Critics on Critics: Queer Bonds

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"Queer Bonds," special issue edited by Joshua J. Weiner and Damon Young. GLQ 17.2–3 (2011).

Eight years after *GLQ* published a special issue titled "Queer Bonds," the questions it poses are still unanswered. This is partly by design. Suspending longstanding debates about sociality, utopia, negativity, antinormativity, and identification, guest editors Joshua J. Weiner and Damon Young (2011: 233) "aim less to identify a 'new wave' in queer scholarship than to uncover the ways that alongside its project as a theory of the subject (of 'queer' subjects), queer theory has also always already been a project of theorizing the relations *between* subjects." In 2011 the editors of the second issue of volume 17 used the issue to interrogate a wide range of relations, and the contributors to "Queer Bonds" take its title many different ways, without resolution. Today, the debates persist, sometimes to the point of stagnation. But the charge of this special issue—to think the (im)possibility of queer sociality—continues to be a generative and uneasy challenge.[1]

The subject of queer bonds harks back to queer theory's foundation. At the start of her 1993 collection *Tendencies*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick recalls a scene of queer bonds forged across identities: marching with ACT UP activists in 1990, she notices that most of the lesbians sport T-shirts that read "BIG FAG," while the majority of the gay men in the crowd wear shirts emblazed with the words "LICK BUSH" or, more simply, "DYKE." As Sedgwick goes on to explain, the cross-identifications that she observes at the gay pride parade in New York epitomizes an aspect of *queer* she wants to emphasize in her theoretical work. "The word 'queer' itself," she observes, "means *across*" (Sedgwick 1993: xii).

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It is no coincidence that this particular understanding of *queer* emerges in 1993, in a climate of relentless right-wing social, economic, and political attacks on women, gay men, and racial minorities. At the time of Sedgwick's writing, state violence blatantly relied on the invocation of certain identities.[2] As such, the term *queer* proved useful for activists in multiple instructive ways: as a reclaimed slur, it sided with perversion and pleasure rather than respectability and assimilation; as a uncertain descriptor, it disavowed identity categories while still invoking specific stigmatized sexualities. As the threat of AIDS in the United States has—at least, in public perception—shifted from immanent death to long-term illness, conceptions of queer have also shifted. Given this shift, the *queer* that Sedgwick invokes in her early work might not be the same *queer* that is often employed today to mean antinormative or radical sexuality. In contrast to this current understanding, *queer* understood in the context of cross-identificatory bonds delinks the antinormative from the anti-identitarian.[3] "Queer Bonds" continues this admirable theoretical work, calling on theorists to attend to socialities that "have won space in the world without being reducible to violent modes of appropriative privilege" (Weiner and Young 2011: 230).

As Weiner and Young point out in their introduction, "academic sociality itself" now constitutes just such a space in the world (ibid.).[4] With this in mind, they spend time performing academic sociality, most notably in a section titled "Critical Bonds," which constitutes about a third of the issue. Nearly all the mini-essays in the "Critical Bonds" section follow a "[critic X] on [critic Y]" formula: Carla Freccero's "Daddy's Girl—on Leo Bersani"; Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's "Waking Nightmares—on David Marriott"; Heather Love's "'His Way'—on D. A. Miller." The titillating prospect of "critic on critic" action gestures toward the erotics of friendship and familiarity that permeate US queer criticism (made all the sexier by the subtitle's valences of bondage play). As the contributors to the special issue would most likely be quick to admit, the world of academic queer theory itself is at times a heady and intoxicating brew of celebrity and exclusivity, what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner—writing in 1995!—refer to as its "star system" (347). It still feels like this, to me, often, especially at conferences.

As it happens, "Queer Bonds" is the result of a graduate student conference by the same name held at the University of California, Berkeley, in February 2009. I did not go, because in February 2009 I had just started college. In fact, by my calculation, I had read my first queer theory only two months prior. It was Miller's "Anal Rope." I downloaded a grainy photocopy for my first undergraduate English class, Lee Edelman's infamous "Hitchcock" lecture course. I still remem-

ber trying to explain to my patient but incredulous roommate the thrill of this initial exposure. Here was close reading, threateningly close; world-shakingly close in a way I could not articulate for many years, after more reading, more queer criticism, more copies of articles and more borrowed theory books.

It was also in 2009 that I first read Sedgwick's (1987) "A Poem Is Being Written" (again for class; this time Joe Litvak's). I found many things in "A Poem Is Being Written" that afforded me the occasion to forge a queer bond of my own with Sedgwick: an adolescence spent composing poems, a long-standing cross-identification with gay men, a shared perverse affinity for both long sentences and anality, and a reflexive narcissism that I hoped others found charming. Again, this story is excruciatingly familiar. The guest editors also describe their own initial "queer bonds" as forged through cross-identificatory encounter—in their introduction, they remember a "straight" female teacher knowingly lending her male student a copy of Leo Bersani's *Homos*. We aren't told if this memory belongs to Weiner or Young, but we are told that "it doesn't matter" (Weiner and Young 2011: 226).

I like reading "Queer Bonds" because it affirms things that I feel but am embarrassed to admit: namely, the power of the bonds that structure this field. Some of these bonds tie us down. Some we might want to break, or even more rigidly define. There are bonds of labor exchange, for example, between professors and their graduate student workers—bonds that the recent graduate union movements across the country continue to bring to light. Here are some of the things these academic and pedagogical bonds can feel like/can be: mentorship, friendship, rivalry, embarrassment, flirtation, celebrity stalking, the family romance, regular romance, acting, spectating, capitalist exploitation, coaching, having a nemesis, having an uncle, awkwardness, debt, networking, pen pal correspondence, hatred, love, uncertainty, failure, anger, exchange, ambivalence. I am only six years out of college, and that means that right now I still negotiate what it means when my academic bonds, now a decade old, shift from mentorship into collegiality.

The bonds produced by the academy are also bonds that bind us to the names with whom we have studied, or under whom we have worked. As young scholars, we are encouraged to commit some light parricide, but not too much; citation, after all, also catalyzes powerful bonds that result in social capital. Though it may make us chafe to admit it, these academic pedigrees often feel like family bonds—and not "queer" family bonds, either; just regular, boring oedipal ones. The introduction to "Queer Bonds" boasts that the special issue comprises "as many as three 'generations' of queer scholarship" (ibid.: 233). But what makes

an academic generation? How do you measure it? In book acknowledgments? In tenure granted? (In midnights? In cups of coffee . . . ?)

I was born the year *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Gender Trouble* were published. By my estimation, this makes me a third-generation queer theorist. Miller, in his contribution to "Critical Bonds," writes about the privileged position of the third. Miller notes that his subject, the late, great deconstructionist Barbara Johnson, often found herself mediating between two opposed approaches, claims, or ideas. "In that cognitively enviable third position," he writes, "[Johnson] could give the series a sense of completion, put forward a decisive-seeming last word" (Miller 2011: 368).[5] I question whether Johnson's "third position" always resulted in decisive conclusion. Often, presented with two sides, Johnson argues that they are both true and untrue; she answers, slyly, "Yes and no." In her classic feminist essay, "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," she writes, "It is often said, in literary-theoretical circles, that to focus on undecidability is to be apolitical. . . . on the contrary, the undecidable *is* the political. There is a politics precisely because there is undecidability" (Johnson 1986: 35). In Johnson's essay, the indeterminacy of violence and subjecthood is the site of politics. Similarly, the ambiguity at the heart of Weiner and Young's understanding of queer bonds is what makes them a site of political and theoretical purchase.

Like Johnson, the editors of "Queer Bonds" hold a privileged position as mediating thirds; also like her, they sit with contradiction rather than definitively conclude. For Weiner and Young (2011: 236), what makes queer bonds queer is "a *simultaneous* adhesion and dehiscence, a centripetal pull toward the social and a radical centrifugal drive away from it." There is value in remaining attentive to the ways in which this impossible simultaneity operates. More interesting than the existence of queer bonds is their paradoxical mechanism: the very impossibility of the persistence of queer sociality is its driving force. Rather than side with the antisocial or the utopian, the normative or antinormative, "Queer Bonds" teaches us that queer theory's greatest potential lies in its inability to escape dramatically negotiating between the two.

Notes

1. Rereading "Queer Bonds," I thought of many examples of work that, though unmentioned in the volume and disparate in scope, might fall under its titular phrase. A few include the following: Tim Dean's (2009) ethnography of bug chasers and barebacking culture, Christina Sharpe's (2011) poetic and historical work on the monstrous intimacies of slavery and its wake, Karen Barad's (2011) theories of queer ethics, quantum

physics, and atomic bonds, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman's (2013) back-and-forth about the unbearable social nonrelation, and Kadji Amin's (2017) recent queer theorization of politically unsavory objects.

2. Consider, for example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's early "four H's" campaign, which warned that AIDS manifested primarily in the "high risk" groups "Haitians, hemophiliacs, homosexuals and heroin addicts" (Washington 2010: n.p.).
3. Robyn Wiegman makes a similar observation in her recent article "Eve's Triangles, or Queer Studies beside Itself" (2015). Wiegman reminds her readers that "when the normalization of AIDS remained a cogent and much needed political goal, Sedgwick renewed the call for a 'queer analysis, not a strictly gay one,' to address a 'disease that respects no simple boundaries of identity'" (ibid.: 50). Wiegman reads this particular invocation of "queer analysis" not as a renewed commitment to antinormative political projects in the post-AIDS-crisis moment but as a "confrontation with convergences" (ibid.).
4. Weiner and Young (2011: 230) make this claim with a wink, given that they themselves are publishing in one of the primary gatekeepers of that queer academic space: "For all the sexism, racism, and occasionally overt homophobia we still face in the academy, there do exist spaces (*GLQ* included) where leading an explicitly queer intellectual life in print as a mode of professional advancement names an institutionally viable and socially intelligible path across the profession."
5. Miller (2011: 368) goes on to claim that Johnson's alleged desire to be "brought out" constitutes a "perverse" (queer?) wish to depose the triangle in which she plays the mediating third in a conversation between two prominent critics: "But this time around, more remarkably, she seems interested in provoking a series in which she would occupy not the third but the second position, after Miller's essay on Barthes, and before. . . . You will have grasped the open secret harbored in the essay, the wish for a *third* essay to be called—inevitably—'Bringing Out Barbara Johnson,' in which Barbara would be granted, as opposed to the critical advantage of coming last, the writerly privilege of being primary."

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