Preface

What a queer thing Life is!¹

All the world is queer save thee and me, and even thou
art a little queer.²

We’re here because we’re queer
Because we’re queer because we’re here.³

THE WORD QUEER HAS historically been used in a number of
different ways: to signify something strange, as in the quote from
P. G. Wodehouse; to refer to negative characteristics (such as mad-
ness or worthlessness) that one associates with others and not with
the self, as in the quote from Robert Owen; and, as in the refrain
from Brendan Behan which ‘queerly’ anticipates the ACT UP slogan
‘we’re here, we’re queer, so get fucking used to it!’, to denote one’s
difference, one’s ‘strangeness’, positively. Similarly, queer has been
used, sometimes abusively, and other times endearingly, as a col-
loquial term for homosexuality. So what exactly does this term
mean when appended by the word ‘theory’?

While Queer Theory may now be recognised by many as an
academic discipline, it nevertheless continues to struggle against
the straitjacketing effects of institutionalisation, to resist closure and
remain in the process of ambiguous (un)becoming. Queer Theory
does not want to ‘straighten up and fly right’ to have the kinks
ironed out of it: it is a discipline that refuses to be disciplined, a
discipline with a difference, with a twist if you like. In saying this,
however, I do not mean to endow Queer Theory with some sort
of ‘Tinkerbell effect’; to claim that no matter how hard you try
you’ll never manage to catch it because essentially it is ethereal,
quixotic, unknowable. Obviously Queer Theory does function in
specific – albeit complex and somewhat ambiguous – ways in particular contexts, and in relation to particular issues. And, as Alan McKee has pointed out, ignoring this because of a fear that any attempt to investigate the multifarious, multivalent, and contextually specific practice(s) of Queer Theory will result in assimilation, is politically dangerous and ethically suspect. Historically, says McKee, Queer Theory has been inscribed in a number of ways, and ‘to write histories of Queer Theories is not the same thing as defining Queer Theory’ (1999: 237). Consequently, this book does not attempt to define what Queer Theory is, but, rather, is concerned with providing an overview of what Queer Theories do, and a critical examination of how and why they have functioned in the specific ways that they have, and what kinds of effects have been produced as a result.

Rather than focusing narrowly on sexuality and/or sexual practices, the book aims to consider critiques of normalising ways of knowing and of being that may not always initially be evident as sex-specific – hence the inclusion of topics such as community, popular culture, race, and so on. This sort of approach is crucial, it seems to me, if we are to understand the broader significance of Queer Theory and the extensive range of ways in which notions of sexuality and gender impact – at times implicitly – on everyday life. Whilst the list of topics covered in the book is far from exhaustive, the theories and issues discussed do lend themselves to other applications. For instance, the analysis of the culturally and historically specific ways in which transsexualism and transgender have been understood and experienced may well prove useful for those interested in intersex issues. Likewise, the chapter entitled ‘Queering Popular Culture’ will provide students of literature with a range of theoretical and methodological approaches to (re)reading canonical texts, as would the genealogical account of the discursive construction of sexuality discussed most explicitly in the earlier chapters of the book. In effect, what this highlights is the interdisciplinary and/or rhizomatic character and potential of Queer Theory which, whilst having its roots in Gay and Lesbian Studies, need not be confined by disciplinary boundaries or what Deleuze and Guattari would refer to as arborescent structures.4

In short, the aim of the book is to queer – to make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimise, to camp up – heteronormative knowledges and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialities that are (in)formed by them and that (in)form them.
NOTES

4. For a more detailed discussion of the terms 'rhizome' and 'arborescent', see Deleuze and Guattari (1983).