

Introduction: Antinormativity's Queer Conventions

*T*he tyrannies of sexual and gender normativity have been widely examined in queer theory. Heteronormativity, homonormativity, whiteness, family values, marriage, monogamy, Christmas: all have been objects of sustained critique, producing some of the most important work in the field in the nearly three decades of its formal existence. Indeed, as we read them, nearly every queer theoretical itinerary of analysis that now matters is informed by the prevailing supposition that a critique of normativity marks the spot where *queer* and *theory* meet. This special issue of *differences* unearths the question that lies dormant within this critical code: what might queer theory do if its allegiance to antinormativity was rendered less secure? In the pages that follow, contributors attend to this question by setting their analytic ambitions on the possibility evoked by the title: can queer theorizing proceed without a primary commitment to antinormativity? No one takes this charge to mean that the future of queer theory lies in a disengagement from the question of normativity. On the contrary, we are motivated by the need to know more about the history, social practices, identities, discursive attachments, and political desires that have converged to make normativity

queer theory's axiomatic foe. The provocation offered by our title, then, is less a manifesto than an invitation to think queer theory without assuming a position of antinormativity from the outset.

To orient readers to this conversation, our introduction proceeds in two parts. The first traces the centrality of antinormativity to the political imaginary and analytic vocabulary of queer theory. Here we demonstrate how profoundly the history of queer theorizing has been shaped by an anti-normative sensibility, one that unites the multiple and at times discordant analyses that comprise the queer theoretical archive into a field-forming synthesis. We call this synthesis *queer studies*, and we read its interdisciplinary consolidation around antinormativity as its most productive field-defining rule. The complexities that ensue—as critical sensibility, political imaginary, and disciplinary rule converge—are at the heart of our concerns, generating our sense that the attention this volume directs toward the possibility of a queer theory without antinormativity is both a necessary and timely pursuit. In the second part, we offer a more studied consideration of the character of norms in order to rethink the conceptual framework that sustains antinormativity. By exploring the difference between a norm and the terms that often define it—domination, homogenization, exclusion, identity, or more colloquially, the familiar, the status quo, or the routine—we demonstrate the importance of the conceptual and political distinctiveness of normativity as an object of inquiry. In particular, our goal is to show that norms are more dynamic and more politically engaging than queer critique has usually allowed.

This introduction explores what might be considered the two impulses that generate this project: one that traces the history and rhetorical formulations of antinormativity as it has served to consolidate queer studies as an academic field of knowledge; the other that seeks to encounter normativity on something other than oppositional terms. The essays in this volume work across these impulses, offering different orientations to the conundrum that antinormativity represents. As such, they do not speak to the theme of the issue in any unitary way, nor do they respond to the problems we raise by insisting on anti-antinormativity as a new critical value. The conceptual difficulties this conversation begins to map are more complex, and more interesting than that. Some essays return to foundational texts in queer studies and cultural criticism to explore early engagements with norms, normativity, and normalization in order to consider the status of normativity as part of the political intervention first offered as queer. Other essays turn to more recent projects to examine the

disarticulation of queer from radicality that has accompanied analyses of neoliberalization, empire, religious and national identity, and deviance. Still others consider the innovation and impact of “nonnormativity” as a political metric and analytic tool. In its “failure” to present a unified stance on what a queer theory without antinormativity might mean, the issue demonstrates 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.

Performing Antinormativity

Today, we think it is safe to say, a defense against normativity is a guiding tenet of queer inquiry, as central to its self-definition as the anti-identitarianism that enabled the famed departure of *queer* from the rubrics of *lesbian* and *gay*. Antinormativity not only collectivizes the diverse work of such foundational figures as Leo Bersani, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Gayle Rubin, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Michael Warner, but it also underwrites the critical analyses and political activisms of the field’s most important interlocutors, including feminist theory, women of color feminism, and transgender studies. Whether as political or analytic description—and sometimes as both—antinormativity appears in all itineraries of current queer critical practice, from scholarly monographs to blogs, journal essays, conference themes, curricula, and program mission statements. In institutional discourses, it provides the governing rationale for formalized academic study, initiating curricular projects that aim to “denaturalize heterosexuality and interrogate sexuality normativity” or that explore “the relationship between the normative and the transgressive” in order to interrupt “how norms are produced and come to be taken for granted.”¹ It can even prompt a return to identity considerations, newly cast, as when queer studies is described as a field committed to the “histories, contemporary experiences, and community-based knowledges of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people, intersexed people, queers, and others who occupy nonheterosexist and nonnormative gender positionalities.” In scholarly venues, antinormativity underwrites methodological investments, serving as the impulse to “queer” any number of disciplines, objects of study, and cultural practices. It also compels a host of theoretical commitments, including those that travel under the contradictory auspices of negativity, utopianism, failure, futurity, and optimism (both cruel and otherwise).

While its focus and theoretical inheritances vary, antinormativity reflects a broad understanding that the critical force of queer inquiry lies in its capacity to undermine norms, challenge normativity, and interrupt the processes of normalization—including the norms and normativities that have been produced by queer inquiry itself.

To present antinormativity as a canonical belief in queer studies, if not its most respected critical attachment, is surely at odds with the political disposition first cultivated under the sign of *queer*. For many scholars, *queer* held critical promise precisely because its antinormativity was bound to a refusal of institutional forms of all kinds, including those most familiar in discipline-oriented terms. Writing in 1995, David Halperin argued in favor of *queer* as a critical value, hoping that it could withstand the impact of popularization by sustaining the rigor “to define (homo)sexual identity oppositionally and relationally, but not necessarily substantively, not as a positivity but as a positionality, not as a thing but as a resistance to the norm” (*Saint Foucault* 66). But by 2003, he would reject such optimism. Recasting “resistance to the norm” as resistance to “the normalization of queer theory,” Halperin would depict queer inquiry as a commodity whose value relied on forfeiting the complexity of gay and lesbian studies in favor of the lure (and lull) of theory’s academic prestige.² Other scholars have likewise set the value of queer inquiry against institutionalization, though Halperin’s lament that “queer theory was simply too lucrative to give up” has not been widely adopted, at least not in the humanities (“Normalization” 341). For many scholars, in fact, it has been queer theory’s theoretical inventiveness that has posed the greatest resistance to the normalizing forces of institutionalization, which have been understood not only as the domestication of the field into familiar academic forms but the reproduction of dominant conceptions of the social and political as well. As Lee Edelman insisted at a conference plenary called The State of Queer Studies in 1994, “Opening spaces, reclaiming them, may be central to the enterprise of queer theory as it proliferates, but defining a space or a state of our own, insisting that we recognize and collectively accede to some common territorial boundaries, this is a fantasy [. . .] on which the heterosexual colonialization of social reality is predicated” (343). His comments, published the following year in *GLQ*, emphasized that the “desire of, and for, queer theory, demands a continuous—and continuously unsettling—challenge to the institutionalization of pleasures (including the pleasures of institutionalization)” (345–46).³ As such, “[Q]ueer theory curves endlessly toward a realization that its realization remains impossible” (346).

Halperin and Edelman may be widely considered major figures in the first generation of queer theory's academic enterprise, but they are hardly intellectual bedfellows. One is a classicist whose queer theoretical inquiries have taken shape around an "antipsychoanalytic" Foucault, while the other, trained in American literary studies, works resolutely through the interpretative framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis (*Saint Foucault* 121). Halperin has often located the critical purchase of his work in intervening in two common misunderstandings of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*: the now famous and for Halperin fabled distinction between the homosexual and the sodomite; and the equally famous assumption that Foucault scripted what Sedgwick called a "Great Paradigm Shift" in his rendering of sexuality's role in the emergence of the modern episteme (*Epistemology* 44). Edelman, on the other hand, has focused little attention on the historicizing weight of queer theory's most celebrated inaugural work. In fact, his 1994 book *Homographesis* acknowledges only an "implicit" debt to Foucault while crafting "more explicitly" its intention to examine "social regulation and ideological power in terms derived from the linguistically-oriented psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan and the rhetorically-based textual practices of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man" (xiv). And in *No Future*, Edelman's most famous queer theoretical text, there is no mention of Foucault at all. What Halperin and Edelman might be said to share, then, is not a theory or a text or a disciplinary inheritance. Rather, in their consignment of critical value to antinormative interpretations and intuitions, they invest in queer inquiry as a mode of critical resistance: against conceptual closure, institutional domestication, the predications of identity, and the normativity of political thought.

To be sure, Edelman is far more committed to queer's negative capability than is Halperin—or any other scholar working today in queer studies for that matter. As Annamarie Jagose has said, "It would be a fool-hardy critic who twitted Edelman for not going far enough" in his refusal of the rehabilitative and reparative instincts that underlie contemporary politics as a struggle for the social good, including those struggles that might have the surname *queer* (522). But our point is not that critics use antinormativity for the same ends, or even that they conceive of norms and normativity in uniform ways. On the contrary, because normativity has come to stand as the negative force against which the field crafts its self-definition, contestations over the history and multiple (and conflicting) disciplinary meanings of norms and normativity have been largely obscured. Think here of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler, two figures who have contributed a

great deal to the postulation of antinormativity as a field-generating consensus but whose oft-cited founding texts, *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Gender Trouble*, published three months apart in 1990, diverge significantly not only in object orientation and theoretical concern but in the political rhetorics they perform. In the differences between the canonical literary archive that determines *Epistemology's* itinerary and Butler's now signature engagement with Foucault and the canon of contemporary critical theory, a range of issues emerges that might direct our attention to the way that literary study, on the one hand, and philosophy, on the other hand, generate distinct critical idioms and interpretative practices—differences that Sedgwick herself would begin to make clear in 1997 with her deliberation on practices of reading and their consequences (“Paranoid”). Still, queer inquiry has been far less interested in exploring the disciplinary orientations that craft its conceptual use of norms and normativity than in positing the disciplines themselves as institutionalized forces of normalization. Instead, a critique of the disciplines tout court has become central to the field's antinormative self-description, generating the now pervasive claim that interdisciplinarity is itself among the field's most valued antinormative transgressions.

One main purpose of this volume is to ask scholars from a number of fields—anthropology, sociology, and literature—to engage with the conceptual specificity of normativity as it travels (or fails to) in their particular areas of study. In doing so, we hope to demonstrate the value of paying closer attention to the object and method dramas that have been muted by antinormativity's broad appeal. Another purpose is to plot that appeal by demonstrating the extent to which antinormativity has come to govern the queer theoretical project in its multiple and contending itineraries. On the face of it, our perception that antinormativity is both ubiquitous and governing is perplexing, as the narratives devoted to the field's critical development have always prioritized the rhetorics of invention, intervention, and succession, leading one prominent scholar to parody the ongoing war of positions by staging differences in analytic orientations as an academic *Game of Thrones*.⁴ But if, as we have suggested, the critique of normativity has been taken as central to the work of those figures most cited when the field was first formally named, it is also the case that nearly every important arena of debate in queer studies today has been shaped by a commitment to antinormativity, including work on transgender, disability, affect, ecology, race, war, surveillance, colonialism, (neo)liberalism, sovereignty, incarceration, and the posthuman. As we demonstrate below, it is the agency of antinormativity—as critical discourse and political imaginary—that generates

continuity for the field, offering scholars not only a distinct vocabulary but a rhetorical mode of argument that continues to bear the promise of the world-making significance first declared as the aim and agency of queer critique.

To be sure, such promises have become harder to keep in the context of the political present, where a series of civil rights successes has inaugurated a broad academic critique of mainstream sexuality activisms, orienting queer studies toward an analysis of distinctly queer complicities unspecified, indeed unthinkable, in earlier queer scholarship. In their introduction to *What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?*, an influential special issue of *Social Text* in 2005, David L. Eng, Judith (Jack) Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz captured the contradictions of the current historical conjuncture by naming them “queer liberalism,” defined as the consequence of “[m]echanisms of normalization [that] have endeavored to organize not only gay and lesbian politics but also the internal workings of the field itself, attempting to constitute its governing logic around certain privileged subjects, standards of sexual conduct, and political and intellectual engagements” (4). Against the normativities of the public political sphere and of an institutionally domesticated queer studies, the issue offered a “renewed queer studies” by emphasizing scholarship that foregrounds the antinormative inheritances of queer inquiry through genealogies of women of color feminism, black Marxism, and transnational studies (1). In this way they answer the question posed in the volume’s title—what’s new?—in expansive terms. “A lot,” they write (3). Now read as a definitive volume for discerning the priorities of queer studies in this century, *What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?* demonstrates the rhetorical force of antinormativity as the means to sustain the political aspirations of the field. Under this formulation, U.S. national queer politics might be standing in patriotic assent to the military or heading to the altar to tie the knot with the state, but queer studies can still be critically queer by rallying against liberal political norms; prioritizing nonnormative sexual practices, identities, and desires; and exposing the exclusions and compromises of the field’s institutionalized logics, including its seeming reliance on traditional disciplinary practices and familiar race and gender hierarchies.

In recent years, other projects have sought to contest identity-based equations of homosexuality with left visions of political transformation in ways that have continued to carve out a space for queer inquiry to marshal a critique of contemporary sexual politics and its institutionalized forms, whether academic or activist. Under the framework of “homonormativity” and “homonationalism,” this scholarship has attended to the incorporative

logics through which gay and lesbian civil rights agendas have partnered with the state to gain recognition within the very institutions (e.g., marriage, the military) long considered the core of a heteronormative culture. For Lisa Duggan, who is often credited with the first use of the concept, *homonormativity* is another name for the sexual politics of neoliberalism, which recodes the lexicon of gay activism in conservative terms: “[E]quality’ becomes narrow, formal access to a few conservatizing institutions, ‘freedom’ becomes impunity for bigotry and vast inequalities in commercial life and civil society, the ‘right to privacy’ becomes domestic confinement, and democratic politics itself becomes something to be escaped” (190).⁵ The result, she writes, is a conservative gay political vision fully congruent with “a corporate culture managed by a minimal state, achieved by the neoliberal privatization of affective as well as economic and public life” (190). In “Mapping U.S. Homonormativities,” Jasbir Puar extends Duggan’s critique by globalizing its perspective, offering the concept of *homonationalism* to name “the collusion between homosexuality and American nationalism [. . .] generated both by national rhetorics of patriotic inclusion and by gay, lesbian, and queer subjects themselves” (67).

As terms, *homonormativity* and its offspring *homonationalism* are now regular features of the critical terrain of queer studies, referring to a proliferating number of instances in which the historical terms of sexual inclusion and exclusion shift as “queerness,” Puar writes in her 2007 book, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, “is being folded (back) into life” (35). Her analysis explicitly rethinks “the process of disaggregating exceptional queer subjects from queer racialized populations” (35), arguing that “the homonormative aids the process of heteronormativity through the fracturing away of queer alliances in favor of the adherence to the reproduction of class, gender, and racial norms” (31–32). By reading homonormativity in its political conjuncture *with* heteronormative and patriarchal formations, and by taking both normativities as intrinsically racial projects, Puar builds on key features of the queer of color project first named by Chandan Reddy and subsequently elaborated by Muñoz and Roderick A. Ferguson.⁶ Largely concerned with the failure of first-generation queer critique to attend to the complexities of racial formation, this project—itsself a burgeoning critical archive—approaches sexuality in its historical and theoretical conjuncture with racial nationalism, anti- and postcolonial struggle, and the regenerative capacities of modern state power, paying especially close attention to the assimilationist and regulatory agencies of liberalism and multiculturalism in shaping the postracial fantasies

now characteristic of the West. For Ferguson, this entails understanding how racialized minority cultural forms and minoritized populations are “eccentric to the normative” (26), even as they are hailed by it—a relation of both complicity and excess that requires ongoing attention to the way that “contemporary globalization is one in which normativity still organizes state and citizen formations, but apprehends subjects previously excluded from the normative privileges of sovereignty and rights” (29). Introducing the concepts of *nonheteronormative* and *nonnormative* to the antinormative grammar of queer studies (27), Ferguson’s reading of the “gendered and eroticized history of U.S. racialization” (6) simultaneously revises the object orientations and analytic priorities of the field while sustaining its promise to render queer inquiry a practice of transformative politics (13).

For scholars working at the intersection of queer and transgender studies, *homonormativity* along with *nonnormativity* have proven useful concepts for shifting from a seemingly singular analytic focus on (homo) sexuality to the complexities of embodied gender in order to challenge a range of assumptions not only in gay and lesbian political movements but in queer critical debates as well. As Susan Stryker put it in her 2006 introduction to the *Transgender Studies Reader*, “[T]ransgender phenomena constitute an axis of difference that cannot be subsumed to an object-choice model of antiheteronormativity. As a result, queer studies sometimes perpetuates what might be called ‘homonormativity,’ that is, a privileging of homosexual ways of differing from heterosocial norms, and an antipathy (or at least an unthinking blindness) toward other modes of queer difference” (7). More recent scholarship has extended this analysis by forwarding the concept of *cisnormativity* to mark ongoing assumptions about the psychic and social congruence between birth assignment and sex/gender identifications, reframing the well-known feminist distinction between the raw material of sex and the social construction of gender by approaching issues of embodiment, materiality, and psychic life in “nonnormative” terms.⁷ Building on Julia Serano’s 2007 use of the concept of *cisgender* and *cissexual*, cisnormativity has become increasingly important for parsing, in ways akin to the use of heteronormativity, how “the expectation [. . .] that those assigned male at birth always grow up to be men and those assigned female at birth always grow up to be women [. . .] shapes social activity such as child rearing, the policies and practices of individuals and institutions, and the organization of the broader social world” (Bauer et al. 356).⁸

Other prominent queer theoretical discourses—including most notably “crip theory”—have likewise used the language of normativity and

its alternatives to articulate their analytic interventions and political value, extending ongoing scholarly engagements with issues of embodiment, psychic life, social discipline, and political change in ways that continue to craft antinormativity as the field's primary political commitment.⁹ Given the ability of antinormativity to underwrite some of the most important and exciting scholarship in the field, it may seem counterproductive to ask practitioners to train their attention on the critical consequences of its proliferation. But it is precisely because of its generative status that we want to consider the role that antinormativity now plays as a privileged rhetorical formulation and analytic destination that frames the critical and political innovation regularly claimed for the field. What objects of study, analytic perspectives, and understanding of politics might emerge if we suspend antinormativity's axiomatic centrality? Our aim in this volume is to confer value on this question in order to incite curiosity about the possibilities for queer inquiry that lie beyond it.

Hetero/Norms

Normative sexualities, normative genders, normative disciplinary protocols, normative ideologies, normative racial regimes, normative political cultures, normative state practices, and normative epistemes: these figures of normativity have been at the heart of queer theoretical inquiry for nearly three decades. In their 2012 introduction to the *Routledge Queer Studies Reader*—successor to the field-defining 1993 *Routledge Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*—Donald Hall and Annamarie Jagose cogently reflect the capacity of antinormativity to define the field: “Queer Studies’s commitment to non-normativity and anti-identitarianism, coupled with its refusal to define its proper field of operation in relation to any fixed content, means that, while prominently organized around sexuality, it is potentially attentive to any socially consequential difference that contributes to regimes of sexual normalization” (xvi). But what is this “regimenting” normalization?

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s widely influential 1998 essay “Sex in Public” is perhaps the fullest early engagement with this question, and it points instructively to the difficulties that queer theory faces in negotiating norms and normativity. Berlant and Warner advocate for “the radical aspirations of queer culture building” (548) that would reimagine sexuality apart from the monolithic regimes of “normal life” (556); they aim to discern what constitutes “a normal metaculture” and the various practices that constitute normalization (557). Their goal, as they state at

the outset, is to explore and promote the way that “[q]ueer social practices like sex and theory try to unsettle the garbled but powerful norms supporting [. . .] the hierarchies of property and propriety that we will describe as heteronormative” (548). By arguing that normativity and sexuality form a readily identifiable modality (“heteronormativity”), and by arguing that such heteronormativity cramps, diminishes, or sedates sex, Berlant and Warner find themselves (how could they not?) taking a stand “against heteronormativity” and “against the processes of normalization” (557). We see a number of difficulties here. By arguing that the goal of queer culture building is to “unsettle” norms, Berlant and Warner pass too quickly over the already “garbled” nature of those norms. This gives too much to queer critique and too little to the entangled character of norms, making queer critique look like the decisive agent of political action in relation to norms. Moreover, Berlant and Warner place “garbled” and “powerful” in an antagonistic relation: they name norms “garbled *but* powerful” rather than, say, garbled *and* powerful. This oppositional framing suggests that the power of norms comes from something other than their twisted character—as if the power of norms is inherently and always straight. Having so configured hetero-norms as domineering social practices, their desire to stand against those norms becomes politically and critically irresistible. Queer theory emerges from this scene in the form we know it today: intuitively oppositional and antinormative.

The antinormative imperative implicit in the designation *heteronormativity* points to a serious methodological quandary for the field. While “queer” has etymological connections to movements that transverse and twist (*Tendencies* xii), its most frequent deployment has been in the service of defiance and reprimand. The allure of moving *against* appears to have had greater critical currency than the more intimate and complicit gesture of moving *athwart*. Before the advent of queer theory, Foucault had already identified the political and conceptual appeal of such oppositional stances. One of the first questions for his reader in volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality* is, “Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?” (*History* 8–9). If much of the queer critical interest in this question has been in relation to the problematic of repression, we would like to draw attention to the methodological stance that Foucault also queries here. He mentions this stance three times: “against” . . . “against” . . . “against.” Every post-Foucaultian queer theorist understands that the claim that sexuality has been repressed is caught in spirals of power-knowledge-pleasure that make such a claim an enactment of norms (rather than a transgression

of them). There has been much less attention paid, however, to the way in which an oppositional posture underwrites the repressive hypothesis. Even as it allies itself with Foucault, queer theory has maintained an attachment to the politics of oppositionality (against, against, against) that form the infrastructure of the repressive hypothesis. Here, we offer one reading of norms that seeks to bring a methodology other than antinormativity, counternormativity, or nonnormativity into focus. We return to the idea of a *norm*, especially as it can be found in the work of Foucault and his commentators, in order to revivify what is galvanizing (indeed, what is queer) about its operations.

We dispute two of the most widely touted characteristics of a norm: that it is *restrictive* and that it *excludes*. We question the political common sense that claims that norms ostracize, or that some of us are more intimate with their operations than others, or that “normative” is a synonym for what is constricting or controlling or tyrannical. This cluster of presumptions (or some part thereof) can be found in scholars widely divergent in terms of their queer theoretical ambitions:

[The] social order achieves normativity by suppressing intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality. (Ferguson 83)

Consider, for example [. . .] those of us outside the heterosexual norm. (Edelman 89)

[H]eterosexual romance [is] nothing more than the violent enforcement of normative forms of sociality and sexuality. (Halberstam, Queer Art 77)

It is [. . .] for very good reasons that queer theory has been defined not only as anti-heteronormative, but as anti-normative [. . .] [T]he norm is regulative. (Ahmed 426)

Don't work toward, or depend on the model of, [. . .] a singular, normative outcome. (Sedgwick, Weather 159–60)

If these theorists share little else, what they do share is a conviction that norms are conceptually and politically limiting. For these theorists, norms have a readily identifiable outside, are univocally on the side of privilege and conventionality, and should be avoided. Berlant states the binding effects of this antinormativity concisely in her joint project with Edelman: “[O]ur commonalities are in our fundamental belief that normativity is an attempt to drown out the subject’s constitution by and attachment to varieties of being undone” (*Sex* 6). It is this commonplace set of beliefs that we wish to put in doubt.

If, as we argue below, a norm is a more capacious event than one might suspect from touring queer theory, another issue arises: what critical and political work is being done by antinormativity? Our hypothesis is this: antinormative stances project stability and immobility onto normativity. In so doing, they generate much of the political tyranny they claim belongs (over there) to regimes of normativity. For in taking a stand against normativity, antinormative analyses must reduce the intricate dynamics of norms to a set of rules and coercions that everyone ought, rightly, to contest. Even a critic as hesitant about dyadic formulations of power as Sedgwick finds resources in the axiomatic quality of antinormative pronouncements, as her juxtaposition “singular, normative,” and the adjacent imperative (“don’t”) exemplifies. Whether ensconced as a central feature of analysis or formulated in an aside, antinormativity is no less decisive in establishing what counts as queer analysis. Perhaps one of the most intriguing places where this dynamic can be found is in Edelman’s *No Future*. Edelman begins by figuring his political and conceptual opposition to the Child in paradoxical terms. He outlines “the impossible project of a queer oppositionality that would oppose itself to the structural determinants of politics as such, which is also to say, that would oppose itself to the logic of opposition” (4). Moreover, Edelman has been clear in subsequent discussion with Halberstam and in his work with Berlant that queer (or sexuality as understood in a Lacanian register) is not in an oppositional relation to the social order. Queer is not, for Edelman, antisocial. Rather, queer is the structural negativity that makes sociality and subjectivity possible.¹⁰ The subtlety of this position is rigorously sustained throughout *No Future*, except when he anticipates—in a footnote—the opposition that this book might (indeed, did) engender. At that moment, obligatory norms and an unironic stance against them take the stage: “There are many types of resistance for which, in writing a book like this, it is best to be prepared. One will be the defiantly ‘political’ rejection of what some will read as an ‘apolitical’ formalism, an insufficiently ‘historicized’ intervention in the materiality of politics as we know it. That such versions of politics and history represent the compulsory norm this book is challenging will not, of course, prevent those espousing them from asserting their ‘radical’ bona fides” (157n19). Edelman’s intensification of norms as “compulsory” (and his challenge to their imperious demands) introduces antinormativity into a text that otherwise carefully frames politics in much more intricate terms. In particular, this footnote seems to imagine that the threat of normativity comes from *outside* Edelman’s own text. Yet, Edelman and his opponents share an investment in the constrictive

and alien nature of norms; they are—fleeting—comrades in relation to the logics of antinormativity. A collapse, at this moment, between Edelman and his adversaries should be unsurprising; by the logic of his own argument, negativity will ruin the comfort of easy differences among us. One name for this ruined political scene (where the logic of oppositionality has become impossibly twisted; where differences between us and them cannot be sustained) is normativity.

There is something about the pull of antinormativity (and, no doubt, the power of an aside or a footnote) that means that even the most rigorous queer theoretical reading can find itself sponsoring a politics of oppositionality. Indeed, in the very same paragraphs where they argue for the structural rather than oppositional nature of queer/negativity, Edelman and Berlant also say that they “seek to affirm negativity’s central role in any antinormative politics” (xii). Honing in on these normative and antinormative commitments, we wish to engage the dispersed, consociating nature of normativity rather than try to banish it under the name of antinormativity. The difficulty, as we see it, is that antinormative arguments—entrenched or *en passant*—tend to immobilize the activity of norms. By transmogrifying norms into rules and imperatives, antinormative stances dislodge a politics of motility and relationality in favor of a politics of insubordination. Importantly, these lifeless norms (e.g., heteronormativity) don’t stand prior to our antinormative analyses, awaiting diagnosis; rather, they are one of our own inventions. These norms birthed by queer antinormativity are often deployed in the service of the good; in standing against the injustices they spawn, we imagine that new worlds are built, exclusions are curbed, injuries are repaired, and diversity is bled of conflict, compromise, or ill feeling. At these moments, it seems to us, our analytic and political capacities have been significantly diminished.

Our next question, then, is whether queer theorists can return, with some curiosity, to the logic of norms. Initially, the prospects for such a return seem slim. The word *norm*, as the *OED* reminds us, has an etymological connection to the Latin *norma*: this is the T-square instrument used by carpenters and masons to measure right angles or by draftsmen to draw them (see also Canguilhem 370). In this sense, a *norm* is a name for a rule; or more specifically *the* rule, the rule of an inflexible and imperious decree: “The norm,” François Ewald notes, “had a long career as a synonym for the rule” (“Norms” 139). However, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, Ewald contends (following Foucault), a norm no longer acts as a rule in this sense. Rather, “it comes to designate both a particular variety of rules and

a way of producing them and, perhaps most significantly of all, a principle of valorization. Of course, the norm still refers to a standard measure that allows us to distinguish what is in conformity with the rule from what is not, but this distinction is no longer directly linked to the notion of rectitude. Its essential reference is no longer to the square but to the average” (“Norms” 140). This historical shift transforms a norm from being a juridical constraint to being a set of measurements, comparisons, adjudications, and regulations: “[T]he law operates more and more as a norm” (Foucault 144). Whether or not we concur with the historical claim here (a before and after for norms), and whether or not we concur that the T-square is a simple measure of straightness, the normative formation that Foucault and Ewald point to is instructive. The norm is a dispersed calculation (an average) that enquires into every corner of the world. That is, the measurements, comparisons, adjudications, and regulations that generate the average man do so not in relation to a compulsory, uniform standard, but through an expansive relationality among and within individuals, across and within groups: “[W]herever there is *life* there are norms” (Canguilhem 351).

To put this in the lingua franca of statistics: an average is the measurement of every member of a set, not just some favored members of a set. Each of us knows this any time we calculate an average: we add up every member of our group and then divide that total by the number of items in that group. Here we are referring to an average as the mean. The average might also operate as the median (the middle data point in an ordered set) or as the mode (the most frequent data point in the set). Kinsey’s study of sexual behavior in women, for example, uses medians more often than it uses means. In each case, however, the same principle applies: *averages are synecdochal measures of the entire group*. Averages don’t exclude anyone; on the contrary, their power as statistical tools relies on the method of counting or ordering everyone in the group. For example, Kinsey says that he uses median measures because they are “unaffected by the frequencies of activity of the extreme individuals in any sample”; and this might seem like the classic exclusionary gesture of an average (49). There is no way to know who stands at the middle point of a data set, however, without also counting the so-called outliers. One might argue that they are counted in order to be excluded, but it seems both more accurate and more politically engaging to argue that the so-called outlier is contained in the very heart of the median: “[T]he idea of the average depends on deviation; normalcy can be articulated as such only if it has outliers” (Halley 121).¹¹ That is, the center calls on and is constituted by the periphery, making the

spatial, conceptual, and evaluative distance between center and periphery something of a nonsense.¹²

So a norm, as a system of averaging, is not invested in singularity. Nor is a norm a demand that each of us bend to a common point: “[A] norm is not an imperative to do something under pain of juridical sanctions” (Canguilhem 370). To be measured in relation to an average is to be compared not to a singularity, but rather to be associated with (and therefore dispersed across) the group as a whole. Ewald says this concisely: a norm is “the means through which the disciplinary society communicates with itself” (“Norms” 141). A norm is a wide-ranging, ever moving appraisal of the structure of a set; and this operation generates each of us in our particularity. Facebook’s expansive list of fifty-something gender designations, for example, is not a contestation of a norm; it is simply one more wrinkle in the fabric of gender normativity:

[T]he norm invites each one of us to imagine ourselves as different from the others, forcing the individual to turn back upon his or her own particular case, his or her individuality and irreducible particularity. More precisely, the norm affirms the equality of individuals just as surely as it makes apparent the infinite differences among them. The reality of normative equality is that we are all comparable; the norm is most effective in its affirmation of differences, discrepancies, and disparities. The norm is not totalitarian but individualizing; it allows individuals to make claims on the basis of their individuality and permits them to lead their own particular lives. However, despite the strength of various individual claims, no one of them can escape the common standard. The norm is not the totality of a group forcing constraints on individuals; rather it is a unit of measurement, a pure relationship without any other supports. (Ewald, “Norms” 154)

In this sense, it is not clear what antinormativity would be. Not because, in a paranoid sense, the norm is voracious (or it requires enormous efforts of imagination or insubordination to reorder the workings of a norm), but rather because the norm is already generating the conditions of differentiation that antinormativity so urgently seeks.¹⁵

Returning to one of our earlier examples, we can see that the character of norms is hard to discern and sometimes all but impossible to firmly grasp. Berlant and Warner are cognizant of the operations of the norm (“not the imposition of an alien will, but a distribution around a statistically

imagined norm”) (557). Yet in leaning on Bidy Martin’s defense of “the average people that we also are” (123), they tag this averageness “heteronormative” (557). What heteronormative means in this context appears to be a system that measures “deviance from the mass” (557). That is, *heteronormative* describes the process of measuring how far any of us might wander from an imagined point of heterosexual rectitude. Berlant and Warner figure heteronormativity spatially: a central corpus of averageness orbited by ever stranger and ever more dispersed satellites of sexual deviance. A norm, thus imagined, figures statistical distribution more or less in oppositional terms: centers versus peripheries, normals versus deviants, proper versus Other Victorians, the charmed circle versus the outer limits (Rubin). What we are suggesting here is that the operations of a norm are more extensive sport than this, both more comprehensive and more differentiated. In a word, a norm is *systemic*.¹⁴ If we want to call some of these systems *heteronormative*, we must keep in mind that what is “hetero” about them is not their insistence of the rule of two (man and woman; normal and abnormal), but their barely containable, ever mobile hetero-geneity.

The bifurcation of the workings of a norm into center and periphery is the conceptual miscalculation that underwrites the seeming good sense of antinormativity. In imagining the norm as a device that divides the world into centers and peripheries, antinormativity misses what is most engaging about a norm: that in collating the world, it gathers up everything. It transverses networks of differentiation; it values everything; it plays. In this vein, Pierre Macherey notes that a norm is not “a relationship of succession, linking together separate terms, *pars extra partes*, following the model of a mechanistic determination”; rather, it is “the simultaneity, the coincidence, the reciprocal presence to one another of all the elements it unites [. . .] [T]here is no norm in itself” (186). By this reading, normativity is a structure of proliferations: some of these normative proliferations duplicate already existing terms, some twist those terms or minimize or amplify or warp them. None of them definitively breaks with the systematicity that they are; nor are they events that are predetermined and therefore knowable in advance. To think statistically again: norms are stochastic. Norms generate not sovereignties, but overdetermined relationalities. So, to stand against one part of a normative system would be to stand, comically, against oneself. In the strict Foucaultian sense of normative as engendering, there is no place from which to take an oppositional stance and no locale that would constitute an exclusion: “The norm, or normative space, knows no outside. The norm integrates anything which might attempt to go beyond

it—nothing, nobody, whatever difference it might display, can actually ever claim to be exterior, or claim to possess an otherness which would actually make it other” (Ewald, “A Power” 173).

It is this rich field of dependencies, differentiations, clashes, and engenderings that queer antinormative arguments misunderstand. And this misunderstanding has distinct consequences: it asphyxiates the relationality that is at the heart of normativity. Antinormativity is antinormative, then, in a way that it presumably does not intend: it turns systemic play (differentiations, comparisons, valuations, attenuations, skirmishes) into unforgiving rules and regulations and so converts the complexity of moving athwart into the much more anodyne notion of moving against. In ways the field has yet to address, queer antinormativity generates and protects the very propriety it claims to despise. To channel the energies of queer inquiry otherwise, we hope to promote scholarship that not only rethinks the meaning of norms, normalization, and the normal but that imagines other ways to approach the politics of queer criticism altogether.

Essays

The essays assembled for this special issue draw inspiration from the critical possibilities described above. The issue opens by returning to queer theory's most canonical texts to examine the modes of analysis that have made antinormativity the sine qua non of queer theory. In “The Trouble with Antinormativity,” Annamarie Jagose reads the elaboration of the norm in Butler's *Gender Trouble* against what is often taken as its inspiration, Foucault's understanding of normalization in *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1. In Jagose's view, Butler's description of how norms work and, more particularly, how norms might be subverted is radically inconsistent with Foucault's account of the processes of normalization that characterize modern power. Jagose's point is not to correct one or the other, but to demonstrate the value of attending to the multiple and contradictory ways in which normativity has been theorized in the field. In “Eve's Triangles, or Queer Studies beside Itself,” Robyn Wiegman turns to another foundational figure, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, to reconsider her investments in the political imaginary and analytic framework that antinormativity has generated for the field. Finding Sedgwick's infrequent invocations of antinormativity as a defense against charges of her own sexual normalcy and complicity, Wiegman focuses on Sedgwick's more impassioned deconstructive investments in incoherence, the double bind, and nondialectical understandings of contradiction. Using

the figure of the triangle to map these relations, the essay seeks to value Sedgwick's queer critical intuitions that are incompatible with the dyadic approach to power and politics that sustains antinormativity's allure.

In contrast to the first two essays of the volume, which are oriented toward the field's primary texts, the middle pieces offer two different ways to rethink the history and contemporary formation of queer theory. In "Doing Being Deviant: Deviance Studies, Description, and the Queer Ordinary," Heather Love considers the roundly disavowed inheritances of an earlier and seemingly outmoded subfield defined by its focused attention on social otherness: deviance studies. Challenging a long-standing tradition in queer studies that privileges the humanities and their culture-oriented forms of critical practice, Love reconsiders the relationship between queer theory and mid-twentieth-century social scientific studies of deviant behavior. Might the objectification that these studies of deviance produce contain an account of the norm wholly different from (and more compelling than) that which we encounter in a queer antinormative stance? Love answers affirmatively in order to advance a consideration of the methodological implications of rethinking normativity for the field. In "Transgression: Normativity's Self-Inversion," Vicki Kirby locates the theoretical problematic at stake in this special issue in the context of social and cultural criticism more generally. Why, she asks, has the "radicality" of both politics and criticism accepted, for several centuries now, that "the center, the norm, the rule" is properly the "reference point *against which* deviation, change, and singularity" have come to be measured? To answer this question, Kirby interrogates the way that cultural analysis routinely assumes that the workings of power rest on a break with nature, a break that interprets the human and its social world as an *unnatural* perversion of nature's previous conventions and prescriptions. By way of Georges Canguilhem, the essay considers the implications of this foundational assumption in order to understand queer theory's inheritances—and blind spots—as endemic to the legacies of left-oriented intellectual thought.

The final three essays of the volume can be considered case studies of the limits of antinormativity as an analytic and political horizon for queer theorizing. Madhavi Menon's essay "Universalism and Partition: A Queer Theory" seeks to expand the ambit of what might be considered queer reading. Taking the role of Muslims in the partition of India and in the concentration camps at Auschwitz as her central concern, Menon makes a case for a "queer universalism" that haunts the seemingly rigid binaries of identitarian partitions. Drawing on a non-Enlightenment notion of universalism (via Alain Badiou), Menon argues that one of queer theory's

greatest strengths is to offer models for theorizing that undercut the logics of identity and partition, norm and antinorm. Erica Edwards's "Sex after the Black Normal" offers an urgent and necessary analysis of the critical alliances and divergent theoretical energies that attend the intersection of queer inquiry and black feminist theory. Arguing that black women's sexuality functions at once as a lubricant for neoliberal governmentality and as a domain of collective preservation within this order, Edwards reads a number of contemporary cultural texts (media reports of Muammar Gaddafi's infatuation with Condoleezza Rice; the Smithsonian Institution's exhibition to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation and the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington; Jesmyn Ward's post-Katrina novel *Salvage the Bones*) to expose the limits of antinormativity for an understanding of the complexities of black women's sexuality in current formations of power. The issue concludes with Elizabeth A. Povinelli's essay "Transgender Creeks and the Three Figures of Power in Late Liberalism," in which she argues that the limits of queer antinormativity can be found at the juncture of settler colonialism, neoliberalism, and human exceptionalism in the geontological politics attending an Australian Aboriginal community. Taking up the case of Tjipel, a creek-girl in Anson Bay in the Northern Territory of Australia, and revisiting the problem of normativity in Foucault and Canguilhem, Povinelli argues that queer theory needs to reconsider the place of biopolitics in our contemporary milieu.

As these essays collectively demonstrate, the pursuit of queer theory without antinormativity is as compelling as it is unsettling. It makes space for new questions to emerge about familiar objects of study; revises critical assumptions by challenging the ways we have uniformly laminated power and constraint to normativity; and enables an incisive reflection on the relationship between queer studies and social criticism more generally. At the same time, it asks scholars to manage the discomfort that comes with turning our attention toward the field's most sustaining belief—and to do so when the prospect of resolution is not part of the goal. The essays assembled here do not constitute a new paradigm for the field, nor do their efforts amount to a field-transforming consensus. They follow different itineraries of analysis, rely on varied methods, and bear decidedly unequal investments in the critical utility of *queer*. What they do share is an affirmation of our invitation to open a conversation. In that spirit, this special issue is best read in a minor key, as an argument *for valuing the question*: what does queer inquiry do when its critical vigor is constituted by something other than an axiomatic opposition to norms?

This issue began as a special session of the same name at the 2013 Convention of the Modern Language Association in Boston. Session presenters were Annamarie Jagose (“The Trouble with Antinormativity”), Robyn Wiegman (“Following Sedgwick: On Triangles, Double Binds, and the Road Not [Yet] Taken”), and Elizabeth Wilson (“Affect Norms, Sexual Norms”). Zahid Chaudhary presided. The project was furthered in April 2014 by a manuscript workshop at the Franklin Humanities Center at Duke University. Participants included members of the MLA session and Rey Chow, Erica Edwards, Carla Freccero, Janet Jakobsen, Vicki Kirby, Madhavi Menon, Ashley Shelden, Pete Sigal, Antonio Viego, and Ken Wissoker.

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ELIZABETH A. WILSON is a professor of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies at Emory University. She is the author of *Affect and AI* (University of Washington Press, 2010) and *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body* (Duke University Press, 2004). Her new book *Gut Feminism* is forthcoming with Duke University Press in 2015. She is cowriting (with Adam Frank) an introduction to the affect theory of Silvan Tomkins.

Notes

- 1 The quotes in this paragraph are taken from various queer studies mission statements in u.s. universities. We have chosen to omit citations to foreground their value as representative formulations of queer inquiry in the institutionalized spaces that now define the field.
- 2 Halperin also describes what he sees as a contraction of *queer’s* critical capacity in its increasing deployment as a postmodern category of identity, as in the elaboration of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) to include queer (Q) (“Normalization” 340).
- 3 The conference was the Sixth North American Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Studies Conference held in Iowa City
- 4 See Halberstam, “*Game of Thrones*.”
- 5 The first use of “homonormativity” in queer criticism actually belongs to Berlant and Warner who use it to evoke the impossibility against which heteronormativity as a conceptual category and social force draws its power. “By heteronormativity,” they write, “we mean the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged [. . .]. Heteronormativity is thus a concept distinct from heterosexuality. One of the most conspicuous differences is that it has no parallel, unlike heterosexuality, which organizes homosexuality as its opposite. Because homosexuality can never have the invisible, tacit, society-founding rightness that heterosexuality has, it would not be possible to speak of ‘homonormativity’ in the same sense” (548n2).
- 6 As this cluster of names might suggest, queer of color scholarship is not unitary in its intellectual inheritances. Reddy, for instance, is distinctly committed to a

- post-Marxist analysis that reads culture, following Lisa Lowe, as the site where the contradictions of capitalism are negotiated. Puar and Ferguson are both indebted to Foucault but grapple quite differently with what they each take as the shortcomings of his analysis: Puar turns to Deleuze and Ferguson to intersectionality and women of color feminism. Muñoz, trained by Sedgwick, has the greatest inclination to issues more routinely connected to literary studies and has engaged with greater interest a more psychoanalytically oriented approach to subjectivity and sociality.
- 7 In the inaugural issue of the *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Aultman notes the etymology of *cis* from the Latin “on the same side as” to offer a keyword definition of *cisgender* as it emerged in activist discourses. A “cisgender person’s gender is on the same side as their birth-assigned sex in contrast to which a transgender person’s gender is on the other side (trans-) of their birth-assigned sex [. . .]. The terms *man* and *woman*, left unmarked, tend to normalize cisness. [. . .] Thus using the identifications of ‘cis man’ or ‘cis woman’ alongside the usage of ‘transman’ and ‘transwoman’ resists that norm reproduction and the marginalization of trans* people that such norms effect” (61–62). See also Bauer et al.; Lee and Brotman; Logie et al.; and Singer.
- 8 See Serano, *The Whipping Girl* and her recent *Excluded*. For a critique of the concept *cisgender* and its potential reinscription of trans as difference, see Enke.
- 9 See esp. McRuer; and McRuer and Wilkerson.
- 10 With Berlant, Edelman writes, “We want to explore the valences of social intensities and fantasies, of the contradictory pressures implicit in established forms of relation, in order to read them not in any simple antithesis to the social but rather as *intrinsic* to it” (*Sex* xiii, emphasis added). In response to Halberstam, he calls (queer) negativity “society’s *constitutive* antagonism” (Caserio et al., “Antisocial” 822, emphasis added).
- 11 Halley’s aspiration for a queer theoretic has long been invested in excising all vestiges of subordination theories of power, especially as they have been smuggled back into readings of *The History of Sexuality*. “The psychiatrization of perversions was not the medical oppression of a preexisting population of perverts or the medical production of a social category thence-forward doomed to suffer subordination. Rather, it was a society-wide set of practices that brought the whole population into collective compliance with a distribution of normalcies and deviances and that thus subjected—and *thus animated*—everyone” (122).
- 12 A standard deviation (the statistical measure that underwrites the notorious bell curve) is similarly expansive and inclusive as a measure. The calculation of a standard deviation (of height, of IQ, of length of orgasm, of clitoral size) requires measurement of everyone in the group and then multiple adjustments of each data point in relation to the group average. It is by this route that a standard deviation gives a measure of the heterogeneity within a set.
- 13 By this logic it is no surprise that Facebook’s expansion of terms of gender identification generated immediate complaints that its list was insufficiently inclusive. At the time of writing, the list included: Androgyne; Androgynous; Bigender; Cis; Cisgender; Cis Female; Cis Male; Cis Man;

Cis Woman; Cisgender Female; Cisgender Male; Cisgender Man; Cisgender Woman; Female to Male; fTM; Gender Fluid; Gender Nonconforming; Gender Questioning; Gender Variant; Genderqueer; Intersex; Male to Female; MTF; Neither; Neutrois; Non-binary; Other; Pangender; Trans; Trans*; Trans Female; Trans* Female; Trans Male; Trans* Male; Trans Man; Trans* Man; Trans Person; Trans* Person; Trans Woman; Trans* Woman; Transfeminine; Transgender; Transgender

Female; Transgender Male; Transgender Man; Transgender Person; Transgender Woman; Trans-masculine; Transsexual; Transsexual Female; Transsexual Male; Transsexual Man; Transsexual Person; Transsexual Woman; and Two-Spirit.

- 14 See Kirby's analysis of norms in *Judith Butler* for a fuller articulation of this problematic; it is from that analysis that our argument in this section draws its power. See also Mills for a comprehensive discussion of Butler's use of Ewald.

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