



We Were There, We Are Here, Where Are We? Notes Toward a Study of Queer Theory in the Neoliberal University

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In his book *Uncivil Rites*, Steven Salaita writes about the case of University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) assistant professor of biology, Leo Koch. In 1960, Koch published a letter in the *Daily Illini* “that challenged repressive sexual mores, decrying ‘the widespread crusades against obscenity.’”¹ For this, he was denied tenure.

Salaita, infamously fired by UIUC *after* being hired into a tenured position, wryly notes, “Ironically, had Koch criticized Israel in 1960, and had I condemned sexual puritanism in 2014, neither of us would have been fired. The topic is less important than the system.” Indeed, from the vantage point of 2016, it seems ridiculous that a university would dismiss a professor for complaining about “crusades against obscenity” (and we can only hope for a time in the future when it will seem as ridiculous to fire someone for criticizing Israel).²

The University, after all, is now Perfectly Queer. It’s not just that nearly every discipline practically mandates that gender and sexuality be incorporated into research and teaching but that queerness is considered, well, not queer at all anymore. So is Queer Theory dead? Or has it simply become queer theory? What place if any does it have in the neoliberal university? This article contends that queer theory’s supposed powers, of breaking norms and binaries, were never as disruptive as its adherents, including me, have claimed or assumed. Furthermore, queer theory, although not without its uses and pleasures, has been firmly

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ensconced within the neoliberal university, quietly helping to distract from the ferocious privatization and corporatization of public and private universities with an allure of the daringly seductive.

This article is an exploratory piece, presaging a larger one. It wends through the history of the neoliberal university, the lineage of queer theory, and the larger economic contexts and storms that continue to rage outside the windows of the ivory tower. Without dwelling profoundly on the details of Salaita's case—I use his remark as a springboard—I aim to provide a history of how we got to this place, where the topic of queerness and its attendant mulling in the form of queer theory became so entrenched in a system that encourages the shutting down of dissent and the exploitation of massive numbers of employees in the name of profits.

I question what has become of queer theory's radical project and whether it ever really *had* a radical project to start with. In broad ways, I take up two forms of arguments that spring from the heart of queer theory, like arrows dipped into basilisk blood in order to defeat foes. The first is the constantly repeated claim that queer theory's primary function is to break down the homo/hetero binary.³ The second is that queer theory is *relevant* to all or at least several modes of inquiry, resulting, for instance, in the popular gerundive act of “queering” everything from capitalism to agriculture to religion. My exploration of these issues will require an interweaving of the history of queer theory, the neoliberal university, and my own place in formal and informal academic contexts.

))) The History of the Neoliberal University

By now, enough has been written about the neoliberal university that its course can be charted quickly. In brief: Following the more general neoliberalization of the global economy, starting in and around the 1970s, universities worldwide increasingly became less invested in research and academics and more focused on making profits as corporate entities.⁴ None of this is to point towards a history of the university as some original place of egalitarianism. If anything, university systems have been generally implicated in the rigid calcification of class hierarchies and the project of nationalism, with Britain's elite universities leading the way and American institutions following.

But at various points of time, it has been generally understood that opening up education is a necessary act. To that end, the post-World War II American G.I. Bill ensured that veterans gained access to both jobs and education (although it was markedly different for black veterans). But all of that has been rapidly unraveling. In the United States, student debt and the rising costs of

tuition make it virtually impossible or even desirable for average people to gain a college education.

One of the key features of the neoliberal university is that its administrative structure bloats out of proportion to its research and teaching structure. Tenure lines have been increasingly whittled down and away, faculty salaries are frozen, and the “adjunctification” of the university means that instructors’ relative autonomy disappears. Adjuncts are hired to teach the majority of the classes, leading to not only more precariousness for them but also a worsening intellectual environment when those without even a chance at gaining tenure do not dare to either teach or present material in ways that are challenging. Students are no longer simply students, but transformed into consumers.

The neoliberal university also makes its presence felt in its sheer physicality and by literally changing the built environment around it. Universities like Columbia in New York City or the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) settle into precarious or less affluent neighborhoods, buying up tracts of land and empty lots as investments, and gradually encroach and begin to push original residents out and away. Loyola University on the north side of Chicago, for instance, has gradually taken over the surrounding area, turning sections into a glorified student mall.⁵

In Hyde Park, where I live, the University of Chicago sits and spreads like a massive blob, fronted by some exquisite buildings that help to make a good part of the neighborhood look like Not Quite Ye Olde Englande, with several older campus buildings carefully designed to look like they have existed since medieval times (the university was founded in 1890). At orientation, its students are warned never to go south of 63rd and to never cross Washington Park, one of the last remaining jewels of landscape architecture designed by the legendary Frederick Law Olmsted. In all likelihood, the park will soon be cut up to make way for Barack Obama’s presidential library.

The University, home to one of the top medical schools in the world, refused for a long time to host a trauma center, despite the number of shooting deaths in the neighborhood, only relenting this summer.⁶ Meanwhile, plans are underway for a massive redoing of 53rd street, renaming it “Downtown Hyde Park,” even though this is only a neighborhood, barely five blocks by five blocks. There are few affordable and good grocery stores, attesting to the long-time reputation of the South Side as a food desert. There is however, a new and flashy Whole Foods set to open in 2016, located on the former site of a cheap and decent neighborhood grocery that catered to students and locals. The neighborhood is increasingly designed for the tastes and incomes of affluent faculty, staff, and students, a project of gentrification undertaken in collusion between wealthier members of the community, black and white, and one of the richest universities in the world.

Architecture defines universities, forging tactile and visual connective tissue with their environments, and the results are not always welcome. It was at UIC, a campus comprised mostly of Brutalist architecture, that I fell in love with Brutalism. I joined its Department of English as a lecturer straight after graduate school at Purdue. On the day of my job interview, I waited in the women's restroom two floors above the floor of University Hall (UH) where my interview was scheduled (UH only has restrooms every few floors) and, as I read my files over, looked down to see a significantly sized roach on its back. The roach, dead or near-death, kept me company till I left to go downstairs. I decided it was a portent, but of what I did not know.

It was 2000, a year after the momentous hiring of Stanley Fish, whose famed academic career at Duke University had already earned him a *New York Times* profile. At Duke, he created a constellation of academic megastars like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon, making that university look like the birthplace of queer studies and literary theory. Suddenly, here he was at UIC, the poorer, much humbler cousin to UIUC, and I found myself in what seemed like the center of the universe. Money was being thrown around to hire the biggest names. Receptions had actual food even though lecturers had no computers at the time. UH, designed by Walter Netsch in the 1960s, was and is the tallest building on campus, a massive behemoth with slits for windows (apocryphally said to be designed for cannons). Sometimes, after lunch on Taylor Street, an Italian neighborhood quietly ceding chunks to the University, I would walk back to my office, pausing to look up and marvel at a sight a lot of other people seemed to think ugly, the tower forcefully rising upwards into the bright blue sky, comfortable in its own sense of power.

These were tumultuous years on the inside, with dozens of fraught and angry faculty meetings (I was privy to some, attending as the lecturer representative for a year). But there was money everywhere, it seemed (except for adjunct salaries, despite the fact that we taught more than regular faculty and that we nearly matched them in numbers). I'm reminded, in thinking of those years, of a line from the film *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, where Kevin Spacey, playing a parvenu of Savannah, Georgia, says, "I'm what they call nouveau riche, but then, it's only the riche that counts."

I left in 2003, mostly to pursue a career in writing, impelled by the fact that I was among those whose yearly contract was not renewed, even though I knew from the grapevine that I would probably be eventually hired back (or perhaps not: grapevines are not reliable). That sounds both noble and sad, and that's not actually how I understood it at the time—I just knew I needed to keep writing, and the crushing adjunct schedule that left no time to breathe made that impossible. Someone I considered a mentor and friend fully agreed I needed to

leave an exploitative position, so I leapt into the abyss of freelance life. Fish, supposedly angered by the cutting of funds for what he wanted to continue to do as dean, stepped down from that position and eventually left for warmer climes in Florida in 2005, and then moved on to the Cardozo Law School of Yeshiva University in New York City.

In 2008, the economic crisis hit and things at UIC took a turn for the worse. I still had friends and colleagues at the University and was there often for talks and meetings. I knew things were bad when they stopped dispensing paper towels in the bathrooms (and then years later that things were better when they restocked the machines). When it comes to the fortunes of public universities, there is much to be said for data analysis and crunching numbers. And there is much to be said for paying attention to those little signs that warn you things are not going well: the feel of the toilet paper, the availability or lack thereof of paper towels, the anxiety in main offices if you look like you're about to walk away with a cheap Bic pen.

In 2009, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick died, meriting obituaries in places like the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker*.

In 2011, the unthinkable and, for some, the unspeakable, happened at UIC, a university that had long yearned to see itself as one of the truly elite and therefore impervious to the sloppier issues like labor and pay and organizing: its teaching force voted to unionize.⁷

))) What Was Queer Theory?

I never saw Eve Sedgwick live (in the spirit of 1990s queer theory, that seems like a title for an academic paper: "Eve Sedgwick Live"). She came to Purdue to deliver a talk when I was still a graduate student, but I had to miss it because I had a conference to attend elsewhere. I was not a huge admirer of hers, though I understood the importance of her intellectual work. But, still, I regretted not being able to see a Minor God in the flesh.

She was by then *Eve Sedgwick* and had published *Epistemology of the Closet* in 1994. In 1992, Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble*. Sometime in those years, the *New York Times* went to the Modern Language Association (MLA) conference, and came back with a report about Sedgwick's presentation, which had been titled, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl." Without even having actually read the (unpublished) paper or attended the presentation (open only to MLA members), strong opinions, mostly against, were expressed about her work. Queer Theory was officially the *enfant terrible*, the Bad Queer, the Wicked

Dominatrix of academia and its proponents including, admittedly, myself, took pride in such a reputation.

As I recall, the *Times* would do this for a while, regaling and enthralling its readers with tales of these wild and wacky LitCritQueerTheory people. In 1991, it wrote about the academic and labor historian Andrew Ross, whose work is both wide-ranging and deeply influential, wearing a yellow polyester jacket at the MLA because that was, apparently, what mattered.⁸

These were the things that mattered in the stratosphere. For graduate students slowly becoming benumbed to the idea that most of us would toil at adjunct careers for a while or forever, the MLA was an annual and expensive chore. As the 1990s wore on, it became the single most dreaded event in our lives as we went from being gushy, curious first-years listening to the tales of our seniors to becoming rapidly the more jaded one-then-two-then-three-or-more-times veterans. In all of this, I and others in my cohort, at Purdue and elsewhere, were resolutely anti-heteronormative and queer as fuck. And we often had the t-shirts that said so. We were the first generation that grew up on queer theory as it exploded into the universe; we sprung from that primordial soup believing we were the first tadpoles of life, that ours was The Age.

I wish I could say that we knew we were living in Really Important Times, *that we just knew this was all going to mean something someday*. But the truth is that for us and for many people across the country, queer theory and its kissing cousin critical theory were being resisted with a ferocity that took a lot of us by surprise. As graduate students, we were unprepared for the backlash as those we considered the older generation of scholars (though in fact several were closer to our age) angrily denounced everything from subaltern and postcolonial studies to queer theory to deconstruction. And this anger was not just contained at the level of personal ire, but seeped into matters like departmental hires.

On one occasion, a prominent queer scholar applied for a job at Purdue, but eventually stayed put before making his way upwards into the stratosphere elsewhere. Those of us who had fought tooth and nail to even have him interviewed and then brought in on a campus visit were left staring as several purportedly straight male faculty first swooned at the candidate (he was, it must be admitted, extraordinarily good looking *and* brilliant, a devastating combination) and then as quickly declared that his work was somehow not up to snuff, despite clear evidence from prominent members in his field who testified otherwise.

All of this will seem strange to those who inhabit a world where everything is subject to “queering” and where any resistance to something as banal as post-colonial studies will seem quaintly old-fashioned. I don’t recount this history as anything even resembling a definitive version of events, but to indicate that

queer theory circulated in and animated these sorts of networks of power. At the time, it seemed like queer theory, along with its aligned disciplines, was about to destabilize the entire academic world. How could we fail, then, to imagine that it could potentially transform the universe as we understood it? How could we fail to imagine that destabilizing the binaries of sex and gender, for instance, actually meant shifting the very axes of power on which everything relied?

I found Purdue and its surrounding environs uninhabitable for several other reasons, including the tiring and ever-present racism of an insular and mostly white college town. I moved to Chicago in 1997, before I was done with my dissertation. I was done with coursework, commuted to teach, and tried to locate a life somewhere in between the two places. Between 1999 and 2005, I was a member of the Chicago queer group Queer to the Left (Q2L, which disbanded sometime around my last year in it).⁹ I joined shortly after the group's first public action during Pride, when it festooned the then brand new and very phallic rainbow pylons in Chicago's Boystown with dollar bill signs as a way to protest the commercialization of gay identity. One of its first meetings I attended was around the time of the Matthew Shepard killing, and I remember being delighted to be among people who were critical of the mainstream gay community screaming for the killers to be thrown into prison and worse.

This was not a group immersed in simply critiquing heteronormativity but concerned with capitalism itself, and with how gay identity was frequently deployed as an instrument with which to wield its devastating power. Q2L would go on to be involved in anti-gentrification efforts alongside community organizations on the North Side, impelled to do so when a group of gays and lesbians declared themselves the 46th Ward Gays and Lesbians and, in essence, declared they would be involved in "cleaning up" the neighborhood of Uptown, one of the most racially and economically mixed areas of the city. When the war in Iraq began, one of Q2L's most successful and visually eye-catching acts in the annual Pride Parade was to dress as Alice in Wonderland characters, with indictments of figures like Dick Cheney. In 2003, I represented the group in one of the first queer gatherings of anti-war voices, in the basement of the downtown Chicago Temple.¹⁰

In other words, as capital mobilized and bombs exploded, Q2L moved quickly to take on positions critical of mainstream politics, with a queer bent. At a giant anti-war rally, members of the group gathered with our queer banners and signs and, at one point, a bit overwhelmed by the presence of so many seemingly straight people, we began to chant, "We're here, we're queer, and we're not going shopping!" At first bemused and then vastly amused, the rest of the huge crowd around us was soon joining in. We couldn't move very much, so large was the

demonstration, so we jumped up and down in place, screaming at the tops of our lungs.¹¹

This is how I remember it, a band of queers jumping up and down and screaming that we were queer, that we weren't going to support war, among thousands of people, asserting our queerness in the midst of it all. There is, somewhere, a scene from a film that might appear in the future, or at least the spool from within my mind that plays like a movie scene. It felt exhilarating, it felt necessary, and it would eventually pass into memory, lodged somewhere like a cinematic clip: *We are here, we were there. We were never going shopping.*

In 2009, I would cofound Against Equality, a radical queer collective, meeting my future friend and comrade Ryan Conrad on the still nascent Facebook and even becoming coeditors of our first book before we ever met in real life. What we have consistently said in Against Equality is that ours is not a critique of the homo-hetero binary, but of the privatization of structures of support. To that end, we began with gay marriage, a topic that absorbed Ryan when he lived in rural Maine and watched mainstream gay groups like Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and what is now known as The Task Force, rush into his state and steer funds and political energy from matters like HIV/AIDS prevention and homelessness among queer youth.¹²

For us, the problem with gay marriage has never been that it establishes either hetero- or homonormativity but that it is a neoliberal tool, performing a sleight of hand by convincing a larger general public that to be *against* gay marriage is to somehow desire to kill all gays and lesbians who simply want to live in wedded bliss. In fact, what gay marriage has done is to make it possible to rationalize the evisceration of the last bits of what we might optimistically call the welfare state, the dregs of such in the United States, and to make it possible for lawmakers to insist that now that everyone *can* get married, everyone *should*.

When gay marriage became legal in Massachusetts, private and state employers made it mandatory for those on domestic partnerships, even straight people, to marry if they wanted their partners to continue to access their health care benefits. Marry or Die. That dictate has since spread to other states; Michigan Senator Rick Jones recently introduced legislation that would eliminate health care for the domestic partners of state employees. Marry or Die.

In the 1990s, this seemed an impossible idea, given that marriage was not even a blip on the horizon. But by the mid-to-late 1990s, as gay marriage became more of a possibility and as states struck back with anti-gay-marriage amendments everywhere, gay marriage became the necessary cause to support. Q2L, to my astonishment, suddenly became a group whose more vocal members, gay white men and women, decided that they needed to take on gay marriage. Its last public action, a far cry from the inventive anti-war rallies and protests or

anti-gentrification marches, was to stand outside the Drake Hotel, site of a Wedding Expo, to protest the exclusion of gays from marriage.¹³

In the meantime, queer protests continue even if they're not coded as explicitly and recognizably *queer*. When I speak to any group of adjuncts or faculty organizing around unionization these days, it doesn't take long for me to recognize most or all of them as queers whom I know and recognize from other contexts. Even if I can't tell, I generally assume they are, and they are, in the sense of "queer" now being a more inclusive term that doesn't require declarative statements. At least in the urban setting I circulate, nobody bothers coming out any more. The group Fearless Leading by the Youth (FLY) organized protests against the University of Chicago to demand a trauma center; it is comprised of many young queers of color, as are the groups Assata's Daughters and Black Lives Matter, which do similar work. These groups do astonishing coalitional organizing work that considers the multiple ways in which violence, racism, gentrification, and capitalism combine and collude to create what are rendered as "unsafe" zones in the city.

The MLA, in the meantime, has spawned a subconference, now entering its third year, a free annual event—*with food*—designed to address the issues of labor and neoliberalism that generally aren't engaged with in-depth during the main conference. Its organizers are adjuncts and graduate students interrogating not only the university's relationships to its built environments but its literal and metaphorical investments in enterprises like drone warfare.¹⁴ Critical work, such as incorporating the unionization of universities, is doubtless here to stay, no matter how much pushback they face right now, and all of that is an excellent development.

But although "queer" and queers are now everywhere in these struggles, it has become more difficult to actually, well, queer the queer, if you will. In the wake of gay marriage, even Republican presidential candidates won't touch the subject, which seems to elicit more yawns and boredom than anything else: Gay marriage is so very 2014.

And yet, gay marriage survives as a powerful conceptual and legislative tool to mobilize neoliberalism. The most obvious example is that of civil unions and domestic partnerships being erased in order to compel people to marry. But there's a more insidious intellectual and cultural problem that has now arisen. To this day, it is difficult to sustain a conversation critical of gay marriage without first having to talk about how *anti-heteronormative* it is. Even when grounded in notions of *homonormativity*, it feels futile to simply rail against the normative. Over and over, we in Against Equality work at making evident the profound economic and legal problems with gay marriage and what its victory has made invisible. For instance, the triumph of Edith Windsor's case allows progressives and lefties to be excited about how wonderful it is that gay people

can now leave their estates to their partners—but this completely obscures the fact that the only people likely to leave estates like the one left to Windsor are extremely wealthy people. In that sense, *Windsor v. United States* simply represents the expansion of the moneyed class to *include* wealthy gays and lesbians like Windsor.

But this is, in a sense, what queer theory has wrought. Its lasting legacy has been to allow people to assume that the mere presence of queer people creates a magical insurgency. Thus, we have the persistent idea that gays and lesbians marrying is somehow disrupting the institution of marriage, with pages spent on explaining that the very idea of a woman in a tuxedo disrupts the universe.¹⁵ These are the kinds of representational and easy moments that mainstream culture loves to revel in. Talk to an average straight progressive or lefty who wants to eagerly demonstrate how non-homophobic *and* cool they are, and they will inevitably call upon the “but gays marrying each other will change the institution” argument. Even as, all around them, there is ample evidence that marriage has not changed anything or been changed, in terms of how it is part and parcel of a state apparatus that privatizes resources so that increasingly only the married can access resources. It is surely no accident that Conservative support for gay marriage in the UK coincides with renewed bids to eviscerate the National Health Service.

The more difficult conversation is the one about how queerness is implicated in capitalism, that although it matters to be present within the belly of the beast, we can only rip its heart out if we understand the extent to which queerness in itself is neither liberatory nor an end to systems of power.

NOTES

1. Steven Salaita, *Uncivil Rites: Palestine and the Limits of Academic Freedom* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), 84.
2. *Ibid.*
3. See Gavin Brown’s sad lament, “Queer’s Contradictions (and Radical Sexual politics for Precarious Times),” *Journalment* 3 (2013), <http://journalment.org/article/queer-s-contradictions-and-radical-sexual-politics-precarious-times>.
4. See, for instance, Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).
5. It should be noted that all of this comes about through complicated processes. I’m gesturing towards a quick history here, but I don’t wish to imply that ideas about “original” ownership of neighborhoods are uncomplicated. I would also caution against overly simplistic renditions of relationships between universities and local communities.

6. Kelly Hayes, "Youth-Led Direct Action Campaign Yields Trauma Center for Chicago's South Side," *TruthOut*, September 14, 2015, <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/32787-youth-led-direct-action-campaign-yields-trauma-center-for-chicago-s-south-side>.
7. Rebecca Burns, "UIC Faculty Union Flexes Muscles in Showdown Over Adjunct Pay," *In These Times*, December 12, 2013, http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/15983/uic_faculty_union_showdown_over_adjunct_pay.
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11. On queer political protests, see Benjamin Shepard, *Queer Political Performance and Protest* (New York: Routledge, 2011).
12. Ryan Conrad, "Against Equality, In Maine and Everywhere," in *Against Equality: Queer Revolution Not Mere Inclusion*, ed. Ryan Conrad (Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press, 2014), 57–64.
13. "Queer Activists Protest Amendments by Becoming SpongeBob," *Windy City Times*, February 23, 2005, accessed at <http://www.windycitymediagroup.com/gay/lesbian/news/ARTICLE.php?AID=7454>.
14. Yasmin Nair, "Solidarity without Affect: The MLA Subconference Enters Its Second Year," *I Don't Live Here Anymore*, January 8, 2015, <http://yasminnair.net/content/solidarity-without-affect-mla-subconference-enters-its-second-year>.
15. Katrina Kimport, "Being Seen through Marriage: Lesbian Wedding Photographs and the Troubling of Heteronormativity," in *The Marrying Kind? Debating Same-Sex Marriage within the Lesbian and Gay Movement*, eds. Mary Bernstein and Vera Taylor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 291–316.

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