

NEWS IN FOCUS

Genealogies and Futures of Queer STS: Issues in Theory, Method, and Institutionalization

Stephen Molldrem
University of Michigan
molldrem@umich.edu

Mitali Thakor
Northwestern University
mitali@northwestern.edu

Abstract

In the following essay, we describe the emergence of work by various STS scholars at the intersections of queer studies and social studies of science and technology. We focus on recent developments that have materialized under the label of “Queer STS” within a longer history of sexuality studies. We ask: what is Queer STS, and what is “new” about it? We also narrate several critical new developments in academic collaborations in this growing subfield, from workshops to conference roundtables, and attempt to further develop Queer STS theory and praxis as intersectional labor in negotiating the role of this nascent sphere of academic practice.

Molldrem, S. and Thakor, M. (2017). Genealogies and Futures of Queer STS: Issues in Theory, Method, and Institutionalization. *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 3 (1) 1-15 <http://www.catalystjournal.org> | ISSN: 2380-3312
© Stephen Molldrem, Mitali Thakor, 2017 | Licensed to the Catalyst Project under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license

Introduction: Toward a Genealogy of “Queer STS”

Since the rise in studies of the history of sexuality in the late 1970s—and, later, the growth of lesbian and gay studies (Abelove et al., 1993), queer theory (de Lauretis, 1991), and LGBTQ studies as identifiable intellectual and disciplinary areas—scholars have labored at the intersections of sexuality studies and studies of science, technology, psychology, and medicine. One could chart out a genealogy of queer feminisms that have centered science and medicine in their analyses of the sex/gender system and heteropatriarchy, beginning, for example, with de Beauvoir (1949), moving through Irigaray’s critiques of psychoanalysis (1985 [1977]), to Haraway’s influential work on cyborg studies and speciesism (1978; 1991 [1985]), and into the explosion of Feminist STS that has emerged over the past two decades and shapes contemporary inquiries into the gendered histories of biomedicine and technology.

A somewhat different genealogy could be told of the 1970s and 1980s, in which the burgeoning conceptual and textual foundations of STS were temporally and disciplinarily aligned with constructivist approaches to the study of gender and sexuality, yet remained largely bracketed off from one another. Many recognizable works in STS and, separately, sexuality studies from this era could be considered as part of the same intellectual-historical moment that produced, for example, Bloor’s *Knowledge and Social Imagery* (1991[1976]) and Latour and Woolgar’s *Laboratory Life* (1986[1979]) alongside Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* (1978[1976]), Weeks’ *Coming Out* (1979[1977]), Rubin’s “Thinking Sex” (1984), and Padgug’s “Sexual Matters” (1979). At this time, scholars in feminist philosophy and epistemology of science were working through constructivist critiques of hegemonic science and political philosophy on the grounds of their masculinist roots (Bordo, 1986; Collins 1989; Keller, 1982; Narayan, 1989) and presciently making linkages between the co-construction of science and politics (Arditti, Klein, and Minden 1984; Merchant, 1980; Scheper-Hughes, 1983). All of these texts shared in dramatic transformations taking place in the

humanities and social sciences that insisted on the rigorous, systematic, and ongoing analysis of the unseen processes that facilitate knowledge-production, truth-telling, and subject-formation, both in history and the contemporary moment.

As scholars in these fields wrote from resurgent feminist, materialist, and otherwise radical or minoritarian positions, they worked to unpack how scientific power both exerts its homogenizing rule against the diversity of human experiences and generates new forms of life. The influence of these fields persisted and intensified through the 1980s, 1990s, and into the first decades of the twenty-first century. Yet for reasons that are still historically opaque (but which likely have everything to do with how STS and gender and sexuality studies have been differently institutionalized), the obvious connections between queer/gender/sexuality studies and STS have only in the last several years come to materialize into a kind of nascent institutional crucible or “field formation” (Wiegman, 2012). In many instances, the works identified with this field have taken the form of a disaggregated collection of efforts loosely collected under the rubric of “Queer STS” – a project that we have actively contributed to and shaped since 2015.

In the sections that follow, we provide an overview of such work, discuss some of its key actors, and conclude by speculating on the possible future(s) of this zone of activity. We do so as an open invitation, and in order to provide some material and conceptual resources to scholars who are interested in advancing the materialization of Queer STS. In the first section, we address the realm of Queer STS **theory**—as in a body of texts, set of structuring claims, or a corpus of literature that could ground and/or orient Queer STS inquiry. In the second section, we discuss Queer STS **method**, as in techniques or tools for doing Queer STS work, in relation to important questions about **institutionalization**—strategies for cultivating infrastructures to support Queer STS on campuses, in journals, professional associations, and other areas. We act in service of fostering what Gayle Rubin calls “durable structural mechanisms to secure the reliable transfer of queer knowledges” to other

Queer STS scholars and future practitioners (2012, p. 354).

Ultimately, we call for a polyvalent Queer STS with many constituents. This vision for Queer STS insists on rigorous and ongoing critiques of institutional power structures within and outside of the university, while also positioning itself to maximize the benefits of inclusion and resources from academic institutions in such a way that refuses tokenization. Rather than a coherent or settled subfield, we imagine an expansive set of transnational and cross-disciplinary conversations and alliances that collectively elaborate Queer STS.

Queer STS Theory: From Lack to Materialization

We realized the need for a reproducible body of Queer STS theory after we discovered that, as graduate students, we had no template or guide for building Queer STS prelims or field examinations reading lists. We had to do this labor from scratch, with guidance from faculty mentors and peers, but without the published reference points or shared resources that would guide the development of a field exams list in a more recognizable body of literature such as “queer theory,” “Feminist STS,” “the history of sexuality,” or even new fields like “digital studies” or “digital STS.” Mitali acted publicly on the need for more Queer STS resources in 2013 by publishing a two-part blog post on “Queer STS” as part of her exams process (Thakor, 2013). Subsequently, in 2015, she published a public and collaborative Google Document called the “Queer STS reading list” (Thakor, Molldrem, et al. 2015). At this point Stephen and Mitali became connected via Twitter, and the list quickly started to expand. The Queer STS reading list continues to grow, and anyone can contribute to it.

Compiling these different kinds of texts in an accessible resource signals the deep resonances across distinct fields that could collectively give life to something different—which might be called Queer STS. On the one hand, the list reads like a Who’s-Who of scholars in LGBTQ studies, queer of color critique, the history of sexuality, and STS scholarship

focused on gender and sexuality. On the other hand, the specific themes that cut across the entries in the Queer STS reading list highlight how scholars have honed in on similar topics or approaches in fields that are often very different from one another, methodologically or disciplinarily speaking. For example, biomedicalization, postcolonial and anti-racist inquiry, multiple queer feminisms, queer approaches to media, and gendered histories of technoscience all take center stage in the syllabus. Some of the authors cited were already recognizable as STS scholars whose work was, in one way or along, queer (e.g. Suchman, 2007; Epstein, 1996, 2007; Terry, 1999; and Murphy, 2012). On the other hand, other authors (e.g. Ferguson, 2004 and Canaday, 2009) appear here in a semi-institutional STS context for what is possibly the first time. The list also incorporates feminist and postcolonial science fiction, from Joan Russ (2008[1975]) to Octavia Butler (1987-89), that have been productive toward developing new theories of sexuality and technoscientific futures alike.

It is important to acknowledge that Queer STS was named well before our reading list began to be assembled. Anita Thaler, whose Twitter handle is @QueerSTS and who leads a Queer-Feminist STS Working Group in Austria, has been working on developing a body of Queer STS theory for some years now. Indeed, even since we began the Queer STS reading list project, a great deal of work has been published, some of it in this journal after *Catalyst* was launched in Spring 2015. In the past year, Angie Willey's *Undoing Monogamy* has been published (2016), Christoph Hanssmann has brought an STS perspective to trans studies and feminist health history in *TSQ* (2016), Michelle Murphy has embarked on new queer projects on "alter-life," and the *Queer Feminist Science Studies* anthology, edited by Cyd Cipolla, Kristina Gupta, David A. Rubin, and Angela Willey is forthcoming—and this is just a small sampling.

Queer STS Method and Institutionalization: The Labor of Intersectionality

The labor of building a body of queer STS theory is an ongoing process being done in a number of different LGBTQ/sexuality studies, feminist studies, and STS publishing spaces. In addition to traditional published work, this labor includes the development of novel kinds of collectively-sourced digital resources that help foster new sets of conversations. As a result, Queer STS method is necessarily interdisciplinary, traversing the methodologies of anthropological interviewing and fieldwork, feminist reflexivity, sociological sampling, and laboratory-based experimentation. Thus, we seriously consider intersectional theory as central to queer method. Building upon Kimberlé Crenshaw's metaphor (1989, 1993) of the traffic intersection at which race and gender meet to produce new and different effects than those identities alone, numerous feminist and queer theorists have used intersectionality to interrogate the ways in which racial, sexual, gendered, classed, and ableist subjectivities overlap and conjoin (See also: Taylor et al., 2010; Grzanka, 2014; and Luft and Ward, 2009).

We think of Queer STS as intersectional work, with an emphasis on *work* as a constitutive part of the labor of such theorizing. Nash (2010; 2014) and Puar (2012) have both argued that attention to the labor of doing intersectional theory highlights how such theorizing is often fetishized and abstracted from the experiences of those for whom multiply hyphenated identities have always been a curse. As Nash cautions, "the problem is feminist (or anti-racist) inattention to particular subjects' experiences, the 'cure' is studying more intersections, and crafting more complex intersectional frameworks" (2010, p. 3). Romanticizing intersectionality and making it seem something precious, in other words, treats it as kind of critical panacea, or a solution for somehow fixing social theory. What, then, does the naming of "Queer STS" do for us, if STS always might have been, could be, but is not quite (yet) a form of queer critique? Who is doing the work of keeping STS intersectional, or keeping STS queer and feminist?

Intersectional work is often framed as "difficult"—and therefore stalled—as though we might have to move mountains to be more

expansive and empathetic in our understandings of power, difference, and experience. Can we imagine more full, more enriched and extensive ways of doing STS work that take intersectionality as a given, as more than just personal experiential knowledge?

Queer STS enjoys the privilege of newness in this particular moment, attracting the attention of more early-career scholars at both local and international venues. For instance, at the 2016 joint meeting of the Society for Social Studies and the European Association of the Study of Science and Technology (4S/EASST) in Barcelona, we convened a Queer STS roundtable. All of the invited participants raised the provocation that serious efforts to institutionalize Queer STS within academia would prove a necessary disruption to how universities envision power and technoscientific progress, and contribute to the political aims of the STS project. Yet scholars in this nascent field can begin by building the scaffold for emotionally and intellectually supporting one another in ways that are radically different from the normative forms of recognition and inclusion associated with academic spaces. These need to be in place even before new forms of institutional backing – such as the funding to hold such events and roundtables in the first place – ever materialize. As of this writing, many recent and forthcoming efforts have bubbled up across institutions to foster this kind of activity and space, including a workshop at the first MidweSTS Workshop (September 2016), annual informal meetups at the 4S conference (November 2015, September 2016, August 2017), and regular workshops and reading seminars coordinated by the Sexualities Project at Northwestern University and the Queer STS Group at the University of Michigan. These scholars are working, online and offline, in creative and provocative ways and across disciplines to strengthen academic bonds and offer new avenues for Queer STS world-making.

Conclusion: Staying with the Troubles of Queer STS

We began this essay by noting that Queer STS is simultaneously a

nascent institutional formation that is starting to be organized under a label as *well* as a longstanding and disaggregated collection of overlapping conversations in STS, feminist and gender studies, the history of sexuality, and LGBTQ studies. Rather than approaching this as a paradox, problem, or issue to be resolved through the consolidation of a diffuse body of knowledge into a subfield with defined boundaries, we would follow Haraway's (2007, 2016) cues, and instead encourage scholars to "stay with the trouble" and ambiguities of Queer STS. We would advocate for our colleagues to treat Queer STS as a Haraway-ian (2007) "contact zone"—one that helps to organize research agendas, institutions, and academic lives.

Haraway deployed the phrase "stay with the trouble" in response to reviewers of her manuscript *When Species Meet* (2007): "How can we together inherit these pastpresents; how can I, can we, stay with the trouble without the mad solace of yet another exterminism, another fix...[?]" (2010, p. 55). In many ways, Haraway's questions inadvertently resonate with the one asked by Warner and Berlant in a classic essay written during the mid-1990s: "What does queer theory teach us about x? As difficult as it would be to spell out programmatic content for an answer, this simple question still has the power to wrench frames" (1995, p. 348). We believe that "queer" still has the "power to wrench frames" - but also that "STS" has the analytical power to "stay with the trouble" of "queer."

As queer studies scholars, we argue that the perspectives that STS has to offer to queer, trans, and sexuality studies are clearly wide-ranging, particularly regarding tools for the kinds of reflexive, empirical, and ethnographic methodologies that STS brings to the table. And as STS scholars, we argue that the proliferation of queer perspectives in the study of science, technology, and medicine is not only taking shape in recent iterations of Queer STS. It has been happening for decades. However, as we have pointed out, the institutionalization of minoritarian knowledges is not a neutral process or a necessary outcome of scholarly collaborations or cross-disciplinary dialogue. Rather, institutionalization

must be actively shaped and contested in both research agendas and the labor of intellectual and academic life.

On this front, we take our cues from ongoing debates over institutionalization in women's studies, ethnic studies, and queer studies that highlight both the risks and potentials inherent in the institutionalization of minority knowledges in the neoliberal or corporate university (Ahmed, 2012; Ferguson, 2012; Rubin, 2012; Halberstam, 2009; Nash and Owens, 2015; Wiegman, 2012). Therefore, the work of Queer STS will necessarily entail careful attention to the gendered, raced, and heterosexist scaffolds of not only scientific analysis – the object of much current STS research – but also of the institutions from which that STS research emerges. A collective “we” must ask bluntly (and reflexively): Who sits on steering committees? What is the makeup of incoming graduate cohorts? Whose work is cited on syllabi and graduate exam common lists? Who is receiving tenure and who continues to adjunct? Which institutions are seriously investing time, care, and resources into structuring robust STS programs with a demonstrated commitment to scholarship grounded in minoritarian standpoints?

Conundrums like these – in universities, professional associations, academic presses, and so forth – will continue to constitute the “trouble” of Queer STS as much as any methodological innovation that might emerge from intellectual exchange. Thus, to live up to its potential to wrench frames, Queer STS research cannot just *perform* intersectionality and inclusivity in its writing, but also must do the far more uncomfortable work of critiquing and unsettling the structures in which it could quickly become comfortably at home. As Nash insists, we must take seriously the intent of Crenshaw's “intersectionality” as a call to examine and dislodge: “the attention to Crenshaw's traffic analogy as experiential rather than metaphorical has tended to constrain the feminist imagination, making an attention to more intersections *rather than a deep interrogation of identity* the hallmark of good, hard work” (Nash, 2010, p. 3, emphasis added; see also Nash, 2014).

We conclude then, by stating what might be obvious, but which

always bears repeating: the future of work at the intersection of queer studies and STS—or the future of “Queer STS,” if scholars collectively continue to invest in that label—rests with those who will continue to do this labor. Following traditions of coalitional Left, queer, feminist, and anti-racist movements, the constitution of a “we” can be strategically rearticulated depending on the needs of particular moments, as conflicts over institutionalization arise. This means, ultimately, that forms of alliance and terms of contestation need not be determined in advance. We are excited to be playing a small part in this project, and look forward to working with other scholars to continue to build collaborative Queer STS agendas, spaces, and resources.

Acknowledgements

We extend our thanks to participants in the 2016 4S/EASST Queer STS Roundtable: Ardath Whynacht, Patrick Keilty, Patrick Grzanka, and Rebekah Cupitt. Their thoughts in the pre-conference digital roundtable and at the in-person panel were central to the formation of this essay. We would also like to thank the participants in the Queer STS workshop that we co-convened with Jean Hardy at the 2016 MidweSTS Network Conference. Stephen thanks all of his colleagues who have participated in meetings of the Queer STS Rackham Interdisciplinary Workshop at the University of Michigan, particularly fellow co-coordinator Jean Hardy. We are grateful to the sponsors and supporters who made the 2015 and 2016 #QueerSTS4S meetups possible, and we eagerly anticipate continuing this dialogue at 4S 2017 in Boston. We also thank Banu Subramaniam and Angie Willey for their work editing this special issue of *Catalyst* and for their work in Queer STS.

References

- Abelove, H., Barale, M. A., & Halperin, D. M. (Eds.). (1993). *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional*

Life. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Arditti, R., Klein, R., & Minden, S. (1984). *Test-Tube Women: What Future for Motherhood?*. London: Pandora Press.

Berlant, L., & Warner, M. (1995). What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?. *PMLA*, 110(3), 343-349.

Bloor, D. (1991[1976]). *Knowledge and Social Imagery* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bordo, S. (1986). The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought. *Signs*, 11(3), 439-456.

Butler, O. (1987-1989). *The Xenogenesis Trilogy (Dawn, Adulthood Rites, Imago)*. Warner Books.

Canaday, M. (2009). *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cipolla, C., Gupta, K., Rubin, D. A., & Willey, A. (Eds.). (2017). *Queer Feminist Science Studies: A Reader*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.

Collins, P. H. (1989). The social construction of Black Feminist Thought. *Signs*, 14(4), 745-773.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 140, 139-167.

Crenshaw, K. (1993). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 1241-1299.

de Beauvoir, S. (1949). *The Second Sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans. 1 ed.). New York: Vintage Books.

de Laetis, T. (1991). *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*. *Differences*, 3(2), iii-xviii.

- Epstein, S. (1996). *Impure Science: AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Knowledge*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Epstein, S. (2007). *Inclusion: The Politics of Difference in Medical Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ferguson, R. A. (2004). *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ferguson, R. A. (2012). *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Foucault, M. (1978[1976]). *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Grzanka, P. R. (Ed.) (2014). *Intersectionality: A Foundations and Frontiers Reader*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Halberstam, J. J. (2009). "Beyond Broadway and Main: A Response to the Presidential Address." *American Quarterly*, 61(1), 33-38.
- Hanssmann, C. (2016). Passing Torches? Feminist Inquiries and Trans-Health Politics and Practices. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 3(1-2), 120-136 .
- Haraway, D. (1978). Animal Sociology and a Natural Economy of the Body Politic, Part 1: A Political Physiology of Dominance. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 4(1), 21-36.
- Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Haraway, D. (1991[1985]). A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (pp. 149-181). New York: Routledge.
- Haraway, D. (2007). *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Haraway, D. (2010). "When Species Meet: staying with the trouble." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (28).

Irigaray, L. (1985 [1977]). *The Sex Which is Not One*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Keller, E. F. (1982). Feminism and Science. *Signs*, 7(3), 589-602.

Latour, B., & Woolgar, S. (1986[1979]). *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Luft, R. E., & Ward, J. (2009). Toward an intersectionality just out of reach: Confronting challenges to intersectional practice. In D. Vasilikie & M. T. Segal (Eds.), *Perceiving Gender Locally, Globally, and Intersectionally* (Advances in Gender Research (pp. 9-37). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Merchant, C. (1980). *The Death of Nature*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Murphy, M. (2012). *Seizing the Means of Reproduction: Entanglements of Feminism, Health, and Technoscience*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books.

Narayan, U. (1989). The Project of Feminist Epistemology. In S. a. J. Bordo, A. (Ed.), *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* (pp. 256-272). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Nash, J. C. (2010). On Difficulty: Intersectionality as Feminist Labor. *The Scholar & Feminist Online* 8.3, 1-4.

Nash, J. C. (2014). Institutionalizing the Margins. *Social Text*, 32(1 118), 45-65.

Nash, J. C., & Owens, E. A. (2015). Institutional Feelings: Practicing Women's Studies in the Corporate University. *Feminist Formations*, 27(3).

Padgug, R. A. (1979). Sexual Matters: On Conceptualizing Sexuality In History. *Radical History Review* (20), 3-23.

Puar, J. K. (2012). "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess:" Becoming-Inersectional in Assemblage Theory. *PhiloSOPHIA*, 2(1).

- Rubin, G. (1984). *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*. In C. Vance (Ed.), *Pleasure and Danger*. New York: Routledge.
- Rubin, G. (2012). Geologies of Queer Studies: It's Déjà vu all Over Again, In *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 347-356.
- Russ, J. (2008[[1975]]) *The Female Man*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Scheper-Hughes, N. (1987 [1983]). The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism. In S. Harding (Ed.), *Feminism and Methodology* (pp. 157-180). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Suchman, L. (2007). Feminist STS and the Sciences of the Artificial. In E. J. Hackett, O. Amsterdamska, M. E. Lynch, & J. Wajcman (Eds.), *New Handbook of Science and Technology Studies (3rd ed.)*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Taylor, Y., Hines, S., & Casey, M. (Eds.). (2010). *Theorizing Intersectionality and Sexuality*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Terry, J. (1999). *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society*. Chicago University of Chicago Press.
- Thakor, M (2013). "Queer STS, Part 1 and Part 2." *MIT HASTS Blog*. <http://hasts.mit.edu/2013/12/04/queer-sts-part-1>.
- Thakor, M., Molldrem, S., and multiple authors (2015). *Google Docs*. https://docs.google.com/document/d/18HNaAG2aync0stXRyoWOxOql6cL3SnnJHhvjKPL_Wil/edit.
- Weeks, J. (1979[1977]). *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*. London: Quartet Books.
- Wiegman, R. (2012). *Object Lessons*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Willey, A. (2016). *Undoing Monogamy: The Politics of Science and the Possibilities of Biology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Bios

Stephen Moldrem is a PhD Candidate at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor in the department of American Culture.

Mitali Thakor is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Sexualities Project at Northwestern University.