

QUEER THEORY

UNSTATING DESIRE

Lee Edelman

To inquire into the state of queer studies—as if it *had* a state and all of us happened to live in that state *together*—is to presuppose a fantasy, in large part spatial or geographical, that the very fact of a conference like this should serve, instead, to disrupt. Not only have we come from many states to meet with each other in Iowa, but we have done so in the hope of conferring—of carrying on together—for a very short time, intending to bring news from the numerous fronts on which we variously work, play, and live. And as we come to Iowa from different states so we come from different disciplines as well, and from differing ideological and political perspectives within those different disciplines. Whatever queer studies may become, then, we have reason to hope that for now, at least, it defies any effort to reduce it to the singularity of a “state” that would be subject to any conceptual or methodological totalization.

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, though enabling for some, that is profoundly dangerous in its reproduction of the exclusions—and of the motivating logic of exclusion—on which the heterosexual colonization of social reality is predicated. The alternatives proposed by the title around which this plenary session has been organized—“unified field” or “dysfunctional family”—reflect this needless limitation. Indeed, as the very categories intended to designate the terms within which the “state” of queer theory can properly be thought, these options bespeak the constraints that follow from every too-rapidly synthesizing attempt to instate the “state” of queer theory. For these options quickly prove themselves less the oppositional terms they were intended to be than indicators in themselves of an all-too-insidiously unified field of vision: one always already unified in the name of the cellular singularity, the quasi-

atomic cohesive logic, to which the category of “the family” must, simultaneously, be made to attest (as if this singularity defined its essential nature) and to aspire (as if such singularity remained always to be achieved).

With all due apologies to Sister Sledge and, in her own way, Mary Tyler Moore, those of us working in the field of queer theory would do well to acknowledge—to insist—from the outset that we are *not* family, nor were meant to be. We are not, in other words, and should not be, under any coercive *mandate* of affection predicated on the notion of a commonality extending across the chasms of our real and important differences. Our filiations, however enabling, remain necessarily provisional, open to transformation as a result of their indebtedness to our simultaneous inscriptions in other histories whose various velocities of change continuously redefine the points of contact that can serve to bring us together and, as easily, to drive us apart. Whenever, and wherever, we have occasion to convene—whenever, and wherever, we come together—it is not, indeed, it *ought not* to be, in obedience to any internalized law that would keep us from proclaiming our freedom from the scenes of compulsory amity that, for many in the United States, will be produced next week under the aegis of familialism by the celebration of Thanksgiving. As a paradigmatic festival of the family, what makes Thanksgiving so painful for some is, of course, the prohibition, within the ideologically elaborated space of familial emotion, that forecloses any but the most guilty experiences of hostile or negative feelings: feelings of disaffection, disidentification, or even profound dislike. Correlatively, for others the pain of such scenes may arise from an inexpressible surplus of feeling—too much desire, too much identification—that cannot be expressed within the social structure that both elicits and confounds it.

What queer theory in its various manifestations must be able to observe—what any vision of social production that engages the libidinal should help us to understand—is that we do not, and need not, like everything equally, and some things we do not like at all. That isn’t to say, by any means, that we always know what we like in advance, or that our desires aren’t more capacious than we often *let* ourselves understand. But it *is* to say that even—or even especially—where our desire is most deeply engaged, the result is not, however much we may wish it were (or claim to wish it were), some easily predictable generation of “proper” unity, coherence, and affection. Surely queer theorists, and queer theory, should understand the various meanings and deployments of “attitude” well enough to know that. And just as attitude—and attitudes toward attitude—can vary from the playful and the erotic, to the indifferent and the bored, to the withering and the wounded, so too queer theory will always vary in its attitude toward the gesture that seeks to frame it as a bounded intellectual field: as a space, a territory, a state whose borders, however much we contest them, remain, at least notionally,

as “self-evident” as those that encircle the familial cell itself. Queer theory might better remind us that we are inhabited always by states of desire that exceed our capacity to name them. Every name only gives those desires—conflictual, contradictory, inconsistent, undefined—a fictive border, a definition, that falsifies precisely insofar as the name takes us always back to the family as our culture’s exemplary site of naming and of allegiance to the name.

Why, after all, should a movement intent on social, intellectual, and political intervention—intent, therefore, on instructing hegemonic culture in the necessity of a different understanding of difference—continue to conjure for itself the dominant dream of a common language? Isn’t this precisely the dream from which we would hope to waken others? The names that have been given us, for which “queer” is emblematic, totalize us all too quickly and brutally in the dominant imagination. Our response to that dominant production of our difference as the means to assure their sameness ought not to be the reproduction of some fantasmatic sameness in our difference. Our pleasures, our desires, know better: they know the refusal of singularity within the individual as well as the group; they embody a resistance to whatever forces would separate the social or the political from the unexpected, and often “incorrect,” mobilizations of those desires. As an enterprise that springs from a willingness to attend to the logic of the libidinal, as a locus of political and intellectual activity committed to interrogating the culturally determined—and culturally determining—shapes in which “desire” can appear, queer theory can only become itself through the gesture whereby it refuses itself, resists itself, perceives that it is always somewhere else, operating as a force of displacement, of disappropriation: operating, in short, as a vector of desire. What draws us together here, after all, is what and how we want; but since in many ways what we want is simultaneously here and wanting—and since, to the extent that we find it here, it is subject to wants that may not include us—might we not say that the condition of wanting, as overdetermined and contradictory as such a term must be, constitutes the only state that queer theory can ever properly know?

Can desire survive its naming? Can it survive in the place of its naming, in the state to which, and as which, by naming it, it is named? Queer theory can only remain a desire, and like desire it depends for its energy, for its continuing power to grip us, on the impossibility of knowing its boundaries, of knowing its coherence as a state. Our task—impossible, or self-deconstructing, precisely to the extent that it is worth pursuing—is neither to inhabit such a state nor to sentimentalize it, neither to govern it nor to colonize it as one more outpost for the missionary work of distributing identities, but to interrogate the contradictory directions in which desire and identity always operate. The desire of, and for, queer theory demands a

continuous—and continuously unsettling—challenge to the institutionalization of pleasures (including the pleasures of institutionalization) insofar as they ignore the remainder or excess that designates the distance between the representations by which we know our pleasures and the uncompromising insistence of our self-contradictory, and hence radically “incorrect,” desires. We would do well to construct queer theory, then, less as the site of what we communally want than as the want of any communal site. Queer theory is no one’s safe harbor for the holidays; it should offer no image of home. It can only function as another mode of experiencing, and allegorizing, the persistent displacement that constitutes desire and enables it to function as both spur and resistance to every totalization that would claim to know its “state.” Utopic in its negativity, queer theory curves endlessly toward a realization that its realization remains impossible, that only as a force of derealization, of dissolution into the fluxions of a subjectless desire, can it ever be itself. What, then, can one say of queer theory to those who are gathered to attend to its state? Reinvent it. Resist it. Refuse it. Pursue it. Get over it. Just do it.