, and the questioning (the L, G, B, T, and Q of LGBTQ) as an embattled in-group opposing the greater externalized out-group of hegemonic, compulsory heterosexuality. This insider/outsider dialectic is driven home in QRT with repetitious use of “us” and “them.” “THERE IS NO PLACE IN THIS COUNTRY WHERE WE ARE SAFE, no place where we are not targeted for hatred and attack, the self-hatred, the suicide—of the closet” (Queers Read This, 1990, p. 10).

As a manifesto, QRT radically (re)articulated what it meant to be queer. A manifesto “declares a position . . . refuses dialogue . . . fosters antagonism and conciliation . . . and indulges no tolerance for the fainthearted” (Lyon, 1999, p. 9). In these ways, QRT textualized queer’s counter-discourse by unequivocally demarcating its (queer) constituency from extra-group adversaries, the straight establishment and the more passive, assumedly “assimilated” members of the LGBTQ community. Within days of QRT’s initial distribution, Queer Nation chapters formed in several major cities. “Queer” was wrested from heterosexist nomenclature to empower a re-envisioned LGBTQ community. Stryker (2007) notes,

A signal accomplishment of the group was to reclaim a set of positive associations for an old epithet, “queer,” and to assert that queer people had a right to take up cultural space—right here, right now—with no apologies and no arguments. Just as

importantly, “queer” became an important concept both socially and intellectually, helping to broaden what had been primarily a gay and lesbian social movement into one that was more inclusive of bisexual and transgender people.

Revolutionary coalitions (such as queer) occur at a moment of the ethical, a radical investment occurring through contingent equivalence. People accept contingent equivalencies *because they are convenient, and because they are the best available discourses to address an ongoing crisis* (Laclau, 2000).

Emerging queer discourse marked more than just a moment of the ethical—it marked an evental shift. An Event “compels us to decide a new way of being” (Badiou, 2002, p. 41). The Event of AIDS ravaged bodies, repelled progress toward LGBTQ assimilation, and shattered gay subjectivity. The precipice of an inconceivable, incalculable void, AIDS rendered preexisting gay discourse moot. To combat this inconceivability, the writer(s) of QRT introduced a new vocabulary and a new (queer) subject. (Re)appropriating queer was a rhetorical masterstroke. The Event of AIDS queered (as a verb) LGBTQ assimilationist discourse, yielding queer as an empty signifier, identifying discourse and deconstructive practice.

“Going Beyond”

In Western thought, heterosexuality and homosexuality are conceptualized as opposites. With its procreative function serving patriarchal hierarchies, heterosexuality is constructed as the expected, “natural” orientation. The discourses most oppressive to women, lesbians, and gay men are those grounded in the idea of the “naturalness” of heteronormativity assuming heterosexuality to be the “truth” of human experience (Wittig, 1992). This notion of naturalness impels a dialectic. If heteronormativity is “natural,” it follows that non-normative orientations are unnatural (Sullivan, 2003). Privileging heteronormativity as “natural” sexuality serves patriarchal power structures and is “born out of ideological commitments, not hard facts about sexual practice” (Grindstaff, 2006, p. 74). Queer discourse destabilizes “normal” by embracing and idealizing the non-normative. From this perspective, heterosexuality (like homosexuality) is simply a discursive construct (Jagose, 1996). Still, adopting queer identity is a bold, perilous move. “Queer is more than a choice or a personal preference: It is a complicated cultural political transgression” (Mansfield, 2000, pp. 115–116). Complicated indeed—another example of queer’s double-edge.

The designation “queer” reinforces Foucault’s (1980) notion that rigid sexual identities are foisted on us to bolster preexisting power relations. Power “dictates its law to sex” (Foucault, 1980, p. 83) by situating sex in a binary system dictating “normal” and “abnormal,” licit and illicit. These binaries, of course, are the results of purposive discursive production, not physiology and innate nature. Destabilizing sexuality and gender, queer pushed the

heterosexual/homosexual binary through an allegorical blender. Sullivan (2003) asserts that queer *transcends* categorization through deconstructive practices that are *not* based on pre-constructed subject positions. QRT defines “queer” as a spectrum extending *beyond* gay and lesbian to include the transgendered, bisexuals, or anyone outside the boundaries of heteronormativity as a means of uniting against common enemies. “This new [queer] community is unified only by a shared dissent from the dominant organization of sex and gender” (Duggan & Hunter, 2006, p. 157). The writer(s) of QRT put it more bluntly: “Using ‘queer’ is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. . . . Yeah, QUEER can be a rough word but it also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe’s hands and use against him” (Queers Read This, 1990, p. 8). As such an ironic weapon, queer wielded massive firepower. Still, factions of the LGBTQ community maintain that such discursive “weaponry” holds self-destructive potential. Queer is criticized for its non-specificity, and because the term categorizes all people of non-normative orientation as “other”—starkly contrasting assimilationist tactics of the “gay is good” era (Jagose, 1996). Others have suggested that queer is becoming an assimilationist discourse. The free-floating, queer subject is ideal for the “cultivated ambivalence” of neoliberal capitalism (Merck, 2005, p. 190). Shows like “Queer Eye” have served to recast queer as a euphemism for urban, White male affluence (Moreland & Willox, 2005). Repackaging queer as urban, male consumerism and the continued extension of queer’s equivalential chain have negated queer discourse’s progress somewhat. But queer holds fast by transcending binaries, yielding new ways of understanding identity and subjectivity as deconstructive practice (Sullivan, 2003).

Queer became an empty signifier for the LGBTQ community as metonymy. Queer gained new momentum as initial meanings of the term became even *more* ambiguous in the process of uniting disparate factions⁴ under one banner. Laclau (2001) explains how empty signifiers work this way, stating that “Both metaphor and metonymy are tropological movements, that is, forms of condensation and displacement whose effects are achieved on the basis of going beyond literal meaning” (p. 244). Queer gained discursive ground through the late 1990s as its chain of equivalency stretched. As links were acquired, queer’s initial particularity eroded. “So, to be internal moments of a discursive system, particularities cannot be simply empirical—factually given—but have to be constructed as differential identities, i.e., as having to always go beyond themselves” (Laclau, 2004, p. 282). Such “going beyond,” however, often serves to weaken equivalential links.

As an inter-subcultural DED, queer corralled a previously incongruous group as a singular collectivity, destabilizing an LGBTQ discourse theretofore dominated by gay males and, to a lesser degree, lesbians. The contradictory power of queer discourse created antagonistic fronts, producing schisms within the LGBTQ community and generating worldwide debates about the discursiveness

of gendered identities. Not only antagonistic toward complacent gays and lesbians who were perchance too comfortable with the assimilationist tack, QRT also attacked smug, “liberal” heterosexuals:

I hate every sector of the straight establishment in this country—the worst of whom actively want all queers dead, the best of whom never stick their necks out to keep us alive. I hate straight people who think they have anything to say about “outing.” I hate straight people who think stories about themselves are “universal,” but stories about us are only about homosexuality. (Queers Read This, 1990, p. 5)

This tension between universality and particularity foregrounds the paradox of queer: Tensions existed not only between the realms of straight (universal) and queer (particular), but also between the inclusiveness of queer as an empty signifier and the particularity of various identities it encompassed. *Any* empty signifier’s function is to *reduce* particularisms to a single universality. How can queer signify (absent) universality as an empty signifier yet still *be* queer? It cannot—well, not exactly.

While queer expanded as a “people,” queer discourse evolved to address needs of its expanding coalition. Such expansion, however, holds a double-edge. Laclau (2005) explains that the expansion of an equivalential chain may lead toward an eventual discursive collapse:

I would like now, however, to refer to only one of them, which is a very real—albeit an extreme—possibility, because it involves the dissolution of the “people”: namely, the absorption of each of the individual demands, as pure differentiability, within the dominant system—with its concomitant result, the dissolution of its equivalential links with other demands. So the destiny of [queer] populism is strictly related to the density of the political frontier: if this frontier collapses, the “people” as historical actor disintegrates. (p. 89)

Clearly, queer “‘people’ as historical actor” endures. So why has queer discourse yet to disintegrate—even as its equivalential chain continues to multiply its links?

Reconceptualizing Queer as *Différance*?

As a signifying discourse, queer was an immediate response to the anti-gay hostilities that resurfaced with the Event of AIDS. By appropriating a term once considered the vilest epithet, factions of the LGBTQ community reclaimed strategically important rhetorical ground. As an empty signifier, queer gained momentum by identifying its constituency, then retroactively encompassing factionalized groups (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and the questioning) into an empowered collectivity. An oppositional discourse within a larger

oppositional (LGBTQ) discourse, queer attained a double-edged function, impelling a schism in the LGBTQ community and aggressively opposing the constitutive politics of the straight (heteronormative) world. Still, queer has acquired considerable cultural currency—losing at least a degree of its particularity and confrontational allure in the process. As such, queer is something of a co-opted discourse. But queer discourse's longevity attests to the fact that it is much more than just another briefly realized category in a continuum of short-lived identity movements. Why has queer discourse endured while sundry identifying discourses are discarded, forgotten, rendered moot, or become petrified?

The term “queer” conjures a multiplicity of oftentimes contradictory meanings. This contradictoriness is the source of queer's staying power. Indeed, queer continues its function as an empty signifier for the LGBTQ community. But queer is more than a designation. Queer is an infinite state of flux. “To queer” is to skew and revision meaning, identity, the nature of being—everything. To queer, in this way, is to deconstruct. The task of deconstruction (hence, the task of queer) is to interrogate interplay(s) among fields of meaning—not merely a cynical ploy to deny meaning⁵ as such. As deconstructive practice, queer transcends the inevitable dissipations of Laclau's (2004, 2005) framework. Queer's deconstructive practice is best understood as *différance*.

Derrida (1982) developed the concept of *différance* in contrempts to the Americanized “difference,” a term denoting the quality of separation. *Différance* is different from “different” (humor intended) in that Derrida's *différance* juxtaposes two meanings—“to differ” and “to defer.” The former, “to differ,” explains how separating elements in any semiotic field produces a dialectic, and the latter, “to defer,” explains slippage among discourses where meaning is ever-pending—but never materializes. This secondary understanding, “to defer,” undermines traditional, structuralist notions that the subject is sutured to some kind of essence or fixed point of origin (Biesecker, 1989). As such, *différance*'s “play” among fields of meaning destabilizes binarisms (Derrida, 1988). To illustrate/underscore this slippage or “play” among fields of meaning, Derrida continually introduced novel terms (such as *pharmakon*, *hymen*, and, of course, *différance*) that confused and vexed readers—but were playful in and of themselves. The term “queer” operates similarly to Derrida's aforementioned neologisms (especially *différance*) because of its infinitely multiple meanings and for its capacity to erode traditional subject/structure binaries. One can define the meaning of the term “queer” only within the context of a particular, provisional field of meaning—but not as a monolithic concept per se.

Biesecker's (1989) reassessment of *différance* provides the means through which Derrida's (1982) elusive concept might be harnessed to do the theoretical heavy lifting necessary to explain queer's paradoxical permanence as an identifying discourse. Biesecker suggests that *différance* be understood not only as slippage among fields of meaning but *also* as a means of dismantling connections

among speaker and audience,⁶ context, and outcome. By unmooring the subject from context, temporal location and any *ur*-point, *différance* enables an understanding of identity as being transitional rather than fixed. Freed from these strictures, we are enabled to think of rhetoric as “radical possibility” rather than as a preconfigured set of relations where context invariably determines outcome(s). Biesecker posits that “presum[ing] a text whose meaning is the effect of *différance* and a subject whose identity is produced and reproduced in discursive practices resituates the rhetorical situation on a trajectory of becoming rather than being” (p. 127). Understanding queer as deconstructive practice and queer’s function as *différance*, we can more capably explain why queer discourse has yet to succumb to the discursive undoing that typically occurs in Laclau’s (2004, 2005) framework.

In his response to Chrichtley, Laclau (2002) claims that his work concerns deconstructive practice. Laclau’s logic of equivalence certainly *is* deconstructive—for the most part. The sticking point is that Laclau’s logic of equivalence is predicated on a having a determinable point of inception for any social movement. Assuming such temporal fixity, of course, is antithetical to deconstruction. It closes the horizon of possibility—at least on one end. To close the discursive horizon in this way, it presumes that discourse is linear rather than rhizomatic or multidimensional.

As an identifying discourse—and as an empty signifier—queer rhetorically sidesteps the aforementioned temporal location conundrum. Queer *acknowledges* that it is a thing that cannot be. Queer’s paradox, in this way, is its strength. Because queer is a thing that *is* and a thing that *cannot be*, one cannot affix it to a temporal location as an empty signifier. It is impossible to define an exact point of origination/inscription for a thing that does not exactly exist. Nevertheless, queer still *functions* as an empty signifier—and as deconstructive practice. Therein lies the genius of QRT’s anonymous author(s) in choosing an empty signifier and identity designation that defies itself and is, therefore, impervious to the discursive collapse that occurs when an equivalential chain acquires too many links. Crucially, queer endures—not *despite* the fact that it is a DED, but *because* of it. In this way, queer identity discourse has no endpoint.

Subjugated populations are remarkably adept at counteracting oppression(s) in novel, clever ways. Oppressed peoples have employed postmodern means of coping since long before postmodernism is said to have begun (Sandoval, 2000). In contrast, the framers of queer were remarkably postmodern, adroitly constructing an identifying discourse functioning *by design* as deconstructive practice. Using the thematic of *différance*, we are enabled to understand queer discourse as interplay among fields of meaning that enables an ever-shifting politics of conciliation and reconciliation. Thus, queer discourse is a discourse of refreshing idealism. With this understanding, new vistas of possibility seem infinite and inevitable.

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Notes

1. In this article, LGBTQ is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning.
2. Here, the defaults are what is taken for granted as “normal” and inevitable in Western society such as heteronormativity and the patriarchal family, for example.
3. “Event” is capitalized to designate Badiou’s concept.
4. Contemporary academic understandings of queer extend far beyond non-normative sexuality.
5. Naysayers of deconstruction often misunderstand the practice as purposive negation of meaning.
6. As in the Aristotelian rhetorical situation, more or less.

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