

Lewd Critique

Cris Mayo

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

I appreciate James Stillwaggon's reading of Plato's Aristophanes' story and I find his — and would help build a case for the relationship between the development of a particular kind of Allan Bloom's — reading quite compelling and can certainly see where reading it that way would help build a case for the development of a particular kind of desire in relation to the law. From his response to my work I can see that we have different ideas about the degree to which one understands the normative laws one lives under and is defined by — if I understand my Lacanian colleagues, one can only know one's desires through the law but ultimately know neither the law nor one's desires. Stillwaggon's account here has more certainty, I think, about that process and seems to me to have more certainty as well about what forms of dissident sexualities will be effective. My own use of Plato's version of Aristophanes is for a different purpose: arguing that new forms of desire and association are not the stuff of "clinging" but instead are about movement and possibility. But even if our projects differ, what Stillwaggon has reminded me of is that the lewd desires of lesbians may be the better desires to track for my project as they push desire beyond recognition by law and reinforce a kind of desire that is not fully intelligible by those who believe that they fully understand normative law.¹ Lewdness, then, not intelligible desires in relation to a clearly intelligible law, seems the best route for understanding the disruptions to clear recognition or stable understandings. This lewd critique might respond to the troubling way in which Stillwaggon embodies normative law in his demand that desires not be "insignificant" and "do little" to change things. While I think his main project is to critique the law that tragically brings subjectivities into being and then leaves them to suffer, as he articulates the position of normativity I think he winds up reinstalling the kind of potentially punitive perspective he critiques.

I do appreciate that he has pointed out something I relegate to a footnote — that could use some analysis in itself. Perhaps I wish he had taken the lewd path, but even in his discussion of "the" law, he accords it too much certainty, describing a law that is understood, seems to have a stolid singularity, and so on. I would put Michel Foucault's multiple discourse centers, rather than the symbolic, into this discussion and just say in response to Stillwaggon's contention that my definition of desire "as long as a feeling is my own and as long as I am moved by it, the feeling must be desire" is nowhere near what I take desire to be nor how I think queer youth are working through ideas and acts around desire. But like all of us living under contradictory tangles of normativity, I do see the simultaneous pull of desire for recognition and a refusal of categories by which such recognition could happen.

I am concerned that Stillwaggon, in describing the force of the law, has also come to embody its perspective and take on its role as judge of efficacy of various forms of desires and identities:

Unless our discussion of desire acknowledges the law's formative role in shaping our desires and our identities, we risk attaching ourselves to an understanding of desire that is socially and politically insignificant and that can do little to change political conditions for those who stand in a minimized place in relation to the law by virtue of their desires.

Even setting aside what I see as a bit of a god trick in his perspective, I would like to complicate his view of how norms and laws function. A "formative role" is not definitive — the law or laws, customs, and discourse centers all provide the context for desire-related meaning making but do not completely circumscribe responses to or interpretations and refusals of the law. Discourses proliferate, expand, and sometimes contract, but even in periods where conserving moments in law or custom seem to create fewer options for public life, the disruption, possibility, and multiplications of desires continues. Neither my reading nor the work of queer kids discounts the context of structuring laws and institutions, but queer youth activism shifts away from concern about intelligibility in relation to dominant understandings — that is, the law they are referring to — and moves toward thinking and acting in ways that demonstrate the generative aspects of desire, kinds of desire that come at normativity in ways that frustrate simple operations of law and regulations. Like the lewd desires Aristophanes scoffs, these are desires and forms of subjectivity that do not contribute to bolstering normative politics as we understand them. Indeed, that is really the point of queer theory in general: sexual dissidence screws up the time and place of politics, challenges stable understandings, and rather than aspiring to join the polity as is, seeks to baffle normative categories. One might even see this complex constellation of potential normative law in the *Symposium* as a whole, itself a series of narratives about the relation between laws, norms, desires, and ends of desire that show the uncertainty and variation of living under laws, trying to come to grips with desire, and understanding how others might view those attempts. So rather than the singular law and seemingly socially agreed upon refusal, there are local gaps, contradictions, and yes, contexts where norms crystallize into institutions and practices that seem unassailable but are in crisis from their start.

Assuming that more than Bloom is behind Stillwaggon's larger project, I think a better psychoanalytic response to my emphasis on futurity would be Lee Edelman's work on queerness and the death drive. Edelman positions queerness as against the procreative futurity of heterosexuality. Taking Jacques Lacan's contention that "love...seeks to regain...lost immortality,"⁷² Edelman argues that the death drive "offers assurance of nothing at all: neither identity, nor survival, nor any promise of a future."⁷³ As he puts it, "what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively — to insist that the future stop here."⁷⁴ As a polemic against the time and place of normative heterosexuality and its attendant positioning of homosexuality, Edelman critiques forms of homosexuality that can be too easily converted to "homonormativity," that is, that are intelligible to the law, live well with norms of procreation, and settle down into a productive relationship with the expectations of dominant judgment.

I am not sure what Bloom would make of homonormativity but, at least in Eve Sedgwick's account, he evinced some despair over how public and recognizable gayness had become in an age apparently dedicated to dismantling the closet — the

allure and mystique of things that could not be said but were understood, he feared, would go missing in the harsh light of clear identification and stabilized meaning.⁵ If this is Bloom or even Sedgwick's hope for what Bloom meant then I think the inarticulacy of desire and perhaps strategies of using desire to stimulate distaste and/or critique are things worth keeping. People exceed their desires when experiences and meanings, connections and relationships offer more possibility than people can account for in their descriptions of who they are in relation to the law or series of normative discourse centers and resistances. Queer youth, it seems to me, try to take responsibility for understanding how their social and political context has attempted to shape their desires and how their own resistances may reinscribe patterns of dominance that echo those they are working against. I think they are as much troubling their own desires for recognition as they are troubling the law as law itself.

Stillwaggon's account reads gay-straight alliances as if they were an interest group seeking to become part of the polity, but I think they are doing things that are more complicated. They are also often critical of their own aspirations, for recognition understanding the particular power of lewdness to remain distasteful but also visible (or even lurking). Indeed queer theorists young and old are critical of homonormativity, that is, attempts to gain recognition by assimilating to expectations of intelligibility, usefulness, and all the sorts of things that Stillwaggon says that desires that truly want to be productive should be concerned about. As Deborah Britzman puts it, shifting away from identity, with its attendant demand for authenticity and legibility, may open up "the possibility of exceeding selves through new modes of sociality."⁶ These new forms of association and sociality, aiming both toward vexed political engagement and destabilizing energy, is what draws me to gay-straight alliances and to what I see as the promise of lewdness.

1. It would be tempting to set Luce Irigaray against what I take to be Stillwaggon's implicit use of Lacan.

2. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 73.

3. Edelman, *No Future*, 48.

4. *Ibid.*, 31.

5. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 55.

6. Deborah Britzman, "Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or Stop Reading Straight," *Educational Theory* 45, no. 2 (1995): 158.