

A research programme¹ for queer studies

Queer theory and Harvey Sacks's Membership Categorization Analysis

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ABSTRACT: Starting from a definition of queer as the deontologization of categories and the denaturalization of performances, this paper aims to delineate a research programme for queer studies based on American sociologist Harvey Sacks's work on social categories. This would make it possible both to generalize the application of queer theory to the analysis of the repressive consequences of all forms of categorization, and to elucidate these repressive effects in a huge variety of social contexts and situation thus considerably broadening the range of convenience of queer theory.

KEYWORDS: queer theory; Harvey Sacks; Membership Categorization Analysis; queer ethics.

It is the use of such a procedure [membership categorization] which is the important thing. You might want to knock out this or that statement, thinking you would do away with the trouble it makes, where what you want to knock out, if you want to do away with the trouble, is the use of the procedure.

Harvey Sacks

O bailan todos o no baila nadie.

Tupamaros

1. INTRODUCTION

The revolutionary promise of queer, which was expressed with such proud self-awareness ever since its very first manifestations, and which played such a large role in the enthusiastic anticipations they aroused, seems to have been achieved only imperfectly in its history up to this point. One of the reasons is that, in concrete practice if not in theoretical pronouncements, queer has tended to align itself (epistemologically even before than politically) with the LGBT position; this has led to a rather partial and predictable selection

¹ The phrase "research programme" is of course a nod to Imre Lakatos (LAKATOS 1978). It is likely that the very gesture of bringing together queer theory and the philosophy of science will be perceived (by both parties) as a form of irreverence bordering on sacrilege, thus setting the stage for an appropriate interaction with what follows.

of both its objects of enquiry, and of its political objectives. It is important to note that this outcome, far from being inevitable, flatly contradicts the vision of queer upheld by many of its first and most original proponents:²

Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence (*ibid.* 1995: 62).

Queer [...] does not designate a class of already objectified pathologies or perversions; rather, it describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance (HALPERIN 1995: 62).

[A] lot of the more exciting work around “queer” spins the term outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender or sexuality at all. [...] Queer’s denaturalising impulse may well find an articulation within precisely those contexts to which it has been judged indifferent. [...] By refusing to crystallise in any specific form, queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal (SEDGWICK 1993: 9).

² A note on the theoretical, ethical and political import of long block quotes.

I have been quite adept at writing summaries and paraphrases since primary school. The reason I prefer to quote extensively from other authors instead of summarizing is that I envision scholarly writing as a dialogue, and my idea of a dialogue is not putting words in other people’s mouths. Also, one of the effects I hope my writing will have on readers (if indeed it will have any...) is to act as a gateway to the work and thought of other authors who are incomparably more important than I can ever hope to be. I will never forget the moment, over fifteen years ago, when a two-line quote in Stanley Fish’s *Is There a Text in This Class* sent me rushing to the library to check out Harvey Sacks’s *Lectures on Conversation*. No summary or paraphrase could have had the same effect. Indeed, if we believed summary or paraphrase to be equivalent to the original texts, the whole discipline of literary studies, based as it is on the laborious acquisition of competence in sometimes extinct languages, and on painstaking analysis and potentially endless interpretation of traits which can never be preserved by even the most faithful summary or paraphrase, would collapse.

However, there is more to my preference for lengthy quotes, and this more has a direct relevance to queer.

Over the years I have been thinking a lot about the outer limits of queer: about the areas into which well-mannered theorists are not supposed to stray because they will be making everybody else uncomfortable, and will be ridiculed or attacked for this. One is certainly the performative nature of the human/animal binary, to which I have devoted most of my efforts in the field, but another one is just as certainly the binary which makes the living and the dead both essential to each other’s definition and impossible to contemplate together. To me scholarly work in the humanities, consisting as it does of devoting decades of our lives to the works of dead authors, or to the events and customs of bygone times, has a purpose which can only be described as metaphysical: to cross the boundary between life and death, and to allow the dead to speak again through us. By quoting at length rather than summarizing or paraphrasing, I try to step aside so that their own voices can be heard once again. To me this is a momentous ethical consideration, and a vital political point.

It is necessary to affirm the contingency of the term [queer], to let it be vanquished by those who are excluded by the term but who justifiably expect representation by it, to let it take on meanings that cannot now be anticipated by a younger generation whose political vocabulary may well carry a very different set of investments (BUTLER 1993: 230).

The purpose, both theoretical and political, which animates all my work in queer studies and gives it meaning, and from which this paper arises, is to make this vision of queer not only interesting in the abstract but relevant and useful as an analytical tool in a variety of disciplinary and social contexts through a systematic and creative exploration of its implications, regarding both methodological choices and the definition of the objects of research. This paper presents an inevitably rough and fragmentary version of two methodological proposals, which consider queer theory as worthy and capable of inspiring a very broad research programme with a quite remarkable potential for innovation. The first aims to make queer more general and abstract, by showing how its theoretical constructs can be applied beyond the historically central fields of sexuality and gender; the second aims at making those constructs more specific and concrete, by applying them to the analysis of individual texts and particular social situations. However different they may appear, these two objectives are actually deeply connected and interdependent, since both arise from the same theoretical foundation: the work of Harvey Sacks, whose extraordinary conceptual richness and theoretical rigour make it an inexhaustible source of inspiration.³

³ Harvey Sacks (1935-1975) is remembered as the founder of conversation analysis; however, his most important published work, *Lectures on Conversation* (the transcription of all his surviving lectures, spanning the years from 1964 to 1972), contains a wealth of insights which transcend the disciplinary boundaries of linguistics, no matter how applied, and find their meaning in an attempt to rebuild, on a rigorously empiric foundation, Sacks's home field of sociology; this ambitious attempt is conducted with a breathtaking rigour and its results, however fragmentary, are nothing short of cosmogonic. "All the sociology we read is unanalytic, in the sense that they simply put some category in. They may make sense to us in doing that, but they're doing it simply as another Member. They haven't described the phenomena they're seeking to describe – or that they ought to be seeking to describe. What they need to do is give us some procedure for choosing that category which is used to present some piece of information" (SACKS 1992: 1, 40-42); "I'm trying to develop a sociology where the reader has as much information as the author, and can reproduce the analysis. If you ever read a biological paper it will say, for example, 'I used such-and-such which I bought at Joe's drugstore'. And they tell you just what they do, and you can pick it up and see whether it holds. You can re-do the observations. Here, I'm showing my materials

As the indeterminate article in the title of this paper should make abundantly clear, I am of course not implying that there should (or, indeed, could) be a single “research programme” unifying the whole of queer studies; this is not only not possible but not desirable, since there is not, and there never will be, one single, final and normative version or form of queer studies or of queer theory. Any attempt at a definitive and all-encompassing definition of queer, at imposing a copyright, at establishing an orthodoxy, at excommunicating heretics and unbelievers, is not only doomed to failure from the outset but ludicrous, since it betrays a profound lack of understanding of the sources of queer’s irrepressible vitality, and also of its political productivity. In what follows I will start out from a particular vision of queer, not with the aim of extolling it above others or of preaching it to the unconvinced, but simply in order to make it possible to evaluate, and thus to accept or reject, my proposal, and to form a rational opinion of the ways it might or might not prove useful, and of what it might be useful for. Not surprisingly, the vision is one I share with the colleagues with whom I established CIRQUE (Centro Interuniversitario di Ricerca Queer), and which builds the foundation of our work together.

According to this vision, the most basic, and at the same the most abstract, idea in queer studies is the deontologization of categories, first of all of the categories towards which a given culture makes it compulsory to position oneself, those which define social identity. Performativity, which is arguably the most widely applied concept in queer theory, is, from the logical viewpoint, nothing but a consequence of this questioning and deconstruction of categories: unless social categories are deontologized, they cannot be revealed as nothing more than the outcome of the iteration of performances. Historically, the main objects of this deconstruction have been the categories of gender and sexual identity, and to this day these are still the focus of most contributions to the field. However productive this mode of enquiry may have proved, it hides a risk: focusing the deconstruction of identity categories on the variables of sexuality and gender means to subscribe, implicitly and thus all the more insidiously, to a definition of identity centering on sexuality and gender; ultimately, this leads not to deontologize identity but, on the contrary, to essentialize it, by linking it to a narrow and homogeneous set of parameters which come to be regarded as unconditionally

and others can analyze them as well” (SACKS 1992: 1, 24).

foundational and inescapably definitional. A marginal but significant consequence of this trend is the latest addition to the continually expanding list of minoritarian and subversive identity labels with which queer identifies, or at least sympathizes, politically: the time-hallowed LGBT acronym is nowadays more and more often expanded not only with Q (for “queer” or “questioning”) and with I (for “intersex”) but also with A, for “asexual”. But it is (or at least, it should be) clear that an asexual person’s relationship, both logical and existential, with the categories of sexuality and gender is deeply different from that of, say, a bisexual person: a bisexual person could find it difficult to affirm their own definition of their sexuality in a number of social situations and relationships, and could as a consequence be a victim of marginalization, discrimination or violence; but for an asexual person the category of sexuality is simply *not relevant*: to compel an asexual person to position themselves along this category is, quite simply, nothing but a new form of oppression: and this form of oppression is even more insidious than the one which dominant heteronormativity exerts towards sexual minorities. First of all, because it is paradoxically justified as a form of liberation; but most of all because the “orthodox” and the “deviants”, in the field of sexuality and gender as in all others, share at least an orientation towards the world and a definition of priorities; both the inquisitor and the heretic place faith and dogma at the core of their self-definition. But that a person for whom the category of sexuality has no relationship to their lived experience and self-perception should be offered, *as a form of liberation*, the possibility to “integrate” in, and “be represented” by, a movement defined by the centrality and productivity of the category of sexuality and of all experiences (both positive and negative) which arise from it, is more or less equivalent to offering a person with no interest whatsoever in soccer the possibility to “integrate in society” by “coming out” as a supporter of some team, and of attending their games every Sunday.

The case of asexuality, of momentous theoretical significance despite its present marginality, is however not the only reason to believe that the choice to limit the scope of queer theories and studies to issues related to sexuality and gender may, in the long run, prove not only theoretically stifling but also politically reactionary. To essentialize, by focusing on them exclusively and continuously, identity categories relating to sexuality and gender means in practice, if not in theory, to confine all other possible categorizations to the theoretical, social, and political unsaid and unseen: to

stress as central and non-negotiable one's right to affirm the components of one's self-definition relating to gender and sexuality means to make all other components marginal and negotiable; that the disregard and the silence which make this possible are not deliberate does not make them harmless. The result is a situation in which innumerable modes and conditions of oppression can not only perpetuate themselves, but remain impossible to conceptualize and to perceive as long as they do not affect a narrow set of predefined variables (sexual orientation, gender, maybe ethnicity...) which are the exclusive focus of a systematic vigilance.⁴

It is important to note that this essentialization, however useful it may have proved in determining the academic and political fortune of queer, conflicts rather radically with its theoretical foundations. This is the elephant in the room of queer studies, as glaringly evident as is it seldom noticed: in a field which worships "Saint Foucault" Madhabi Menon is, as far as I know, not only the first but the only author so far to observe the radical incompatibility between Foucault's unmasking of identity as an effect of discourse and queer's stubborn insistence on seeing it as ontologically foundational and politically relevant:⁵

⁴ The distinction between a form of oppression which is at least conceptualized and visible, and can thus be called out, and one which is invisible and therefore cannot be the object of political action may seem subtle but is actually vital: a huge number of persons, even in the most "civilized" countries, are oppressed because they are nonwhite, homosexual, migrant and so on; the difference is that these forms of oppressions are visible and generally recognized as such, which has the far from negligible consequence of enabling victims to receive solidarity and support, and of exposing perpetrators, at least theoretically, to the opprobrium of society, and to legal consequences. Unfortunately, just as many people are oppressed because of traits or behaviours which either are not recognized as possible causes of oppression or – which is even worse – which are still unanimously surrounded by a generalized and unquestioned stigma, which can assume forms ranging from ridicule to active and criminal ill will, practiced without any form of social disapproval and without any institutional sanction. An example from my personal experience is that of "gattari"; this Italian slang word labels volunteers who take care of cats who do not have an owner and who freely roam the streets. In Italy, for over twenty-five years, stray cats have been protected by national law, which explicitly states that the volunteers who take care of them are acting in the interest of, and on behalf of, the local authorities and the State. All over Italy, people who take care of groups of stray cats near their places of work are frequently subjected to odious discrimination, not seldom culminating in dismissal; the property of those who take care of stray cats near their homes is often vandalized; all volunteers continually face the far from theoretical risk of having the animals they care for killed. It goes without saying that all the actions undertaken by their oppressors are crimes; it also goes without saying that it regularly proves impossible to direct the attention of the institutions to these crimes, and to secure some form of protection for the victims.

⁵ One of the most daring and radical critiques of identity I have come across is the one which Francesco Remotti has been pursuing over the last 25 years in his work in anthropology (RE-

[A]s Michel Foucault has already pointed out in his analyses of power, to talk about identity as a *cause* by which people get classified is to put the cart before the horse. For Foucault, even as identity has many real and often nasty effects, *it is also itself an effect*. Identity is the demand made by power—tell us who you are so we can tell you what you can do. And by complying with that demand, by parsing endlessly the particulars that make our identity different from one another, we are slotting into a power structure, not dismantling it [...]

If anything, the most widespread truth about lived reality is that it is too multiple to abide by a code of identitarian difference: *lived reality is at odds with identity politics*. This is why it is so startling when many of us seem content with thinking of our lives strictly within the structures that constrain it, speaking unironically about the immutability of race or gender or sexuality. Race and sex and gender and class are certainly policed fiercely in all societies, but why do we confuse the policing with the truth about ourselves? If anything, the categorization is the problem, not our challenging of it.⁶ In a bizarre move of sympathizing with our oppressors, we take to heart regimes that restrict us, and then tell ourselves that the restriction is the truth of our being in the world (MENON 2015: 2-3, emphases in original).

As well as being at odds with the theoretical foundations of queer, the exclusive focus on a small number of issues also threatens to strongly limit its potentialities for innovation, both social and intellectual. Another problem, which does not have to do with a hypothetical future but with present actuality, is the lack of understanding often displayed, by people who openly identify for theoretical or biographical reasons as queer, for the implications of their position, whether ethical or simply logical. Statements like “seeing a girl kiss a dog disgusts me” or “people should be ashamed of being Catholic” (which I am not going to ascribe to identifiable individuals, but which have actually been uttered in my presence in queer academic contexts) are incompatible with queer for reasons which have to do not with their content (anyone can be disgusted by anything and has a right to their gut reactions) but with their logical form: no particularly developed talent for abstraction should be necessary to realize that expressing disgust for a display of physical affection between two socially

MOTTI 1996, REMOTTI 2010). Its relevance to queer studies is considerable, so much so indeed that Remotti is one of a number of scholars who “font du queer sans le savoir”.

⁶ About fifty years before Menon, this was also Sacks’s position: “It is the use of such a procedure [membership categorization] which is the important thing. You might want to knock out this or that statement, thinking you would do away with the trouble it makes, where what you want to knock out, if you want to do away with the trouble, is the use of the procedure” (SACKS 1992: I, 336).

inappropriate subjects, or expecting someone to be ashamed of who they are, are two rhetorical stereotypes of the crassest and most oppressive heteronormativity, and that statements like these are therefore incompatible with any interpretation of queer. Without taking into account the limits of individual empathy, and personal inclinations or disinclinations, it should be clear to everyone that, on the political plane proper, a consistently queer position can only aim to defend the freedom of expression and self-definition of *any* subject, and not only of those who are represented in the LGBT litany and in its extensions. As the Tupamaros would put it, it is a case of “either everyone dances, or nobody does.”

In this regard it is interesting to note that, for some years now, a number of the central representatives of queer theory have expressed, in highly visible contexts, some wide-ranging perplexities about the real potential for theoretical and political subversion inherent in the identities which have traditionally been more closely associated with queer; however, they have never gone so far as to question systematically, and with theoretical awareness, the historically canonical identification of queer with gender and sexuality:

Fourteen years after *Social Text*'s publication of “Fear of a Queer Planet”, and eight years after “Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender”, this special double issue reassesses the political utility of queer by asking “what’s queer about queer studies now?”. The contemporary mainstreaming of gay and lesbian identity—as a mass-mediated consumer lifestyle and embattled legal category—demands a renewed queer studies ever vigilant to the fact that sexuality is intersectional, not extraneous to other modes of difference, and calibrated to a firm understanding of queer as a political metaphor without a fixed referent. [...]

That queerness remains open to a continuing critique of its exclusionary operations has always been one of the field’s key theoretical and political promises. What might be called the “subjectless” critique of queer studies disallows any positing of a proper subject of or object for the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent. Such an understanding orients queer epistemology [...]. Attention to queer epistemology also insists that sexuality—the organizing rubric of lesbian and gay studies—must be rethought for its positivist assumptions (ENG, HALBERSTAM, MUÑOZ 2005: 1).

The obvious “contemporary mainstreaming of gay and lesbian identity” does not lead the authors to explore the possibility of generalizing the applicability of the hermeneutic and political categories of queer to situations

and condition which cannot be conceptualized in terms of sexuality, but only to attempt a further expansion of the range of phenomena which can be connected, and therefore ultimately reduced to, sexual categories. The rhetorically compulsory conclusion, which emphasizes the absence of fixed referents as the non-negotiable theoretical hallmark of queer, does not in the least question the determination, which might appear somewhat contradictory, to continue nevertheless to identify queer activism and analysis with a fixed, and narrow, (and by now traditional to the point of conservatism) range of referents: the exploration and the problematization of issues related to sexual and gender identity.

But the absence of “fixed referent[s]”, which is so frequently emphasized (albeit all too often with a merely ritual function) in queer theory is in no way arbitrary or merely cosmetic. The foundational and definitional gesture of queer, on the theoretical as on the political plane, as I remarked at the outset, is the questioning and deconstruction of categories and their consequent deontologization; this gesture cannot have a fixed referent because its nature is by definition abstract, since the plane on which it takes place is purely logical. Unfortunately, in the vast majority of cases, this questioning and deconstruction has been exclusively focused on a narrow and completely predictable range of categories (gender, sexuality, sometimes – for particularly adventurous theorists – ethnicity; class is curiously absent...); and this lack, at the same time, of imagination, and of intellectual, ethical, and political courage threatens to reduce queer merely to one of the many theoretical labels, interchangeable in their irrelevance, available in the department store of postmodern academia. But the cause of this gap in the historical development of queer is to be sought in a far more serious and deeper fault, of an epistemological and theoretical nature: even though the texts which established queer studies as a lively and innovative voice in the academic and political arenas were published almost thirty years ago, queer studies have yet to develop any kind of research programme which can give indications as to *how* exactly its mission of questioning and deconstruction could be carried out.⁷

⁷ As I remarked at the outset, I do not believe that the constitutive plurality of queer could (or should) ever be reduced to a unity, and therefore I do not envision *one* such programme: I am simply deploring the absence of *any* consideration, debate or proposal about the methods, instruments and procedures which might be most suited to carry out the mission of queer *however defined*. I am perfectly aware that the definition of queer I share with my colleagues in CIRQUE is but one among an indeterminable, and constantly increasing, number of possible and practiced

The availability of such a research programme would have two effects on queer studies, both unconditionally positive. On the one side, by making the applicability of queer more general and abstract, it would make it possible to extend queer analysis to fields of experience which have not only been neglected by queer studies⁸ so far but which are socially (and thus politically) invisible;⁹ on the other, through the development and use of procedures focused on the most concrete details of particular phenomena, it would make it possible to perceive, observe and demonstrate the repressive action of normativity in the most mundane, and apparently most benign, everyday situations, thus opening up the vast but closely watched field of everyday “normalcy” to critical awareness and political action.

As mentioned above, the fundamental theoretical premise of this proposal is the self-presentation of queer (expressed in a number of authoritative statements which have marked and shaped its history from the very beginning) as a theory defined by *self-transcendence*, by an unrest (existential and ethical even more than intellectual) which leads it to push the boundaries of its own applicability ever further and, as a consequence, to explore ever new fields of reflection and activity, not only theoretical, but also and above all social and political. I firmly believe that the most productive, and at the moment certainly the most innovative, way in which queer can transcend itself, is by daring to accomplish a leap from a lower logical level to a superordinate one, moving from the plane of the critique

definitions, whose plurality I welcome and enjoy; and I am also well aware that the methodological proposal I am advancing in this paper is, inevitably, dependent on this definition, and of no interest to those who do not find the definition useful. But I cannot help wishing that the people who have developed other definitions of queer would come forward with their own proposals for research programmes which take those definitions as their starting point, and which show how to apply them to the analysis of concrete texts and situations (for instance, I have tried to show how the definition of queer which inspires my own work can be applied to the interpretation of literary texts in DELL'AVERSANO 2017); and the reason I wish they would is that I feel that this would enable me to learn a great deal from their work.

⁸ An exciting example is YERGEAU 2017.

⁹ This is the point, both theoretical and political, of my personal elaboration of queer in an animal rights perspective (DELL'AVERSANO 2010): animals, and the humans who stubbornly continue, in the face of contempt, ridicule, stigma and oppression, to support them, to love them, and thus necessarily to suffer without any possibility of comfort, for them and with them (humans who are, with very few exceptions, fairly marginal to begin with, and whom their love of animals will push down into even greater marginality..) are the focal case of the condition described by BUTLER 1990: viii: “to live in the social world as what is ‘impossible’, illegible, unrealizable, unreal and illegitimate”. That most of my readers will find this claim shocking or ridiculous is actually powerful evidence of its truth.

of the *contents* of particular categories, or of the *modes* of particular performances, to that of the analysis of the establishment, of the use, and of the function of the very *procedures* of categorization and performativity, and of their existential, gnoseological, psychological, social and political effects, with the purpose of questioning them, both in theory and in practice. And I would like to emphasize that what might appear to be a move towards the abstract, with an exclusively theoretical scope, entails on the contrary quite concrete implications, and immediate, and momentous, ethical and political consequences: such a move would make it possible to perceive, and thus to question and to oppose, the repressive action of *all* forms of categorization and of *all* the performances which constitute them; this would enable us to realize that what Butler describes as

a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production [...] (BUTLER 1993: 95)

is part of the experience of a vast number of people in a bewildering variety of situations. And this realization that “up close nobody is normal” is not merely of considerable theoretical interest, but of momentous political significance, since it offers the necessary premise for building what Angela Davis (2011) describes as a “new majority” made up of “old minorities”, who can and must fight together.

If we are willing to put this idea to the test, we cannot help noticing that the birth of queer theory, in this most abstract, but for this very reason most productive sense, predates by far both Butler and Kosofsky Sedgwick’s synchronous work and De Lauretis’s fortunate terminological creativity, but must instead be located in the years between 1964 and 1972, when Harvey Sacks, as he was establishing conversation analysis, devoted a big part of his analytical acumen and theoretical brilliance to the study of the social use of linguistic categorizations, and to analyzing ordinariness not as a trait but as an activity, as the result of “work”.¹⁰ Indeed. in the first

¹⁰ In order to explain more clearly what I am claiming and what I am not claiming, a number of terminological clarifications might be in order.

First, it might be useful to remember that “queer”, like any descriptive term in the humanities and social sciences, can be used in two ways: either historically, to refer to a cluster of events occurring together in time, or theoretically, to abstract from these event a set of defining characteristics which can potentially recur in any historical moment or context. Thus, it can plausibly

lecture of the Spring 1970 course, “Doing ‘being ordinary’” Sacks argues at least two things which are of huge relevance to queer theory: one is that “all sorts of nominalized things - personal characteristics and the like” (that is, not just “being ordinary”, but arguably also “being American”, “being disabled”, “being a man/woman/child”, “being straight/gay”, “being young/adult/old”, and so on *ad infinitum*) “are jobs which are done, which took some kind of effort, training, etc.” (SACKS 1992: II, 216). Another is that his critique of “ordinariness” and, indeed, of “all sort of nominalized things” is the real point of the course he will be teaching (and, therefore, one can assume, of Conversation Analysis as a discipline), and that the point of becoming aware of the workings of social categories is not merely theoretical, but political:

Usually I start the course by doing what I do in the course, without any programmatic statements, without any indication of why it should be of any interest to anybody. But - and this may be unfair - the course will turn out to be much more severely technical than most people could possibly be interested in, and some good percentage will drop out, and usually that has the consequence that they get nothing out of the class if they last one time. So I decided to spend the

be argued that Callimachus’s attitude to mythology was postmodern, even though historically postmodernism originated in the 1960s, and without being accused of making the ludicrous claim that Callimachus was familiar with the work of Baudrillard; it can be argued that Virgil’s reading of Greek epic was classicist even though it predates historical Classicism by sixteen centuries, and so on.

With regard, more specifically, to what I am arguing here about the relationship between the work of Harvey Sacks and queer theory, it might be useful to further distinguish among genealogical, historical, and chronological relationships: a genealogical relationship exists when direct contact can be proved: for instance, between Teresa De Lauretis use of “queer” in *differences* and the use of the term by subsequent queer theorists; a historical relationship does not necessitate direct contact but only the sharing in a common socio-cultural environment: for instance, Darwin and Wallace worked quite independently at two separate versions of evolutionary theory which are both part of the history of life sciences in the West; a chronological relationship can be established in the absence of cultural contact, purely on the basis of the relative positions of two events in time: an example is the Phaistos disk, which in no way influenced the *history* of printing processes, to which it has no *genealogical* connection, but which *chronologically* is indisputably the first documented occurrence of movable type in the history of the West.

Based on the above definitions, what I am claiming is no more (but also no less) than this: that, *if* the definition of “queer” I proposed above is accepted, and *if* queer is accepted to have (as any other descriptive term in the humanities and social sciences) both a historical and theoretical meaning, then Sacks’s work on categorization processes is the first known instance of queer theory. Of course, given the complete lack of contact, up to this moment, between Sacks’s theory of social categories and queer theory, the import of my claim is not genealogical or historical but exclusively chronological. For a similar claim about the momentous relevance to queer theory of the scholarly tradition of which Sacks is a part see LOVE 2015.

first time telling people something that I take it could hardly *not* be of interest to them. Then, when they drop out, they'd at least have gotten what I figure would be worth the price of the course. And I guess I should say if this isn't absorbing, you could hardly imagine how unabsorbing the rest will be.

[...]

The loosest message is that the world you live in is much more finely organized than you'd imagine. [...] I'll be saying some things about why the study of storytelling should be of interest to anybody. But people don't have to stay around after that to have caught that message, and to have been *armed* with some materials that would permit them to wander around *noticing things that they might not have noticed*, and *find them ghastly* (SACKS 1992: II, 215; first emphasis Sacks', others mine).

According to Sacks himself, the point of doing what he is doing is, of course, as with any scientific endeavour, to become able to notice things which would otherwise have escaped our attention; but this enhancement to our perceptual abilities must necessarily be accompanied (“noticing things [...] and”) by a change in our attitude; and the attitude Sacks prescribes to us has nothing in common with the ones which are usually taken to “naturally” accompany the performance of the social identity of the scholar, such as “neutrality”, “impersonality” or “scientific detachment”: once we have noticed these things, we are not supposed to merely find them interesting or to write papers about them and to seek to publish them in high-impact journals: we are supposed to have a reaction to them which is both ethical and political: to “find them ghastly”. This is the reason the materials Sacks presents to us are, according to him, something we are “armed with”: because they are supposed to be used not only for intellectual critique, but also for political rebellion. And that this viewpoint was shared at least by one other person among the founders of Conversation Analysis is shown by the fact that, when Gail Jefferson (long before she edited a complete edition of Sacks's lectures; indeed, when nobody could have anticipated that such an edition would ever come into being) was asked to produce a short paper which would exemplify the scope and import of Sacks's work, she chose this lecture as its beginning, and did not edit out these remarks (SACKS 1984).

Therefore, it can be argued that Sacks's enterprise, his denaturalization of social categories and of the “work” they entail, exactly paralleled the one Butler would carry out almost twenty years later through her use of the

now-popular term “performance”, and anticipated its momentous ontological consequences.

It would not be possible to convey a clear vision of the perspectives and problems which would be opened up by a serious and systematic effort to apply Sacks’s ideas about categories to queer theory without first giving some information on the present state of Sacks’s work. In 1975, when he died at forty in a car crash, Sacks had published about a dozen articles, but was renowned internationally thanks to the transcriptions of his lectures, which had been circulating for about a decade among sociologists, psychologists, and linguists all over the English-speaking world, and which had made the discipline he founded, conversation analysis, extraordinarily lively and productive even though it still lacked a set of officially codified procedures.¹¹ All surviving lectures have been published in 1992 under the editorship of Gail Jefferson (Sacks’s first student and the creator of the transcription system which is now used by conversation analysts the world over). What is at present publicly accessible of Sacks’s work on categories is contained in the *Lectures*;¹² thus the conceptual and methodological foundations of the research programme I am envisioning for queer studies must be sought in the *Lectures* (more accessible texts, like “On doing being ordinary” (SACKS 1984), were put together after Sacks’s death from various parts of the *Lectures*). The *Lectures* are transcriptions of oral texts addressed to an audience of absolute beginners; moreover, they span a period of nine years, during which Sacks’s interests and theories underwent changes of direction influenced by a variety of factors which are now

¹¹ What is left of Sacks is incomparably more interesting, more intense and more meaningful, both intellectually and existentially, than anything I may ever hope to write, here or elsewhere; one consequence of this awareness is that I have tried to give space to Sacks’s own voice in my argument, to act as a conduit through which my readers (assuming they exist...) will have direct, though partial, access to the words of one of the most brilliant minds of the twentieth century, whose work is still practically unknown beyond a narrow circle of specialists... I will try to be honest: my work in queer studies will have been worthwhile if at least some of my readers (supposing they exist...) will be led by what I write to do two things: 1) denaturalize the socially prevalent description of some of the objects which are normally found on their plates and 2) read at least “On doing ‘being ordinary’” (SACKS 1984); incidentally, the two things are far from unrelated, as an even cursory and superficial consideration of what Sacks writes on emotion and experience should be enough to show.

¹² In the Department of Special Collections of the UCLA library there are 144 boxes of “notes, drafts, diaries, unpublished lectures, tapes, lectures, and miscellaneous materials related to the life and work of Harvey Sacks” (<http://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf8s2o09gs>); it is impossible to imagine how many world-altering discoveries could be made by philologists, if only philologists were interested in studying them...

almost invariably impossible to reconstruct: as a consequence, they are full of discontinuities, inconsistencies, and repetitions. Sacks's ideas on categories have therefore never received a definitive and systematic formulation but must be retrieved by slowly and painstakingly establishing a system of cross-references and, partly, by inferring links between scattered sections of the *Lectures*, which are not explicitly connected but which must be considered together in order to flesh out or systematize the definition of the various concepts and of the ways they should be applied. In what follows I would like to present some examples of the way this work should be conducted, and of the results to which it might be expected to lead, so as to make it possible to evaluate its promise.

I will limit my analysis to three samples, focusing on three concepts selected according to two criteria: their ease of understanding for an audience I assume to lack any familiarity with Sacks's thought (which is quite complex), and their relevance to the present theoretical and political priorities of queer; my intention in doing so is to build a bridge between a more "traditional" understanding of queer and the one I am proposing. The concepts I will consider are "accountable action", "category-bound activity", and "doing being ordinary". The examples will be aimed to illustrate the way these concepts make it possible to reformulate core issues in the present debate on sexuality and gender (which is of course central to the prevalent present definition of queer) by introducing a new, rigorous, and productive perspective, one which makes it possible to articulate a properly queer position. As such, this position will be shown to be distinct in several cases not only from that of a generic progressive liberalism, but also from a specific alignment with LGBTI values and priorities. The, admittedly more exciting, task of showing how a systematic consideration of Sacks's work can make it possible to redesign and reconceive queer, both theoretically and politically, will be the object of subsequent papers.

2. THREE EXAMPLES

2.1 HOMOSEXUALITY AS "ACCOUNTABLE ACTION"

In the very first of his *Lectures* Sacks introduces the concept of "accountable action":

what one does with "Why?" is to propose about some action that it is an "accountable action". That is to say, "Why?" is a way of asking for an account. Accounts are

most extraordinary. And the use of accounts and the use of requests for accounts are very highly regulated phenomena (SACKS 1992: I, 4).

Among the social rules regulating “accounts”, one is that not all activities can be considered “accountable”:

A: Hope you have a good time.

B: Why?

The “Why?” here is quite apparently a paranoid return, and the whole conversation from which this comes makes it quite clear that the person who produces it is paranoid (SACKS 1992: I, 19).

Treating a “non-accountable” activity as “accountable” entails the risk of a (more or less official) psychiatric diagnosis, or at least of the far from friendly reactions described by Garfinkel in his reports about “breaching experiments”.¹³

Just as relevant to the pragmatics of the concept of “accountable action” are two of Sacks’s remarks in other parts of the *Lectures*. First of all, “accounts” are always potentially controversial (“the task of the person who is offered the account can then be to, in some way, counter it” SACKS 1992: I, 5); moreover, the adequacy of any account is assessed by the person who requested it, who has the right to question or reject as they see fit; as a consequence, labeling something as “accountable” implicitly, and almost necessarily, means to put the person who is called upon to deliver the “account” in a position of inferiority, since to deliver an account means to find oneself at the mercy of the listener, who is free to accept, question or reject the account; this can be psychologically and socially devastating. Second,

Variations from ‘normal’ are noticeable phenomena. [...] And if the product of some monitoring comes up with one of the variant states, that provides that that

¹³ Harold Garfinkel, the creator of ethnomethodology (a branch of sociology which studies the methods used by members of a culture to make sense of reality, particularly by explaining their own and other people’s actions) considerably influenced Sacks; when the two first met Sacks was working with Erving Goffman towards a PhD degree in sociology, while Garfinkel was a professor of sociology at UCLA. One of the most original methods envisioned by Garfinkel to study social norms are the so-called “breaching experiments”, where in an everyday social situation someone deliberately and systematically breaks one of the most basic rules which should govern the interaction. If anyone should be interested in spicing up their social life, they will glean useful suggestions from the second chapter of GARFINKEL 1967, “Studies of the routine grounds of everyday activities”.

state is noticeable, and provides, then, an occasion for an account of that variant state. That is, it provides for an inquiry being launched as to how come it's that (SACKS 1992: I, 58).

This means that “accountability” is a social property of states which are perceived as “variations from ‘normal’”.

No particularly fertile theoretical imagination is needed to realize that the concepts of “accountable action” and of “non-accountable action” might prove invaluable to a queer analysis. For instance, all theories of the origin of homosexuality, simply because they aim at an “explanation” and offer an “aetiology”, present it by definition as “accountable”, and therefore, according to an implicit but inescapable logic, as “abnormal”; in a queer perspective (which, in this as in other cases, is rather sharply distinct from the LGBTI liberal-progressive-civil rights one), theories of homosexuality are not either “good” (politically conscious choice in the era of “any woman can” lesbian feminism, biology today, God only knows what tomorrow...) or “bad” (perverse whim, neurosis-inducing effect of a queerogenic mother, seduction by a creepy pedophile who should have been castrated earlier...): rather, the only good theorist of homosexuality is a dead one, since to subscribe to *any* theory of homosexuality implicitly means to define homosexuality as “accountable”, which of course is something nobody would dream of doing with heterosexuality. That this fraudulent asymmetry can be exploited in more or less repulsive ways does not rend the asymmetry itself less epistemologically untenable, or less politically pernicious. The only consistently queer reaction to such attempts, completely independent of their “contents”, is to use against them the same gnoseological construct on which they are based, presenting as “accountable” not the phenomenon they would like to “explain”, but the very act of looking for an explanation (for example organizing academic conferences on “Why study the origin of homosexuality? A sociology of science issue”), or reversing the use of the “accountability” device (“The aetiology of heterosexuality: a comparison of theories in an interdisciplinary framework”).

2.2 FEMININITY AS THE ARCHETYPE OF DEGRADATION

In a broad range of sociocultural contexts, from ancient Greece,¹⁴ to Palermo or Naples today,¹⁵ a curious phenomenon can be observed. The stigma of sexual deviance, with all its devastating social consequences, does not accrue equally to both partners in a male homosexual interaction, but only to the “passive” one, while whoever takes up the “active” role (which is assumed to coincide with penetration) does not incur any stigma, and continues to regard and define himself, and to be regarded and defined, as unquestionably “manly”.

The rather peculiar logic on which this asymmetry is based can be elucidated by reference to a central theme of Sacks’s thought on categories, specifically on how categories are used not only to classify members of a society but also – indeed, chiefly – to order and generate information about them:

It seems that there is a class of category sets. By ‘category sets’ I mean just that: A set which is made up of a group of categories. There are more than one set, each of which can be named, and they have common properties. And that is what I mean by referring to them as a ‘class’.

A first thing we can say about this class of category sets is that its sets are ‘which’-type sets. By that I mean that whatever number of categories a set contains, and without regard to the addition or subtraction of categories for that set, each set’s categories classify a population. Now, I haven’t made up these categories, they’re Members’ categories. The names of the sets would be things like sex, age, race, religion, perhaps occupation. And in each set are categories which can classify any member of the population. I call them ‘which’-type sets because questions about any one of these can be formulated as, “Which, for some set, are you?”, and “None” is not a presumptive member of any of the categories. [...] And of course for some of the sets you don’t have to ask the question.

A second thing we can say about this class of category sets is that its categories are what we can call ‘inference rich’. By that I mean, a great deal of the knowledge that members of a society have about the society is stored in terms of these categories. And by ‘stored in terms of’ I mean that much knowledge has some category term from this class as its subject. [...]

A third feature is that any member of any category is presumptively a

¹⁴ The seminal work about Greek homosexuality is of course DOVER 1978; a thorough, very useful sourcebook in translation is HUBBARD 2003; stigmatizing references to “passive” male homosexuality abound in Aristophanes, Martial and Juvenal among others.

¹⁵ See for instance Barbagli and COLOMBO 2001: 90, MASSAD 2002, WHITAKER 2006, BARBAGLI, DALLA ZUANNA, GARELLI 2010: 145-146, GUARDI and VANZAN 2012: 113-114, BURGIO 2016.

representative of that category for the purpose of use of whatever knowledge is stored by reference to that category (SACKS 1992: I, 40-41).

According to Sacks, a central property of categories is that they are organized in sets which have three features: 1) the categories in each can be used to classify *all* members of a society (for example, everybody *has to have* an age and a sex); 2) the information a society creates and circulates about its members is connected to these categories (it is commonly believed that certain characteristics can be ascribed to people of a certain age or of a certain sex); 3) these attributions pertain to *all* members of a category (“that is what children/women are like”).

Among the information necessarily and essentially connected to categories is the attribution to specific categories of certain activities, which Sacks accordingly labels as “category-bound activities”:

Let’s introduce a term, which I’m going to call ‘category-bound activities’. What I mean by that is, there are a great many activities which Members take it are done by some particular category of persons, or several categories of persons [...] (SACKS 1992: I, 241).

It is quite obvious that, according to a sufficiently high number of people who are lamentably lacking in imagination, penetrating and being penetrated are “category-bound activities”, and that the categories to which they are bound are, respectively, “male” and “female”; it is therefore not surprising that common sense should consider the “category-bound activity” of being penetrated (or even its possibility, however vague, abstract and remote) as a sufficient pretext for a “female” categorization, and therefore for the stigmatization of all those who dare to question their own categorization as “male” by engaging in an activity which is “category-bound” to “female”.

Yet, however simplistic and specious the logic which considers a single “category-bound activity” as sufficient to question an individual’s categorization, its functioning does not explain the strongly negative connotation which is unanimously attributed to any trace, suspicion or paranoia of “effeminacy”.¹⁶ And, unfortunately, by “unanimously” I do not refer only,

¹⁶ And which makes me personally welcome as a breath of fresh air any information about cultures in which this is not the case. For a particularly enjoyable example see BOYARIN 1997.

and not even chiefly, to backward and homophobic cultural contexts, or to people who have never seen a homosexual person (at least, not that they are aware of ...) and whose absurd and chimerical image of homosexuality is born of ignorance and prejudice.

SONO UN MASKIO E CERCO UN MASKIO¹⁷
(I am a male and I am looking for a male)¹⁸

So far there would be absolutely nothing to object to (apart from the spelling...), were it not for the fact that this is the text of a personal ad which appears on a gay website, where therefore *all* possible partners are *by definition* “males”. The rationale behind what appears to be a pleonasm is elucidated by the rest of the profile:

NO KEKKE¹⁹
(No fairies)

Evidently, for the anonymous author, the audience of gay websites can be divided into two categories: the “males” like him and the “fairies”, with whom he does not wish to interact in any way.

MASCHIOGARANTITO
MASCHIO 100% MASCHIO 100% MASCHIO 100% MASCHIO 100% MASCHIO
100% MASCHIO 100% MASCHIO 100% MASCHIO 100% MASCHIO 100%
MASCHIO 100% MASCHIO 100% MASCHIO 100%
CERCO SOLAMENTE MASCHI 100%, PER FAVORE EVITATE DI CONTAT-
TARMI... TANTO UNA VOLTA SENTITO AL TELEFONO O VISTO IN CAM SI
CAPISCE TUTTO!!!
(GuaranteedMale
100%male 100%male 100%male 100%male
100%male 100%male 100%male 100%male
100%male 100%male 100%male 100%male
I am only interested in 100% males, please do not bother to respond... it only
takes a phone call or a webcam to realize what's up!!!)

¹⁷ Here the Italian word for “male”, “maschio” is spelled with a K instead of the digraph CH; this used to be usual in text messages with a 140-character limit, and spilled over to other modes of informal written communication.

¹⁸ All translations are mine.

¹⁹ As before, here too the Italian word for “fairy”, “checca” is spelled with a K.

The emphasis with which this writer proclaims what, is after all, the universal and necessary condition for being on the website (being a “male”, just like all other users) reveals that he too subscribes to a categorization which distinguishes “100%” “GuaranteedMale[s]” from another category, who according to him wishes to pass as such (since he believes they would like to reply to his ad) but who, because of their obvious discrediting traits,²⁰ can be unmasked by even the briefest interaction via phone or webcam.

These are, unfortunately, far from being isolated cases: the short and depressing review which follows (which I could have extended *ad libitum*) is the outcome of a few minutes of browsing on one of the most popular gay personals websites in Italy, www.planetromeo.com:

cerco un maskio di nome e di fatto alla larga quindi bimbetti vari, eff o kekke nn fanno x me

(I am looking for a male in word and deed, therefore stay away kids of various descriptions, sissies or fairies they are not what I want)

sono maschile e pretendo lo stesso, fuori dalle balle checche effeminati e indecisi
(I am masculine and I expect the same, fairies, sissies and fence-sitters stay away)

NO a effeminati (ops... donne mancate) a grassi, depilati, e checche isteriche!
(NO to sissies (actually, would-be women) to fatsos, hairless, and hysterical fairies!)

MASCHIO PER MASCHIO. SE CERCHI IL CLASSICO FINOCCHIO CON ME
MARCA MALE

(A male for a male. If you are looking for a stereotypical faggot you are going to be sorely disappointed.)

Sono un uomo, sotto tutti gli aspetti e con tutti gli attributi, che si comporta da uomo. E vorrei relazionarmi con un uomo che si comporta da uomo. Non sono interessato finte donne o a donne mancate, nè [*sic*] a checchè [*sic*] isteriche.

(I am a man, in all respects and with all attributes, who behaves as a man. And I would like to interact with a man who behaves as a man. I am not interested in fake or would-be women nor in hysterical fairies)

²⁰ “Where there is a discrepancy between an individual’s actual social identity and his virtual one, it is possible for this fact to be known to us before we normals contact him, or to be quite evident when he presents himself to us. He is a discredited person” (GOFFMAN 1963: 41).

No a checche o donne mancate, no a dichiarati. Cerco uomini con la U maiuscola!
(No to fairies or would-be women, no if you are “out”. I am looking for capital-M men!)

...NO DONNE...NO KEKKE...NO POLSI ROTTI...NE GENTE EFFEMMINATA
(... No women... no fairies...no broken wrists... no sissies...)

Il Bello di essere Maskio con altri Maski! Sottolineo MASKI! NO a iperpassivi!!!
...POTETE BARDARVI CON FINIMENTI DA CAVALLO, MA SE SIETE DELLE CIUCHE...SEMPRE TALI RESTERETE!!!

(It's Great to be a Male with other Males. And I emphasize MALES. No to hyper-passives!!! You can get all slicked up like horses, but if you are female donkeys you will always stay that way!!!)

Phrases like “maskioxmaskio” (“maleformales”), “no effeminati” (“no sissies”), “astenersikekke” (“fairies need not apply”) (in endless variations, not a few of which rather crude) are ubiquitous not only in the text of the ads²¹ but also as usernames, and are often the *only* indication about the needs and preferences of the writer.²² Someone might object that these ads, however harsh and rude their language, merely express an aesthetic preference; but this is flatly refuted by the clearly insulting way in which they are phrased, which in only made legitimate (linguistically even more than socially) by the cultural prevalence of a stigmatizing categorization. For instance, it is absolutely impossible to imagine ads like the following:

*²³ I am dark-haired and I expect the same. No to blondes, manqué redheads or baldheads. I am looking for capital-D dark hair!

These expressions of contempt and revulsion, which are on a par with

²¹ The single exception being a user who, probably after an analogous experience to mine, writes “I have had enough of the phrase ‘maleformale’! I do not think I saw any women on the site!”. My first impulse was to contact him, but I would probably have been misunderstood...

²² Even more to the point, several informants confirmed to me that “lack of effeminacy” (however defined) is at the top of desirable qualities: a person who is endowed with all traits which are conventionally considered important in an erotic partner (beauty, youth, likeability, and a good-sized penis, as well as an interest in sexual experimentation), but who is “effeminate”, is instantly discarded, while far less pleasant people, as long as they are more “virile”, have no difficulty finding partners, But the most significant, and most sinister, aspect is that, according to my informants, “effeminacy” is considered in a strongly negative light even in simple socializing without any expectation of erotic involvement.

²³ I employ the linguistic convention of marking ungrammatical expressions with an asterisk.

the displays of the rudest homophobes, can be, if not understood, at least explained, by referring to an important development of Sacks's concept of "category-bound activity":

[T]he term 'baby', it's part of a set of what I'll call 'positioned categories': 'baby' ... 'adolescent' ... 'adult'. The dots mean that there are other categories in there, in various places. By 'positioned' I mean such a matter as, that 'B' could be said to be higher than 'A', and if 'B' is lower than 'C' then 'A' is lower than 'C', etc. [...].

If there is an activity 'bound' to some category of the positioned collection, then one thing that we may find about it is that if a person is a member of another such category and does that action which is bound to this category, then he can be said to be 'acting like an X', that X being whatever category the activity is bound to. And when "You're acting like an X" or things to that effect are said, that turns out to be one of two sorts of actions. If the activity is bound to a category lower than the one the person is in, then the statement is a 'degradation'. If the activity is bound to a higher category than he is in, then the statement is 'praise'. So that, say, in the case of an 'adolescent' found to be crying, they can be said to be 'acting like a baby' and that statement will be seen as a 'degrading' remark. [...]

You can then use those 'acting like an X', 'looks like an X', etc., types of statements to begin to get some of the data relevant to proving that some statement you want to show to be category-bound is or is not. And you can collect, e.g., the specific damning uses of categories, i.e., where you say about somebody 'he's an X' where it's not true, on an occasion of seeing that the thing he's done is category-bound to 'those people' (SACKS 1992: I, 586-587).

That the male/female categories in our culture are ordered in a rigid hierarchy is evident (at least...) from the absence of phrases like "he has ovaries" or "be a woman!". And this ubiquitous and actually undisputable hierarchy explains not only the ridicule with which the most diverse cultures stigmatize the "passive" partner in a male homosexual encounter, but, unfortunately, also the fierce intolerance of, and the violent revulsion for, any hint of degrading femininity by the members of a group whose continuous and prolonged lengthy experience should make them particularly sensitive to this form of stigmatization, but who, actually, do their utmost to perpetuate it. And that contempt for, and discrimination against, women in society at large is the implicit but necessary and all-powerful foundation, not only of the stigma against "passive" partners in traditional Mediterranean sexuality, but also of the ubiquitous discrimination against

“sissies” and “fairies” in the gay community nowadays, is shown, among others, by one otherwise inexplicable fact: in the gay personals the category of “fairies” is often specified by a modifier which is not generically negative but quintessentially feminine like “hysterical”, and linked to those of “effeminate” and of “manqué women”.²⁴

I am of course not implying any sort of historical continuity or of conscious consistency between traditional Mediterranean sexuality and the values, attitudes and behaviours of present-day gays: for instance, I am well aware of the fact that a large number of the authors of the “maleformale” personals are what in the Mediterranean model would be labeled as “passives”, and that they see no contradiction whatsoever between this sexual preference and their aggressive and intolerant protestations of virility.²⁵ What I am saying is that contempt against women is the underlying foundation of a variety of constructions of what we would call homosexuality, each of which is further determined by a variety of other factors. And that these factors are not only historical and social but can also be, for instance, intensely political can be appreciated by appropriately contextualizing what Sedgwick calls

the contradiction between seeing same-sex object choice on the one hand as a matter of liminality or transitivity between genders, and seeing it on the other hand as reflecting an impulse of separatism – though by no means necessarily political separatism – within each gender (SEDGWICK 1990: 2).

Sedgwick correctly locates this “contradiction” in the early history of the German homosexual rights movement, and more particularly in the conflict between Magnus Hirschfeld and Benedikt Friedländer:

The immanence of each of these models throughout the history of modern gay definition is clear from the early split in the German homosexual rights movement between Magnus Hirschfeld, founder (in 1897) of the Scientific-Humanitarian

²⁴ As well as to that of “kids” which, in the hierarchy of categories by age groups (“kid”... “man”) occupies an equivalent place to that of “woman” in the hierarchy of genders (“woman”... “man”).

²⁵ I am, however, intrigued by the use of “hyperpassives” in one of the ads. On one hand, the writer is obviously aware of the fact that “passivity” is a legitimate sexual preference, and that people who share it should not be stigmatized; on the other, he does not seem to be at ease with it. The rhetorical solution to his dilemma is the creation of a new category, “hyperpassives”, towards which he feels free to express the contempt he knows would not be tolerated if its object were “regular” “passives”.

Committee, a believer in the “third sex” who posited, in Don Mager’s paraphrase, “an exact equation [...] between cross-gender behaviors and homosexual desire”; and Benedict [*sic*] Friedländer [*sic*], co-founder (in 1902) of the Community of the Special, who concluded to the contrary “that homosexuality was the highest, most perfect evolutionary stage of gender differentiation.” As James Steakley explains, “the true *typus inversus*, “according to this later argument, “as distinct from the effeminate homosexual, was seen as the founder of patriarchal society and ranked above the heterosexual in terms of his capacity for leadership and heroism” (SEDGWICK 1990: 88-89).

However, she fails to contextualize the Hirschfield/Friedländer controversy within the larger landscape of German culture, society and politics of the time. Far from being an abstract issue of merely theoretical relevance, the conflict between a definition of male homosexuality as an intermediate stage between man and woman (and thus as a form of acceptance, or appropriation, of femininity), or, on the contrary, as a form of hypermasculinity far surpassing that accessible to mere heterosexual men (and thus as a radical and uncompromising rejection and devaluation of femininity), is but one relatively marginal aspect of a much more crucial conflict, which is both much larger and much less benign. In its original historical context, Friedländer’s hypermasculinity was affirmed – and read – as opposed not only to Hirschfield’s alternative theorizations but, much more saliently, to the doubtful and far from aggressive masculinity of Jewish men;²⁶ its contiguity with emergent “Aryan” racism is apparent not only in the fact that Friedländer was a converted Jew and a virulent antisemite, but also in the political preferences of his followers, stalwart defenders of the “Aryan race” against the contamination of “Jewish effeminacy”; Magnus Hirschfeld (like quite a few of his supporters) was of course Jewish.²⁷

The conclusion of this overview, which hardly needs spelling out, is that a rigorous and systematic queer critique cannot help but acknowledge that homosexuals and homophobes, despite their everlasting opposition, on the political level as oppressed and oppressors and often, tragically, in everyday life as victims and abusers, find an unexpected meeting point in what threatens to prove the most solid and most indisputable foundation

²⁶ Which was at the time an ubiquitous cliché, of which WEININGER 1903 is only the most widely quoted example. For a radical vindication of this construction not as antisemitic fabrication but as a real, and valuable, trait of Jewish masculinity see BOYARIN 1997.

²⁷ For more information on this fascinating issue see STEAKLEY 1975.

of untold forms of cultural identity, almost independent of time and place: a violent, rabid, crazy misogyny.

2.3 MARRIAGE AS “DOING BEING ORDINARY”

Whatever you may think about what it is to be an ordinary person in the world, an initial shift is not think of “an ordinary person” as some person, but as somebody having as one’s job, as one’s constant preoccupation, doing “being ordinary”. It is not that somebody is ordinary; it is perhaps that that is what one’s business is, and it takes work, as any other business does. If you just extend the analogy of what you obviously think of as work - as whatever it is that takes analytic, intellectual, emotional energy - then you will be able to see that all sorts of nominalized things, for example, personal characteristics and the like, are jobs that are done, that took some kind of effort, training, and so on.

So I am not going to be talking about an ordinary person as this or that person, or as some average; that is, as a nonexceptional person on some statistical basis, but as something that is the way somebody constitutes oneself, and, in effect, a job that persons and the people around them may be coordinatively engaged in, to achieve that each of them, together, are ordinary persons.

A core question is, how do people go about doing “being an ordinary person”? In the first instance, the answer is easy. Among the ways you go about doing “being an ordinary person” is to spend your time in usual ways, having usual thoughts, usual interests, so that all you have to do to be an ordinary person in the evening is turn on the TV set. Now, the trick is to see that it is not that it happens that you are doing what lots of ordinary people are doing, but that you know that the way to do “having a usual evening”, for anybody, is to do that. It is not that you happen to decide, gee, I’ll watch TV tonight, but that you are making a job of, and finding an answer to, how to do “being ordinary” tonight. [...]

So one part of the job is that you have to know what anybody/everybody is doing; doing ordinarily. Further, you have to have that available to do. There are people who do not have that available to do, and who specifically cannot be ordinary (SACKS 1984: 414-415).

In the 1970-71 lectures from whose transcripts Gail Jefferson, after Sacks’s death, assembled this paper, Sacks, about twenty years before Butler, had addressed the issue of ordinariness as the result of a continuous and systematic activity, which is pursued with unstinting effort and whose accomplishment demands, among others, the availability of a number of props. And the question of the props which are necessary to what queer theory calls the performance of normalcy²⁸ and Sacks called “doing being ordinary”, and

²⁸ It should be noted that the term “performance” and the related “performativity”, by which queer theory from Butler onwards has been referring to the iterations which produce the illusion

of their availability, marks, I believe, the most enlightening starting point to formulate a distinctly queer position on the issue of marriage equality. I hardly need to point out not only that a queer position does not necessarily identify with an LGBTI position, or even with a politically progressive one, but also that a queer position can also contrast with basic considerations of philosophy of law (just like considerations of philosophy of law could – if only philosophers of law were aware of the existence of queer theory– contrast with the most basic principles of queer theory). A ruling like 245/2011 of the Italian Constitutional court, which states that marriage is a “fundamental human right”, which therefore cannot be denied even to illegal aliens, while the same Court had established (with ruling 138/2010) that this same “fundamental human right” should continue to be denied to all homosexual Italian citizens who were not interested in entering into a heterosexual marriage, is, from the juridical viewpoint, an unambiguous monstrosity, since the present definitions of “state” and “citizenship” make it inconceivable that there should exist a right that in a state is enjoyed by illegal aliens but not by citizens.²⁹

of a stable identity, have their origin in Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical theory of social interaction; Goffman was, of course, Sacks’s doctoral supervisor, and in the *Lectures* Sacks explicitly singles out Goffman’s work out as the best possible background to his own (SACKS 1992: 1 619). It might also be of interest to observe that in BUTLER 1988, where the concept of performativity first appears, Butler explicitly references Goffman (BUTLER 1988: 528), as far as I know for the first and last time. In her 1999 “Preface” to *Gender Trouble*, Butler refers to Derrida as the origin of her reflections on the issue (BUTLER 1990: xiv; it is also important to be aware of the fact that Sedgwick uses the term “performative” with the meaning it has in speech act theory; see for example SEDGWICK 1990: 3, 9, 47-48, 82, 110, 137, 173).

Important work on the place of classical US sociology in the intellectual genealogy of queer studies is being accomplished by Heather Love; her starting point, with which I wholeheartedly agree, is that

The study of norms and deviance is central to the intellectual genealogy of queer studies. One of the key sites for this investigation is research on social deviance undertaken by postwar scholars in sociology, anthropology, psychology, and criminology (LOVE 2015: 74). [T]he field of queer studies – with its emphasis on marginality, nonconformity, and miscellaneous forms of difference [...] is unthinkable without the contributions of postwar research on social problems, including homosexuality (LOVE 2015: 75).

My own theoretical work on Harvey Sacks’s Membership Categorization Analysis and queer theory should be seen as in dialogue with hers.

²⁹ When confronted with such a juridical aberration, and with such a blatant and violent disrespect of their civil rights, the only adequate response from homosexual Italians and their allies would be mass tax objection. However, such a protest has never even been suggested or contemplated, let alone practiced. This is, to me, absolutely incomprehensible.

In a queer perspective, however, other considerations are relevant as well: marriage is not only, as the Constitutional court has rightly reiterated, a fundamental human right (not only of heterosexual illegal aliens but also of homosexual Italians!), but also a key asset for the performance of normalcy. In this perspective, the whole battle for marriage equality, both in its juridical and political aspects, and in its representation in the media, can be interpreted as a battle for the right to “doing being ordinary”, and therefore as an implicit, but momentous, validation of the absolute and objective desirability of normalcy as the only legitimate and reasonable object of anyone’s existential aspirations. Obviously, marriage is not only a prop for the performance of normalcy but it also guarantees vital legal safeguards; but it should be just as obvious that in this respect its functioning is far from optimal, and that these same (quite reasonable) safeguards could be guaranteed without any loss (actually, with some far from negligible advantages) by other, more rational and flexible, legal instruments;³⁰ and my queer side (although “side” is probably not the right way to refer to a whole...) cannot help but wonder if the systematic lack of consideration for these legal alternatives, not only in politics and activism but also by specialists, should not be ascribed first of all to the impossibility of using them as props for “doing being ordinary”.

The trouble is that the work of normalcy is far from neutral, both ethically and politically;³¹ in order to understand its effects, and the way they are achieved, we must once again refer to Sacks’s work on categories. Sacks’s interest in categorization processes is not abstract: it arises from the fundamental role categories play in all socially mediated processes, starting from those which are so elementary and fundamental that they might seem to be regulated by purely individual physiological or cognitive mechanisms, like perception and understanding; because of his interests and of his background (see note 3 above) Sacks’s analysis focuses on the categories which are used to classify those which the technical vocabulary of conversation analysis today still defines (using a term derived from Garfinkel, and ultimately from Parsons) “members”, that is, members of a society. Among these

³⁰ Such as the ones analytically and comprehensively argued for by POLIKOFF 2008, who proposes that the institution of marriage be made obsolete in order to extend legal protection to all families, irrespective of how they are constituted.

³¹ This point has been made by queer critics of the struggle for marriage equality; one of the most important arguments is WARREN 1999; see also, among (not many) others, CONRAD 2010, CLARK 2011,

categories, the most important one is “member” itself, which designates full-fledged members of a social group; one of the most important rules of its functioning, which can be inferred by linking various statements in the *Lectures*, is that the category “member” is defined by its opposition to a number of “boundary categories” (SACKS 1992: I, 71), whose function is to limit and question the right of some individuals or groups to be considered full members of society. If we wonder for what reason so many people devote such a large share of their time and energies to the not exactly productive (and far from pleasant) work of normalcy, the answer which can be inferred from the *Lectures* is that normalcy is a necessary condition to achieve member status, and to earn a number of privileges which may be regarded as negligible, and taken for granted, until we realize how easily they can be revoked:

[Y]ou could now take that point with you, and, watching yourself live in the world - or watching somebody else, if that is more pleasant - you could see them working at finding how to make it ordinary. Presumably, it would be from such a sort of perceived awareness of, for example, the ease with which, after practice, you see only the most usual characterizations of the people passing (that is a married couple and that is a black guy and that is an old lady) or what a sunset looks like, or what an afternoon with your girlfriend or boyfriend consists of, that you can begin to appreciate that there is some immensely powerful kind of mechanism operating in handling your perceptions and thoughts, other than the known and immensely powerful things like the chemistry of vision, and so on.

Those sorts of things would not explain how it is that you end up seeing that, for example, nothing much happened; that you can come home day after day and, asked what happened, report, without concealing, that nothing happened. And, if you are concealing, what you are concealing, if it were reported, would turn out to be nothing much. And, as it happens with you, so it happens with those you know. And, further, that ventures outside of being ordinary have unknown virtues and unknown costs. That is, if you come home and report what the grass looked like along the freeway; that there were four noticeable shades of green, some of which just appeared yesterday because of the rain, then there may well be some tightening up on the part of your recipient. And if you were to do it routinely, then people might figure that there is something odd about you; that you are pretentious. You might find them jealous of you. You might lose friends. That is to say, you might want to check out the costs of venturing into making your life an epic (SACKS 1984: 418-19).

[A]lthough lots of people figure that experience is a great thing, and apparently at least some people are eager to have experiences, they are extraordinarily

carefully regulated sorts of things. The occasions of entitlement to have them are carefully regulated, and then the experience you are entitled to have on an occasion that you are entitled to have one is further carefully regulated. Insofar as part of the experience involves telling about it, then the telling of it constitutes one way in which what you might privately make of it is subject to the control of an open presentation, even to what you thought was a friend.

That is to say, your friends are not going to help you out, by and large, when you tell them some story, unless you tell them a story in the way anybody should tell it to anybody. Then they will be appropriately amused or sorrowed. Otherwise you will find that they are watching you to see that, for example, you are making something big out of something that you are not entitled to make big, or something small that should have been bigger, or missed seeing something that you should have seen, all of which could be deduced by virtue of the way you requiredly formed the thing up (SACKS 1984: 428-29).

This is the reason why individuals or groups whose status as full-fledged members of society is denied with various pretexts attempt to put together a set of props for the performance of normalcy, and to make that set as complete as they can. From the point of view of the victims of discrimination, this effort can be considered legitimate, and worthy of support for progressive and humanitarian reasons. In a queer perspective, however, it has the far from negligible, indeed momentous (although easily overlooked), fault of failing to question in any way the boundary which separates full-fledged members from boundary categories: its aim is only to push it a little further, where its discriminatory effects will be felt by someone else.

The reason is that the reward for the drudgery of normalcy, the yearned-for status of “member”, cannot be granted to everyone, and the reason is not that not everyone is willing to strive for it but, quite simply, that the existence of “boundary categories” is *logically necessary* to its functioning and to its very definition. That taking refuge in normalcy always means to leave someone else out in the cold is not a cruel joke of destiny: normalcy is *designed* to leave someone out in the cold. If membership could be extended to everyone it would cease to exist as such, since its deepest structure is logically exclusive and its necessary consequence is moral blackmail: it offers the privilege not to be singled out, criticized, ridiculed, repressed, abused or murdered in exchange for the obligation to become like everyone else, to mutilate in the most cruel and systematic way all the most intimate and individual peculiarities of one’s way of being, feeling, thinking and living,

so as to make them fit the Procrustean coffin of normalcy.

Under these circumstances, the only not just consistently queer but also ethically viable attitude is, on the individual level, to refuse to lie down in it and, on the political level, to refuse to fight for the normalization of the various “boundary categories”. On the contrary, we should be aiming to highlight the repressive effects and significance of membership and of “doing being ordinary” (effects about which Sacks’s work offers invaluable insights); and to do so also, indeed chiefly, with regard to all those who are used to treating “normalcy” as an indisputable reference point, indeed as the foundation of an identity they are proud of. Those who do not feel the repressive thrust of normalcy are simply those on whom the work of repression has had the best results: those who have lost even the memory of all they had to sacrifice in order to become like everyone else. Far from being an ideal to look up to, they are the ones most in need of a liberation movement.

3. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A QUEER ETHICS

This short reference, however provocative, to a political programme is a welcome occasion to finally address the central and inevitable issue of queer ethics and politics. I believe, and this is no provocation but the direct and sincere expression of a deeply felt conviction, that the issue is not a particularly complex one. The theoretical and epistemological foundation of queer is the deontologization of categories and the consequent denaturalization of performances; from this twofold basis an ethical commitment and a political mission directly and necessarily follow which are articulated along the same two lines.

The first is the replacement of equality with difference as the criterion of inclusion. The most daring and innovative, because the most systematic, articulation of this position so far is Madhavi Menon’s argument about the relevance to Alain Badiou’s reading of Pauline universalism to queer theory (MENON 2015). Menon positions her work “against the investment in difference that marks our current iteration of identity politics”; its starting point is “taking seriously the politics of *indifference*” (MENON 2015 1-2). The core of her proposal is to “resist such a universal regime of difference that fixes difference into identity” by “institut[ing] a project of antiphilosophy that opposes the certainty of identitarian knowledge” (MENON 2015 5). Her project involves “a revolution in which the self becomes indifferent to itself”, since, as Badiou points out

it is only in individually being able to traverse differences that one can hope to prise other people's grip from their specificities. Or, rather, traversing differences while in the grip of the universal models a way of being in which people need not give up the differences by which they function in the world while *at the same time* appreciating the universal that asks them to transcend those boundaries as identity. The individual thus remains an individual marked by race, class, gender, culture even as s/he decides to give up being grounded in any of those markers (MENON 2015: 12, emphases in original).

Menon's point is not to deny differences but to deontologize them: this is what makes her argument queer:

The difference that disrupts the discourse of differences no longer performs the ontological division mandated by the term. Instead, it becomes indifference. Difference asks us to abide by the constraints of its agenda, while indifference does not require any adherence whatsoever. [...]

Even as differences exist, they cannot be translated into particular identities: differences are way stations but never destinations; indeed, universalism is a movement across these way stations that does not arrive at an ontological resting place (MENON 2015; 12).

I will term such an indifferent universalism "queer" not because it has to do with an identity one can understand as queer, but precisely because, like universalism, queerness too is marked by a desire that refuses the contours of a fixed body (MENON 2015: 15).

A such, queer universalism pushes at the boundaries of identity-specific fields that presume a stable project of subject-formation. [...] [I]t seeks to explore a non-foundationalism that takes queerness seriously enough to refuse being sutured to any one particular subject or identity. In opposition to the additive properties of LGBT studies, for instance, queer universalism undertakes the refusal of identity outlined by Lee Edelman when he notes that "queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one". The negation insisted upon by Edelman's queerness is Badiou's universal (MENON 2015: 18-19)

The only useful remark I might add is that, far from being a purely theoretical proposition devoid of any political relevance, the queer universalism Menon advocates builds on the foundations of the only two revolutionary political propositions which have ever proved able to actually make a difference in the lives of billions of people over generations: Pauline Christianity (which is the object of Badiou's argument) and Marxism (MENON 2015:

9-13).³² In both these utopian propositions “differences will continue to exist but will lose their power to define” (MENON 2015: 13). This is the reason why Pauline Christianity (unlike the welter of other faiths which competed in the burgeoning religious market of the Roman Empire) managed to infiltrate all social classes, and to attract such a numerous and diverse following from all corners of the Empire that its supplanting the Olympian pantheon as the state religion was only a matter of time: because, unlike Judaism and all other ancient religions, which defined their membership on an ethnic or social basis, it made room for all differences while at the same time emptying them of their potential to spawn dissension or conflict by denying their power to define and thus to create limits to solidarity and empathy.³³

It is, however, important to remember that even before Menon, for quite some time some of the bravest attempts in queer theory, such as EDELMAN 2004, have been moving in the direction of a radical questioning of some of the values on which the standardizing action of cultural stereotyping is

³² The tactical effectiveness – indeed, the strategic necessity – of coalition-building, that is, of overcoming definition by differences in favour of a form of universality, has of course long been recognized by revolutionaries. A memorable and useful statement in ALINSKY 1971:

For a variety of reasons the organizer must develop multiple issues. First, a wide-based membership can only be based on many issues. [...] In a multiple-issue organization, each person is saying to the others: “I can’t get what I want alone and neither can you. Let’s make a deal: I’ll support you for what you want and you support me for what I want.” Those deals become the program.

Not only does a single- or even a dual-issue organization condemn you to a small organization, it is axiomatic that a single-issue organization won’t last. An organization needs action as an individual needs oxygen. With only one or two issues there will certainly be a lapse of action, and there comes death. Multiple issues mean constant action and life (ALINSKY 1971: 76-78).

I personally find it sad beyond words that the most visible presence of Alinsky’s vision in contemporary politics is the reaction to it embodied in the “divide et impera” (divide and reign) attitude embraced as a common strategy by both the conservative elites and the populist right.

³³ That identity and social categories work in such a way as to limit empathy was very clear to Sacks:

If a trouble occurs in the world somewhere, then a characteristic way it’s dealt with is to, e.g., find which family’s trouble it is, and, it being some family’s trouble it’s nobody else’s trouble. Sometimes it turns out not to be satisfactorily formulatable as a family’s trouble in that it might turn out to be a neighborhood’s trouble. But if it’s a neighborhood’s trouble then it’s nobody else’s neighborhood’s trouble. So, e.g., crimes are by and large historically treated that way. A gets robbed or injured and that’s a problem for B and C, but is nobody else’s. And thereby, of course, one is not then constantly swamped with the troubles of the world. Instead, it turns out that people can be thankful that the troubles occur elsewhere (SACKS 1992: II, 245).

based, such as the narcissistic investment in the mirrorlike continuity guaranteed by reproduction.³⁴ When Edelman writes that “queerness names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children’, the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” (2004: 3), what he is actually calling for, in the most abstract, and therefore theoretically most productive, sense, is the dismantling of all the standardizing and homologating apparatus which produces subjects as subjects to whom rights can be ascribed, and therefore subordinates the enjoyment of any right to the willingness and to the ability to present oneself recognizably as the product of that apparatus (as rational, as normal, as human...). The extreme, and therefore the theoretically most interesting and politically most urgent form of this dismantling is of course the recognition of the rights of the subjects who are least amenable to homologation and standardization, and this is the reason why my own theoretical elaboration of queer and my own political activism have always focused on the issue of animal rights; however, the principle may, and indeed demands to, be applied in an absolutely general fashion. It is of course impossible to go into details now, but it is important and urgent to spell out at least one necessary and fundamental theoretical implication: violence is the attempt to affirm the self over the other by limiting or extinguishing their existence. Violence is practiced antonomastically on those who are different and excluded (in the first place, of course, on those who are different and excluded from the most general and foundational membership condition, the human species); this is not a historical accident but part and parcel of its definition. To renounce the dream of a community of equals in order to embrace the reality of a world of differences, to replace the narcissistic reproduction of the self, on which social uniformity with its exclusionary practices is based, with the curiosity towards the innumerable forms which the other can embody when they are left free to be, necessarily and unconditionally entails renouncing violence.

The second part of queer’s ethical engagement and political mission has to do with the denaturalization of performances. If the creation of an “oxymoronic community of difference”,³⁵ extending its inclusiveness to the

³⁴ “The Child marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity; an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism” (EDELMAN 2004: 21).

³⁵ The lovely phrase is Louise Sloan’s (SLOAN 1991).

furthest limits of the animate, is the hallmark of a queer politics, the aspiration to affirm one's self-definition against the pressures of stereotyping and repressive social categorizations is its existential and aesthetic hallmark: queer's affinity for drag is not an accident of the history of taste but the expression of a foundational and essential theoretical connection. The motto of the queer (as an individual, not as a theory) is the statement uttered by the trans woman Agrado in Pedro Almodovar's *Todo sobre mi madre*: "One is the more authentic the closer one gets to the idea one has dreamed of oneself"; her bedtime story is "The ugly ducking". And the patron saints to whom she addresses her prayer before she closes her eyes are those who in their lives pushed the impulse towards self-fashioning and self-definition to the extreme, with outcomes which proved sometimes fantastic, sometimes tragic or grotesque, but invariably moving:

My oldest brother Rheinhold [...] became a rightist, if anything, and displayed even stronger assimilationist tendencies than my father. Later he became a member of the *Deutsche Volkspartei*, and if the *Deutschnationale* had welcomed Jews as members, he probably would have joined them. In 1938 he emigrated to Australia, and when we had a reunion with him in Zürich shortly after his eightieth birthday, my wife, who was not well versed in these German matters, asked him what he really was. He answered, perhaps overdoing it a bit, "I am a *Deutschnationaler*". "What?" said my wife, "and you say that after Hitler?" "I'm not going to let Hitler dictate my views to me!" he replied. That left her speechless (SCHOLEM 1977: 42-43).

Milton "Mezz" Mezzrow, the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants in Chicago and one of the great Jazz clarinetists of his age, went so far as to declare his racial defection. After a teenaged excursion to Missouri, he remembered "the Southerners had called me a 'nigger lover' there."

"Solid. I not only loved these colored boys, but I was one of them—I felt closer to them than I felt to the whites, and I even got the same treatment they got... . By the time I reached home, I knew that I was going to spend all my time from then on sticking close to Negroes. They were my kind of people. And I was going to learn their music and play it for the rest of my days. I was going to be a musician, a Negro musician, hipping the world about the blues the way only Negroes can."

Mezzrow performed in otherwise all-black jazz bands, married a black woman and moved to Harlem. He not only declared himself a "voluntary Negro" but also became a "bad nigger". In the 1930s, Mezzrow established himself as the primary drug dealer in the jazz scene, and in 1940 he was arrested and convicted of possession and intent to distribute marijuana. When he arrived at Riker's Island, he told

the guards he was black and was sent to the segregated prison's Negro section.

In 1946 *Ebony* magazine honored Mezzrow in a feature story titled "Case history of an ex-white man", for being "one of the few whites" to have "passed through the Jim Crow portals of Negro life to live on equal terms with its harried inhabitants". Of course, the article noted, "Physically speaking" Mezzrow "couldn't pass for Negro by any stretch of the imagination; his skin is too white". Nonetheless, the article maintained, "his conversion to 'the race' has taken place largely within himself. In psychological makeup, he is completely a black man and proudly admits it" (RUSSELL 2010: 171-172).

Reinhold Scholem's voice only reaches us through his brother who, for all his philology, cannot help trying to neutralize its radical implications and its subversive thrust as much as he can ("if anything", "probably", "perhaps overdoing it a bit"). It is perhaps paradoxical, and certainly sobering, that an American popular magazine in 1946 should be able to express in the simplest and most direct way, on an absolutely similar case, a perfectly queer position. The race equivalent of the sex/gender distinction is perfectly clear to the author of the article and, judging from the matter-of-fact tone in which it is referred to, to his audience; most importantly, the possibility of "pass[ing] through the Jim Crow portals" is presented as a rare event ("one of the few"), but is far from being the object of the repressive anxiety and of the suppressive violence which normally greet attempts to question the ubiquitous and pervasive convention of the "naturalness" of social categories and the compulsory practice of their performances in the only context that matters, that of the concrete practice of lived experience; an anxiety, and a violence, which are, quite rightly, so often singled out in queer analysis.³⁶ What makes this real miracle of empathy and inclusiveness possible is the willingness of the author of the article to accept Mezzrow's word on himself, to take his subject's inner conviction as the criterion for truth; with reference to external, "objective" and "rational" criteria, Mezzrow "couldn't pass for Negro by any stretch of the imagination"; "his conversion to 'the race' has taken place largely within himself", but this much is enough, and earns him the right, as basic as it is fundamental, to define himself, for better or worse (the "Negro section" of a US segregated prison in the early

³⁶ "[P]erformance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production [...]" (BUTLER 1993: 95).

Forties was probably not a very salubrious place, and it is not unlikely that the outright self-harming extent of Mezzrow's conviction had a role in strengthening his credibility), regardless of how others would define him.

Investigating the insidious and ubiquitous workings of normative categorization is intellectually fascinating and can prove to be politically productive; but if, after investigating them, we want to overcome them, we must be ready to change something first of all in ourselves, to admit that others, *all* others, regardless of how distant from our preconceived idea of the subject, are home to a version of themselves which deserves to exist alongside our own version of ourselves, whose worth is equal to that of ours, and which must be taken seriously. And I cannot imagine a better inspiration and guide, in this hard, exhausting, and estranging journey, than the respectful, welcoming, maybe even credulous³⁷ attitude of a forgotten Black journalist of over seventy years ago.

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³⁷ George Kelly, the founder of the psychology of personal constructs (PCP), prescribes the “credulous attitude” (KELLY 1955: I, 121; 241 ff.) to the therapist as the essential foundation of professional practice and of the therapeutic relationship: this is only one of the many points of contact between PCP and queer, which could prove of momentous importance to the development of queer theory, and which I hope to explore in detail in a subsequent paper. On a more personal note, it is also the reason why, ever since I first came into contact with the international PCP community, I have made it my home.

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