



Queer Nation

by Susan Stryker

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Queer Nation erupted into being in the summer of 1990, when militant AIDS activists at New York's Gay Pride parade passed out to the assembled crowd an inflammatory manifesto, printed on both sides of a single newspaper-sized piece of newsprint, bearing the titles *I Hate Straights!* and *Queers Read This!* Within days, in response to the brash, "in-your-face" tone of the broadside, Queer Nation chapters had sprung up in San Francisco and other major cities.

Described by activist scholars Allan Bérubé and Jeffrey Escoffier as the first "retro-future/postmodern" activist group to address gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender concerns, the short-lived organization (lasting only two years) made a lasting impact on sexual identity politics in the United States. To a significant degree, the relative frequency and acceptability of glbtq representation in mass culture in the 1990s and early twenty-first century can be dated to the emergence of Queer Nation.

Queer Nation had no formal structure or leadership and relied on large, raucous, community-wide meetings to set the agendas and plan the actions of its numerous cleverly named committees and sub-groups (such as LABIA: Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action, and SHOP: Suburban Homosexual Outreach Project). Queer Nation's style drew on the urgency felt in the AIDS activist community about the mounting epidemic and the paucity of meaningful governmental response, and was inspired largely by the attention-grabbing direct-action tactics of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP).

Rather than launching long-term campaigns to create social change, Queer Nation favored short-term, highly visible, media-oriented actions, such as same-sex kiss-ins at shopping malls. Their political philosophy was succinctly summed up in the now-clichéd slogan, "We're Here. We're Queer. Get Used to It."

A signal accomplishment of the group was to reclaim a set of positive associations for an old epithet, "queer," and to assert that queer people had a right to take up cultural space--right here, right now--with no apologies and no arguments.

Just as importantly, "queer" became an important concept both socially and intellectually, helping to broaden what had been primarily a gay and lesbian social movement into one that was more inclusive of bisexual and transgender people. Rather than denote a particular genre of sexual identity, "queer" came to represent any number of positions arrayed in opposition to oppressive social and cultural norms and policies related to sexuality and gender. The lived political necessity of understanding the nexus of gender and sexuality in this broadening social movement in turn helped launch the field of "queer studies" in higher education.

Use of the term "queer" was never universally embraced by all segments of the constituencies that the concept of "queerness" could potentially represent; indeed, the term often evoked intense hostility. Queer Nation chapters were rife with dissension over issues of race, gender, and class, and they ultimately collapsed under the weight of their own internal contradictions--"queer," after all, means "diversity," whereas "nation" implies "sameness."

Still, in spite of its shortcomings, the shift in perceptions and tactics marked by the emergence of Queer Nation is an important foundation of the current notion of an inclusive gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community.

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