Queer Theory

An Introduction

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Queer

Homosexual, lesbian or gay, queer

Although the widespread use of 'queer' as a term of self-description is a relatively recent phenomenon, it is only the most recent in a series of words that have constituted the semantic forcefield of homosexuality since the nineteenth century. The word 'homosexuality'—coined in 1869 by a Swiss doctor, Karoly Maria Benkert—was not used widely in English until the 1890s, when it was adopted by the sexologist Havelock Ellis. It continues to have a certain currency but, because of its unshakeable association with the pathologising discourses of medicine, it is seldom used nowadays as a term of self-identification. 'To describe oneself as "a homosexual"', writes Simon Watney (1992:20), 'is immediately to inhabit a pseudo-scientific theory of sexuality which more properly belongs to the age of the steam engine than to the late twentieth century'.

More recently, in the 1960s, liberationists made a strategic break with 'homosexuality' by annexing the word 'gay', thus redeploying a nineteenth-century slang term which had formerly described women of dubious morals. 'Gay' was mobilised as a specifically political counter to that binarised and hierarchised sexual categorisation which classifies homosexuality as a deviation from a privileged and naturalised heterosexuality. Much conservative—not to mention linguistically naive—criticism was levelled at this appropriation on the grounds that an 'innocent' word was being

'perverted' from its proper usage. When John Boswell's book, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, was published, Keith Thomas chided the publisher for allowing such slackness in Boswell's use of 'gay': 'History suggests that attempts to resist semantic change are almost invariably unsuccessful', he wrote. 'But it seems a pity that the University of Chicago Press should in this case have capitulated so readily' (1980:26). Thomas then specified wh t is wrong with this usage:

> The first objection is political. A minority is doubtless entitled to rebaptise itself with a term carrying more favourable connotations so as to validate its own behavior and free itself from scandal. But it is scarcely entitled to expect those who do not belong to that minority to observe this new usage, particularly when the chosen label seems bizarrely inappropriate and appears to involve an implicit slur upon everyone else . . . The second objection to 'gay' is linguistic. For centuries the word has meant (approximately) 'blithe,' 'light-hearted,' or 'exuberantly cheerful.' To endow it with a wholly different meaning is to deprive ourselves of a hitherto indispensable piece of vocabulary and incidentally to make nonsense of much inherited literature. (ibid.)

Only fifteen years later Thomas's objections seem comic. His outrage that 'gay' not only misdescribes homosexuals but also disenfranchises heterosexuals from such categorical happiness has been no more persuasive than his anxiety that the homonymous 'gay' would damage language and literature. Indeed, the popularity of the term 'gay' testifies to its potential as a non-clinical descriptor unburdened by the pathologising history of sexology.

Tracing etymological evolution is more commonly a general than a precise task. While, to a large extent, the terms 'homosexual', 'gay' or 'lesbian' and 'queer' successively trace historical shifts in the conceptualisation of same-sex sex, their actual deployment has sometimes been less predictable, often preceding or post-dating the periods which they respectively characterise. For example, George Chauncey (1994) observes that in the various

subcultures which constituted the visible and complex gay world of pre-World War II New York the term 'queer' pre-dated 'gay'. He notes that 'by the 1910s and 1920s, men who identified themselves as different from other men primarily on the basis of their homosexual interest rather than their womanlike gender status usually called themselves "queer"' (Chauncey, 1994:101). By contrast, the term 'gay' first 'began to catch on in the 1930s, and its primacy was consolidated during the war' (ibid.:19). As recently as 1990 the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* glossed 'queer' as an almost archaic term, concluding—prematurely, as it turned out—that 'the word's declining popularity may therefore reflect today's greater visibility and acceptance of gay men and lesbians and the growing knowledge that most of them are in fact quite harmless, ordinary people' (Dynes, 1990:1091). While conceding that in twentieth-century America 'queer' 'has probably been the most popular vernacular term of abuse for homosexuals', the *Encyclopedia* incredulously reports that 'even today some older English homosexuals prefer the term, even sometimes affecting to believe that it is value-free' (ibid.). The examples of Chauncey and Dynes stand as cautionary reminders that the vagaries of historical evolution rarely match the altogether neater paradigms that purport to describe them. Nevertheless, the path traced by 'homosexual', 'gay' or 'lesbian' and 'queer' accurately describes the terms and identificatory categories commonly used to frame same-sex desire in the twentieth century.

Although these terms are clearly related to one another, the constructionist arguments surveyed in Chapter 2 indicate that they are not merely different ways of saying the same thing, and therefore should not be misrecognised as synonyms. As Simon Watney (1992:20) has argued: 'Far from being trivial issues, such questions of change and contestation at the level of intimate personal identities are fundamental to our understanding of the workings of power within the wider framework of Modernity'. 'Queer' is not simply the latest example in a series of words that describe and constitute same-sex desire transhistorically but rather a consequence of the constructionist problematising of any allegedly universal term. Noting in the recent discursive proliferation of lesbian and gay studies a certain hesitancy or self-consciousness about

what terms to use in which circumstances, James Davidson (1994:12) writes: '*Queer* is in fact the most common solution to this modern crisis of utterance, a word so well-travelled it is equally at home in 19th-century drawing-rooms, accommodating itself to whispered insinuation, and on the streets of the Nineties, where it raises its profile to that of an empowering slogan'. In its erratic claims to various historic periods, Davidson argues that queer 'produces nothing but confusion' (ibid.). The critical term 'queer' has proved to have a highly elastic sense of history (see Chapter 1). But it has been most commonly mobilised not as a retrospective and transhistoricising descriptor, but as a term that indexes precisely and specifically cultural formations of the late 1980s and 1990s. Describing the shift from 'homosexual' to 'gay', Weeks (1977:3) argues that these terms 'are not just new labels for old realities: they point to a changing reality, both in the ways a hostile society labelled homosexuality, and in the way those stigmatized saw themselves'. Similarly, in distinguishing itself from those terms which form its semantic history, 'queer' equally foregrounds 'a changing reality' whose dimensions will now be examined further.

The post-structuralist context of queer

Queer marks both a continuity and a break with previous gay liberationist and lesbian feminist models. Lesbian feminist models of organisation were correctives to the masculinist bias of a gay liberation which itself had grown out of dissatisfactions with earlier homophile organisations. Similarly, queer effects a rupture which, far from being absolute, is meaningful only in the context of its historical development. The mock-historical sweep of gay evolution by Susan Hayes (1994:14) casts queer as the latest in a series of related events:

> First there was Sappho (the good old days). Then there was the acceptable homoeroticism of classical Greece, the excesses of Rome. Then, casually to skip two millennia, there was Oscar Wilde, sodomy, blackmail and imprisonment, Forster, Sackville-West, Radclyffe Hall, inversion, censorship; then pansies, butch

and femme, poofs, queens, fag hags, more censorship and blackmail, and Orton. Then there was Stonewall (1969) and we all became gay. There was feminism, too, and some of us became lesbian feminists and even lesbian separatists. There was drag and clones and dykes and politics and Gay Sweatshop. Then there was Aids, which, through the intense discussion of sexual practices (as opposed to sexual identities), spawned the Queer movement in America. Then that supreme manifestation of Thatcherite paranoia, Clause 28, which pro- voked the shotgun marriage of lesbian and gay politics in the UK. The child is Queer, and a problem child it surely is.

Although this account is too tongue-in-cheek to be a wholly per- suasive genealogy of queer as a category, its parodic invocation of historical cause and effect certainly dramatises the ambivalent con- tinuities and discontinuities that characterise queer's evolution.

While the mobilisation of queer in its most recent sense cannot be dated exactly, it is generally understood to have been popularly adopted in the early 1990s. Queer is a product of specific cultural and theoretical pressures which increasingly structured debates (both within and outside the academy) about questions of lesbian and gay identity. Perhaps most significant in this regard has been the problematising by post-structuralism of gay liberationist and lesbian feminist understandings of identity and the operations of power. This prompts David Herkt (1995:46) to argue that 'the Gay identity is observably a philosophically conservative construct, based upon premises that no longer have any persuasive aca- demic relationship to contemporary theories of identity or gender'. The delegitimation of liberal, liberationist, ethnic and even sepa- ratist notions of identity generated the cultural space necessary for the emergence of the term 'queer'; its non-specificity guarantees it against recent criticisms made of the exclusionist tendencies of 'lesbian' and 'gay' as identity categories. Although there is no agreement on the exact definition of queer, the interdependent spheres of activism and theory that constitute its necessary context have undergone various shifts.

Before considering specific debates about the efficacy of queer, it is important to understand that those models of identity, gender

and sexuality which in large part underwrite the queer agenda have changed, and to recognise the implications such changes have for the theorising of power and resistance. In distinguishing the Gay Liberation Front from Queer Nation, Joseph Bristow and Angelia R. Wilson (1993:1–2) consider it definitionally significant that 'an ertswhile politics of identity has largely been superseded by a politics of difference'. Similarly, Lisa Duggan (1992:15) notes that in queer models 'the rhetoric of difference replaces the more assimilationist liberal emphasis on similarity to other groups'. In identifying difference as a crucial term for queer knowledges and modes of organisation, these theorists map a change which is not specific to queer but characteristic of post-structuralism in general. As Donald Morton (1995:370) writes:

> Rather than as a local effect, the return of the queer has to be understood as the result, in the domain of sexuality, of the (post)modern encounter with—and rejection of—Enlighten- ment views concerning the role of the conceptual, rational, systematic, structural, normative, progressive, liberatory, revo- lutionary, and so forth, in social change.

Indeed, as an intellectual model, queer has not been produced solely by lesbian and gay politics and theory, but rather informed by historically specific knowledges which constitute late twentieth- century western thought. Similar shifts can be seen in both femi- nist and post-colonial theory and practice when, for example, Denise Riley (1988) problematises feminism's insistence on 'women' as a unified, stable and coherent category, and Henry Louis Gates (1985) denaturalises 'race'. Such conceptual shifts have had great impact within lesbian and gay scholarship and activism and are the historical context for any analysis of queer.

Both the lesbian and gay movements were committed funda- mentally to the notion of identity politics in assuming identity as the necessary prerequisite for effective political intervention. Queer, on the other hand, exemplifies a more mediated relation to categories of identification. Access to the post-structuralist theori- sation of identity as provisional and contingent, coupled with a growing awareness of the limitations of identity categories in terms of political representation, enabled queer to emerge as a

new form of personal identification and political organisation. 'Identity' is probably one of the most naturalised cultural categories each of us inhabits: one always thinks of one's *self* as existing outside all representational frames, and as somehow marking a point of undeniable realness. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, such seemingly self-evident or logical claims to identity have been problematised radically on a number of fronts by such theorists as Louis Althusser, Sigmund Freud, Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault. Collectively, their work has made possible certain advances in social theory and the human sciences which, in the words of Stuart Hall (1994:120), have effected 'the final de-centring of the Cartesian subject' (cf. Chris Weedon, 1987; Diana Fuss, 1989; Barbara Creed, 1994). Consequently, identity has been reconceptualised as a sustaining and persistent cultural fantasy or myth. To think of identity as a 'mythological' construction is not to say that categories of identity have no material effect. Rather it is to realise—as Roland Barthes does in his *Mythologies* (1978)—that our understanding of ourselves as coherent, unified, and self-determining subjects is an effect of those representational codes commonly used to describe the self and through which, consequently, identity comes to be understood. Barthes' understanding of subjectivity questions that seemingly natural or self-evident 'truth' of identity which derives historically from René Descartes' notion of the self as something that is self-determining, rational and coherent.

Reconsidering Karl Marx's emphasis on the framework of constraints or historical conditions which determine an individual's actions, Louis Althusser has argued that we do not pre-exist as free subjects: on the contrary, we are constituted as such by ideology. His central thesis is that individuals are 'interpellated' or 'called forth' as subjects by ideology, and that interpellation is achieved through a compelling mixture of recognition and identification. This notion is important for any thorough examination of identity politics, because it demonstrates how ideology not only positions individuals in society but also confers on them their sense of identity. In other words, it shows how one's identity is already constituted by ideology itself rather than simply by resistance to it.

Like the Marxist structuralist approach to subjectivity, psychoanalysis makes culturally available a narrative that complicates the

assumption that an identity is the natural property of any individual. Sigmund Freud's theorisation of the unconscious further challenges the notion that subjectivity is stable and coherent. In establishing the formative influence of important mental and psychic processes of which an individual is unaware, the theory of the unconscious has radical implications for the common-sense assumption that the subject is both whole and self-knowing. Furthermore, interpretations of Freud's work—particularly by the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan—establish subjectivity as something which must be learned, rather than as something which is always already there. Subjectivity is not an essential property of the self, but something which originates outside it. Identity, then, is an effect of identification with and against others: being ongoing, and always incomplete, it is a process rather than a property.

In some influential lectures on structural linguistics which he delivered in 1906–11, Ferdinand de Saussure argues that language does not so much reflect as construct social reality. For Saussure, language is not some second-order system whose function is simply to describe what is already there. Rather, language constitutes and makes significant that which it seems only to describe. Moreover, Saussure defines language as a system of signification that precedes any individual speaker. Language is commonly misunderstood as the medium by which we express our 'authentic' selves, and our private thoughts and emotions. Saussure, however, asks us to consider that our notions of a private, personal and interior self is something constituted through language.

The theories of Althusser, Freud, Lacan and Saussure provide the post-structuralist context in which queer emerges. The French historian Michel Foucault has been more explicitly engaged in denaturalising dominant understandings of sexual identity. In emphasising that sexuality is not an essentially personal attribute but an available cultural category—and that it is the effect of power rather than simply its object—Foucault's writings have been crucially significant for the development of lesbian and gay and, subsequently, queer activism and scholarship. To say this is not to claim that there is literally a causal connection between Foucault's work and queer practice and theory. Yet, as Diana Fuss (1989:97) observes, Foucault's work on sexuality resonates with 'current

disputes amongst gay theorists and activists over the meaning and applicability of such categories as "gay", "lesbian", and "homosexual" in a post-structuralist climate which renders all such assertions of identity problematic'.[1]

Foucault's argument that sexuality is a discursive production rather than a natural condition is part of his larger contention that modern subjectivity is an effect of networks of power. Not only negative or repressive but also productive and enabling, power is 'exercised from innumerable points' to no predetermined effect (Foucault, 1981:94). Against the popular concept that sex both exists beyond power relations and yet is repressed by them, Foucault (1979:36) argues that power is not primarily a repressive force:

> In defining the effects of power by repression, one accepts a purely juridical conception of that power; one identifies power with a law that says no; it has above all the force of an interdict. Now, I believe that this is a wholly negative, narrow and skeletal conception of power which has been curiously shared. If power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really believe that we should manage to obey it? What gives power its hold, what makes it accepted, is quite simply the fact that it does not simply weigh like a force which says no, but that it runs through, and it produces, things, it induces pleasure, it forms knowledge, it produces discourse; it must be considered as a productive network which runs through the entire social body much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.

In Foucault's analysis, marginalised sexual identities are not simply victims of the operations of power. On the contrary, they are produced by those same operations: 'For two centuries now, the discourse on sex has been multiplied rather than rarefied; and if it has carried with it taboos and prohibitions, it has also, in a more fundamental way, ensured the solidification and implantation of an entire sexual mosaic' (Foucault, 1981:53). This emphasis on the productive and enabling aspects of power profoundly alters the models by which traditionally it has been understood. Conse-

quently, Foucault's revaluation of power has significantly affected much lesbian and gay analysis.

Since he does not think that power is a fundamentally repressive force, Foucault does not endorse such liberationist strategies as breaking prohibitions and speaking out. Indeed, because the idea of modern sexual repression is widely accepted, Foucault speculates that the discursive critique of oppression, far from correctly identifying the mechanisms of power, 'is . . . in fact part of the same historical network as the thing it denounces (and doubtless misrepresents) by calling it "repression"' (ibid.:10). Foucault questions the liberationist confidence that to voice previously denied and silenced lesbian and gay identities and sexualities is to defy power, and hence induce a transformative effect. As Foucault takes a resolutely anti-liberatory position on this matter he is sometimes read—perhaps unsurprisingly given the common currency of what he critiques as 'the repressive hypothesis'—as advocating political defeatism (ibid.:15).

Yet Foucault also argues that 'where there is power, there is resistance' (ibid.:95), a resistance 'coextensive with [power] and absolutely its contemporary' (Foucault, 1988:122). Like power, resistance is multiple and unstable; it coagulates at certain points, is dispersed across others, and circulates in discourse. 'Discourse' is the heterogeneous collection of utterances that relate to a particular concept, and thereby constitute and contest its meaning—that 'series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable' (ibid.:100). Just as he cautions against thinking that power demarcates only hierarchical relations, so Foucault insists that discourse is not simply for or against anything, but endlessly prolific and multivalent: 'we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies' (ibid.).

When describing the relation between discourses and strategies, and demonstrating how a single discourse can be used strategically for oppositional purposes, Foucault specifically instances how the category of homosexuality was formed in

relation to structures of power and resistance. The rise of the homosexual as a 'species' exemplifies the polyvalent capacities of discourse:

> There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and 'psychic hermaphrodism' made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of 'perversity'; but it also made possible the formation of a 'reverse' discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturality' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified. (ibid.:101)

Discourse, then, is entirely within (yet not necessarily in the service of) the mechanisms of power. Foucault's analysis focuses on discourse as a mode of resistance, not to contest its content but in order to particularise its strategic operations. In so far as homosexuality is one of his key examples, Foucault regards sexual identities as the discursive effects of available cultural categories. Challenging commonly held understandings of power and resistance, his work has obvious appeal for lesbian and gay—and subsequently queer—theory and practice. Although Foucault (1988b) treats the 'author' as a textual effect rather than a real presence, his public identity as a gay man may well have facilitated the gay studies inspired by his work.

Even more explicitly than Althusser, Saussure, Freud and Lacan, Foucault radically reconceptualises identity in ways that have substantially reshaped lesbian and gay studies. The recent critique of identity politics—both inside and outside lesbian and gay circles—has not arisen simply because the reification of any single identity is felt to be exclusionary. It has occurred because, within post-structuralism, the very notion of identity as a coherent and abiding sense of self is perceived as a cultural fantasy rather than a demonstrable fact. Objections to the emphasis on identity in lesbian and gay politics were based initially on the fact that the foundational category of any identity politics inevitably excludes potential subjects in the name of representation. Clearly, lesbian and gay iden-

tity politics that merely replicate race and class oppression are inadequate. Yet identity politics cannot be recovered simply by a scrupulous attention to the axes of difference. For as post-structuralism also demonstrates, identity politics are eviscerated not only by the differences *between* subjects but the irresolvable differences *within* each subject. As Diana Fuss (1989:103) argues, 'theories of "multiple identities" fail to challenge effectively the traditional metaphysical understanding of identity as unity'.

Performativity and identity

Within lesbian and gay studies, the theorist who has done most to unpack the risks and limits of identity is Judith Butler. In her widely cited book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler elaborates Foucault's argument about the operations of power and resistance in order to demonstrate the ways in which marginalised identities are complicit with those identificatory regimes they seek to counter. If Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (vol. 1) is for David Halperin (1995:15) 'the single most important intellectual source of political inspiration for contemporary AIDS activists', then for Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993a:1) Butler's *Gender Trouble* is the correspondingly influential book for queer theory: 'Anyone who was at the 1991 Rutgers conference on Gay and Lesbian Studies, and heard *Gender Trouble* appealed to in paper after paper, couldn't help being awed by the productive impact this dense and even imposing work has had on the recent development of queer theory and reading'. Rosemary Hennessy (1994:94) similarly reports that 'Judith Butler is cited more persistently and pervasively than any other queer theorist'. Although *Gender Trouble* is framed most prominently in terms of feminism, one of its most influential achievements is to specify how gender operates as a regulatory construct that privileges heterosexuality and, furthermore, how the deconstruction of normative models of gender legitimates lesbian and gay subject-positions.

Butler argues—controversially—that feminism works against its explicit aims if it takes 'women' as its grounding category. This is because the term 'women' does not signify a natural unity but

instead a regulatory fiction, whose deployment inadvertently reproduces those normative relations between sex, gender and desire that naturalise heterosexuality. 'The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible', writes Butler (1990:17), 'requires that certain kinds of "identities" cannot "exist" —that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender'. Instead of naturalising the same-sex desire of homosexuality—which is the usual strategy of gay and lesbian movements—Butler contests the truth of gender itself, arguing that any commitment to gender identity works ultimately against the legitimation of homosexual subjects.

No longer a natural basis for solidarity, gender is refigured by Butler as a cultural fiction, a performative effect of reiterative acts: 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (ibid.:33). Consequently, there is nothing authentic about gender, no 'core' that produces the reassuring signs of gender. The reason 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender' is 'that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (ibid.:25). Heterosexuality, which passes itself off as natural and therefore in no need of explanation, is reframed by Butler as a discursive production, an effect of the sex/gender system which purports merely to describe it. Like Foucault, who foregrounds the importance of discursive strategies and their revisionist potential, Butler identifies gender as 'an ongoing discursive practice . . . open to intervention and resignification' (ibid.:33). Her strategic resignification of normative gender models and heterosexuality is achieved by staging gender in ways that emphasise the manner in which 'the "unity" of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality' (ibid.:31).

'What kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?' asks Butler (ibid.:32). She argues that those failures or confusions of gender—those performative repetitions that do not consolidate the law but that (remembering Foucault's emphasis on the productive aspects of

power) are nevertheless generated by that law—highlight the discursive rather than the essential character of gender. Heterosexuality is naturalised by the performative repetition of normative gender identities. Butler advocates contesting such naturalisation by means of a displaced repetition of its performativity that would draw attention to those processes that consolidate sexual identities. One of the strategies she recommends is a parodic repetition of gender norms. Instead of marking a distance between itself and the parodied original, the kind of parody which Butler has in mind 'is *of* the very notion of an original' (ibid.:138). Consequently, heterosexuality is no longer assumed to be the original of which homosexuality is an inferior copy. In advocating parody as a resistant strategy, Butler intends to demonstrate that the domains of gender and sexuality are not organised in terms of originality and imitation. What they manifest instead is the endless—though heavily regulated—possibilities of performativity.

By persistently denaturalising gender and sexuality, Butler problematises many of the cherished assumptions of gay liberation and lesbian feminism, including their appeals to commonality and collectivity. Michael Warner (1992:19) points to discontinuities in their respective theoretical frames when he compares the Radicalesbian manifesto with Butler's work:

> Radicalesbians began their manifesto 'What is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion'. If Butler could be persuaded to regard the question 'What is a lesbian?' as one worth answering, she might respond that 'a lesbian is the incoherence of gender binarism and heterosexuality condensed to the point of parody'.

While Butler is interested in all performativities that repeat the law with a difference, she focuses on drag as a practice that reinflects heterosexual norms within a gay context:

> As much as drag creates a unified picture of "woman" . . . it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well*

as its contingency. Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary (Butler, 1990:137–8).

Butler does not consider drag to be an essentially subversive parody. Rather, in its literal staginess, it offers an effective cultural model for deconstructing those commonly held assumptions that privilege certain genders and sexualities by attributing 'natural-ness' and 'originality' to them. She argues just as emphatically— although, as subsequent uses of her work demonstrate, less mem-orably—for the efficacy of all those troublesome gender perfor-mances which 'repeat and displace through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation the very constructs by which they are mobilized' (ibid.:31).

Butler's notion of performativity has gone into a kind of hyper-circulation. Mentioned in passing here, pressed into more rigorous service there, it has been highly productive for lesbian and gay studies in the 1990s. Most commonly, however, critics who appro-priate Butler's notion of performativity literalise it as performance, and concentrate on those theatricalised stagings of gender which self-consciously interrogate the relations between sex, gender and desire. Performativity figures, for example, in the work of Judith Halberstam (1994) on female masculinity, Cathy Schwichtenberg (1993) on Madonna, and Paula Graham (1995) on the male lesbian and camp. While the concept of performativity includes these and other self-reflexive instances, equally—if less obviously—it explains those everyday productions of gender and sexual identi-ty which seem most to evade explanation. For gender is perfor-mative, not because it is something that the subject deliberately and playfully assumes, but because, through reiteration, it con-solidates the subject. In this respect, performativity is the precon-dition of the subject.

In a later book, *Bodies That Matter* (1993a), Butler puzzles over reductive uses of her work, and particularly the tendency to con-sider performativity literally and theatrically in terms of drag. Presented by Butler as an *example* of performativity, drag was

taken by many of her readers to be '*exemplary* of performativity'; as such, it satisfied 'the political needs of an emergent queer movement in which the publicization of theatrical agency has become quite central' (Butler, 1993a:231). Distancing herself from those who understand gender as wilfully performed, Butler em-phasises that 'performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance' (ibid.:95). To counter these dominant misreadings of her work— and to discourage thinking about performativity in voluntarist or deliberate terms—Butler introduces the notions of 'constituted-ness' and 'constraint':

> Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the pro-duction, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (ibid.)

Butler reiterates the fact that gender, being performative, is not like clothing, and therefore cannot be put on or off at will. Rather it is constrained—not simply in the sense of being structured by limitations but because (given the regulatory frameworks in which performativity is meaningful) constraint is the prerequisite of per-formativity.

Although Butler carefully specifies her anti-voluntarist posi-tion—and emphasises that performativity is not something a sub-ject *does*, but a process through which that subject is *constituted*— her notion of performativity has been criticised as a naive render-ing of more complex material conditions. Literalising Butler's notion of performativity, Sheila Jeffreys (1994:461) misrepresents it as a kind of quasi-theatricality, and not the register of everyday gendered life. 'Surely it would be hard not to notice', she asks rhetorically if also counter-intuitively, 'that a problem arises when

seeking to include lesbians in notions of camp and queer which depend on "performativity" of the feminine?' Jeffreys's problem, however, arises only when 'performativity' (in Butler's sense) is misunderstood as being a pretence and therefore less real than some underlying gender truth. Yet the theoretical significance of Butler's performativity is that *all gender*—and not simply that which self-consciously dramatises its theatricality—*is performative*. Since lesbians—no more nor less than any other group constituted as subjects through the repetition of gender norms—'perform' gender, there is no problem in theorising lesbianism within models that depend on Butler's notion of performativity.

Jeffreys persists in misreading Butler despite the fact that her evidence comes from the very article in which Butler explicitly corrects such misapprehensions. Although Butler (1993b:21) specifically describes gender as 'performative insofar as it is the *effect* of a regulatory regime of gender differences in which genders are divided and hierarchised *under constraint*', Jeffreys (1993:81) maintains that Butler's understanding of gender is 'removed from a context of power relations'. Jeffreys also trivialises Butler's emphasis on the subversive potential of understanding gender performatively:

> When a woman is being beaten by the brutal man she lives with is this because she has adopted the feminine gender in her appearance? Would it be a solution for her to adopt a masculine gender for the day and strut about in a work shirt or leather chaps? (ibid.)

Clearly, the answer—for Butler as for Jeffreys—is no. It is worth noting—precisely because Jeffreys doesn't—that Butler (1993b:22) specifically argues that 'gender performativity is not a matter of choosing which gender one will be today'. Jeffreys ignores the anti-voluntarist emphasis of Butler's argument. Consequently, in criticising Butler's notion of performativity, Jeffreys not only oversimplifies Butler's theoretical position but also misrecognises her own over-simplification as a deficiency of the position she seeks to discredit.

In an essay which is more attentive to Butler's text and correspondingly more persuasive, Kath Weston also critiques Butler's emphasis on the performative. Although she considers aspects of performativity theory productive, Weston (1993:5) finds 'this framework inadequate to comprehend the complexities of the gendering of lesbian relationships'. Weston's criticisms, however, depend again on a misreading of performativity as a voluntary theatricality. Concluding that performativity falls short of 'its promise of a personal/political empowerment'—as well it might, since empowerment is not what performativity promises—Weston foregrounds what she takes to be inadequate about the performative understanding of gender by introducing the trope of the wardrobe. 'When a lesbian opens the closet door to put together an outfit for the evening', she writes, 'the size of her paycheck limits the choices she finds available' (ibid.:14). There is no disputing the accuracy of this observation. Yet to reduce Butler's understanding of performativity to the closet—to clothes, and the seemingly endless possibility of assuming and casting off gender identities—is a serious misreading. Weston's title—'Do Clothes Make the Woman?'—implies that, in a theory of performativity, they do. Yet Butler—in a passage fortuitously rendered in the same vocabulary—emphatically states that they don't: 'The publication of *Gender Trouble* coincided with a number of publications that did assert that "clothes make the women", but I never did think that gender was like clothes, or that clothes make the woman' (Butler, 1993a:231).

While understanding that performativity is not 'the efficacious expression of a human will in language' (ibid.:187), Elizabeth Grosz (1994a:139) disputes the centralisation of gender in performativity on the grounds that 'gender *must* be understood as a kind of overlay on a pre-established foundation of sex—a cultural variation of a more or less fixed and universal substratum'. As a consequence of characterising gender in this way, Grosz argues that Butler's account of performativity ought to focus properly on sex: 'The force of [Butler's] already powerful arguments would, I believe, be strengthened, if instead of the play generated by a term somehow beyond the dimension of sex, in the order of gender, she focused on the instabilities of sex itself, of bodies themselves' (ibid.:140). Such a change in focus would denaturalise sex by drawing attention to the fact that 'there is an instability at the

very heart of sex and bodies, that the body is what it is capable of doing, and what anybody is capable of doing is well beyond the tolerance of any given culture' (ibid.). To recommend that sex—a category that historically has been theorised as more 'natural' than gender—be denaturalised is valuable. Yet Butler's project is closer to her own than Grosz allows. For although Butler undeniably prioritises gender, she does not, as Grosz suggests, mobilise it in opposition to some more foundational sense of sex. On the contrary, she explicitly questions such a reification of sex:

> If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.
>
> It would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex . . . [because it] must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established (Butler, 1990:7).

In contesting the allegedly immutable character of sex, Butler (ibid.:6–7) asks the following questions:

> And what is 'sex' anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such 'facts' for us? Does sex have a history? Does each sex have a different history, or histories? Is there a history of how the duality of sex was established, a genealogy that might expose the binary options as a variable construction? Are the ostensibly natural facts of sex discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests?

In refusing the commonly assumed distinction between sex and gender, and in dismantling those allegedly causal relations that structure the difference between the two, Butler—like Grosz— foregrounds the 'instability at the very heart of sex'.

Debates about performativity put a denaturalising pressure on sex, gender, sexuality, bodies and identities. In proliferating as an

explanatory model—and being subject to contestations and negotiations—performativity has engendered a renewed engagement with those processes by which the identity categories we inhabit determine our knowledge and everyday ways of being in the world. Butler's rigorous deconstruction of identity is most evident in lesbian and gay studies' cultivation of a suspicion about the efficacies of identity, its 'crisis about "gay" identity' (Cohen, 1991:82). In the wake of Butler's critique, homosexuality—like heterosexuality—comes to be understood as the effect of signifying practices, an 'identity effect' that concentrates at certain bodies: '"Homosexual", like "woman", is not a name that refers to a "natural kind" of thing', David Halperin explains (1995:45). 'It's a discursive, and homophobic, construction that has come to be misrecognized as an object under the epistemological regime known as realism.' As a result of this profound suspicion of classification, identity categories have come to be considered complicit in the very structures that their assertion was intended to overthrow. For Butler (1991:13–14), 'identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression'. Formerly assumed to be a prerequisite for political intervention, the assertion of collective identities is now routinely understood to put into circulation effects in excess of its avowed intention.

In stark contrast to those liberationist or ethnic gay and lesbian models that affirm identity, promote 'coming out', and proclaim homosexuality under the organising affect of 'pride', lesbian and gay studies in the 1990s have begun to question and resist identity categories and their promise of unity and political effectiveness. That 'recognition of the precarious state of identity and a full awareness of the complicated processes of identity formation, both psychical and social' which Diana Fuss (1989:100) called for in relation to gay and lesbian identity politics now commonly undergirds queer practice and theory. Frequently the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay' are both interrogated and denaturalised even as they are being mobilised in critical discourse and political practice. Ed Cohen (1991:72) writes of his difficulty in identifying with the category 'gay man' because he finds that term's implicit claims to collectivity unpersuasive: 'By predicating "our" affinity upon the

assertion of a common "sexuality", we tacitly agree to leave unexplored any "internal" contradictions which undermine the coherence we desire from the imagined certainty of an unassailable commonality or of incontestable sexuality.' Similarly, Butler (1991:14) discusses her ambivalence about writing an essay for an anthology which, in being subtitled *Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, seems to identify her with the very terms she is contesting: 'I am skeptical about how the "I" is determined as it operates under the title of the lesbian sign, and I am no more comfortable with its homophobic determination than with those normative definitions offered by other members of the "gay or lesbian community"'. The strenuousness of these efforts to denaturalise such seemingly self-evident categories as 'identity' and 'sexuality' is discernible here in the diacritical work that both Butler and Cohen devolve to quotation marks: 'our', 'sexuality', 'I', 'gay and lesbian community'. The same strategy is employed relentlessly by Valerie Traub (1995), who always encloses the word 'lesbian' in quotation marks.

The widespread discontent with that version of identity politics which is advocated in both liberationist and ethnic models of homosexuality is generated not only by a sense of resistance to a new normativity but also by a more sophisticated understanding of the interworkings of identity and power, as evident in comments by David Halperin (1995:32):

> Disenchantment with liberation [does not] proceed merely from a growing awareness that gay life has generated its own disciplinary regimes, its own techniques of normalization, in the form of obligatory haircuts, T-shirts, dietary practices, body piercing, leather accoutrements, and physical exercise . . . Ultimately, I think, what the shift away from a liberation model of gay politics reflects is a deepened understanding of the discursive structures and representational systems that determine the production of sexual meanings, and that micromanage individual perceptions, in such a way as to maintain and reproduce the underpinnings of heterosexist privilege.

This 'deepened understanding' of how the marshalling of lesbian and gay identities might inadvertently reinforce that heterosexual

hegemony they are programmatically opposed to has generated an imperative—even a willingness—to adopt analytical models that question the authenticity of identity, and particularly those that critique the putatively causal relation between a secure identity and an effective politics.

The implications of such a critique for lesbian and gay politics are taken up by Diana Fuss (1989:100) when she asks:

> Is politics based on identity, or is identity based on politics? Is identity a natural, political, historical, psychical, or linguistic construct? What implications does the deconstruction of 'identity' have for those who espouse an identity politics? Can feminist, gay, or lesbian subjects afford to dispense with the notion of unified, stable identities or must we begin to base our politics on something other than identity? What, in other words, is the politics of 'identity politics'?

Although queer was not a popular term of self-identification at the time when Fuss articulated these questions, its recent deployment is often informed by those issues of identity, community and politics that she raises here. A similar scrutinising of lesbian and gay identities can be seen in the queer engagement with post-structural critiques of subjectivity and individual or collective identities, its pragmatic crystallisation and deployment of recently reworked subject positions, and in its attention to the discursive formations of the various terms by which homosexuality in particular and sexuality more generally are categorised.

HIV/AIDS discourse

If post-structuralist theory can be claimed as part of the context of queer, then queer's emergence as a diacritical term can be linked just as plausibly to developments outside—but not discrete from—the academy. The most frequently cited context for queer in this sense is the network of activism and theory generated by the AIDS epidemic, parts of which have found that queer offers a rubric roomy and assertive enough for political intervention. In this respect, queer is understood as a response not only to 'the AIDS crisis [which] prompted a renewal of radical activism' (Seidman,

1994:172) but also to 'the growing homophobia brought about by public response to AIDS' (Creed, 1994:152). What set of effects—put into circulation around the AIDS epidemic—both necessitated and nurtured those new forms of political organisation, education, and theorising that are produced under the rubric of queer? An adequate answer to this question has to take account of the following:

- the ways in which the status of the subject or individual is problematised in the biomedical discourses which construct AIDS (Haraway, 1989)
- the shift—effected by safe-sex education—in emphasising sexual practices over sexual identities (Bartos et al., 1993:69–72; Dowsett, 1991:5)
- the persistent misrecognition of AIDS as a gay disease (Meyer, 1991:275) and of homosexuality as a kind of fatality (Hanson, 1991; Nunokawa, 1991:311–16)
- the coalitional politics of much AIDS activism that rethinks identity in terms of affinity rather than essence (Saalfield and Navarro, 1991) and therefore includes not only lesbians and gay men but also bisexuals, transsexuals, sex workers, PWAs (People with AIDS), health workers, and parents and friends of gays
- the pressing recognition that discourse is not a separate or second-order 'reality', and the consequent emphasis on contestation in resisting dominant depictions of HIV and AIDS and representing them otherwise (Edelman, 1994:79–92)
- the rethinking of traditional understandings of the workings of power in cross-hatched struggles over epidemiology, scientific research, public health, and immigration policy (Halperin, 1995:28).

These are just some of the multidirectional pressures which the AIDS epidemic places on categories of identification, power and knowledge. Their relation to the rise of queer as a potent and enabling term is more than coincidental.

While responses to the AIDS epidemic—governmental, medical, scientific, activist, theoretical—cannot be held entirely responsible for generating the conditions in which queer emerged

as a significant term, the urgent need to resist dominant constructions of HIV/AIDS reinforced a radical revision of contemporary lesbian and gay politics. Commenting on the historical failures or limitations of the gay and lesbian movements—such as inadequate attention to internal differences, and an inability to collaborate effectively with other liberation movements—Douglas Crimp (1993: 314) writes: 'The AIDS crisis brought us face-to-face with the consequences of both our separatism and our liberalism. And it is in this new political conjuncture that the word "queer" has been reclaimed to designate new political identities'. The 'new political identities' enabled by queer are very often intent on denaturalising those categories which AIDS renders equally strange. Like queer, observes Thomas Yingling (1991:292),

> the material effects of AIDS deplete so many of our cultural assumptions about identity, justice, desire, and knowledge that it seems at times able to threaten the entire system of Western thought—that which maintains the health and immunity of our epistemology: the psychic presence of AIDS signifies a collapse of identity and difference that refuses to be abjected from the systems of self-knowledge.

A similar recognition of the 'collapse of identity and difference' prompts Lee Edelman (1994:96) to argue that queer and AIDS are interconnected, because each is articulated through a post-modernist understanding of the death of the subject, and both understand identity as a curiously ambivalent site: '"AIDS", then, can be figured as a crisis in—and hence an opportunity for—the social shaping or articulation of subjectivities'. In so far as AIDS enables—and at times, demands—a radical rethinking of the cultural and psychic constitution of subjectivity itself, Edelman finds in it the promise of a refashioned subjectivity, which might rearticulate current notions not only of identity but also of politics, community and agency:

> we have the chance to displace that [oppressive] logic [of the culture] and begin to articulate the range of options for what might *become* a postmodern subject; we have the chance, in other words, to challenge, as Andreas Huyssen suggests

postmodernism must, '*the ideology of the subject* (as male, white, and middle-class [and we must add, as he does not, heterosexual]) by developing alternative and different notions of subjectivity. (ibid.:111)

Perhaps not surprisingly in this context, Edelman concludes that 'such a mutation of the gay subject can already be seen in the process by which, in certain quarters, "gay" is being rewritten as "queer"' (ibid.:113).

The most public mobilisations of the term 'queer' have doubtless been in the services of AIDS activism, which in turn has been one of the most visible sites for the restructuring of sexual identities. The relationship between the new and decentralised activism, and the coming into prominence of queer as a term that can direct attention to identity without solidifying it is contextual rather than causal. Certainly debates (in what were once lesbian and gay contexts) about how to refigure subjectivities and identities differently have been partly reinforced and partly provoked by the new urgency generated by the AIDS crisis. Yet such debates about identity and the most efficacious ways of ensuring social transformation have been equally, if less spectacularly, energised by developments in post-structuralist, feminist and post-colonial circles. All of these have challenged the notion of a stable identity— not simply because it is a fiction but because it is the sort of fiction which may well work against the interests of those constituents it claims to represent.

Queer identity

Given the extent of its commitment to denaturalisation, queer itself can have neither a foundational logic nor a consistent set of characteristics: '*There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*', writes David Halperin (1995:62, original emphasis). 'It is an identity without an essence.' This fundamental indeterminacy makes queer a difficult object of study; always ambiguous, always relational, it has been described as 'a largely intuitive and half-articulate theory' (Warner, 1992:19). Queer's ambiguity is often cited as the reason for its mobilisation. Defining queer as a term

which 'mark[s] a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception', Alexander Doty (1993:3, 2) finds it attractive in so far as he also wants 'to find a term with some ambiguity, a term that would describe a wide range of impulses and cultural expressions, including space for describing and expressing bisexual, trans-sexual, and straight queerness'. Queer is widely perceived as calling into question conventional understandings of sexual identity by deconstructing the categories, oppositions and equations that sustain them (Hennessy, 1994:94); yet 'just what "queer" signifies or includes or refers to is by no means easy to say' (Abelove, 1993:20). Partly because queer is necessarily indeterminate, Sedgwick argues in a recent interview that calling yourself queer 'dramatises the difference between what you call yourself and what other people call you. There is a sense in which queer can only be used in the first person' (Hodges, 1994). Sedgwick's provocative suggestion that, despite its routine circulation as a descriptive term, queer can only be auto-descriptive emphasises the extent to which queer refers to self-identification rather than to empirical observations of other people's characteristics.

Even more than the lesbian and gay models from which it has developed, queer evades programmatic description, because it is differently valued in different contexts. Often used as a convenient shorthand for the more ponderous 'lesbian and gay', 'queer' is a boon to sub-editors. Gay and lesbian community newspapers evidence an enthusiasm for 'queer' as the preferred synonym for 'lesbian and gay', as Stephen Angelides (1994:68) discovered:

A cursory scan of the pages of two of Australia's lesbian and gay newspapers—*Melbourne Star Observer* and *Sydney Star Observer*—highlights the extent to which the term queer is being deployed in this context. From 'Queer Cartoons' to queer film to letters to the editor section entitled 'Queerly Speaking', the pages are saturated with queer references directed specifically at the lesbian and gay community.

Recent books similarly favour queer in titles such as *Queering the Pitch: The New Lesbian and Gay Musicology* (Brett et al., 1994) and *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture*

(Burston and Richardson, 1995). At other times, queer is deployed to indicate a critical distance from the identity politics that underpin traditional notions of lesbian and gay community. In this sense, queer marks a suspension of identity as something fixed, coherent and natural. But queer may also be used to signify a different kind of identity which is consistent and self-identical, as in the case of some of the mobilisations of Queer Nation (see Chapter 8). Eschewing post-structuralist critiques of identity categories, queer functions here more as a fashionable than a theoretical term. It is used as a way of distinguishing old-style lesbians and gays from the new, where that distinction may be registered not so much historically as variations in the understanding of identity formation but stylistically in, for example, body piercing. Or queer may be used to describe an open-ended constituency, whose shared characteristic is not identity itself but an anti-normative positioning with regard to sexuality. In this way, queer may exclude lesbians and gay men whose identification with community and identity marks a relatively recent legitimacy, but include all those whose sexual identifications are not considered normal or sanctioned.

Like the theory of performativity, which to a large extent underwrites its project, queer opts for denaturalisation as its primary strategy. It demarcates 'a domain virtually synonymous with homosexuality and yet wonderfully suggestive of a whole range of sexual possibilities ... that challenge the familiar distinction between normal and pathological, straight and gay, masculine men and feminine women' (Hanson, 1993:138). Like early gay liberationism, queer confounds the categories that license sexual normativity; it differs from its predecessor by avoiding the delusion that its project is to uncover or invent some free, natural and primordial sexuality. By rejecting what Michael Warner (1993a: xxvi) calls the 'minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation', and favouring instead 'a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal', it demonstrates its understanding that sexuality is a discursive effect. Since queer does not assume for itself any specific materiality or positivity, its resistance to what it differs from is necessarily relational rather than oppositional.

Queer has tended to occupy a predominantly sexual register. Recent signs indicate, however, that its denaturalising project is being brought to bear on other axes of identification than sex and gender. Describing queer as both 'anti-assimilationist and anti-separatist', Rosemary Hennessy (1994:86–7) argues that the queer project marks 'an effort to speak from and to the differences and silences that have been suppressed by the homo–hetero binary, an effort to unpack the monolithic identities "lesbian" and "gay", including the intricate ways lesbian and gay sexualities are inflected by heterosexuality, race, gender, and ethnicity'. Sedgwick (1993a:9) makes an even stronger claim when she observes that, in recent work, queer is being spun outward

> along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example. Intellectuals and artists of color whose sexual self-definition includes 'queer' ... are using the leverage of 'queer' to do a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies of language, skin, migration, state.

Although some complain that queer encodes a Eurocentric bias, which makes it insensitive to the largely identity-based politics of ethnic communities (Maggenti, 1991; Malinowitz, 1993), the recent work that Sedgwick here refers to indicates that queer's denaturalising impulse may well find an articulation within precisely those contexts to which it has been judged indifferent.

Clearly, there is no generally acceptable definition of queer; indeed, many of the common understandings of the term contradict each other irresolvably. Nevertheless, the inflection of queer that has proved most disruptive to received understandings of identity, community and politics is the one that problematises normative consolidations of sex, gender and sexuality—and that, consequently, is critical of all those versions of identity, community and politics that are believed to evolve 'naturally' from such consolidations. By refusing to crystallise in any specific form, queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal. While bearing in mind the multiple and even contradictory sites signified by queer, *Queer Theory* emphasises this aspect of

queer, and the analytical pressure it brings to bear on what Sedgwick (1993a:8) calls 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning where the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically'.

8

Contestations of Queer

Although queer can be described as a logical development in twentieth-century gay and lesbian politics and scholarship, its progress has not been uncontentious. As the point of convergence for a potentially infinite number of non-normative subject positions, queer is markedly unlike those traditional political movements which ground themselves in a fixed and necessarily exclusionist identity. In stretching the boundaries of identity categories, and in seeming to disregard the distinctions between various forms of marginalised sexual identification, queer has provoked exuberance in some quarters, but anxiety and outrage in others. The various contestations of the term demonstrate the implications and investments of queer, clarifying its ambitions and limitations.

Queer scepticism about the self-evident status of identity categories has itself come under suspicion from those who think it is a merely apolitical or even reactionary form of intellectualising. In an extreme example of this, Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope (1993:5) introduce their recent anthology of lesbian cultural criticism by identifying the destabilisation of identity as an explicitly homophobic strategy:

> We [cannot] afford to allow privileged patriarchal discourse (of which poststructuralism is but a new variant) to erase the collective identity Lesbians have only recently begun to establish . . . For what has in fact resulted from the incorporation of