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Deconstructing queer theory or the under-theorization of the social and the ethical

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From at least the early 1950s through the mid-1970s, the idea was widespread in American society that what was called homosexuality was a phenomenon with a uniform essential meaning across histories. Both mainstream America and the homosexual mainstream assumed that homosexuality marks out a common human identity. Public dispute has centered on the moral significance of this presumed natural fact. Whereas the post-World War II scientific, medical, and legal establishment routinely figured homosexuality as signaling a psychologically abnormal, morally inferior, and socially deviant human type, homophile groups and their supporters defended the "normality" of "the homosexual." Even the mainstream lesbian and gay movements of the 1970s primarily contested stereotypes of homosexuality, not the notion that "the homosexual" is a distinct human type. Public struggles easily folded into friend-versus-foe of the homosexual.

Since the late 1970s, the terms of the struggle over "homosexuality" have changed dramatically. The assumption that "homosexuality" is a uniform, identical condition has given way to the notion that the meaning of same-sex sexual desire varies considerably within and across societies (e.g., by class, race, ethnicity, or subcultural identity). By the early 1980s, it had become conventional wisdom among many intellectuals at least that the meaning and therefore the experience of same-sex sexuality articulates a social and historical, not a natural and universal, logic.

One consequence of the "constructionist" questioning of "essentialism" has been the loss of innocence within the gay community. The

presumption of a lesbian and gay community unified by a common baseline of experience and interest has been placed into seemingly permanent doubt. The struggle over homosexuality has been grudgingly acknowledged to be a struggle among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer individuals and groups who hold to different, sometimes conflicting, social interests, values, and political agendas. A new cynicism has crept into lesbian and gay intellectual culture. Representations of homosexuality produced within these subcultures evoke similar suspicions with regard to their disciplining role and their regulatory power effects as representations issuing from a heterosexist cultural mainstream. No discourse or representation of homosexuality, no matter how sincerely it speaks in the name of liberation, can escape the suspicion that it exhibits particular social interests and entails definite political effects. All images of homosexuality have, to use Foucault's term, power/knowledge effects or are perceived as productive of social hierarchies. The simple polarity between friend and foe of homosexuality has given way to a multivocal cultural clash that is so disconcerting to some intellectuals that they have retreated into the presumed certainties of a naturalistic ontology, e.g., the gay brain.

I write in 1993 with a sense of the end of an era. The sex and race debates exposed deep and bitter divisions among lesbians and gay men; AIDS has threatened the very desires by which many of us have defined and organized ourselves into a community with the spectre of disease and death; a relentless politic of coming out, being out, and outing, has failed to deliver on its promise of liberation from fear and prejudice; the growing crisis of lesbian-feminism and the dubious gains of the gay mainstream surrendering to a single-interest group politic of assimilationism suggest the exhaustion of the dominant templates of lesbian and gay politics. Solidarity built around the assumption of a common identity and agenda has given way to social division; multiple voices, often speaking past one another, have replaced a defiant monotone which drowned out dissonant voices in favor of an illusory but exalted unity.

If we are witnessing the passing of an era, it is, in no small part, because of the discrediting of the idea of a unitary, common sexual identity. The troubling of identity was instigated initially in the sex and race debates. Sex rebels protesting the consolidation of a gay and lesbian-feminist sexual ethic, and the resounding public voices of people of color contesting the writing of the lesbian and gay subject as a white, middle-class figure, were crucial discursive junctures in the growing sense of crisis in the lesbian and gay mainstream. I view the assertion of a queer politics and theory as both a response to, and further instigation of, this

crisis. Although many meanings circulate under this sign, queer suggests a positioning as oppositional to both the heterosexual and homosexual mainstream. I take the critique of "the homosexual subject," perhaps the grounding idea of modern Western images of homosexuality, as central to queer interventions. Both queer theory and politics intend to expose and disturb the normalizing politics of identity as practiced in the straight and lesbian and gay mainstream; whereas queer politics mobilizes against all normalized hierarchies, queer theory put into permanent crisis the identity-based theory and discourses that have served as the unquestioned foundation of lesbian and gay life. Queers disrupt and subvert in the name of a politic of difference which moves back and forth between anarchism and a radical democratic pluralism. My focus will be on the theory side of queer interventions.

Queer theory represents a powerful force in rethinking homosexuality as a culture and politics. It might seem odd to think of mostly academic theorists as shaping a movement of cultural change. Yet their placement in prestigious universities, their growing prominence in gay intellectual culture, and their influence in the radical politics of Queer Nation and HIV/AIDS activism suggests that they have become an important force shaping lesbian and gay culture and politics. Indicative of their social influence is their critical reception from old-guard humanistic intellectual elites. For example, Jeff Escoffier (1990) registers concern about the depoliticization of gay intellectuals as they are converted to deconstruction. Similarly, in a brief review of the 1991 lesbian and gay studies conference, Simon Watney (1992) criticizes queer theory for marginalizing AIDS politics in favor of the high ground of theory. In *Lingua franca*, Daniel Harris (1991) attacks deconstruction for trivializing AIDS politics by single-mindedly focusing on media criticism. These criticisms evidence a cultural clash among elites who represent divergent intellectual and political standpoints. Such cultural collisions should not be discounted as mere ideological obfuscation. Cultural elites produce representations and discourses which shape images of self and community, social norms, and political strategies. Although news reporters, novelists, artists, and film makers may have access to more people, academic intellectuals influence these media and cultural elite directly and exert a broad public influence through teaching and writing. Just as an earlier generation of liberationist theorists shaped gay cultural and political life, today it is a new movement, a generation of queer theorists, who are shaping lesbian and gay intellectual culture.

To grasp the social and political significance of queer theory, I wish to situate it historically. I sketch the historical contours of the development

of lesbian and gay intellectual culture from the early 1970s to the present. This sketch is intended to be merely suggestive. This is followed by a characterization of the basic ideas of queer theory and its social and political meaning. Finally, I expose its own silences while appreciating its important connection to a politics of knowledge.

I. Situating post-Stonewall gay intellectual culture

A first phase of lesbian and gay intellectual culture spanned roughly the years between 1968 and 1975. In 1968, there was only the beginnings of a gay community and that only in a few major urban areas. A lesbian and gay cultural apparatus, if one can speak of that in 1968, was the product of a previous generation which organized around the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis. Reflecting the local and clandestine character of these organizations, there were no national public lesbian- or gay-identified newspapers, magazines, or presses; no institutionalized gay art or theatre, and only a few gay-identified writers who mostly wrote in isolation. Homosexual theory moved back and forth between a view of homosexuality as a secondary psychological disorder characteristic of a segment of the population and a normal desire present in varying degrees in the human population. The beginnings of a theory of homosexuality as an oppressed minority was voiced by radicals such as Harry Hay but largely ignored. Gay politics was overwhelmingly oriented to civil rights with the aim of social assimilation (D'Emilio 1983).

A lesbian and gay liberationist movement emerged in response both to the forced heterosexualization of society and to the assimilationist politics of the homophile movement (Adam 1987; Altman 1982; Faderman 1991). At its cultural forefront were mostly young, educated, white individuals who identified themselves as gay liberationists or lesbian-feminists. They criticized the heterosexism and sexism of the social mainstream. Inspired by the new left and feminism, they substituted a transformative politics for the politics of assimilationism of the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis. Liberationist thinking exhibited several major strains. For example, homosexuality was often viewed as a natural, universal condition. Protest was aimed at the pathologizing of homosexuality. Homosexuality was being reclaimed as natural, normal, and good without challenging a sexual regime organized around hetero/homosexuality. However, some liberationists struggled against a system of mutually exclusive sexual and gender roles; they envisioned an androgynous, polymorphous ideal of humanity

liberated from the roles of heterosexual/homosexual and man/woman and from a narrow genital-centered sexuality. Other liberationists, especially lesbian-feminists and the "radical fairie movement," assumed and celebrated the differences between heterosexuals and homosexuals; radically nationalistic, they aimed to build a new community and culture. Some proposed a separatist agenda while others appealed to liberal pluralistic images of the American mosaic.

By the early 1970s, we can observe the beginnings of a lesbian and gay national cultural apparatus. Liberationists were pivotal in shaping this intellectual culture. They published journals, magazines, newsletters, and newspapers; national publications cropped up circulating lesbian and gay art, literature, and theory. Although many lesbian- and gay-identified intellectuals had ties to academia – indeed many were graduate students or professors – their writings were squarely anchored in movement culture and politics. In part, this position reflected their weak ties to academia (as junior faculty in a fiercely hostile setting) and their strong ties (e.g., through self-definition and community affiliation) to the evolving movement. With their primary personal and social roots in the movement, gay liberationists and lesbian-feminists were able to merge the roles of intellectual and activist (e.g., Altman 1971; Bunch 1975). The style and language of their writing is indicative of the interests of movement activists, e.g., critiques that typically took the form of short essays, poems, pamphlets, manifestoes, memoirs, short stories, and autobiographical statements rather than analytical or theoretically oriented books. Their work appeared in inexpensive newsletters, newspapers, pamphlets, or books and anthologies written for general public consumption. In short, in the early years of gay liberation and lesbian-feminism, lesbian/gay intellectual culture was firmly rooted in movement concerns and public struggles. Liberationists were, if you will, public intellectuals, spokespersons for a social movement and community-in-the-making.

A second phase of lesbian and gay culture spans roughly the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. This was a period of community building and the political maturation of the lesbian and gay movements. A fully elaborated and institutionalized gay community dotted the social landscape of virtually all major cities across the United States. A pivotal part of this social development was the creation of a national, public lesbian and gay cultural apparatus that included newspapers, periodicals, gay national presses, and artistic and literary associations. A national gay and lesbian culture existed for the first time in the United States by the mid-1980s.

Although gay liberationists were pivotal in this community-building

effort, their ideas and agenda were marginalized in the new lesbian and gay mainstream. Liberationist visions of creating a new humanity gave way to ethnic nationalist models of identity and single-interest group politics inspired by either a liberal assimilationist ideal or, in the case of lesbian-feminism, a separatist ideological agenda. Being lesbian and gay was celebrated, often as a natural, unchangeable condition, or, among lesbian-feminists, as a political choice.

A new intelligentsia appeared. With the institutionalization of lesbian/gay communities across the nation, a new stratum of lesbian- and gay-identified cultural workers (e.g., writers, news reporters, artists, and knowledge producers) could be supported by newspapers, magazines, book publishers, and theatres. Moreover, the expanded tolerance for homosexuality in the mainstream United States allowed for the rise of a new stratum of gay academic intellectuals who made homosexuality into the topic of their research and theorizing. Many of these academics had roots in gay liberationism or lesbian-feminist communities. They were, in general, critical of the view of homosexuality as a transhistorical condition. They disputed attempts to frame homosexual identity as a fixed, universally identical phenomenon without, however, breaking away from identity politics. They approached homosexuality in social and historical terms. In particular, the merging of homosexuality and identity was analyzed as a recent Western historical event, not a natural, universal condition.

Unlike a previous generation of lesbian- and gay-identified intellectuals, this generation (e.g., Weeks 1977; D'Emilio 1983; Boswell 1980; Faderman 1981) were much more academically anchored. Mostly historians, they often were tenured faculty; they wrote for academic journals or published books in university presses; they were the first generation of intellectuals who could succeed in academia despite assuming a lesbian or gay identity. Although many of these intellectuals were academics, their work was not divorced from movement culture and politics. In part, this unity reflects the fact that as historians they generally wrote in a style broadly accessible to the lay community, even as they aimed for recognition by their colleagues. Moreover, many had a history of social activism and were politically and socially integrated into lesbian and gay life; these lay communities were a chief audience for this new intelligentsia. Perhaps most importantly, their work, which focused on the social formation of a homosexual identity and community, reinforced the heightened minoritization of lesbian and gay life in the late 1970s. Thus, although many of these intellectuals wrote as academics seeking collegial status, their strong ties to the history and current politics of the

movement, and their identification with disciplines that valued public education, allowed them to merge the roles of academic and public intellectual.

The third phase of an evolving lesbian/gay intellectual culture spans the period between roughly the mid-1980s and the present. Community building continued as the lesbian and gay communities assumed the form of fully institutionalized subcultures. Moreover, while the previous period witnessed dramatic social and political successes, a drive to become mainstream dominated movement politics in this period. Indeed, the antigay backlash of the late 1970s through the early 1980s might be read as evidence of the very success of mainstreaming. Mainstreaming is evident in the marketing of blatantly gay-identified fashion; in the inclusion of gays in the Rainbow Coalition as an integral partner; in the diminished danger social and cultural elites felt in being associated publicly with lesbian and gay causes. Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of mainstreaming occurred in the realm of intellectual culture. Mainstream high-brow journals, magazines, and presses opened up to lesbian- and gay-identified writers, especially in academically oriented publishing. Journals such as *October*, *Social Text*, *Socialist Review*, *Radical America*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *differences*, *Oxford Review*, and *Raritan* have published major statements on lesbian/gay themes. Important presses, from Routledge and Beacon to university presses such as Chicago, Columbia, Duke, Minnesota, and Indiana, have developed strong lists in lesbian and gay studies. Gay studies degree programs and research centers are being established in major universities.

The mainstreaming of lesbian and gay intellectual culture means that the university has become a chief site for the production of lesbian and gay discourses. To be sure, discourses of same-sex experiences continue to be produced by nonacademic cultural workers, e.g., film makers, journalists, novelists, poets, essayists, pornographers, political activists, and writers. Yet is increasingly gay-identified academics who are controlling the production of lesbian and gay knowledges. And while this development suggests that lesbians and gay men will have a voice in the struggles over the production and circulation of knowledge, it also means that gay intellectual culture is now more divided than ever between an academic and nonacademic sector. Moreover, as the gap widens between an academically dominated discourse of homosexuality and everyday gay culture, there is the distinct possibility that gay theory and politics will have only a feeble connection. As theorists and activists are socially positioned differently, as they speak in different languages to divergent publics, their relations may be strained and weak; for example, theorists might invoke activists for political correctness while activists appeal to theory for cultural respectability.

The third phase has seen the rise of a new force in lesbian and gay intellectual culture: queer theory. An older intellectual elite of self-taught interpreters of lesbian and gay life (e.g., Katz 1976; Martin and Lyon 1972; Rich 1980) and professional historians and social scientists (e.g., D'Emilio 1983; Trumbach 1977; Weeks 1977; Smith-Rosenberg 1975), whose roots and chief public were the lesbian and gay community, are losing ground in the struggle over defining knowledges of "homosexuality" to a new cultural elite of academics who increasingly deploy the sign of queer to describe or position their approach. The most conspicuous strain of queer theory draws heavily on French poststructural theory and the critical method of deconstruction. Producers of queer theory are integrated into academia more completely than previous generations who produced gay knowledges; they are mostly English professors who pursue collegial status as well as recognition from the lesbian and gay nonacademic cultural elite, e.g., public writers, editors of magazines and newspapers, commercial publishers, and political elites. Queer theorists have often come of age during a period of the renewed activism of HIV/AIDS politics and share a spirit of the renewal of transformative politics with groups like ACT-UP or Queer Nation. Queer theory is profoundly shaping gay intellectual culture, at least that segment previously controlled by independent scholars, academic historians, and social scientists.

Queer theorists are positioned to become a substantial force in shaping lesbian and gay intellectual culture. Frequently unified by generation and by academic affiliation, sharing a culture based on common conceptual and linguistic practices, and capturing the spirit of discontent toward both the straight mainstream and the lesbian and gay mainstream, queer theory is an important social force in the making of gay intellectual culture and politics in the 1990s. I wish to contribute to understanding and assessing this cultural movement.

II. Deconstructing gay identity: queer theory and the politics of knowledge

Despite an antigay backlash, the lesbian and gay movement made giant steps towards community building and social mainstreaming in the 1980s. In urban centers across the United States the lesbian and gay community staked out a public territorial, institutional, cultural, and political

identity. From this social base, lesbians and gay men campaigned, with a great deal of success, for social inclusion, as evidenced by civil rights legislation, political representation, legal reform, and the appearance of affirmative media representations.

Social success may, ironically, have allowed for hitherto-muted differences to surface publicly. Differences that were submerged for the sake of solidarity against a heterosexist mainstream erupted into public view. In particular, clashes over sexuality and race served as key sites for differences to coalesce socially. Local skirmishes over sexual ethics and political priorities escalated into a general war over the social coherence and desirability of asserting a lesbian and gay identity (Seidman 1993).

The dominant ethnic nationalist model of identity and politics was criticized for exhibiting white, middle-class, hetero-imitative values and liberal political interests. On the political front, parallel criticisms of the lesbian and gay mainstream surfaced among HIV/AIDS activists (e.g., ACT-UP) and Queer Nation activists who positioned themselves in opposition to the normalizing, disciplining cultural politics of the lesbian and gay social center. They challenged the very basis of mainstream gay politics: a politics organized on the premise of a unified subject. By calling themselves queer, and by organizing around broad issues of controlling the body or access to health care, a new post-identity cultural political force coalesced in the 1980s. On the intellectual front, a wave of lesbian- and gay-identified people of color and sex radicals attacked the unitary gay identity construction as normative and as a disciplining force which excludes and marginalizes many desires, acts, and identities of lesbian- and gay-identified individuals. They evolved various alternative proposals for rethinking identity and politics, for example, the notion of interlocking subject positions and sites of oppression and resistance. Nevertheless, it has been the movement of queer theorists, drawing on French poststructuralism, who have theoretically articulated this challenge to identity politics and whose ideas have moved into the center of lesbian and gay intellectual culture.

Poststructural theory frames literary criticism less as a matter of defining or contesting a canon, engaging in a dialogue on presumably universal questions of literary form, or as delineating the formal structures of a text, than as a type of social analysis. Literary texts are viewed as social and political practices, as organized by social and cultural codes, and indeed as social forces that structure identities, social norms, and power relations. In particular, texts are viewed as organized around foundational symbolic figures such as masculine/feminine or heterosexual/homosexual. Such binary oppositions are understood as

categories of knowledge; they structure the way we think and organize experience. These linguistic and discursive meanings contribute to the making of social hierarchies. Deconstruction aims to disturb or displace the power of these hierarchies by showing their arbitrary, social, and political character. Deconstruction may be described as a cultural politics of knowledge. It is this rendering of literary analysis into social analysis, of textual critique into social critique, of readings into a political practice, of politics into the politics of knowledge, that makes deconstruction and the queer theory inspired by it an important movement of theory and politics.

Who are the queer theorists? Some names may serve as initial markers: Eve Sedgwick (1990), Diana Fuss (1991), Judith Butler (1990, 1991), Lee Edelman (1994), Michael Moon (1991), Teresa de Lauretis (1991), Thomas Yingling (1990), and D. A. Miller (1991). Key texts include Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), and Diana Fuss's *Essentially Speaking* (1989). A central statement is the anthology, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, edited by Diana Fuss (1991). Let me be clear. I am not speaking of an intellectually and politically unified cultural movement. Queer theorists are a diverse lot exhibiting important disagreements and divergences. Nevertheless, they share certain broad commitments – in particular, they draw heavily on French poststructural theory and deconstruction as a method of literary and social critique; they deploy in key ways psychoanalytic categories and perspectives; they favor a de-centering or deconstructive strategy that retreats from positive programmatic social and political proposals; they imagine the social as a text to be interpreted and criticized towards the aim of contesting dominant knowledges and social hierarchies.

I intend to sketch what I take to be the dominant intellectual and political impulse of queer theory. I do not intend to provide detailed analyses of key texts. My aim is to make the project of a particularly influential cultural movement intelligible and to begin to assess its importance. In the remainder of this section, I wish to state, as clearly as I can, the guiding impulse and core ideas of this body of work.

Homosexual theory – whether essentialist or constructionist – has favored a view of homosexuality as a condition of a social minority. Although essentialist and constructionist perspectives may assume that homoeroticism is a universal experience, both viewpoints simultaneously aim to account for the making of a homosexual social minority. For example, an essentialist position might hold that only some individuals are exclusively or primarily homosexual. Holding to this assumption, the

analyst might proceed to explain how this homosexual population has come to speak for itself as a social minority. A social constructionist position might assume that, though same-sex experiences are a universal condition, only some individuals in some societies organize their lives around homoeroticism. A social analyst who assumes constructionist premises may wish to trace the social factors which have transformed this universal homoerotic desire into a homosexual identity. Despite differences between so-called essentialist and constructionist assumptions regarding same-sex experience, lesbian and gay analysts have been preoccupied with explaining the social forces creating a self-conscious homosexual minority. Both essentialist and social constructionist versions of lesbian/gay theory in the 1970s and 1980s have related stories of the coming of age of a collective homosexual subject.

Queer theorists have criticized the view of homosexuality as a property of an individual or group, whether that identity is explained as natural or social in origin. They argue that this perspective leaves in place the heterosexual/homosexual binary as a master framework for constructing the self, sexual knowledge, and social institutions. A theoretical and political project which aims exclusively to normalize homosexuality and to legitimate homosexuality as a social minority does not challenge a social regime which perpetuates the production of subjects and social worlds organized and regulated by the heterosexual/homosexual binary. Minoritizing epistemological strategies stabilizes a power/knowledge regime which defines bodies, desires, behaviors, and social relations in binary terms according to a fixed hetero/homo sexual preference. Such linguistic and discursive binary figures inevitably get framed in hierarchical terms, thus reinforcing a politics of exclusion and domination. Moreover, in such a regime homosexual politics is pressured to move between two limited options: the liberal struggle to legitimate homosexuality in order to maximize a politics of inclusion and the separatist struggle to assert difference on behalf of a politics of ethnic nationalism.

To date, the dominant logic of lesbian and gay politics has been that of battling heteronormativity toward the end of legitimating homosexuality. As important as that project is, queer theorists have exposed its limits. A binary sex system, whether compulsively heterosexual or not, creates rigid psychological and social boundaries that inevitably give rise to systems of dominance and hierarchy – certain feelings, desires, acts, identities, and social formations are excluded, marginalized, and made inferior. To the extent that individuals feel compelled to define themselves as hetero-or-homosexual, they erect boundaries and protective

identities which are self-limiting and socially controlling. Moreover, identity constructions developed on the basis of an exclusively hetero-or-homo desire are inherently unstable; the assertion of one identity category presupposes, incites, and excludes its opposite. The declaration of heterosexual selfhood elicits its opposite, indeed needs the homosexual in order to be coherent and bounded. In fact, the very consciousness of the homosexual other cannot but elicit suspicions of homosexual desire in oneself and others across the range of daily same-sex interactions, friendships, dreams, fantasies, and public images. Heterosexuality and homosexuality belong together as an unstable coupling, simultaneously mutually productive and subverting.

Beyond producing a series of psychological, social, and political oppositions and instabilities, a binary sexual regime places serious limits on sexual theory and politics. To the extent that sexual (and self) identity is defined by sexual orientation equated with gender preference, a vast range of desires, acts, and social relations are never made into an object of theory and politics. To equate sexual liberation with heterosexual and homosexual legitimation presupposes an extremely reductive notion of "the sexual" since it leaves out of consideration any explicit concern with the body, sensual stimulation, and sex acts and relations other than in terms of gender preference. Implicit in the texts of the queer theorists is the claim that the mainstream focus on legitimating a homo-sexual preference and identity betrays middle-class, conventional intimate values. By focusing politics exclusively on legitimating same-sex gender choice, the lesbian and gay movement leaves politically uncontested a range of particular sexual and intimate values that may be marginalized or devalued in other respects. In other words, the gay mainstream takes for granted the normative status of long-term monogamous, adult-to-adult, intraracial, intragenerational, romantic sexual and intimate values. If a person's sexual orientation involves, say, same-sex S/M or interracial or commercial sex, s/he would be resistant to reducing the politics of sexual orientation to gender preference and the legitimation of a homosexual identity. The gay mainstream, including gay theory, is criticized as a disciplining, normative force, one unwittingly reinforcing dynamics of exclusion and hierarchy.

Queer theorists argue that homosexuality should not be treated as an issue of the lives and fate of a social minority. Implicit in this approach is the notion that the identity of the individual is the ultimate foundation for gay theory and politics. The gay community and its politics is imagined as the summation and mobilization of individuals who are self-defined as gay or lesbian. Queer critics urge an epistemological

shift. They propose to focus on a cultural level. Their field of analysis is linguistic or discursive structures and, in principle, their institutional settings. Specifically, their object of analysis is the hetero/homosexual opposition. This is understood as a category of knowledge, a way of defining and organizing selves, desires, behaviors, and social relations. Through the articulation of this hetero/homosexual figure in texts and social practices (e.g., therapeutic regimes or marital customs and laws), it contributes to producing mutually exclusive heterosexualized and homosexualized subjects and social worlds. Just as feminists claim to have discovered a gender code (the masculine/feminine binary) which shapes the texture of personal and public life, a parallel claim is made for the hetero/homosexual figure. Queer interventions urge a shift from a framing of the question of homosexuality in terms of personal identity and the politics of homosexual oppression and liberation to imagining homosexuality in relation to the cultural politics of knowledge. In this regard, queer theory places the question of homosexuality at the center of society and social analysis. 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, and social institutions, and social relations – in a word, the constitution of the self and society.

The shift from approaching homosexuality as an issue of individual identity (its repression, expression, and liberation) to viewing it as a cultural figure or category of knowledge is the central claim of Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). Her opening paragraph announces a framing of homosexuality in terms of a cultural politic of knowledge.

> *Epistemology of the Closet* proposes that many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured – indeed, fractured – by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition . . . The 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. (Sedgwick 1990, 1)

From the turn of the [nineteenth] century "every given person . . . was now considered necessarily assignable . . . to a homo-or-a-hetero-sexuality, a binarized identity . . . It was this new development that left no space in the culture exempt from the potent incoherences of homo/-heterosexual definition" (Sedgwick 1990, 2). The homo/heterosexual definition is said to shape the culture of society, not just individual identities and behaviors. It does so, moreover, not only by imposing sexual definitions on bodies, actions, and social relations, but, perhaps more significantly, by shaping broad categories of thought and culture whose thematic focus is not always explicitly sexual.

> I think that a whole cluster of the most crucial sites for the contestation of meaning in twentieth-century western culture are consequently and quite indelibly marked with the historical specificity of homo-social/heterosexual definition . . . Among those sites are . . . the pairings secrecy/disclosure and private/public. Along with and sometimes through these epistemologically charged pairings, condensed in the figures of "the closet" and "coming out," this very specific crisis of definition has then ineffaceably marked other pairings as basic to modern cultural organization as masculine/feminine, majority/minority, innocence/initiation, natural/ artificial, new/old, growth/decadence, urbane/provincial, health/illness, same/different, cognition/paranoia, art/kitsch, sincerity/sentimentality, and voluntarity/addiction. So pervasive has the suffusing stain of homo/heterosexual crisis been that to discuss any of these indices in any context, in the absence of an antihomophobic analysis, must perhaps be to perpetuate unknowingly compulsions implicit in each. (Sedgwick 1990, 72)

Sedgwick insists that these categories of knowledge are unstable. Modern Western sexual definitions move between contradictory positions. For example homosexuality may be viewed as specific to a minority of the human population (i.e., some individuals are exclusively homosexual) or understood as universal (i.e., all people are thought to have homosexual desires). The instability of the homo/hetero sexual definition makes it a favorable site for deconstructive analysis. "One main strand of argument in this book is deconstructive . . . The analytic move it makes is to demonstrate that categories presented in a culture as symmetrical binary oppositions – heterosexual/homosexual, in this case – actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation" (Sedgwick 1990, 9–10). Sedgwick wishes to reveal the instability of this symbolic trope and to disrupt its hierarchical structuring for the purpose of displacing or neutralizing its social force.

In the collection *Inside/Out* (Fuss 1991), the figuring of society as a social text and of social analysis into deconstructive analysis is made into the programmatic center of queer theory. Departing from Sedgwick, who attends exclusively to the canonized texts of academic "high" culture, the contributors to this volume deploy a deconstructive critical method on the "texts" of popular culture, e.g., Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rope* (Miller 1991), the 1963 horror movie, *The Haunting* (White 1991), or popular representations of Rock Hudson (Meyer 1991).

In her introduction to *Inside/Out* (1991) and in *Essentially Speaking* (1989), Diana Fuss sketches a framework for a deconstructive or queer cultural politic of knowledge. She contrasts conventional approaches to identity which view it as a property of an object with a poststructural approach which defines identity as a discursive relational figure. "Deconstruction dislocates the understanding of identity as self-presence and offers, instead, a view of identity as difference. To the extent that identity always contains the specter of non-identity within it, the subject is always divided and identity is always purchased at the price of the exclusion of the Other, the repression or repudiation of non-identity" (Fuss 1989, 103). In other words, persons or objects acquire identities only in contrast to what they are not. The affirmation of an identity entails the production and exclusion of that which is different or the creation of otherness. This otherness, though, is never truly excluded or silenced; it is present in identity and haunts it as its limit or impossibility.

Fuss applies this deconstructive approach to the hetero/homosexual figure:

> The philosophical opposition between "heterosexual" and "homosexual" . . . has always been constructed on the foundations of another related opposition: the couple "inside" and "outside." The metaphysics of identity that has governed discussions of sexual behavior and libidinal object choice has, until now, depended on the structural symmetry of these seemingly functional distinctions and the inevitability of a symbolic order based on a logic of limits, margins, borders, and boundaries. Many of the current efforts in lesbian and gay theory, which this volume seeks to showcase, have begun the difficult but urgent textual work necessary to call into question the stability and ineradicability of the hetero/homo hierarchy, suggesting that new (and old) sexual possibilities are no longer thinkable in terms of a simple inside/outside dialectic. But how, exactly, do we bring the hetero/homo opposition to the point of collapse?
>
> (1991, 1)

The point of departure for queer theory is not the figure of homosexual repression and the struggle for personal and collective expression or the making of homosexual/gay/lesbian identities but the hetero/homosexual discursive or epistemological figure. The question of its origin is less compelling than a description of its social textual efficacy. Thus, virtually every essay in *Inside/Out* searches out this symbolic figure in a wide range of publicly circulating social texts. To the extent that Fuss's introduction is intent on making the case for shifting theory away from its present grounding in identity concepts to a cultural or epistemological centering, she intends to underscore, and indeed

contribute to, the destabilizing of the hetero/homo code and the limits of a politics organized around the affirmation of a homo-sexual identity. She rehearses the standard deconstructive critique: the hetero/homo code creates hierarchies of insides and outsides. A politics organized around an affirmative homo-sexual identity reinforces this code and creates its own inside/outside hierarchy.

Deconstructive analysis aims to expose the limits and instabilities of a binary identity figure. "Sexual identities are rarely secure. Heterosexuality can never fully ignore the close psychical 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 . . ." (Fuss 1991, 4). Deconstructive analysis reveals that the hetero/homo presuppose each other, each is elicited by the other, contained, as it were, in the other, 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 toward confusion and collapse. "The fear of the homo, which continually rubs up against the hetero (tribadic-style), concentrates and codifies the very real possibility and ever-present threat of a collapse of boundaries, an effacing of limits, and a radical confusion of identities" (Fuss 1991, 6). The collapse of this binary identity figure as a cultural social force and as a framework of opposition politics as identity politics is the aim of the deconstructive project. Fuss advocates a politics of cultural subversion. "What is called for is nothing less than an insistent and intrepid disorganization of the very structures which produce this inescapable logic" (1991, 6).

III. The limits of queer textualism

From the beginning of the homophile movement in the 1950s through gay liberationism and the ethnic nationalism of the 1980s, lesbian and gay theory in the United States has been wedded to a particular metanarrative. This has been a story of the formation of a homosexual subject and its mobilization to challenge a heteronormative society. Gay theory has been linked to what I wish to call a "politics of interest." This refers to a politics organized around the claims for rights and social, cultural, and political representation by a homosexual subject. In the early homophile quest for tolerance, in the gay liberationist project of liberating the homosexual self, or in the ethnic nationalist assertion of equal rights and representation, the gay movement has been wedded to a politics of interest.

Queer theory has proposed an alternative to, or supplement of, the paradigm of an identity-based politics of interest. Abandoning the homosexual subject as the foundation of theory and politics, queer critics take the hetero/homosexual discursive figure as its object of knowledge and critique. This binary is said to function as a central category of knowledge which structures broad fields of Western culture and social conventions. Queer social analysts expose the ways this epistemological figure functions in Western culture and social practices. The hetero/homosexual definition serves as a sort of global framework within which bodies, desires, identities, behaviors, and social relations are constituted and regulated.

Queer theorists, or at least one prominent strain, may be described as proposing a cultural "politics of knowledge." Their aim is to trace the ways the hetero/homo figure structures discourses and representations which are at the center of Western societies. They aim to make gay theory central to social theory or cultural criticism, rather than approach it as a minority discourse. Paralleling the Marxist or feminist claims about the bourgeois/proletariat and masculine/feminine oppositions, queer analysts claim for the hetero/homo binary the status of a master category of social analysis. They wish to contest this structure of knowledge and cultural paradigm. They intend to subvert the hetero/homo hierarchy not with the goal of celebrating the equality or superiority of homosexuality nor with the hope of liberating a homosexual subject. Rather, the deconstructive project of queer theory and politics aims at neutralizing and displacing the social force of this cultural figure. But by what means and to what end?

As I consider the politics of queer theory, I will register some reservations. We have seen that, as I read this intervention, queer social critics are clear about their aim and strategy: they wish to trace the cultural operation of the hetero/homo hierarchical figure with the aim of reversing and disturbing its infectious and pervasive social power. But how? What force is claimed for deconstructive critique and what is its ethical and political standpoint?

Fuss insists that the aim of queer analysis is to "question the stability and ineradicability of the hetero/homo hierarchy [and to bring] the hetero/homo opposition to the point of collapse" (1991, 1). But how? Fuss calls for an "analysis interminable, a responsibility to exert sustained pressure from/on the margins to reshape and to reorient the field of sexual difference to include sexual differences" (1991, 6). Fuss does not assume that this "analysis interminable" is sufficient to subvert the hetero/homo hierarchy. Cultural critique must be wedded

to a politics of interest. Fuss assumes that only social agents challenging institutional arrangements and relations of power can effect a major cultural and social change. However, she also believes that current social movements such as the lesbian and gay and women's movements are organized around the assertion of unitary, essentialized identities which perpetuate and stabilize the hetero/homo figure. This is her dilemma: the very subjects positioned to trouble the hetero/homo hierarchy are invested in it. Deconstructive critique cannot disavow identity, as it is the very subjects who claim identities as man, woman lesbian, and gay who are the only agents of change. Thus, the queer project aims to deconstruct and refigure identities as multiple and fluid with the hope that "such a view of identity as unstable and potentially disruptive . . . could in the end produce a more mature identity politics . . . [and] stable political subjects" (Fuss 1989, 104). Unfortunately, there is no analysis of what such subjects might look like or what configuration of interests and social will might propel them to instigate the kinds of changes Fuss wishes. Indeed, there is no account of the social conditions (e.g., changes in the economy or state or class, gender, or racial formation) that make her own critique of identity politics possible. What social forces are producing this political and discursive pressuring on the center? This under-theorization of the social is even clearer in Eve Sedgwick.

Sedgwick is no idealist. She is keenly aware of the limits of deconstructive analysis. Sedgwick holds that "there is reason to believe that the oppressive sexual system of the past hundred years was if anything born and bred . . . in the briar patch of the most notorious and repeated decenterings and exposures" (1990, 10). The staying power of the hetero/homo figure rests, in no small part, on the fact that it has been rearticulated in a dense cultural network of normative definitions and binaries such as secrecy/disclosure, knowledge/ignorance, private/public, natural/artificial, wholeness/decadence, domestic/foreign, urbane/provincial, health/illness, and sincerity/sentimentality. In other words, the hetero/homo figure is woven into the core cultural premises and understandings of Western societies. At one level, Sedgwick's project is to identify the ways the hetero/homo definition has been sustained by being written into the cultural organization of Western societies. Here we may raise an initial concern about the politics of knowledge. If the exposure of the instabilities and contradictions of the hetero/homo structuring of Western cultural configurations does not effectively displace or de-center this figure, deconstructive critique would seem to have surrendered much, if not all, political force. Sedgwick seems to be acknowledging that the social force of the deconstructive critique is

contingent upon its being connected to a politics of interest. However, the only politics of interest she alludes to is the varied movements of homosexual politics, which assume the validity of the hetero/homo figure while challenging its particular hierarchical ordering. It would seem that the logical move for Sedgwick is to link cultural to social analysis and to couple a deconstructive critique of knowledge to a constructive politics of interest. Unfortunately, Sedgwick's analysis remains at the level of the critique of knowledge and the de-centering of cultural meanings, an intervention which by her own account has been going on for a century. This uncoupling of cultural from social analysis is a departure from at least the original intention of Derrida, who insisted on linking discursive meanings to their institutional settings and thereby connecting deconstructive to institutional critique. "What is somewhat hastily called deconstruction is not . . . a specialized set of discursive procedures . . . [but] a way of taking a position, in its work of analysis, concerning the political and institutional structures that make possible and govern our practices . . . Precisely because it is never concerned only with signified content, deconstruction should not be separable from this politico-institutional problematic" (Derrida, quoted in Culler 1982, 156). Queer theory has largely abandoned institutional analysis. In Sedgwick, the hetero/homo definition functions as an autonomous cultural logic, prolifically generating categories and fields of knowledge. These cultural meanings are never linked to social structural arrangements or processes such as nationalism, colonialism, globalization, or dynamics of class or family formation or popular social movements. Lacking an understanding of the ways cultural meanings are interlaced with social forces, especially in light of Sedgwick's analysis of the productive and infectious character of the hetero/homo figure, greatly weakens the political force of her analysis.

Queer theory is a response to the hierarchies of sexual and homosexual politics. No less than liberationist or lesbian-feminist theory, queer analysis is responding to the damaged lives and suffering engendered in a compulsively heterosexual society. The former approach homosexual politics by asserting a homosexual subject struggling for liberation against oppression. By contrast, queer theorists approach homosexual politics in relation to a power/knowledge regime organized around the hetero/homo hierarchical figure which is said to function as a master framework for the constitution and ordering of fields of knowledge and cultural understandings which shape the making of subjectivities, social relations, and social norms. I perceive a parallel with many feminist discourses in the 1980s. In the face of the staying power of male

domination and resistance to change, many feminists in the 1980s turned away from learning theory and sex-role theory to psychoanalytic theory and to a quasi-naturalistic gynocentric or cultural feminism. Queer theory suggests a deep cultural logic to explain the staying power of heterosexism. The roots of heterosexism are not socialization, prejudice, tradition, or scapegoating, but a basic way of organizing knowledges and fields of daily life which are deeply articulated in the core social practices of Western societies.

Queer theory analyzes homosexuality as part of a power/knowledge regime rather than as a minority social identity. It hopes to contribute to destabilizing this regime, to disrupt its foundational cultural status. But to what end? What is the ethical and political standpoint of queer theory?

The deconstructive critique of the hetero/homo hierarchical figure is tied to a politics of difference. Its goal is to release possibilities for bodily, sexual, and social experiences which are submerged or marginalized by the dominant regime. Queer theory's social hope is allied to proliferating forms of personal and social difference. The queer politics of difference is, I believe, different in important respects from the assertion of difference that surfaced in the race and sex debates. In the latter case, the assertion of difference often remained tied to a politics of identity; the aim was to validate marginalized subjects and communities. For example, the cultural criticism of people of color did not deconstruct or contest identity categories but sought to multiply identity political standpoints. Deconstructive queer theorists affirm the surfacing of new subject voices but are critical of its identity political grounding in the name of a more insistent politics of difference. Despite its critique of methodological individualism or the view of the individual as the source and center of knowledge, society, and history, much queer theory, at least its deconstructive currents, is wedded to a social vision whose ultimate value lies in promoting individuality and tolerance of difference; where queer theory does not edge into an anarchistic social ideal it gestures towards a democratic pluralistic ideal.

The tie between queer theory and a politics of difference needs to be at least provisionally queried. What kind of politics is this and what kinds of differences are intended and with what ethical force? Unfortunately, we must proceed obliquely since queer theorists have not directly engaged such questions. Consider Eve Sedgwick. If one of her aims is to explain the persistence of compulsive heterosexuality by reference to the hetero/homo figure as productive of cultural fields of knowledge, her other aim is to expose the ways a multitude of

desires have been muted, marginalized, and depoliticized by this power/knowledge regime. Sedgwick exposes the monumental constriction involved in defining sexual orientation primarily by gender preference. Revealing the immense condensation entailed in rendering the gender of sexual-object choice into a master category defining sexual and social identity is a main pivot of her work.

> Historically, the framing of *Epistemology of the Closet* begins with a puzzle. It is a rather amazing fact that, of the 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, etc. etc. etc.), precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as the dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of "sexual orientation" . . . *Epistemology of the Closet* does not have an explanation to offer for this sudden, radical condensation of sexual categories; instead, . . . the book explores its unpredictably varied and acute implications and consequences. (Sedgwick 1990, 8–9)

As hetero/homosexuality become master categories of a sexual regime, as sexual desires, identities, and politics are comprehended by the hetero/homo object choice, a whole series of possible sites of individuation, identity, pleasure, social definition, and politics (e.g., sex act, number of partners, time, place, technique) are suppressed or depoliticized. The moral and political force of Sedgwick's critique of the hetero/homo figure, as I read her, draws on the cultural capital of a politics of sexual difference. Against the sexual and social condensation of the hetero/homo power/knowledge regime, Sedgwick implicitly appeals to an order of sexual difference. This is a social ideal where desires, pleasures, bodies, social relations, and sexualities multiply and proliferate. But what would such an order of difference look like? What ethical guidelines would permit such sexual innovation while being attentive to considerations of power and legitimate normative regulation? Not all self and social expressions would be tolerated; we cannot evade the need for a sexual ethic and regulation, including structures of discipline and moral hierarchy. What would such a normative order look like? Sedgwick's silence on these matters is, I think, indicative of a refusal on the part of many queer theorists to articulate their own ethical and political standpoint and to imagine a constructive social project.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990) and elsewhere (1991), Judith Butler proposes a variant of deconstructive analysis but one which gestures towards a constructive politics. Butler's focus is a system of compulsive heterosexuality which is said to contribute to the formation of a bipolar sex/gender system. In this power/knowledge regime, a rigid natural order is posited that assumes a causality that proceeds from a bipolar sexed subject (male or female), to gender bipolarity (men and women), and to a heteronormative sexuality. Butler aims to show that instead of a natural sex/gender system underwriting heterosexuality, the latter is the unconscious compulsion behind figuring a natural, dichotomous sex/gender system as an order of truth. In a deconstructive move, Butler aims to trouble this power/knowledge regime by suggesting that this presumed order of nature is a contingent, politically enacted social order. To illustrate this point, she analyzes drag as a practice which disturbs the sex/gender/sexuality system by presumably exhibiting the performative character of sex and gender and its fluid relation to sexuality. Butler is not suggesting drag or a performative politics as an alternative to the politics of interest; rather she is proposing, as I read her, that the current Western sex/gender/compulsively heterosexual system is maintained, in part, because it functions as a configuration of knowledge. This power/knowledge regime needs to be exposed as social and political; drag or performative disruptions are practical counterparts, as it were, of deconstructive critique. They do not replace the politics of interest but supplement it.

For Butler, deconstructive analysis takes aim at a system of compulsive heterosexuality which is said to underpin the production of bipolar sexed and gendered subjects. Her critique aims to undermine this sex/gender/sexual order for the purpose of ending the compulsion to enact a rigid bipolar gender identity and conform to a narrow heterosexuality. Butler's critique is inspired by an ideal of difference – by the possibilities of a social space where selves can fashion bodies, gender identities, and sexualities without the normative constraints of compulsive heterosexuality and bipolar gender norms. In this regard, drag serves as more than an exemplar of cultural politics; it prefigures a social ideal – of a porous, fluid social terrain that celebrates individuality and difference. Her appeal to difference, however, lacks an ethical reflection. For example, which differences are permissible and what norms would guide such judgements? Moreover, I detect in Butler the suggestion of a post-identity order as part of a social ideal characterized by minimal disciplinary and constraining structures. But what would such an order look like? What concept of self or subject is imaginable in the absence of a strong identity concept? Moreover, are not such identities productive of rich experiences, subjective stability, and social bonds?

If self identities were not regulatory, what structures would serve to organize subjectivities?

IV. The university and the politics of knowledge

Deconstruction originated in France in the late 1960s. A reaction to both structuralism and the social rebellions issuing from new oppositional subjects (e.g., prisoners, students, cultural workers, women), deconstruction exhibited the spirit of rebellion of a post-Marxian left. It advocated a politics of negative dialectics, of permanent resistance to established orders and hierarchies. Animating the spirit of May 1968 was a politics of difference, a vaguely anarchistic, aestheticized ideal of fashioning a social space of minimal constraint and maximum individuality and tolerance of difference. However, deconstruction presupposed subjects with bounded identities who conformed to normative orders which made discipline and political mobilization possible as a condition of their own critique and a transformative politics. Moreover, deconstructive critics have been notorious in refusing to articulate the ethical standpoint of their critique and politics making them vulnerable to charges of nihilism or opportunism. As we have seen, many of the same limitations are evident in queer theory.

Queer theory originated in the United States, amongst mostly English and Humanities professors in the 1980s. It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss queer theory as merely academic. Its roots are, in part, the renewed activism of the 1980s associated with HIV/AIDS activism and the confrontational, direct-action, anti-identity politics of Queer Nation. Moreover, I wish to suggest that much queer theory can be viewed as a response to the development in the postwar United States of the university as a chief site in the production and validation of knowledge. The university and its disciplinary knowledges have become a major terrain of social conflict as knowledge is viewed as a key social power. Knowledges were of course politicized in the social rebellions of the 1960s. For example, feminists criticized the social sciences for producing knowledges which constructed and positioned women as different, inferior, and socially subordinate to men. In the 1980s, debates over canons and multiculturalism have rendered the sphere of knowledge a key arena of politics. Accordingly, the housing of queer theory in the university should not, as some critics fear, be interpreted as necessarily depoliticizing theory. To the contrary, its academic positioning makes a cultural politics of disciplinary knowledges possible. Such a politics is important precisely because such knowledges are a major social force shaping subjects and social practices. Although we need to interrogate the politics of knowledge in terms of how it articulates with a politics of interest, it would be a mistake to dismiss its key role in social struggles in Western postmodernity.

The persuasive force of the queer project depends on the extent to which one assumes that the dominant models of lesbian and gay politics presuppose the hetero/homo binary. Queer interventions aim to expose their unconscious complicity in reproducing a heteronormative order and an order that condenses sexual freedom to legitimating same-sex gender preference. Yet queer theorists have often surrendered to a narrow culturalism or textualism; they have not articulated their critique of knowledge with a critique of the social conditions productive of such textual figures; they have not provided an account of the social conditions of their own critique. The "social" is often narrowed into categories of knowledge and culture while the latter is itself often reduced to linguistic, discursive binary figures. The "historical" is similarly reduced to an undifferentiated space, e.g., the modern West or the period 1880–1980 in modern Western societies. Finally, the ethical standpoint of their own discourses is veiled. Queer critics have refused to give social and moral articulation to the key concepts of difference as they invoke it to critique the compulsiveness to identity in modern Western societies. If we are to recover a fuller social critical perspective and a transformative political vision, one fruitful direction is to articulate a politics of knowledge with an institutional social analysis that does not disavow a willingness to spell out its own ethical standpoint.

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To Neil – L. N.