

*A Critical Introduction  
to Queer Theory*

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# Contents

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## *Preface*

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## *Queer: A Question of Being or A Question of Doing?*

reformers; and that the Society's leaders were active and effective throughout the 1960s.

9. For filmic accounts of pre-Stonewall bar dyke communities in Canada and California respectively see *Forbidden Love: The Unshamed Stories of Lesbian Lives* (1992) directed by Aerlyn Weissman and Lynne Fernie, and *Last Call at Maud's* (1998) directed by Paris Poirier. For a critical analysis of these and other such films, see Hankin (2000).
10. This image of the 'untouchable' is particularly associated with the figure of the stone butch. See, for example, Halberstam (1998); Feinberg (1993).
11. For an explicit example of this, see Lee Lynch's poem *Stone Butch* in Nestle (1992) p. 405.
12. For a more detailed account of the political context in which Gay Liberation organisations formed in the USA, the UK, and Australia respectively, see D'Emilio (1983); Weeks (1977); and Wotherspoon (1991).
13. In saying this I do not mean to conflate what was in reality a heterogeneous range of organisations and forms of activism. For an account of the important political and socio-economic differences that gave rise to different models of Gay Liberation in different countries, see Adam (1995).
14. Sartelle quotes Cal Thomas, an opponent of gay rights, who says of the determinist argument: 'I don't think it legitimizes homosexual practice and behavior any more than the discovery of heavy doses of testosterone in a male justifies his adultery or promiscuity' (1994: 3).
15. Creet (1995), Phelan (1993), and Sedgwick (1990) have all critically engaged with the coming out narrative.
16. For similar critiques of the alleged sexism and misogyny of gay (male) politics see Jeffreys (1990); Frye (1983).
17. Friedan, the author of the influential *The Feminist Mystique* (1963) was at the time (1970) the national president of NOW.
18. This excerpt was taken from a copy of the entire manifesto which can be found at <http://carap.umd.edu/queer/radicalesbian.htm>
19. This sort of agenda also played a central role in the development of separatist politics and communities. For detailed culturally specific accounts of lesbian separatism, see Doyle (1996); Ion (1997).
20. See, for example, Abbott and Love (1972).
21. See O'Sullivan (1997).
22. See Moraga (1983); Nestle (1992).
23. For a more detailed account of the Sex Wars, see Duggan and Hunter (1996); Faderman (1991); Healey (1996); and O'Sullivan (1997).

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTERS we focused on the ways in which homosexuality and lesbianism have been discursively produced in the West over the past two hundred years or so, and examined the various theoretical and/or political responses, positions, and strategies that evolved as a result of dominant understandings of sexuality, subjectivity, social relations, and the connections between them. In this chapter we will undertake a similar task, examining the social, theoretical, and political conditions that enabled the emergence of what has come to be known as Queer Theory. In addition to this we will consider the many and varied ways in which the term queer has been understood, and discuss the theoretical and political effects of these diverse uses. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the existence of a range of queer activist groups such as ACT UP, Queer Nation, OutRage, PUSSY (Perverts Undermining State Scrutiny), Transsexual Menace, Lesbian Avengers and Transgender Nation that formed in the 1990s and shaped Queer Theory and its practice, it is not within the bounds of this chapter to discuss these groups and their various forms of activism in any detail.<sup>1</sup>

As I discussed in Chapter 2, from the late 1970s on, gay and lesbian movements, like feminist movements, were challenged by those who felt frustrated and marginalised by the assumption that sexual preference or gender should (unquestionably) take precedence over other aspects of identity. Women of colour, for example, expressed their distrust of the white feminist focus on gender, claiming that politically and socially they had as much, if not more, in common with (the struggles of) men of colour than with white women, who, they noted, continued – in some respects

at least – to reap the benefits of colonisation. Increasingly, the ethnic model of identity and politics discussed in the previous chapter was ‘criticized for exhibiting white, middle-class, heteronormative values and liberal political interests’ (Seidman 1995: 124). Consequently, as we shall see in Chapter 4, writers such as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa argued for the necessity of a focus on the intersectionality of racial, sexual, gender, and class identities. Such a focus necessarily involves the problematisation of the notion of a unitary lesbian and/or gay identity and community,<sup>2</sup> which, as we saw in the earlier discussion of the ‘lesbian sex wars’, was becoming increasingly implausible. Connected to the challenging of unified, essentialising, and universalising identities was a critique of binary oppositions such as homosexuality/heterosexuality, male/female, and so on.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s critique of the tendency to understand sexual identity on the basis of the gender of one’s sexual object choice is an example of the changing theoretical and political milieu that the politics of difference engendered. In her landmark text, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) Sedgwick, claiming that such forms of designation reaffirm, rather than challenge, heteronormative logic and institutions, writes:

It is a rather amazing fact that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, and so on) precisely one, the gender of the object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as *the* dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of ‘sexual orientation’. (1990: 8)

This sort of counter-hegemonic logic is also apparent in the writings and practices of many of those now associated with ‘sex radicalism’. Pat Califia, for instance, argued in 1983 in an article published in *The Advocate*, that the terms, lesbian, gay man, and heterosexual, are limited and limiting as a category of sexual identification.<sup>3</sup> Califia, a proponent of sadomasochism, claims that sadomasochistic practices transgress the allegedly inviolate line between gay men and lesbians, and that sex between the two is something other than heterosexual since the gender of one’s object choice is no longer the defining factor. Sharon Kelly uses the same sort of argument to claim that she (who usually has sex

with so-called heterosexual men) and her sometimes sex partner Richard (who usually has sex with so-called gay men) are, in fact, queer.<sup>4</sup> As Annamarie Jagose notes, citing Jan Clausen, some bisexual theorists have made similar claims. Clausen says: ‘bisexuality is not a sexual identity at all, but a sort of anti-identity, a refusal (not, of course, conscious) to be limited to one object of desire, one way of loving’ (cited in Jagose 1996: 69).

These are just a few examples of the many and varied challenges to gay and lesbian theory and/or politics, to feminism, and to identity-based politics in general that proliferated in the 1980s and that engendered what some have called a politics of difference. The 1980s also saw the popularisation of the work of Michel Foucault and an increase, particularly in academia, of poststructuralist accounts of subjectivity and social relations. The impact of such theoretical shifts has been significant, not least of all in regards to notions of sexual identity and politics. Given this, let’s now look at some of the fundamental tenets of poststructuralism.

Poststructuralism is most often associated with a rejection, or at least a critique, of humanist logic and aspirations. It therefore involves a rethinking of concepts such as ‘meaning’, ‘truth’, ‘subjectivity’, ‘freedom’, ‘power’, and so on. Poststructuralist theorists such as Foucault argue that there are no objective and universal truths, but that particular forms of knowledge, and the ways of being that they engender, become ‘naturalised’, in culturally and historically specific ways. For example, Judith Butler, and Monique Wittig argue (in slightly different ways) that heterosexuality is a complex matrix of discourses, institutions, and so on, that has become normalised in our culture, thus making particular relationships, lifestyles, and identities, seem natural, ahistorical, and universal. In short, heterosexuality, as it is currently understood and experienced, is a (historically and culturally specific) truth-effect of systems of power/knowledge. Given this, its dominant position and current configuration are contestable and open to change.

Poststructuralism is critical of universalising explanations of the subject and the world. Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984) is a case in point. In this text Lyotard argues that what we perceive as truth is constructed as such in and through its conformity with universalising accounts – or grand narratives as he calls them – of subjectivity and sociality that govern particular cultures at particular times. One such narrative embraces the notion of human being (and of history) as

evolving towards an enlightened or ideal state of being. As a result, (political) actions, artworks, scientific 'discoveries', particular lifestyles, and so on, are judged on the basis of whether or not they supposedly contribute to, or inhibit, such progress. As we saw in the previous chapters, political theory and/or activism often attempts to validate itself in these sorts of terms. The liberationist agenda, for example, is most often driven by the image of a singular and supposedly universally achievable goal or state - sexual freedom - which presumably is understood and experienced (at least fundamentally) in the same way by all human beings. Lyotard and other poststructuralist theorists are, however, critical of grand narratives and the logic that they attempt to (re)produce and/or legitimate on the grounds that they lead to totalising or universalising discourses and practices that leave no room for difference, for complexities, or for ambiguity. Consequently, poststructuralist theorists tend to concentrate on the local and the specific, and eschew universal and ahistorical accounts of oppression, definitions of homosexuality, blueprints for freedom, and so on.

Rather than reproducing the logic of what Luce Irigaray has called an Economy of the Same, poststructuralist theorists are concerned with developing analyses of the differences within and between people, and the ways in which these are constructed and lived. Foucault's genealogical account of the ways in which sexuality (in its many forms) has been discursively produced in historically and culturally specific ways is an example of this. In *The History of Sexuality* Volume 1, for instance, Foucault, refuting what he refers to as the 'repressive hypothesis' - the idea that sex, as an instinctual drive, has been repressed by oppressive institutions, and thus is in need of liberation - critically analyses the ways in which educational establishments, discourses, and discursive practices, construct adolescent sexuality in and through the division of time and space not only in the school, but also in the home, in work life and recreation, and in all aspects of daily life. Moreover, in texts such as *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault demonstrates how grand narratives, or what he might call normalising discourses, constitute difference solely in terms of degrees of difference from the norm that is the ideal. It is this sort of logic that engenders and legitimises the representation of homosexuality as an aberration from heterosexuality (the norm/ideal).

The focus on difference both between and within subjects

necessarily involves a critique of, and challenge to, the humanist notion of the subject as a unique, unified, rational, autonomous individual whose relations with others are secondary and whose desires and actions are transparent to him or herself. For post-structuralist theorists there is no true self that exists prior to its immersion in culture. Rather, the self is constructed in and through its relations with others, and with systems of power/knowledge. But insofar as the humanist subject is constituted in and through the privileging of certain aspects of the self which come to represent the self as naturally superior, and the simultaneous splitting off parts of the self deemed inappropriate and the projection of these onto others, such a being is, as Naomi Scheman argues both 'engorged' and 'diminished' (1997: 126), privileged and threatened. As will become apparent throughout this text, this tension engenders all sorts of forms of social problems.

There are a range of poststructuralist accounts of subjectivity ranging from the psychoanalytic account of the split subject, to the Foucauldian notion of the subject as an agent and effect of systems of power/knowledge,<sup>5</sup> to the idea of rhizomatic (un)becoming developed by Deleuze and Guattari,<sup>6</sup> but what each share is a rejection of the belief that the subject is autonomous, unified, self-knowing, and static. As a result, poststructuralists are critical of the liberationist ideal of the liberation of the true self and of sexuality as a singular unified force that has been repressed.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as we shall come to see, poststructuralist theorists and queer theorists find identity politics inherently problematic.

The humanist model of the subject is also founded on a distinction between the mind and the body; it exemplifies what is sometimes referred to as Cartesian dualism. The assumption is that identity is located in consciousness, and that the body is simply a material receptacle that houses the mind or spirit. Ulrich's theory of inversion as a female soul/mind in a male body is an example of mind/body dualism, and the liberationist assumption that ideology colonises the mind of the individual, and that the goal of politics is (through processes such as consciousness raising) to free the mind, and hence the self, from the repressive constraints of dominant culture, is yet another. But poststructuralist theorists argue that changing your life is not simply a matter of changing your mind. This is because we embody the discourses that exist in our culture, our very being is constituted by them, they are a part of us, and thus we cannot simply throw them off. Indeed,

as we shall see in Chapter 5, both Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Judith Butler argue that the body is my being-in-the-world and as such is the instrument through which identity is performatively generated. It is in virtue of having/being a body that is discursively produced in and through its relation to culture, that I am an 'I'.

The notion of ideology as a tool with which the masses are 'brainwashed', is tied, in the grand narratives associated with left politics, to an understanding of power as something that the ruling elite alone can possess and wield to the detriment of the majority of the population, and, of course, to a model of subjectivity informed by Cartesian dualism. Power, on this model, is repressive; it is negative and dis-enabling. Foucault, however, has argued that power is productive rather than simply oppressive, and should be understood as a network of relations rather than something one group owns and wields in order to control another.<sup>8</sup> In short, Foucault, like poststructuralist theorists in general, is critical of dichotomous logic, of, for example, the (humanist) distinction between rulers and ruled, power and powerlessness, that seems to inform much of the homophile and gay and lesbian theory that we discussed in the previous chapters. An important example of this is the claim that:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power... The existence [of power relationships] depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal... or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances... [which] by definition... can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. (Foucault 1980: 95-6)

In other words, for Foucault, unlike liberationists, resistance is inseparable from power rather than being opposed to it. And since resistance is not, and cannot be, external to systems of power/knowledge, then an oppositional politics that attempts to replace supposedly false ideologies with non-normative truths is inherently contradictory. There can be no universally applicable political goals or strategies, only a plurality of heterogeneous and localised practices, the effects of which will never be entirely predictable in advance.

It is this sort of focus on the constructed, contingent, unstable

and heterogeneous character of subjectivity, social relations, power, and knowledge, that has paved the way for Queer Theory. So what exactly is Queer Theory? What do we mean when we use the term queer? Is queer an attitude, an identity, a particular approach to politics? Rather than attempting to define what queer is - which, as we will come to see, would be a decidedly un-queer thing to do - the remainder of this chapter is dedicated to the examination of a number of, often contradictory, examples of the ways in which this term has been used by contemporary theorists and activists.

In the same way that feminists and/or poststructuralist theorists have developed, and continue to develop, a broad range of critical responses to liberal humanism which are at times competing and contradictory, 'queer theorists are a diverse lot exhibiting important disagreements and divergences' (Seidman 1995: 125). Nevertheless, it is possible to identify similarities in the ways in which Queer Theory and politics are understood and practised.

So, let us begin with some fairly typical explanations of queer. For Chris Berry and Annamarie Jagose, 'Queer is an ongoing and necessarily unfixable site of engagement and contestation' (1996: 11). Or, as Jagose puts it in her book entitled *Queer Theory*, 'Queer itself can have neither a fundamental logic, nor a consistent set of characteristics' (1996: 96). In his book, *Saint Foucault*, David Halperin also refrains from pinning down the term queer, arguing instead that:

Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality *vis-à-vis* the normative... [Queer] describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance. (1995: 62)

This is a sentiment shared by a range of other writers. According to Cherry Smith, for example, queer 'defines a strategy, an attitude... [Q]ueer articulates a radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproductive sexuality, and the family' (1996: 280). Similarly, Lisa Duggan argues that Queer Theory does not simply develop new labels for old boxes, but rather, carries with it 'the promise of new meanings, new ways of thinking and acting politically - a promise sometimes realized, sometimes not' (1992: 11). In each case, Queer (Theory) is constructed as a sort of vague and indefinable set of practices and (political)

positions that has the potential to challenge normative knowledges and identities.

Halperin goes on to explain that since queer is a positionality rather than an identity in the humanist sense, it is not restricted to gays and lesbians, but can be taken up by anyone who feels marginalised as a result of their sexual practices. Queer could include, suggests Halperin, 'some married couples without children . . . or even (who knows?) some married couples with children - with, perhaps, *very naughty* children' (1995: 62). Likewise, the anonymous authors of a pamphlet entitled 'Queer Power Now' that was produced and circulated in London in 1991, state, 'Queer means to fuck with gender. There are straight queers, bi-queers, tranny queers, lez queers, fag queers, SM queers, fisting queers' (cited in Smith 1996: 277). In short, then, whilst queer is not an essential identity, it is nevertheless, according to both of these accounts, a provisional political one. Given this, it seems that the term queer, as Halperin and the authors of 'Queer Power Now' use it, functions in similar ways to the term 'political lesbian' which we discussed in the previous chapter.

For Gabriel Rotello, the former editor of *Outweek*, however, queer does denote an identity. Rotello says, 'When you're trying to describe the community, and you have to list gays, lesbians, bisexuals, drag queens, transsexuals (post-op and pre), it gets unwieldy. Queer says it all' (cited in Duggan 1992: 21). So, despite the claim made by Duggan, it appears that queer does function, at least at times, as a new, and less wordy, label for an old box. One of the problems with this particular use of queer as an umbrella term is that it does little if anything to deconstruct the humanist understanding of the subject. Worse still, it veils over the differences between, for example, lesbianism and gayness, between 'women', between transsexualism and cross-dressing, and ignores differences of class, race, age and so on, once again positing sexuality as a unified and unifying factor. As Gloria Anzaldúa puts it:

Queer is used as a false unifying umbrella which all 'queers' of all races, ethnicities and classes are shoved under. At times we need this umbrella to solidify our ranks against outsiders. But even when we seek shelter under it we must not forget that it homogenizes, erases our differences. (1991: 250)

In effect, then, the term queer can at times be used in such a way as to imply the existence of some sort of queer solidarity that has triumphed over the kinds of political divisions discussed in the

previous chapter. The use of queer as an umbrella term can, as Halperin has noted,<sup>9</sup> have the effect of (mis)representing us as one big happy (queer) family.

Right at the other end of the queer continuum we find groups such as Queercore, a loose coalition of radical anarchist and/or punk queers for whom the term queer defines not a specific sexuality, 'but the freedom to personalize anything you see or hear then shoot it back into the stupid world more distorted and amazing than it was before' (Cooper 1996: 295). In fact, unlike Rotello, for whom the terms gay and lesbian, and queer appear synonymous, Johnny Noxzema and Rex Boy, editors of the queerzine *Bimbox*, state in no uncertain terms that for them gay and lesbian, and queer are as antithetical as you can get. In the editorial to a 1991 edition of *Bimbox*, they write:

You are entering a gay and lesbian-free zone . . . Effective immediately, BIMBOX is at war against lesbians and gays. A war in which modern queer boys and queer girls are united against the prehistoric thinking and demented self-serving politics of the above-mentioned scum. BIMBOX hereby renounces its past use of the term lesbian and/or gay in a positive manner. This is a civil war against the ultimate evil, and consequently we must identify us and them in no uncertain terms . . . So, dear lesbian woman [sic] or gay man to whom perhaps BIMBOX has been inappropriately posted . . . prepare to pay dearly for the way you and your kind have fucked things up. (cited in Cooper 1996: 292)

These 'radical' queers claim what they presume to be an outsider status; they do not want to be assimilated into heteronormative culture which is what they see as being advocated by lesbians and gays. In fact, as Cooper puts it, 'They don't pretend for a moment that they can alter the dominant culture - gay or straight. They don't want to . . . They're trying to create an alternative culture in and around it' (Ibid.: 296). What the quote from Noxzema and Boy makes clear is that the term queer can be used to reinforce, rather than deconstruct, the ways in which identity and difference are constructed in terms of binary oppositions, of us and them - oppositions which are never neutral, but are always hierarchical. The queer subject of this kind of discourse reaffirms his or her identity in opposition to the supposedly normative other - a gesture which is inherent in liberal humanism, and which poststructuralist theorists are eager to avoid. Consequently, particular uses of the term queer can even, as Halperin notes, 'support the restigmatization of lesbians and gays . . . who can now be



regarded... as benighted, sad, folks, still locked - unlike the postmodern, non-sexually labeled, self-theorized queers - into an old-fashioned, essentialized, rigidly defined, conservative, specifically sexual... identity' (1995: 65).

The Chicago-based activist group Queers United Against Straight Acting Homosexuals (QUASH) take a similar position to the editors of *Bimbox*. They likewise believe that gay and lesbian politics and activism all too often plays into the hands of normative culture, reinforcing its values, beliefs, and status. In short, they are critical of what they see as the assimilationist agenda of gay and lesbian politics and activism. They state:

Assimilation is killing us. We are falling into a trap. Some of us adopt an apologetic stance, stating, 'that's just the way I am' (read: 'I'd be straight if I could'). Others pattern their behavior in such a way as to mimic heterosexual society so as to minimize the glaring differences between us and them. (QUASH, cited in Cohen 1997: 445)

QUASH go on to argue that no matter how much money queers make, or what kinds of corporate or professional positions queers might hold, they will never share the legal rights accorded to heterosexuals. Moreover, they argue that the concerns that are particular to queers will continue to be ignored and/or underfunded, and they will be bashed and persecuted by those whose being and whose actions epitomise the cultural logic of heteronormativity. For QUASH, then, like the editors of *Bimbox*, assimilation is a deadly myth that must be shattered.

As Alan McKee has noted, the refusal to define queer apparent in the quotations from Halperin, Smith, Jagose, Berry, and Duggan, often goes hand in hand with this sort of virulent attack on assimilationism. In a critical analysis of such assumptions and associations, McKee problematises some of the key tenets found in much of the writing that calls itself Queer Theory. The first of these is the belief that naming something constitutes a form of closure, or of assimilation: that, for example, what is transgressive about queer is its ephemerality, and any attempt to 'explain what must forever escape meaning' (McKee 1999: 236) inevitably goes against the grain of the post-identity ethos of Queer Theory. This sort of position may seem attractive to those well versed in the limits and dangers of singular universalising accounts of politics and political activism, but, according to McKee, it too has its (all too often unacknowledged) dangers. McKee's argument is that the claim that Queer Theory is indefinable belies the fact that Queer Theory

courses are taught in academia, and that some articles are chosen for inclusion in such courses, and for publication in Queer Theory journals and books, whereas other are not. In other words, some sort of sense of what queer is (or is not) is at work in the judgments being made in these institutional situations. 'Queer is not an entirely empty signifier', says McKee: 'in the face of a resolved and insistent unknowability, it remains clear that Queer means' (Ibid.: 237).

In denying this, as McKee notes, we fail to recognise or acknowledge how and why particular knowledges, practices, identities, and texts, are validated at the expense of others. In other words, the refusal to define queer, or at least the ways in which the term is functioning in specific contexts, promotes a sense of inclusivity which is misleading, and worse still, enables exclusionary praxis to go unchecked. Steven Seidman shares McKee's concerns and asks what kinds of politics and/or ethics Queer Theory is implicitly promoting - a point which he claims queer theorists are suspiciously silent about. Indeed, Seidman argues that unless we seriously think through this question and refrain from simply reiterating enigmatic calls for fluidity, ambiguity, indefinability, and so on, Queer Theory will be little more than an anarchistic social ideal, or a form of libertarianism founded on a democratic pluralist ideal. In either case, Queer Theory will be no less problematic than the humanist system that it claims to be attempting to work against.

Second, McKee identifies a number of dichotomies that seem to play a central, although not always explicit, role in much Queer Theory. For example, despite the Foucauldian critique discussed earlier, assimilationism is often represented as conservative and as the opposite of resistance, which, by association, is posited as radical. Tied to this is a distinction between gay and lesbian theory and/or politics which is seen as epitomising the former, and Queer Theory and/or politics which is presumed to be somehow inherently transgressive. But as Lee Edelman, whom McKee cites, states, "Queer" as the endlessly mutating token of non-assimilation (and hence as the utopian badge of a would-be "authentic" position of resistance) may reflect a certain bourgeois aspiration to be always *au courant*' (1999: 242). What Edelman means by this is that ironically, despite the fact that queer theorists insist that there is 'no single locus of great Refusal... or pure law of the revolutionary' (Foucault 1980: 96), this insistence, coupled



with the associated image of queer as 'the endlessly mutating token of non-assimilation', functions to position queer (as it is understood here) and, by association, those who practise it, as quintessentially resistant, and, of course, as superior to, or more enlightened than, the so-called non-queer. So again, it is apparent, as McKee argues, that the term queer does inform the ways in which a range of practices and identities are interpreted, judged, evaluated, and positioned: queer does signify in specific, if unacknowledged, ways.

The problem, then, is that the unacknowledged meanings attached to this term and its usage do tend to privilege the values, desires, and aspirations of particular people and groups, and to overlook, or silence those of others. Consequently, some theorists and activists have accused Queer Theory and/or politics of repeating the same sort of exclusionary logic that is often associated with the Homophile Movement, with liberationist politics, and with second wave feminism.<sup>10</sup> Harriet Wistrich, for example, states 'I don't use the term [queer]. I associate it with gay men', and Isling Mack-Nataf says, 'I'm more inclined to use the words "black lesbian", because when I hear the word queer I think of white, gay men'<sup>11</sup> (both cited in Smith 1996: 280). Julia Parnaby goes so far as to claim that queer, a 'movement based almost solely on a male agenda' (1996: 5),

is far from the revolutionary movement it would like itself to be, it is little more than a liberal/libertarian alliance - neither of which is noted for its commitment to feminist politics... [Queer offers us [lesbian feminists] nothing. It is yet one more face of the backlash, trying to pass itself off as something new. (Ibid.: 10)

In summary, then, Queer Theory and/or activism has been accused of being, among other things, male-centred, anti-feminist, and race-blind.

Whether or not one agrees with these criticisms, it does seem valid enough to suggest that at times Queer Theory and politics are informed by, and inform, an overly simplistic distinction between what or who is deemed to be queer, and what or who is not. So, for example, we find dichotomies such as 'us' and 'them', queer and heterosexual, queer and gay/lesbian at work in many accounts of queer practice and/or identity. As a result, all heterosexuals, it is often implied, are situated in a dominant normative position, and all gays and lesbians simply aspire to be granted access to this position, whereas all queers are marginalised and

consciously and intentionally resist assimilation of any kind. Of course, this sort of logic is reiterated in the work of anti-queer theorists such as Parnaby who simply reverse the hierarchy - but then Parnaby never does claim to be writing from a poststructuralist position.

Cathy J. Cohen is one of a number of contemporary critics who is critical of dichotomous logic and of the (re)production of 'narrow and homogenised political identities... that inhibit the radical potential of queer politics' (1997: 441). Instead of focusing primarily on sexuality, Cohen calls for a 'broadened understanding of queerness... based on an intersectional analysis that recognizes how numerous systems of oppression interact to regulate... the lives of most people' (Ibid.: 441). Such an approach would undermine dichotomies such as heterosexual/queer in that it would demonstrate that heterosexuals have multiple subject positions and thus not all heterosexuals are situated socially, politically, economically, in the same way. Cohen mentions, for example, heterosexual women who are on welfare, single mothers, and/or women of colour. She asks how, as queer theorists, we might begin to understand the position(s) of such women who, whilst being heterosexual, do not fit the ideal image of heterosexual femininity and are thus often perceived as something other than 'normal'. She also asks how queer theorists and/or activists relate, politically, to those whose sexuality may be deemed queer, but who, at the same time, see themselves as members of other communities, that is, communities formed around race, class, disability, and so on. In raising these kinds of questions Cohen challenges the notion of a homogenized identity on which (queer) political practice can be founded, and calls instead for a politics based on intersectional analyses of identity and its relation to prevailing systems of power/knowledge.

What the various uses of the term queer that we've looked at thus far seem to indicate is that the question of what, or who, is queer is as contentious as the definitions of lesbianism discussed in the previous chapter. If, as Halperin has suggested, queer is a positionality (rather than an innate identity) that potentially can be taken up by anyone who feels themselves to have been marginalized as a result of their sexual preferences, then one might argue that the majority of the world's population is (at least potentially) queer. But, as Elizabeth Grosz has warned, queer could consequently up end being used to validate what she regards as ethically

questionable sexual practices and identities at the same time that it denigrates so-called conservative forms of same-sex relations. She says:

'Queer' is capable of accommodating, and will no doubt provide a political rationale and coverage in the near future for many of the most blatant and extreme forms of heterosexual and patriarchal power games. They too are, in a certain sense, queer, persecuted, ostracized. Heterosexual sadists, pederasts, fetishists, pornographers, pimps, voyeurs, suffer from social sanctions: in a certain sense they too can be regarded as oppressed. But to claim an oppression of the order of lesbian and gay, women's or racial oppression is to ignore the very real complicity and phallic rewards of what might be called 'deviant sexualities' within patriarchal and heterocentric power relations. (1994b: 113)

One way of avoiding the problems associated with the notion of queer as an identity – albeit a non-essential, provisional, and fragmented one – is, as Janet R. Jakobsen suggests, to 'complete the Foucauldian move from human being to human doing' (1998: 516). What Jakobsen means by this is that it may be more productive to think of queer as a verb (a set of actions), rather than as a noun (an identity, or even a nameable positionality formed in and through the practice of particular actions). This seems to be the position taken by Michael Warner who says that queer is not just a resistance to the norm, but more importantly, consists of protesting against 'the idea[] of normal behavior' (1993: 290). Queer, in this sense, comes to be understood as a deconstructive practice that is not undertaken by an already constituted subject, and does not, in turn, furnish the subject with a nameable identity.

So what exactly is deconstruction? The term deconstruction is often associated with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Deconstruction could be said to constitute a critical response to the humanist belief in absolute essences and oppositions. The idea that heterosexuality is a naturally occurring and fundamental aspect of one's identity, and, moreover, that it is the polar opposite of homosexuality, is one example of humanist ontology. Deconstruction works away at the very foundation of what Derrida refers to as Western metaphysics (a historically and culturally specific system of meaning-making), by undermining the notion of polarised essences. It is important to note, however, that deconstruction is not synonymous with destruction: it does not involve the obliteration and replacement of what is erroneous with that

which is held to be true. In other words, a deconstructive approach to the hierarchised binary opposition heterosexuality/homosexuality would not consist of reversing the terms or of attempting to somehow annihilate the concepts and/or the relation between them altogether. Rather, a deconstructive analysis would highlight the inherent instability of the terms, as well as enabling an analysis of the culturally and historically specific ways in which the terms and the relation between them have developed, and the effects they have produced. So, for example, a deconstructive reading of heterosexuality as something that has been represented as natural and/or original, discrete, and essential, would show that heterosexuality is dependent on its so-called opposite (homosexuality) for its identity. In other words, heterosexuality (and/or the 'natural') includes what it excludes (homosexuality and/or the 'unnatural'); homosexuality is internal to heterosexuality (and vice versa) and not external to it as a humanist account of identity and meaning would claim. The 'two', then, are never discrete, and thus the opposition no longer holds. As Diana Fuss puts it:

Sexual identities are rarely secure. Heterosexuality can never fully ignore the close psychological proximity of its terrifying (homo) sexual other, any more than homosexuality can entirely escape the equally insistent social pressures of (hetero) sexual conformity. Each is haunted by the other. (1991: 4)

It is this haunting/haunted relation, says Seidman, 'which ultimately accounts for the extreme defensiveness, the hardening of each into a bounded, self-protective hardcore and, at the same time, the opposite tendency towards confusion and collapse' (1995: 131). Deconstructing the presumed opposition between homosexuality and heterosexuality, the 'unnatural' and the 'natural' is important, then, because it enables us to acknowledge the constructedness of meaning and identity and thus to begin to imagine alternative ways of thinking and of living. At the same time, it enables us also to ask why it is that in particular cultural contexts being is divided up in this (arbitrary) way, and who it is that benefits from the cultural logic that (re)produces these kinds of divisions. As Seidman puts it:

Queer theory is less a matter of explaining the repression or expression of a homosexual minority, than an analysis of the Hetero/Homosexual figure as a power/knowledge regime that shapes the ordering of desires, behaviors, social institutions, and social relations – in a word, the constitution of the self and society. (Ibid.: 128)

It is this view of Queer Theory as a deconstructive strategy that Sue-Ellen Case has in mind when she says that Queer Theory, at least as she conceives it, works 'at the site of ontology, to shift the ground of being itself, thus challenging the Platonic parameters of Being - the borders of life and death' (1991: 3). The distinction between life and death, Case argues, not only structures Western metaphysics, but also plays an integral part in the politics of sexuality - most particularly in the denigration of homosexuality on the grounds that it (unlike heterosexuality) is a sterile or non-reproductive, and unnatural relationship. Consequently, homosexuality is constructed as anathematic to 'the family' as the cornerstone of heteronormativity, and, by association, to blood (lines) as that which enable(s) the passing on of private property and racial purity, at least when it sticks to the appropriate path carved out for it by phallogocentric systems of power/knowledge. Case writes:

Queer sexual practice . . . impels one out of the generational production of what has been called 'life' and history, and ultimately out of the category of the living. The equation of hetero=sex=life and homo=sex=unlife generated a queer discourse that revealed in proscribed desiring by imagining sexual objects and sexual practices within the realm of the other-than-natural, and the consequent other-than-living. In this discourse new forms of being, or beings, are imagined through desire. And desire is that which wounds - a desire that breaks through the sheath of being as it has been imagined within a heterosexist society. Striking at its very core, queer desire punctuates the life/death and generative/destructive bipolarities that enclose the heterosexist notion of being. (Ibid.: 4)

For Case then, Queer Theory and practice are vampyric in that they consist of a perverse form of blood letting, of the abject's transgression of boundaries between the proper and the improper. To some, Case's argument may, no doubt, seem strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric even, but given that this is one of the many definitions of the term queer offered in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, then perhaps we could say that Case's article practises what it preaches. Queer is also defined in this text as 'not in the normal condition, out of sorts, drunk', and, of course, as a slang term for 'homosexual'.<sup>15</sup> If we turn to queer as a verb (to queer) we find 'to quiz or ridicule, to spoil, put out of order'.

For the remainder of the chapter I want to examine *But I'm A Cheerleader* in order to think through some of the possible ways in which we might, spoil, quiz, disorder, denaturalise, or, in a word,

queer, heteronormativity. The cheerleader referred to in the film's title is seventeen-year-old Megan, the only child of a middle-aged and exceedingly straight Christian couple whose philosophy is that there is a 'single path', and that one must abide by all that is natural, healthy, and sacred'. Despite Megan's demure 1950sish appearance and seemingly naive manner, her parents and friends nevertheless feel that there is something not quite right about her, and there are all sorts of signs that suggest that their suspicions may be well founded. Megan, for example, is a vegetarian who eats tofu, has posters of Melissa Etheridge on her bedroom wall and pictures of girls in bikinis in her locker, likes the art of Georgia O'Keefe (which, it is claimed, is full of vaginal motifs), and, does not get much pleasure from the slaving attentions of a boyfriend who seems to think that his tongue belongs anywhere but in his own mouth. Consequently, Megan's parents call on the expertise of 'True Directions', an organisation that works hard to get those who are bent - even in the slightest - back on the straight and narrow. Thus enters Mike (played, ironically, by RuPaul), an ex-gay who wears very short shorts and a 'straight is great' T-shirt.

When Megan and her parents arrive at True Directions - which is something like a cross between a rehabilitation centre and a school camp - they are introduced to Mary, the Director of the programme and mother of the overtly camp Adonis-like Rock. Mary declares that Megan's parents may well have caught the problem just in time since 'it's much more difficult once they [young gays and lesbians] have been through all that liberal arts brainwashing' at college. Thus begins the five-step programme of normalisation - itself a form of the most overt 'brainwashing' imaginable.

Step One, of course, is (self-) confession: Megan must admit to herself, and to a room full of boys dressed in blue, and girls dressed in pink, that she is indeed a homosexual. What the film makes clear is that the process of naming inevitably involves (re)constructing oneself in and through humanist identity categories - often imposed by others - and moreover, bracketing off or veiling over all the aspects of oneself that do not seem to fit neatly with such a designation. This scene also nicely illustrates Foucault's claim that the technologies of self-examination, confession and self-decipherment are aspects of a particular form of self-formation that he calls a hermeneutics of desire. In *The History of Sexuality* Volume I, he describes how, through the process of

self-examination as 'an infinite extracting from the depths of oneself' (1980: 59), it is supposed that one comes to know the truth of oneself. The subject who knows him or herself is at the same time able, or, perhaps more importantly, obliged, to make pronouncements concerning him or herself, and this is what Foucault has in mind when he speaks of confession as being 'at the heart of the procedures of individualization' (Ibid.: 59). Moreover, according to Foucault, the obligation to confess has been embodied or normalised to such an extent that we no longer see it as an effect of a power that circumscribes us. In fact, the opposite is the case. Insofar as we experience subjectivity as autonomous and internal, we presume that self-expression has been repressed by oppressive social systems and that self-confession is, therefore, liberatory (Ibid.: 60). Confession then, Foucault argues, is a truth-effect of power, rather than a therapeutic practice of freedom, and thus it is a normalising mode of self-formation in which individual bodies are constituted as both objects and instruments of power.

Perhaps even more importantly, Foucault's analysis demonstrates that such technologies create a disjunction between self-knowledge and the interpretation of that knowledge by others, since the processes of self-examination, confession, and interpretation take place within a network of power relations that function to identify, classify, and evaluate individuals in accordance with normative criteria. The confession, as Foucault describes it, is a structurally asymmetrical ritual that presupposes the presence or virtual presence of an authority figure – in this case Mary – who interprets and evaluates in order to 'judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile' (Ibid.: 61–2).

Step Two involves 'rediscovering your gender identity', and consists of the girls learning to use a vacuum cleaner and become proficient at household chores, to apply make-up, to walk, talk, and sit in a 'ladylike' fashion, to change nappies, and ultimately, to desire, dream about, and constantly rehearse, getting married. Likewise, the boys are schooled (by RuPaul) in the art of wood chopping, car mechanics, target shooting, spitting, ball sports, and the regular readjustment of their genitals. Despite the fact that this part of the programme is referred to as the 'rediscovery' of one's gender identity – because, as Mary says, 'we're all *latent* heterosexuals' – what the film shows is that far from being 'natural', gender is learnt, often, with much difficulty and somewhat 'unsuccessfully'. Step Three is family therapy and here we find the queering of what

one might refer to as the 'myth of origins', or the logic of cause and effect, and of psychotherapy as a practice founded on such logic. During the family therapy session each 'soldier' whose duty it is to 'fight against unnatural desires' is required to identify their 'root', that is, the thing that caused them to deviate from the one 'true direction'. For example, Graham's root,<sup>14</sup> is the fact that her 'mother got married in pants'; for Sinead it was being born in France; Clayton's mother let him 'play in her pumps'; whereas Joel's root is 'traumatic breasts'. These explanations of the various 'causes' of homosexuality engage with, and ridicule, the stereotypes of ethnicity, gender, mother/child relations, and so on that abound in our culture and that inform the ways in which sexuality is commonly understood and experienced. At the same time the viewer is made aware that the search for the 'cause' of homosexuality – which involves a form of (self-) scrutiny that is never directed at homosexuality – draws on, and reaffirms the idea that heterosexuality and homosexuality are discrete and opposed entities and that the former is natural whereas the latter is an aberration. It could also be argued that the film's parodying of the humanist search for origins constitutes a deconstructive critique of the logic of cause and effect.<sup>15</sup>

Step Four, 'demystifying the opposite sex', and Step Five, 'simulated sexual lifestyle', also involve learning how to perform gender and homosexuality in seemingly appropriate ways. In the final step of the programme Graham and Rock, dressed in flesh-tone bodysuits adorned with fig leaves come to symbolise both sexual difference and homosexuality as Edenic and/or God-given. At the same time, the gender norms that are presumed to be intrinsic to homosexuality are shown to be historically and culturally specific when Mary dictates, in soft porn clichés, the moves that the couple must make, declaring to the sensitive and thoughtful (and thus 'unmanly') Rock that 'foreplay is for sissies. Real men go in, unload, and pull out.' Indeed, in the lead-up to this scene, it becomes abundantly clear that what inspires the entire 'true directions' programme is Mary's virulent desire to both 'cure' and disavow her son's homosexuality. Whilst this may be read, at one level, as a comment on the lengths that some parents will go to in order to drag their perverse offsprings back onto the straight and narrow, on another level it highlights the self-defeating, but nevertheless dangerous and damaging character of dichotomous logic and the various forms of bigotry it engenders.

In foregrounding the mechanisms in and through which gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and the relations between them, are culturally constructed, *But I'm A Cheerleader* could be said to render strange, or queer, the 'truths' or norms that structure contemporary forms of knowledge and of being. In this sense, *But I'm A Cheerleader* - or at least the reading of the film that I have proposed - could be understood as an exemplification of Queer Theory as 'a theoretical perspective from which to challenge the normative' (Goldman 1996: 170).

## NOTES

1. For a detailed discussion of these groups see Smyth (1992); Lucas (1998); Berlant and Freeman (1996).
2. Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981)
3. Califia (1983b)
4. Kelly (1996)
5. For example, Foucault writes, 'The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle' (1980: 98).
6. For an overview of various theories of the self, see Mansfield (2000).
7. See, for example, 'The Repressive Hypothesis', in Foucault (1980).
8. See Foucault (1980) pp. 92-102.
9. Halperin (1995) p. 64
10. For a range of contestatory responses to queer, see Jagose (1996) pp. 101-26.
11. See also Smith (1993).
12. For an account of the notion of abjection, see Kristeva (1982).
13. This definition is not in the main body of the above-mentioned dictionary, but is contained in the addenda, p. 2654.
14. Graham (played by Clea Duvall) is the rebel girl whom Megan falls in love with.
15. For examples of such critiques, see Nietzsche (1974), Aphorism #360, 'Two Kinds of Causes Which Are Confounded'; Nietzsche (1989: 45); and Derrida (1978).

## Queer Race

RACE, LIKE GENDER, AND SEXUALITY, often tends to be regarded as something natural and innate. Indeed, the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines race as 'a group of persons, animals, or plants, connected by common descent or origin'. This text also cites the 1774 definition of race as 'one of the great divisions of mankind, having certain physical peculiarities in common'. Race, however, is not a concept that has always existed in the Western imaginary. In fact, theorists such as Soibhan Somerville, Linda Alcoff, and Tim McCaskell have argued that 'race', like 'sexuality' emerged as a classificatory concept in the era Foucault refers to as the Classical episteme. The aim of this chapter is to critically examine the emergence of the notion of race, the different and sometimes conflicting uses of the term, and the ways in which race intersects (or otherwise) with ideas about sexuality.

Historically, argues Somerville, the science of race emerged alongside of, or perhaps more particularly, in conjunction with, sexological accounts of sexuality in the eighteenth century. An explicitly pernicious example of the science of race - or of 'scientific racism' as McCaskell calls it - can be found in the classificatory system developed by the Swede Charles Linnaeus in his *General System of Nature*.<sup>1</sup> Originally Linnaeus proposed the existence of four basic colour types which he ordered in the following way: White Europeans, Red Americans, Yellow Asians and Black Africans. But, as Tim McCaskell notes, by the tenth edition of this text Linnaeus had attributed character traits to each race. For example, 'White' Europeans were gentle and inventive, 'Red' Americans obstinate, 'Yellow' Asians melancholy and covetous, and 'Black' Africans indolent and negligent (McCaskell, online, no page numbers in original).<sup>2</sup> What we see here is what McCaskell identifies as the three fundamental assertions central to biological

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