

Introduction: Post-Normative?

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This is a show tune, but the show hasn't been written for it, yet.

-Nina Simone, "Mississippi Goddam"

The Normativity Wars

What ought to be queer theory's relationship to the "normative" today? In the nearly thirty years since Michael Warner's foundational definition of "queer" as a "more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal" (xxvi), queerness has come to bear a plethora of political uses and social definitions engaging with "the normal." Popularly, "queer" as a category of identification articulates the broad swath of gender and sexual minorities seeking solace in those very same "regimes of the normal," motivated by what David Halperin has called the "drive to social acceptance and integration into society as a whole" (441). In spite of its own nervous differentiation of itself from, as Cathy Cohen observed in 1997, these "category-based identity politics," which aim to normalize themselves (440), queer theory has similarly been married to the "normative." In the last decade in particular, the field has reflected on the problem of its genealogical welding to the normative by challenging the tendency to conflate queer theory with antinormativity; interrogating the very genealogical narrowness of "queer theory *proper*," which has obscured other—namely Black—queer theories that, as Tavia Nyong'o describes, illuminate queer theory as never having been "reflexively antinormative" (153); and clarifying what exactly queer theory means by the "normal," "normative," and, indeed, "queer."¹ We find ourselves in the wake of this work, wherein the "normative" remains the scene of attachment, however ambivalent, to which "queers" and "queer theorists" alike have flocked. In a 2015 special issue of *differences*, of which we recognize this issue as a kind of offspring—"Queer

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Theory without Antinormativity”—Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson make a similar observation by considering if queer theory can loosen itself from its axiomatically antagonistic relationship to normativity. Extending “an invitation to think queer theory without assuming a position of antinormativity” (2), Wiegman and Wilson seek to direct queer theory into an elsewhere less calcified—wherein normativity is no longer cast as the a priori villain against which queer theory stakes its critique. In reaction to this polemic, several queer theorists, chiefly Jack Halberstam, bristle at Wiegman and Wilson’s invitation. “Without a critique of normativity,” Halberstam claims, “queer theory may well look a lot like straight thinking” (1). Indeed, in Halberstam’s eyes, “Queer Theory without Antinormativity” resembles theory made less queer and politically defanged, inasmuch as queer theory has been thought of as useful primarily in its utility as a divining rod with which to expose the normativities structuring various antagonisms of the social. Whether in adoration or contestation, though, the questions queer theory hopes to pose have been dominated by its fascination with the normative. Indeed, if queer theory itself has a normativity (and it has many) it may be to tarry with it. This special issue, then, takes this wake as the occasion to pose a new kind of question: can we be “post-normative?” We do not aim to say conclusively which side of what might be called the “Normativity Wars”—represented here by, though not reducible to, Wiegman, Wilson, and Halberstam—ought to prevail. Rather, we want to delve into what seems to be at the moment unthinkable for queer theory: a realm of critique not cohered by normativity as its object of deliberation.

“?”

You may have noticed: we have already fallen for our own trap. We confess, in asking if we can be post-normative, we have kept the normative in a close embrace. “Normative,” after all, remains the referent on which any critique our “post-” hopes to make relies. In the closing lines of *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz describes the book as “an invitation [. . .] to look beyond a narrow version of the here and now on which so many around us who are bent on the normative count” (189). Though not precisely in the way Muñoz meant, we too are extending an invitation to consider the outside contours of the narrow scope of a queer theory “bent on the normative,” even if it remains internal to a here and now dominated by the normative’s conceptual grip. Such a provisional imagining of the “post-normative” is sure to raise some queer eyebrows. In his critique of Wiegman and Wilson, for instance,

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Halberstam pantomimes the special issue as “we critics, who read athwart not against, who offer critique without solutions, who know something is wrong but cannot offer to replace it, will keep thinking about this in the hopes of generating something that is not more of the same” (1). Likewise, we are offering critiques without any clear solutions, offer no plan forward, and are calling for continued thinking that is not the “more of the same” of queer theory’s penchant to fixate on the normative. And yet, like the end of a long relationship, we recognize the imperative to break up with the normative even when we cannot yet imagine life without it.

In their keynote to the 2019 Feminist Theory Workshop at Duke University, Lauren Berlant offers just such a methodology in providing a theory of the thought experiment:

A thought experiment can be a game in which people smuggle in potentially unpopular ideas under the ruse of free speech. We mainly associate that version with the irritating devil’s advocate who seeks to be protected by a deniability cloak. But of course, floating ideas and following them out is central to all brainstorming. That is, the performative genre of the thought experiment can also be an attempt to knock on the coconut that fell to the ground to see if it can nourish a project that feels stuck somewhere. (“Sex”)

Berlant, much like Nina Simone’s show tune, recognizes the utility of provisional thought, to asking questions when one feels stuck. For our purposes here, framing this special issue as one such thought experiment is particularly useful, as queer theory, we propose, is stuck in the impasse of normativity, is held up in the trenches of a war of conceptual attrition. We are not saying that critiques of normativity do nothing or are not worth doing at all. Indeed, as some of the contributors to this issue remind us, critiquing forms of normativity and the hostile infrastructures inimical to queer life that they commission remains important to preserving that life. This is the “post-” that gestures to an excess of the normative’s clutch. Nor are we saying, however, that the work of Wiegman and Wilson’s special issue represents a futile critique which has no queer legs to stand on. On the contrary, our very preference for the “performative genre of the thought experiment” is a lesson learned from taking seriously Wiegman and Wilson’s aim of demonstrating “the ongoing value of queer thinking as a contestatory, highly mobile, and decentered practice, one dedicated less to resolution than to serious engagement with the content and consequences of its own political and critical commitments” (3).

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In taking the “content” of queer theory’s hypnotic obsession with the normative as our occasion, this issue represents another entry in what Gila Ashtor has recently termed the “self-critical” turn in queer theory. Opposed to the “first generation of queer critique” that championed the radical horizon queerness made possible, “a new generation of work demands that queerness be problematized, contextualized, and deconstructed in an urgent effort to examine what underlying ideological conditions produce a *queerness* that is surprisingly complicit with existing politico-ethical norms” (3). Just so, as a number of contributors to this special issue point out implicitly (and a few explicitly), to ask “Post-Normative?” is to immediately position that question in a succession of publications characteristic of this “self-critical” turn, all of which share its quizzical form: “Queer at Last?” (2004), “What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?” (2005), “After Sex?: On Writing Since Queer Theory” (2007), “Are We Post-Queer?” (2013). What has gone noticeably undertheorized in all of our inquisitive predecessors, however, is the sheer dubiety that their collective use of “?” interjects into the security of their assertions. That is, these “self-critical” queer theories are formally marked by uncertainty. We’d like to lean into this uncertainty as it were, adding the question mark to the end of “post-normative” not as a stylistic flourish or as a question we then proceed to conclusively answer, but rather to fuse the dubiety of the thought experiment to our proposition of post-normative. That is, to open us to the possibility of our own failure. As such, if we fail in rendering the post-normative as a viable detour from these debates around normativity, this too will have been worthwhile in generating a kind of knowledge. Although this may resemble a preemptive absolution—if we’re right, we’re right/if we’re wrong, we’re still right—it is, in actuality, the opposite. If we are open to this particular experiment failing, it is because we are open to acknowledging that the impasse of the normative might be worked differently. Indeed, Berlant might be correct after all in their claim that “the question isn’t how to become post-normative as such but how to respond to the urgency to engender other kinds of anchors or magnets for new social relations and modes of life” (“Depressive”). Although Berlant dispenses with this “question,” we want to ask it anyway, because we affirm the imperative to continue asking the “self-critical” questions characteristic of the performative genre of the thought experiment and the queer theory that serves as its laboratory.

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In this way, this special issue is especially well suited to be *South Atlantic Review's* first dedicated to queer theory, as it reflects on queer theory's methodological impasse while concurrently illustrating "queer thinking" by eschewing the presumption of resolution. Perfectly demonstrating this dovetail are the first two essays of the issue, which reflect self-critically on queer theory as a "discipline." The first, solicited from Ricardo L. Ortiz, "(Inter-)Disciplinarity's (Dis-)Contents: Tarrying with the 'Post-Normative,' Lingering with the 'Post-Ethnic' at the Aporetic Intersections of Queer Latinx Studies' Undecidable Now," opens the issue by contemplating many of the provocations the issue poses more generally. Ortiz's essay—which is the final installment in a trilogy of essays Ortiz has published on the "x" in Latinx Studies²—surveys the numerous disciplinary affiliations underpinning queer studies and its development. Reading across a broad swath of texts (including this issue's call for papers), Ortiz proposes that "queerness" is perhaps best understood not as a series of critiques of normativity or, later, critiques of that critique, but instead a coincidence of disciplinary frictions. To go post-normative, though, Ortiz suggests, is not as easy as shaking off our disciplinary commitments in favor of a catchall inter-disciplinarity. Instead, it may be to fundamentally reconsider the arrangements by which our various theories, no matter how queer, are structured by the "normative" of discipline. If there is a queer theory post-normative, Ortiz hints, it is necessarily one which aspires to an inter-disciplinarity held in self-critical suspension. Similarly, in "Queer Straits: 'Far from Normal' at the Southernmost," Eric Solomon dismisses attempts to resolve the critical deadlock of anti- and anti-anti-normativity in favor of interrogating how the conceptual arsenal of that deadlock—"queer," "straight," "normative," "nonnormative"—ensnare one another and thereby problematize the clear distinctions between each. Turning to several examples of literature of/in Key West, Florida, Solomon interrogates the spatial coincidence of normative and anti-normative categories of identification. In lieu of the narrow "queer straits" of the Normativity Wars, Solomon's analysis reveals that the very concepts on which queer theory relies generatively maroon us in waters more choppy than not.

In contrast to the queer theory characterized by its uncertainty rendered by Ortiz and Solomon, the middle essays attempt to mobilize the "post-normative" in order to produce more delineated forms of queer criticism and politics. In a historical and ethnographic study, "Tumbling Toddlers and Luxury Lofts: Post-Normative Queer Geographies of the American South," Sarah Chant observes the very material ways in which

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spaces are mediated sites of both normativity and queerness. Studying several such sites in Alabama—locations which, Chant claims “include queer people and radical politics just as much as they include the Civil War and racism”—Chant glimpses the post-normative as intrinsic to this pluralism of space and its everyday uses. At a moment wherein spaces are routinely designated symptomatically as “queer” or “normative,” Chant’s detailing of the complex histories and overlapping uses of these spaces productively blurs those taxonomies. Reminiscent of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “nonce-taxonomic work” (23), Chant’s analysis lends “post-normative” methodological credence as an assumption that spaces are in a historical flux in no neat way reducible to “normative” or “queer.” Similar to Chant’s use of space to engage with the post-normative, Aaron Hammes considers the literary purchase of the post-normative in “Trans Minor Fiction, Literature of Para-Normativity.” Blending the queer theoretical distinction between the “minority” and the “minoritarian” with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s use of “minor literature,” Hammes presents “trans minor literature” as a genre that thematizes an ambivalent relationship to normativity. Opting for a prefixal alteration to our favored rapport with the normative, Hammes reads across several “sites” of trans minor literature as exemplars of “para-normativity.” These sites trouble narratives reliant on the normative (such as trans “becoming”), Hammes observes, while concurrently evidencing the difficulty of escaping normativity *tout court*—that is, of going post-normative. *Para*-normativity, on the other hand, Hammes contends, comes into focus as a way of directing that ambivalence toward political ends. Concluding this section, Christopher Griffin’s essay “Relationalities of Refusal: Neuroqueer Disidentification and Post-Normative Approaches to Narrative Recognition” homes in on the particular techniques that institute a binaristic relation to various normativities. Specifically, in analyzing Rivers Solomon’s 2017 novel *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, Griffin perceives a non-dialectic relationship between “neuroqueerness” and forms of narrative presumptive of a neuronormative subject. Such a relationship is instructive, Griffin argues, of a nondyadic relation to normativity more generally. Whereas various iterations of the normative (such as neuronormativity) attempt to obscure their dependency on definitional antagonists (like neuroqueerness), Griffin returns to Muñoz to argue for the post-normative as a relation to normativity structured by disidentification. Neuroqueer literature such as *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, Griffin’s analysis reveals, offers a post-normative passage through the conceptual quagmire of anti- and anti-anti-normativity by reminding us of the non-agential interdependencies of not just those concepts but the subjects they authorize.

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In closing, the concluding two essays productively complicate much of the conceptual work of the issue. Jess Shollenberger's "The Sex Lives of Spinsters" takes as its departure contemporary anxieties surrounding the difficulty in distinguishing queers from a larger (straight) public. As a result of the perceptual confluence of what were then queer aesthetic practices and the mainstream, the apparent oxymoron "ordinary queerness" is taken as indicative of a queer radicalism that has run out of steam. Instead, Shollenberger tracks the queer ordinary as adjacent to anti-normative, *extraordinary* forms of desire and relationality that have been taken to be synonymous with queerness itself. Shollenberger detects in Sarah Orne Jewett, on the other hand, queer forms wherein practices of intimacy play out in the register of ordinary life. The queer ordinary thereby brings to the fore the inscrutability of normative/anti-normative distinctions and how the desire for "recognizable" queerness is ultimately underpinned, paradoxically, by a normative presumption of uniformity. The final essay, "Can the Trans Body Speak? On (Post)Normativity and (Anti)Blackness in Trans Studies," co-authored by Miša Stekl and Jenny Andrine Madsen Evang, observes the role in which transness has been cast as figuring either as the paradigm of normative or anti-normative relations to gendered subjectivity, a casting that Stekl and Evang convincingly track across not only TERF discourses but also queer and trans theory. Naming the oscillation of this assumption "post/normative" (recalling other uses of "post-" in trans theory), Stekl and Evang reveal a series of shared assumptions on either side of this post/normative divide—namely, an investment in a universalized trans body and an enlisting of "plasticity" at the expense of obscuring such plasticity's racialized history. In elaborating these shared assumptions, Stekl and Evang evidence how whether one figures transness as the transgressive negation or "realist" affirmation of the normative—a conceptual bind resembling much of queer theory's Normativity Wars more generally—that figuration is ultimately haunted by the forced plasticity and humanist conceptualizations of the body predicated on the structural exclusion of Blackness, leaving neither the post-normative nor normative unscathed.

Being a thought experiment, this issue hopes to nourish something new in queer theory's critical purchase. And, being a specifically *queer* experiment, these essays far from represent a unified prescription for what such a critique might look like. They take the series of questions that the banner of "post-normative?" encompasses in varied, often contradictory, directions. What they share, however, is an interrogation of what has arguably remained the binding object of queer theoretical inquiry and what assumptions (disciplinary, genealogical, literary, et al.) bolster the normative's cohering gravity. The hope is, however, that

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in singing this particular show tune, however out of tune, the show will come into focus.

Notes

1. See Wiegman and Wilson, Nyong'o, and Duggan.
2. See Ortiz.

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