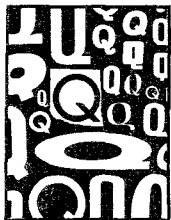


Socialist Review, 22 No. 1, Jan-Mar 1992

LISA DUGGAN

## MAKING IT PERFECTLY QUEER



During the past few years, the new designation “queer” has emerged from within lesbian, gay, and bisexual politics and theory. “Queer Nation” and “Queer Theory,” now widely familiar locations for activists and academics, are more than just new labels for old boxes. They carry with them the promise of new meanings, new ways of thinking and acting politically—a promise sometimes realized, sometimes not. In this essay I want to elucidate and advocate this new potential within politics and theory.

Because I am a Southern girl, I want to arrive at my discussion of these new meanings through a process of storytelling. From an account of concrete events—recent events that gripped and provoked me personally—I will construct a certain political history, and from that history raise certain theoretical questions. Because the position “queer” has arisen most proximately from developments in lesbian and gay politics, the trajectory I follow here reflects my own passage through those politics. Were I to follow another trajectory—through feminist or socialist politics, for example—I would arrive at a similar position, with many of the same questions and suggestions. But the stories would be different, and the “work” of those stories would be differently constructed. Here, I want to take up the position of “queer” largely in order to criticize (but not completely displace) the liberal and nationalist strategies in gay politics and to advocate the constructionist turn in lesbian and gay theories and practices.

**SCENE #1: NEW YORK CITY, MARCH 1991. THE ST. PATRICK'S DAY PARADE.** *The Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization (ILGO) has*

**Lisa Duggan** is a journalist, historian, and visiting fellow at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy.

been denied permission to march. After much public protest of this exclusion, a deal has been struck with the march organizers. ILGO members will be permitted to march as the guests of a contingent of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, but they have had to agree not to carry any identifying banners or signs. Mayor David Dinkins, who helped to broker the deal, has decided to walk with the lesbian and gay group. On the day of the parade, this group, marked out for the curious by the presence of Dinkins, becomes the target of repeated outbursts of intense hostility on the part of spectators, parade organizers, and officials of the Catholic Church.

These events received extensive nationwide news coverage, which focused largely on the spectacle of the Mayor under attack. Dinkins himself used this spectacle to frame an analogy between the treatment of the lesbian and gay marchers in the St. Patrick's Day parade and the hostile treatment of civil rights marchers in the South decades earlier. In an op-ed published in *The New York Times* several days after the parade, he extended and elaborated on this analogy:

On Saturday, despite our taking great care to see that the parade rules were observed, a fearful rage erupted—a rage of intolerance. The anger hurled at the gay and lesbian Irish Americans and me was so fierce that one man threw a filled beer can at us. Perhaps the anger from those watching the parade stemmed from a fear of a lifestyle unlike their own; perhaps it was the violent call of people frightened by a future that seems unlike the past.

It is strange that what is now my most vivid experience of mob hatred came not in the South but in New York—and was directed against me, not because I was defending the rights of African Americans but of gay and lesbian Americans.

Yet, the hostility I saw was not unfamiliar. It was the same anger that led a bus driver to tell me back in 1945, when I was en route to North Carolina in Marine uniform, that there was no place for me: "Two more white seats," he said. It was the same anger that I am sure Montgomery marchers and Birmingham demonstrators experienced when they fought for racial tolerance. It is the fury of people who want the right to deny another's identity.

We cannot flinch from our responsibility to widen the circle of tolerance. For the true evil of discrimination is not in the choice of groups to hate but in the fact that a group is chosen at all. Not only does our Bill of Rights protect us all equally, but every religious tradition I know affirms that, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Every man is somebody because he is a child of God."<sup>1</sup>

I quote the Dinkins op-ed extensively here even though it is in most respects formulaic and unsurprising, an invocation of the themes and images of a familiar brand of liberal politics, with its limited call for "tolerance" and an end to "discrimination." I quote it because even my most radical and cynical lesbian and gay friends found it deeply moving, because it was in one important respect quite rare. Dinkins' analogy to the civil rights movement, an analogy liberal gay organizations have outlined and pursued for decades, is still seldom heard outside lesbian and gay circles. In the hands of David Dinkins, a political figure with national visibility and a well-known record of civil rights activism, this analogy mobilizes images of noble suffering in the face of naked hatred. It invokes the culturally resonant figure of Martin Luther King, Jr. on behalf of lesbians and gay men, thereby endowing our struggle for equality with a precious and, for us, elusive political resource—moral authority.

## APPEALS TO LIBERALISM

For nearly fifty years now, lesbian and gay organizations have worked to forge a politically active and effective lesbian and gay "minority" group, and to claim the liberal "rights" of privacy and formal equality on its behalf. As a rhetorical strategy, this positioning has aimed to align lesbian and gay populations with racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups and women in a quest for full economic, political, and cultural participation in U.S. life. This rhetorical move, when successful, opens up avenues of political and legal recourse forged by the civil rights and feminist movements to lesbian and gay action: support for group-specific anti-discrimination statutes, participation in political coalitions to design, pass, and enforce broad civil rights provisions; application to the courts for equal protection under various constitutional provisions; organiza-

**For nearly fifty years, lesbian and gay organizations have worked to claim the liberal "rights" of privacy and formal equal**

tion to elect and pressure public officials; lobbying of media organizations for fair and equitable representation, etc.

But this rhetorical overture to the logic of liberal tolerance has generally met with very limited success. The inclusion of lesbians and gay men in the pantheon of unjustly persecuted groups is everywhere unstable and contested. Political coalitions risk their legitimacy when they include lesbian and gay groups or issues. Group-specific municipal anti-discrimination ordinances are constantly subject to repeal attempts. Cultural groups from the National Endowment for the Arts to the Modern Language Association are attacked or ridiculed for the presence of lesbian and gay topics on their agendas. And the legal climate for lesbian and gay organizations has been poisoned for the rest of this century (at least) by the nasty, brutish, and short 1986 decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Bowers vs. Hardwick* (upholding the state of Georgia's statute criminalizing consensual sodomy).

The spectacle of the suffering Mayor walking with downcast gays and lesbians in the St. Patrick's Day parade brings both these failures and the important achievements of liberal gay politics into vivid relief. The hostility of the spectators, the parade organizers, and the Roman Catholic Cardinal underscored the precarious position of the ILGO, and by extension of gay communities more generally. Inclusion could be negotiated only on humiliating terms, and even then public civility could not be enforced.

But as the subsequent press coverage and the Dinkins op-ed show, the parade was also a moment of highly visible achievement for the rhetoric of liberal gay politics. The circulation of images from the parade evoked a response supportive of Dinkins and the ILGO from non-gay politicians and pundits, a response which frequently framed the issues in language that liberal gay organizations have proposed, appropriating the American Dream for the "minority" that seems to reside permanently at the bottom of the list.

At this historical moment, marked by the precarious and contested achievements illustrated by the example of the St. Patrick's Day parade, the liberal strategy has also come under increasing attack from within lesbian and gay communities. Of course, this strategy

has never occupied the field of gay politics unopposed. Challenges to it have appeared from the overlapping yet distinguishable positions of militant nationalism and radical constructionism. In the 1990s, both of these positions appear to be gaining ground.

## THE CALL TO MILITANT NATIONALISM

**SCENE #2: NEW YORK CITY, SPRING 1991.** *Posters of celebrities labeled "Absolutely Queer" appear on Manhattan walls. One, featuring an image of actress Jodie Foster, is captioned "Actress, Yalie, Dyke." These posters have not been produced by homophobic conservatives, but by gay militants engaged in the practice of "outing."*

"Outing" is a political tactic inaugurated by New York City's now defunct gay weekly newspaper *Outweek* (though the term for it was coined by *Time*), and associated most closely with the paper's "lifestyle" columnist, Michelangelo Signorile. As a practice, it is an extension of the early gay liberationist appeal to lesbians and gay men to "come out of the closet," reveal their hidden lives, and reject the fear and stigma attached to their identities. In "outing," this appeal is transformed from an invitation into a command. Journalists and activists expose "closeted" lesbians or gay men in public life, especially those deemed hypocritical in their approach to gay issues. Their goal is to end the secrecy and hypocrisy surrounding homosexuality, to challenge the notion that gay life is somehow shameful, and to show the world that many widely admired and respected men and women are gay.

Both "outing" and *Outweek* sprang from the efflorescence of militance surrounding the rhetoric and politics of ACT UP and its spinoff, Queer Nation. Many of these new gay militants reject the liberal value of privacy and the appeal to tolerance which dominate the agendas of more mainstream gay organizations. Instead, they emphasize publicity and self-assertion; confrontation and direct action top their list of tactical options; the rhetoric of difference replaces the more assimilationist liberal emphasis on similarity to other groups.

But the challenge that the new politics poses to the liberal strategy is not only the challenge of militance—the familiar counterposing of anger to civility, of flamboyance to respectability, often symbolized through “style”—but also the challenge of nationalism.\*

Nationalisms have a long history in gay and lesbian politics and culture. From turn-of-the-century German homosexual emancipationist Magnus Hirschfeld to contemporary radical feminist philosopher Mary Daly, the “nation” and its interests have been defined in varying ways. With no geographical base or kinship ties to provide boundaries, gay and lesbian nationalists have offered biological characteristics (as in the “Third Sex”), or shared experience (whether of sexual desire or gender solidarity) as common ground. Of these various nationalisms, two broadly distinguishable competing forms have appeared and reappeared since the mid 19th century: 1) the ethnic model of a fixed minority of both sexes defined by biology and/or the experience of desire (most often estimated at 10 percent)<sup>2</sup> and 2) the single-sex union of gender loyalists, the no-fixed-percentage model associated with lesbian separatism (theoretically, all women could belong to the Lesbian Nation).<sup>3</sup>

The ethnic model also underpins the liberal strategy, of course. The argument for “rights” is made on behalf of a relatively fixed minority constituency. It becomes the basis for a more militant nationalism when the “ethnic” group is represented as monolithic, its interests primary and utterly clear to a political vanguard. The example of “outing” serves as an illustration of this brand of gay politics. Outers generally not only believe in the existence of a gay nation, but are confident of their ability to identify its members and of their authority to do so. They have no doubts about definitions or boundaries, and do not hesitate to override the welfare and autonomy of individuals “in the national interest.”<sup>4</sup>

Outers present their version of gay nationalism as radical, but like other nationalisms its political implications are complex, and often

\*The ideas in this discussion of gay nationalism were generated in conversations with Jenny Terry, Jackie Urla, and Jeff Escoffier. It was Urla who first suggested to me that certain strains in gay politics could be considered nationalist discourses.

actually reactionary. These new nationalists define the nation and its interests as unitary; they suppress internal difference and political conflict. Self-appointed ayatollahs explain it all.

This reactionary potential was especially apparent in the pages of *Outweek* in 1990, when Malcolm Forbes, then recently deceased, was “outed” and presented as a role model for gay youth. The same magazine had earlier reviled Tim Sweeney, a longtime gay activist and executive director of Gay Men’s Health Crisis in New York City, for compromising the gay national interests by negotiating with African-American groups over the conditions for appointment of a New York City health commissioner.<sup>5</sup> *Outweek’s* “nation,” it appears, is white, values wealth and celebrity for their own sake, and pursues self-interest in the narrowest possible terms.

This particularly virulent strain of gay nationalism has been criticized with increasing vehemence by those excluded, misrepresented, or terrorized by it. C. Carr, writing in *The Village Voice* under the banner headline, “Why Outing Must Stop,” called it “the most absurd excuse for political thinking I have ever encountered,” and commented:

Anyone who thinks . . . that a lesbian can proclaim her sexuality in an industry as male-centered as Hollywood, where even straight women have trouble getting work . . . has to be out of his fucking mind.

Voicing the sentiments of many, Carr also noted that “I’m still waiting for the news of Malcolm Forbes’ homosexuality to improve my life.”<sup>6</sup>

Carr’s critique of “outing” takes up the liberal defense of “privacy”—emphasizing the continuing strategic value of a “right to privacy” for lesbians and gay men threatened with everyday persecution. But her column also echoes the criticisms of gay political discourses that women and people of color (especially, though not exclusively) have forged and developed over the past two decades.

## WHOSE IDENTITY?

Both the liberal assimilationist and the militant nationalist strands of gay politics posit gay identity as a unitary, unproblematic given—the political project revolves around its public articulation. But for people

with multiple “marked” identities, the political project begins at the level of the very problematic construction of identities and their relation to different communities and different political projects. In Audre Lorde’s much quoted words: “It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus Carr hypothesizes that, for Jodie Foster, being a woman defines her relationship to Hollywood in a way that shifts the meaning of being “gay,” and the consequences of “coming out.” From this perspective, advocacy of “outing” is colonizing. Foster’s situation is appropriated by a single-issue politics that cannot honor the complexity of her differences.

The charge I want to make here against both the liberal and nationalist strategies, but especially against the latter, is this: *Any* gay politics based on the primacy of sexual identity defined as unitary and “essential,” residing clearly, intelligibly and unalterably in the body or psyche, and fixing desire in a gendered direction, ultimately represents the view from the subject position “20th-century Western white gay male.”

**SCENE #3: SAN FRANCISCO, FEBRUARY 1991. THE 2ND ANNUAL LESBIAN AND GAY WRITERS’ CONFERENCE.** *The designation of this conference as simply “lesbian and gay” is contested everywhere I look. An organized bisexual lobby is highly visible and voluble. The designation “Queer” is ubiquitous, sometimes used in the “in-your-face” manner of the many “Faggot” and “Dyke” buttons that I see, but also used to designate a more broadly inclusive “community.”*

Louise Sloan, reporting on this conference in the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, wrote that it constructed a “community”

of men, women, transsexuals, gay males, lesbians, bisexuals, straight men and women, African Americans, Chicanos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, people who can see and/or walk and people who cannot, welfare recipients, trust fund recipients, wage earners, Democrats, Republicans, and anarchists—to name a few. . . . Indeed, since difference from the “norm” is about all that many people in the “gay community” have in common with each other, these sorts

of “gay and lesbian” gatherings, at their best and worst and most radical, seem to be spaces where cross-sections of the human multiverse can gather to thrash out differences and perhaps to lay the groundwork for peaceful and productive futures. . . . In my most naively hopeful moments, I often imagine it will be the “queer community”—the oxymoronic community of difference—that might be able to teach the world how to get along.<sup>8</sup>

Sloan’s description of the “oxymoronic community of difference” at the writers’ conference challenges the oversimplified notion that the essentialist versus social constructionist debate, now saturating the gay press, is a controversy of activist politics versus academic theory.

In its most clichéd formulations, this controversy is presented in one of two ways: Valiant and dedicated activists working to get civil rights for gay and lesbian people are being undermined by a bunch of obscure, arcane, jargon-ridden academics bent on “deconstructing” the gay community before it even comes into full visibility, or: Theoretically informed writers at the cutting edge of the political horizon are being bashed by anti-intellectual activists who cling naively to the discursive categories of their oppressors.<sup>9</sup> Both these formulations fail to acknowledge the vigor and longevity of the constructionist strand in lesbian and gay politics, a strand which theorists have taken up, not produced.

From the first appearance of the homosexual/heterosexual polarity just over 100 years ago, “essentialist” theories, both homophile and homophobic, have had to account for the observed malleability of sexual desire. Each theoretical assertion of the fixity of desire has had attached to it a residual category—a catch-all explanation for those formations of pleasure that defy the proffered etiologies. In Havelock Ellis’ scheme, flexible “acquired” sexual inversion accompanied the more permanent “congenital” type. In the lexicon of contemporary sociology, “situational” homosexuality occurs among “heterosexual” persons under special circumstances—in prisons or other single-sex institutions, for example. (“Situational” heterosexuality is seldom discussed.)<sup>10</sup> In each theoretical paradigm, the “essential” nature and truth of the homo/hetero dyad is shored up

with a rhetoric of authenticity. The “real” is distinguished from the “copy,” the “true inverts” from those merely susceptible to seduction.

Such constructionist branches on the tree of essentialism grew up on their own during the heady days of early gay liberation. Drawing on the more constructionist versions of psychoanalytic theories of sexuality, visionaries painted a utopia in which everyone was potentially polymorphously sexual with everyone else.<sup>11</sup> During the 1970s, lesbian feminists outlined a somewhat more ambivalent position, with a sharper political edge. They aggressively denaturalized heterosexuality and presented it as a central apparatus in the perpetuation of patriarchy. But these same women often presented lesbianism as the naturalized alternative. When Alix Dobkin sang that “Any Woman Can Be a Lesbian,” the implication was that any woman not suffering from false consciousness *would* be.<sup>12</sup>

The current revival of constructionist rhetoric in activist discourses is, like its constructionist predecessors, also partial and ambivalent—but in a very different sense. The new political currency of the term “bisexual,” for instance, which has been added to the titles of lesbian/gay organizations from coast to coast in the United States, has had contradictory effects. Activists have used the term “bisexual” to disrupt the natural status of the dualism heterosexual/homosexual. But they have then paradoxically reinstated sexual polarity through the addition of a third naturalized term, as rigidly gendered as the original two, only doubled. The tendency of bisexual writers and organizations to appropriate wholesale the rhetoric of the lesbian and gay rights movement reinforces the latter effect.<sup>13</sup>

## DEFINING A QUEER COMMUNITY

The notion of a “queer community” can work somewhat differently. It is often used to construct a collectivity no longer defined solely by the gender of its members’ sexual partners. This new community is unified only by a shared dissent from the dominant organization of sex and gender. But not every individual or group that adopts the name “queer” means to invoke these altered boundaries. Many members of Queer Nation, a highly decentralized militant organization, use the term “queer” only as a synonym for lesbian or gay.

Queer Nation, for some, is quite simply a gay nationalist organization. For others, the “queer” nation is a newly defined political entity, better able to cross boundaries and construct more fluid identities. In many other instances, various contradictory definitions coexist—in a single group, or in an individual’s mind. This ambivalent mixture is illustrated in a series of interviews with Queer Nation activists published in *OUT/LOOK*:

**Miguel Gutierrez:** Queerness means nonassimilationist to me.

**Rebecca Hensler:** A lot of what the “queer generation” is arguing for is the same stuff that was being fought for by gay liberation.

**Alexander Chee:** The operant dream is of a community united in diversity, queerly ourselves. . . . [The facilitators] took great care to explain that everyone was welcome under the word *queer*.

**Laura Thomas:** I don’t see the queer movement as being organized to do anything beyond issues of anti-assimilation and being who we want to be.

**Adele Morrison:** Queer is not an “instead of,” it’s an “inclusive of.” . . . It’s like the whole issue of “people of color”.

**Gerard Koskovich:** I think *queer* has been adopted here in San Francisco by people who are using their experience of marginalization to produce an aggressive critique of the prevailing social system. . . . I think we’re seeing in its early stages a reorganization of some of those forces into a new community of people where the range of defining factors is rather fluid. People’s limits have shifted significantly from the traditional urban gay community of the 1970s.<sup>14</sup>

Or, as former *Outweek* editor Gabriel Rotello explained to a *New York Times* reporter,

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.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the appearance of organizations for “bisexuals” and “queers,” the boundaries of community have also been altered by a new elasticity in the meanings of “lesbian” and “gay.” When Pat Califia announced that sex between lesbians and gay men is “gay sex,” and *Outweek* published a cover story on “Lesbians Who Sleep

With Men,” the notion of a fixed sexual identity determined by a firmly gendered desire began to slip quietly away.<sup>16</sup>

## QUEER THEORY ON THE MOVE

The constructionist perspective began to generate theoretical writing beginning in the 1970s. British historical sociologist Jeffrey Weeks, influenced by the earlier work of Mary McIntosh, appropriated and reworked the sociological theories known as “symbolic interactionism” or “labeling theory” to underpin his account of the emergence of a homosexual identity in Western societies during the 19th century. Other British writers associated with the Gay Left Collective produced work from within this same field of influence. U.S. historians Jonathan Ned Katz and John D’Emilio, influenced primarily by feminist theory and the work of Marxists such as E.P. Thompson, began to produce “social construction” theories of homosexuality by the early 1980s.<sup>17</sup>

This theory, though rich with implications for theoretical investigations of identity and subjectivity generally, remained severely ghettoized until relatively recently. Gay authors and gay topics, stigmatized and tabooed in the academy, have found audiences and sources of support elsewhere. But lesbian and gay history and theory have suffered from this ghettoization, as have history and theory more broadly.<sup>18</sup>

The figure who most clearly marks the recent movement of this theory out of the ghetto is Michel Foucault. His reputation and influence placed his investigations of the emergence of homosexual identity within a theoretical context, embedded in a body of work, that legitimated it—and ultimately served to legitimate the work of other, more stigmatized and marginalized theorists. The history of sexuality ultimately became a subject, a disciplinary location, largely as an effect of the circulation of Foucault’s work through the work of (predominantly) lesbian and gay authors.<sup>19</sup>

Since the publication of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, the cultural work of lesbian and gay theory has shifted. After a couple of decades of staking out a position, a territory, a locale, our theories are now preparing to travel. After defining a viewpoint, articulating a set of

questions, and producing a body of knowledges, we are determined now to transport these resources across cultural boundaries. Theory is now working—finally—to get us out of the academic ghetto.

“Constructionist” theories accomplish this in a way “essentialist” theories never could. Lesbian and gay identities, theorized as fixed and borne by a minority, place certain limits on the horizon of theory as well as politics. They contain desire and naturalize gender through the operations of their very definitions. Constructionist theories, on the other hand, recognize the (constrained) mobility of desire and support a critical relation to gender. They stake out a new stance of opposition, which many theorists now call “queer.” This stance is constituted through its dissent from the hegemonic, structured relations and meanings of sexuality and gender, but its actual historical forms and positions are open, constantly subject to negotiation and renegotiation.

Queer theories do their ghetto-busting work by placing the production and circulation of sexualities at the core of Western cultures, defining the emergence of the homosexual/heterosexual dyad as an issue that *no* cultural theory can afford to ignore. As Eve Sedgwick put it in the first paragraph of her new book *The Epistemology of the Closet*:

This book will argue that an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition.<sup>20</sup>

This project works in at least two directions—taking queer questions and knowledges into the domain of mainstream theoretical paradigms, and bringing the formulations of feminist, Marxist, postmodernist, and poststructuralist theories to bear on issues of queer culture and politics.

In the case of a major figure such as Foucault, the project involved the smuggling of queer questions into the very foundations of contemporary theory. Without being *completely* crude and reductive, it is possible to ask: From what subject position do prisons, mental asylums, confessionals, and sexuality seem connected and central to

**Queer theories  
their ghetto-  
busting work  
placing the  
production and  
circulation of  
sexualities at  
core of Western  
cultures as an  
issue that no  
cultural theory  
can afford to  
ignore.**

the operations of power? Foucault's own queerness, seldom stated but widely known, may have shaped his questions and his work in ways that endowed it with its current legitimating power.<sup>21</sup>

In the area of literary studies, Eve Sedgwick's work is now performing the work of legitimation and de-ghettoization. She is importing "queer readings" into the house of critical theory. She's able to accomplish this effectively in part because, as the "Judy Garland" of gay studies, she doesn't bear the stigma of homosexuality herself. She can be perceived (however wrongly) as in some sense "disinterested," and therefore as a more "credible" standard bearer for theoretical queerness. (This is not a criticism of Sedgwick, but of the conditions of reception for her work.)

Sedgwick's work performs its magic primarily for the benefit of gay male readers and readings, and on the texts of the traditional white male "canon."<sup>22</sup> Within the field defined by queer literary theory, lesbian visions remain profoundly ghettoized, though they are gaining ground from within feminist theory (which is itself only newly emerging from its own ghetto). Only a few literary theorists have embarked on queer readings of the texts of lesbians, especially those from less privileged class backgrounds or from communities of color.<sup>23</sup>

It is precisely from within feminist theory, however, that a "queer" critique of the dominant categories of sexuality and gender is emerging most imaginatively and persuasively. The work of film theorist Teresa de Lauretis, especially, has effected the de-ghettoization of a queer perspective in feminist theory. As she wrote in *Technologies of Gender* in 1987:

The problem, which is a problem for all feminist scholars and teachers, is one we face almost daily in our work, namely, that most of the available theories of reading, writing, sexuality, ideology, or any other cultural production are built on male narratives of gender, whether oedipal or anti-oedipal, bound by the heterosexual contract; narratives which persistently tend to re-produce themselves in feminist theories. They *tend* to, and will do so unless one constantly resists, suspicious of their drift.<sup>24</sup>

We can surmise who is the "one" who is most likely to become and remain so relentlessly suspicious.

Following on the work of de Lauretis, feminist philosopher Judith Butler has hacked away at the heterosexual assumptions built into the foundations of theories of gender, whether feminist, non-feminist, or anti-feminist.

Her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, draws upon the queer practices of drag and cross-dressing (treated in the earlier work of anthropologist Esther Newton) and the queer "styles" of

lesbian butch-femme to build her own conception of gender as performance, and of gender parodies as subversive bodily acts.<sup>25</sup>

Though neither de Lauretis nor Butler has staked out a position named specifically as "queer," the elaboration of such a locale within feminist theory could work a radical magic similar to that of the category "women of color." As many feminists have argued, the category "women of color" as proposed in such ground-breaking anthologies as *This Bridge Called My Back*, is a significant conceptual and political innovation.<sup>26</sup> As Donna Haraway wrote in 1985:

This identity marks out a self-consciously constructed space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship. Unlike the "woman" of some streams of the white women's movement in the United States, there is no naturalization of the matrix, or at least this is what [Chela] Sandoval argues is uniquely available through the power of oppositional consciousness.<sup>27</sup>





This description (I would argue) applies equally well to the political community and theoretical standpoint constructed by the designation "queer."

### ACTIVISM VERSUS ACADEMIA?

The challenge for queer theory as it emerges from the academic ghetto is to engage intellectually with the political project in the best sense of "theory," while avoiding jargon and obscurantism in the worst sense of "academic." The record to date is at best uneven. On the down side, there is a tendency among some queer theorists to engage in academic debates at a high level of intellectual sophistication, while erasing the political and activist roots of their theoretical insights and concerns. Such theorists cite, modify, or dispute Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida, while feminist, lesbian, and gay innovations and political figures disappear from sight. They use formal languages to exclude all but the most specialized from the audience for theory.

On the up side, some queer theorists work in a way that disrupts the activist/theorist opposition, combining sophisticated thinking, accessible language, and an address to a broadly imagined audience. Writer/activists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Kobena Mercer, Douglas Crimp, and Gayle Rubin offer us the possibility of escape from the twin pitfalls of anti-intellectual posturing among some activists *and* the functional elitism of some would-be radical theorists.<sup>28</sup>

The continuing work of queer politics and theory is to open up possibilities for coalition across barriers of class, race, and gender, and to somehow satisfy the paradoxical necessity of recognizing differences, while producing (provisional) unity. Can we avoid the dead end of various nationalisms and separatisms, without producing a bankrupt universalism?

I think queer politics and theory offer us promising new directions for intervention in U.S. life—though in different ways in differing arenas. In the arena of academic cultural theory, queer theory is breaking into the mainstream, making a difference and providing (some, limited) material support in the form of careers. This is possible because queer theory shares with much academic cultural

theory a critique of U.S. liberalism and a focus on the process of political marginalization. But in the arena of political activism—the kind that takes place in mass institutions from mainstream media to Congress—queer politics occupies the critical margins. This is because the language and logic of liberalism still occupy the progressive edge of the possible in mainstream U.S. politics. Lesbian and gay liberal politics offer us the best opportunities we have to make gains in courtrooms, legislatures, and TV sit-coms. Queer politics, with its critique of the categories and strategies of liberal gay politics, keeps the possibility of radical change alive at the margins. It also infuses a remarkable efflorescence of off-center cultural production—art, music, dance, theater, film and video, and more.

Jeffrey Escoffier and Allan Bérubé describe this paradoxical reality in the special *OUT/LOOK* section on Queer Nation:

The new generation calls itself *queer*, not *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual*—awkward, narrow, and perhaps compromised words. *Queer* is meant to be confrontational—opposed to gay assimilationists and straight oppressors while inclusive of people who have been marginalized by anyone in power. Queer Nationals are undertaking an awesome task. They are trying to combine contradictory impulses: to bring together people who have been made to feel perverse, queer, odd, outcast, different, and deviant, and to affirm sameness by defining a common identity on the fringes.

Queer Nationals are torn between affirming a new identity—"I am queer"—and rejecting restrictive identities—"I reject your categories," between rejecting assimilation—"I don't need your approval, just get out of my face"—and wanting to be recognized by mainstream society—"We queers are gonna get in your face."

These queers are constructing a new culture by combining elements that usually don't go together. They may be the first wave of activists to embrace the retrofuture/classic contemporary styles of postmodernism. They are building their own identity from old and new elements—borrowing styles and tactics from popular culture, communities of color, hippies, AIDS activists, the antinuclear movement, MTV, feminists, and early gay liberationists. Their new culture is slick, quick, anarchic, transgressive, ironic. They are dead serious, but they also just wanna have fun. If they manage not to blow up

in contradiction or get bogged down in process, they may lead the way into new forms of activism for the 1990s.<sup>29</sup>

For the foreseeable future, we need both our liberal and radical fronts. But queer politics and theory, in their best guises and combinations, offer us a possible future full of provocations and possibilities.

## NOTES

This essay was first presented at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana's Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory Colloquium in April, 1991, then at the 5th Annual Lesbian and Gay Studies Conference at Rutgers University in November, 1991. I would like to thank Alan Hance and Lee Furey for their comments in Urbana, and Kathleen McHugh, Carole Vance, Cindy Patton, Jeff Escoffier, Jonathan Ned Katz, and especially Nan D. Hunter, for their invaluable contributions to my thinking. I would also like to thank Gayle Rubin and Larry Gross for providing me with copies of important but obscure articles from their voluminous files, and the SR Bay Area collective for their helpful editorial suggestions.

- 1 David N. Dinkins, "Keep Marching for Equality," *The New York Times*, March 21, 1991.
- 2 For a description and defense of the "ethnic model" see Steven Epstein, "Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity: The Limits of Social Constructionism," *Socialist Review*, vol. 17, no. 3/4 (May-August 1987).
- 3 For an account of a 1970s incarnation of this form of nationalism—based on gender rather than sexuality per se—see Charlotte Bunch, "Learning from Lesbian Separatism," in her *Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).
- 4 See for example Michelangelo Signorile, "Gossip Watch," *Outweek*, April 18, 1990, pp. 55-57. For an extended discussion of these issues see Steve Beery et. al., "Smashing the Closet: The Pros and Cons of Outing," *Outweek*, May 16, 1990, pp. 40-53. The many opinions expressed in this issue indicate that not all editors of *Outweek* agreed with Signorile—though the editor-in-chief Gabriel Rotello was in complete agreement.
- 5 See Michelangelo Signorile, "The Other Side of Malcolm," *Outweek*, March 18, 1990, pp. 40-45. The Tim Sweeney controversy continued in the pages of the magazine for several months.
- 6 C. Carr, "Why Outing Must Stop," *The Village Voice*, March 19, 1991, p. 37. She was later joined in the letters column of the *Voice* by B. Ruby Rich, who announced the formation of DAO—Dykes Against Outing.
- 7 Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1982), p. 226.

- 8 Louise Sloan, "Beyond Dialogue," *San Francisco Bay Guardian Literary Supplement*, March 1991, p. 3.
- 9 For an excellent account of the political ramifications of this debate, see Jeffrey Escoffier, "Inside the Ivory Closet: The Challenges Facing Lesbian and Gay Studies," *OUT/LOOK: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly*, no. 10 (Fall 1990), pp. 40-48. For a theoretical discussion, see Diana Fuss, "Lesbian and Gay Theory: The Question of Identity Politics" in her *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 97-112. (Neither of these writers offers the clichéd version of the debate that I have caricatured.)
- 10 For discussions of the emergence of the homosexual/heterosexual dyad and its representations in various medical-scientific discourses, see Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain From the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet Books, 1977) and his *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800* (London: Longman, 1981). See also Jonathan Katz, "The Invention of the Homosexual, 1880-1950," in his *Gay/Lesbian Almanac* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), pp. 137-174.
- 11 See Dennis Altman, *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation* (New York: Avon Books, 1971), especially Chapter 3, "Liberation: Toward the Polymorphous Whole."
- 12 Alix Dobkin, "Any Woman Can Be a Lesbian," from the album *Lavender Jane Loves Women*. The best known example of this move—the denaturalization of heterosexuality, and the naturalization of lesbianism—is Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," reprinted in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, A. Snitow, C. Stansell, and S. Thompson, eds. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), pp. 177-205. It is important to note that male-dominated gay politics has seldom supported a critique of the convention of heterosexuality for most people (the 90 percent or so seen as "naturally" heterosexual). Lesbian feminists *always* regarded heterosexuality as an oppressive institution, which any woman (potentially all women) might escape through lesbianism.
- 13 See for example the anthology edited by Loraine Hutchins and Lani Kaahumani, *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991).
- 14 "Birth of a Queer Nation," *OUT/LOOK: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly*, no. 11 (Winter 1991), pp. 14-23. The interviews and articles in this special section were collected from New York and San Francisco, though there are other groups all over the country. My account of Queer Nation is drawn from my own (limited) knowledge of the New York and Chicago groups, and from articles and interviews in the gay and lesbian press. Because Queer Nation has no central "organization," I'm not attempting to describe it exhaustively; I am pointing to several tendencies and possibilities within it.
- 15 "'Gay' Fades as Militants Pick 'Queer,'" *The New York Times*, April 6, 1991.

- 16 Pat Califia, "Gay Men, Lesbians and Sex: Doing It Together," *The Advocate*, July 7, 1983, pp. 24-27; Jorjet Harper, "Lesbians Who Sleep With Men," *Outweek*, February 11, 1990, pp. 46-52.
- 17 These developments are summarized by Jeffrey Escoffier in "Inside the Ivory Closet." See note 9.
- 18 See Lisa Duggan, "History's Gay Ghetto: The Contradictions of Growth in Lesbian and Gay History," in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, Susan Porter Benson et. al., eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1986, pp. 281-290; and John D'Emilio, "Not A Simple Matter: Gay History and Gay Historians," *Journal of American History*, vol. 76, no. 2 (Sept. 1989), pp. 435-442.
- 19 The most influential single text in the United States was the English translation of *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (New York: Pantheon, 1978). My point about the ubiquity of lesbian and gay authors in the field of "history of sexuality" can be confirmed with a glance at the list of editors for the new journal, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*. All but a few are known to be lesbian or gay.
- 20 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 1.
- 21 In a fascinating interview with Foucault published in the gay periodical *The Advocate* just after his death from AIDS in 1984, he comments: "Sexuality is something that we ourselves create. . . . We have to understand that with our desires, through our desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation." Bob Gallagher and Alexander Wilson, "Foucault and the Politics of Identity," *The Advocate*, Aug. 7, 1984, pp. 27-30, 58.
- 22 See Julie Abraham's review of Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* in *The Women's Review of Books*, vol. 8, no. 7 (April 1991), pp. 17-18. Abraham concludes provocatively that "*Epistemology of the Closet* is an extraordinary book. The questions Sedgwick addresses, and those her work provokes, together create a great deal of theoretical space. But all the women are straight, all the gays are male (and all the males are, potentially, gay). The sisters are still doing it for themselves."
- 23 See especially Bidy Martin, "Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference(s)," in *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, Bella Brodzky and Celeste Schenck, eds. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 77-103. The texts of privileged lesbians such as Gertrude Stein, Radclyffe Hall, and Willa Cather have received relatively more attention, of course.
- 24 Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 25.
- 25 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). See especially pp. 136-139.
- 26 Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981).

- 27 Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," *Socialist Review*, vol. 15, no. 2 (March-April, 1985), p. 73-74. Haraway is citing Chela Sandoval, "Dis-Illusionment and the Poetry of the Future: The Making of Oppositional Consciousness," Ph.D. qualifying essay, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1984.
- 28 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987); Kobena Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, Bad Objects Collective, ed. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), pp. 169-210; Douglas Crimp with Adam Rolston, *AIDS DemoGraphics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990); Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Explorations in Female Sexuality*, Carole S. Vance, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1984), pp. 267-319.
- 29 Jeffrey Escoffier and Allan Bérubé, "Queer/Nation," *OUT/LOOK: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly*, no. 11 (Winter 1991), pp. 14-16.