

Queer Archive: an Imagined Curriculum

Queer Archive: an Imagined Curriculum – The Queer Theory Edition

Queer Archive: an Imagined
Curriculum – The Queer
Theory Edition

Academic Project Developed
by João dos Santos

Project II - 2022
Master in Communication Design
Faculty of Fine Arts Lisbon

Four-color Printed Book
English
64 Pages
170mm X 250mm

[1] Foreword **7**

A. **Defining the**
Key Terms and Concepts

B. **Queer Theory**
Itself:

C. **But I'm a**
Queer in Content and

[2] References **59**

Indefinable: **13**

Articulates **31**

B. **What's So Queer About**
Judith Butler? **35**

B. **What's So Queer About**
Eva Sedgwick? **43**

Cheerleader:
Production—Syd Martin **51**

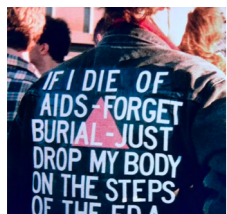
[1] Foreword

THE SILENCE= DEATH POSTER WAS ALSO USED BY THE AIDS COALITION TO UNLEASH POWER (ACT UP) AS A CENTRAL IMAGE IN THEIR ACTIVIST CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE AIDS EPIDEMIC. BECAUSE OF ACT UP'S ADVOCACY, THE PINK TRIANGLE REMAINS SYNONYMOUS WITH AIDS ACTIVISM.



IN 2017, THE IMAGE WAS REINSTALLED IN THE WINDOWS OF THE LESLIE LOHMAN MUSEUM OF GAY AND LESBIAN ART WITH A NEW LINE AT THE BOTTOM:

“Be Vigilant. Refuse. Resist.”



[1] Sullivan, N (2003). A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory (9/15/03 ed.). New York, USA: NYU Press.

The word queer has historically been used in a number of different ways: to signify something strange, as in the quote from P. G. Wodehouse; to refer to negative characteristics (such as madness or worthlessness) that one associates with others and not with the self, as in the quote from Robert Owen; and, as in the refrain from Brendan Behan which ‘queerly’ anticipates the ACT UP slogan “we’re here, we’re queer, so get fucking used to it!”, that denote one’s difference, one’s ‘strangeness’, positively. Similarly, queer has been used, sometimes abusively, and other times endearingly, as a colloquial term for homosexuality.

So what exactly does this term mean when appended by the word ‘theory’? While Queer Theory may now be recognised by many academic discipline, it nevertheless continues to struggle against the straight-jacketing effects of institutionalisation, to resist closure and remain in the process of (un)becoming. Queer Theory does not want to ‘straighten up and fly right’ to have the kinks ironed out of it: it is a discipline that refuses to be disciplined, a discipline with a difference, with a twist if you like. In saying this, however, I do not mean to endow Queer Theory with some sort of ‘Tinkerbell effect’; to claim that no matter how hard you try you’ll never manage to catch it because essentially it is ethereal, quixotic, unknowable.

Obviously, Queer Theory does function in specific and somewhat ambiguous ways in particular contexts, and in relation to particular issues. And, as Alan McKee has pointed out, ignoring this because of a fear that any attempt to investigate the multifarious, multivalent, and contextually specific practice(s) of Queer Theory will result in assimilation, is politically dangerous and ethically suspect. Historically, says McKee, Queer Theory has been inscribed in a number of ways, and ‘to write histories of Queer Theories is not the same thing as defining Queer Theory’ (1999: 237). [1]



BUSH IS

120

GEORGE BUSH YOU MAKE ME SICK

LAG

GEORGE BUSH YOU MAKE ME SICK

KINDER GENTLER HOUSING FOR PEOPLE AIDS

FREE HEALTH CARE

IT'S TIME FOR A NATIONAL PLAN GEORGE

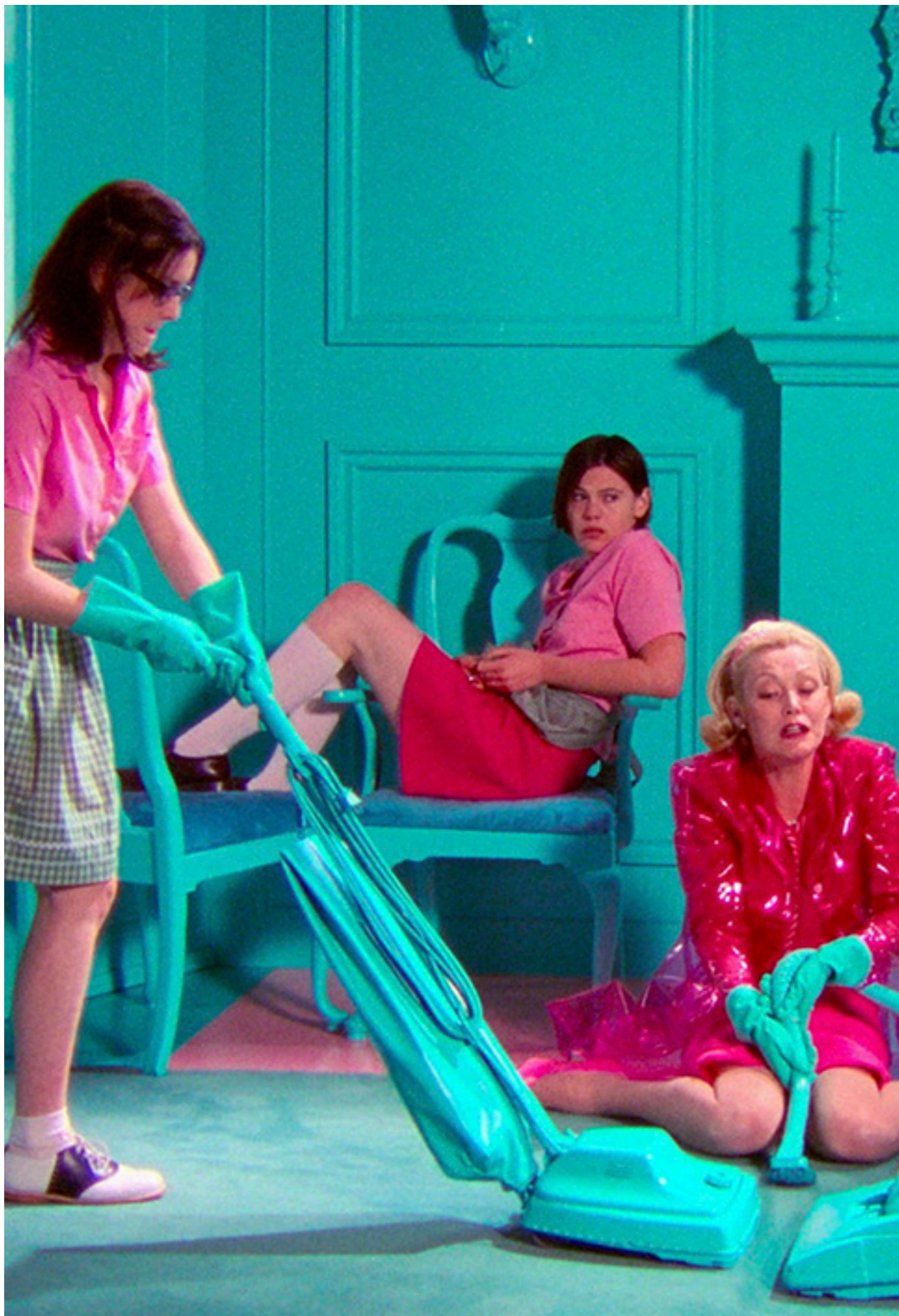
LEADERSHIP LEADERSHIP LEADERSHIP CAN END THE AIDS CRISIS

BUSH IS GET AWAY MURDER

SH TING

Defining the Indefinable:

Key Terms and Concepts



Index

Queer
Queering
Geneology
The Gender Binary
Lgbtiq
Norms
Normative
Normativity
Anti-normativity
Postqueer
Heteronormativity

The aim of this book is to help make sense of these questions by tracing queer theory across a range of historical contexts.

How can theory be “queer”? What is the difference between queer identity, queer politics and queer theory? Is queer theory always related to sexuality in some way?

As we find, though queer identity, politics and theory can be understood to offer separate and often conflicting approaches, a historical lens helps us understand how these tensions have come to be. We find that we cannot understand what queer theory “now” is, without looking backward, and at times, rethinking a few grand narratives.

It is often said that queer theory is difficult to define, or that it is anti-thetical to the spirit of the theory to tie it down to a single meaning. As we will see throughout this book, queer is a “deliberately ambiguous term” that is simultaneously a way of naming, describing, doing and being (Monaghan 2016, 7).

This is where queer theory finds its radical potential as a term to challenge, interrogate, destabilise and subvert, but it also means there is difficulty in pinpointing queer theory’s meaning. As Annamarie Jagose notes, it is

“a concept that prominently insists on the radical unknowability of its future formations,” that maintains a “strategically open-ended relational character” (2009, 158). Or, as Donald Hall has argued, we must understand queer theory in the plural:

“there is no ‘queer theory’ in the singular, only many different voices and sometimes overlapping, sometimes divergent perspectives that can be loosely called ‘queer theories’” (2003, 5). Queer theory is, it seems, mercurial (Dilley 1999).

Queer Queering

As Janet Jakobsen outlines, we can differentiate the uses of “queer” in three ways (1998, 516–517): As a noun (example: “this is the queer space”); As an identity that resists traditional categories (example: “I identify as queer”);

As a verb (example: “let’s queer gender!”). These ways of using “queer” are often in tension with one another. Jakobsen suggests that the last option—queer as a kind of doing rather than being—holds the most political potential because it focuses on resistance (rather than description) and practice (rather than identity).

To undertake “queering” is to deploy queer as a verb, to challenge and resist expectations or norms. For example, “queering femininity” might mean thinking about how femininity can be more than an oppressive gender ideal, and can be embodied in non-normative ways (McCann 2018).

Genealogy

Genealogy traditionally means “line of descent”, and/or tracing this lineage. Drawing on Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, Michel Foucault suggested a new understanding of genealogy:

a method for investigating the history of ideas. Following Foucault, to undertake a genealogical analysis means looking at how present ideas have been shaped by the past, and working against narratives that assume change or “progress” is inevitable.



The Gender Binary

The gender binary is the idea that gender can be understood in terms of the categories male versus female. Feminist theorists have long critiqued this simplification, arguing that “sex” (biology), ought to be understood as distinct from “gender” (cultural interpretations of biology).

This is known as the “sex/gender distinction”. As Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan explain: The purpose of affirming a sex/gender distinction was to argue that the actual physical or mental effects of a biological difference had been exaggerated to maintain a patriarchal system of power and to create a consciousness among women that they were naturally better suited to “domestic” and nurturant roles.

Butler famously questioned the distinction in *Gender Trouble*, suggesting that biology is always given cultural meaning and therefore “perhaps [sex] was always already gender” (2008, 9). Butler argues that sex operates within a “heterosexual matrix” whereby male/female is to man/woman is to masculine/feminine is to desires women/desires men.

In other words, the gender binary does not simply refer to male versus female, but an entire set of normative expectations that also encompasses embodiment and desire. Much of queer theory is not simply concerned with sexuality, but the entire gender system that underpins it.

Lgbtiq

The acronym LGBTIQ refers to “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer”, and is often used as an umbrella term to describe or imagine a community of sexually and gender diverse persons. Others use “queer” in the same way (that is, as an umbrella noun/identity). Umbrella terms are necessarily and problematically homogenising. As Gloria Anzaldúa describes,

“Queer is used as a false unifying umbrella which all ‘queers’ of all races, ethnicities and classes are shoved under. At times we need this umbrella to solidify our ranks against outsiders. But even when we seek shelter under it we must not forget that it homogenizes, erases our differences” (2009, 164).

Before the acronym LGBTIQ was in common use, “gay” or “gay and lesbian” were predominantly used as umbrella terms. Variants of the acronym include the addition of questioning, allies, pansexual and a plus-sign to indicate other identities not otherwise accounted for (LGBTQQIAAP+). Gender and sexual minorities (GSM) and diverse sexualities and genders (DSG) are also sometimes used.

The term LGBTIQ has been critiqued for misrepresenting the cohesiveness of diverse gender and sexual groups as a “community”. (...) it is often argued that the use of the term “LGBTIQ” distracts from the disproportionate focus given to L and G (lesbians and gay men) compared to BTIQ (bisexuals, transgender persons, intersex persons and queer identifying people).

As Altman suggests, the acronym also “conflates both biological and cultural understandings of sexuality and gender” and flattens difference, distorting “the ways in which these are understood in many non-western societies” (2018, 1252). (...) We acknowledge the limitations of the term to capture

Norms

Normative

Normativity

A key aspect of queer theory is resisting dominant norms, so what exactly is a “norm”? Norms generally refer to standards, rules or expectations.

Norms are associated with the “normal” and opposed from the “abnormal”. Queer theory is particularly concerned with resisting norms around gender and sexuality, and questioning what is considered “normal” versus “abnormal” in these contexts. Queer theory is also interested in understanding and often resisting the normative. While the term normative is related to the idea of norms, it is important to differentiate between the two terms.

Norm simply describes a dominant rule, standard or expectation, but normative refers to the context surrounding how these things are established, perpetuated and often morally endorsed.

As Butler describes: the word is one I use often, mainly to describe the mundane violence performed by certain kinds of gender ideals. I usually use ‘normative’ in a way that is synonymous with ‘pertaining to the norms that govern gender’. But the term ‘normative’ also pertains to ethical justification, how it is established, and what concrete consequences proceed therefrom.

More broadly, queer theory is interested in critiquing, destabilising, subverting and challenging normativity. The term normativity refers to the system through which norms, normalisation and the normative are naturalised and made to seem ideal. Many queer thinkers focus their critiques on both heteronormativity and homonormativity.

Anti-normativity

In recent times, some queer theorists have questioned the reliance of queer theory on “anti-normativity”, that is, always focusing on what is not normative as most resistant. As Jagose contends,

“Queer theory’s anti-normativity, we can say, is evident in its anti-assimilationist, anti-communitarian, anti-social, anti-dentitarian, anti-separatist, and anti-teleological impulses” (2015).

Further, Manalansan highlights that relations between queerness and normativity are never static, arguing that we need to understand:

[H]ow queerness and queers are awash in the flow of the everyday where norm and queer are not easily indexed or separable but are constantly colliding, clashing, intersecting and reconstituting. (2018, 1288)

Postqueer

In 2009, David Ruffolo’s book *Postqueer Politics* was published. Ruffolo argues that **“Queer has reached a political peak”** and critiques queer theory for valorising a dualism between queer and heteronormativity (2009, 1).

Ruffolo imagines how we may use the work of philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze to expand the remit of queer to enhance its relevance to contemporary political questions. Rather than reject queer theory, Ruffolo links queer with concepts such as “becoming” (in Deleuze’s terms)—postqueer ultimately seeks to renew queer as a powerful and vibrant concept. Hence, even in an era of (so-called) post queer politics, queer theory has a future (O’Rourke 2011, 104). As Michael O’Rourke suggests:

With each new book, conference, seminar series, each new masters program, we hear (yet again) that Queer Theory is over. Some argue that the unstoppable train of queer theory came to a halt in the late nineties having been swallowed up by its own

fashionability. It had become, contrary to its own anti-assimilationist rhetoric, fashionable, very much included, rather than being the outlaw, it wanted to be. But the books and articles still continue to appear, the conferences continue to be held. And, if it were true that Queer Theory has been assimilated completely, become sedimented, completely domesticated (or at least capable of being domesticated) then it really would be over. Nobody would be reading any more for we would already know what was to come. (2011, 104)

As we explore throughout this book, queer theory has certainly not reached an expiration date. The pliant nature of queer theory has enabled it to maintain relevance by insisting on its own “radical unknowability” (Jagose 2009, 158) and it continues to be taken up, experimented with and pushed in new directions.

We trace some of the ways in which queer theory has evolved, outline its new shapes and gesture to places within and beyond the academy where queer theory is thriving. In doing so, we seek to demonstrate the value of queer theory now, and point to some of the ways that students, activists, artists and scholars may continue the project of testing queer theory’s limits, shaping it anew for themselves.





Heteronormativity

For much of its history, queer theory has situated itself as challenging normativity—particularly heteronormativity—in society (Gamson and Moon 2004, 49). As Michael Warner most famously notes:

“The task of queer social theory ... must be to confront the default heteronormativity of modern culture with its worst nightmare, a queer planet” (1991, 16).

As many have suggested, the concept of heteronormativity is influenced by the earlier feminist theorisation of “compulsory heterosexuality” offered by Adrienne Rich (1980). As Stevi Jackson suggests, Rich offers an early conceptualisation of heteronormativity that reminds us that it is not only homosexual-identifying persons who are marginalised by this system, but that everyone is affected negatively by the regulation. Warner coined the term “heteronormativity” to describe the pervasive and largely invisible heterosexual norms that underpin society. An example of heteronormativity in practice is the representation of “ordinary” family units as comprising a “mother” and a “father”, and where alternative family arrangements are either not represented, or are depicted as a deviation from this norm. Heteronormativity sexuality and gender (2006b, 105). Importantly, heteronormativity is not equivalent to heterosexuality itself, as Jackson explains:

[H]eterosexuality, while depending on the exclusion or marginalization of other sexualities for its legitimacy, is not precisely coterminous with heterosexual sexuality. Heteronormativity defines not only a normative sexual practice but also a normal way of life. (2006b, 107)

Engaging with this problematic of heteronormativity, queer theory has often sought to illuminate queer identities and formations that would otherwise be erased or invisible under heteronormative arrangements of the social.



B. *Queer Theory* *Articulates Itself:*

- B.1 What's So Queer About Judith Butler?
- B.2 What's So Queer About Eva Sedgwick?



When did
queer theory
come out
of the closet?
Or, as we might
also say, when
did queer
theory challenge
the notion
of a closet
altogether?

This chapter explores the work of Butler, particularly *Gender Trouble* first published in 1990 (and updated with subsequent prefaces; see Butler 1999), with a focus on her critique of the gender binary and her theory of gender performativity. Then, the chapter outlines Sedgwick's key theoretical contributions, particularly her work in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), starting with her axioms and conception of "the closet". From here we explore Sedgwick's notion of queer reading practice and outline her ideas of paranoid versus reparative reading, which continue to be central to many contemporary queer theorists.



B. WHAT'S SO QUEER ABOUT JUDITH BUTLER?

Butler's writing reflects her philosophical training in phenomenology, German Idealism (particularly the work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel) and The Frankfurt School (with a particular focus on neo-Marxist critique). While her work operates within feminist, psychoanalytic and Marxist frameworks, she is best known for her contributions to queer theory.

She is most famous for her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, first published in 1990, but Butler has published many influential books and articles interrogating intersections of power, identity, gender and sexuality. Through each of these works, Butler theorises identity formation and subjectivity with notions of the body, sex, sexuality, language and speech.

As Sarah Salih notes, Butler's works reveal a lifelong dedication to interrogating "the ways in which identity norms are taken up and subject positions assumed" (2004, 2). Butler developed a theory that suggested identity to be "a contingent construction which assumes multiple forms even as it presents itself as singular and stable" (Salih 2004, 2). Butler's theorisation had a profound and far-reaching impact upon the ways that gender, sex and sexuality have been understood within and beyond academia in the post-1990s era.

Butler argued that feminism's focus on the "woman" question was deeply flawed because the subject of its analysis—woman—was an exclusionary construct that was stabilised only via a gender binary underpinned by heterosexuality (Butler 1999, 3).

As Butler writes in the 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*: I was most concerned to criticise a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory. I sought to counter those views that made presumptions about the limits and propriety of gender and restricted the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity. (1999, vii)

Butler suggests that the term “woman” (or “man”) does not refer to a singular, coherent or stable identity category. Instead she asserts that all such categories are unstable constructions that depend on regulation and ritual in order to exist.

BUTLER'S APPROACH TO SEX AND GENDER

What is the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality? Does sex determine gender? Does gender determine sexuality? (...) this is the assumption that a person assigned female at birth (sex) will ideally grow up to be a feminine woman (gender) and her desire will be directed towards a man (e.g., a person of the opposite sex/gender). Butler calls this set of expectations the “heterosexual matrix” (2008, 7) that underpins the gender binary.

For Butler, the concept of the “heterosexual matrix” is a “grid of cultural intelligibility” where sexes, genders and desires are maintained and naturalised under a binary heterosexual logic (1999, 194) (...) To critique the assumed naturalness of this sex/gender relationship, Butler draws attention to some possible discontinuities between “sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders” (1999, 10).

For Butler, understanding gender via binary oppositions reifies the assumed causal relationship between sex and gender, because it assumes that gender difference mimics sexual difference.

If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of “men” will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that “women” will interpret only female bodies. (1999, 10)



WHAT IS GENDER ANYWAY?

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler prompts us to reflect further on the question of gender. As we have noted, a long-held view within feminist discourse was that gender functioned as the cultural interpretation of a person or subject's sex. However, Butler's work suggests that sex does not operate as an "interior 'truth'" (1999, 44) or essence to gender identity.

For Butler, gender is the apparatus that makes us believe in this myth of a natural inner truth. As we have noted, Butler's work suggests that gender is the discursive and cultural means by which sex is produced. Gender is thus a set of power relations; it is the reason that we think of a sex as binary, natural:

"as 'pre-discursive,' prior to culture, a political neutral surface on which culture acts" (Butler 1999, 11, emphasis in original). Querying (and indeed queering) the hegemonic discourse of gender requires a lot of conceptual work, in particular "a radical rethinking of the categories" and formations of identity (Butler 1999, 16). Deconstructing the concept of gender, she asks whether there is "a' gender which persons are said to have" or whether gender is "an essential attribute that a person is said to be" before putting forward her argument that gender is neither of these things (1999, 11, emphasis in original). Butler's most cited contribution to queer theory is her argument that **gender is a doing, not a being.**

Butler suggests that gender does not refer to a singular, coherent or stable identity category. Instead she asserts that the appearance of a "gendered self" is "produced" via "the regulation of attributes along culturally established lines of coherence" (Butler 1999, 32-33). As Butler highlights, genders are unstable productions, dependent upon socio-cultural regulation to exist. By this she means that those gendered behaviours and attributes that we commonly associate with femininity or masculinity are in effect imposed upon us by normative sexuality (within the heterosexual matrix).

However, as she notes, forms of sexual practice do not produce certain genders, rather, that heterosexuality is maintained by policing a strict gender binary. Taking this a step further, Butler asserts that the production of gender is performative. Though it might be tempting to think of gender as a sort of act that is performed by a subject who exists in some form of pre-gendered state, Butler argues that there is no doer behind this process. This is because, for Butler,

the production of gender constitutes identity. She borrows a line from Friedrich Nietzsche to make this argument. In his 1887 *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche argues that:

“there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed the deed is everything” (Nietzsche 2010, 45).

Extending from this, Butler argues that identity is an effect rather than a cause, writing: Here Butler destabilises norms of identity formation by suggesting that there is no identity behind the expression of gender. For Butler, identity is retroactively constructed and comes to be through expressions.

“There is no gender identity behind expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (99, 33)

GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

In her first theorisation of gender performativity, Butler suggests that gender is not an attribute or essence, but “an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts” (1988, 519). Butler’s argument rests on the idea that gender comes to exist through “the stylization of the body” (1988, 519). She refers to “the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (1988, 519).

In *Gender Trouble*, she revises her argument to highlight the role of regulation and temporality in this process, writing that: [G]ender 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. (Butler 1999, 44)

Hence, Butler suggests that gender involves the performative repetition of acts in a pre-determined social context over time in such a way that it appears to be natural and innate. It is important to note the difference between performance and performative, because Butler does not view the expression of gender as a performance. As we have noted, Butler views gender as the process that constitutes subjectivity rather than as an active choice and performance on the part of the subject. The idea of the “performative” comes from the philosopher John Langshaw Austin, who theorised performative as speech acts that perform actions.

For Butler, an example of this is the proclamations “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” that call embodied subjects into a world of gender, whereby their bodies are thus rendered understandable/legible (“intelligible” as Butler would suggest). Butler’s notion of performativity also borrows from the work of Jacques Derrida, who theorised the notion of “différance” which refers to the deferral of meaning and the deconstruc-

tion of the notion of origin. For Butler this means challenging the very notion of an original “sex” underlying gender.

Following Austin and Derrida, Butler’s gender performativity can be explained as “an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates” (Butler 1999, xiv). In her preface to the tenth anniversary edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler further clarifies her use of the term “performativity”, arguing that in her work [P]erformativity is not a single act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration. (1999, xv): Butler’s contribution to queer theory is her insistence that “what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (1999, xv).

Her work seeks to deconstruct the foundations of identity by demonstrating how gender, which have traditionally thought be an interior feature, is produced through the repetition of bodily acts.



B.2 WHAT’S SO QUEER ABOUT EVA SEDGWICK?

Sedgwick (20.05.1950–12.04.2009) was a feminist, literary critic, poet, artist and teacher. Sedgwick’s writing reflects her training in feminist theory and literary criticism. While she is most famous for her book *Epistemology of the Closet*, first published in 1990, she produced many influential books and essays over the course of her life.

As we will see, what Sedgwick brought to queer theory was a methodology for deconstruction that enabled a deep interrogation of sexuality, gender, bodies and pleasure in and across Western culture. As she describes in an interview with *The New York Times* in 1998:

“It’s about trying to understand different kinds of sexual desire and how the culture defines them” (Smith, 1998).

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick uses this methodology to highlight how “the closet” functions as a structuring metaphor in Western culture. In this work she traces correlations between “the closet” and structures of knowledge, drawing heavily on the works of Herman Melville, Henry James, Friedrich Nietzsche, Marcel Proust and Oscar Wilde. While *Epistemology of the Closet* is credited as a pioneering text in queer theory, Sedgwick did not explicitly engage with the term “queer” until her 1993 book *Tendencies* (...) she famously defined queer as:

“the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (1993, 8).

Tendencies was the first volume of the influential Duke University Press Series Q, which brought together gender, sexuality and cultural studies to interrogate intersections

of sex, gender, sexuality class, race, nationality and culture—the series concluded upon Sedgwick’s death in 2009.

Mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to as we explore through the latter parts of this chapter, Sedgwick developed an approach to the study of sexuality, bodies, feeling and power, which has proven useful to many critics, scholars and artists.

Across her work, Sedgwick demonstrates that any analysis of the relation between sexual desire and political power must move along two axes.

The first “needs to make use of whatever forms of analysis are most potent for describing historically variable power asymmetries” (1992, 7). By this she means gender, race, class or nationality.

The second axis is that of representation, as she argues that this is the only way to get insight into the “range of ways in which sexuality functions as a signifier for power relations” (1992, 7). With this in mind, we can move on to exploring Sedgwick’s key contributions to queer theory as it developed through the 1990s.





SEDGWICK AND “THE CLOSET”

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick demonstrates how the metaphor of the closet functions in Western culture. The term epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge, so this means her project interrogates the intersection between knowledge and sexuality. Coming “out of the closet” is never simple and it is never something that LGBTIQ people have to do once. As Sedgwick notes, “the deadly elasticity of heterosexist presumption” means that new closets constantly appear as LGBTIQ people come out of them (2008, 68). Coming out is something that LGBTIQ people must do with every new person they meet:

[E]very encounter with a new class full of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects new closets whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics exact from at least gay people new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure. Even an out gay person deals daily with interlocutors about whom she doesn’t know whether they know or not. (2008, 68)

As we will discuss, Sedgwick does not see the closet operating only in relation to the lives of LGBTIQ people, but she does acknowledge its central place in LGBTIQ experience. She argues, “the closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century” (2008, 71), writing that for many gay people, the closet is:

[S]till the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence. (2008, 68)

Sedgwick argues that the closet (and sexuality more generally) has occupied a privileged relation to “identity, truth, and knowledge” in twentieth-century Western culture (2008, 3). She argues that the closet is performative in that it is part of a “language of sexuality” that “not only intersects with but transforms the other languages and relations by which we know” (2008, 3).

However, Sedgwick notes that the closet also problematizes what counts as speech and language. This is because being in the closet involves the specific act of not disclosing or speaking about one’s sexuality or gender identity. For Sedgwick, this silence is: being in the closet involves the specific act of not disclosing or speaking about one’s sexuality or gender identity. For Sedgwick, this silence is:

“rendered as pointed and performative as speech (...) [which] highlights more broadly the fact that ignorance is as potent and as multiple thing (...) as knowledge” (2008, 4).

Hence, she argues that the “centrality of homophobic oppression in the twentieth century (...) has resulted from its inextricability from the question of knowledge and the process of knowing in modern Western culture at large” (2008, 33–34). Sedgwick argues that within Western culture, the binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality has been a “presiding master term of the past century, one that has the same, primary importance for all modern Western identity and social organization (and not merely for homosexual identity and culture)” (2008, 11).

[F]irst, term B is not symmetrical but subordinated to term A; but, second, the ontologically valorised term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B; hence, third, the question of priority between the supposed central and the supposed marginal category of each dyad is irresolvably unstable, an instability caused by the fact that term B is constituted as at once internal and external to term A. (2008, 9–10)

She argues that the power dynamics and knowledge structures of the closet are not only relevant to LGBTIQ people, but that this metaphor has come to structure many other binaries beyond those implicated directly by its doors. (...) in *Epistemology of the Closet* is to deconstruct these binaries by revealing the mechanisms through which they work. Sedgwick demonstrates that many of these categories, which are typically presented as symmetrical binaries, are actually part of an “unsettled and dynamic tacit relation” and she describes this as a process:

Though their work developed along slightly different trajectories (only intersecting in a few terse essays), Butler and Sedgwick laid the foundation for a queer approach to critical inquiry. Both scholars took queer as a means of destabilising, unsettling, revealing, subverting, opening and questioning established norms around categories of sex, gender, sexuality and identity. They sought to reveal the mechanisms through which these categories are naturalised in Western.

Butler offered a way to deconstruct the relationship between sex and gender, demonstrating how both are produced as effects of the heterosexual matrix. Sedgwick, on the other hand, focused largely on the relationship between gender and sexuality. Her work demonstrates that sexuality is comprised of many characteristics (...) challenging the notion that sexual identity is supposed to organize into a seamless unitary category.



C. **But I'm a Cheerleader:**

Queer in Content and Production;
Syd Martin



When most people talk about LGBT representation in film, they talk about the writing. Is it accurate? Are the gay characters stereotypes? Does the only queer character die in the end (a common trope known as “Bury Your Gays”)? We don’t often analyze the technical aspects of queer cinema. While story content is important for representation of marginalized groups, how a film is shot and edited is just as important when it comes to portraying how LGBT people live their lives.

One film revered by the LGBT community is Jamie Babbit’s *But I’m a Cheerleader* (2000) which uses techniques in art direction, shot selection, and editing to authentically represent how a queer person experiences life. It’s important to note that not every gay, lesbian, trans etc. person has the same experiences. We are all individuals with multiple overlapping identities.

This essay will draw mostly from my personal experience as a lesbian and from the experiences of my friends within the LGBT community.

Nonetheless, many of us face similar experiences and *But I’m a Cheerleader* illustrates a few of them, was directed by Babbit, an out lesbian, and produced by Andrea Sperling, who was her girlfriend at the time (Fuchs, 2000).

The film is about Megan Bloomfield, an all-America teenage girl with a passion for cheerleading. Megan is suspected by her friends and family to be a lesbian. In order to “help” her, they send her to a conversion therapy camp where she is made to confront her homosexuality, perform tasks deemed appropriate for her gender and Gender roles and stereotypes are present in films of all genres. Film theorist Robin Wood writes about this phenomenon in his essay *Ideology, Genre, Auteur*.

In his essay, Wood defines American capitalist ideology which includes male and female “ideals” that are often present in films. Men are seen as adventurous and action

oriented. Women are depicted as gentle and compassionate wives and mothers. Both are heterosexual and destined to marry, have children and continue the legacy. Wood states,

“The most striking fact about this list is that it presents an ideology that, far from being monolithic, is inherently riddled with hopeless contradictions and unresolvable tensions.” (Wood, 528-529).

Gender roles are fake, that is, they are socially constructed concepts that we humans came up with ourselves. However, because we’re constantly exposed to media that presents us with these ideals, people often feel pressured to adhere to them.

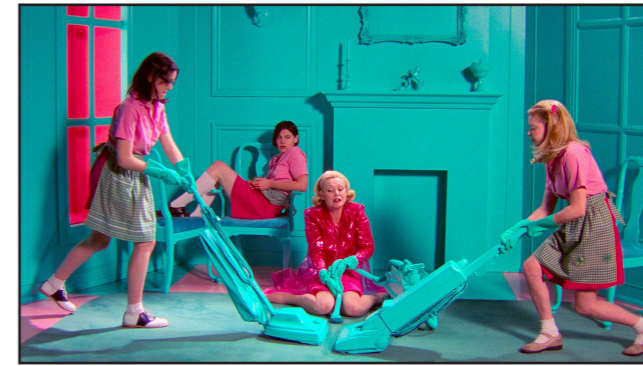
This pressure is especially true for queer people who often don’t fit into these ideals. The art direction in *But I’m a Cheerleader* exemplifies this effect. Everything about the conversion camp that Megan is sent to, called True Directions, represents gender roles similar to the ones that Wood discusses. All of the boys wear blue, typically masculine clothing such as button up shirts and lumberjack outfits. All of the girls at the camp wear pink skirts and blouses.

“I wanted the production design to reflect the themes, like the artificiality of gender construction, like you’re more of a man if you can chop wood. It’s so stupid.”

The girls’ bedroom is pink and frilly. They learn to do housework in a room that looks like a typical 1950s living room. The boys learn to fix blue cars, chop wood out in nature, and even learn to be warriors in a scene where they pretend to battle with guns. The patrons of the camp are bombarded with gender roles and forced to adhere to them. Everything in the camp has a plastic quality to it. The plants are all fake and the house itself looks like a dollhouse.

This approach to the film’s design expresses how gender roles are socially constructed and not real. Babbit explains her decisions in art direction in an interview with film professor Cynthia Fuchs. She states,

“We tried to give it a very homoerotic aspect, so that on all the boys’ sets, there are lots of phallic objects, as



jokes, but also showing how if you repress something, it comes out in other ways.”

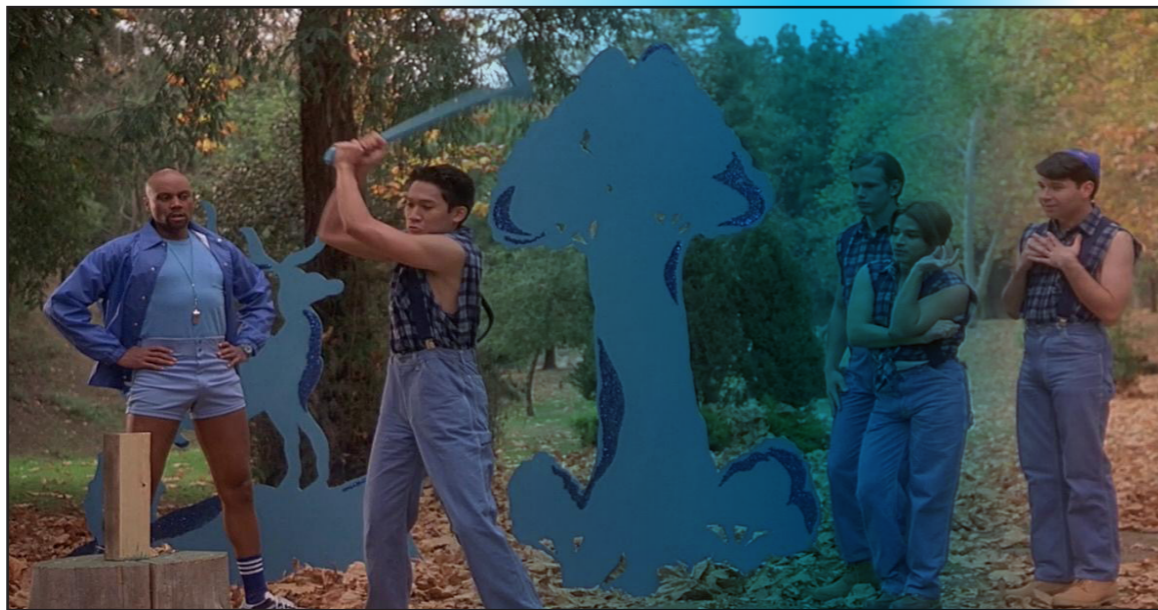
She notes how the fake, colorful set of True Directions contrasts with the scenes at Megan’s home, which have more browns and feel more organic (Fuchs). At home, Megan was comfortable and free to be herself. At True Directions, she’s forced to pretend to be something she’s not. Throughout the film, as the characters try harder and harder to adhere to the roles they are given, the production design becomes more and more artificial looking until, at their graduation ceremony, even their clothes are made of plastic.

This ceremony represents how queer people (especially those in closet) will often fake aspects of themselves in order to fit in and escape discrimination. Another aspect of the production design in *But I’m a Cheerleader* includes suggestive set pieces. Babbit says in her interview,

Often times in the midst of trying to prove to the world that they’re not queer, parts of someone’s true identity can come out in ways they wouldn’t expect. This repression even happens to Megan. Though she’s even convinced herself that she’s straight, she keeps pictures of women in her locker and openly talks about how she hates making out with her boyfriend. While the production design of *But I’m a Cheerleader* carries gendered symbolism, how the film is shot also speaks volumes.

In the scene where Megan's family and friends are giving her an intervention, there are many point-of-view shots from Megan's perspective. A slightly distorted and disorienting wide angle shot shows everyone in the room staring at her, adding discomfort to the scene. Shots of Megan are from a higher angle, emphasizing how she doesn't have much power. In this scene, we get a sense of how Megan feels. Everybody is ganging up on her and it seems like nobody wants to listen to her.

The two camp counselors are shot from extreme low angles, while the in the situation. As each person among her friends and family gives their superficial reasoning for thinking Megan is gay, it cuts to close ups of their faces, even panning quickly between characters at certain points, further adding to the intensity and unease. Teens are shot from extreme high angles which conveys how powerless they are. If they don't pass the test they're going to be kicked out of the camp and likely kicked out of their homes. This power struggle is very real for queer youth in America. Many, if not all of them rely on support from their parents in order to live and face the threat of being kicked out when they come out. It's also easy to feel powerless in general when living in a society where many people don't accept your sexuality.



Lastly, editing helps convey the meanings in *But I'm a Cheerleader*. In his essay *The Dramaturgy of Film Form*, Sergei Eisenstein wrote about how editing two seemingly unrelated images together can create an entirely new meaning. This editing technique is also known as the Kuleshov effect. For example, a shot of a man's face followed by a shot of a bowl of soup conveys the idea that the man is hungry.

This technique is used in one of the opening scenes of *But I'm a Cheerleader*. Megan is making out with her boyfriend in his car. She seems incredibly uncomfortable and the scene is intercut with suggestive shots of cheerleaders performing. This shot sequence suggests that Megan would probably rather be kissing the cheerleaders than her boyfriend. This inference is confirmed later on when Megan comes to realize that she is in fact gay.

Shots of her fellow True Direction members are intercut with the same shots of cheerleaders and shots of her friends saying things like, "You hug us way too much," and her boyfriend saying, "You don't even like to kiss me."

These moments are examples of experiences a person has when they first realize that they're gay or bisexual. One will often fantasize about people of the same gender.

Sometimes, those people in the closet don't even realize what they're doing. Megan says, "Everyone looks at other girls, all the time," to which one of the other group members says "But you only assume

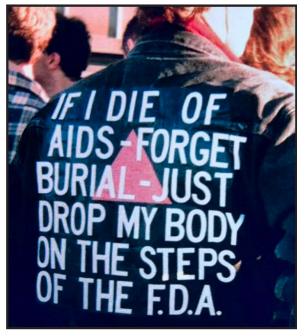
that they're thinking what you're thinking when they look." After finally realizing that she's a lesbian, Megan begins to think about all of the red flags that she hadn't seen before, something that many queer people do.

Though many of the production choices of *But I'm a Cheerleader* are exaggerated, the movie might not have gotten its point across had it been produced in a more typical way.

Sure, the heartfelt story, humor and representation of gay and lesbian people would have been fine on its own, but techniques used in the movie are what gets the audience to fully understand what these characters are going through. assume that they're thinking what you're thinking when they look.

[2] References

Image Index
and Bibliography



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9



10



11



12



13



14



15



16



17



18

"If I Die Of Aids - Forget Burial Just Drop My Body On The Steps Of The F.d.a.," jacket worn by David Wojnarowicz (Sep. 14, 195-4July 22, 1992), ACT UP demonstration, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C., Oct. IMG.1

Silence=Death. Brooklyn Museum. (2011). Retrieved from <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/159258> IMG.2

But I'm A Cheerleader, Movie Frames. (2021, January 20). Retrieved from <https://film-grab.com/2021/01/20/but-im-a-cheerleader/> IMG.3

IMG.4
IMG.5
IMG.6
IMG.7
IMG.8
IMG.9
IMG.10
IMG.11
IMG.12
IMG.13
IMG.14
IMG.15
IMG.16
IMG.17
IMG.18

Judith Butler Portrait. By Oocc, V. T. L. E. (2018, July 7). Podge Judith Butler falar? Retrieved from <https://orgullocriticos.wordpress.com/2017/10/28pode-judith-butler-falar/> IMG.8

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick Portrait, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. (2010). Retrieved from <https://evekosofskysedgwick.net/judith-butler-falar/> IMG.10

References

- Martin, Syd (2018).** "But I'm a Cheerleader: Queer in Content and Production," *Cinesthesia*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 1. Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine/vol8/iss1/1>
- McCann, H., & Monaghan, W. (2019).** *Queer Theory Now: From Foundations to Futures* (1st ed. 2020 ed.). London, UK: Red Globe Press.
- Sullivan, N (2003).** *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (9/15/03). New York, USA: NYU Press.

