

“The opposite sex is....neither!”: Queering the Postmodern or Fucking with Gender

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Everyday life is permeated by examples of sexual ambiguity. From popular stars who continuously reinvent themselves by admitting that they enjoy sex with both men and women only to add a provocative charm to their public personas, to the proliferation of commercials where global, unisex buttocks have become the object of the erotic gaze thus displacing the centrality of masculine/feminine genitalia, popular culture evidences its ambivalent use of the sexual codes that signify desire. Interpreting this growing presence of buttocks in contemporary advertising, Vicente Verdú in his article “El imperio de las nalgas” makes some significant points by referring to it as:

objeto erótico que estuviera derivando hacia un travestismo postsexual; una transcendencia cular, sin distinción de género diferente y concreto. Femeninas y/o masculinas, locuaces en una misma habla carnal, las nalgas serían al sexo lo que la globalización a la economía. En su mapamundi, se plasmaría la nueva globalización de la sexualidad . . . un cuadro global donde se intercambian las anatomías homologables de los sexos.

And he adds, “Contraído el presupuesto y anulada la inquietud de la genitalidad, estas señales regresan como un equilibrio de glúteos intercambiables en la metáfora de una moneda única con valor idéntico y la misma faz” (n.p.).

Such ambiguity is carried to hilarious extremes in one of the episodes of the famous sitcom *Murphy Brown* where trying to guess the sexual orientation of a good-looking young man, some of his officemates make him examine the sole of his shoe: if he inspects it turning his foot outwards (that is, as women are supposed to do) he will be definitively gay, but if he inspects it turning his foot inwards, he will be straight. These generic expectations are comically frustrated when he turns his foot both ways (like a woman and like a man) thus complicating the intrigue and exposing the arbitrary nature of generic cues.

Although it is not our aim to reduce queerness to popular cultural manifestations, we think these examples might invite a productive analogy with other contexts where in-definition, in-difference and in-determinacy are being applauded; and, in fact, just as bisexuality has proved to be fashionable and profitable in popular culture, queerness is becoming fashionable at the level of theory. It seems that cultural theory seeks the appropriation the bisexual *chic* in an attempt to signify the transgressive, in a time where everything else has already been transgressed.

Majorie Garber in *Viceversa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* states that “Sexual confusion, chronic indecisiveness, bisexuality is looked through rather than at,

reinterpreted, and appropriated to tell *another kind of story*.” For her the bisexual is so compelling a figure, so dangerous, so culturally subversive and erotic that most of us are afraid to acknowledge his or her very existence. If we did, we would have to admit the subject’s nomadic positionings in the desire continuum. Facing this possibility she concludes: “the sexual opportunities would be unlimited—The *closet* becomes the whole world and *everybody* is your potential lover” (7). As the queer signifier is more and more attached to a variety of different signifieds or more culturally pervading (in other words, it becomes “fashionable”) it gets detached from sexuality and attached to theory, and one of the aims of this article is to explain the terms of such “fashionability” by focussing on the different contexts/moments in which the term *queer* is used.

In their attempts to map the genealogy of queer theory and other related disciplines, Eve Sedgwick and Henry Abelove have tried to define its methodological, theoretical and political boundaries only to confirm that they are mobile, unstable and changing. Sedgwick assumes that Gender Criticism, considered by many critics an elusive and euphemistic term, is actually a criticism *of* gender; rejects the view of the term as an all-inclusive concept—identified with the related “Women’s Studies,” “Feminist Criticism,” “Men’s Studies”—and prioritizes its connection with “Gay and Lesbian” as, in her opinion, it is homosexuality that best challenges the traditional clear-cut categories of masculinity and femininity. Abelove introduces his *The Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader* by explaining that he had very reluctantly chosen that title still acknowledging that the term might exclude other aspects of sexual non-conformity—bisexuality, transexuality, etc—that the term *queer* did designate in its more comprehensive quality (xvii).

Although the original connection with homosexual identity has been dominant (actually *queer* emerged as a pejorative word for *gays*), the identification was not productive enough, as the very term *queer* began to problematize any sexual identity, including homosexuality. In this claim for seniority (which leads, paradoxically enough, to something so pre-modern and so close to Harold Bloom’s anxiety for the search of origin), feminists also seem to vindicate themselves as the mothers of Gay and Lesbian criticism and the grandmothers of Queer studies maintaining that they were the first ones to problematize gender. Mandy Merck is quite ironic about this feminist claim by arguing that they might be “older but not necessarily wiser in a political moment that prizes ‘post’erity.” If this is so, she adds, have contemporary sexual politics not just “come out” but also “grown out” of their presumed predecessor? (3).

Whatever be the terms of such rivalry, it is true that as identity-based criticism of the 70’s and 80’s gave way to the questioning of all sort of identitarian politics (racial, sexual, geographical), the 90’s welcomed the *queer* as (to use Merck’s words) “the antidiscipline discipline, not only sexualizing the academy’s desexualized spaces (that is, those that did not fit within the binary system), but also subverting the norms of curricular division and research specialization” (7).

From this point of view, queerness seems to emerge only to *de-identify* or *de-specify* specific sexualities and their related identity politics. Although sexuality is still a strong presence in any account of queer theory, one of the risks of putting it into discourse is that

over-textualization might lead to a sort of de-sexualization. After all, Queer Theory—and its immediate predecessor—is said to have done with sexuality what feminism has done with gender: to deconstruct and problematize its very object.

But if at some point queerness has begun to be looked at as a "postmodern condition," inasmuch as it is only at the interstices of the western discourses on sexuality that it is enacted, by extension the queer has become the perfect epitome of the liminal, unstable post-modern self. Current definitions of queer theory put the emphasis precisely on this aspect (as its object becomes less and less graspable). Sedgwick herself, who in *Epistemology of the Closet* focussed her analysis on a specific homosexual consciousness, seems to question such association in her more recent *Tendencies* (1993) by implying that "queer can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically." (8) David Halperin's formulation is even much looser as he conceives queer theory as an all-inclusive discipline that might designate almost anything: "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it refers. It is an identity without an essence" (26).

After all, as it is well-known, Queer theory grew basically out of Foucault and Butler's belief in the free-floating status of sexual identity, from their assumption that sexual identities (just as any other identity) are never given, but rather constructed, exercised and regulated. In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault argued that sexuality (and ultimately bodies, if we are to follow his extreme constructivist view) is the product of regulatory regimes and gets articulated by power discourses (and the various forms of resistance to it). Much of this argument is inherited by Butler when she states, in what has become almost a queer manifesto that "[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results". Seen in this light, sexual identity is rendered as an effect of our representations (and not as their pre-existing inner cause); and the implication that gender, sex and sexuality are performances (and not essences that legitimate a given subjectivity) is a large-scale one: it ends up calling into question the very notion of a "person," especially by the irruption of those she calls "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings that simply do not conform to the gendered standards by which persons are defined. One of these "incoherences/discontinuities" of the binary system would be that of homosexuality, that according to her can never be rendered as a *copy* of heterosexuality, since heterosexuality has not the status of an *original* identity. Once we assume that the very notion of gender is derived from the mere repetition of certain "signifying practices", we have to conclude that there is not a generic primary subject, but just an "I" constituted through the very act of repetition (311-13). That the old paradigm "gender as identity" is replaced by "gender as performance" means also that the gendered subject (a provisional, unstable, substitutable one) only manifests itself through extra-sexual gestures that provide simultaneously an access to social visibility and a self-representational framework.

We have paused this long on Butler and Foucault because we wanted to show that despite the sexual focus of their theories, they are really presenting a similar fluidity in the conceptualization of identity or subjectivity, which could help us relate queer theory to other postmodern approaches advocating for a non-identitarian model: Gayatri Spivak, for example, proposes essentialism only as an “operational strategy” but never as an ontological belief. Seen this way, identity-based narratives would be valid only as “necessary fictions” in homophobic, racist, or misogynist contexts; otherwise, that is, beyond the political requirements of these contexts, they become part of what she calls “the fallacy of essentialism” (Burston and Richardson 38-41). It is also worth mentioning the work of the French philosopher Mafessoli who makes a very productive distinction between modernity and postmodernity by making good use of the opposition identity/identification. He relates the concept of *identity* to stable, essential and exclusionary symbols, and that of *identification* to more ephemeral, fragmentary, and probably less “coherent” representations of the subject.

It is precisely this assumption of “gender as an act of becoming” which seems to have inspired Kate Borstein, a M-to-F transsexual performance artist, whose Cross-Gender Workshop is basically aimed at deconstructing and then reconstructing generic character by focussing on the cues that are supposed to legitimate it as a “natural” identity: body, gestures, voice, clothes, use of space and movement, protocol, manners, power relationships, pleasure, stories and narratives that dictate our sexual “being in the world.” Much of this gender education (or should we say gender insubordination?) meant by these exercises take us back to that episode of *Murphy Brown* we mentioned at the beginning.

For Borstein, who has been portrayed as a sort of “Transgender Transsexual Postmodern Tiresias,” the very fact that gender is limited to a number of traits that can be learned, worn, and self-invested simply evidences its artificial and arbitrary nature, and ultimately reduces “this strong category” to a mere parody of itself. Her performances can also be understood in relation to Butler’s theorization on butch-femme desire as a clear instance of the ways homosexual practices can denaturalize and destabilize heterosexual normativity. In order to illustrate this parodic resignification of the masculine/feminine polarity Butler quotes a femme who justified her attraction to butches by saying that she liked “her boys to be girls.”

An extreme instance of this gendertrouble (or “genderfuck,” if we are to use Borstein’s provocative terminology) would be her play *The Opposite Sex is...Neither!* (the title we have borrowed for our article), where she examines a “typology of difference” occupied by transgenderists, transvestites, transsexuals, and all gender outlaws who are in between one thing and the other. She maintains that the transgendered/transsexed body is the site where representations and discourses of gender and sex are resignified. But she is not the only one holding this view: Marjorie Garber also speaks of the transgendered individual as a signifier of boundary crossing; and in “The Empire Strikes Back: A Post-Transsexual Manifesto,” Sandy Stone, one of the superstars of cyberculture, foresees a moment in the evolution of the transgendered movement where the transsexual will not pass, will not assimilate and will not be ashamed.

As it can be observed, either from a theoretical perspective or taking into account the everyday signifying practices in which it is enacted, queerness stands at the core of many postmodern frameworks, to the point of being used almost as a synonym for "postmodern" in a number of contexts; contexts where the application of Foucault's and Butler's ideas about the plasticity of gender and sexuality to various contemporary discourses is made possible: Donald Morton, for instance, situates Dennis Altman's concepts of globalism and homosexuality within the domain of political theory by making a significant distinction between what he calls "need theory"—historical materialism—and "desire theory"—post-structuralist postcapitalism. Queer theory would represent the culmination of "desire theory" and consequently would realize the Lyotardian shift from a "conceptual economy model" to a "libidinal economy model" of culture. Queerness therefore could stand for any poststructuralist critique of culture, devoid of any connection with sex, gender or sexuality.

In a similar vein, though focussing on a very different area, Jonathan Alexander makes quite enthusiastic claims about the similarities between queer theory and hypertexts, as the former is perfectly valid to explain the workings of hypertextuality. He assumes that "both hypertext and queer theory are about breaking out of simple, often binary, hierarchical and linear forms of thought and, instead, engaging more sophisticated, polyvocal ways of understanding, or at least representing, human experience, sexual and otherwise" (n.p.).

But once again, bearing in mind these meaning transferences, our reflection might be as follows: doesn't this process (transformation and ultimate dissolution of original meaning into subsequent non-related meanings) end up reinforcing queerness' postmodern quality? Couldn't these proliferating metaphors be the *copies* that have lost their *original*? Without getting into Baudrillard's apocalyptic pessimism, queer polysemy could also be explained in methodological terms, if we admit (as in the case of feminist critique) that queer theory is not exclusively defined by the lives and cultural production of homosexuals, bisexuals or transexuals, but it rather proposes a category of historical/cultural analysis that operates in broader contexts. Just as feminism inaugurated a critical paradigm that put gender at the very centre of the hermeneutic activity, or the *closet* turned into a productive metaphor for all those negotiations between the centre and the margins, visibility and invisibility, a sort of queer gaze might enable its practitioners to engage in a variety of contexts from destabilizing/denaturalizing positions. Once identity is regarded as a fluid category and the subjectivity that legitimated it has been deconstructed, it is possible, for example, to talk about queer identifications that allow the reader or viewer multiple positions; an anti-essentialist exercise that Diana Fuss seems to assume when she says that, since subjectivity is changeable and plural, readings are always historically and culturally specific constructions: "If we read from multiple subject positions the very act of reading becomes a force for dislocating our belief in stable subjects and essential meanings" (35).

Despite the appropriation of the term by other contexts (a gradual process we can describe almost as the "queering of theory") queer meanings have not been transferred unproblematically, since the homosexual community keeps on vindicating their political/social signifieds. The fact that the dominant chant in Gay Parades is "we're here, we're queer," is a clear signal of political intervention, in the same way as "Camp" far from being

the purely theatrical/aesthetic pose Susan Sontag described in *Against Interpretation*, is now being invoked as a political reenactment of queer discourse. These instances are part of a more widespread anxiety among sexual theorists who seem to be very much alerted by the dangers of sexual *de-specification*, an ultimate strategy where, as the editors of *GLQ* state, “Gay and Lesbian Studies gets redescribed as Gender Studies, for example, in order to domesticate it or to make it more academically palatable” (Merck 2).

In what seems to be a struggle for the appropriation of queer meaning, postmodern theorists—holding a universalizing view—and political activists—representing the minoritizing view—engage in the negotiation of its object, practices and projections. As is the case in many other contemporary frames, theorizing the margins—postcolonialism, feminism—there exists the risk that when trying to escape the Scylla of ghettoization, the queer subject may be grasped by the Charybdis of poststructuralist overtextualization.

Perhaps one way out of this conceptual loop is that promised by cyberspace where subjects are supposed to get freed from the restrictions of normative identity as they can enjoy multiple generic adscriptions through a number of virtual personalities. In this context, cyberspace is being welcomed not only as the gateway to a Third Sex, but to many other liminal positions challenging the binaries that support Western culture. Donna Haraway in her all-too-quoted “Manifesto for Cyborgs” seems to have in mind the image of a “queer” in-different and anti-essentialist consciousness when defining the figure of the feminist-socialist cyborg, since for her “cyborg politics insist on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine” (199). From this perspective, it is not surprising that she places cyborgs, women and simians in the same interstitial space since all of them stand as signifiers of cross-boundaries. And a more attentive reading of her work reveals that, for her, the cyborg is not only a futuristic human/machine hybrid, but “a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia” (204).

That is why, despite the alleged depoliticization of postmodernist non-identitarian models (such as cyborg or queer theory) we see multiple identification precisely as the very condition for sympathy because the subject is continuously allowed to place him/herself in the position of the Other, thus expanding the possibilities of social connection.

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