



archives

Issue Six

STRATEGIC SUBJECTS: THE SEXUAL BINARY, TRANSGRESSION AND THE ETHICS OF STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM

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Since the revolution against reason, from the moment it is articulated, can operate only *within* reason, it always has the limited scope of what is called, precisely in the language of a department of *internal* affairs, a disturbance.

Derrida, *Writing and Difference*

Love the life you lead
Just to lead the life you love—
I don't think so.

Olive, 'I Don't Think So', *Extra Virgin*

For more than ten years the collective set of critical post-structuralist positions labelled 'queer theory' has been deployed to show that sexual identity—and particularly hetero and homo sexual subjectivities—are produced through discursive knowledges; contingent and historical. Such work has usefully opened paths for the examination of racial, ethnic and gendered tensions within the ethnic-minority grouping that is the lesbian/gay (or 'queer') community. What might be considered the largest contribution of queer theory to the field of lesbian/gay politics has been the ways in which it can be deployed for the examination of lesbian/gay (and 'straight') subjects as they are subjectively performed *in accord* with various discourses of sexuality and subjectivity, thus prompting examinations of how these discourses are governed by the cultural construct hetero/homo binary. Nevertheless, much of this work is ignored in the *praxis* of lesbian/gay politics which continues to assert and reassert the hetero/homo binary as 'sexual truth'.

Following Michel Foucault,^[1] much queer theory continues the suggestion that sexual categorisations and classifications—and the subjects that are performed in time with such categories and classes—are on one hand *productive* but on the other are *regimentations*; liable to both discipline and surveillance, such as seen in the policing of codes of lesbian/gay desire and the denunciation of more 'fluid' articulations of desires, pleasures and erotics. However, as Butler points out, it would be erroneous to assume that eighteenth and nineteenth century medicine, psychiatry and other disciplinary institutions 'shackled' sexuality and that queer theory can 'remove' the shackles in order to return to a prior freedom.^[2] For Butler, this would be to read that pre-modern prior freedom as a futural postmodernism, both temporal trajectories which in their articulation cannot escape the culture of the present-day and its network of discursive knowledges. What can be said to be regimented here are the *range* of identities produced that force, for the sake of social belonging and participation, an identification with a dichotomy

of sexual/attractive desire.

I examine here the continuing role of the hetero/homo binary as it is deployed for 'totalised' articulations of lesbian and gay sexual identities—often in the face of very convincing arguments which denounce such totalisation. I go on to explore some of the ways in which the binary has been contested—and can be seen to be contested—and suggest that there are distinct ethical implications in the continuing re-assertion and reiteration of the binary in lesbian/gay politics which, without intention, continue to foreclose on sexualities, eroticisms and bodies which fall outside of the reductive binary. Finally, I address the ways in which queer theory continues to affirm the citation of the binary through advocating a 'strategic essentialism' in which it is expected that lesbian/gay political assertions continue despite their very critique from the academic field. Virtually every writer labouring from a queer theory position grants a place for a strategic-essentialist political approach to work alongside the discourses which destabilise the 'essence' of the subjectivities evoked by that approach. In light of Jacques Derrida's notions of iterativity, context, reappropriation, presence and trace, I suggest that *any* articulation of the hetero/homo binary and the notion of essentialist identities may on one hand be unstable in their signification and always open to reappropriation, but on the other can be thereby re-deployed to invoke, regiment and discipline agents into the restrictive illusion of totalised, fixed and essential sexual subjectivities. What is to be questioned, then, are the 'ethics' of cultural citation of the binary in terms of the ways in which it operates to constrain the signification of sexuality and gender, and foreclose on alternative erotics based on non-gendered articulations of desire—an important consideration for the politics of affirmation and empowerment that relies on the articulation of the binary.

I: SEXUAL SUBJECTS IN PERFORMATIVITY AND DISCOURSE

In a post-liberal or postmodern culture, not only is the individual bourgeois subject a thing of the past but, as Fredric Jameson notes, from a poststructuralist perspective "it *never* really existed in the first place; there have never been autonomous subjects of that type."^[3] The fixed and self-evident subject of modernity as articulated by liberal philosophers such as John Locke and John Stuart Mill has been exposed to a long history of decentralisation and destabilisation. From Marx's notion of 'false consciousness', Althusserian interpellation, the Freudian/Lacanian enunciation of the unconscious binding the subject to its seemingly 'orginary' desires, to Foucault's inculcation of the subject by and through power-relations and processes of normalisation, very few cultural theorists feel comfortable now to understand subjective identity as foundational or essential.

Despite such theoretical decentring of the subject in academe, there continues to be less 'seepage', as it were, into popular culture. Among lesbian/gay culture, the notion that heterosexual and homosexual identities are fixed and natural is ardently fought for, and since the mid-1980s has been the platform of a politics of rights, which has required the forgetting or marginalisation or denouncement of any argument that suggests otherwise. The defence of fixity is evidenced in the widespread lesbian/gay acceptance of spurious notions of a 'gay gene' that govern and totalise the non-heterosexual sexual subject.

Through queer theory, it can be argued that such a stance is not merely the result of a set of political decisions or procedures, but stems from a cultural imperative or injunction *to be* a sexual subject in accord with the hetero/homo binary. One is *compelled* either to identify as lesbian/gay or as heterosexual. This compulsion is rooted in the discursive deployment of power through confession, and insists that sexual identities are articulated as *coherent* and culturally-*intelligible*. Given the prohibition on sexual knowledge from children and youth,^[4] there is a specific culturally-legitimated *age* in which subjects are expected to re-constitute themselves as *sexual subjects*, symbolically represented by the parental 'birds and the bees' proclamation, but more realistically circulated through institutionalised sex education, and the youthful rituals of gossip, rumour, innuendo, peer discussion and media reading.

Most useful in the analysis of the compulsion to heterosexual or homosexual subjectivities is the work of Judith Butler who, in radicalising Foucault, shows that subjects are constituted by repetitive performances in terms of the structure of signification that produces retroactively the *illusion* of an inner subjective core in line with the fulfilment of the imperative of coherence.[5] Identity/subjectivity becomes a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience, and is the resultant effect of regimentary discursive practices.[6] The subject, then, is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that, from a humanist position, have been considered the essential subject's subsequent conscious actions. It is in the *encounter* with discourses which categorise, label and define sexuality (implicitly or explicitly) that a subject comes to begin a process of re-constitution as a sexual subject. In other words, given the ways in which discourses of sexuality are often restricted from having the ear of (or signification for) 'the child', subjective identities as heterosexual or homosexual are the re-constitution or the re-configuration of subjective performances under a 'new' system in the case of each specific subject. As Butler suggests: "It is through the repeated play of this sexuality that the 'I' is insistently reconstituted as a lesbian 'I' . . ."[7] The *I*, by no means always already a Cartesian subject in itself, is already performing an illusionary and processional subject-position, but in the culturally-legitimated and age-based encounter with discourses of sexuality and the rituals of self-confession, is re-configured as a *hetero/homo I*, stabilising through time and repetition. For Butler, to be 'constituted' means "to be compelled to cite or repeat or mime" the signifier itself.[8] There is thus an assumed subjective 'performer', one who 'encounters' that compulsive discourse (generally as an already gendered subject)—an illusionary subject who comes to be 're-constituted' as a *lesbian* or *gay* subject through new codes of a new performance. Although the texts, discourses and symbols that govern meanings around sexuality are open to interpretation or, better, are productively activated in their reading,[9] if we take Chantal Mouffe's suggestion that there are 'nodal points' which uphold signification, and prevent the flux of the signifier under the signified,[10] then it is the case that through 'context' and 'repetition' the signifiers of sexuality are read in a particular way, and has what Butler—following Althusser—maintains is an interpellative effect, re-constituting the subject along specific lines and prescribing particular codes of desire (desiring particular genders), behaviour, affiliation, and senses of belonging in order to fulfil the social imperatives of coherence and intelligibility.[11]

II: TOTALISATION AND REGIMENTATION

If every subject is multiply constituted in terms of culturally-given axes of discrimination and categorisation such as gender, sexuality, race, nationality, workplace and so on, what does it mean to suggest that there is an articulable lesbian or gay subject? There is a tendency in lesbian/gay writing to pronounce a *totalised* lesbian or gay subject—subjects who are lesbian or gay *prior* to their intersection with nationality, ethnicity, etc., and whose sexuality determines their behaviours, tastes, cultural affiliations and especially their erotic and affectionate desires.

What can be seen in lesbian/gay cultural articulations of identity, however, are two conflicting views on the totalisation of lesbian/gay identity. On the one hand, the claims of sexuality as the result of genes or birth—*expressed* through a coherent trajectory of sexual object-choices and a cultural 'lifestyle'—suggests a call to the totalised lesbian/gay subject. 'I am gay, this is *who* I am' is common parlance in lesbian/gay cultural and political production. At the same time, however, there is the rhetorical claim 'this is only a *small* part of who I am'. However, even after a cursory examination of lesbian/gay cultural writing, totalisational accounts of sexual subjectivity are more frequently encountered. In his *Virtually Normal*, conservative gay writer Andrew Sullivan conflicts with his own title and devotes the first sixteen pages to discussing his childhood where all his actions, interactions, behaviour, likes and dislikes are to be seen as the *result* of his (hidden) homosexuality.[12] Foucault shows how a cultural notion of 'homosexuality' was given a 'totalised' status by the Nineteenth Century. Following the often-cited quote in which he points out the historical moment at which 'the homosexual' was discursively inaugurated,

Foucault claims that:

Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle: written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was *consubstantial with him*, less as a habitual sin than as a *singular nature*.^[13]

This common understanding roots 'homosexuality' as a core of the human homosexual subject, founded in the 'physical body' (or now commonly in its genetic make-up), and guides the production of that body in terms of its 'behaviour', 'tastes' and 'mind' in a clear replication of the Cartesian mind/body dualism. None of this, of course, is to say that any subject is truly totalised as a (homo)sexual subject. Such an illusional 'sense' of totalisation is a *process*. For Derrida, the subject "assumes presence, that is to say substance, stasis, stance. Not to be able to stabilize itself *absolutely* would mean to be able *only* to be stabilizing itself."^[14] The process of stabilisation can be considered in part the procedure of the western discursive insistence on coherent identities.

Totalisation is in part a result of what Fuss identifies as the "synecdochical tendency to see only one part of a subject's identity (usually the most visible part) and to make that part stand for the whole."^[15] While in some ways this can be productive, for it provides a necessary assertion of counter-heteronormative *visibility* against oppression and erasure, thereby presenting a totalised identity as a political, though not necessarily voluntarist, identificatory vocalisation. At the same time, however, such totalisation can be understood as regimentary, constraining and imperious. It may not be the case for all homosexuals that a totalised identity, in which the signifiers of the hetero/homo binary govern the significations of all other categories cited or mimed in performativity, is a constraint. However, when desires, actions and needs are forcibly constrained by a cultural call for coherence and intelligibility in order to participate not just as a citizen but a sexual citizen, then those who—for whatever reason—are unable to meet the requirements of coherence are dislodged from the criteria of social belonging.

But what is signified by this frequent queer theoretical reference to 'regimentation'? If so many people are content in their heterosexuality or homosexuality, then why suggest they are regimented? Are we assuming a false consciousness in the Marxian sense and claiming they know not what they do (or are)? Butler finds that insistences on intelligibility and coherence can be considered "tacit cruelties that sustain coherent identity, cruelties that include self-cruelty as well as the abasement through which coherence is fictively produced and sustained."^[16] In this sense, then, I want to suggest that the problem of totalisationism is not about the freedom of free-play performativity—a utopian desire if ever there was one—but about the ways in which representations of allegedly totalised identities come to be used to police those who fall short of the authorised and legitimated mark. Those who are external to the hetero/homo regime, those who are excluded from social participation and belonging by virtue of their inability or unwillingness to locate and articulate a clear sexuality in accord with the hetero/homo binary. Those who do not express a desire for a *gender per se*, but through alternative and marginalised means of manifesting a sexuality and a code of erotics or attraction.

III: THE BINARY AND ITS (DIS)CONTENTS

What does it mean to suggest there is an 'outside' to the hetero/homo regime, one which is sometimes marked by marginalisation or exclusion of those who fail to perform 'in accord' with the hetero/homo binary? According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the binary is deployed in the name of heterosexual normality in conservative discourses or gay affirmation in more liberal ones.^[17] Sedgwick's analysis and de-naturalisation of the binary has been a significant cornerstone of queer theory. What is upheld in the deployment of the binary is a notion of gender as the position from which the subject enacts attraction in the direction of an equally gendered subject. Gender, as Sedgwick admits, is *definitionally* built into determinations of sexuality.^[18] This is, of course, an *historical* account of sexuality. There are many,

though marginalised, examples of how sexuality can be constituted through object-choices which are not gendered. However, contemporary western discourses posit an over-determined importance of gender in sexual object-choice. The hetero/homo binary as necessary and definitional for a lesbian or gay subjectivity means nothing without a cultural construction of gender and the *necessity* of attraction towards gendered 'objects of desire'.

To explain the cultural intelligibility which links sexual desires with genders, Butler deploys the term *heterosexual matrix*, by which she seeks to characterise a hegemonic discursive model of knowledge that assumes oppositional and hierarchical binaries of bodily sex expressed through stable genders and desiring across gendered lines.[19] This matrix upholds both the cultural notions of the two-ness of gender and 'compulsory heterosexuality'—a term derived from Adrienne Rich[20]—as the 'true' expression of those two genders. I suggest that in the ten years since Butler's *Gender Trouble*, the heterosexual matrix needs to be reconsidered in light of the *less compulsorily compulsory* heterosexuality. By this, I mean that although discourses of sexuality continue to be based on binary-informed models, the relative increase in tolerance and cultural re-designation of homosexuality as minoritised but not necessarily 'unnatural' suggests that the matrix is no longer purely a 'heterosexual' one. Instead, it is reliant on the trajectory *bodily sex to stable gender to desire for a gendered object*. Desire for *gendered* objects is the cultural imperative of sexual coherence and intelligibility—there is little or no tolerance of sexual subjects operating outside the hetero/homo distinction—this is seen in, say, the exoticisation of incoherence as might be witnessed in experiential accounts on the *Jerry Springer Show*, the relegation of sexual activities that do not *prefer* a *gender* to deviance or given a status of 'fetish' (such as certain sado-masochistic activities or sexualities that, say, involve the erogenisation of feet of either gender), or—in the worst-case scenario—the labelling of the sexually incoherent as 'insane'. It could now be considered a 'hetero/homo matrix' or 'gender-desiring matrix' of gender intelligibility in which 'homo' is appended and is equally (if not more fervently) deployed to sustain the cultural intelligibility of gender as innate, necessary and *two*.

The binary that promotes gendered-articulations of sexuality has, of course, been contested variously, and the particular tactics of these rejections of—or adjustments to—the binary have great significance in terms of the strategic maintenance of the binary as a political tool. Among the positions deployed to 'work the weakness' in the binary norm include, among others, certain radical articulations of non-gendered sexualities. More marginal than bisexuality—which while upsetting it, also often upholds the binary through the reinforcement of the *bi*—are the sort of articulations of experiences which necessarily reject *gender* as the prime or base categorical object(ive) of desire. In critique of the hetero/homo binary, however, Sedgwick suggests that certain

dimensions of sexuality . . . distinguish object-choice quite differently (e.g., human/ animal, adult/ child, singular/ plural, autoerotic/ alloerotic) or are not even about object choice (e.g., orgasmic/ nonorgasmic, noncommercial/ commercial, using bodies only/ using manufactured objects, in private/in public, spontaneous/ scripted.)[21]

It is possible to add to this list along trajectories that generally are not encompassed in dialogue on sexuality or erotics. Gender—*any* concept of gender—might be discharged entirely from a trajectory of desire. Time, space, place, the disunified body, or, as Grosz hints, body-parts that are not usually constituted as libidinal or gendered zones,[22] may well be the codes or factors which constitute the naming of a sexual act and the codes of performative desire. In other words, there is no foundational logic on which to suggest that *gender* be the primary object-of-attraction (sexual, emotional), and that this reductive view of desire is the result of deployments of disciplinary power in terms of the hetero/homo binary.

Providing an example of a desire-trajectory that operates outside the bounds of a gender-based hetero/homo dichotomy is markedly problematic, as any citation I read and provide will be open to resignification in terms of gender. Images, descriptors or signifiers which indicate a fluidity or anti-gendered sexuality in accord with my anti-dichotomy stance are prone to resignification in the framework

of the binary due to the iteratively circulated cultural knowledge which makes both the personal pronouns (he and she) and the visual codes of gender (masculine and feminine) intelligible within the framework of *western* discourses of gender-based sexuality.[23] The example I *can* give is anecdotal, and typically depends on a reading certain texts and experiences from a particular standpoint. In a post-structuralist communications analysis, this would be to 'activate meanings', as Tony Bennett puts it, in terms of a reading formation, or particular set of discourses.[24] For Bennett, texts—and by implication, experiences, desires and memories—have no 'meaning' of their own, but can only be said to have 'meaning' when it is productively activated in terms of a reading formation. The formation in this case is queer theory, and while others might read from a differing perspective, the anecdote as read here underlines the possibility of non-gender-based erotics and desires.

For several months during 1997, a protest against the application of economic-rationalist policy to courses and staffing at Monash University (Melbourne) involved a 'claiming' of campus space with the establishment of a 'tent city'. Loosely involved in the crowd and the culture that was central to the tent city project, I found evidence of very strong links between a non-gender based trajectory of sexual behaviour and the nightly activities, discussions, philosophies and parties that became integral to the tent city culture. Transgressing both the rules of the university (in the refusal to leave campus) and the procedures of more formal student union politics, the people who regularly 'lived' for those weeks at tent city, as well as the many visitors and supporters, expressed a level of sexual and gender subversion as part of the *culture* of the commune. Of course, drug and alcohol induced sexual turbulence is often understood as a stereotypical behaviour of western undergraduates, as Brett Easton Ellis' *The Rules of Attraction* affirms.[25] However, what is evidenced through such fluid sexual practice is the expression of desire through non-gender-specific erotic behaviour, and the breaking of gender boundaries parody, play and subversion.

Much of the 'subversive' potential of the Monash 'tent city' commune is dependent on a history of radical subversion as political culture, extending such subversions of, or resistances to, regimented norms through food-choice (vegetarian-vegan and the banning of animal flesh at the site), collective and consensus decision-making and a rejection of hierarchy and private ownership. As Tony Camilleri put it in discussing the Monash-inspired RMIT tent city of the same year: "Overtly we were a collective of equals with no leaders who strove for consensus in decision making, however we brought to the group our disparate power, experience and abilities to participate." [26] Although the rhetoric of resistance of such sites is discursively positioned by power-relations in a larger culture, the cultural resistance to norms inflects a resistance to gender and sexuality norms, norms of theatricality, norms of the body. Many of these notions rely on earlier (counter-)cultural formations and there is an increasing circulation of these 'temporary' and 'amorphous' sites in which sexuality is unshackled from gendered norms and trajectories in the context of protest on issues unrelated to sexuality and gender. These include much of the festival component of the recent anti-globalisation (anti-corporatism/capitalism) protests. One might also add such sites as the 'underground rave' and 'streetkid sexual culture', although admittedly these are formations of significant difference from the protest site.

There was no articulation of a lesbian/gay presence at tent city, rather an embrace of anti-heteronormativity on a widespread scale. The erotics of tent city involved behaviour that might otherwise be classified as orgiastic, multiply-partnered sexual encounters, avowedly 'straight' boys erotically encountering other avowedly 'straight' boys, lesbians 'doing it' with gay men, eroticisms that broke the bounds of the reduction of bodily erogenous zones to their genitalia and other demarcated sexual bodily 'sites', affectionate behaviour that disrupted the distance between homosociality and *homosexuality*. What occurs, then, to direct the proliferation of sexual possibilities is a dislodgment of the cultural imperative to coherence and sexual, and is replaced by a (sub)cultural injunction to subversion and play, undoing the 'nodal point' that is the hetero/homo binary's mastery over significations of sexuality, and adopting sexualities that are governed by alternative nodal points, which allow sexuality and sensuality to signify otherwise. This effectively undoes the social codes of heteronormativity by providing *more* than a

reverse discourse (such as lesbian/gay cultural articulations), but at the same time continues to work in accord with subjectivity and the codes which govern sexual subjectivity by enacting a deliberate transgression of them, thus drawing attention to—and de-naturalising—the workings of the cultural imperative to sexual coherence. In that sense, tent city, as I have related the experience, is a good example of Michael Warner's prompt to seek out resistances to regimes of the normal,[27] particularly where homosexuality in contemporary formulations is in some ways just as 'normal' as heterosexuality.

In several ways tent city worked as a temporary and amorphous *frame* in which the transgressions of commonly accepted boundaries were able to flourish, which is not to suggest that a 'queer' or 'perverse' utopia is either possible in permanency or even necessarily desirable. But what is significant here is that in a frame within a campus-of-orders, transgressions of binary-based discourses were possible through the avoidance of the 'name'. The speaking of a sexually-positioned 'name' in, say, the formulations *I am gay* or *this is queer space* invokes the governing binary. Leo Bersani, citing Lee Edelman, suggests that the signifier 'gay' names the "unknowability of sexuality" where homosexuality is the reified figure of the unknowable within the field of 'sexuality'." [28] I disagree. Rather, the very recent but expeditious proliferation of the cultural codes of 'lesbian/gay' performativities through an array of media formations indicates, I suggest, the probability that lesbian/gay cultural codes and norms are *too well known*. Instead, the unknowable is the un-named. Names, as Derrida tells us, risk the binding, enslavement or engagement of the other, "to call him/her to respond even before any decision or any deliberation, even before any freedom." [29] By avoiding the name and, in a sense, the figurative law of the *name of the father* in a Lacanian formulation, [30] tent city as a temporal/spatial site opened a temporary but effective possibility for the radical play of the signification of sexuality itself. In avoidance of the *conferred or baptismal name* [31] and lack of self-nomination—for no speaking position in that framework had the power to *give* a name—the site and its erotics were able to avoid the "repeated inculcation of a norm." [32]

IV: STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM AND 'DIVERSITY'

In post-structuralist queer theoretical discourse we reject the notion of a unitary and fixed subject and provide ways of understanding 'being' that are alternative to humanist and metaphysical discourses. However, the vast majority of writers working from a queer theoretical perspective have continued to advocate a 'strategic essentialist' approach, whereby they affirm the current lesbian/gay cultural-political project even as their work denounces the foundations upon which that project is articulated—innate or essentialist sexualities. The idea of proceeding politically *as if* a particular subjective identity has essence (for example lesbian and gay, but also marginalised ethnic, racial and gendered identities) stems back, according to Andrew Milner, to Edward Thompson's humanist arguments against structuralism. [33] However, it is Spivak who is most frequently credited with this political tactic, after suggesting the need for "*strategically* adhering to the essentialist notion of consciousness, that would fall prey to an anti-humanist critique." [34] Maintaining a tactic of strategic essentialism is appealing from a certain political point of view—after all, it has been usefully deployed to make *some* tenuous gains of inclusion and resource distribution in certain local spheres. And it works particularly, as Linda Singer put it, to avoid "false inclusion or erasure." [35] Certainly it appears a useful necessity for such subaltern colonised 'groups' as indigenous Australians. In much the same way, the invocation of a 'real nature' in opposition to 'human culture' can provide enormous gains for animal rights and ecological protections.

But what of the deployment of strategic essentialism in the name of non-heterosexualities? Lesbian/gay politics arose out of Gay Liberationist revolutionary rhetoric based on the Freudian-Marxian stance of Herbert Marcuse and was expected to lead to an "end of the homosexual" via social transformation to a new society "based on a 'new human' who is able to accept the multifaceted and varied nature of his or her sexual identity." [36] In his later analysis of lesbian/gay politics Dennis Altman bemoaned the fact that "[t]he expectation that the growth of gay self-assertion would lead to a much greater degree of androgyny

and blurring of sex roles seems, at least for the moment, to have been an illusion."^[37] The gay civil rights lobby politics—operating on the 'default model' of the Black Civil Rights Movement in the United States—has been the dominant cultural mode of lesbian/gay politics since the early 1980s, reliant on essentialist notions of both sexuality and gender and the citation of the hetero/homo binary in combination with the unsteady trope of 'equality'. It is a politics not of change or resignification of power-relations themselves, but a bourgeois politics of gaining a 'piece of the pie',^[38] reliant on the affirmation of the secondary term, and necessarily rejecting any destabilisation of the binary as a denunciation of lesbian/gay authenticity.

Although queer theory might be expected to take an oppositional stance to any deployment of essentialism, due to the constraints and regulations and exclusions it manifests, virtually every writer (self-named or otherwise labelled a queer theorist) continues to put forward arguments for strategic essentialist citations of the binary while simultaneously obliterating its very grounding in their theoretical writing. Eve Sedgwick, for example maintained the position with the following statement:

To question the natural self-evidence of this opposition between gay and straight as distinct kinds of persons is not, however, . . . to dismantle it. Perhaps no one should wish it to do so; substantial groups of women and men under this representational regime have found that the nominative category 'homosexual,' or its more recent near-synonyms, does have a real power to organize and describe their experience of their own sexuality and identity, enough at any rate to make their self-application of it (even when only tacit) worth the enormous accompanying costs. If only for this reason, the categorization commands respect.^[39]

Jeffrey Weeks referred to "necessary fictions" and claimed that oppositional sexual identities "provide such means and alternatives, fictions that provide sources of comfort and support, a sense of belonging, a focus for opposition, a strategy for survival and cultural and political change."^[40] Likewise, Judith Butler suggested in reference to the terms lesbian and gay that "there remains a political imperative to use these necessary errors or category mistakes."^[41] However, both Butler and Weeks appear somewhat more cautious about strategic essentialism than Sedgwick; they are concerned that legislating these categorical terms might oblige regulatory imperatives.^[42] Similarly, Diana Fuss shows a certain wariness in advocating a strategic essentialist approach.^[43]

That the queer theoretical position advocates in a dichotomous structure a (quietly cautious) requirement for strategic essentialism is testament to the origin of queer theoretical discourses in early gay and lesbian studies and, perhaps to a greater extent, the residue of essentialist strands of radical feminism. There is also some basis in Foucault through his failure to disavow completely the political use of a reverse discourse.^[44] What is important to note, then, is that in the relegation or exemption of certain, very specific modes of political praxis from the political imperatives for which queer theory is useful, these writers are ignoring the ways in which theory has been configured as praxis itself. As Milner suggests, there seems little point in "a theory which requires for its effective application that we pretend not to believe in it."^[45] In a similar vein, Derrida has claimed that he would not keep the term *subject* "at any price, especially if the context and conventions of discourse risk re-introducing precisely what [he is putting] in question."^[46]

The careless (if well-meaning) deployment of the dichotomous hetero/homo binary as essentialist sexual 'truth', even as we deconstruct it at the same time, might be questioned on four distinct grounds. Firstly, the citing of the categories and the discourses of binary-based sexuality, as Butler points out, "not only names, but forms and frames the subject,"^[47] and once cited and encountered, risks the interpellative effects of a discourse which seeks to constrain a fictional, totalised and essential subjectivity. The 'fact' of citation through reiteration of terms without foundation opens the possibility of radical resignification of the terms^[48]: a political tactic with much promise, though it must be understood that resignification cannot be guaranteed. As Butler notes, "[n]either power nor discourse are rendered anew at every moment; they are not as weightless as the utopics of radical resignification might imply."^[49] If the tent city example serves to show how pleasures can be proliferated through subversion of the imperative of coherent answerability to cultural norms, then it remains necessary to continue to *discredit* the hetero/homo binary

for its operations of reducing the proliferation of desires that might be more productive, imaginative, subversive, affectionate or politically-destabilising of norms (not just sexual).

Secondly, where the lesbian/gay articulations are understood as opposition to heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality (which they are), the citation of the hetero/homo binary enacts a certain *colonisation* of all other positions from which anti-heteronormativity is articulated. By this, I mean the reduction of non-heteronormativity to the identities 'lesbian' and 'gay'. I suggest that this results in the unnecessary and inaccurate labelling of many people practising non-heteronormative erotics as either lesbian or gay, assimilating expressions of desire which may have been divorced from gender *per se* to lesbian/gay cultural expressions, and stemming the productive proliferation of anti-heteronormative stances that ground themselves in alternative, emergent or subcultural discourses.

Thirdly, there are yet to be considered the problematics of personal subjective breakdown or fragmentation under the *current* regime of sexual subjective coherence. This can manifest in several forms, not least of which is that currently labelled queer youth suicide. As a queer theoretical perspective on this issue will show, suicide can be based in the breakdown of subjectivity by those *unable* for multifarious reasons to adhere to the imperative of sexual subjective coherence, and those who experience the violence of an imposed totalisation of their 'selves' as lesbian/gay or straight selves.[50]

Finally, if we are to understand the opposition between lesbian/gay politics as attempting to create 'safe spaces' for lesbian and gay articulations and a queer theoretical disruption as part of a larger democratic project,[51] then it is significant to ask if—and how—both can perhaps be achieved. By way of example, 'safe spaces', for Larry Gross, are the "saving refuges" which are the constructed lesbian/gay media citations.[52] Where heteronormative society can also be considered a safe space—or field of intelligibility—for heterosexual articulations, both 'hetero' and 'homo' are covered for those *able* to operate performatively within the constraints. But for those falling outside the hetero/homo binary, the spaces of 'intelligibility' and discursive 'coherence' for the articulation of desires, pleasures and erotics are not available. There should be no wholesale denunciation of either lesbian/gay or heterosexual performative articulations, for in any project of the democratisation of sexual knowledge, such articulations have their place. When it comes to a matter of resources, it is the privileging, visibility and availability of the 'safe spaces' that is at stake—that is, the available codes by which to perform one's subjectivity and subjective desires in accord with a *variety* of norms. A project of diversifying the available categories to allow such spaces for the performativity of a range of sexualities which neither regiments nor excludes can only occur through the rejection of the cultural imperative of coherence in terms of the hetero/homo binary. The task, then, is to use the binary only in the most strategic ways, only with care, and only under a sense of ethics derived through arguments of performativity, post-structuralism and difference.

[1] Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1977); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990).

[2] Judith Butler, 'Revisiting Bodies and Pleasures,' *Theory, Culture & Society* 16(2) 1999:16.

[3] Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society,' *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 115.

[4] David T. Evans, *Sexual Citizenship: The Material Construction of Sexualities* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 210.

[5] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), 143.

- [6] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 16, 18.
- [7] Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination.' *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (London: Routledge, 1991), 18.
- [8] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 220.
- [9] Tony Bennett, 'Texts, Readers, Reading Formations,' *Literature and History* 9(2) 1983: 216, 218.
- [10] Chantal Mouffe 'Democratic Politics and the Question of Identity,' *The Identity in Question*, ed. John Rajchman (New York & London: Routledge, 1995), 34.
- [11] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997), 49, 153.
- [12] Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal* (London: Picador, 1995), 4-18.
- [13] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 43. Emphases added.
- [14] Jacques Derrida, "'Eating Well," or the Calculation of the Subject' (trans. Peter Connor & Avital Ronell), *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 270.
- [15] Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference* (New York & London: Routledge, 1989), 116.
- [16] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 115.
- [17] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (London: Penguin, 1990), 1.
- [18] Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 31. See also Dennis Altman, *The Homosexualization of America, The Americanisation of the Homosexual* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 70.
- [19] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 31, 151n6.
- [20] Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,' *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove et al. (New York & London: Routledge, 1993).
- [21] Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 35.
- [22] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 139.
- [23] Non-western discourses, of course, can be understood to have a variety of non-gender-based sexualities, sexual positions, subjectivities, acts and so on. Neil Miller, [*Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1869 to the Present* (London: Vintage, 1995), 32] suggests that the Native American 'berdache' status functions outside hetero/homo dichotomies and although Alphonso Lingis, [*Foreign Bodies* (New York & London: Routledge, 1994), 138-58] frames Herdt's findings on the sexual culture of Sambia peoples as gendered and bisexual, the complexities of the Sambian sexual rituals suggest to me that the sexual significations lie in terms of a differential understanding of bodies, bodily fluids and reproductive practices such that they cannot be so readily imputed into a hetero/homo binary. Problematically, these are sometimes read in terms of western discourses of sexuality: recognised (*re-cognised*) as hetero/homo identities by western viewers, analysts and participants.
- [24] Bennett, 'Texts, Readers, Reading Formations,' 216-218.
- [25] Brett Easton Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987). Similarly, such B-grade 'tit-city' films as *Porky's* (1981) and its subsequent sequels carry the stereotype of university undergraduates as rampantly breaking 'certain' bounds of legitimate sexual practice (such as the hiring of prostitutes and the hosting of 'orgies'). The stereotype serves to constrain such supposedly illegitimate behaviour by the implication that it is to end at 'graduation'.
- [26] Tony Camilleri, 'No Fees @ Tent City: AN Evaluation of a Ten Day Resitance Commune at R.M.I.T. Bundoora,' Unpublished Paper.
- [27] Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).
- [28] Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 69.
- [29] Jacques Derrida, *On the Name* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 84.

- [30] Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), 41.
- [31] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 110-111.
- [32] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 7-8.
- [33] Andrew Milner, *Contemporary Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (London: UCL Press, 1994), 99.
- [34] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London: Methuen, 1987), 206-7.
- [35] Linda Singer, 'Recalling a Community at Loose Ends,' *Community at Loose Ends*, ed. Miami Theory Collective (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 125.
- [36] Dennis Altman, *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), 241.
- [37] Altman, *Homosexualization of America*, 14.
- [38] Steven Epstein, 'Gay Politics Ethnic Identity: The Limits of Social Constructionism,' *Forms of Desire: Sexual Orientation and the Social Constructionist Controversy*, ed. E. Stein (New York & London: Gardland, 1990), 290.
- [39] Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 83.
- [40] Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities* (London: routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 43-4.
- [41] Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination,' 16; Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 230.
- [42] Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination,' 19; Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents*, 44.
- [43] Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 104.
- [44] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 101.
- [45] Milner, *Contemporary Cultural Theory*, 99.
- [46] Derrida, 'Eating Well,' 259.
- [47] Butler, *Psychic Life*, 93.
- [48] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 107.
- [49] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 224.
- [50] The orthodox analysis of queer youth suicide is that it is a response to homophobia. See Michael Emslie, 'Ignored to Death: Representations of Young Gay Men, Lesbians and Bisexuals in Australian Youth Suicide Policy and Programs,' *Youth Studies Australia*, 15(4) 1996. This is a field I am currently examining, and my work intends to apply the critique of the cultural imperative of sexual coherence to the issue of suicide as it remains to be theorised from a queer theoretical perspective.
- [51] Shane Phelan (ed.), *Playing with Fire: Queer Politics, Queer Theories* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), 2-3.
- [52] Larry Gross, 'Minorities, Majorities and the Media,' *Media, Ritual and Identity*, ed. Tamar Liebes & James Curran (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), 98.

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