



Reclaiming Queer: Activist and Academic Rhetorics of Resistance (Albma Rhetoric Cult & Soc Crit)

Dr. Erin J. Rand Ph.D.

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Reclaiming Queer is an examination of the rhetorical linkage of queer theory in the academy with street-level queer activism in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The late 1980s and early 1990s were a defining historical moment for both queer activism and queer theory in the United States. LGBT communities, confronted with the alarming violence and homophobia of the AIDS crisis, often responded with angry, militant forms of activism designed not merely to promote acceptance or tolerance, but to forge identity and strength from victimization and assert loudly and forcefully their rights to safety and humanity. The activist reclamation of the word “queer” is one marker of this shift in ideology and practice, and it was mirrored in academic circles by the concurrent emergence of the new field of “queer theory.” That is, as queer activists were mobilizing in the streets, queer theorists were producing a similar foment in the halls and publications of academia, questioning regulatory categories of gender and sexuality, and attempting to illuminate the heteronormative foundations of Western thought. Notably, the narrative of queer theory’s development often describes it as arising from or being inspired by queer activism.

In *Reclaiming Queer*, Erin J. Rand examines both queer activist and academic practices during this period, taking as her primary object the rhetorical linkage of queer theory in the academy with street-level queer activism. Through this strategic conjuncture of activism and academia, Rand grapples with the specific conditions for and constraints on rhetorical agency in each context. She examines the early texts that inaugurated the field of queer theory, Queer Nation’s infamous “Queers Read This” manifesto, Larry Kramer’s polemic speeches and editorials, the Lesbian Avengers’ humorous and outrageous antics, the history of ACT UP, and the more recent appearance of Gay Shame activism. From these activist and academic discourses, Rand builds a theory of rhetorical agency that posits queerness as the very condition from which agency emerges.

Reclaiming Queer thus offers a critical look at the rhetoric of queer activism, engages the history of queer theory’s institutionalization and the politics of its proliferation, suggests a radically contextual understanding of rhetorical agency and form, and argues for the centrality of queerness to all rhetorical action.

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