Queer Theory

While not directly discussed in Slaughter City, Naomi Wallace was influenced by queer theory and many of the questions she asks us to consider about these characters and the impact of their sexual identities are tied to the field of queer theory. Below is the Wikipedia introduction to the field.

Queer theory is a field of post-structuralist critical theory that emerged in the early 1990s out of the fields of queer studies and women's studies. Queer theory includes both queer readings of texts and the theorisation of 'queerness' itself. Heavily influenced by the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, José Esteban Muñoz, and Lauren Berlant, queer theory builds both upon feminist challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self and upon gay/lesbian studies' close examination of the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities. Whereas gay/lesbian studies focused its inquiries into natural and unnatural behaviour with respect to homosexual behaviour, queer theory expands its focus to encompass any kind of sexual activity or identity that falls into normative and deviant categories. Italian feminist and film theorist Teresa de Lauretis coined the term "queer theory" for a conference she organized at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1990 and a special issue of Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies she edited based on that conference.

Queer focuses on "mismatches" between sex, gender and desire. Queer has been associated most prominently with bisexual, lesbian and gay subjects, but analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, intersexuality, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Queer theory's attempted debunking of stable (and correlated) sexes, genders and sexualities develops out of the specifically lesbian and gay reworking of the post-structuralist figuring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions. Queer theory examines the constitutive discourses of homosexuality developed in the last century in order to place "queer" in its historical context, and surveys contemporary arguments both for and against this latest terminology.

Annamarie Jagose wrote Queer Theory: An Introduction in 1997. Queer used to be a slang for homosexual and worse, used for homophobic abuse. Recently, this term has been used as an umbrella term for both cultural-sexual identifications and other times as a model for more traditional lesbian and gay studies. According to Jagose (1996), "Queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. For most, queer has prominently been associated with simply those who identify as lesbian and gay. Unknown to many, queer is in association with more than just gay and lesbian, but also cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery." Karl Ulrich's model, he understood...
homosexuality to be an intermediate condition, a 'third sex' that combined physiological aspects of both masculinity and femininity.

"Queer is a product of specific cultural and theoretical pressures which increasingly structured debates (both within and outside the academy) about questions of lesbian and gay identity"

Queer theorist Michael Warner attempts to provide a solid definition of a concept that typically circumvents categorical definitions: "Social reflection carried out in such a manner tends to be creative, fragmentary, and defensive, and leaves us perpetually at a disadvantage. And it is easy to be misled by the utopian claims advanced in support of particular tactics. But the range and seriousness of the problems that are continually raised by queer practice indicate how much work remains to be done. Because the logic of the sexual order is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions, and is embedded in the most standard accounts of the world, queer struggles aim not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those institutions and accounts. The dawning realisation that themes of homophobia and heterosexism may be read in almost any document of our culture means that we are only beginning to have an idea of how widespread those institutions and accounts are".

Queer theory's main project is exploring the contesting of the categorisation of gender and sexuality; identities are not fixed – they cannot be categorised and labeled – because identities consist of many varied components and that to categorise by one characteristic is wrong. Queer theory said that there is an interval between what a subject "does" (role-taking) and what a subject "is" (the self). So despite its title the theory’s goal is to destabilise identity categories, which are designed to identify the "sexed subject" and place individuals within a single restrictive sexual orientation.

Queer theory is derived largely from post-structuralist theory, and deconstruction in particular. Starting in the 1970s, a range of authors brought deconstructionist critical approaches to bear on issues of sexual identity, and especially on the construction of a normative "straight" ideology. Queer theorists challenged the validity and consistency of heteronormative discourses, and focused to a large degree on non-heteronormative sexualities and sexual practices.

The term "queer theory" was introduced in 1990, with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich and Diana Fuss (all largely following the work of Michel Foucault) being among its foundational proponents.

History

The word 'homosexuality'--coined in 1869 by an Austro-Hungarian doctor, Karoly Maria Benkert—was not used widely in English until the 1890s. Gay was mobilized as a specifically political counter to that binaries and hierarchised sexual categorization which classifies homosexuality as a deviation from a privileged and naturalized heterosexuality. Queer marks both a continuity and a break with previous gay liberationist and lesbian feminist models. Queer is a product of specific cultural and theoretical pressure which
increasingly structured debates (both within and outside the academy) about questions of lesbian and gay identity.

There has been a long history of critical and anarchistic thinking about sexual and gender relations across many cultures. Most recently, in the late 1970s and 1980's, social constructionists conceived of the sexual subject as a culturally dependent, historically specific product. Before the phrase "queer theory" was born, the term "Queer Nation" appeared on the cover of the short-lived lesbian/gay quarterly Outlook (magazine) in the winter 1991 issues. Writers Allan Berube and Jeffrey Escoffier drove home the point that Queer Nation strove to embrace paradoxes in its political activism, and that the activism was taking new form and revolving around the issue of identity. Soon enough Outlook and Queer Nation stopped being published, however, there was a mini-gay renaissance going on during the 1980s and early 1990s. There were a number of significant outbursts of lesbian/gay political/cultural activity. Out of this emerged queer theory. Their work however did not arise out of the blue. Teresa de Lauretis is credited with coining the phrase "queer theory". It was at a working conference on lesbian and gay sexualities that was held at the University of California, Santa Cruz in February 1990 that de Lauretis first made mention of the phrase. She later introduced the phrase in a 1991 special issue of differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies, entitled "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities." Similar to the description Berube and Escoffier used for Queer Nation, de Lauretis asserted that, "queer unsettles and questions the genderedness of sexuality." Barely three years later, she abandoned the phrase on the grounds that it had been taken over by mainstream forces and institutions it was originally coined to resist. Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s Epistemology of the Closet, and David Halperin’s One Hundred Years of Homosexuality inspired other works. Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler, and Eve Sedgwick arranged much of the conceptual base for the emerging field in the 1990s. Along with other queer theorists, these three outlined a political hermeneutics, which emphasized representation. These scholars asked questioned if people of varying sexual orientations had the same goals politically and did those in the sexual minority feel that they could be represented along with others of different sexualities and orientations. "While some critics insist that queer theory is apolitical word-smithery, [de Lauretis, Butler, and Sedgwick] take seriously the role that signs and symbols play in shaping the meanings and possibilities of our culture at the most basic level, including politics conventionally defined." 

**Background concepts**

Queer theory is grounded in gender and sexuality. Due to this association, a debate emerges as to whether sexual orientation is natural or essential to the person, as an essentialist believes, or if sexuality is a social construction and subject to change.

The queer theory has two predominant strains:

- Radical deconstructionism: interrogates categories of sexual orientations.
- Radical subversion: disrupts the normalizing tendencies of the sexual order.