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A Transdisciplinary

Journal of *Queer*

Theories and Studies

A preface to the first issue of *Whatever*

From its very beginnings, queer has again and again proved its unpredictable productivity, its irrepressible vitality, its unconditional refusal to be circumscribed, defined, tamed. Queer is, of course, well established in the field of LGBTI studies, where it has quickly achieved the worldwide recognition it deserves; in addition, today, scholars and activists the world over are spinning queer outwards in a range of new and exciting directions, such as (to name but a few) neuroqueer, animal queer, queer economies, queer pedagogies, or the queer politics of migration. Their daring and original work is a powerful testimonial to the productivity and vitality of a cluster of theories which deserve to be more widely known and applied, both in scholarship, teaching, and research, and in activism, advocacy, and policy-making.

However, scholars working in queer studies, both in and out of academia, are still often marginalized; one of the aspects of this marginalization is the dearth of publishing venues, which discourages potentially original and creative researchers from pursuing their interest in queer studies, and from contributing to the development of the field. This has a negative impact on both the queer studies community and on scholarly, social, and political discourse in general.

The purpose of *Whatever* is to host, facilitate, and promote a conversation among scholars working with queer theories, whatever their research interests, methodological allegiances, and disciplinary affiliations. We hope that this will not only contribute to the growth of queer studies as an ever more diverse and imaginative field of enquiry, where original, daring, and relevant work is conceived, produced, and shared, but that it will foster a diverse and mutually respectful community where people reflecting within the framework of queer theories will be able to to share their work, to reach like-minded readers, to initiate collaborations, to make things happen.

At its most abstract, queer's research programme hinges on the questioning of categories and the deconstruction of performances. Thus, a truly

queer approach to scholarship and research cannot but begin by questioning the categories and performances which define normal and normative scholarly identities as they are constituted, exacted, and rewarded. Two of the most fundamental constructs in the production of academic normativity are the system of the disciplines, with its definitions, boundaries, and hierarchies, and the opposition between specialists and laypeople, which entails the systematic devaluing of the latter's experiences and forms of knowledge, and the distrust of their abilities to achieve insight into their own predicament, and to elaborate viable solutions to their own problems.

The forms and devices of normativity and oppression overlap and strengthen one another. This makes any faith in a reductionist epistemology of separate disciplines not only intellectually simplistic but politically futile. Queer theory is not an idle pastime but a basic and effective tool to achieve change: it can accommodate any disciplinary perspective because the world is bigger than any possible description; it can accommodate any methodology because the world is more complex than any possible model. Questioning the disciplinary and methodological categories on which scholarly work is based does not mean to be disciplinarily incompetent or methodologically naïve: it means to have a lucid and sober vision of the limits of any method and of the arbitrariness of all disciplinary boundaries. As well as celebrating the affective roots of queer (with an allusion to Maria Bello's 2016 book, *Whatever. Love is Love*), *Whatever* aims to emphasize the difference between the lack of methodological and disciplinary awareness of "anything goes" and the responsible and self-reflective eclecticism of "whatever works". Which can, of course, be read both as an act of all-inclusive acceptance and as an affirmation of the strengths of flexibility.

In its refusal to let issues be defined and hemmed in by disciplinary boundaries, and in its aim towards the co-production of a form of situated, embodied, methodologically aware and politically active knowledge, where not only "specialists" of different fields, but also laypeople are involved, listened to and honoured, transdisciplinarity should be acknowledged and celebrated as a vital and fundamental part of any intellectually and ethically responsible project to engage and disseminate queer theories.

Whatever is double-blind peer-reviewed, online, open-access. Contributions are accepted in English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

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A queer whatever:
political figures of non-identity

Marco Pustianaz

Abstract: The essay proposes a journey through whateverness, in an attempt to rethink difference through a desire for a 'whatever difference' – a difference that is not specifically different – and a desire for a being with no specific name. The essay maps out the whateverness at work in queer theory and politics, and consists of six texts: Text 1 is "Whatever!" On exasperation"; Text 2 is "A trip to the death zone" (on Queer Nation); Text 3 is "Queer demos. Plunging into the whatever of democracy" (on Jacques Rancière); Text 4 is "The force of emptiness" (on Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau); Text 5 is "Agamben in the disco: pausal politics" (on Agamben and disco dancers); Text 6 is "Becoming whatever" (on Paul B. Preciado *Testo Junkie*).

Keywords: whateverness; identity politics; difference; empty signifier; becoming-common.

Companion playlist: The six texts of "A Queer Whatever" feature a companion playlist, consisting of six tracks. There is no exact pairing between texts and tracks. The playlist is suggested as a different way to tune in to whateverness, at least as I have sensed it while writing the essay. The tracks can be used as pauses in the reading, or in any other temporal tangle with the texts. They can be listened to in any order. Or not listened to at all. However, here is the title listing anyway:
> Emptyset, "Speak" (from *Borders*)
> Respect, "I am what I am - Mary Brazzle vocal mix" (from *I am what I am*)
> Terre Thaemlitz, "Elevatorium – Sub Dub Remix" (from *Ambient Intermix*)
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> To listen to the playlist click on this link.

Disclaimer: *Neither the author nor* Whatever*'s editorial board intend to give special support to the website hosting the tracks, or gain any benefit from linking the abovementioned tracks.*

Prelude

What follows is a journey through whateverness. It is a dangerous one, because through a politics of difference(s) queer subjectivities have learnt, and are still learning, to affirm their right to the world and negotiate the terms of what they potentially share. What follows does not deny the power

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of difference to shatter the illusion of equality, to bring new subjects into being, to resist normalization and the violent imposition of the same. However, what follows is against a politics of identity that rests upon an obligatory identification of what any difference consists of. It is an attempt to rethink difference through a different desire that fully belongs to it: namely, the desire for a whatever difference, for a difference that is not specifically different, but is on the contrary so generic that it can be translated, and does translate, into other differences. If "whatever" is such a degraded word – signaled in Italian by the feminized phrase "la qualunque" – maybe it is because it bears no respect to the differences we value and in which we invest so much. Or maybe because its obtuse power flows like an undercurrent below and across the differences we are struggling for, and against. Therefore, the desire for whatever is also a desire for a being with no specific name. Such a desire is as political as the opposite desire to be named exactly as we want. Even while fighting for our differences, our politics has also silently harboured a resistance to a difference that is only *ours*: this is the conjunction that I call whatever. In what follows I attempt to bring out the whateverness at work in queer theory and politics by intersecting high and low theory, mundane praxis and activist practice. By no means do I claim to be exhaustive. Indeed, I could have included, for instance, Karen Barad's quantum queer theory, which takes its starting point from quantum theory's principle of indeterminacy (Barad 2012), as well as François Laruelle's non-philosophy, whose radical flat ontology has been translated into queer and gender terms by Katerina Kolozova (see O'Rourke 2013), or the queer critics assembled by Noreen Giffney and Myra Hird, working on the human/non human divide (Giffney and Hird 2008). Whateverness is seeping everywhere. What I am concerned with here is showing how this need not mark a return to universalism; there is a wealth of unexplored politics hidden in the folds of whatever. What is more, it has always been there.

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Text 1

"Whatever!" On exasperation.

Uttering "Whatever!" irritates and unsettles. It is an exclamation that gives no grounds for its indifference. It can take on any meaning, while refusing to be tied to the very necessity of meaning. It refuses to name, to specify,

to pin down, using language not only to defer any referentiality, but also to deny its ultimate import. By its refusal to ascribe meaning, and to acknowledge the importance of the meanings already assigned, it functions as a magic wand, a way to disavow and make disappear the meanings by which we are made to exist socially, that is, dependently from others. Saying "Whatever!" in a conversation disengages one from the need to respond properly, to care for the continuity of social interaction. It signals a breakdown and is often used in order to bring an exchange (not unfrequently a painful one) to a close. Furthermore, being a non-argumentative reply and eschewing any reasons, it does far more than end, one-sidedly, a conversation: its aspiration is to erase its ever having happened, its consequences, its 'mattering'.

Seen as an easy way out from both rationality and relationality, there is no wonder that the "Whatever!" speech act sounds highly suspect and improductive. Politically, "Whatever!" is usually interpreted as a ground for inaction. At least in its Italian equivalent, the semantically neutral term *qualunque* has given rise to a noun, *qualunquismo*, which is virtually synonymous with political apathy, with conformism to commonly held beliefs, not necessarily because one believes in them but because they are safe common places, generic truths to live by.[1] *Qualunquismo* is inimical to critique, to resistance, to activism, as well as to politics in general. Since it avoids strife, the utterance "Whatever!" is easily driven by, or drives to, resignation. On the other hand, while seeming to affect unaffectedness (hence, its purported apathy), its acquired passivity *is* a kind of response, even though couched as a refusal: a refusal to take part. Such a refusal is not only unpromising and destructive, though: its wilful resistance to 'mattering' is also expansive and alluring. Once you find yourself saying "Whatever!" to something, you also find that more and more things fall under the spell of "Whatever!". Whateverness is contagious, it is world-making. "Whatever!" stalls any further hope and sees no promise in the future. Not only does it deflate any meaningful value in the current context, it also projects its unappealing pall over any following reprise. In this sense, its vector is powerful and its temporality timeless, flattening, and profoundly a-historical.

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[1] On Italian *qualunquismo* as a historical anti-political movement after WWII see Setta 2005.

It would be incorrect, however, to say that "Whatever!" shuns any affect.[2] As we see political apathy gaining ground, enveloping us in its numbing and slightly depressive folds, we need to grasp all the variations that compose whateverness as a complex and far from unified strategy of non-involvement. The variations that define the tonal performance of any "Whatever!" speech act are, in fact, multiple. It is true that the indifference of "Whatever!" subtracts energy to action – to antagonism rather – because the general equivalence asserted by it not only paralyses the choice between action and inaction, but also between any alternative actions (they are all the same). Nevertheless, there is a hidden multiplicity in such generic passivity, a becoming-passive that is already a form of being affected, as the exclamation mark shows. After all, "Whatever!" can hardly be pronounced neutrally. There may be a "Whatever!", for instance, that is enraged and exasperated, born in the middle of strife and conflict, especially as a result of the impossibility to sustain one's own position, or identity. If the vague indefinitess of "Whatever!" is clearly insufficient as a response because of its rather too easy vanishing act, its pointed nihilism can in fact adequately function as a *parody*[3] of the arbitrary nature of the discursive conditions determining the experience of subjection and defeat for the "Whatever!" speaker.

In one of its mundane, conversational uses I hear this exasperation, for instance, ringing (in English) in the voice of Lauren Cooper, the

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[2]   In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai covers a range of 'minor emotions' that share a kind of affective indeterminacy mediating between aesthetics and politics (Ngai 2005). See in particular her chapter on irritation, the feeling that comes closer to the exasperation I am commenting upon here. As she observes, irritation is mostly interpreted as affective opacity, a mood that lacks any definite object. Therefore, it is thought "least likely to play a significant role in any oppositional praxis or ideological struggle" (181). Rather than playing on disaffection, I wish to look at whateverness as a mode of temporary detachment, politically suspended and in search for any subsequently 'proper' attachment. The "Whatever!" speech-act I choose to investigate is also more expressive than the "underperformative" mode so acutely examined by Lauren Berlant in "Structures of Unfeeling" (Berlant 2015). However, her serious analysis of reticent aesthetic, of withholding and withdrawal shows how fruitful an engagement may be with "structures of unfeeling" that may be too diffuse and low-intensity to register as political performance, but are no less sensitive to historical becoming: "a mode of presence that can lead to things but often presents initially as a drag on the production of an event" (199). Berlant also comments on the varied resonances of "Whatever" as a reticent performance, as a form of slackness (206). I wish to thank Roberto Filippello for drawing my attention to the abovementioned works.
[3]   A parody is always a performance at the same time of detachment and debasement: a counter-performance (or 'singing', ᾠδή) carried out beside (παρὰ) a more powerful and authoritative 'song'. You sidestep and point at the performance going on without you. This causes in itself a deflation of its totality.

loud-mouthed teenager created by the English comedian Catherine Tate, whose main speech act seems to be summed up by repeated bursts of "I ain't bovvered!" (I am not bothered), as her own equivalent of "Whatever!". This "Whatever!" stands for an iterative strategy of disengagement, as if to say, "Whatever you say – or have said, or will say – I don't care". Of course, as Lauren vents her indifference by pretending not to be hurt, it is precisely the hurtful nature of social interaction that she performs upon by her claim of indifference. Her exasperation clearly shows that her careless "Whatever!" is a performative way to interrupt a discursive chain that has pushed her into a corner, a way to cease supporting it, and therefore disqualify it. While acknowledging her own subjection – saying "Whatever!" is tantamount to saying you have lost the game by default – Lauren performs her own way to escape the social effect of defeat by negating the validity of the game itself. Interestingly, the utterance "I ain't bovvered!" provides most of the comic endings of her sketches. As a comic character, she performs her own escape act and comes out winning. Her comic "whatever", in other words, far from being unaffected and non-relational, marks by its own interruption an affected and relational stance towards a specific performance of power/discourse. It is a strategy by which the defeated enjoy a come-uppance, thanks to a trump card that *always works*, by way of a renunciation. On abandoning the contested ground you avoid witnessing your own defeat, which is of course another way to concede defeat. Or it would be so, if "Whatever!" did not also perform its own sovereign indifference to dominance and subjection: indifference as a powerful leveller of sorts. Of course, just because it always works (in the fantasy of the "Whatever!" speaker, anyway), this is a politics that defeats politics. However, it is also an affirmative instance (in the case of Lauren, a rebellious one) of disengagement and disidentification from the terms that are causing subordination.

There *is* an informal politics (a micropolitics, a swarm of politics) in the childish and unreasonable outburst of careless whateverness. By this, I do not mean a politics that is just implied, unformed, or at best uneducated (as Lauren's 'chav' stereotype of the ignorant and disrespectful working-class teenage schoolgirl would suggest). I mean a politics that, on the contrary, exposes politics as fundamentally unjustifiable and non-argumentative, despite the staged performances of speech (of rhetorics) in which it revels. Such exposure is in fact so explicit as to belie an open secret, that is, a

secret that no one is supposed to tell, not just because everybody already knows it, but because, if told, it would also consign discursive exchange to hopelessness: "Whatever I say, I will always lose out given the discursive conditions in which I am forced to play". Or, conversely, "Whatever *you* say, you will always win given the discursive conditions...". The pretended not-mattering of the rhetorical argument ("whatever!", "whatever you say...") serves to shift the attention to the grounds of any discursive exchange: it is *those grounds* that matter so much as to inflect differentially the access to power/meaning (let us say, the weight) inherent in whatever one says. Because of the biased weight in any power/discourse, the indifferent charge of "Whatever!" marks a scandal and performs its own useless truthfulness: by its levelling and calmly destructive annihilation of surface rhetorical divergences, a more radical, until then unexposed, power differential shows up through the cracks.

When this happens, a certain unsustainable weight of speech emerges, so that what matters is now the possibility of address itself, rather than what is being said. This is why the indifference of "Whatever!" points to the bare ground of that *Ur*-difference, a throw-back to constitutive differentiation in the access to meaning. This is why listening to "Whatever!", and sometimes even succumbing to it, means to partake in a strategy of indifference that sees through the constitutive limits of representation. It also marks the moment when we come up against the pure contingency and lack of justification that underscore our enunciative positions. It is the moment that marks our being subdued, as well as the moment in which we step aside in order to decry it and effectively – impolitically – suspend it.[4] By stepping aside, we become a different anyone, a singularity that refuses to be named by the terms of a certain engagement. Having uttered "Whatever!" we freefall and drop out into an unnamed territory, politically uncharted. Blank, un-differentiated, asocial, a kind of hopeless, yet also hopeful, emptiness. To some it means disappearance, to others it may signal the beginning of heterotopia, hence another form of appearance. As

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[4]   As Roberto Esposito argues, the impolitical has nothing to do with depoliticization; it is, on the contrary, "the extreme outcome, the 'ulterior' outcome, in the strong sense of the word, reached by a political critique of depoliticization; and for that reason its relationship to it is one of intrinsic opposition" (Esposito 2015: 82). More pointedly still, "This absence *in* the present, this decoupling from the present, this disjuncture between that which merely exists and yet is *all* that exists, bears the title 'impolitical' (80). Despite its blank opacity, "Whatever!" enacts such a disjuncture, a decoupling that undermines a specific arrangement of differences.

we will see, this *terrain vague* is of crucial importance for much of queer theory. Despite all appearances, queer subjectivation has a lot to do with the notion of whateverness. My aim in what follows is to trace some of the passages that make queerness consistent with a politics that falls under the rubric of whatever. In other words, mine will be an attempt that seeks to ground politics precisely in the space that falls outside the political, i.e. the ungrounded.

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TEXT 2

A trip to the death zone.

"Queer" – it is often argued – marks a redeployment of a homophobic term, an instance of reverse discourse by which the negative interpellation is taken up again and repeated, this time with a crucial difference. Instead of singling out as queer – that is, as non-belonging, cast out – the target to which it is addressed, the term of abjection is appropriated as one that might, on the contrary, hold a promise for a new subjectivity – a subjectivity defined precisely by such a performative self-naming. According to this 'myth of origin', then, queer turns essentially around the politics of naming and self-naming through which a political subject is potentially born. As Sedgwick hypothetically suggests: "'queer' can signify only *when attached to the first person*" (SEDGWICK 1994: 8). This kind of attachment takes place through language, both the attachment *of* the term that 'sticks' to the one so named, and the attachment *to* the term that can be effected only by overcoming shame's individualizing affect. Only by repeatedly turning against itself the hate speech term, one can learn to own it, survive its blow and install a reparative meaning within the term itself. However, by focusing so much on linguistic strategy and pinning all our political hopes on reframing the way we are called and call ourselves, we may well miss, or marginalize, an alternative account of queer subjectivity that is far less rooted in linguistic agency as such. After all, what if one has never been addressed as "queer" *in the first person*? What if one is not, by chance, anglophone or has been addressed by other terms, each casting a different burden than "queer"? What if, finally, the queer subject is already figured as dead, beyond interpellation?

One of the first uses of "queer" as a term of political resistance, in fact, sees

it coupled with another that somehow runs counter to the first-person street scene scenario of interpellation that is evoked by Judith Butler's revision of Althusser (Butler 1997): "nation". It seems that queer subjectivity emerged already collectivized, without the necessary time for the preliminary development of queer subjects, each one of them pondering in the first person the chances of reverse discourse and then coming together on the strength of a shared identity. When "queer" erupted on the American streets in the late '80s and early 90's it was as a lumpen group or mass, defined biopolitically by its being discounted as part of the (American) nation.[5] It was death by AIDS, or better death by State negligence, moral panic and securization, that created the queer as the nation of those who suddenly found they were disposable, or even dangerous to the "Nation". Thus, "queer" served to name the "nation" that was no longer of the Nation, despite the illusion of inclusion that the latter term conjures up. This spelled out a far more threatening prospect than 'just' getting AIDS: it was social death preceding or even replacing biological death, a doubling of death one of whose effects was the blurring of the distinction between the living and the dead. In particular, the AIDS crisis at its height marked the time and site where the notion of Nation split up into that of a 'general public' – its healthy (heterosexual) core – whose immunity had to be preserved at all costs, and that of a 'risk group' whose health (whose life) had already been foregone.

It is not identity, then, but 'bare' survival that provided the common ground to those who literally insisted on coming back from the dead zone, like veritable zombies.[6] As Samuel Chambers has pointed out, the slogan "We're here, we're queer, get used to it" does not attach any particularized meaning to "queer" (Chambers 2009). It only marks the spectral insistence of those who refuse to be dead, as well as the persistent occupation of public space through the performance of one's own uncounted presence. There is nothing specific that the queer subject wants or demands from anyone, then, except asserting its own visibility, weight and body, pitted against the visibility, weight and body of the 'general public' that has come to hijack the Nation. As a matter of fact, in this original context queerness has no meaning outside the biopolitical emergence that marks the struggle around the concept of the Nation and the eugenic ideology barely masking its own exclusionary

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[5]   ACT UP was founded in 1987, Queer Nation started in 1990.
[6]   I would like to refer the reader to the chapter on queer zombies in Bernini 2017, titled "Resurrections", for a different take on queer zombification through a reading of B-movies.

character. It is neither as gay nor lesbian, nor as any other sexually identified subject, that the queer body takes shape on this evental horizon. If anything, queer signals the moment when sexuality ceases to operate as a potentially autonomous and differentiating force and allows itself to be legible as a dispositif, that is, an arrangement of heterogeneous planes of bodily existence capable of social meaning. The 'public body' that is the productive outcome of such a will to health is the only body that will bear reproduction as the "Nation". It is this 'knowledge', gained at the expense of one's own body – a body that can never be made 'public' –, that materializes the queer subject beyond any of its previous sexual (and/or gender) identities.

What can we say of this nation? Whereas the term "community" speaks of a positive social bond forged through everyday common practices of belonging, a "nation" is a generality that is altogether more abstract and, above all, unchosen. Claiming a queer nationhood marks a certain insufficiency in the positive communitarian identities that are no longer sustainable, faced with a crisis that far surpasses sexuality *as such*. Survival now entails the radical claim to generality at the precise historical moment when that generality is found working for the survival of only 'some'. How can a generality fail so tragically to acknowledge anyone, whomever? How can a generality still maintain its name after being proved so fatally particularizing? The lesson that we can draw from this ground zero of politics is that a generality is a biopolitical dispenser of life and death, dealing with division, partition and distribution, in this case of health and life-chances. As one ACT-UP poster by the Gran Fury collective tentatively wonders: "When a government turns its back on its people, is it civil war?".
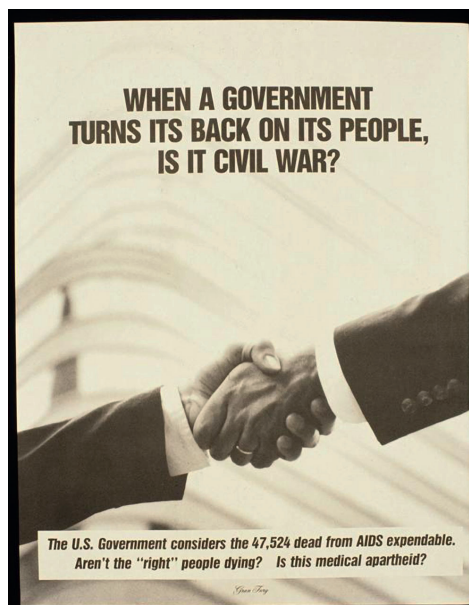
The visual image starkly refers to the (male) social contract that has been broken by the AIDS crisis, thus not only suggesting that the "medical apartheid" racializes those subjects whose lives are expendable (like today, black lives do not matter) but also daring to posit the "queer nation" as the general stand-in for all the "people". Once the 'general public' betrays the universality that it should uphold, it is only as "queer" that the nation must forcibly occupy that role: the nation of those betrayed and fraudulently denied access to the 'general public'. Therefore, it is neither a totality nor a specific sexual identity that turns the queer into a nation; it is the what-everness of its constituent members, temporarily identified through their negative equality (the equality of what they do *not* partake).

Although I am stressing the national element in the queerness of this specific historical "Queer Nation", I do not wish to suggest a necessarily specific link with *American* national discourse.[7] On the contrary, the trau-matic emergence of a queer nation is far from being limited to the USA in the late '80s and early 90's. Queer "nation" marks the limit, or threshold, at which a certain discourse around the Nation's body dramatically col-lapses under the failure to sustain its own fantasy of inclusion. AIDS and the queer nation produced by it are not in this sense a state of exception at all. The AIDS crisis only inscribed the earliest instance of a neoliberal paradigm that has multiplied the production of biopolitical thresholds ever since. Queer is the non-specific name for the people when it comes under the threat of elision through the loss of generality. It is at the deathbed of the subject that the people's "rightfulness" must be defended. Rightful-ness is not a demand for rights: this would make it specific to each subject requesting them. Rightfulness is a call to generality produced by a specific erasure: democracy must extend up to the limit of death and within its folds, or it is nothing. "Aren't the 'right' people dying?". This statement, couched in the form of an interrogation, reclaims death to politics, which is in itself one of the most shattering biopolitical contributions that a queer nation can lay claim to.

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[7]   For a reading that embeds Queer Nation's strategies of camp nationalism in the specific American context see Berlant and Freeman 1993. They emphasize the transgression of the cat-egorical distinctions between sexuality and politics carried out by QN and privilege an "*erotic description*" of the political (196); I, on the other hand, follow another route, which serves to link this section to the next on Rancière's *demos*. In doing so, I am aware that I am pushing an AIDS-inflected reading of QN, which is only part of the story.

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Text 3

Queer demos. Plunging into the whatever of democracy.

If the queer nation lays a radical claim to generality insofar as it is disallowed to represent it, what is at stake is the identity, or non-identity, of the *demos* that is the source of rule in a *demo*cratic nation. According to this myth of origin, queer was born as a nation even before we could speak of a queer subject: it is a we that is not made up of any preceding I's, and its name is a common name that already names a nation without really caring whether it is appropriate as a name for each of its singularities. Whatever! Referring back to Sedgwick's hypothesis, we might venture to add the following: "'queer' can signify only when attached to the first person *plural*", as long as we think of this plural as a *pluralia tantum*, a plural without a singular person. Thinking queerly as a nation means taking on board the roots of democracy, the extent of the claims to generality, the exclusions that drive its representational agenda and the materialization, or dematerialization, of embodied subjects as belonging or not-belonging to the people. This will mean tackling queerness in its generalizable whateverness, rather than specifying all the staggeringly multiple differences that compose it. The materialization of a queer nation is of a different scale and nature than the materialization of any singular body: the articulation between the two is hardly a matter of individual agency. This is why the body of the queer nation cannot be anatomized by looking at the bodies of each of its own members. Such indifference, however, is a measure of its democratic weight. The name "queer" is not able to name all the differences it contains, or will contain, because it does not know them. As a consequence, it cannot even be asked to acknowledge them one by one, singularly, according to their own specific right.

Maybe this is part of that "critical distance" that separates "queer" (and queer theory) from terms such as "gay" and "lesbian" (De Lauretis 1991, iv). The discursive horizon opened up by the queer name is less about the articulation of, and between, each difference than a radical enquiry on what difference those differences make so that they cannot ever be generalizable. What disables them from functioning as the generality? It is their disability that turns them into a nation, rather than what each of them is able to do

for themselves. In other words, it is their non-identity that makes them political, over against what singularizes them. This also means re-centering democracy around its excluded core, of which the queer nation is one of the critical figures. Rather than figuring queer subjects as the abjected beyond its margins, queer theory may enjoin us to rethink democracy through the *return* of the abjected, that is, through the possibility – inevitable indeed for democracy – of generalizing what has been abjected. We need a queer theory to account not for queer subjects, but for a queer *demos*.[8]

Demos is not in itself a name for a specific group with specific qualities. In Rancière's reading democracy is different from any other criteria of rule essentially because it neither requires nor presupposes a quality that only some groups or classes might have. It is not the rule of the richest, or of the eldest, or of the best. In this sense the rule of power is arbitrary, i.e., is not justified by a superior quality from which it could be said to derive. It is, literally, an-archic, without an external source. It also presupposes a radical equality, which is itself ungrounded, as there can be no superior foundation or principle to which it can make an appeal. *Demos* is just the name for the embodiment of such a radical equality, not a name at all, then, but the anonymity at the heart of democracy (the "capacity of the anonymous people", Rancière 2009: 17). Unlike a liberal politics of rights, in which an oppressed subject seeks justice by claiming a specific right that has been denied and by providing the necessary proofs for one's own enti-tlement, radical equality presupposes a foundational rightfulness that is both unjustified and unjustifiable. Politics, accordingly, can only be a mat-ter of verification, a making-true of the principle of radical equality, which extends to all kinds of human capacities: a capacity to do, to be whatever. Whenever this is not verified, there ensues the political moment of dis-agreement (discord, dissensus), which disrupts an ordered "distribution of

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[8]   This is why the thinking of Jacques Rancière can be fruitful in grafting the notion of queer nation onto our decrepit democracies. What follows is my own concise attempt at such a demot-ic re-orientation of queer founded on Rancière's *Dis-agreement* (1999). In editing the *Borderlands* issue on Rancière and queer theory, Samuel Chambers and Michael O'Rourke propose a borrow-ing, or rather a theft and appropriation, that goes beyond Rancière's stated intentions, much in the same way as a host of non-queer thinkers have been made queer by a queer performance of their thought, of some detachable elements of their thought. As there is no question of asking Rancière's permission to inflect his *demos* so as to accommodate our own contingencies, so there is no question of being faithful to a queer canon: the latter, as I see it, is a chosen, asystematic af-filiation, not a lineage. The same proviso will hold true for my readings of whateverness in Butler, Laclau, Agamben, Gaynor and Preciado in the following sections.

the sensible", where, on the contrary, a distribution prevails according to a certain allotment of capacities, properties and rightful places. This regime is called "police" by Rancière, not because it necessarily resorts to force, but because it is invested in policing the boundaries of what is common, so that its force has become *the common.*

Here, indeed, is the crux of the matter, capable of determining the future of democracy: what is posited as common, so that it is shareable among the countable subjects that partake in any distribution? By deviating from the premise that what is common must be returned to the people, the true scandal of politics, according to Rancière, shows that what is common is already the effect of a certain partition, that it has already been alienated from those assumed to have nothing in common with that common. In other words, in the police order there is always a remainder, an uncounted whatever, which is "the part of those who have no part" (Rancière 1999: 30-ff.). This "part" should not be identified altogether with the marginalized, or the minorities. Insofar as they can hope for a better distribution, those groups will consent to the prevailing logic of countability, which insists on the fantasy of total inclusion. The part that has no part, however, only partakes in the nothing, because it lacks a place in the existing, tangible configuration. As a consequence, no name is able to identify it, or specify exactly who or what it is: it is imperceptible, unperceived and inexistent. Its heterogeneous non-identity affords it the only name that is 'proper' to the non-specific: *demos.*

In its non-being *demos* not only 'names' the remainder uncounted and disavowed by the police order; it also names the only locus for the emergence of politics, its source. The subject of politics can only come from the uncounted and uncountable remainder that is not part of the common, as it is the only subject capable of undoing the perceptible divisions of the police order and, by doing so, of demonstrating the contingency of that order (what Rancière calls its originary "wrong"). Its political subjectivation does not precede its own emergent action: there is no subject waiting for recognition with a name already speaking to what s/h/it is. This activist subjectivation does not accrue from the recognition of a shared identity, but from the impulse to verify radical equality in the site of its own negation. Taking action and claiming speech from where no action or speech is expected to hail is a wager that politicizes a subject in its event, an event in which it produces and discovers its new-found 'name'. Political subjects

are contingent to this event, and their own naming – including "queer" – is none other than the name for their own action.

Whenever a subject becomes increasingly identified, it becomes a part that has a part, however marginal or minoritarian. For these subjects something will always be better than nothing, once they are accounted for. Therefore, the impulse towards identification marking the transition into the police order has at least two effects: a progressive desubjectivation[9] and an increased investment in identity (that is, the part of their identity taken into account by the police order). Both processes also mark a decisive distancing from the queer moment of their political insurgence, in which they were driven to action as the uncounted by nothing less than the whateverness of their human potential. Thus, the queer whatever suddenly leaves room to a discrete negotiation that is dependent on a subtle discrimination of differences. Each will claim its own name, its own distinct right pertaining to a specific visibility in the distribution of the sensible (Rancière 2004). There is a difference between a name that specifies and identifies (i.e. produces a homogeneous class) and one that is taken up in the event of a subjectivation: the latter declassifies (names its non-belonging) and acts as a tool for the inscription of a subject "as being different from any identified part of the community" (Rancière 1999: 37). This is reflected in the whateverness of its naming: in order for this subject to come into existence its name does not have to refer to a shared positive property necessary to form a coherent group, one that can be counted, and counted upon, to repeatedly appear in a certain recognisable way.

On the other hand, it would seem that a politics based on identities must also be able to specify the exact nature of their relational difference from the other identities that make up the police order. The specification of properties goes along with a tendency for these identities to compete for the participation in the common, binding them to a consensual definition of politics that is, for Rancière, a far cry from the disruptive and dissociative aspect of a dissensual politics. Yet, this does not mean that politics is always recuperated. It just means that it can never be stabilized and embodied by the same subject. Above all, the insurgent politics of the *demos* points to a

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9   It should be remembered that subjectivation is defined by Rancière as "the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience" (Rancière 1999: 35).

paradox that is well worth attending to: although subjectivation is grounded on the principle of radical equality, on whateverness, its own performative appearance on the stage of politics can only be enacted by an embodied particularity, whose declassifying pull is already wavering under the logic of countability. If we had to translate this logic in order to assess yet again the critical distance between queer and other names that have invested in specific subjectivities, we could say that the queer *demos* exceeds counting, whereas the other require some counting. That is also why a queer nation can never be a minority. Radically equal to all other anonyms, it calls for the verification, in history, of an apriori that is both generic and generalizing.

However, we need not be melancholic about the transience of any queer political moment, or be in mourning if queer is soon captured into the web of a specific distribution of the sensible. Although the name *demos* could lead us into thinking of a unitary revolutionary subject that is dormant and ready to wake up, there is no such master narrative and no such master subject. *Demos* does not name a subject, not even a hidden one: it names the capacity of a subject. History is the punctuation of any number of these eruptions, each one with its own minor name, particularizing in specific, contingent sites and times the absent reach of radical equality. *Demos* is never about totality: it is about the return of equality as a figure of totality. Since this equality is never present, whateverness may adequately represent its equal capacity to be embodied by whatever collective subject. It is not about us, individually. Ultimately, the queer name is not an offer to be taken up by the individual in order to better express its own truer self (or singularity), but a potential for coming back as a democratic subject in order to disrupt the counting. In any case, we are not even required to feel attached to the name, only to the politics that can erupt under that name. Or under whatever name that catches up with 'us'.

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TEXT 4

The force of emptiness.

By exceeding any positive naming, queer's democratic force brings trouble not only to identity, but also to difference itself. In the short paragraph of *Bodies That Matter* titled "Queer Trouble" Judith Butler recasts the term

queer as a particular articulation of difference within identity (Butler 1993: 226-30). In doing so, she uses it to rework identity politics through a specific version of historicism. Identity is founded on repetition and citation, producing effects of stability and normativity; in other words, identity is performative in that it is an effect of interpellations that accrue a force of authority through their own iteration. As a consequence, discursive practices, such as naming oneselves, never have their origin where they seem to take root: in the subject. As part of a discursive chain, the subject can be held in place only by the temporality of a repetition, which also marks its historicity. Historicity is not just the mark of a past, but its ongoing being-repeated. Therefore, it cannot work as the foundation for a subject; on the contrary, it produces and decenters the subject at the same time. Historicity also decenters history by always binding it to a present: this bond is repetition itself, the one sure sign that something is not over, that it needs re-enacting. Identity is thus an active repetition of the conditions that ensure its recognition and self-knowledge, a repetition that is not in the hands of the subject, but happens in its site. The subject is a locus, temporally repeated (hence, terms like "subject position").

Because the subject always depends on a performance of iteration that never originates from it, its resonant emptiness manifests a knot where convergent and divergent relations of power hinder any sense of self-identity. The impossibility of self-identity introduces difference at the heart of the subject; repetition binds it to difference as constitutive for its possibility: there is no repetition without difference. The problem is how to bridge the gap between the subject's ongoing performativity and a 'positive' political subjectivity, that is, a subjectivity that latches on to the production of a subject as an originating locus of identity politics. This was arguably what the women's movement and the gay and lesbian movement had done: using the fiction of a collective subject as a source of emancipatory action. The blindspots these movements had produced, however, were by the 1980's already too evident as a consequence of the exclusionary nature of identity politics. Such exclusions do not only produce the otherness of 'Others'; they also falsely attribute a figment of unity to the subject claiming its own autonomous identity as a source of radical politics. It seems that in order to produce oneselves as political subjects, a certain degree of self-misrecognition is needed: a suspension of one's own contingency and of one's own failure to be one.

In "Queer Trouble" queer theory seems to name the self-reflexive locus where this double-bind becomes visible and gets articulated through a genealogical critique of identity, thus supplementing the "necessary error" of identity politics (Spivak) with its own 'unnecessary' difference. This difference is of a different order when compared to the difference already domesticated by identity. I'd like to dwell on the brief passage where Spivak's "necessary error" leads Butler to articulate a paradoxical relationship between democratization and politics. On the one hand, she writes, "the critique of the queer subject is crucial to the continuing *democratization* of queer politics" (Butler 1993: 227); on the other, the same move lays itself open to charges of "depoliticizing". In what sense can democratization be felt as a weakening of politics, even as its negation? Indeed, from the point of view of identity politics perhaps it must, if it is true, as Butler contends, that this politics seems to "demand a turn *against* [...] constitutive historicity". Why "demand"? Why a politics that must turn against its own constitutive terms in order to perform politically? One possible answer is that identity politics needs to suspend historicity in order to produce the fiction of an absolute present, a temporal rupture that also stages a positive presence, above all a presence to itself: this is what Butler calls its "presentist assumptions". Such assumptions work towards the identification of a specific subject with the politics that bears its name, and call for the prescribed repetition of that particular identification in order to sustain its own political identity. Here is the paradox: identity politics requires repetition to forestall its own demise, yet it also requires the misrecognition of the nature of repetition.

By requiring an absolute faithfulness to the present conditions of its self-identification, 'political' agency must be proactively blind to the work of difference, namely to the work that has enabled its own specific identity, different from any other. In this sense, it also works against democratization within itself, i.e. against the insurgence of unnamed subject positions queering its own constituency. This is where queer theory comes in as a critical agency both within and without identity politics. From within, as it speaks for the necessary queer differential that harbours in every identity, from without because in order to see it, it must also carve out a critical positionality that is able to name the blindspot. Taking the perspective of an internal difference that is as yet unnamed and is always failed by a naming, the agency instituted by queer theory

acts as a politics that exceeds one's own politics. No wonder it can appear as parasitical, devious or even traitorous. On the other hand, according to Butler, it is necessary in order to dislocate any presentist assumptions of identity politics and insert another temporal horizon: futurity. Futurity is not the future: it is the future that is already inside the present, gnawing away at its own orderly constitution. It is the present viewed from the perspective of its dispossession, its own historicity. It is the present becoming different.

As a political strategy embedded within LGBT politics, Butler's theorizing of queerness makes up for the necessary error of identity by opening up identity politics to a future that is bound to change it. Partly, queer agency is about placing one's own bet in what cannot be known in advance. It can work, for instance, towards "new possibilities for coalitional alliances that do not presume that these [existing] constituencies are radically distinct from one another" (BUTLER 1993: 229). Queer's refusal to presume those differences underlines the extent to which the opening up of the future can only be enabled by a different assumption than the one acknowledged as political in the present, that is, by the assumption that the differences held as different are not substantially so. This would imply that the error of identity is only "necessary" on behalf of the now, and that holding to its necessity might be inimical to the "continuing" democratization heralded by the term "queer agency": a paradoxical agency that does not belong to any *substantially different* subject, only to a subject that is insurgently so. Queer agency is democratizing not because it is more inclusive, in short, because it adds more subjects within a more expansive set or category; it is so because it weakens the radical, or substantive, distinctions that are held as constitutive of political subjectivities. Such agency is queer by questioning the specificity and temporal coherence of existing differences. Forcing Butler's thinking to its improper limits, we might say that working through de-specification, the futurity of whateverness is the breeding ground of queerness in its opening up time and identity beyond presentness. This is embodied in the figure of queer: a 'subject' (an agency) whose time is never exactly of the now and whose differential effect can be measured only as an unspecified, open potential. This is why Butler's queer agency can be interpreted also as whatever agency. It is the agency best able to stand for the futural drive that is at work in Butler's thinking. In this sense, queer agency is

more historical than political *per se*. It recasts subjectivity as historicity, even working against its present/ness.

The reference to historical dialectics and to queerness as an agent of continuing democratization may sound peripheral to the more general arguments of *Bodies That Matter*. They are less marginal, however, in the light of 1990's post-Marxist anti-foundationalist politics, as it grappled with the issues of multiculturalism and the question of the relationship between identity and difference, universalism and particularism after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This is why I propose to read the futural drive of Butler's improper queerness in conjunction with Ernesto Laclau's "Subject pf Politics, Politics of the Subject" (Laclau 2007). Laclau's stance frames the question of the relationship between particularism and universalism within the context of cultural relativism and post-identity politics, when it becomes increasingly hard to envisage a political subject capable of uniting several struggles – an issue that is also shadowed by the conflicts around "queer": should it function as an inclusive umbrella term, or as a term that multiplies difference? In bringing up Laclau my goal is also to hint at a 'universality' that remains unthought in queer theory. Its function is to reveal a general equivalence that underscores the political reliance on affirmative difference(s). Whereas in Butler whateverness appears through the tropes of futural opening and lack of ownership, Laclau theorizes it as the "empty place" of the universal (Laclau 2007: 56-60).

According to Laclau, the site of universality is empty because it has no content, or at least no content that belongs to it. Moreover, it is not a physical or empirical space, but a postulated outside, transcending the system of differences that make up the political terrain. By acting in this way it provides a boundary defining the social field. Social differences are inherently relational, that is, they depend for their identity on the identity of others and on their mutual stability. In this relational context with no transcendent foundation, any claim to a right or any struggle against discrimination can only rely in its demand on a logic of equivalence located outside the system. Although such an outside does not materially exist, it needs to exist as a political function, an empty repository from which any new claimant can borrow the source of its own affirmative right. In this sense, particularism and difference can only be affirmed in their contingency through some kind of shared commonality, which refers to nothing that is inherent in them. Particularism needs to rest on some

relative universalization, a logic of equivalence that must be indifferent to the content over which the struggle is being fought. This indifference is the source of politics.[10]

Literally nowhere ("empty place" is equivalent to non-place, or Utopia), this universality, blind to whoever resorts to it, has no content, a non-foundational premise to which any political subject can lay claim. Without this empty outside, there would just be an endless array of differences in a flat space of immanence, with no capability for change, according to Laclau. Thus, political change is activated when a particular subject appropriates the function of equivalence in order to resist the existing regime of differences (the status quo). By doing so, universality is temporarily embodied in a political subject. This explains why universality is always enacted by way of a *particular* demand. The latter is both particular and universal: a double articulation that Laclau adapts from the Gramscian notion of hegemonic relationship. Since the emptiness of equivalence can only be translated into political content by a particularized subject, universality is always (mis)represented through particularity. At the same time, through hegemony a particular struggle also advances the principle of relative equivalence.

In the guise of emptiness and indifference the whateverness of universality acts in Laclau as a political premise for any hegemonic articulation. It is the empty ground that allows for the intertwining of the particular and the universal. Because of its non-propositional content, emptiness has the endless capacity to keep the chain of equivalence open. In this sense we can also call it queer, as long as we understand queer not as a name among others in the chain of equivalence LGBTQIA tending to infinity, but as the empty name ensuring the equivalence and incompletion of the terms in the chain. Thus, through abstract equivalence history and politics may be joined again: by supplementing the logic of difference, which would only lead to a dead end if left to itself, empty universality is able to introduce historical change through its contingent hegemonic articulations.[11]

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[10]   Recently, William Watkin has investigated Alain Badiou's thinking (in particular *Being and Event*) and brought to light its core of "indifferent being" (Watkin 2017). This is only part of a more general tendency to reinscribe what I have called whateverness within our thinking about difference, particularity, specificity and singularity. I believe this is what queer theory has always envisaged, at least implicitly, by its embodied focus on the event of its multiple, in(de)finite singularities.

[11]   My interest in Laclau's universality lies in its double aspect of: general availability (a 'whatever generality') and particular hegemonic articulation. The latter, however, does not dispel the former. The specificity of any hegemonic articulation can be at any moment contested, because

Universality without content, thus, should not be confused with any of its previous totalitarian incarnations, white, Western and masculine: it can be redeemed as the foundation for all transformative political change in an era that has rejected all transcendent foundationalism. The fantasy of totality embodied by the latter is radically rejected: "Precisely because it is a constitutive lack, there is no content which is a priori destined to fill it, and it is open to the most diverse articulations." (Laclau 2007: 67). Politics exists because no difference can be shown to resolve and unify the social field; by the same token, it can only exist historically by positing a universal that is equally lacking in resolution. Figuring whateverness as another name for this empty universality, it can be argued that its resourceful lack is necessary in order to think the social field as un-totalizable, therefore politicizable. Politicization needs a site that is not coincident with the one that is given; this is why its subject – the political subject – cannot be the given, either. Whateverness would name the site and condition of this non-givenness.

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Text 5

Agamben in the disco: pausal politics.

Through tropes such as remainder, surplus, excess, or supplement, the queer whatever ensures the becoming of the social field through its own particular kind of *work*; it is a productivity without a name that can easily be turned into an ethical task: a correction, a making-just, a restitution of sorts. This is what continuing democratization means, a never-ending work embodied by whoever embraces the task of imputing a failure, of carrying one of democracy's endless names. Appearing on the scene of history through the event of its own (coming to) being – its visible appearance – the queer subject is always the bearer of a burden. Historicity *is* burdensome, after all. The scene of exasperation with which this essay has opened out grasps the moment when the work of sustaining one's own

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it is a specificity that is impurely so, marred – so to speak – by the generic nature of its ordinary occurrence. This would be one way to make universality count as a potential for any – whatever – subject. The politics of difference and the struggle for universality are not alien to one another. Particularity, according to Laclau, should keep "open, and constantly redefine[s], its relation to the universal" (Laclau 2007: 65).

dialectical role – whether in history or in discourse – ceases to pay the ethical dividends of activism. Why ought *being* to be like work? Can what-everness, for once, not figure the relentless indeterminacy that still needs to be produced, but rather the indeterminacy that is already there? Let's step out into a disco to search for a wholly different cup of politics.

Circa 1984, having survived the disco backlash of the late 70's in the USA[12] and now under the spell of the HIV virus which had just been 'identi-fied', thousands of anonymous dancing bodies started moving at the sound and rhythm of Gloria Gaynor's "I am what I am". Despite soon becom-ing a 'gay' anthem, due to its clear references to "pride" and opening up "your closet", the politics of the song is a far cry from any kind of identity politics. In the disco, an anonymous assemblage of bodies, technologically linked via the sound system, embraces an I that is both/neither individual and/nor collective, whose politics takes place in a space of self-exposure, rather than one of public exhibition, appearance or event directed at oth-ers. This space is home to a special kind of politics, one that feeds itself on effortless existence, that is, a being that neither needs to be made just nor has to convene in the space proper to politics in order to be recognized. On the contrary, by seeming to reproduce insulation and in shutting out what keeps one out, the separatist politics of the disco would seem to perform the perfect suspension of politics, or at least the temporary fantasy of its abolition.[13]

The seeming disappearance of politics in this space stems from the rel-ative illegibility of the disco dancers in relation to the categories under-pinning the identity of politics. If there must be some visible work, pro-ductivity, or rupture in order for the event of politics to take place, then the ostentation of play, the improductivity and the emphasis on flow will

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[12]   Famously exemplified by the burning of disco records at the Disco Demolition Night, Comis-key Park, Chicago (July 12th, 1979).
[13]   There is still a lot to be done to investigate the politics of the dancefloor from a queer theo-retical perspective, joining cultural studies with studies of affect, queer body politics with sound studies. Compared to the activism of political movements, the moving-together of dancing bodies has often been devalued as non-political: escapist, hedonistic and improductive. I call it 'pausal' politics not only because it is a pause from politics, but also because it is a politics of the spare time, a 'nightly' politics. Paraphrasing Rancière, dancing the night away is a "night of labor", a time where a different kind of work is produced, i.e. a work that will not count as work. This bodily movement may not be the 'alliance of bodies' on the streets visibly reclaiming a public space, but is nonetheless a collective technology of space production, intensely sexualized. See, among others, NYONG'O 2008; ECHOLS 2010. On Gloria Gaynor's "I will survive", cf. HUBBS 2007.

pose an obstacle to the amount of negativity necessary for the political return of the whatever subject. Dancing is a dangerously liminal activity, bordering on inaction, on letting go: you move to the music in a way that is akin to some sort of 'animatedness', rather than agency.[14] The dancers are "slaves" to the rhythm (Grace Jones), caught in the repetition of the groove. The dancers may well form a collective assemblage moving in unison, but the very activity they indulge in and the non-dialectical space in which they expose themselves paradoxically re-privatize their coming out of the "closet": they are the perfect parody of the political collective body. This is why dancing threatens politics, by offering an *ersatz* to proper activism, thereby postponing, or bracketing, a 'higher' form of mobilization. In order to imagine a politics accounting for the movement of these dancers, we need to conceive a different form of whateverness and a politics that knows otherwise than the positionality of antagonism, one that is not dependent on negation as a causal motive for one's own staged comeback: something like an existence (a pure exteriority) that needs no outside emptiness as a motor of change. This whateverness will appear machinic, self-moving, without lack: a Deleuzian body-without-organs, if you will. Or a "whatever singularity", such as Agamben's *quodlibet*, which is – I would argue – the perfect figure to read the pausal, or suspensive, politics of the disco dancer.

"I am what I am": isn't this a refusal to say what one is, while representing at the same time the most explicit affirmation of self-ownership, indeed of 'self-production' ("I am my own special creation")? At first sight, this refusal is hard to reconcile with a politics of pride, with coming out as a 'coming out *as X*'? However, the dancers' refusal to specify through language does not mean a lack of forwardness in *showing* what one is: it simply privileges exposure to representation. Disregarding the latter, the dancer to "I am what I am" does not shy away from claiming an unnamed subjectivity that, while ignoring the requirements of acknowledgment and/ or acceptance (the "excuses", the "praise", the "pity"), is worthy no matter what. There is a core of indifference and irrelevance to the worth that accrues to the subject, which is neither seen as a reward for oppression nor

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[14] Ngai discusses animatedness as the heightened disposition to be moved, often racialized, but especially connected to modes of directed or automated agency in the post-Fordist era (Ngai 2005: 89-125). This would also suggest a connection between disco dancing and automated motion, a kind of agency that is only partly attributable to the dancer. The politics of disco dancing, and even more so of later techno, plays with 'animated movement' rather than with activist movement.

as a prize in exchange for some dutiful action. This worth no-matter-what exists as such and, unsurprisingly, is felt as an ecstasy, a rapture that is embodied and unconditional. This ecstatic whateverness neither trades in emptiness nor is driven towards the future: on the contrary, it consists in the fulness of all the attributes that might legitimately follow "I am". As Agamben would say, the only condition that they share is that they are "lovable" (Agamben 1993: 2). It is a whateverness held and sustained by self-desire, an indifference that is democratic to all its possibilities: "Quodlibet ens is not 'being, it does not matter which', but rather 'being such that it always matters. [...] Whatever being has an original relation to desire" (Agamben 1993: 1, "Whatever").

Agamben names this subject a "whatever being", or "whatever singularity". It is a singularity, "such as it is", claiming the same kind of superfluous predication found in the song: "such-and-such being is reclaimed from its having this or that property, which identifies it as belonging to this or that set, to this or that class [...] and it is reclaimed not for another class nor for the simple generic absence of any belonging, but for its being-*such*, for belonging itself" (Agamben 1993: 1-2).[15] Dancers in the disco have their own way of belonging, though not belonging *to*: the missing attachment would refer them to a class or a set, ready-made to harvest what is shared among its members. For the 'coming community' of the dancers, though, there is nothing that is shared except whatever is lovable in each one of them. Love is sustained as an immanent and therefore concrete capacity, forgetful of how politics needs you to be the unloved in order to make you react to this. Theirs is a collective capacity: the dancers need to be dancing together in order to turn their singularity into something sufficiently generic as to become, in Agamben's terms, "exemplary" (Agamben 1993: 8-10) and "special", that is, adhering to their qualities "generically and indifferently [...] without allowing any of them to identify" the whatever being (Agamben 2007: 58). They thus become the irredeemable, waiting for nobody or nothing in order to be saved, or to acquire worth.

As the amount of energy spent (wasted?) in the disco manifestly shows,

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15   The reference to whatever-being as not belonging to this or that set confirms the relevance of set theory to Agamben's work, which he had already developed in the pages of *Homo Sacer* dealing with the relation between example and exception (Agamben 1998: 24ff.). See Watkin 2013, especially ch. 4, for a comparison between Agamben and Badiou on this account. For a useful overview of Agamben's *quodlibet* see Salzani 2012.

the 'self-creation' that goes on in the dancing together is indeed a kind of 'work', provided we take such work to be unproductive, a 'means without ends'. It is also the work of a community: this should not be confused with the production of individuality, that is, a set of specific qualities making up the unrepeatable, self-sufficient and unique agentive subject. Indeed, Agamben's thinking pushes the 'indistinction' of whatever being so far as to make its community illegible, a pure 'anything' appearing as such, with all the qualifications that make it so, but without any one of them becoming hegemonic, or installing a discrete regime of differences. Created in what Agamben calls "limbo" (AGAMBEN 1993: 5-7) – we might as well call it a disco – the whateverness sustained by the abolition of differences is ceaselessly emerging. Rather than poised between an I and a we, the dancers are oscillating between the two, indifferent to the choice between generalization and individuation. Outside the logic of representation, whateverness ceases to be the empty repository whose function is to articulate a universal equivalence onto a contingent particularity. In other words, whateverness is not the expedient emptiness that must always be filled: it becomes the interface that allows the passage and endless conversion of equivalence into particularity, indeed their suspension. Any singularity straddles the two slopes: its own way of doing so is the particular manner in which each one opens out to the world. This 'ethical' stance, then, has no future in mind: it is the 'ethos' (bearing or comportment) through which life manifests itself as extension, out there and in the present (AGAMBEN 1993: 19). Such whateverness is a way to conceive difference as generic and inessential, a common property of what Agamben calles "form-of-life",[16] communicable especially through blank gestures of refusal. Its mode of action lies in the refusal to adhere to the demands made by any politics that knows better. Being outside salvation (and liberation), no external positivity is allowed to touch it.

Back to 1984, there is a sense in which thousands of 'gay' dancers (and lesbians, Latin*s, blacks…) could be both out and proud of their own self-created identity, and yet shout out "I am what I am" in a refusal to specify their identity. This need not be contradictory. Partly this has to do

[16] For a definition of "form-of-life" in Agamben see the concise entry by Alex Murray in *Agamben Dictionary*: "form-of-life cannot be given any attributes or qualities, existing in opposition to the biopolitical capture of life. To give it attributes would be to isolate forms, splitting life from itself as one attempted to capture it" (MURRAY and WHYTE 2011: 71-73).

with the creation of a special place – the disco as 'limbic' space – that does not demand identity in order to 'work'. More importantly, there is no need to assume that whateverness cannot also be found within the very heart of identity politics. Instead of the term "gay" meaning a *specific* identity, differentially produced, the same term might be taken up (loved) as a temporary stand-in for all the other attributes and ways of being in the world that are equally lovable. In fact, who would want to be loved only for their gayness without wanting to be loved also no-matter-what? Love of difference and indifferent love: Agamben's impolitic community is steeped in the everyday practices that make both possible.

<div align="center">******</div>

Text 6

Becoming whatever.

In the context of the changes brought about by 21st century capitalist economy, whateverness mutates, too. On the one hand, it takes on the mask of global neo-liberism with its relentless erasure of differences. Above all, capitalism embraces whateverness as endless capacity for differentiation, all the while managing discontinuity through modulation. Thus, whateverness becomes the raw material of a new biopolitical economy, its inherent availability grabbed hold of and actualized, with an apparent disregard for the need to produce stable subjectivities. In this light, whateverness should not be approached as an ontological property, but primarily as a mode of production and control. Biocapitalism produces it in order to extract value from the actualization of some (as many as possible) of its potentialities.[17] As biocapitalism knows well enough, whateverness is a becoming different whose promise lies in the endless self-transformation of the system, envisaged as an all-encompassing global ecology producing all the change it needs *from within.* Turned into a biopolitical product, whateverness is liable to be analyzed and critiqued as an apparatus of governmentality by Foucauldian and post-Foucaldian queer feminist and anti-capitalist critical theories.

On the 'other' hand, whateverness also produces life effects. No amount

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[17]   On biocapitalism see for instance Codeluppi 2008; Marazzi 2010. On affective biocapitalism and the shifting meaning of the body at the crossroads of "a never-ending modulation" beyond sex and gender, see Ticineto Clough 2003.

of critique will alter the fact that nobody can enjoy an exteriority in regard to it, or a vantage point that is outside this 'life'. This is why whateverness can never be just critiqued without also being experienced as a *bio*political event, i.e. an event constituting its own reality. The systemic disregard for stability mentioned above enhances, if anything, its liveness. Being felt as life, whateverness produces also a different range of promises from the ones that would advance biocapitalism. For instance, whateverness fails to stabilize the system of differences holding in place hierarchical binaries (subject/object, life/matter, male/female, and so on): a horizon opens up with all the potential of a flat horizontality – a whatever plane of general equivalence –, which is accelerated by the expanding connectivity fueled by contemporary biocapitalism. To be sure, even such a term as *life* fails to convey the whatever convergence that makes up its uncanny materiality. Although the global network of biocapitalism mimics the organicity of a complex living machine, it would be hard to define its ever-expanding reach as a unified totality, on account of its fundamental heterogeneity. Its 'life', then, is no longer mainly human or organic. Cutting indifferently across species, lifeforms, body parts, machines, texts, frequencies, pixels, data, this systemic whateverness produces entropy and turbulence, collapsing control and chaos to the point of indistinction. Such non-teleological autopoiesis constitutes the uncanny superposition of life and capital in the 21st century. Mutually convertible into one another, both appear to share the same logic.

In order to investigate the possibilities of political production in the biocapitalist plane of immanence, I propose to turn to the experimental praxis of transitioning testified by Paul B. Preciado (hereafter PB) in *Testo Junkie. Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (Preciado 2013), one of the contemporary classics of queer transfeminism: a "record of physiological and political micromutations" (Preciado 2013: 11). PB, assigned to the female gender at birth and socially programmed as 'woman', takes the decision to undergo a self-managed treatment of gel testosterone in order to hack 'her' own gender by chemical means. Significantly, PB calls this process "becoming T", since this is neither a becoming male nor a becoming female: T stands for the unmarked continuum between M and F, a hovering between the two. T stands, in fact, for transition itself, having no end and bearing no proper name. Unlike ordinary autobiographies, where the knowing subject narrativizes the

life-story that has already produced the self that is now writing, this is an auto-techno-biography whose writing undoes subjectivity, or at least "the psychopolitical neoliberal modeling of subjectivity" (Preciado 2013: 117). It is a writing *within* transition, not the writing *of* a transition.

The challenge faced by PB is to produce a political gesture out of 'her' transition, through the body and by means of a body that is radically immersed in the immanent plane of what s/he calls the pharmacopornographical regime (hereafter PPR). Indebted to Foucauldian micropolitics, to feminist materialism and to Deleuzian deterritorialization, PB's desire to salvage a political fiction in the midst of a becoming where life and capital mirror one another deserves a closer look. Defined in the text as a practice devoted to the "invention of subjectivity" (Preciado 2013: 93), it is also an invention of politics as groundless practice: a recoding of the heterogeneous material that flows and circulates in the immanent plane of PPR. The topology of immanence dumps the would-be political subject in a sprawling 'middle ground', where the term "middle" stands both for pure instrumentality (means without ends) and for mediation (the general condition of being-in-relation). Its subjectivities are actually *interfaces*, a medial condition that transfigures the body, too. This has crucial consequences especially for feminist and queer politics, because both are usually meant to be agencies of *body* politics. Turned into a material-semiotic interface, can this body afford anything resembling a critical leverage? In PPR what makes the body crucial is its capacity to be captured, engaged in material relations and affected by the forces that traverse it. Its liveness depends on interference, not on autonomy. Therefore, body politics no longer consists in claiming one's own body, but in claiming a share in its 'alienation', namely, the positive property of becoming other. Agency becomes uncanny: it is a 'minor' agency, a distributed one. The political claim can only refer to an agency that is nobody's – nobody owns it – and anyone's – the agency of one that is already becoming other, whatever one is becoming.

This body politics is necessarily post-human. The body-as-interface is always an assemblage. In *Testo Junkie* PB dives into the bio-technological machine that composes the contemporary 'human' body through networks of sex, gender, chemicals, plastics, drugs, beauty products, prostheses, fuel resources, which in turn produce hybrid assemblages that cross the economic, ecological, military and somatic planes. Lacking a

discrete source, agency is not only diffuse but also multidirectional – a co-agency irreducible to an ethics of collaboration. Shaped in its becoming by performative feedback loops, causes and effects are also temporally dislocated, making it impossible to say "which comes first" (Preciado 2013: 34). This renders opaque the traditional notion of action, defined as a production of an effect as a result of a discernible agency. Agency itself becomes enmeshed in passivity, in affect: the capacity to affect and *be affected*. As PB affirms, "I personify a dyke-transgender condition made up of numerous biocodes, *certain of which are normative and others spaces of resistance and still others potential places for the invention of subjectivity*" (Preciado 2013: 93, italics mine). Mastering the mesh in which normativity, resistance and invention are overlaid seems out of the question. Politics is no longer master of its own signifiers. We may ask: is there a way to know for certain *which* biocodes are normative, *which* are resisting, *which* are ushering in new subjectivities?

One way to differentiate between the normative and the resisting is to introduce a qualification in the rule of immanence and deterritorialization. If PPR could be shown to be stratified into temporally asynchronous planes, some would appear to be engaged in the endless production of whateverness, while others, perhaps a trace of 'previous' disciplinary stages, would still be concerned in management and control. The overlapping of these planes would allow for effects of asynchronicity and re-territorialization. As PB underlines, the body is the last hiding place of the biopolitical systems of control (Preciado 2013: 78-79). Even though the productive logic of PPR is driven by a desire for expenditure and transformation, its 'other' privatizing logic, bound to accumulation, reinstalls prohibitions and enclosures. One case in point is the gender norm, a system of enclosure that creates and maintains a hierarchy within the (human) species via the control over the binary codes of male and female. Only the persistence of enclosures barring or limiting whateverness allows for the chance of a political subject, whose politics, in fact, would appear to share the logic of PPR: the freedom to engage in the invention of whateverness through a differentiation that escapes the control of socio-semiotic gatekeepers. Its antagonism, radically different from previous forms of oppositionality, upholds the generalization of the means of producing whateverness, fighting for their "becoming common" (Preciado 2013: 127). Emancipation is not for the subject, it is for the network: a liberation of its general potential and

desire for transformation. The political figure for this copyleft embodiment is the pirate, the freeloader, or, in more contemporary discourse, the hacker. In such a mode, politics gets reconfigured as a struggle for open access to the unlimited and unknowable potential of differentiation. It surfaces in the nodes where access is denied, where territorialization safeguards the enclosures known to accumulate profit.[18]

Becoming T, however, is not just about getting hold of the means of production: it is, above all, about a 'politics of invention'. On the other hand, because this invention merges with an undifferentiated desire for becoming, its political drive is also absorbed into the whatever life of the plane of immanence. In a regime of positive production politics becomes opaque, so that even the desire for politics becomes suspect. Where to draw a line between biopolitics and life itself, and why? The former would as soon disappear as it is affirmed. Once becoming becomes a generic mode of producing life, politics becomes illegible. Can this illegibility become politicized in turn? PB argues in the affirmative. As s/he transitions – 'her' hormonal composition modulated as an effect of the variations in testosterone – 'her' body acquires a certain degree of unrecognisability; by hacking the body's material flows, the socio-semiotic gender codes F and M get blurred and tend to become illegible. This relative illegibility can certainly be recoded as political, once it is identified as the wilful desire for any embodiment that is not captured by the return of signification. Without this notion of capture, producing whateverness would not be sufficient to produce, let alone sustain, the fiction of politics. What is capture, however, if not the condition of becoming attached? Is it possible to neatly split capture into capture in the passive mode (a form of dispossession) and capture as affordance (a form of activation reliant on being available)? Only a notion of 'negative' capture would allow for the positive politicization of whateverness, defined by the resisting subject as the production of ever new differentials that elude the possibility of capture by a territorializing semiosis. This politics of endless escape refigures the political subject as a runaway, foiling the captors. Indeed, without fictionalizing oneself as always on the brink of capture, as PB candidly observes, "taking testosterone would never be *anything but a molecular becoming*" (Preciado 2013: 143, italics mine). "Anything but"?

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[18]   Of course, it is also a fictional effect upheld by a certain theoretical critique, which parses the logic of the system and brings out the internal 'contradictions' (that is, the differences to itself) that may then enable a fiction of politics.

Why is the yearning for unrecognition, opacity and disidentification (Preciado 2013: 397-398) not satisfied by a becoming that is just becoming, without the need of an impediment to acquire activist worth? In passages like these, the desire for becoming and the desire for politics tend to part ways. Politics is recoded as the fear of absorption. Ironically, as long as the political runaway is haunted by the dominant codes of legibility, not even scrambling the gender signal will stop the latter from being parsed, albeit uncertainly, as either F or M. Runaway politics retroactively reproduces the binary codes that stalk its own whateverness. The plot of eternal pursuit is a gothic plot. With a difference, though: here the haunted crypt *has no outside.*

If I have overstressed the anxious element of PB's politics of becoming whatever, one should not fail to be excited, too, by *Testo Junkie*'s abandonment to the orgasmic force of General Sex – an empowering loss of self already set in motion by transitioning. Through sexual connectivity PB yields to a force that is anonymous, beyond possession and dispossession. Its euphoric indifference to individuation is experienced as an overwhelming flux, fucking the whole history of bodies in all their unbounded materiality. Becoming T seems to authorize an eroticized gender politics that is multitudinous, a virtual joining with the anonymous swarm of "transgender, mutating bodies all over the planet", forming "microcommunities" (Preciado 2013: 21). Although it is easy to think of them as made up of purely human bonds, they are also, indistinguishably, chemical ones. In any case, while being traversed by the "orgasmic force", they face a becoming that is indifferent to their 'nature', to any attempt at determination. The more indifferent it is, the more powerful:

> [Its] strength is of indeterminate capacity; it has no gender; it is neither male nor female, neither human nor animal, neither animated nor inanimate. Its orientation emphasizes neither the feminine nor the masculine and creates no boundary between heterosexuality nor homosexuality, or between object or subject; neither does it know the difference between being excited, being exciting, or being-excited-with. It favors no organ over any other [...]. Orgasmic force [...] aspires only to its own extension in space and time, toward everything and everyone, in every place and at every moment. It is a force of transformation for the world in pleasure – "in pleasure-with" (Preciado 2013: 41-42).

There is no scandal if this indeterminate *jouissance* fuels both PPR's bodily production and PB's transfeminist, non-capitalist protocol of bodily

excitation. Through other fictions it would sustain any number of other contingent productions and ecologies of affect. This is how whateverness queers politics itself beyond recognition. In its own becoming, it approximates another fiction that is no less queer: the "Real" plane of non-identity (O'Rourke 2013). PB has a name for it: "becoming common", which is a becoming common not just of whateverness, but also of politics itself – a politics so common that it escapes us.

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A research programme[1] for queer studies

Queer theory and Harvey Sacks's Membership Categorization Analysis

Carmen Dell'Aversano

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

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[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.

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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]

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[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 possibile 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

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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]

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[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 studies[8] 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

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[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

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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 empasis 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

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[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/tf8s2009gs); 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: 1, 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: 1, 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: 1, 5); moreover, the adequacy of any account is assessed by the person who requested it, who has the right to question or reject is 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 orginal 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

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[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,

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[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 MASKIO[17]
(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 KEKKE[19]
(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!!!)

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[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 effemminati (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 attibuti, 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 ads[21] 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

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[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 "effeminates" 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

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[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*] Friedlander [*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 overwiew, 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 normalcy[28] and Sacks called "doing being ordinary", and

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[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: I 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 hetereosexual 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

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[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

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[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 "naturality" 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

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[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 credulous[37] 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: 1, 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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The Chinese encyclopedia and the living dead

A queer approach to categorization and taxonomy in comparative literature

Mattia Petricola

Abstract: This article presents a case study in queer hermeneutics dealing with the construction of a corpus in a comparative study. More specifically, I propose to queer the category 'living dead' by restructuring its internal taxonomy. This will be achieved through the intersection of two approaches to categorization, both developed in the field of cognitive sciences as elaborations of Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblance': Eleanor Rosch's prototype theory and George Lakoff's discussion of classification strategies in the Dyirbal language. I will then analyze the epistemological implications that derive from restructuring the taxonomy of the living dead in the light of the notion of 'nonce taxonomy', described by Eve Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*. My aim will be to show, firstly, that Rosch and Lakoff could provide nonce taxonomy with the theoretical support it needs; and secondly, how the field of comparative literature could be queered through the systematic use of prototype-based and nonce-taxonomic categorization.

Keywords: comparative studies; nonce taxonomy; thematics; prototype theory; living dead.

> When we open our eyes each morning, it is upon a world we
> have spent a lifetime *learning* to see. We are not given the world:
> we make our world through incessant experience, categorization,
> memory, reconnection.
>
> O. Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars*

1. Introduction

1.1. The construction of the binary opposition 'living vs dead' through the practice of burial rituals is unanimously considered a fundamental stage in the development of early human cultures. Together with the opposition 'human vs animal', its function is to transform the individual into a member of a social and cultural entity: the community of living humans. Such a community is defined by its crucial opposition, on the one hand, to the community of animals, and to that of the dead, on the other.[1] Social figures

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[1]   Of course, both the divide between the living and the dead and that between humans and

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like the shaman establish and maintain the relationships between the world of the living and the world of the dead, while highly ritualized moments of passage are created in order to keep the two worlds apart: the dead must be prevented from hunting the living. Nevertheless, despite all efforts, violations to this binary opposition can occur. These events release some of our most primitive fears, thus representing an inexhaustible source of horror and uncanniness. The agents of these ontological and cultural violations are what we call 'the living dead'.

In this cultural landscape, speculative fiction[2] has been for centuries – and continues to be – a practice of key importance for the construction and proliferation of the entities that violate the polarity 'life vs death'. Nevertheless, the current notion of 'living dead', while pervading cultural (and academic) discourses, allows us to deal only with a relatively small number of these entities: ghosts, vampires, zombies, mummies, ghouls and a very few others.

This study starts from the observation that the cultural construction of the category 'living dead' does not account for a particularly interesting area of western literary and artistic productions from the mid-18th century to the present day. This area is inhabited by characters, worlds and narratives that not only destabilize a binary opposition crucial to human identity by blurring the border between life and death; they also do so outside the traditional taxonomy that frames living-dead identities themselves.

1.2. The presence of this double level of subversion seems to make queer theory the perfect hermeneutic tool for approaching these texts. For this reason, I will propose a case study in queer hermeneutics dealing with the construction of a corpus in a comparative study and, more precisely, with the strategies of categorization that make this construction possible. In order to do so, I will focus my attention on a corpus of residual texts thematizing 'living-dead-like' conditions and use them as the basis for the construction of an ad-hoc category called 'non-traditional intermediate states between life and death'.[3] This will allow me to queer the category 'living dead' by restructuring its internal taxonomy.

animals are considered here, from a constructionist perspective, as cultural artifacts that are not in any way 'natural'.

[2]   'Speculative fiction' is intended here as an overall term indicating a wide range of genres like, among others, supernatural fiction, fantasy, science-fiction and horror. It can be considered the English equivalent of the French expression *littératures de l'imaginaire*.

[3]   From now on, I will refer to this category as 'i.s.'.

The construction of i.s. will be first formalized through the intersection of two approaches to categorization, both developed in the field of cognitive sciences as elaborations of Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance: Eleanor Rosch's prototype theory and George Lakoff's discussion of classification strategies in the Dyirbal language.

I will then try to analyze the epistemological implications deriving from restructuring the taxonomy of the living dead in the light of the notion of 'nonce taxonomy', described by Eve Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and recently reconsidered by Carmen Dell'Aversano. Sedgwick posits nonce-taxonomy as a strategy for the construction of identities mediating between the need to account for the uniqueness of every human being and the very small number of axes of categorization available in our culture. However, while recognizing the crucial role nonce-taxonomy has played in the deconstruction of the category of 'the individual', Sedgwick doesn't provide any theoretical framework for the description of this strategy. Dell'Aversano has recently contributed to the theoretical (re)definition of nonce taxonomy from a radical perspective, showing how it could work as a tool for the segmentation of one's reality according to absolutely idiosyncratic criteria.

I will conclude by intersecting the approaches to categorization deriving from cognitive sciences with those deriving from queer theory. My aim will be to show, firstly, that Rosch and Lakoff could provide nonce taxonomy with the theoretical support it needs; and secondly, how the field of comparative studies could be queered through the systematic use of prototype-based and nonce-taxonomic categorization.

The analyses that follow will hopefully show how questioning the hermeneutics of comparative studies through queer theory – defined, in a broad sense, as a fluid set of tools possessing "the potential to subvert accepted ways of thinking on any issue" (Dell'Aversano 2010: 74)[4] – may

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4   "Subversion, as well as fluidity, is definitory of queer; indeed, its fluidity is not an end in itself, but simply the most effective and aesthetically fulfilling means to accomplish the political and metaphysical task of permanent and neverending subversion. [...] [Q]ueer does not simply maintain that it is OK to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (this is a given of progressive common sense, about the least queer position imaginable...) but states that any construction of identity (including LGBT ones) is a performance constituting a subject which does not "exist" prior to it, and encourages to bring into being (both as objects of desire, of fantasy and of theoretical reflection and as concrete existential and political possibilities) alternative modes of performance" (Dell'Aversano 2010: 74-75). Queer approaches to comparative studies from a LGBT* related perspective can be found, for example, in Spurlin, Hayes and Higonnet 2010.

open up new perspectives in the study of fiction by raising awareness of the categorization processes at work in the field of comparative literature, in general, and of thematics, in particular.

2. The living, the dead, the living dead, and all the others

2.1. When asked "What comes to your mind when I say 'the living dead'?", people normally answer with a list of supernatural and horror figures: ghosts, vampires, zombies and mummies. In particular, the association of 'living dead' with zombies is almost instantaneous. Horror buffs and connoisseurs could add other minor figures, like the ghoul or the white lady. Some people mention Frankenstein. When asked to think of other examples outside fictional characters or supernatural beings, people sometimes point to permanent vegetative state and NDEs (Near Death Experiences) as possible examples of living-dead-like conditions.

This evident cognitive hierarchy in the cultural construction of the category 'the living dead' cannot be explained by the so-called 'classical' theories of categorization. According to these theories, categories have clear boundaries and are defined by common properties:

> From the time of Aristotle to the later work of Wittgenstein, categories were thought to be well understood and unproblematic. They were assumed to be abstract containers, with things either inside or outside the category. Things were assumed to be in the same category if and only if they had certain properties in common. And the properties they had in common were taken as defining the category (Lakoff 1987: 6).

The description of categorization processes according to classical theories entails at least two fundamental consequences:

> First, if categories are defined only by properties that all members share, then no members should be better examples of the category than any other members. Second, if categories are defined only by properties inherent in the members, then categories should be independent of the peculiarities of any beings doing the categorizing (Lakoff 1987: 6).

However, as we have just seen, both these statements do not apply to how people describe the category 'living dead'. In order to be accounted for, this process has to be studied in the light of the prototype theory of

categorization, developed by Eleanor Rosch as an elaboration of Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblance', that is, "[t]he idea that members of a category may be related to one another without all members having any properties in common that define the category" (Lakoff 1987: 12). In particular, Rosch enriches Wittgenstein's view of categorization by introducing the key concept of 'centrality', defined as "[t]he idea that some members of a category may be 'better examples' of that category than others" (Lakoff 1987: 12). According to Rosch

> experiments indicate that people categorize objects, not in set-theoretical terms, but in terms of prototypes and family resemblances. For example, small flying singing birds, like sparrows, robins, etc., are prototypical birds. Chickens, ostriches, and penguins are birds but are not central members of the category—they are nonprototypical birds. But they are birds nonetheless, because they bear sufficient family resemblances to the prototype; that is, they share enough of the relevant properties of the prototype to be classified by people as birds (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 71).

In other words, Rosch's experiments demonstrate that, contrary to what the classical theory of categorization holds, the relationship between an object and a category is not defined in rigid yes-or-no terms, but rather that there are degrees of membership, which are determined by differences involving degrees of typicality.

Even though prototype theory has been criticized by a number of logicians and philosophers of mind, as well as challenged by other categorization theories,[5] these views mostly approach categorization from an abstract perspective, which tends to disregard what is most important to the analysis that I'm going to propose: the 'cultural life' of categories. On the contrary, Rosch provides us with an invaluable model for mapping how categorization concretely works in a culture and in our everyday lives.[6]

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[5]   For an overview of the subject, see Weiskopf 2013 and Margolis and Laurence 2014. Criticisms to prototype theory have been raised notably by Fodor 1998. For advances in the study of categorization in cognitive science after Rosch, see the essays collected in Cohen and Lefebvre 2005.

[6]   "It should be noted that the issues in categorization with which we are primarily concerned have to do with explaining the categories found in a culture and coded by the language of that culture at a particular point in time. When we speak of the formation of categories, we mean their formation in the culture. This point is often misunderstood. The principles of categorization proposed are not as such intended to constitute a theory of the development of categories in children born into a culture nor to constitute a model of how categories are processed (how categorizations are made) in the mind of adult speakers of a language" (Rosch 1999: 189).

2.2. By interpreting the difference between prototypical and nonprototypical members through a geographical metaphor – as Lakoff and Johnson do in the above quotation – a category can be viewed as a city area: it has a center, inhabited by the prototypical members, and a number of outskirts, inhabited by the nonprototypical members. The boundaries delimiting the two areas are neither clear-cut nor fixed, but rather blurred and unstable, subjected as they are to constant cultural re-negotiations.

If we look at the way Western culture has constructed the category 'living dead' through this prototype-based metaphor, it is clear that its center is inhabited by three prototypical members: the ghost, the vampire and the zombie. Each one of these figures possesses a detailed cultural identikit with precisely defined traits. They belong to a more or less recent tradition in literature, cinema, and the visual arts, which makes them immediately recognizable. Finally, they have become immensely successful in every form of fiction over the last decades. As a consequence, they have also become widely studied by academics in a wide range of fields.

A number of somewhat 'minor' figures can be considered to inhabit the center as well: the mummy, the ghoul, the white lady. They may not be as popular as the members of the first triad, but are, nonetheless, defined by a precise set of traits and can be traced back to well-known traditions, which are the criteria that define prototypical membership in our case.

2.3. If recognizing the center of the category 'living dead' is almost intuitive, any attempt to define its periphery proves to be far less immediate: the center is so intensely active that it seems to occupy the whole space of the category, thus making it difficult to even conceptualize a periphery.

I would argue that this periphery can be constructed by moving the focus of our attention towards a number of isolated and (seemingly) unrelated figures that stud the speculative fiction landscape of the last 150 years. For example, the protagonist of E.A. Poe's famous horror tale *The Facts in the Case of Mr Valdemar* (1845) is mesmerized *in articulo mortis* and his existence lingers on for several months in a state of hypnotic suspension after the death of his body. In Franz Kafka's 1916 journal fragments about *der Jäger Gracchus*, a hunter dies after falling into a ravine but, as a result of an incomprehensible mistake, he cannot reach the afterlife and is forced to eternally roam the earth.

Joe Chip, the protagonist of Philip K. Dick's science-fiction novel *Ubik*

(1969), finds himself literally frozen in a state called 'half-life' after an explosion. His consciousness is separated from the world of the living and inhabits a new plane of existence, suspended between life and death. In J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), the wizard Voldemort manifests his presence among the living through the diary of Tom Riddle, a paradoxical living object infused with a piece of a dead man's soul.

In regards to cinema, the mysterious *Jacobs's Ladder* (LYNE 1990) plunges the viewer into the consciousness of an American soldier at the moment of his passage from life to death, while in Wally Pfister's *Transcendence* (2014) the brain patterns of the dying protagonist are encoded in the software of an artificial intelligence: he thus loses his mortal body in order to literally inhabit the Internet, eventually becoming the Internet itself.

These narratives are a representative sample of a larger set of at least forty texts – novels, short stories, films and graphic novels. They undeniably have *something to do* with the living dead, but *do not quite fit* the current cultural mapping of this category, thus forcing us to reconsider, from a much wider perspective, how intermediate states between life and death can be represented in fiction.

2.4. If considered individually, each one of these texts could be viewed as a sort of quirky exception, a bizarre exercise in style, an isolated deviation from the 'normal' conceptualization of the undead. But, in doing so, we would simply define it from the point of view of the central figures of the category. This would implicitly deny any strong cultural relevance and significance to its unique peculiarities: they would be seen as fortuitous and forgettable traits, too isolated to be worthy of telling us something important about how the polarity 'life vs death' is structured in contemporary culture. On the contrary, I propose to gather these isolated texts together into *one single corpus* and to define them in a way that dispenses with the ghost-vampire-zombie paradigm altogether. By doing so, they stop being isolated exceptions to a dominant category and become fully-fledged members *of a new category*: the 'non-traditional intermediate states between life and death'. This category can be used to identify liminal characters, worlds and contexts whose features are original and possibly unique and do not belong to any well-known cultural tradition.

But how can we theoretically deal with a category whose members are the scattered leftovers of another category?

We could answer this question by describing the category 'i.s.' in the light of the notion of 'otherness', as defined by George Lakoff in his 1987 essay *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*, which represents the most successful attempt to date to systematically describe the mechanisms of human cognition according to Rosch's prototype theory.

From the perspective outlined in the previous paragraph, the category 'i.s.' appears to be defined in exclusively negative terms: its members are those objects which do not fit any other category for the description of the living dead. It is interesting to note that the same kind of 'negative definition' of a category can be found in what is probably the most extraordinary literary text dealing with the speculative re-elaboration of taxonomy: the classification of the animal kingdom according to an ancient Chinese encyclopedia described by J.L. Borges in "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins":

> On those remote pages it is written that animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel's hair brush, *(l) others*, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, (n) those that resemble flies from a distance (BORGES 1966: 108, emphasis mine).

With a move that clearly reminds Foucault's premise to *The Order of Things*, the chapter that gives Lakoff's book his curious title opens with an analysis of this quote. Like Foucault, Lakoff focuses on our inability to think Borges' fantastic taxonomy,[7] but he does so by relating such inability to the actual hermeneutic practices of linguists and anthropologists:

> Part of what makes this passage art, rather than mere fantasy, is that it comes close to the impression a Western reader gets when reading descriptions of non-western languages and cultures. The fact is that people around the world categorize things in ways that both boggle the Western mind and stump Western linguists and anthropologists. More often than not, the linguist or anthropologist just throws up his hands and resorts to giving a list—a list that one would not be surprised to find in the writing of Borges (LAKOFF 1987: 92).

[7] "Dans l'émerveillement de cette taxinomie, ce qu'on rejoint d'un bond, ce qui, à la faveur de l'apologue, nous est indiqué comme le charme exotique d'une autre pensée, c'est la limite de la notre: l'impossibilité nue de penser *cela*" (FOUCAULT 1990: 7).

This analysis, in fact, introduces Lakoff's discussion of the traditional classification of objects in Dyirbal – an aboriginal language of Australia – as described by linguist Robert M.W. Dixon. In Dyirbal, every noun must always be preceded by a variant of one of four words: 'bayi', 'balan', 'balam', 'bala'. Dixon uncovers the categorization system underlying this syntactic distribution by observing that

> speakers do not learn category members one by one, but operate in terms of some general principles. [...] Dixon's proposed basic schema is this:
> I. *Bayi*: (human) males; animals
> II. *Balan*: (human) females; water; fire; fighting
> III. *Balam*: nonflesh food
> IV. *Bala*: everything not in the other classes (Lakoff 1987: 93).

After a detailed and compelling analysis of Dixon's schema, Lakoff finally shows how this "superb example of how human cognition works" (95) allows us to identify and recapitulate the general principles at work in human categorization – the key principle being, as said before, centrality. Among these principles, Lakoff includes "*The Other:* Borges was right about this. Conceptual systems can have an 'everything else' category. It, of course, does not have central members, chaining etc."(96).[8]

Given this account of human categorization, the category 'i.s.' can be described precisely as an 'everything else' category that follows the conceptual logic of otherness. Thus, Lakoff's analysis allows us to formalize the construction of a residual category according to the general principles governing the functioning of conceptual systems. Even more importantly, it allows us to make a key feature of residual categories explicit: by their very nature, they cannot possess an internal structure based on typicality differences. In this sense, residual categories are exceptional and fundamentally different from any other category.

I will now briefly explore the main implications for the study of 'i.s' deriving from this structural absence of prototypes.

2.5. As I have pointed out, the figures at the center of the category 'living dead' are immensely famous and defined by recurrent sets of traits.

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[8]   Lakoff defines 'chaining' as the idea that "central members are linked to other members, which are linked to other members, and so on" (95).

Whenever we encounter, for example, a character with long canines that feeds on human blood, we immediately identify this character as a vampire. On the contrary, i.s. completely lack both structural coherence and cultural renown. While every individual occurrence of the semiotic object 'Dracula' can be automatically subsumed under the prototype 'vampire', the same does not apply to the individual occurrence of the object 'Mr Valdemar'. It has no 'figure' to which it can be referred, because there seem to be no prototypes framing our cultural construction of Mr Valdemar.[9]

More importantly, recognizing a central member of the category generates precise expectations in readers and audiences: we all know quite well what kind of aesthetic experience we can expect from a zombie movie or a ghost story. In fact, we know it so well that our expectations can be intentionally transgressed in order to create new kinds of texts, like a zombie love story or a novel about a vegan vampire, whose aesthetic effect relies precisely on the contrast between our expectations and the actual traits given to the 'transgressive' character. Because of these figures' constant, pervasive and highly structured presence in contemporary fiction, the horror and fear they inspire have crystallized into recurrent and predictable patterns. We have learnt to associate zombies with *a precise quality of fear*, and know exactly how the fear of zombies is different from the fear of ghosts or vampires. In this sense, by providing us with well-defined patterns of experience, the living dead have become paradoxically reassuring and ultimately harmless. On the other hand, there are no rigid sets of expectations that guide our textual experience of i.s. This allows them to inspire fears, anxieties and speculative challenges we may not be culturally trained to face.

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[9]   This observation may be relevant not only to the study of categories but also, on a broader perspective, to Lotman's culturology, which is axed on an analogous 'center vs. periphery' opposition. In particular, it may help to elaborate on Lotman's well-known idea that the periphery of a culture lacks order and structure: "the entire system for preserving and communicating human experience is constructed as a concentric system in the center of which are located the most obvious and logical structures, that is, the most structural ones. Nearer to the periphery are found formations whose structuredness is not evident or has not been proved, but which, being included in general sign-communicational situations, *function as structures*" (Lotman and Uspensky 1978: 213). The lack of structuredness consists precisely in the impossibility to intuitively 'extract' traits from a category member: while one can easily do so for a vampire ('pale', 'with long canines', 'haematophagous' etc.), the same thing cannot be done for an i.s.

3. From the Chinese encyclopedia to nonce taxonomy

3.1. The creation of the category 'i.s.' as emancipated from the ghost-vampire-zombie paradigm represents an attempt to reshape our understanding of a set of fictional objects through the restructuring of the categorization processes by which these objects become part of a taxonomy.

Up to this point, I have analyzed these processes mainly from a broad, socio-cultural perspective: Wittgenstein, Rosch and Lakoff provide us with invaluable hermeneutic tools for describing how categories shape every aspect of our thinking and how we act *through* categories. In the second part of this study, I would like to focus on categorization processes by adopting the opposite perspective: how can we actively and consciously contribute to the construction of conceptual systems? Through which strategies can we act *on* categories? This is where queer theory comes in, opening up a fundamental space of mediation, created by the tension between what categories do to us and what we do to categories.

The hermeneutic strategy that led to the construction of 'i.s.' as a category was pursued in order to account for the wide variety of texts that are 'somehow related' to the notion of 'living dead' but are rendered invisible by the current configuration of this same notion. In the very first pages of *Epistemology of the Closet,* Eve Sedgwick seems to express a structurally analogous desire – with a broader perspective and with different aims – to account for the almost inexhaustible variety of identity traits that make each person unique:

> *Axiom 1: People are different from each other.*
> It is astonishing how few respectable conceptual tools we have for dealing with this self-evident fact. A tiny number of inconceivably coarse axes of categorization have been painstakingly inscribed in current critical and political thought: gender, race, class, nationality, sexual orientation are pretty much the available distinctions. They, with the associated demonstrations of the mechanisms by which they are constructed and reproduced, are indispensable, and they may indeed override all or some other forms of difference and similarity. But the sister or brother, the best friend, the classmate, the parent, the child, the lover, the ex-: our families, loves, and enmities alike, not to mention the strange relations of our work, play, and activism, prove that even people who share all or most of our own positionings along these crude axes may still be different enough from us, and from each other, to seem like all but different species (Sedgwick 1990: 22).

According to Sedgwick, the response to the rigidity of our axes of categorization is to be found in what she calls 'nonce taxonomy':

> probably everybody who survives at all has reasonably rich, unsystematic resources of nonce taxonomy for mapping out the possibilities, dangers, and stimulations of their human social landscape. [...] The writing of a Proust or a James would be exemplary here: projects precisely of nonce taxonomy, of making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world (Sedgwick 1990: 23).

Sedgwick posits nonce taxonomy as a means to remedy both the scarcity and the coarseness of social categories which can be used to describe the individual in our culture ("A *tiny* number of *inconceivably coarse* axes of categorization have been painstakingly inscribed in current critical and political thought"). From this perspective, nonce taxonomy seems to pursue a twofold aim: one the one hand, the creation of new axes of categorization; on the other hand, the multiplication of the number of possible positionings along a given axis of categorization.

When Sedgwick provides an example of nonce taxonomy, however, she does so with reference to "the particular area of sexuality" (24), which results in a long enumeration of specifications of people's sexual preferences. This strategy seems to pursue the second aim much more than the first one: in fact, if sexuality "has been made expressive of the essence of both identity and knowledge" (26) in which sense could it be considered a *new* axis of categorization?[10] Or rather: even if we consider it as such, what matters most here is that Sedgwick's nonce taxonomy proposes new categorizations while firmly remaining within the parameters that our culture already considers important – even fundamental – for the construction of personal identity.

3.2. In order to try to escape from these cultural parameters, Carmen Dell'Aversano[11] proposes to rethink nonce taxonomy from a radical

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[10]   Of course, to ask this question does not in any way imply undervaluing the fundamental relevance of Sedgwick's claim that "to alienate [...] from anyone on any theoretical ground the authority to describe and name their own sexual desire [...] may represent the most intimate violence possible" (26).

[11]   Dell'Aversano studied Sedgwick's treatment of nonce taxonomy and reconsidered the defini-

perspective by shifting the focus of our attention from what the culture considers important to what *the individual* considers important for the definition of her/his identity. From this perspective, a nonce taxonomy can be defined as an original arrangement of objects or categories, created by a single person on the basis of absolutely idiosyncratic criteria that are indicative of this person's unique, eccentric and quaint way of making sense of the world. In this sense, the "rich, unsystematic resources of nonce taxonomy" about which Sedgwick (23) speaks are those resources that allow us to conceive of and express idiosyncratic identity parameters that cannot be subsumed into any pre-established axis of categorization. In other words, this definition of nonce taxonomy promotes the re-segmentation of reality according to parameters that become particularly meaningful – from a philosophical point of view in general and for queer theory in particular – when they are considered highly relevant for the individual but not for the culture. Nonce taxonomy thus becomes a queer hermeneutic tool catalyzing the never-ending proliferation of novel categories and categorization strategies. The tool through which one becomes able to assert and exercise the right to compile one's own Chinese encyclopedia.

Dell'Aversano, however, observes that the application of this radical definition inevitably collides with the fact that nonce taxonomies cannot, by their very nature, become part of social interactions. If the cultural construction of normal social intercourse[12] is based on *shared* categorizations, then there is no place in it for the expression of absolutely idiosyncratic parameters. From this point of view, Dell'Aversano concludes, the process of education can be thought of as the process of systematic suppression of one's nonce taxonomies and, sometimes, of one's very ability to conceptualize a nonce taxonomy.

4. From nonce taxonomy to queer comparative literature

4.1. The discussion of the notion of nonce taxonomy has shown how queer theory can open up a hermeneutic space for mediating between what categories do to us and what we do to categories. More specifically, the analysis of the definitions of nonce taxonomy, provided by Sedgwick and Dell'Aversano, has outlined two models suggesting how one should position oneself

tion of this concept in a series of lectures on queer theory given at the University of Pisa during the first semester of the academic year 2016-2017.

[12]   On this subject, see the illuminating Sacks 1984.

and how one should act inside this space. At the same time, my argument has moved from the study of categorization processes to that of taxonomic processes, that is, from examining how objects can be gathered together in order to become members of a category, to examining how one can construct relationships between categories in order to create a taxonomy. Thus, we can now look at 'prototypical living dead' and 'i.s.' as the two sub-categories whose links and relationships structure the internal taxonomy of the category 'living dead'.

More precisely, I propose to interpret the construction of the residual category 'i.s' and the subsequent restructuring of the taxonomy of the living dead, drawing on reflections by both Sedgwick and Dell'Aversano, as an attempt to create a nonce taxonomy that mediates between the attention to personal (and textual) idiosyncrasies and the necessity to share the results of one's research with the members of the academic community.

This parallel allows me to conclude my argument by criss-crossing the results of the first part of the study and those of the second part. On the one hand, nonce taxonomy can be analyzed from the perspective of the hermeneutic strategy that led to the construction of the category 'i.s.'; more importantly, on the other hand, the invisible processes of categorization that are normally at work in comparative studies can be queered in the light of nonce taxonomy. This intersection pinpoints new strategies and patterns we may follow while we move in the hermeneutic space that mediates the interactions between the researcher and a given set of categories.

4.2. With regard to the first point, prototype theory shows that: *a)* the 'invaluably rich, unsystematic resources of nonce taxonomy' conceptualized by Sedgwick can be found at the peripheries of concepts;[13] *b)* 'everything else' categories can represent potentially enormous reservoirs of nonce taxonomic energies whose importance is often downplayed in critical analysis; *c)* by avoiding the adoption of a 'centralist' model for the

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[13] Dell'Aversano (2017: 124) proposes a parallel modelization of this argument from the perspective of Lotman's culturology. In order to do so, she draws on Freud's account of psychoanalysis as a discipline that deals with the observation of residual phenomena: "It is true that psycho-analysis cannot boast that it has never concerned itself with trivialities. On the contrary, the material for its observations is usually provided by the inconsiderable events which have been put aside by the other sciences as being too unimportant - the dregs, one might say, of the world of phenomena. But are you not making a confusion in your criticism between the vastness of the problems and the conspicuousness of what points to them?" (FREUD 1974: 3137).

interpretation of non-prototypical phenomena and focusing on the relationships that non-prototypical members entertain the one with the other, a chaotic body of quirky textual objects can challenge common categorizations and possibly give birth to a nonce taxonomy.

Regarding the second point, the notion that the systematic use of nonce taxonomy could result in the proliferation of new categorizations can easily be applied to the practice of comparative studies. This field could be queered, for example, by adopting nonce taxonomy when dealing with thematic categorization, which would in turn result in an exciting proliferation of *new themes*. This possibility is all the more important if one considers that the research field of thematics is constructed in such a way as to leave nonce taxonomic energies normally inactive. When working on topics, themes and motives,[14] the need to be aware of the possible ways in which idiosyncratic corpora could be created is rarely felt. This depends on the fact that, normally, themes are not considered as something that needs to be *constructed from scratch* by the researcher; rather, they are already available in the researcher's semiotic encyclopedia ('the forest', 'the mirror', 'the city', 'the zombie', 'magic', 'the teacher', 'war') and need only to be *recognized* in a text. On the contrary, there is no *a priori* agreement between the reader and me on what an 'i.s.' is and 'where' it can be found, while we unquestionably already agree, for example, on what a zombie or a mummy is.

4.3. These observations, in conclusion, link research practice in comparative studies to Dell'Aversano's idea of education as suppression of one's nonce taxonomies. I have the impression that they may intersect in the almost morbid fear of 'going off topic', inculcated in students during elementary school and often reasserted until the end of university education. Maybe, in order to exploit the hermeneutic potential of a nonce taxonomy, one must precisely take the risk of going off topic. In order to re-draw the geography of a thematic field, maybe one must re-learn how to go off topic and how to trust one's own quirky sense of family resemblances. Otherwise, if we devalue our

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[14]   Owing to the lack of a strong common theoretical framework for the thematic study of literature, the definition of even its most fundamental concepts remains highly controversial. Ceserani 2008 and Domínguez, Saussy and Villanueva 2014 (esp.: 68-77) offer a concise overview of the field, its current trends and an international bibliography of key readings. For an interdisciplinary approach to thematics, see the essays collected in Louwerse and van Peer 2002.

own ability to create new categories and taxonomies, we risk devaluing the most beautiful and extraordinary feature of the aesthetic experience, in general, and of speculative fiction in particular: its capacity to re-shape the construction of our world through the creation of objects, categories and ontologies that we will never be able to experience in our own reality. Its capacity to endlessly create and re-create Chinese encyclopedias of the world.

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Gay orgies under the big top

Re-sexualising the queer debate

Lorenzo Bernini

Abstract: In *Freud's Drive* (2008), Teresa de Lauretis tries to keep the Freudian concept of the drive together with the Foucauldian category of biopolitics, through the mediation of Fanon's understanding of race. Indeed, according to Jean Laplanche, the drive does not coincide with the instinct, but it leans on the instinct and sticks onto the bodily surface. By doing so, it individuates an intermediate region between the physical and the psychic, like the one where race spreads out and biopolitics acts upon. From this region, the drive troubles the inscription of the subject into the social order, pushing them towards its dissolution. We should start from there if we wish not only to overcome vain dichotomies in queer theory between essentialism and constructivism, or between political and apolitical thinking, but also 'to do justice' to Freud and Foucault. And if we wish to stay queer while doing queer theory.

Keywords: antisocial theory; sexual drive; biopolitics; race; intersectionality.

1. Bowls of contention

Through these pages,[1] I would like to continue on from a discussion which started in Pisa on April 6, 2016, when I held my first seminar for the CIRQUE – the Italian Interuniversity research centre devoted to queer studies whose name sounds as the French word for "circus" but in Italian is the acronym for "Centro Interuniversitario di Ricerca Queer". I introduced on that occasion so-called antisocial theories, which my book *Queer Apocalypses: Elements of Antisocial Theory* (Bernini 2014; Eng. tr. 2017) is devoted to. In particular, I presented antisocial theories as a critique of the radical constructivist methodology that Butler (1990; 1993; 1997; 2004) inherited from Foucault (1976), and that many other scholars inherited from Butler later on.[2] And I praised

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[1]   This text was firstly presented as a talk during the conference *What's New in Queer Studies?* organized in L'Aquila by the CIRQUE from the 31st of March to the 2nd of April 2017.

[2]   By "radical constructivism" I mean the thesis according to which subjects are shaped by power, and in particular: 1) sexuality can be understood as a power device that produces sexual subjects, 2) gender can be understood as a set of biopolitical norms that regulates sexuality, and 3) sex is not considered the natural foundation of sexuality, but a social construction which is always read through gender norms. See note 14 and Bernini 2017.

such critique for two reasons. The first is that, in this trend of queer thought, the category of *sex*, understood as Freud's sexual *drive*, is brought back to the core of queer research: a field dominated since the 1990s onwards by the category of *gender*, understood in Butler's terms as identity construction. The second reason is that, by insisting on the sexual drive, antisocial theories reinstate the subject of queer research as a perverted subject who belongs to a minority, with no ambition to become universal – while a certain current easy combination of the methodologies of constructivism and intersectionality runs the risk to reintroduce universality by calling for an alliance among all the oppressed, and turning queer from a floating signifier to a universal signifier that represents this alliance. Clearly, mine was a provocation. The CIRQUE's statement of intent does not just promote an intersectional approach, but goes as far as to state that "queer's relationship with LGBT studies […] is neither necessary nor a key defining factor", and that one of "the objects of queer enquiries" is the "deconstruction of identities", which extends beyond sexual minorities to encompass "categories like 'migrant', 'precarious worker', 'disabled person'", "marginal individuals, losers, misfits", "our colleague with Asperger's" and "the cat lady with her bowls".[3] In Pisa I made a plea for an understanding of queer theories as political ones, aimed at investigating the relationship between sex and power from the point of view of sexual minorities – something I am still eager to argue for. As a matter of clarity, I have got nothing against theories that help investigate the identity and subject construction of migrants, of people diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, of animal rights activists in general and of cat ladies in particular. What I contend is that such topics become queer only when they thematize sexuality, as for instance the so called antisocial stream of queer theories does through the Freudian concept of the drive. In Pisa my provocation succeeded: a lively discussion followed, in which Carmen Dell'Aversano, director of the CIRQUE, at the end of her intervention addressed an essential and radical question to me: "what does queer research *gain* from focusing on sexual drive?". Here, I would like to continue answering this question, not so much to put an end to it as to keep it open. In so doing, I will not bring anything "new" to queer studies,[4] but I will rather invite to look at the present and the past of gay men's sexual

[3]   The CIRQUE's statement of intent can be found here: http://cirque.unipi.it/en/unidea-del-queer/
[4]   Go back to note number 1.

experience, and remain in those interstitial sexual spaces where queer people have always been.

One of the possible starting points for a queer reflection on the antisociality of the drive is Leo Bersani's famous essay *Is the Rectum a Grave?* (2010; 1st ed. 1987). However, the book that relaunched the debate in the last fifteen years is Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). In 1987, during the AIDS crisis, Bersani proposed gay men to suspend their desire for inclusion in liberal societies and welcome, though temporarily, a politically incorrect understanding of homosexuality, which would take the disgust raised by anal intercourse seriously. In 2004 instead, in the midst of the political struggle for lesbian and gay marriage, Edelman invited queer subjects to welcome – not just temporarily, but permanently – the sexual negativity they are associated with in heterosexist (hence all) societies, and turn it into their political positioning. A similar yet different proposal is to be found in the avant-la-lettre queer manifesto *Le Désir homosexuel* (1972), where Guy Hocquenghem argued against both liberal and Marxist thought, and in favour of a "homosexual struggle", aimed at the sexualization of society and at no sublimation. But one could also look at Mario Mieli's pervert version of the Freudo-Marxist theory of sexual revolution as it is elaborated in his *Elementi di critica omosessuale* (1977). What is it, then, that queer theories, movements and subjects *gain* from this? I am not able to provide one single reply to this question; therefore, I will sketch two possible answers. In the last section of this text, I will tackle the issue from a theoretical perspective. But as a starting point, I will leave theory aside and contend that, from a political and existential point of view, we are not talking so much about gain, as we are about loss. A focus on sexual drive implies that one takes up the burden of their own abjection and negativity, gets rid of phantasies of universal inclusion, and abandons all dreams of absolute peacefulness. In fact, we are talking about a big loss, one that may lead to losing politics itself by depriving the sexual subject of intelligibility in the public sphere (BERNINI 2014). But, in my opinion, on our ability to get enjoyment from this risk depends the very fact of being queer: weirdo, twisted and perverted.

2. CONFORMIST HYENAS AND GAY ORGIES

In June 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States legalized same-sex marriage. In May 2016, instead, the Italian Parliament ruled in favour of a

poor and ultimately discriminatory law on civil partnerships, which does not recognize to lesbian and gay couples a family status, but nevertheless constitutes an important step towards full citizenship for sexual minorities. Yet, what does it mean for LGBT people to fully become citizens? Does the recognition of them as good husbands and wives, or fathers and mothers, equal the recognition as LGBT or queer subjects? Do the rights connected to family life, or all rights in general, suffice to free queer people from the negativity they are associated with in heterosexist societies, and bestow full citizenship on them?

What followed the approval of civil partnerships in Italian mediascape helps reply to such questions. Initially, Italian public opinion reacted quite well. Few political groups countered the discriminatory version of the law that got approved, and articles, TV programmes and reports abounded, celebrating this new legal tool and recounting romantic narratives about gay and lesbian couples. In the TV show "Uomini e donne" ("Men and Women"), presenter Maria De Filippi even hosted the first gay "tronista" (the main contender of the show, who seats on a throne). But soon, horniness began to spoil the honeymoon of equality. On February 19, 2017, a TV report of "Le Iene" show ("The Hyenas" show) was broadcasted, which accused the National Secretariat against Racial Discrimination (UNAR) of funding an association that groups together gay sex clubs. Most likely, the organization under attack is anddos, the National Association against Discrimination based on Sexual Orientation. This is not the first time "Le Iene" show spreads an outcry against sexual habits of gay men. On November 26, 2014, they broadcasted a report on the bareback and bug-chasing practices in Italy. This time, however, they added footages secretly shot inside gay saunas and cruising bars in Rome. There, male bodies can be seen (not faces, which are covered) performing fellatio, anal sex and fist fucking. Because of the show, UNAR's president Francesco Spano resigned, and junior minister Maria Elena Boschi promised to put a stop to public funds to anddos. Several political figures took advantage of the outcry, and a huge homophobic campaign started on social media. After one week, a new waive of disgust and indignation was raised by the national daily *Corriere della sera*, which published a report on gay debauchery in Milan, featuring gay bars, darkrooms and private parties with chems and unprotected sex (Berberi 2017). Few people, even from the LGBT scene, have openly reacted and stood up

in defence of sexual freedom.[5] Vis-à-vis these events, it is fair to wonder why no one in Italy has ever complained when an organization such as the ARCI (Italian Cultural and Leisure Time Association) gets public money for social and cultural purposes, whereas the participation of anddos in projects against violence has provoked such an outcry. The answer is quite easy: because affiliates to ARCI include bars, restaurants and dance halls, not clubs with darkrooms, cruising bars and gay saunas. To get indignant for everyone's indignation and to cry out because of everyone's outcry are no solutions. We may dream of a world where to play blackjack in an ARCI bar equals a group jack off in an anddos club, but it may be more effective to be aware that such equivalence, in this world, is not given. Today, we are living in neoliberal and hyper-hedonistic societies that are able to capitalize even on sexual enjoyment, and yet the sexual drive – that is, sex as such, free from affectivity, wedding vows and reproductive phantasies – is still understood as a toxic force disturbing consciousness and spoiling social relations, hence by no means to be funded or sponsored by state bodies. For this reason, I believe, sexual promiscuity in gay venues keeps troubling the same public opinion that is touched by televised gay couples and their love dream turned into second class marriage.[6]

Bersani paved the way to raise this awareness in queer subjects. Edelman, for his part, goes further and opens the door for queers to become active representatives of sexual drive, thereby assuming an untenable, unreasonable and ultimately defeatable political stance. Embracing such stance in today's Italy would not mean to follow the reality principle and reassert the right for anddos to receive public funding *in spite of* their promotion of sexual intercourse among men. Instead, it would mean to follow a principle of *jouissance* that is much beyond the pleasure principle, and assert that UNAR shall finance anddos precisely *because* it promotes sexual intercourse among men. Or better, that the anddos affiliates should close down and men having sex with men should obtain a "queer basic income",

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[5]   Among the few, it is worth mentioning Franco Grillini and Porpora Marcasciano (Orrù 2017; Marcasciano 2017).

[6]   "Le Iene" show itself, on December 6, 2016, televised an interview with *Simone e Ivan: I più giovani sposi gay d'Italia* (Simone and Ivan, the youngest gay married couple of Italy). The two 23-years old partners who met in high school conveyed a positive picture of homosexuality, condemned homophobic bullying, stated they never cheated on one another and claimed to be sexually versatile, thereby neutralizing the troubling edge of sex among men through romantic ideals of reciprocity and faithfulness.

or a "sexuality wage", to be free to have sex in public, wherever and whenever they like. This, obviously, is an untenable (and bound to be defeated) political stance, which I would not recommend for the gay movements' agenda. In my *Queer Apocalypses* I even criticize Edelman for seemingly drawing norms from Lacan's ontology of *jouissance*, moving without mediations from the descriptive to the normative level – as if politics can do without contingencies, circumstances and possible alliances.[7] The situation changes, though, if we move from the activist to the philosophical field. While, in the former, the reclaiming of negativity runs the risk to loose sight of politics,[8] in the latter the refusal to reflect on such negativity runs the risk to loose queerness itself.

3. Queers under the big top

To be more exact, I would like to make the following point, in partial disagreement with both Bersani and Edelman: that it is possible to preserve the queer edge of queer theories without necessarily dismissing the radical constructivist paradigm initiated by Foucault's research on sexuality. As is known, the latter constitutes the background, not only of Butler's theory of performativity, but also of Puar's concept of homonationalism, Massad's gay imperialism, Preciado's farmacopornographic regime (Puar 2007; Massad 2007; Preciado 2008; 2010), and it can be found in the CIRQUE's statement too, when we read that one of the "defining objects of queer enquiries" is the "deconstruction of identities". It is therefore not my task to partake in the struggle of antisocial theories against constructivism, of antisociality against relationality, of the apolitical *jouissance* of the drive against the political subversion of gender roles. In my opinion, it is much more interesting to detect the points these different politico-philosophical stances have in common than to focus on their frictions, which make the contrast too simplistic. My latest investigation is moving precisely in this direction, opened up by Teresa de Lauretis in her *Freud's Drive* (2008).

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[7]   In my book *Le teorie queer: Un'introduzione* (2017), I trace the genealogy of queer theories within critical philosophy as opposed to normative thought.

[8]   For the same reason, I also disagree with those who – vis-à-vis the all-pervading war waged by radical Catholics against an alleged "gender ideology" that would pervert society – reclaim "gender ideology" as the creed of transfeminist and queer movements. I find it an act of political responsibility to hold a counter-information campaign and explain teachers, parents, students and citizens in general what queer and feminist theories are, beyond any caricatural picture that the Vatican and "anti-gender" movements can provide (Bernini 2016).

Following Laplanche (1970; 1992), de Lauretis insists that, in Freud, sexual drive is not sexual instinct, but the perversion of it. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Freud contends that such perversion emerges not so much from the infant's needs, despite surfacing at an early stage, as from the arousal that the infant's body experiences while being fed, washed and touched by other caring bodies.[9] The drive, then, does not originate from the body, Laplanche and de Lauretis argue, but "sticks onto" the bodily surface, thereby configuring a middle region between the inside and the outside, the somatic and the psychic. This region is transindividual,[10] in the sense that it does not belong to the subject, for the subject loses themselves through it into the other and the world.[11] Whereas Bersani and Edelman confront psychoanalysis with Foucault's constructivism, de Lauretis argues that precisely in this middle region do psychoanalysis and constructivism meet. The subject's exposure to the manipulation of the other makes not only the installation of the drive possible, but also the production of biopolitical identities. This is what, according to de Lauretis, Frantz Fanon well understood. In his pivotal *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952), Fanon explains how colonial domination works onto the black male body through a process of racialization that is both denigrating and hypersexualizing. The outcome is known among non-specialists of Fanon as well: sticking and coagulating onto his body, race comes to identify the black man as an exaggerated phallus craving to possess and rape white women. In this sense, Fanon provides an example of intersectional analysis thirty-seven years before Kimberlé

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[9]   To provide an example: according to Freud, "sucking with delight", is a masturbatory activity of the infant, which reactivates the arousal of the oral area initially stimulated by the mother's breast and/or bottle. The oral drive, therefore, leans onto the feeding instinct, not on that sexual instinct which Freud deems "natural". To him, the latter aims at the heterosexual coitus for procreative purposes, and surfaces only in puberty, without ever erasing once and for all other perverse (hence non-reproductive) drives. The Freudian theory can shed light on the glory holes that shocked journalist Filippo Roma from "Le Iene", author of the above-mentioned TV report among anddos gay clubs.

[10]   Neither Laplanche nor de Lauretis make use of the term "transindividual", which I borrow from Simondon (1958; 1989).

[11]   This topological reading of the drive is confirmed by Bersani (1996: 100) himself: "Overwhelmed by stimuli in excess of the ego structures capable of resisting or binding them, the infant may survive that imbalance only by finding it exciting. So the masochistic thrill of being invaded by a world we have not yet learned to master might be an inherited disposition, the result of an evolutionary conquest. This, in any case, is what Freud appears to be moving toward as a definition of the *sexual*: an aptitude for the defeat of power by pleasure, the human subject's potential for *jouissance* in which the subject is momentarily undone".

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Crenshaw coined the very term "intersectionality".[12] Yet, compared to many contemporary intersectional analyses and intersectional political practices resulting in the mere juxtaposition of different axes of discrimination, Fanon's antiracist and decolonial critique puts sexuality at the core, and the author of such critique (i.e., Fanon), does not position himself as a universal subject, detached from the objects under scrutiny, but thematizes what it means to be a hypersexualized black man within a world dominated by white people who read him as a possible assaulter. Because of this, and despite its rampant sexism and homophobia,[13] *Black Skin, White Masks* is still of the utmost importance for researchers who do not want to give up queerness in order to apply constructivism and intersectionality.

Hereby, I am not proposing an alternative genealogy of queer theories where Fanon replaces Foucault as their putative founder. Indeed, we can easily do without founders, or decide to multiply them if we like to (Mieli, in Italy, could be one of them). It is my conviction, instead, that Bersani has pointed too hastily to Foucault, in his *Homos* (1996), as the one responsible to desexualize the political theory inherited by constructivist queer theorists later on. For Bersani, Foucault was unable to conceptualize the disturbing obscenity of the drive when he came to reject the use of psychoanalysis in political theory. But actually, in *The Will to Knowledge* (1976) Foucault did not criticize Reich and Marcuse's Freudomarxism and Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis for their disturbing obscenity (Reich 1936; Marcuse 1955; 1964; Deleuze *et al.* 1972); on the contrary, he held these theories responsible for using psychoanalysis in order to provide over-reassuring understandings of power and desire and in order to promise a final liberation of the human from negativity.[14] Elsewhere, Foucault himself shows that psychoanalysis can be used differently. In *The History of Madness*, he invites the reader to "do justice to Freud" (Foucault 1972: 360;

[12]   Within the field of critical legal studies, Crenshaw (1989) deployed the concept of "intersectionality" to refer to the need to cross raced and gendered lines to formulate well-balanced judgements in discrimination trials.

[13]   According to Fanon, black Antilleans, whose psychology is deeply marked by colonial subjugation, do not undergo the Oedipus complex, hence cannot be homosexual. Moreover, to him racist xenophobia is the expression of white women's and men's desire to get raped by black men.

[14]   Foucault contrasts a repressive conception of power that he explicitly attributes to Reich and Marcuse, and implicitly to Deleuze and Guattari, with a productive conception of power. According to the latter, biopowers constitute the subject as well as their own sexual identity – therefore, the subject cannot get rid of this powers once and for all. This is the radical constructivist hypothesis that Butler herself borrowed, and has inspired many subsequent queer reflections.

Eng. tr. 2006: 339), and to recognize his fundamental contribution to the dialogue over the obscure and apocalyptic "unreasoning" that positivist psychology has been trying to silence. Additionally, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault considers psychoanalysis an ally when he carries out an archaeological critique of the modern dream to turn "man" into an object for science. Psychoanalysis, he holds, is not a general theory about the human, but an investigation of its external boundaries. It is not a human science, therefore, but a counter-science that dissolves the human into "that region where death prowls, where thought is extinguished, where the promise of the origin interminably recedes" (Foucault 1966: 395; Eng. tr. 1970: 418).

In contrast with Bersani, my claim is that these passages from Foucault are telling that, similarly to Fanon, Foucault did explore the liminal region theorized by de Lauretis as the region of the drive. In this region, subjects are done and undone, and they are exposed to the intervention, not only of the powers that construct their identities, but also of the drives that make their identities explode with excitement. This region is certainly not "new" at all – if we wish to find "what's new in queer studies",[15] we should go somewhere else. This is rather the region where sexual minorities have been relegated to for a long time, and from which they have never been ultimately rescued, either by equal marriage or by neoliberal hyper-hedonism. In Italy, "Le Iene" show and the *Corriere della sera* daily have reminded gay men that they belong there, as if to punish them for their increased legal inclusion. Going back to the declaration of intent of the CIRQUE – or the circus –, my proposal is to invite all marginal individuals, losers, misfits, colleagues with Asperger's and cat ladies with their bowls to inhabit that region, convinced as I am that occupying such unliveable space does imply an existential and political loss, but also an existential and theoretical gain. That is, the gain to stay, or better become, queer.

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[15]   Go back, once again, to note number 1.

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On doing 'being a misfit':
towards a constrastive grammar of ordinariness

Alessandro Grilli

Abstract: This paper aims at exploring the shaping of normality, in the hegemonial patterns which constitute the difference between the performances of social failure and success, by presenting the methodology and some key results of an extensive ongoing research project about the representation of misfits in Western literature. Through the analysis of the literary representation of a variety of interactions between misfits and 'normals', my work aims to investigate the primordial shaping of normative constructs in a number of apparently benign forms of social exchange such as conversation. Beyond its thematological framework, stemming from a traditional comparative setting, my research project aims at a comprehensive analysis of the repressive thrust of normality and of the various socially relevant meanings which can be expressed through the literary representation of its imperfect performance, from the cautionary tale to the return of the repressed.

Keywords: misfits in literature; normality as performance; Harvey Sacks, "On doing 'being ordinary'"; queer theory.

1. Harvey Sacks's theory of normality as performance

The questioning of the ontological stability of identity and normality, through the reduction of their apparent consistency to the mere iteration of performances, are central premises of queer theory.[1] In this paper I would like to present some preliminary findings of a project, very much in progress, whose aim is to flesh out this starting point through an analysis of the concrete ways performances of normality and of deviance are constructed in the literary representation of social interaction.

Misfits are a popular figure in poetry, narrative and drama of all ages, but they appear ever more frequently, for reasons that will be not dealt with in this paper, in literary texts from the beginning of the XIXth century onwards. Beyond their obvious relevance to literature, I have chosen to focus my inquiry on the literary construction of misfits not only

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[1]   Butler herself, in her 1999 "Preface" to *Gender Trouble*, acknowledges the central role of performativity in her own work and in that of other queer theorists (Butler 1999 [1990]: xiv).

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because of the intrinsic affinity of queer theory with antinormativity, but chiefly because the normal, as the unmarked, only becomes perceptible and accessible to analysis when juxtaposed with its differential opposites. The purpose of my inquiry is to delineate and work out the most basic aspects of the performance of normality, which are also the most apparently anodyne and least perceptually salient: this has led me to focus on the mildest and most benign forms of deviance: not madmen or rebels but characters who display a minimal ineptitude to social relations, who can believe in good faith that their performance of normality is adequate, but who are singled out as incompetent by their consistently poor results and their permanently defective integration. Through their incompetence and the malfunctioning of the social situations they happen to be involved in, misfits enable the observer to become conscious of details, and to infer from them regularities, that would remain unperceived in faultlessly performed social scripts.

My choice of topic has mandated the use of an eclectic hermeneutic toolbox, from literary theory to linguistics, from psychology to anthropology to cultural studies. All these perspectives allow to throw light on the huge relevance of literary representation to an analysis of relational dynamics. Because literature does not merely reproduce or mirror social reality, its technique of representation is in itself analytical; therefore literary portrayals of misfits (as of any other category or phenomenon) already include their own theories of social ineptitude, which are not less complete or enlightening for being encoded in a different language from the metadiscourse of the social sciences. The defamiliarization which is the hallmark of literary discourse makes it possible to reflect analytically on situations and processes which are invisible in direct social experience.

My most important theoretical reference framework is the work of American sociologist Harvey Sacks (1935-1975). Sacks is renowned as the founder of conversation analysis; but his brilliant intuitions range well beyond pragmatics. As far as queer studies are concerned, Sacks is to be credited with describing the performative nature of identity over twenty years earlier than Judith Butler (1990), and in considerably greater detail. In what follows I will refer chiefly to a posthumously published paper edited by his student Gail Jefferson assembling parts of several lectures held between 1969 and 1971 (SACKS 1984). The title of the paper, "On doing 'being ordinary'", already shows that Sacks's approach anticipates queer theory's

basic tenet of identity as performance. The main claim of the paper is that "being ordinary" is not, in fact, a mode of being but a form of *work*:

> 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.
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> 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 (Sacks 1984: 414-415).

In order to carry out this work, a number of conditions are necessary. The two basic ones, Sacks points out, are *competence* and the *availability of resources*: whoever performs normality must first of all *know* what the ordinary behavior in the social situation she is currently involved in consists of:

> 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. (And some people, as a matter of kicks, could say, "Let's do 'being ordinary' tonight. We'll watch TV, eat popcorn", etc. Something they know is being done at the same time by millions of others around.)
>
> So one part of the job is that you have to know what anybody/ everybody is doing; doing ordinarily (Sacks 1984: 415; emphasis in original).

The person doing 'being ordinary' must moreover have access to the resources which allow her to perform that behavior correctly (a prisoner in a cell without a TV set cannot spend an "ordinary evening" watching TV, *ibid.*).

Another important assumption about the performance of normality is that normality is specifically bound to social situations. There is no absolute

notion of 'normal', but only an acknowledged set of behaviors which are perceived as such in a given situation: a professor of history is entitled to intersperse her discourse with pieces of historical erudition without disrupting the ordinariness of a social interaction – provided that her identity as a professor of history is relevant to the situation. The same professor of history would not be performing ordinariness should she display the same erudition to a total stranger sitting next to her in a bus.

The original context of Sacks's remarks on the performance of ordinariness was a wider study aimed at understanding how storytelling is organised in conversation.[2] This is why most of his observations refer to the techniques that regulate how events are reported in dialogue. In fact, most regularities Sacks observes in the pragmatics of ordinary conversation deliver precious information on the social construction of experience and the ways people find to cut down even the most unusual events to ordinary shareable information.

In the example Sacks analyzes on p. 424, a woman tells a friend during a phone conversation of a car crash she witnessed on her way home. Her direct involvement in the event makes the teller entitled to report her experience and convey her emotional response to it: "the teller owns rights to tell this story, and they give their credentials for their rights to tell the story by offering such things as that they saw it, and that they suffered by it" (*ibid.*). But these credentials, as the involvement in the event on which they rest, are non-transferable:

> For example, you might, on seeing an automobile accident and people lying there, feel awful, cry, have the rest of your day ruined. The question is, is the recipient of this story entitled to feel as you do? I think the facts are, plainly, no. That is to say, if you call up a friend of yours, unaffiliated with the event you are reporting, that is, someone who does not turn out to be the cousin of, the aunt of, the person who was killed in the accident, but just a somebody you call up and tell about an awful experience, then, if the recipient becomes as disturbed as you, or more, something peculiar is going on, and you might even feel wronged – although that might seem to be an odd thing to feel (Sacks 1984: 425).

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[2]   "[I]n this course I will be taking stories offered in conversation and subjecting them to a type of analysis that is concerned, roughly, to see whether it is possible to subject the details of actual events to formal investigation, informatively. The gross aim of the work I am doing is to see how finely the details of actual, naturally occurring conversation can be subjected to analysis that will yield the technology of conversation" (Sacks 1984: 413).

At the same time, the urge to share experienced events may even exceed the need for experience in itself:

> [...] you have experienced being in scenes the virtue of which was that, as you were in them, you could see what it was you could later tell people had transpired.
>
> There are presumably lots of things that, at least at some point in people's lives, are done just for that; that is, it seems fair to suppose that there is a time, when kids do "kissing and telling", that they are doing the kissing in order to have something to tell, and not that they happen to do kissing and happen to do telling, or that they want to do kissing and happen to do telling, but that a way to get them to like the kissing is via the fact that they like the telling (SACKS 1984: 417).

This leads, according to Sacks, to the general propensity to adapt lived experience to ordinary knowledge in order to meet the requirements of discursive exchange. Sacks's analyses of storytelling highlight a general paradoxical tendency in the approach of social subjects to reality: while looking constantly for events that are worth reporting – that are, to use Sacks's words, "storyable" –, people nonetheless register only those aspects that correspond to a shared notion of ordinariness (*ibid.*):

> So it seems plain enough that people monitor the scenes they are in for their storyable characteristics. And yet the awesome, overwhelming fact is that they come away with *no* storyable characteristics. Presumably, any of us with any wit could make of this half-hour, or of the next, a rather large array of things to say. But there is the job of being an ordinary person, and that job includes attending the world, yourself, others, objects, so as to see how it is that it is a usual scene. And when offering what transpired, you present it in its usual fashion: "Nothing much", and whatever variants of banal characterizations you might happen to use [...].

Beyond the advantages of membership and social inclusion,[3] ordinariness has a major gnoseological benefit: that of providing an ontological foundation of reality that is rooted in intersubjective consistency, and that therefore protects the subject from the danger of solipsism.

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[3]   Sacks, like Garfinkel and Parsons before him, uses 'Member' to refer to a full-fledged member of a social group. It is important to note that the condition of membership is not a given but a form of privilege; Sacks devotes considerable theoretical acumen to elucidating the workings of what he calls "boundary categories" (see for instance SACKS 1992: I, 69-71), that is, of categorization devices which question and limit the rights of some social subjects to be recognized as Members.

2. The neutralization of salience

Sacks's observations allow to conclude that the most basic discursive strategy for the performance of normality is the removal or *neutralization of salience*. Whatever exceeds or contradicts normality, first of all perceptually, must be normalized, that is, perceived, represented, and talked about as if it were normal. The reason is that, in order for Members to feel that they can competently deal with reality through the resources that the culture makes available to them as normal individuals, their normality must be assumed to be adequate to dealing with any state of the world, and this is only possible if the descriptive resources of normality can be shown to be up to the task of describing the world in any of its states. But since, of course, the world vastly exceeds what any culture models as normal (and thus the ability of most Members to deal competently with quite a few of its states), everything that exceeds the normal must be cut down to size, in both perception and discourse. As a consequence, a number of perceptual and discursive strategies are available for reducing the salient to the non-noticeable, the non-normal to the normal.

Sacks only analyzes a couple of concrete examples without drawing any general conclusions. I believe that his analysis can be shown to point to two main forms of neutralization, *reduction* and *distancing*, each of which is implemented through several strategies. *Reduction* consists in the elimination of salient aspects, cutting down the marked experience to ordinariness. This takes place in most cases through an elision of specific or atypical traits: the marked experience is stripped of its salient details so as to be made to conform to an abstract and interchangeable version of itself. Sacks quotes as an example the account of somebody talking about a man she met the night before:

> He's just a real, dear, nice guy. Just a real, real nice guy. So we were really talking up a storm, and having a real good time, had a few drinks and so forth, and he's real easygoing. He's intelligent, and he's uh, not handsome, but he's nice looking, and uh, just real real nice, personable, very personable, very sweet (Sacks 1984: 416).

Intensifiers like "real" are all the more necessary the less specific the data about the date's positive qualities are. But this lack in specificity (the "guy" is just "nice") is a necessary requirement of the social sharing of experience.

And it is crucial to note that here too the need to tell the story as ordinary affects the very *perception* of the event:

> I think it is not that you might make such observations but not include them in the story, but it is that the cast of mind of doing "being ordinary" is essentially that your business in life is only to see and report the usual aspects of any possibly usual scene. That is to say, what you *look* for is to see how any scene you are in can be made an ordinary scene, a usual scene, and that is what that scene is (*ibid.*, emphasis in original).

It is worth noting that according to Sacks the analytic recording of details is a specific 'professional' competence of artists:

> There are, of course, people whose job it is to make such observations. If you were to pick up the notebooks of writers, poets, novelists, you would be likely to find elaborated studies of small, real objects. For example, in the notebooks of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, there are extended naturalistic observations of a detailed sort, of cloud formations, or what a leaf looks like, looking up at it under varying types of light, and so on. And some novelists' notebooks have extended and detailed observations of character and appearance (*ibid.*).

This is particularly relevant to my research, which deals with the literary representation of the extra-ordinary as a disruption of some shared notion of ordinariness: literature is in itself, according to Sacks, the business of particularly keen observers who make it their job to register details that would be out of place in the context of normal social exchange.

Allocating a habit of peculiar perception to a specific set of social subjects makes it easy to understand how perceptive salience can be neutralized through *distancing*. Distancing itself can be thought of as a particular case of reduction, since it is nothing but a reduction of closeness and involvement; it hinges on the discursive acknowledgment of salience, which is however kept *separate* from shared ordinary experience through a number of strategies. The first of these is *specialization*, whereby salient data are contained within a kind of specialist competence, and therefore circumscribed to professional discourse so that they cannot interfere with the content and rules of ordinary social exchange.

Specialization is a particular case of 'proxy'. Proxy is the tolerance which the rules of ordinary interaction show towards some categories who, *as*

such, are allowed to exceed the limits of ordinary discourse. Among these categories are not only poets and artists in general, public figures and stars, as Sacks himself points out (Sacks 1984: 419), but children, intellectuals, mystics and so on; the point is that the salience of a given behavior or discourse is normalized on the basis of the 'special identity' involved in it (one can think of the freedom of speech and action enjoyed by the fool at a king's court). The delimitation of subgroups with whom salience is associated *a priori* makes it possible to neutralize salience by considering it a specific property of those social categories; this is why this kind of salience does not need to be understood or explained;[4] most important: it never interferes with, or questions, the rules of ordinary discourse.

The prime example of 'proxy discourse' is, of course, literature, which is free to display the most salient content as long as it does not trespass beyond its definition as a clearly delimited 'secondary reality'; the result otherwise is an aberrant situation like that of Don Quijote or Madame Bovary, against which people are constantly warned by ordinary knowledge. The border between primary reality, which must be ordinary, and secondary reality, where markedness is allowed to exist, cannot be questioned.

The point is that *normality*, as we will see below in greater detail,[5] *is at the same time descriptive and prescriptive*. Since the shared and socially compulsory discourse of ordinariness is assumed to be adequate to the description of reality, it necessarily follows that whatever transcends it (such as salience) *cannot be real*. This suggests once again that ontology is a fundamental part of the definition of normality: the normal is what

4   According to Sacks, social categories are devices for storing and making available information about social groups which make it possible to perceive social reality as ordered and rational, and thus as ultimately comprehensible. Among the information necessarily and essentially connected to social categories is the attribution to specific categories of certain activities, which are accordingly labelled "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); "The way things work is something like the following. We have our category-bound activities, where, for some activity occurring, we have a rule of relevance which says, 'look first to see whether the person who did it is a member of the category to which the activity is bound'. [...] And of course, using that procedure for finding the category, you may never come across occasions for seeing that it's 'incorrect' [...]. Now, one consequence of that procedure's use is, if it turns out that someone is a member of some category, then what you have is an explanation. [...] One importance of these statements, then, is that they make some large class of activities immediately understandable, needing no further explanation. The statements are then to be seen as, heavily, 'explanations'" (Sacks 1992: I, 337).

5   See par. 4.

we are entitled to experience and what our language describes without exceeding the limits or disrupting the performance of ordinary social exchange: deviations from it are only possible on a *secondary* level of experience, which can be 'bracketed' and dealt with as an ordinary package of extra-ordinary information – in Sacks's terminology, a non-transferrable 'experience' converted into ordinary shareable 'knowledge'. To name but an example: if I tell a story about an acquaintance of mine who has had experiences of demonic possession, this can arouse the interest of my audience without preventing the exchange from being normally performed; on the other hand, if I start telling my interlocutor that I was *myself* the object of demonic possession, this would lead to forms of unease that would easily derail the conversation and prevent it from 'being ordinary'.

3. The phatic-epideictic dimension of discourse

Ordinary social exchange – idle, apparently relaxed and unfocused conversation – is the crucial moment where ordinariness is created and where it is imperceptibly transformed into normality and normativity. Sacks's analyses show how the urge to tell and share experience is at the root of its reduction to unmarked quanta of information. In order to see more precisely in what terms this reduction has to be understood, it will be useful to refer to Bronisław Malinowski's concept of 'phatic communion'.[6]

According to Malinowski, who in this anticipates a foundational premise of pragmatics, the purpose of language is not exclusively to convey information (symbolic, propositional meaning) but to act as an instrument of social exchange; Malinowski points out in particular that in many situations language is used only in order to display the speakers' availability for social contact.

> There can be no doubt that we have here a new type of linguistic use – phatic communion I am tempted to call it, actuated by the demon of terminological invention – a type of spech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words (Malinowski 1923: 315).

I have found it necessary to rework this concept to include an important

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[6]   The word 'phatic' was first introduced by B. Malinowski (1923) to qualify a specific variety of discourse; later on, R. Jakobson (1960) borrowed it to designate, in a quite different perspective, one of the basic functions of language, the one concerning contact between sender and receiver.

caveat. More precisely, I would like to question Malinowski's view that in phatic communion content (the words' symbolical, propositional meaning) is irrelevant:

> Let us look at it from the special point of view with which we are here concerned; let us ask what light it throws on the function or nature of language. *Are words in Phatic Communion used primarily to convey meaning, the meaning which is symbolically theirs? Certainly not!* They fulfill a social function and that is their principal aim, but they are neither the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener. Once again we may say that language does not function here as a means of transmission of thought (*ibid.*, emphasis mine).

I maintain that, on the contrary, propositional meaning is deeply relevant, since phatic communion is the locus where socially shared knowledge about the world is *ritually rehearsed* and socially transmitted. This is why I have chosen to replace Malinowski's concept of "phatic communion" with that of a "phatic-epideictic dimension" of discourse. In Western rhetorical tradition "epideictic" designates a kind of speech which is aimed not at persuading the audience but at rehearsing already shared beliefs. However, such a rehearsing is only apparently neutral, since it shapes the socially shared sense of reality; therefore what may appear as idle and benign, actually conceals a powerful repressive thrust against any and all deviations from the norm, as is apparent, for instance, in the social function of gossip.

Positing a phatic-epideictic dimension of discourse makes it possible to understand on which level Sacks and Malinowski's positions converge: words in phatic communion, where "they are neither the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener", are easily shown to correspond to Sacks's notion of ordinary content. If the participants' priority is to show availability for social contact, this is achieved in a way that is easier the more usual and insignificant is the information conveyed, since the idleness of propositional content emphasizes the underlying pragmatic dimension of the exchange. On one hand, Sacks's observation that storyable content is paradoxically reduced in conversation to inconspicuous, ordinary experience, can be clarified through Malinowski's idea that words convey social attitudes beyond propositional meaning: the attitude to be conveyed, and in most cases actually being

conveyed, is exactly that very availability for social contact which is at the root of phatic communion. In other words, we could assume that phatic communion is a major factor in all conversations analyzed by Sacks in his work on ordinariness, since it explains how renouncing salient experience can help reach the pragmatic goal of achieving social closeness. On the other hand, Sacks's theory of ordinariness explains Malinowski's mistake that propositional meaning in phatic communion is irrelevant; Malinowski is led to believe this because he finds that the contents of phatic speech are utterly mundane; in doing this, however, he fails to realize that this very banality is not a drawback but an asset which is systematically pursued as the most suited to the end of establishing and fostering social exchange.

4. Normality as double encoding and as initiatory process

The concept "phatic-epideictic" also highlights the double nature of discursive exchange: on one side statements have a 'propositional' meaning, which depends on the information they convey; but on the other side they also display a 'positional' alignment of participants, highlighting their taking sides in a number of actions and positions which arise in social exchange.[7]

The relationship, and above all the conflict, between the propositional meaning of discourse and the positions which arise from the actions of the participants yield an important insight into the performance of normality, since they allow us to realize that *the social incompetence of misfits is mostly a consequence of their inability to manage interactions on two parallel levels.* Misfits tend to adhere to the propositional level of explicit discourse, which is to them the only relevant dimension, whereas the level of habit-ingrained action, which situational pragmatics points to only indirectly and implicitly, is more or less opaque to them.

I would like to illustrate this dichotomy through the analysis of an

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[7]   The concept of 'position', first introduced by Hollway 1984 and further developed in Harré and van Langenhove 1999, is defined as "a complex cluster of generic personal attributes, structured in various ways, which impinges on the possibilites of interpersonal, intergroup and even intrapersonal action through some assignment of such rights, duties and obligations to an individual as are sustained by the cluster" (Harré and van Langenhove 1999: 1); as such, it offers "a dynamic alternative to the more static concept of role. Talking about positions instead of roles fits within the framework of an emerging body of new ideas about the ontology of social phenomena" (Harré and van Langenhove 1999: 14). Positions arise and exist in interaction; more specifically, they are negotiated and emergent properties of verbal interactions: "discourses make available positions for subjects to take up. These positions are in relation to other people" (Hollway 1984, quoted in van Langenhove and Harré 1999: 16).

excerpt from an Italian film of the late Seventies, *Ratataplan* by Maurizio Nichetti (1979); here, the comparison between the behavior of a misfit and that of a community of normals clearly reveals another important facet of these interactions: their initiatory character.

We shall focus on the film's first scene:[8] a clearly atypical engineer (long hair, loose clothes, puzzled childish expression) takes part in a selection process for a job in a corporate company. All participants are requested to perform a very simple task: drawing a tree. Whereas all the protagonist's more typical competitors struggle with black pens and pencils only to hand in hilariously primitive sketches, the film's hero sets happily to work with a number of colored pencils he surprisingly produces from his pockets. The tree he manages to draw is luxuriant and colourful, quite the opposite of the skeletal figures drawn by the other candidates. So, when he is the only one to be singled out and escorted out of the room by the selection assistant, we are induced to think he is the only winner of the game, that he got the only position available. On the contrary: with an unexpected, comic reversal, he is shown out of the building while all the other candidates are congratulated on getting the job. "We are sorry, but we have no need of you here", says the selection assistant on taking leave from him.

Some observations: here the misfit's behavior in relation to a social context can obviously be modeled as a rite of passage, more specifically as an initiation ritual aimed at getting access to normality as a privileged condition;[9] it can therefore be analyzed with the tools of anthropology from van Gennep (1909) onwards. The normal person is co-opted within the community of her peers, while the misfit is expelled as a scapegoat; this event strengthens the bond among the normals (again, anthropological tools are useful here, starting from René Girard's scapegoat theory: GIRARD 1972; 1982). The misunderstanding which arises around the admission test reveals that *the real initiation test consists in the ability to deal with the ambiguity of the demand*: it is quite obvious that the demand "draw a tree" ("design a tree", in the broken English of the Italian selection assistant) has two different meanings: 1. on the surface (that is: literally, *propositionally*) it must be taken as a request to accomplish the task in the best possible way with regard to the verb "draw"; in this respect, "drawing well" is better

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[8]   The scene is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Mj6OM9j7cY (retrieved August 30th, 2017).
[9]   That it, as a requirement for Membership: see above, n. 3.

than "drawing badly"; 2. implicitly (that is: pragmatically, *positionally*), it must be taken as a request to display (through the way the task is carried out) one's positioning in relation to the implicit traits which are the really relevant ones in the social frame of cooptation.[10]

Beyond the paradoxical and comic thrust of the sequence, what clearly emerges is that the real purpose of the admission test is to organize a positional response which displays the ability to completely disregard the propositional dimension of discourse: the real engineer reveals his aptitude for an engineer's job by his positioning himself as indifferent to the aesthetic dimension of experience and to nature. An engineer who is able to draw a tree well is not a real engineer – at least he does not fit the profile stereotypically ascribed to engineers, and is therefore incompatible with the patterns of ordinary social exchange, which can only be carried out by stereotypical actors.

In order to pass the test it is necessary to show *through one's behaviour and not through words* that one understands what is important on the level of unwritten laws (that is, to behave as an 'ordinary' engineer by positioning oneself as alien to aesthetics and nature; let me point out here that this is also a good instance of the vicious circle set off by the repressive thrust of ordinariness as epideictic rehearsal of shared notions: discarding those who do not conform to the stereotype, we only get to confirm the assumption that engineers can *never* be imaginative; hence the loop: assumptions of ordinariness guide social action, and social action results in more evidence of the truth of the ordinary assumption).

Whoever adheres to the explicit conditions of the task, and shows herself unable to detach herself from the propositional content of discourse, fails the test. *I believe that the ability to dissociate the positional and the propositional aspects is the defining trait of normal behavior, as well as the measure against which anomalies can be assessed.* To put it more bluntly, this is tantamount to saying that hypocrisy, which is often deplored as a dysfunction in normal social relations, *is not at all a dysfunction but, on the contrary, a necessary condition*: without a penchant for hypocritical dissociation, one cannot be – or at least one cannot function or be recognized as – perfectly normal.

To summarize: we have seen that normality, the condition of social exchange within an ordinary frame, is not a neutral starting point but the

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[10]   For the use of the concept 'frame' see Goffman 1974.

result of a number of social actions, a formalized condition to be achieved through work.

This implies a number of important corollaries:

1. access to the prerogatives of normality is a selective procedure, organized according to the script of initiation rites: normality is conquered after an admission test;

2. because of this selectivity, normality is constructed as an object of desire (normality as fetish);[11]

3. normality as an object of desire can be analyzed according to Girard's theory of mimetic desire,[12] through concepts like the fetishization of the object (see above) to indiscriminate competition, to the expulsion of the scapegoat (as in *Ratataplan*);

4. the existence of a number of procedures through which Members are selected and maintain their status creates a *space of control* in which the machinery of domination is at work.[13]

5. Normality as self-sacrifice

Another important corollary of conceptualizing the access to normality as an initiation test is that this definition implies a *sacrifice*. Sacks's analyses show that the performance of ordinariness depends on an ever-vigilant readiness to cut down salience in order to shape easily shareable pieces of information.

I believe that *the sacrifice required by the cooptation into the ranks of the normals is the belief in the binding value of the propositional dimension of language.* Whoever continues to ascribe a binding propositional value to words, whoever continues to treat discourses as having the power to determine choices and actions, is unable to function socially, since social

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[11] Useful insights on the process of fetishization in Fusillo 2012.

[12] Girard 1961 – a seminal work who opened up new horizons in the understanding of social processes as well as of their literary representations.

[13] This connection between dominion and the knowledge of procedures needed to implement a state of social order is clearly to be related to Foucault's notion of 'pouvoir-savoir', relocating power from the hands of a few privileged subjects to the network of all the subjects involved in social practices: "Ces rapports de 'pouvoir-savoir' ne sont donc pas à analyser à partir d'un sujet de connaissance qui serait libre ou non par rapport au système du pouvoir; mais il faut considérer au contraire que le sujet qui connaît, les objets à connaître et les modalités de connaissance sont autant d'effets de ces implications fondamentales du pouvoir-savoir et de leurs transformations historiques. En bref, ce n'est pas l'activité du sujet de connaissance qui produirait un savoir, utile ou rétif au pouvoir, mais le pouvoir-savoir, les processus et les luttes qui le traversent et dont il est constitué, qui déterminent les formes et les domaines possibles de la connaissance", Foucault 1975: 32).

discourse works on the assumption that the positional, implicit dimension of social exchange invariably trumps the explicit propositional one.

The attention to the propositional meaning of utterances is a feature of most literary representation of misfits. From the narrow-minded peasant of ancient Greek comedy[14] to the moronic dimwit of folk-tale,[15] up to the more sophisticated non-neurotypical misfits of contemporary TV series,[16] sticking to the literal meaning of language is the hallmark of a mild, generally benign, ineptitude which disrupts normal social exchange and exposes the use of implicitness and indirect speech to convey a meaning that is never totally transparent. The fourth chapter of G.K. Chesterton's *The Club of Queer Trades* (1905) brilliantly articulates this substantial philosophical question: the short story's main character is Lieutenant Keith, an eccentric officer who is suspected of a crime. When the police try to find him at the address he gave them, "The Elms, Buxton Common, near Purley, Surrey" (CHESTERTON 1987 [1905]: 73), they suspect they have been fooled since they can't see any house on Buxton Common. But the main character of the book, Basil Grant, a retired judge and a philosophical eccentric himself, easily leads the searching party to Keith, who actually lives in an "arboreal villa", an egg-shaped cabin spectacularly located up in the elm's branches. To their utter astonishment, Basil provides his companions with the following "two facts":

> "The first is that though when you are guessing about any one who is sane, the sanest thing is the most likely; when you are guessing about any one who is, like our host, insane, the maddest thing is the most likely. The second is to remember that very plain literal fact always seems fantastic. If Keith had taken a little brick box of a house in Clapham with nothing but railings in front of it and had written 'The Elms' over it, you wouldn't have thought there was anything fantastic about that. Simply because it was a great blaring, swaggering lie you would have believed it" (CHESTERTON 1987 [1905]: 83-84).

Through the brilliant paradox ("very plain literal fact always seems fantastic") Chesterton's protagonist warns the reader of the dangers of ordinary

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[14]   I am referring to the protagonist of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, the old Attic farmer Strepsiades, who proves unfit for philosophical education, among other things, because of his stubborn attachment to literal propositional meaning (ARISTOFANE 2001 [423-418 BCE]: 178-197).

[15]   Just one example from a high-brow version of a traditional folktale: *Vardiello*, in BASILE 1986 [1634-1636]: 94-107.

[16]   Here, too, iconic examples range from the physicist Sheldon Cooper in Chuck LORRE and Bill PRADYS's *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-) to the young Sam in Robia RASHID's *Atypical* (2017-).

discourse, where exact meaning has been replaced by the fuzziness of habit and usage. Once again, the artist proves a talented theorist: Chesterton's *caveat* concurs with Sacks's view that the need for ordinary content cannot but cloud the very perception of reality, leading prepackaged and commonly shared notions to prevail upon the most salient perceptions. More specifically, the metaphoric dimension of language is seen as evidence of man's proneness to hypocrisy and mystification: naming a house after a tree is not, in this character's view, a simple metonymy or an innocent instance of wishful thinking, but is a "great blaring, swaggering lie" that strives to conceal the oppressiveness of "a little brick box of a house" behind the pretentious appeal of a false designation.

Chesterton's plea for a return to the unexpected madness of literal truth is only one particularly astute critique of the dullness of normality. But its taking sides with the insane is not a unique event. One aspect which remains constant through the considerable, occasionally bewildering, variety of my corpus is that the implied audience of artistic texts is invariably assumed to empathize with the misfit. Through the portrayal of this kind of character, literature seems to react against a social practice in which the words, the propositional value of statements, the *logos*, are deprived of power in favor of considerations of habit and opportunity. But why should literature always take the misfit's side, empathizing with her adherence to the literal value of statements against any tempering considerations of context, position and opportunity?

One reason may be that literature itself as a discourse has no context which may condition its reception and frame its meaning, and therefore has no positional value; what value it does possess, what hope it has to be taken seriously, depends only on its propositional content. *Literature therefore is the embodiment, made permanent and super-personal, of the misfit's discourse.* In literature, what is socially repressed in the misfit returns[17] as the organizing principle of a form of discourse which is central to the self-definition and to the continuity of the culture.

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[17]   I am referring to Francesco Orlando's well known theory of literature as the "return of the repressed" (ORLANDO 1999 [1965]).

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Why bisexuality is queer

Non-dichotomous, de-colonial and intersectional reflections*

Laura Corradi

Abstract: The essay starts with the author's *Positioning*, a feminist practice of disclosing her own intellectual and political perspectives – since knowledge is situated, never neutral. In section 1. *Coming to terms with bisexuality* naming practices, labeling and definitions are discussed, to introduce the reader to the arena of debate around bisexuality and queer, and introduce intersectional and decolonial perspectives. Section 2. *From the margins of queer theory* demonstrates how bisexuality has occupied, from its very origins, a marginal space in Lgbti queer studies; it also touches upon the struggle against biphobia and for recognition of bisexual people. Section 3. *Bisexuality and queer spaces – beyond Western eyes* looks at the epistemological limitations of the monosexual paradigm within queer spaces, the necessity to decolonize them and use non-dichotomous perspectives. The section giving the title to the essay 4. *Why bisexuality is queer* explains the author's motivations, to be taken as an axiomatic starting point for an earnest discussion among queer scholars and activists. 5. *Re-queering the queer movement* ends with the necessity of intersectional alliances, in order not to restrict to sex, gender and sexuality the subversive potential of the queer perspective; and the need to take into account some neglected topics, such as Poly-amorous and Asexual love.

Keywords: labeling practices; biphobia; (non)monosexuality; intersectional alliances; decolonization.

> Nature created us as bisexual beings.
> And requires us to act as bisexual beings.
>
> Wilhem Steckel, 1922

0. (Partial) positioning

Having been out as a bisexual activist since 1990 in California, I can recall the times when bisexuality was a taboo topic in the lesbian and gay movements. In the U.S. bisexuals were considered to be responsible for spreading HIV-AIDS: bi-men from the gay community to the heterosexual world, and bi-women to the lesbian community. A myth is hard to die; yet after some time of bisexual politics, after campaigning for visibility and acceptance,

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initiatives of sensitization, and workshops against bi-phobia, the B was finally added and the community became lgbt. In those years, I nourished myself with publications by scholars and activists (often they were the same people), political meetings, and support groups for bisexuals. Soon, I joined the queer milieu in the University where I was studying and working – and found it comfortable as a common house. Yet, after decades of success-ful diffusion of queer Studies, bisexuality became marginal; bisexuals did not disappear of course, but an interesting process of invisibilization took place. We are going to explore this phenomenon.

The reason why I think it is relevant to write about bisexuality being queer lies in the fact that such politics of belonging are still controversial. In a recent lecture I gave about the queerness of bisexuality, a person from the audience raised the point that I was "trying to sneak bisexuality in the queer discourse." As a marginal intellectual in academia, that sounded to me as an urgent call for dealing with issues of entitlement of bisexuality (and bisexuals) in the queer space. I am beginning this work by looking at terms and naming practices around bisexuality and non-monosexuality; and at studies dealing with the complicated relation between bisexuality and queer, from a feminist, *intersectional* and *de-colonial* standpoint.[1] The central argument, *why bisexuality is queer*, is the output of a line of rea-soning, developing a non-hierarchical position in the current debate in the awareness that all knowledge production is situated[2] and never 'neutral.'

I believe some of my reflections, and the selection of decolonial and intersectional authors and concepts here offered (with no presumption of being exhaustive), may help us to think in non-dichotomous ways about gender, sex and sexuality while taking in account class, race, ethnicity, and geopolitical differences. Even though the essay is interdisciplinary, draw-ing from cultural studies, psychology, history, politics, and other fields of knowledge, the sociological perspective is intrinsically privileged because

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[1] The intersectional approach, proposed by feminists of color, considers differences and in-equalities comprehensively by intersecting them, understanding them as mutually constitutive rather than analyzing them separately (Davis 1981; Hurtado 1989; Crenshaw 1989; 1991; Hill Collins 1990; Lykke 2010; Yuval Davis 2012). While the post-colonial and de-colonial perspec-tives and practices were introduced by intellectuals from former colonies and criticize the way knowledge was/is produced (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986; Mignolo 2000; Quijano 2000; 2007; Boatcă, Costa 2010). Both theories have a special focus on *power relations*, and an emphasis on *transformative practices.*

[2] For an introduction to the concept of *situated knowledge* see: Haraway 1988.

of 'my background'. The choice of including some secondary sources from websites and activists' blogs is meant to bring fresh positions and stimulating ideas into the picture. In my experience, the multifaceted link between bisexual activism and academic work has been one of fruitful mutual inspiration.

1. Coming to terms with bisexuality

> Bisexuality
>
> A state that has no existence beyond the word itself—is an out-and-out fraud, involuntarily maintained by some naive homosexuals, and voluntarily perpetrated by some who are not so naive.
>
> Edmund Bergler 1956[3]

In the last century, most literature and research on bisexuality emerged in North America and other anglophone countries, where bisexual movements first took place in the public arena. The debate is still dominated by what is published in the north-Atlantic area; and it is in the English language. The 'inclusion' of bisexuality in the lgt area, and later in the queer space, happened without decolonizing neither the contexts nor the theory. Yet, beyond western binary notions, there lies a multitude of concepts and practices, which are found today in different parts of the world. Postcolonial/decolonial approaches[4] are very helpful in feminist and queer studies and have been argued for in the last couple of decades in different fields of knowledge (Campbell 2000; Altman 2001; Hawley 2001; Mohanty 2003; Boyce and Khanna 2011; Bidaseca, Vazquez Laba 2011; Boyce, Coyle 2013; Wekker 2016).

If we embark on the practice of de-colonizing our concepts on the basis of non-Western perspectives and experiences, we may find how both queerness and bisexual identities can dramatically change features with

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[3] As quoted in Angelides 2001.

[4] In her masterpiece *White Innocence*, Gloria Wekker writes about the difference between the two terms, a distinction I profoundly agree with: "While I use the terms 'postcolonial' and 'decolonial' I find that 'postcolonial' is increasingly used in a manner that is subject to inflation and is uncritical; that is, one can do postcolonial studies very well without ever critically addressing race. In that sense, it has come to resemble an old-fashioned type of anthropology, in that the other is unblushingly studied without questioning one's own position, while anthropologists have, since the late 1960s, sternly interrogated their own discipline for its racializing power moves. Decoloniality, decolonial studies, or the decolonial option is the more cutting-edge approach, which starts from the realization of the nexus of modernity and coloniality" (Wekker 2016: 174).

the variation of the geo-cultural locations we are considering. In some indigenous contexts bisexuality may have to do with polytheistic religions and the sphere of spirituality (Hutchins, Williams, Sharif 2011; Hutchins, Williams 2012), such as the notion of *two spirits* found among Native-American people, which cannot be unproblematically assimilated to the term of 'bisexuality' and/or 'queer'.

> Increasingly, two-spirit identity is being included as one of the identities under the bisexual umbrella, yet there has been very little discussion about how this inclusion might affect two-spirit people, the research that pertains to us, or the services shaped by such data (Robinson 2017).

Drawing upon her personal experience as a two-spirit *and* bisexual woman, as well as upon research conducted with two-spirit people in the province of Ontario, Canada, Margaret Robinson offers five intersectional and decolonial points of comparison between bisexual and two-spirit identities:

> (1) the complexity of our identities, (2) the role of spirituality, (3) our elevated rates of poverty, (4) sexual violence, and (5) the influence of colonialism. Although bisexual and two-spirit identities share a number of commonalities they have key differences in cultural context and meaning (Robinson 2017).

Issues of poverty and class are rarely mentioned in lgbt and queer literature, though we can find them in feminist studies by native/aboriginal, dalit, and gypsy scholars (Corradi 2014; 2018). Even some self-defined intersectional works are not *fully* intersectional, because of the failure to address economic differences and inequalities – as if these categories of oppression did not add elements of explanation to the analysis, as if these important aspects were not mutually constitutive in the life of subjects and groups, and could be safely neglected.

Much of the debate on bisexuality is oriented toward epistemology, politics and social movements, where differences are remarkable, if we take into account geopolitical and cultural intersections. I can offer an example from my experience in Calcutta, India, where I was amazed to realize how the bisexual women's movement founded an early expression in alliance with lesbians and with trans-women. While in the U.S. trans-phobia and bi-phobia were encountered both in the feminist movement and in the gay and lesbian community, the (latecomer) Indian political practice in this

field bypassed *years of conflicts based on the rejection of bisexuals and trans* people. To my eyes, non-monosexual and transgender identities, as well as lesbians and gays, seemed in the Indian context to have transcended – or never had shown – those rigid labeling boundaries and issues of purity still functioning as obstacles in our discussions about how to name ourselves and how to relate with each other.

About non-monosexual naming practices, Corey Flander argues in a special issue of the *Journal of bisexuality* that

> [t]he 'bisexual umbrella' is a phrase that is most commonly used to describe a range of nonmonosexual identities, behaviors, and forms of attraction. Although this includes people who identify as bisexual, it has also been used to group together bisexuality with other nonmonosexual identities, notably pansexual, queer, and fluid (…). There are many other words that we use to describe what I have been referring to as the "bisexual umbrella" and non-monosexuality. Some resist the term non-monosexuality as it defines a population by what it is not (i.e., monosexual) and prefer other identity terms that are inclusive of attraction to more than one gender, such as plurisexual, polysexual pomosexual and multisexual. Others prefer the label of queer, though this term is problematic as an umbrella term in that it does not specify the existence of attraction to multiple genders (Flanders 2017).

It is worth noticing that the author enlists 'queer' among the 'non-monosexual' identities in a way that would probably be problematic to many lesbians and gays in the queer arena. While bisexuality is used at times as a synonymous for polysexuality and pansexuality, for some activists pansexuality is a subcategory of bisexuality, even though the former seems to have a broader meaning. The prefix 'Bi' appears to be limiting the subjective choice to a binary model, while the term 'pan-sexual' looks more inclusive, in terms of the existence of more than two genders and sexes. However, some bisexual activists interpret 'Bi' as not having an exclusionary implication: the duality would refer to 'my sexuality' and 'the Other's', not to 'males' and 'females'.

Pan-sexuality as 'love for everything'[5] – implying the possibility of emotional, sexual, affective relations also with transsexuals, trans-genders and

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[5] Love for everything has limits marked by being – and interacting with – consenting adults. pan-sexuals and poly-sexuals have been mistaken, misrepresented and wrongly associated with pedophilia, as happened to Gays in the past.

inter-sexuals – can be seen as overlapping with poly-sexuality, commonly understood as the attraction to all genders. While for the Oxford English Dictionary, a poly-sexual person is one "encompassing or characterized by many different kinds of sexuality" (Simpson 2009), Linda Garnets and Douglas Kimmel explains how a poly-sexual identity is chosen "by people who recognize that the term *bisexual* reifies the gender dichotomy that underlies the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality, implying that bisexuality is nothing more than a hybrid combination of these gender and sexual dichotomies" (Garnets, Kimmel 2003). In the same way, as was argued above in the case of pan-sexuality, bisexual activists claim the "bi" suffix can refer to "genders which are the same" and "genders which are different", simply referring to the attraction to more than one gender – thus excluding all possibilities of discrimination.

Toward the end of this brief excursus around definitions – meant to give an idea of the complexity of issues around non-monosexual terms, and about how bisexuality is located in the debate – I would like to offer the results of an empirical research on such distinctions, whose subjects are Canadian youths who participate in Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) and teachers. The goal of the investigation was to assess how they perceive and/or experience bi/pan-sexualities. Despite different definitions, the author Alicia Anne Lapointe underlines how non-monosexualities show a common trait: the one "marked by invisibility, mis/understandings, and prejudice in school" (Lapointe 2016).

Stigma and resilience among bi/pansexual people are examined with particular attention being paid to youth's experiences with biphobic prejudice— negative attitudes toward bisexuality and misunderstandings related to their identification as pansexuals. The findings are particularly salient considering there is little scholarship that explores bi/pansexualities in schooling. Because monosexuality is privileged over bi/pansexualities in society, bi/pansexual youth, like trans folks, often assume the role of cultural workers who actively de/re/construct gender, and subsequently sexuality through identifications that transgress fe/male and hetero/homo classification (Lapointe 2016).

The notion of 'cultural worker' well represents the constant effort non-monosexual people have to make on a daily basis in every environment – a work I believe is common among trans people. Since my paper, among the different non-monosexual options, focuses on bisexuality, the

working definition I want to disclose to the readers is the following: "bisexuality is the emotional and/or sexual attraction for people of any sex or gender". However, the scope here is not to prove its appropriateness, but to think about the relation between bisexuality (whatever we mean by it) and queer – from a feminist standpoint and self-reflective practice.[6]

2. FROM THE MARGINS OF QUEER THEORY

> I'm not sure that because there are people who identify as bisexual there is a bisexual identity.
>
> Eve KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK 1991[7]

If all sexualities have a history, the story of bisexuality since its early days is the one of exclusion – not just in the straight world but also in the queer one. The first time I read the word 'queer' in the title of a publication "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities. An Introduction" (DE LAURETIS 1991) I felt something was left out: exclusionary practices are everywhere. For bisexuals *a margin within the margins* was created already at the dawn of queer studies, because of the lack of understanding; the prevalence of binary modes of thinking; and the fear of challenging one's own boundaries – even the theoretical ones the queer concept promised to overcome.

Some normative ideas around bisexuality are still operating today, consciously or unconsciously, in the queer arena – and we may want to reflect about their origins. The persistence of Freud's definition of 'ambi-sexuality' as *a stage in all individuals' evolution* leaves room for an interpretation of bisexuality as a phase to be overcome. Later on, Freud partially corrected his theory by including the role of education: social censorship would inhibit the still bisexual adolescent by compelling him/her to become mono-sexual – either gay/lesbian or straight. In my understanding, this later position formulated by Freud leaves the door open to the idea that heterosexuality is a learned behavior (in today's terms: a social construction), which creates a friction with the 'essentialist' (or 'innatist') model of explanation – and contributes to the acceptance of a notion of sexuality as a changing element. In 1922, Wilhelm Stekel produced a very innovative piece of theory (Eng. tr. 1946): bisexuality was not a stage, but a sexual identity. His work, hidden

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[6] For an introduction to different writings on feminist standpoint theories, see HARDING 2004.

[7] The statement is part of an interview released in 1991 and mentioned in several publications, it can be found in ANGELIDES 2001.

and ostracized by Freud, was crucial in giving a status to bisexuality, and even legitimized 'normal fetishism' as an erotic option.[8]

Since then, a non-dichotomous conception of sexuality in the West re-emerged only in the late 40's, with biologist Alfred Kinsey's Report, which became a milestone for bisexual studies. Kinsey proposed a 'scale test' putting human sexuality on a continuum between heterosexuality and homosexuality (instead of categorizing them in separate boxes). He discovered that most people fall in the large 'middle area' between zero (totally hetero) and six (totally homo). In his findings, those who had shown preferences for one gender but occasionally desired or had sex with the other were the majority. In the following decade, during the 50's, the pioneers of sexology, the famous couple William Masters and Virgina Johnson, found a prevalence of bisexuality as a sexual orientation[9] – and some of their followers' quantitative research scored bisexuality quite high, up to 83% – but investigations were again confined to bisexuality as a behavior.

In the following decades, bisexuality started to be perceived as a mass behavior thanks to an empirical research: Laud Humphrey's book Tea *Room Trade. Impersonal Sex in Public Places* (1970) became a classic in social sciences methodology manuals, both for the innovative value of the research and for the ethical issues Humphrey had to face in the aftermath of the publication. By using quite unorthodox methods, Humphrey proved how most men engaging in sexual encounters in public toilets were regularly married or in a relationship with a woman: although they represented themselves as heterosexuals, they had undeniable *bisexual behaviors*. Since then, the idea of bisexuality as just a sexual conduct informed much literature and is still around in the queer milieu.

The first research daring to go beyond bisexuality as a behavior, *The Bisexual Option* (1978) finally dealt with the research subjects' *self-identification* and was produced by Fritz Klein, who further elaborated the Kinsey scale adding a 7th grade – where the 4th would be *attraction for both sexes at the same level*. However, few years later, with Timothy Wolf, he published *Two Lives To Lead* (1985) where bisexuality in men and women was represented as a variation of homosexuality, narrowing bisexuals to being again a minority within the gay and lesbian sexual minority.

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[8]   His contrast with Freud on these and other issues led to his expulsion from the psycho-analytical society – and ultimately to suicide.

[9]   On bisexuality as a sexual orientation see Marchetti 2001.

Ivan Hill's *The Bisexual Spouse* (1987) a qualitative study on six bisexual couples was published in the outburst of the AIDS pandemic. On the back cover of the book, the author estimates a number of 25 million bisexuals married in the United States alone. Unwillingly, it added fuel to the ongoing bi-scare;[10] in those days, the scapegoating of bisexual people both in the heterosexual community and in the gay and lesbian milieu was common. For years to come bisexuals were seen as 'infectors' of the HIV-AIDS plague. A bi-phobic social paranoia took hold, representing bi-males as the carriers of the virus from the homosexual community to the heterosexual world, and bi-women as carriers to the lesbian community.

Finally, the 90's marked the rise of a Bisexual social movement, expressing the political agency of bisexual people, who started to struggle collectively for the recognition of their identity: the Bay Area Bisexual Network (BABN); the Intimate Network in Los Angeles; and Bi-Nets in Florida, Boston, San Diego, Chicago. The publications of the anthology By *Any Other Name. Bisexual People Speak Out* (1991) edited by Lani Ka'ahumanu and Loraine Hutchins was a milestone that galvanized activists. A plethora of seminars against bi-phobia, of workshops and kiss-ins in progressive universities started to give visibility to the bisexual movement. In 1992, an *International Directory of Bisexual Groups* was published and reached the 10th edition in only one year.

More and more people were identifying as bisexuals and willing to meet with others. I remember when bisexuals took the lead of the "gay Parade" in San Francisco, with Lani Ka'ahumanu as a Grand Marshal opening the demonstration. Finally, the B was added, to GLT but it was mostly a formal achievement, as biphobia was still rampant. A paper I presented at a gay, lesbian and bisexual conference at the University of Illinois with the title 'Elements for a theory of bisexuality' (Corradi 1992)[11] suggested that sexuality could be seen as a fluid element that changes over time in each person life. The point was harshly contested, and before a debate could start, I had to be escorted out by a group of feminist lesbians.

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[10]   Media and physicians contributed to spread the idea that bisexuality and HIV-AIDS were related, by listing bisexuals as a 'risk group' (like i.v. drug users and sex workers) while the problem was not related to sexual identities, neither to drug addiction nor to prostitution: there are no risk groups, only risk behaviors.

[11]   Laura Corradi, "Elements For A Theory of Bisexuality", (presented paper) Gay, *Lesbian and Bisexual Conference, Unit for Criticism and Interpretative Theory*, University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, April 2-4, 1992.

The empirical part of that research 'Profiles of (bisexual) desire' through in-depth interviews in Santa Cruz, California, harvested firsthand narrations and outlined ideal-types – with a vast range of differences. For some interviewees bisexuality meant polygamy *tout court*; for others it meant bigamy; for the so called "bi-cycles" bisexuality could imply sequential monogamous relations. One of the women interviewed (grade 4 of Klein scale) was in a relationship, and "faithful" to it – having a bisexual identity combined with a monogamous behavior she said she was comfortable with. Yet her dream was to have an expanded family, a common desire in the queer bi-community: 'you can only fly with two wings' as one commented. In most of the interviews a critique emerged of the dominant mono-sexual paradigm and the necessity to overcome the nuclear family. Motivated research is needed to develop hypothesis, and answer questions such as: How many types of bisexualities are there? How does bisexuality intersect with categories such as class, race, gender, status, dis/ability? To which extent do bisexuals consider themselves queer? How do they feel in queer spaces today?

A recent study by Ethan H. Mereish, Sabra L. Katz-Wise and Julie Woulfe has looked at differences and similarities, in sexual orientation and sexual fluidity, among self-identified 'bisexual women' and 'queer women'. In the results,

> [s]ignificant differences between queer and bisexual women were also found for sexual attraction. Women identifying as bisexual were more likely to report equal attraction to men/transmen and women/transwomen, whereas women identifying as queer were more likely to report being mostly attracted to one gender or "other" genders. Women identifying as queer who experience more attraction to one gender may feel that their experiences are not captured within conventional definitions of 'bisexuality' as reflecting equal attraction to women and men. Although researchers have begun to explore the multiple ways in which the queer label is used, particularly within bisexual communities […] Interestingly, no significant difference was found between women identifying as queer or bisexual regarding sexual fluidity in attractions. Previous research has indicated that women who report sexual fluidity in attractions are more likely to identify with identities that reflect attraction toward more than one gender, such as bisexual or queer […] However, women identifying as queer were significantly more likely than women identifying as bisexual to report having ever experienced a change in sexual orientation identity and to report experiencing more than one change. This may be related to developmental timing of exposure to the term 'queer.' For

instance, a woman may identify as bisexual in high school and then identify as queer in college after learning about this identity. This may also occur in relation to a partner's gender transition (i.e., social and/or medical steps taken to align a transgender person's body with their gender identity), which in turn may lead to changes in an individual's orientation label (Mereish *et al.* 2016).

By adding the intersectional prism in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, color and geopolitical background, we find a wide range of diverse yet common struggles. In Latin American countries bisexual activists are vocal and committed to gain visibility. The following quote from a Mexican website points out issues of acceptance: a self-managed survey in the lgbt collectivity resulted in almost half of the respondents identifying as bisexual – yet being invisible in the community.

> Tristemente los bisexuales son un sector de la Comunidad LGBT (lesbianas, gays, Bisexuales, Trans) con menos reconocimiento dentro de la lucha por sus derechos y visibilidad. La invisibilidad dentro de la comunidad LGBT es un fenómeno muy preocupante; se requiere mayor participación de los bisexuales y mayor preocupación por sus necesidades por parte de otros miembros del colectivo. [...] En 2007 se hizo una encuesta a 768 miembros de la Comunidad LGBT, de entre ellos el 48.9 por ciento se identificó como bisexual. Por lo tanto, los bisexuales son tantos como sus "hermanos" gays, lesbianas y trans. *Nos guste o no, los bisexuales están aquí y están para quedarse* (http://www.sdpnoticias.com/gay/2014/06/02/top-10-cosas-que-nunca-debes-decir-a-un-bisexual Sdpnoticias 2014).

Latinos/nas bisexuals are active against bi-phobia in the lgbt queer communities as in heteronormative societies at large. With wit and irony they produce incursions in the web to contrast bi-phobic attitudes and ridiculous stereotypes implying bisexuals do not exist, such as the following one: *Dicen que si encuentras a un bisexual "de verdad", puedes pedir un deseo y se cumplirá al tercer día...* Bisexuals in Latin America are committed to the educational mission by targeting families and communities, working on acceptance and suicide prevention at the crossroads of gender, sex, class, race/ethnicity, sexuality.

In an online publication from Ecuador there is a reference to the work of Rinna Riesenfeld who stated the importance of *pluralism* when dealing with bisexuality: "No hay una bisexualidad, hay muchas" – and advocated for a full acceptance:

> Los bisexuales son poco comprendidos, se les cree 'homosexuales no asumidos' o 'gente confundida', se les exige 'definirse' y se imagina que son incapaces de comprometerse en una relación amorosa", dice el libro Bisexualidades, de la sexóloga y psicoterapeuta Rinna Riesenfeld, el cual, según las palabras de su autora, está dirigido a los bisexuales, a sus parejas, familias, amigos, curiosos y cualquiera deseoso de entender y respetar la diversidad sexual (http://www.amicsgais.org/forums/showthread.php?1643-%E2%80%9CNo-hay-una-bisexualidad-hay-muchas%E2%80%9D-Rinna-Riesenfeld GAG: grup d'Amics Gais lesbianes Transsexuals y Bisexual, 2004).

The struggle for recognition of bisexuality as an identity in societies at large, as well as in the lgbt queer movement and studies, implies overcoming binarism and internal hierarchies. As Angelides puts it,

> In overlooking the role the category of bisexuality has played in the formation of the hetero/homosexual structure, the project of queer deconstruction has in important ways fallen short of its goals. In subordinating gender to sexuality and insisting on a degree of analytic autonomy for the latter, many queer theorists have thought the two axes vertically or hierarchically rather than relationally and obliquely. As a result, bisexuality, an important historical regulator of the axes of gender and sexuality, has been elided in the present tense and, indeed, in almost any sense at all (Angelides 2006).

In the same line of thought, Gurevich, Bailey and Bower (2009) indicate how bisexuality is undergoing an epistemic (dis)location within queer theory. This perspective is shared by Jonathan Alexander and Serena Anderlini (2012) who look at bisexuality and queer as

> [...] two parallel thought collectives that have made significant contributions to cultural discourses about sexual and amorous practices (...) we have launched this project at a critical time in global and human history, when practicing love may be more useful as a way to care for than to multiply our species. The two constructs we engage are quite significant, as a practice of plural loves, bisexuality transgresses heteronormative mandates for gender and intimacy. queer theory proposes a theoretical inquiry and intervention into heteronormativity (Alexander and Anderlini 2012).

We should remember how queer theory was meant to overcome identity binarism such as masculinity/femininity and straight/gay; yet the inbetweenness of bisexuality has been too often ignored by queer academics

and activists. For Alexander and Anderlini, bisexual theory is a *queer path to knowledge*; and without the specific contribution bisexuality can offer, a fundamental element is missing. This is why efforts should be made to push bisexuality out of the margins it has been confined to by the dominant monosexual paradigm, and recognize its epistemological space to fully accomplish the subversive goals of queer theory.

3. Bisexuality and queer spaces – beyond western eyes

> [Gender studies, sexuality studies and queer studies] … these (inter) disciplines behave as if their central objects of study – gender and sexuality – can be studied most intensely if other axes of signification are firmly kept out of sight. For both gender studies and sexuality studies or queer studies, this means that a commitment to intersectionality notwithstanding race is mostly evacuated.
>
> Gloria Wekker 2016: 22

The metaphor of space is quite common both in bisexual and queer literature. In the former, to indicate an opening, or room for liberty in the debate, a breathing space, and a safe physical place where it is possible to gather, far from biphobic attitudes; bisexuality is seen intersectionally by Hemmings as

> […] a space that offers refuge from the perceived tyranny of what has come to be termed 'monosexuality'. In this trajectory, sexual and gendered middle ground has been conceived of in a number of positive ways: as a bridge linking polar and otherwise estranged opposites, as a unique combination of sexual (as well as gendered or raced) differences, or as a space of difference rather than derivation (Hemmings 2002: 2).

'Queer' has also been variously defined as a symbolic and material friendly space – versus unsafe spaces, since most public spaces are under heterosexual social control. The necessity and possibility of a queer space has been theorized in several fields; such as social sciences, architecture, spirituality/religion, and human geography (Browne 2009; 2010). As a blogger has pointed out, queer spaces are not to be considered just LGBT locations, since processes of deterritorialization happen around queerness:

> I have been using the term "queer space" without defining it. I have appropriated it form Foucault via Halberstam, but I feel free to mutate it as I work with it. I use

it to refer to social spaces with tolerance for difference and ambiguity. There are the cracks in the social system where new styles of dressing and living become possible. In Deleuzian terms these are spaces where deterritorialization occurs. I am not using queer as a synonym for lgbt. I do not consider all lgbt spaces to be queer. Some of them have become consumerist and thoroughly mainstream. One dyke I talked to called it the 'gaystream.' Queer space is not physical, it is a field of possibility in a social space. I organize queer space by wearing my outfits and by being out and open about my gender explorations. Queer space recedes and becomes less possible when I hide my difference when I try to "pass" as either gender. My view of queerness is heavily influenced by my background with ethnographic studies and Latour/Actor Network Theory. I see queerness as something that an actor organizes in her environment. She performs it and recruits others to participate in her idea. I do this by making friends and recruiting them into my gender project, and by just showing up and being visible day after day. Spaces become queer for me because I recruit allies who support me in my performance/structuring of queerness. Paraphrasing Bruno Latour I would call this a Program of Action. One of my most basic programs might be "I am femme and male. I claim the right to be here, and not to live in fear of violence" (https://jasperswardrobe.wordpress.com/2009/01/21/what-is-queer-space/ Jasper 2009).

Queer is a social space where it is possible to experiment oneself. The scholar/blogger Jasper offers a hint about last decade's enthusiasm around the queer promise of being the ultimate solution for socially subversive types of agency and subjectivity. Yet, Indian feminist theoreticians, such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Guruminder Bhambra suggest in different ways how the cooptation of gender, feminism and queer categories within the paradigm of western representative democracy and neoliberal academia is an ongoing process. If queer theories are not combined with post-colonial viewpoints, a concrete risk of being *subsumed* remains (Mohanty Chandra Talpade 2003; Bhambra 2007; Bhaskaran 2004). Therefore, de-colonizing theory, praxis, and activism can be an antidote to political neutralization and cultural assimilation (Corradi 2018).

How can we decolonize both bisexual and queer Spaces? One way to start would be to consciously and self-reflectively learn from non-western cultures and experiences, an effort to be combined with the systematic attempt to overcome dichotomous thinking: after so many words spent about non-binary perspectives, it would be decisive to start *walking the talk*. 'Innocent' behaviors of white superiority (Wekker 2016) are at times displayed also in the queer arena – in terms of leadership, agenda, patterns

of communication, and lack of reference to categories, authors and knowledge from the South of the world. Such a knowledge is being perceived by some whites as intellectually naïve, too 'poetic', methodologically spurious and theoretically not rigorous; overall failing to reach the 'state of the art' from the point of view of Euro-Atlantic *situated knowledge*. This is why queers of color are often invisible in academic settings and in society at large, feeling not to belong to any of the worlds they are part of.[12] As an example, feminist and queer gypsies are supposed to be non-existent (as it used to be for native/indigenous/aboriginal queer); they live their sexual and intellectual lives mostly unnoticed by whites, and feel alien in their roma, sinti, traveler communities, as well as in the lgbti queer and feminist arena, where they are seen – as everywhere else – as *transpassers* (Puar 2004; Corradi 2018). Queer theory urgently needs to be decolonized also at the intersection between sexuality and disability, as feminists in the field of critical disability studies have pointed out (Meekosha 2011; Sparkes *et al.* 2017).

Western cultures are deeply grounded in dichotomous and hierarchical thought, for their theories and methodologies are marked with the same features of white supremacy, classism, inferiorization of the Other, binarism – and in great need to be decolonized (Tuhiwae Smith 1999). Indigenous, aboriginal, Maori perspectives and non-western cultures have developed sets of non-hierarchical and non-dichotomous concepts that should be considered with attention. I want to mention the Indian notion of *Advaita,* or 'non-duality' (Ascione 2014; Ascione, Shahi 2015; Connell, Corradi 2017) which can be useful both practically, in coalition building and alliance politics, and theoretically in overcoming dual, binary standpoints, which consider sexuality either gay/lesbian or straight – a representation commonly found in queer studies, where mono-sexual supremacy is quite established.

As Angelides proposes, epistemologically we should talk about sexualities in a non-binary, or in a 'trinary' mode:

> While gay/lesbian constructionism and queer deconstructionism have correctly identified the hetero/homosexual structure as the epistemological linchpin of modern western concepts and representations of sexuality, what I have suggested is that they have misunderstood the workings of this seemingly binary structure.

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[12]   On the politics of belonging see Yuval-Davis 2012.

Instead of functioning as a binary of two mutually constituting poles, the hetero/homosexual structure has, both historically and epistemologically, functioned strictly speaking as a trinary. It is important to reiterate, however, that to argue that each of these terms are meaningful only in relation to the other two–that is, that each requires the other two for its self-definition–is not to argue that these terms are somehow truthful reflections of individual sexualities. It is simply to argue that, however ill-conceived or inadequate for the representation of the wide range of cultural forms of sexuality, this trinary structure has nonetheless been the primary organizing principle of modern western thought on sexuality. This has significant ramifications not just for queer theory and gay and lesbian history, but, indeed, for any research into modern western sexualities (ANGELIDES 2006).

Surya Monro in her book *Bisexuality: Identites, Politics and Theories* raises an important question: why is postcolonial analysis relevant to a discussion about bisexualities and intersectionality?

Contemporary internationally dominant sex, sexuality, and gender systems of categorization, and the social inequalities with which they are intrinsically linked, stem at least partially from a Western colonial past. This colonial past was the locus of the formation of not only modern Western sex/gender/sexuality categories, but also homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism. These sets of categorization and hierarchies developed together, as part of the system of racialised, sexualized and gendered inequalities that underpin many contemporary societies. It is unsurprising that critiques of LGBT identities categories have emerged from postcolonial sites although postcolonial critiques of colonial prejudices and persecution regarding sexual diversity have been comparatively subdued […] *Southern homophobias and biphobias are, to date, a largely unacknowledged legacy of colonialism* (MONRO 2015: 63-64, my emphasis).

Clare Hemmings, in her work *What's in a Name? Bisexuality, Transnational Sexuality Studies and Western Colonial Legacies* problematizes in a post-colonial manner, the way in which

[…] bisexuality is either absent, or inscribed as potential or behaviour, rather than identity. In the process, transnational sexuality studies reproduces bisexuality's historical role as facilitator of Western sexual oppositions, a role that also facilitates colonial distinctions between *cultures as sexually civilised or sexually primitive*. [my emphasis] In addition, rendering bisexuality as potential or behavior safeguards lesbian and gay subjects as de facto authors of queer studies transnationally (…). In Western theorization of sexual identities, particularly queer theory, bisexuality has faded somewhat from view in the last decade.

While bisexual theorists in the early to mid 1990s embraced queer approaches to sexuality, albeit critically, notes bisexuality's position within the field has not been institutionalized in the same way as transgender studies' has. While theorists seem to know that bisexuality needs to be acknowledged, this tends to take place only in footnote glosses, or tacked-on mentions that have no impact on sexual epistemology or methodology. In part, this must be due to the dual form that queer resistance to bisexuality has taken within queer theory and politics. On one hand, bisexuality has been understood as undermining lesbian or gay claims to legitimacy, bringing opposite-sex relationships very firmly into the frame that only ambivalently seemed able to contain them. On the other hand, it has been understood to reproduce the oppositional identity categories queer theorists wanted to challenge, the 'bi' in bisexuality figuring as the 'tie that binds' sexual poles. As a variety of bisexual theorists noted at the time, *bisexuality was simultaneously viewed as a challenge to and reproducer of Western sexual categories* (HEMMINGS 2009).

I would like to end this paragraph by recalling another de-colonial theoretical tool, manufactured in a different non-Western culture. While the Sanskrit notion of *Advaita* is related to the positive deliberation of avoiding dualities, the Islamic sociological concept of *Gharbzadegi* (translated as 'Westoxication') and introduced by the Iranian Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1982) urges oppressed people to initiate a social and personal detoxification from the west. The author regards the process of westernization as an illness, a contagious disease, a drug addiction; detoxification from the west is proposed as a first step of liberation from cultural subalternity (Connell 2007; Connell, Corradi 2014). Such a detoxification from the established supremacy of western ways of thinking, and from un-problematized general categories, would be a good practice also in the queer arena, which is becoming de-facto increasingly participated by diverse people. An intersectional gaze would convey the impression that queer is becoming less classist and more colored, while it remains very white in its intellectual production; and in everyday life relations, agendas, social representations. Authors in queer Islamic Studies (DAVIES 2010; Ali 2015; GUARDI, VANZAN 2012) should also be taken into account in the debate, not just as 'regional studies', but because of their epistemic value.

4. Why bisexuality is queer

> I am black and I am female,
> and I am a mother and I am a bisexual,
> and I am a nationalist and I am an anti-nationalist (…)
> And no, I do not believe it is blasphemous to compare
> oppressions of sexuality to oppression of race and ethnicity:
> Freedom is indivisible or it is nothing at all.
>
> June Jordan 1993

The African-American feminist writer and activist June Jordan, in the above poem, applies one of the principles of intersectionality: differences should be discussed with no hierarchy of importance, since they are all expressions and categories of the same system of oppression. She also suggests bisexuality is a matter of freedom – not a sign of either confusion or opportunism.

Yet, the myth of bisexuality as *just a phase* – a period of uncertainty before one understands/decides whether to be gay or straight – is still enduring. For a long time, in the lesbian and gay milieu, bisexuality denoted the comfortable choice of not choosing, of not taking a stance: a sign of disorientation or mystification, an immature position, or a 'fence-sitting' behavior – while we should know in genders and sexualities there are no fences at all. What was so threatening about bisexuality?

Why do some people still not believe bisexuals are fully entitled to identify as "queer"? Objections about bisexuality being queer come mostly from two different epistemological positions: the first, a 'fundamentalist' monosexual standpoint, regards those having a hard time in recognizing sexuality as a fluid entity, and bisexuality as an identity among others. From their point of view bisexuality is not queer because bisexuals can enjoy *heterosexual privileges* by not disclosing their own sexual orientation. This objection is quite weak: gays and lesbians also have a long story of closeted lives – bisexuals may have more options in *passing* – but the problem is not about identity, it is about *coming out politics*: once you are *out*, you are queer, it doesn't matter if you are G/L/T or Bi. Actually, bisexuals are often perceived as having something even more inexplicable: compared to monosexual queers, non-monosexuals are seen as strange, anomalous, weird individuals. For this reason, I find this type of argument – about bisexuals not being *really* queer – as somehow bi-phobic, given the efforts of bi-activists around visibility in the community and in society at large. The stigma hitting bisexuals is comparable to the one affecting

Transsexuals and Intersexuals: *inbetweenness* is still considered inappropriate, embarrassing, dangerous.

The second argument I am going to discuss about the queerness of bisexuality is seemingly more attractive and comes from the non-labeling standpoint: if sexuality is fluid, what is the sense of trying to define something so changeable as desire and attraction? "Why should I name myself Bi-queer – or anything at all?" ask some bloggers who share their reflections on topics such as "what's wrong with labels;" or invite their readers to "stop putting so much pressure on yourself to pick a side." The following excerpt is from an interview published in the online version of a popular magazine, where Lane Moore explains why she won't label her sexuality:

> I've dated pretty much every configuration of gender imaginable. But when people ask, I wouldn't call myself bisexual (which is one of the only universally recognized defining boxes we currently have if you're not gay or straight). I wouldn't call myself anything because I don't think any of the boxes apply, not to mention they all come with baggage that isn't super appealing to me. bisexuals are still largely seen — incorrectly — as people sitting in chairs in sexual identity waiting rooms until their names are called to go into the "straight" or "gay" offices; lesbians are seen as being attracted to women and women only, and never men, not even a little bit or else you don't count as a lesbian; and straight people are seen as people attracted to the opposite sex only (http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/news/a39306/why-im-not-labeling-my-sexuality/ Moore 2015)

To some, labels are an obstacle, a source of anxiety, an outgrown dress, the expression of an individualistic western model:

> An often cited attack on 'Western' categories of sexual identities comes from the Palestinian scholar Joseph Massad who describes the defense of human rights on the basis of sexual orientation as a 'missionary task'. The need to adhere to Western definitions of sexual identity is cited as an example of imperialism, where same-sex relations are ascribed particular meanings and identities by the West. This has prompted significant debate around the role of development agencies and multilateral organisations in protecting and promoting LGBT rights, particularly in post-colonial nations (http://spl.ids.ac.uk/sexuality-and-social-justice-toolkit/1-issues-and-debates/whats-wrong-labels, Redacción Sdpnoticias.Com 2014).

However, labels, while being somehow considered to be obsolete today, are recognized as having had an important role in the past:

The identity categories lesbian, gay, Bisexual and Transgender have been instrumental in raising awareness of sexuality issues and of bringing them onto national and international policy agendas. The acronym 'LGBT' (with the addition of Intersex and sometimes queer and Questioning), is now recognized around the globe and provides a common language for talking about sexual rights and for bringing together individuals and organizations working for social justice. Understanding identity in terms of fixed categories has helped to make same-sex desire and gender non-conforming people visible to policy makers and development actors where they were not before. It has also helped to facilitate dialogue around citizenship and in some cases, enable legal reform (http://spl.ids.ac.uk/sexuality-and-social-justice-toolkit/1-issues-and-debates/whats-wrong-labels, Redacción Sdpnoticias.Com 2014).

The power of self-definition is undeniably important to some extent. Here I am going to offer a long and enlightening quote from a blogger, well representing the ambivalence young people display around labeling practices:

Whenever I discuss my sexuality — as someone who identifies broadly as queer and bisexual and more specifically as pansexual — I am met with a very common response: "But why do labels matter? We're all the same." Often, this response comes from a place of good intentions. *Many people say labels don't matter because they believe that labels are hindering equality*. And I understand why many people think this way. It's *tempting* to believe that inequality is caused by difference. It's *tempting* to think that the only way to ensure that people don't treat others differently is by ignoring our differences. We're often socialized to view differences as the cause of inequality, rather than to understand oppression and inequality as systemic. [...] Often, imposing labels on people is rooted in a lot of queerphobia and monosexism. For example, if someone uses the word "gay" to describe a man who doesn't identify as gay, but exhibits behavior that is stereotypically associated with gay men, this can be pretty oppressive. That's telling someone what their sexual identity is, and this is not okay. Secondly, you're perpetuating stereotypes about gay people — and those stereotypes are dangerous as they often cultivate homophobia. Let's look at another example. Non-monosexual people — *people who are attracted to more than one gender* — are often defined by the gender of their partner. For example, I'm currently in a relationship with a man. Often, we are referred to as a "heterosexual couple", and I've been told by many gay people that I'm not queer because I'm dating a man. The label of "straight" is imposed on me, despite the fact that I don't identify as heterosexual. This is a direct example of monosexism and bi/pan-erasure, as it perpetuates the myth that people can't be attracted to more than one gender (emphasis in the text; http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/labels-empowering-harmful, Ferguson 2015).

I believe the problem lies not in the (legitimate) self-labelling but the (inappropriate) labeling from others; and in the pressure to choose a label: it should not be mandatory to define oneself in order to access a space, especially a space that wants to be open to diversities. Bisexuality is one among many self-definitions people can choose within or outside the queer milieu.

The position I am arguing for – that bisexuality is queer – is grounded on at least four motivations which I list below. These points in part represent a synthesis of the line of reasoning I have been carrying out so far. They can also be read as the basis of a theoretical and political proposal, in a work that can only be *collective*.

a. Bisexuality is intrinsically queer because it contests mono-sexual representations of human sexuality. The mono-sexual paradigm is still dominant and pervasive today: either you are male or female, straight or gay/lesbian; either you like one gender or the other – and nothing in between. The very existence of bisexual identities (as well as trans-inter-sexual identities) defies the either/or social compulsion on genders and sexual preferences

b. Bisexuality is queer because it challenges the established division between the hetero-norm and the 'deviants' – in favor of a non-dichotomous, fluid, interpretation of genders and sexuality, seen on a continuum, rather than in separate categories of un-changing identities. The existence of a third option – even though an inclusive spectrum of sexual diversities would better illustrate reality – can look threatening and make old identity politics look obsolete in clinging to boundaries.

c. Bisexuality is queer because it questions the classic systems of explanation still prevalent in feminism, lgbti studies, as well as in social sciences, which are grounded on a binary understanding of differences: essentialism/innatism versus social constructionism; nature/ biology versus relations/society. By dwelling on the epistemological inbetweenness, of bisexuality it is easier to avoid reasoning in either/or terms; thus, overcoming dichotomous approaches by combining different elements of explanations (social, biological, biographical) and by considering them as non -competitive. Beyond classical (western) systems of explanation, we can move in the direction of creating forms of inclusive knowledge – learning from indigenous epistemologies (Black TAIARAHIA 2014), and de-colonizing theories and methodologies (Tuhiwae SMITH 1999) to speak of the increasing level of awareness and political complexity, globally.

d. A theory of bisexuality is a pivotal element in understanding the potentials of queer itself. Many still believe queer is just an umbrella category for marginalized and discriminated sexual minorities. Starting to represent bisexualities also as an *emerging majority*[13] would have far reaching consequences for the whole queer movement, both epistemologically and politically, implying the possibility to create intersectional alliances and subvert social heternomativity from *within*. Taking such a stand would give a crucial contribution in disassembling patriarchy – and classism, racism, ageism, ableism – if only the queer did not restrict itself to gender/sex/sexualities, as we are going to discuss in the next paragraph.

5. Re-queering the queer

> The continued erasure of bisexuality, by queer scholars in addition to mainstream critics, reveals that queer theory has not yet moved beyond its position as a homosexual opponent to heterosexuality, and therefore that bisexual theory has a role to play in queering queer theory.
>
> Laura Erickson-Schroth and Jennifer Mitchell, 2009

In some special occasions, such as when a movie star or a politician performs a coming out, queer spaces and identities can get a (sensationalistic) media attention and are improperly glamorized; bisexuality too can incur in some form of spectacularization and 'juicy' social representation. These processes of *exotification* – far from being really useful for the social recognition and respect of diversities –represent the soft side of homophobia and racism. Bisexuals are portrayed as the spicy ingredient for heterosexual couples and in swingers communities, where bisexual females are particularly welcome.[14] "Performative bisexuality" is represented in movies as a piquant element; or in advertisements, mostly oriented to the heterosexual public, where bisexual young women are portrayed in a stereotypical way, as a stimulating yet frightening presence in the picture, to revive the attention of consumers, anesthetized by over-exposure to advertising (Corradi 2012).

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[13]   I learned the concept 'emerging majorities' in the 90's from Angela Davis, who referred it to communities of color, workers, students, black people, Latinas/Latinos, women, lgbt people, indigenous people and the necessity of "forging a unity that can *make a new* majority of the old minorities" – as she restated during the Occupy movement (Davis 2011).
[14]   While male bisexuality remains less accepted also in these 'alternative' sexual environments because of the enduring social stigma connected with the 'passive' role and the assumption of loss of masculinity.

Only some of the political contributions of bisexual theories and practices to queer Studies do interact with post/de-colonial, feminist, intersectional standpoints, and do not restrict their range of critique solely to the contexts of gender/sex/sexualities. More studies are needed in this area, since the danger today is one of academic and political *domestication.*[15] As the Indian theoretician Gurminder Bhambra (2007) has pointed out, the feminist and queer challenge can be re-absorbed in the dominant discourse by a simple 'opening of dialogue' and improvement of 'identity pluralism', while postcolonial/decolonial theories and practices can subvert analytical categories because of their trajectory heading to the very roots of the *colonial matrix of power* (Quijano 2000; 2007). Whereas today sex, gender, sexuality can be added to the prevailing western paradigm as elements of 'modernity;' the decolonial critique does not fit into such a frame. In other words, if the *opción descolonial* (Mignolo 2008) is left out of our work, whatever we call 'queer' is at risk of being subsumed and co-opted, as it has happened for Women and Gender Studies, Lgbt, and Sexuality Studies:

> The postcolonial critique is not substantially different from that made by feminism and queer studies, but the nature of its *location* outside of the dominant understanding of the 'modern social' enables it to resist assimilation into the domain of the socio-cultural (despite the efforts of theorists of multiple modernities to so contain it) and open up discussion of general categories (Bhambra 2007: 880).

If we add the intersectional prism to our decolonial reflections, we may notice how much of the literature tends to look at bisexuality in a color-blind way – as happened in the past for lesbians and gays, when people of color were invisibilized; the assumption is of bisexuality as a neutral or mostly white phenomenon – while it is present in all communities, with common traits of misrepresentation. Richard N. Pitt (2006) has published a book on the 'Down Low'[16] – one of the bisexual lifestyles in the African

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[15]   On the risk of academic domestication, see Hingangaroa 2012.

[16]   The Black English expression *Down Low* (DL) was considered as 'a not marginal lifestyle' as early as summer 2003, according to one of the uncoolest articles of the New York Times Magazine ever published, which improperly generalized the DL as *the* form of expression of Black's (unconfessed) bisexuality, in a paragraph dense with racial and sexual stereotypes, worth reading:

> Rejecting a gay culture they perceive as white and effeminate, many black men have settled on a new identity, with its own vocabulary and customs and its own name: Down Low. There have always been men – black and white – who have had secret sexual lives with men. But the creation of an organized, underground subculture largely made up of

American community – presenting the results of a sociological analysis of around 170 articles written between 2001 and 2006. These point out how media tend to stigmatize black men's bisexual behavior – described negatively as *duplicitous heterosexuals*. At the same time, they show a compassionate understanding of white bisexual men as *victimized homosexuals* who are forced into the closet by heteronormativity and homophobia. An interesting *double standard* indeed.

Another social double standard regards the different degrees of sexual freedom and entitlement to polygamous relations (e.g., males vs females). Personal/political queer intersections meant to overcome both the mono-sexual and the monogamous paradigm have been studied by Serena Anderlini at the University of California in Santa Barbara, in particular the crossroads between bisexuality and *Poly-amory*[17] – also defined as *Poly-fidelity* to stress the emotional and responsible dimension of multiple loving relations. As she posits, in an email interview:

> […] from a theoretical point of view, bisexuality should be considered as an *epistemic portal*, approaching the hypothesis of a 'Gaia paradigm' where symbiosis, love and sustainability are the keys of evolution. The practice of bisexuality allows knowledge of oneself, and the capacity to love in a complete and multiple way. A culture able to accept bisexuality can overcome the dychotomy which structures desire on the basis of an exclusive desired 'object'. Such a culture opens up an horizon where loving energies are free to circulate and those who participate in amorous communities can have collective and individual benefits, enjoying physical and emotional health.[18]

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black men who otherwise live straight lives is a phenomenon of the last decade… *Most date or marry women and engage sexually with men; they meet only in anonymous settings like bathhouses and parks or through the Internet.* Many of these men are young and from the inner city, where they live in *a hypermasculine thug culture*. Other DL men form romantic relationships with men and may even be peripheral participants in mainstream gay culture, *all unknown to their colleagues and families*. Most DL men identify themselves not as gay or bisexual but first and foremost as black. To them, as to many blacks, that equates to being inherently masculine (my emphasis; Denizet-Lewis 2003).

The accent in the article is put on the secrecy factor, the failure to disclose the truth, the social mask worn by bisexual black males, especially with *friend and family* (while supposedly among Whites they know all about the sexual conduct of their relatives). A few years later, Keith Boykin 'answered' to such a racist stereotype by pointing out how concealment in sex affairs is not unique to Black men (Boykin 2006). As a matter of fact, practices of cover up normally take place in all societies, all types of sexualities, all genders, and all races.

[17]   Polyamory is distinct from Polysexuality: it refers to the desire to be intimately or emotionally involved with more than one person at once, independently from sex or gender.

[18]   Personal communication 22/12/09.

According to Serena Anderlini, in poly-amorist communities bisexuality is very common and statistics produced within groups show the majority of poly-amorists also identify as bisexual. Poly-amorist communities offer an hospitable environment to those who desire loving experiences, which may include bisexuality. Sex is not the center of their discursive practices and politics – allowing space for theorizing around tender and caring dimensions, affect and social feelings.

A non dychotomous remark: poly-fidelity, multiple loves, polyamorous relations may be a-sexual, as well as bisexual and other sexual identities. Being asexual or demi-sexual, means people may live their life, or part of it, as characterized by a lack of sexual attraction, or desire of intimacy, or the decision not to be engaging in sexual activity unless emotionally involved. There are individuals, and communities – the most known being the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) – who identify as asexual or demi-sexual, who are active in the queer political movement and participate in public initiatives. Some asexuals do not feel comfortable being the A at the end of the GLBTIQ acronym, because they feel critical about placing gender/sex/sexuality in a hierarchical position with respect to other diversities; and would rather opt for a larger scope in queer politics.

Indeed, as Carmen Dell'Aversano reminds us in her work (2012), the dimension of sexuality shouldn't prevail, exorting us to go back to the pristine meaning of the term queer. She offers important historical quotes in favor of the argument that queer is not limited to gender, sex, sexuality. It can be useful to read such 'foundational' statements altogether,

> Queer is ... *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 (emphasis in original; HALPERIN 1995: 62).

> [Queer] mark[s] a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception (DOTY 1993: 3).

> [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 1996: 96-99).

> 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).

Queer should not be regarded as another label, or an 'umbrella term': it is about *social subversion* by communities and people who recognize their own being as socially constructed, departing from gender/sex and sexuality but also going beyond them; and who identify the infinite ties relating oppressed people with each other and with a multifaceted system of domination operating in everybody. For this reason, the 'horizon of possibilities' cannot be restricted in advance to a set of groups, hence limiting the impact of queer to the area of gender/sex/sexuality. In real social life differences and inequalities are found only in mutually constitutive relations with other interlocking categories of oppression.

6. Open conclusions

> It is only through recognizing our privilege,
> whether it be white privilege,
> male privilege,
> class privilege,
> light skinned privilege,
> or heterosexual privilege,
> that we can challenge hierarchical relationships.
>
> (Alexandra Oprea 2004: 39)

In this essay I have considered bisexuality within a constellation of terms related to non-monosexuality, which tend to overlap with each other and enrich the controversies around labeling practices; I have discussed the marginality of bisexuality in the queer arena, and explained some of the reasons why I believe bisexuality is queer; why bisexuals should be fully entitled in the queer milieu; and how the category of bisexuality, as en epistemic tool, can improve queer theory and spaces. I have also argued for the necessity of an intersectional approach and the decolonization of queer studies and politics, for enlarging the scope of queer politics by re-queering the queer movement and its relations, opening up to diversities and perspectives.

Bisexual, pansexual, queer, fluid, and the many other identity groups could exist as they are without stretching or retracting to (un)cover others, but we could still benefit from coming together for collective action. This would certainly mean that for groups who are marginalized in the umbrella communities, such as two-spirit people, there needs to be a specific focus to let people "opt-in" as opposed to be forcefully covered. Further, as recommended by intersectional theorists (…) collective action priorities should be determined by those who experience multiple forms of marginalization to not erase the needs and experiences of Indigenous people, communities of color, people with disabilities, or people living in poverty that are a part of the community (FLANDERS 2017).

Politically – in terms of intersectional alliances – it would be important to look at queer contributions that are not focusing exclusively on gender, sex and sexuality; to give more attention to Trans/Inter theories and experiences; to adopt a non (or less) labeling attitude; and to accept all types of self definitions in a non-judgmental way. At the social level, we should attribute more importance to new insights coming from postcolonial/decolonial studies and feminist intersectional theories and research, engaging with neglected components such as the Poly-amorist and Asexual communities. I want to mention other liminal perspectives I have not examined in the paper –such as queer Eco-feminism, Vegan *antispéciste* queer (GAARD 1997; JIMÉNEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2016) – which are looking at the multiple ways of re-sensualizing our relationship with nature; walking the path of radicality; and calling for consideration and acceptance in the queer arena.

In an era of rampant neoliberism, committing to intersectional alliances and becoming a liberating *emerging majority* gives – to each and all – more political responsibilities in avoiding sectarianism and building coalitions across communities and agendas. Decolonization is a complex process, a collective enterprise that implies the deconstruction of despotic signifiers: *compulsory monosexuality* is one of them. The decolonization of our theoretical tools is a key passage for dismantling gender binarism, racism and hetero-sexism; dichotomous and hierarchical thinking; and white supremacy in the production of theories, methodologies and activism.

Other key passages consist in the overcoming of a widespread tendency to un/consciously indulge in destructive conflicts while dealing with the disarticulation of century old interconnected systems of oppression and exclusion. Such a divisive attitude, produced by internalized forms of oppression, can be challenged by starting with the recognition of embodying one

or more types of privilege – as Alexandra Oprea urges us to do in the above quote – in terms of class; race/ethnicity/culture/color; gender/sex and sexuality; status; abilities; religion; age and geopolitical locations. This strategy has to do with the collective practice of re-reading priorities and re-signifying relations – as black feminists, feminists of color and indigenous feminists have suggested.[19] In such a frame, self-reflection, the politics of affect, and the social processing of difficulties can be regarded as useful steps for enhancing queer political agency.

A disclaimer. Stating that bisexuality is queer does not mean all queer are (or should be) bisexual; I do not intend to hide the fact that many bisexuals are not at ease in the queer milieu – given the persistence of biphobia and exclusionary practices. The epistemological and political proposal here is to take bisexuality seriously in a wider queer discourse, which should open up to intersectional perspectives, become 'less white' and commit to decolonize one's own choice of concepts and ideas. An increased awareness about queer theory's unrecognized boundaries can be achieved by actively practicing the acceptance of all diversities. The marginalization of bisexuality and bisexuals (as well as others) should not be further ignored in any space that claims to be queer.

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[19]   On indigenous feminism see: Maracle 1996; Hernandez Castillo 2002; Green 2007; Suzack 2010; Corradi 2018.

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Queer histories and identities on the Ecuadorian Coast

The Personal, the Political, and the Transnational

María Fernanda Ugalde*, O. Hugo Benavides

ABSTRACT: This article looks to critique the heteronormative discourses with which both authors grew up in Ecuador in the 1970s and 80s. We do this through a thorough archaeological and historical analysis of Ecuador's past, but always looking to destabilize the heterenormative discourse which has served as a hegemonic stronghold that has not only strangled the day-to-day livelihood of several generations of Ecuadorians but in a similar way served as an ideological vice on national historical production and culture. It is our hope that through the ethnohistorical, ethnographic and archaeological material discussed in the article we are able to express a more realistic picture of the sexual and gender diversity present in this part of the Americas during prehispanic (and even contemporary) times.

KEYWORDS: sexuality; archaeology; Latin America; hegemony.

> Do you know that there is something called gender ideology? (…) It basically states that there is no such thing as a natural man or woman, or that biological sex does not determine man or woman, but rather the "social conditions" (*said in a burlesque tone*); that one is entitled, free to choose even if one is man or woman. Please!!!, that does not stand the slightest analysis. That is an outrageous belief that goes against everything; natural law, against everything. But that is what is maintained. […] We are thanks to God different; men and women, complementary, and it is not to impose stereotypes, but how good it is for a woman to keep her feminine traits; how good for a man to keep his masculine traits. And well, the whole world is free, for a man to be effeminate, a woman to be manly, but I prefer woman who look like woman (*laughs*) and I think women prefer us men who look like men (*audience applause*). You will see that because of what I am saying I will be called retarded, a caveman; that I am not at the forefront of civilized thought. Well, they can go to others with these so-called stories.
>
> Ecuadorian ex-President, Rafael Correa in a national citizen link

1. Introduction

Ecuador has made some progress in recent decades with regard to sexual identity, but there is still a long way to go. Watershed moments, such as the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1997 and the current constitution guaranteeing the rights of any person regardless of their sexual preference, represent major steps forward. However, there is still a backlash not only from conservative groups, but also from the state itself, both equally invested in ignoring the diversity and complexity of Ecuadorian sexual identities (Argüello 2014: 121). This is most evident when essential social policy decisions are traversed by personal prejudices of those who hold political power (see ex-President Correa's quote above).

In this fashion, this article was a long time in the making; one could say our entire lives. Through different paths and experiences, as well as emerging from very personal contexts, the two authors of this article came to the same conclusion: that the heteronormative discourses with which they grew up in Ecuador in the 1970s and 80s did not cohere to social reality. But perhaps even more poignantly, it was clear that this heterenormative discourse had served as a hegemonic stronghold that not only strangled (many times almost literally) the day-to-day livelihood of several generations of Ecuadorians but in a similar way served as an ideological vice on national historical production and culture. It is perhaps because of this, that as James Baldwin (1966: 171) elaborates, "only creature(s) despised by history find history a questionable manner," and as a result are able to transform it.

We now understand that our individual journeys were far from merely personal but rather quite political as we began to understand the political infused by a feminist and queer reading of one's daily social struggle. This reading of gender and sexual politics also went in hand with a strong transnational experience as well. As García Canclini (2002) states, Latin America provides the global with three large commodities: oil, telenovelas and people. In this regard, Ecuador provides the world considerable amounts of the first and the latter. It is estimated that at least 20% of Ecuadorians currently live (or have lived) outside of the national fold. The authors of this text are no exception (see below).

In a manner of speaking, it was these elements of repression, travel and curiosity, as well as mere survival, that led both of us to investigate the

sexual past of our country. These conditions, as well as other significant coincidences, brought our research agenda together. They also made us look back to the more or less remote past, and the gendered social structures that have constituted the territory known today as Ecuador. Several years later, and finally with a research project in progress,[1] we present here the first reflections and results of our analyses of ethnographic, ethnohistorical and archaeological sources of the Ecuadorian coast. Our work points to a more complex sexual historical picture than the one we were allowed to know growing up as Ecuadorians, and not surprisingly one imbued with strong colonial legacies of race, class and space (see Benavides 2013).

Covering an extended period of time, by means of disordered space-time jumps, as our own migrants lives have traversed, below we outline our individual reflections, our intersecting paths, and the joint focus in search of a more humane and realistic sexual Ecuadorian historiography.

2. First itinerary: Guayaquil-New York, or 'the Grindio (Gringo/Indio)' anthropologist

"The peninsula of Santa Elena is the biggest source of fags (*es la mata de los maricones*)!" From a very young age I got used to hearing this phrase, first said by older men and then among my own friends. Somehow it involved a kind of forbidden geographical and sexual knowledge, both of which were a kind of off-limit territory, in one way or another, until my adolescence. In addition, each time the phrase was repeated it was said with some jocosity and not little pleasure, seeming to highlight another type of transgression. A kind of liberation that, being unconscious, was possibly even more 'real' and powerful (*sensu* Lacan 2007). Little did I know that homosexuality (the *mariconada*) would be my thing, and that it would become one of my academic specialties. Even less did I know that my coming out as a gay man would cost me my relationship with my family and even with my own country, the Ecuador to which I could not return for fifteen years.

In this regard, I left Ecuador when I was twenty-two years old to pursue my Bachelor of Arts in anthropology in New York City. Little did I know that not only was I pursuing my studies but also desperately taking advantage of the opportunity to be who I really wanted to be. Like many

other 'sexiles' (Anzaldúa 1987) of the Americas, I chose to continue my professional life outside my home country as well. During all those years, I kept trying to understand why my sexual preference would have such a negative impact on my relationship with my country and my family.

As a result of this intersection, I decided to analyze (possibly excavate would be the most appropriate word) the historical legacy of the *enchaquirados* on the Ecuadorian coast (Benavides 2002; Sp. transl. 2006). It is important to state that the word 'intersectionality' is currently used in the academy for what queers have known from our very sexualized beginnings, and that is that our sexual agency and identification is not separate from that of our racial, ethnic, national, generational and class characteristics. This is why the work of female scholars of color such as Anzaldúa (1987), Morraga (1983), Lorde (1982) and Mohanty (2003) privileged the intersectionality (even before it was recognized by all in the academy) of all these social traits, and above all the lived-in experience of being a discriminated subject for more than one reason.

The article I wrote was very much embedded within this intersectional approach and attempted to investigate and define the historical figure of a transgender group known as the *enchaquirados*, of which we have consistent ethnohistorical data, albeit this knowledge had (and still has) never been incorporated into Ecuador's national identity. On the contrary, until now it only has been sought in order to minimize, and even deny, the existence of this group of transgender people in the country. I was also interested, in this manner, in understanding how and/or why this transgender knowledge was so dangerous, and how the sexual was connected in an intimate manner to the racial, class and social reality of the national Ecuadorian imaginary.

It is very much this fluid relationship of sexuality, race, class, culture and nation that I explored in my article that has now become a mainstay of intersectional studies. These works, particularly the contributions of renowned legal scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (2018) and Patricia Hill Collins (2008), as well as that of bell hooks (2014), continue to help us understand the complex manner in which these differing traits, particularly those related to gender and sexuality, are afforded agency and even made visible to ourselves. One's queerness is never read purely on sexual grounds but rather in the larger cultural reading that incorporate other gender, ethnic, class and national elements that enable it to be assessed

in particular ways, and not in others.

This finding was central to my article written almost two decades ago, and continues to fuel the main thrust of this one as well.

3. Second itinerary: Quito-Berlin, or 'the Sudaca' archaeologist

Very young, in the 1990s, I set out from Quito to Berlin determined to study archaeology, and perhaps naively considered myself to be a quite open, tolerant person, free of prejudices, unlike most of my country-people, whose conservatism I fled from quite disgustingly. At that point, I was not aware of the cultural constructs of gender and sexuality, nor could I imagine how these could play a role in archaeological analysis, which was what I was enthusiastically studying. I thought at the time that the 'problem' of sexual categories lay in the intolerance of some cavemen who refused to admit the normality of homosexuality, and that it was resolved only by cultivating and encouraging 'tolerance' in society. Recognizing as normal the categories of 'man', 'woman' and 'homosexual' (understanding the latter as one who was born within one of the categories but identified with the other) allowed me to feel like a more developed person since supposedly I had a better understanding of sexuality in all its diversity and breadth; and because of this assumption I did not need to devote any more thought to it.

Yet I was forced to question this conviction when shaken up in a class at the Free University of Berlin I found someone whom I could not pigeonhole into any sexual category I accepted as possible. It was somebody who was neither man nor woman, who could possibly be classified as a transvestite, yet did not meet the feminine characteristics that I expected in my understanding of this category. I would have not had any awkward reactions to see 'him' fully transformed into a woman, yet I was deeply disconcerted to see that 'he' blatantly combined male and female elements. I could not understand, for example, if 'he' "wanted to be a woman" (which was my wrong and myopic reading of 'his' desire) why 'he' did not shave 'his' beard. This bewilderment became a growing curiosity, and the talk held by this person on his thesis research led me to seek avidly books on third gender and sexual identity, and in that way, opened a window to a new world for me. But even then, to that moment it stayed just as a window, since I understood this interest as a personal curiosity, a subject of general culture, foreign to my area of study.

Later on, as I worked strictly within archaeology on my doctoral thesis on the iconography of the Tolita-Tumaco culture located on the northern Ecuadorian and southern Colombian coast (Ugalde 2006; 2009; 2011), I encountered a similar classification problem. In order to understand the structure and symbology beyond the images I was analyzing, the archaeological pieces that needed to be ordered in some coherent scientific taxonomy for us to infer their meaning, did not always conform with the categories that I had previously established. Although most anthropomorphic figurines, to my relief at that time, could be categorized as female and male, a few definitely combined the attributes that were considered typical for each sex. This being a small issue – as I thought of it then, but it has only continued to grow in relevance – within a complex and extensive doctoral thesis on archaeological iconography, I could only state the issue (Ugalde 2009: 58) and leave it inconclusive. However, it continued to hover in my head for the next decade, until I met Hugo, the 'grindio' anthropologist. Thanks to this encounter, the window became a door inviting me to visit that new, fascinating world of sexual diversity.

4. The encounter and its consequences: reflections on the Sixteenth-century *enchaquirados*' ancestors and successors

The early colonial chronicles make clear allusions not only to homosexual practices in the Americas but also to a remarkable diversity of sexual identities, both in domestic and ritual contexts (Horswell 2010). The Manteño-Huancavilcas, a complex highly stratified society that settled along much of what today is the Ecuadorian coast, by the time of the arrival of the Incas and Spaniards, are represented as infamous in many ethnohistoric accounts. They are accused of carrying out diabolical practices such as the adoration of stones, sacred wooden effigies and other deities, the reduction of heads, bizarre burial customs, and last but not least, for their public acceptance and practice of sodomy. The latter practice was described as being partly carried out through a sort of enslaved homosexual harem of young servants destined to religious and sexual tasks.

The recovery of a series of ethnohistorical data related to ritualized homosexual practices, as well as evidence of a more general and normative practice of homosexuality on the Ecuadorian coast, on the part of Benavides

(2002; 2006) was not positively met. This article was mostly ignored, published in an academic journal of some recognition in the United States (in the Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology) but never really had a social repercussion. At least nothing like what was desired. Although this was one of the initial intentions, that of wanting to progressively impact gender relations within the country.

It was not until almost ten years later, the same article would be used by a group of transgender activists to carry out a workshop on identity and sexuality on the Ecuadorian coast, specifically in the community of Engabao (in the Santa Elena province). The journalistic reports on the workshop, both in the newspapers and on television, detailed how this group of homosexuals/transgendered subjects of Engabao had appropriated the term of the *enchaquirados*. In this way, the article to a certain degree contributed to the revitalization of the homosexual identity of the community, which very much seems to be part of a transgender regional identity that extends through several of the provinces of the Ecuadorian coast, in particular Guayas, Santa Elena and Manabí. This identity surely refers to the phrase *la mata de los maricones* (biggest source of fags), which possibly stems from this regional historical homosexual identification.

Engabao's contemporary transgender community (figs. 1-4) used this title to call attention to the need for the historical recovery of a tradition which they regarded as forgotten and neglected. In this way, the term *enchaquirados* became important again and began to decorate t-shirts and fishing boats, with a pride possibly not seen in over five centuries on the Ecuadorian coast, that is to say not since before the colonial period. Recognizing themselves as *enchaquirados* allowed this small group in Engabao to claim a lost historicity and above all to reclaim a pre-Hispanic identity that has been projected by them to the present.

To address many of these gendered concerns we developed our project: "Ethnoarchaeology of Sexual Identities in pre-Hispanic Ecuador." The relevant evidence, we believe, must be found in the media of each period's culture, that is, material culture in general, and iconography in particular, which are the most potent ways of transmitting messages in pre-literate societies (*sensu* TILLEY 1991). The starting point, then, is the question about how this sexual diversity manifests itself in the material and iconographic record and what guidelines could shed light on these patterns over a period of several centuries. Because as the *enchaquirado* community of Engabao

Fig. 1 – Engabao, Vicky. Foto: Iván Mora Manzano.

Fig. 2 – Engabao, John. Foto: Iván Mora Manzano.

Fig. 3 – Engabao, Lindsay. Foto: Iván Mora Manzano.

Fig. 4 – Engabao, Tamara. Foto: Iván Mora Manzano.

has proven, the sexual past is never just about the past, showing clear connotations for the present and our contemporary existence. For these reasons, we have also incorporated an ethnographic element in the project that consists of interviewing several of Engabao's transgender members. It is not surprising that these subjects have much to say not only about their sexuality and gender identity, but also about the present and past transgender Ecuadorian identity.

With regard to the very remote past, there is no doubt that the interpretation of the archaeological record has been biased by the violence of the colonial discourse, and it is evident that contemporary archeological analysis suffers from a rampant heterosexism and homophobia (see Ugalde 2017). This same heterosexist discourse ignores the anthropological research of the last 30 years that clearly demonstrates the existence of a minimum of five sexes biologically speaking (Fausto-Sterling 1992; 2000). It also fails to acknowledge that it was not until the nineteenth century itself that a purely binary sexuality of woman and man was assumed, which is also when hermaphrodites began to be surgically intervened to deny the natural sexual diversity present in humans (Foucault 1990; Laqueur 1994).

5. Two thousand years ago – a new look at the iconography of the regional development figurines

5.1. Scene one: heterosexist coupling

Within the iconographic corpus of several cultures of the Regional Development period (about 500 BC–AD 500) on the Ecuadorian coast, especially among the styles known as Tolita and Bahia, anthropomorphic representations are frequent (figs. 5-8). Although most represent individuals elaborated in the form of clay figurines, there are occasionally pairs or groups of people whose representation follow quite strict iconographic conventions (figs. 9-10). Such representations traditionally have been interpreted as family scenes, always speaking of 'marriages', 'couples' or 'erotic scenes' when the couple represented corresponds to a male and a female person. However, when a scene is described with a similar canon of representation but the two characters

clearly correspond to individuals of female sex (fig. 11), it is not viewed as a marriage or couple, but rather as Siamese twins (see details of this analysis, as well as other examples, in Ugalde 2017). Such heteronormative readings starting from *a priori* assumptions continually have dominated

Fig. 5 – Tolita-Figurine, normally interpreted as female, with the most representative attribute being the skirt. Museo de Arqueología y de Arte Contemporáneo (MAAC), Guayaquil. Object-code: GA-311-1745-81. Foto: María Fernanda Ugalde.

Fig. 6 – Tolita-Figurine, normally interpreted as male, with the most representative attribute being the loincloth. Museo Nacional, Quito. Object-code: LT-16-16-69. Foto: María Fernanda Ugalde.

Fig. 7 – Bahia-Figurine, normally interpreted as female, with the most representative attribute being the skirt. Museo de Arqueología y de Arte Contemporáneo (MAAC), Guayaquil. Object-code: BP-4895. Foto: María Fernanda Ugalde.

Fig. 8 – Bahia-Figurine, normally interpreted as male, with the most representative attribute being the loincloth. Museo de Arqueología y de Arte Contemporáneo (MAAC), Guayaquil. Object-code: BP-4441. Foto: María Fernanda Ugalde.

FIG. 9 – Tolita-composition, normally interpreted as heterosexual couple. Museo Nacional, Quito. Object-code: LT-5-6-80. Foto: María Fernanda Ugalde.

FIG. 10 – Bahia-composition, normally interpreted as heterosexual couple. Museo de Arqueología y de Arte Contemporáneo (MAAC), Guayaquil. Object-code: BP-06609. Foto: María Fernanda Ugalde.

Fig. 11 – Tolita-composition, representing two women, normally not mentioned or interpreted as "Siamese sisters". Museo de Arqueología y de Arte Contemporáneo (MAAC), Guayaquil. Object-code: GA-43-2015-81. Foto: María Fernanda Ugalde.

the iconographic interpretation of the pre-Hispanic cultures of Ecuador, lacking any analytic and alternative reflection on identity and sexual preference.

The heteronormative readings of the past are not restricted to iconographic interpretations, but also are observed in the interpretation of other types of archaeological evidence. For example, we present two very suggestive archaeological findings of the Preceramic period, from Ecuador and Peru respectively. These discoveries are very similar, but have been interpreted in a very different manner. In both cases, they are a double funeral context, consisting on two individuals placed together in the same tomb, in a position that belies a strong bond and intimacy, manifested through an embrace.

However, their sexual identification offered through an osteological analysis has unconsciously provided a basis for divergent interpretations. The Ecuadorian find, located at the Las Vegas site (Santa Elena province, Ecuador) (STOTHERT 1985), corresponds to a female and a male. Out of roughly 170 burials, this funeral context is the most famous one, having been baptized as 'The Lovers of Sumpa', to the point of having inspired poems from two very well-known Ecuadorian writers (CARVAJAL 1983; ADOUM 1993).

On the other hand, at the Peruvian site of La Paloma (QUILTER 1994), two individuals were buried together in a practically interlaced form (see tomb

illustration in Quilter 1994: 133). Both were identified as male and the context was interpreted much more ambiguously within the ritual scope. The outrageous interpretation expressed that the presence of a crystal in the tomb could indicate some ritual or shamanistic role of the older individual (whose age was estimated at 47 years):

> Burial 142a was judged to be a 21-year-old male; Burial 142b was another male, about 47 years of age. These two individuals appear to have been special members of the Paloma community. Although some double infant burials were found at Paloma, this grave is the only evidence of a double adult burial. Furthermore, the nature and number of burial offerings and the time and trouble expended in placing the bodies in an embrace suggests that these individuals were of special concern to the Paloma community. Crystals are associated with shamanism throughout the Americas, and staves are both symbols of authority and religious symbols in the Andes. Although the evidence is slim, these items in the double burial may indicate a religious or authoritative role for one or both of the individuals (Quilter 1994: 62).

This contrasts markedly with another double funeral context of the same cemetery, in which the two individuals were identified as male and female and are interpreted by default as marriage (Quilter 1994: 58), without it ever being necessary to justify such an interpretation. A similar double-standard is present in other archaeological interpretations. A recent analysis of a warrior grave from the Viking Age town of Birka in Sweden, confirmed by genomic data that the buried individual was a woman (Hedenstierna-Jonson *et al.* 2017). The interpretation of a female Viking warrior was criticized and instead many other alternative explanations were immediately offered. Of course, similar findings of male burials are accepted without question as being warriors.

This lack of perception or interest in the diversity of sexual identities and preferences, and ultimately on gender roles, seems quite provocative. This is especially true when taking into account that chronicles from the first centuries of the Colonial Period make it very clear that in the pre-Hispanic Americas there were varied manifestations of sexual preference, practiced freely and openly, without any social sanction, to the explicit horror of the Spanish chroniclers.

5.2. Scene two: iconographic ambiguity in Bahia and Tolita

A comprehensive review of archaeological pieces of the Bahia culture within the framework of our ongoing project has allowed us to identify some couples who, while maintaining the representative pattern of heterosexual couples that usually are interpreted as marriages, are clearly composed of two women (fig. 12). This type of representation, in turn, leads us to the supposed siamese of Tolita, who probably are not such. Also for Tolita, Ugalde had previously drawn attention to figures that break with the iconographic convention and combine biological attributes of a sex with clothing corresponding to the opposite sex (Ugalde 2009: 59).

It is striking that among the numerous representations of the Tolita culture of young characters with little attire, who are often classified as female or male according to their clothing, there are numerous individuals dressed in a loincloth (and therefore would have to be men according to the traditional binary classification), but whose silhouettes are suspiciously feminine, since they have a very pronounced curve between their waist and hip (fig. 13). Some authors have suggested that this is due to the use of the same mold for the manufacture of all these pieces and that the

Fig. 12 – Bahia-composition, representing two women with a baby, not mentioned in any study or museum-catalogue. Museo de Arqueología y de Arte Contemporáneo (MAAC), Guayaquil. Object-code: GA-46-482-77. Foto: María Fernanda Ugalde.

Fig. 13 – Tolita-Figurine, normally interpreted as male due to the loincloth. Museo Nacional, Quito. Object-code: LT-45-112-70. Foto: María Fernanda Ugalde.

sex would have been defined through the dress (Brezzi 2003: 501). Such an interpretation does not seem very plausible, as there are also figures with markedly masculine silhouettes, which also were made with molds. The same author, interestingly, in describing a piece of this type that he characterizes as a "young man", mentions that "the character has masculine and feminine characters at the same time" (Brezzi 2003: 469), but does not reflect on the implications that such iconographic particularity can have in terms of sexual identity and gender role.

This archaeological evidence has led us to develop a systematic iconographic analysis of anthropomorphic pieces of the Bahia culture, with a corpus composed of several hundred figures from museums throughout Ecuador. Through an analytical approximation that makes use of the methodological semiotic principles (already used by Ugalde in her iconographic analysis of Tolita, see especially Ugalde 2009), we are trying to assess the relationships between the physical sexual attributes (of a more biological character) and other attributes of a cultural character, such as dress and ornaments. In this way, we hope to be able to offer an alternative view of gender and gender roles that were present in this past society, and in this way offer a new look, more independent of the heteronormative bias that up to now has limited the interpretative capacity of those

who have previously worked with this material. Our initial findings (see below) show the imperative to revisit the cultural material in such a way that scholars can begin to repay the outstanding debt to gender and sexual diversity, ignored until now as the normative Ecuadorian culture continues to be dominated by the heteronormative discourse that still prevails since colonial days.

6. Back to the future: an ethnography of the contemporary *enchaquirados*

Initial interviews carried out at Engabao, within the framework of the ethnographic component of our project, reveal a transgender history on the Ecuadorian coast, very different from what is normally understood not only at the national level, but also within the global context. To begin with, it is understood that *la mata de los maricones* is not a haphazard reality, but rather the result of a millennial history (both prehispanic and colonial) with diverse and alternative forms of living one's sexuality and gender identities.

As one can imagine the historical knowledge that contemporary *enchaquirados* have of themselves is a complex one. To this effect their re-reading of an *enchaquirado* past is a quite recent one, and it is not a name they would have afforded themselves had it not been for the recent historical research on this identity or the political contributions of contemporary transgender activists. However, neither of these realities created the contemporary transgender individuals that exist in Engabao and rather, their easy identification with the historical *enchaquirados* speaks volumes to their postcolonial legacy. One could argue that for the contemporary transgender community in Engabao the *enchaquirados* legacy provided a much needed legitimization of their own sexual reality and daily existence, perhaps less within their own community but more so against the heteronormative modernizing enterprise of the public media and the state.

Like contemporary berdaches in the North-American Southwest, contemporary *enchaquirados* have a recognized rightful place in their community. This identity allows them to feel pride in an ancient association and recognize themselves in the ethnohistorical descriptions written for the area several centuries ago. But the sexual diversity present in the Americas before the European conquest was far from uniform or monolithic. Despite the fact that both have an ancestral religious association there are

significant differences between berdaches and *enchaquirados* both in the ethnohistorical record and in contemporary terms. Perhaps one of the biggest is the pedagogical role that berdaches possessed that *enchaquirados* never had. This along with the birthing ritual that similarly are not part of the *enchaquirados* historical or contemporary cultural lexicon.

However, both of these ancient American sexual traditions have grown side by side with the urban explosion of the continent. The transgender individuals interviewed in Engabao complained about the mistreatment and discrimination they received in Guayaquil (the Ecuadorian port city has over two and half million inhabitants), as compared to their normal existence in their small fishing community, demonstrating a transgender community socially integrated into the local life of the town. But this supposed national anomaly, that is, to expect that a transgender identity would cause more malaise and discrimination in a rural setting than in a big city like Guayaquil also responds to a global prejudice; one even inherent in queer theory. Most global understanding of queer theory often assumes that homosexuality is above all an urban phenomenon, within large cities and iconic places like San Francisco, New York or Berlin in the north. It supposedly being these global centers which manage to maintain and develop queer or gender identities alternative to those normally developed within a binary heterosexist hegemony.

In this way, both the United States and Europe understand sexual diversity as a modern, urban and Western achievement that as good missionaries they must defend and protect in the Global South. Unfortunately, it is also the same manner in which many African and Latin American governments understand transgender identity, as a plague and perverse colonial intrusion stemming from the White north. It is also equally important that it is through these ideological mechanisms that queer identities are also racialized, as if would seem that only the developed northern White world would have the right to sexual diversity, as they also had before access to Christian truth and then to secular enlightenment.

However, it should be remembered that this 'civilizing' West (and North) was the first to condemn America's sexual diversity, killing indigenous people not only because they were indigenous (i.e., Native Americans), but also because they practiced sodomy (HORSWELL 2010). Of course, it is hard to believe that it is now that same civilizing West that seeks to defend sexual diversity and transgender identity as they define it. We consider that

both the ethnohistorical evidence and the iconographic and ethnographic work that we are carrying out allow us to elucidate that transgender identities, at least on the Ecuadorian coast, are neither urban nor modern and even less white (or even white/*mestizo*).

But the hope is that something always escapes, especially from the West's exacting culture (*sensu* Hall 1997). Among them are traditions such as *La Nueva* in the community of Engabao, which is what the person who decides to take a transgender identity is called. And taking into account the phases of the moon, so important for a fishing community, a communal rite is celebrated to recognize and baptize the new member of the transgender community with a female name of her choice. We are possibly seeing in this tradition new arrangements and old adaptations to produce a historical palimpsest as authentic as it is hybrid, that is to say like any other cultural sexual identity.

7. "Deep Rivers" and the history of the vanishing present

The concerns expressed are very much in keeping with the decolonial approach that has been a mainstay in the Americas for over half a century (see Zea 1991; Mignolo 2012; and Quijano 2014). As Benavides' (2010) work shows, the decolonial attempt in archaeology to re-assess a hegemonic and official history is a crucial endeavor that is at the core of making research essential beyond the academic enterprise. For example, Silvia Rivera Cusincanqui (2000) shows how it is no longer possible to understand categories such as Indigenous and Western independent of each other. The West and the Rest have been brought up in mutual recognition (see Said 1978) and the decolonial approach helps us recognize the messy palimpsest of our mutual historical origins.

As Foucault (1994) elaborates in his analysis of the development of theoretical production in the West, one of the most interesting phenomena is the pervasive ethnological role that history will come to occupy. Far from it being obvious or natural, historical description and chronological order have taken on a teleological authority in the narrative development of the West.

This insight is particularly important as one tries to understand the 'histories' (in the plural) of communities that were present before the West became the West. Perhaps more importantly, it is central to point out that it was precisely the conquest of non-Western communities (in what would consequently become the Americas, Africa, and Asia) that allowed

the West, beginning in 1492, to claim themselves as modern. Interestingly enough, it was these same Indigenous communities that allowed the West to be constituted as such that then were historically denied their participation in the Western framework of civilized behavior.

As Ecuadorian subjects we were schooled in a Western tradition of cultural norms (*buenas costumbres*) and modern (i.e., the Global North's) academic standards. However, along with those cultural and academic requirements we have also entertained a millenary tradition (mainly expressed through the art and music): what Jose María Arguedas (1958) referred to in the title of his paradigmatic novel as *Los ríos profundos* (deep rivers) that refuses to be erased or completely encapsulated into the West's rational historical categorization.

In many ways, our lives, and the ethnographic, iconographic and ethno-historical strands of our project, stem from listening to the 'deep rivers' of a "past (that) is not dead. It is not even past" (Faulkner 1951: 67). Our attempt is not to define any 'panacea', sexual or otherwise in the past, as some have naively expressed (see the very limited analysis about homophobia in the prehispanic Americas expressed in González Arenas and Gamboa 2015). Rather, the different evidence we discuss shows that many regions in the Americas presented elements of a different normal than the one expressed by the colonial West. Our work shows glimpses of particular sets of cultural norms in which homosexuality was not the automatic perversion it would be constituted as. Sexual difference is expressed in the archaeological figurines we have noted (see above) and has even survived the colonial narrative. Perhaps even more to this point the large presence of a rural form of homosexuality on the Ecuadorian coast today (in 2018) shows a sexual practice different than those predicted even by the most progressive queer theory scholars today.

Our ethnographic work in Engabao and throughout the Ecuadorian coast continues to excavate suppressed sexual histories that are far from the modern, urban and Western sexual identity that most queer narratives put forward. Homosexual practice is as normal to these coastal Ecuadorian communities as the open-ocean fishing that they carry out for their daily livelihood. The fact that homosexuality is more accepted in these rural fishing villages up and down the Ecuadorian coast than in the large modern metropolis of Guayaquil or Quito express 'an-other' history and 'an-other' sexuality than the one contained in the West's officializing chronological teleology.

    In fact, we might be much closer to Arguedas' 'Deep Rivers' than to the Western narrative of homosexuality as a contemporary development and modernizing civilizing goal. The biggest clue in this sense is that homosexuals in Engabao, and the majority of coastal communities, are not seen as foreign to their culture, and more importantly are not even merely tolerated. After all, one would tolerate something that is different, and in this regard homosexuals are not seen as foreign but rather within the sexual variation expected of human behavior. Of course there are some negative reactions, the same way that certain heterosexual expressions (e.g., class or age differences come to mind) are subject to them as well. What you do not see is the indiscriminate homophobia that Ecuador's modern society and national culture continues to express, and within which we grew up.

8. In (conclusion)

By refusing to stay within this prejudiced enculturation, officially expressed by the Ecuadorian heteronormative state (see above), we align ourselves with a 'long line of vendidas' (Morraga 1983) conformed by visionaries such as Jose María Arguedas and Gloria Anzaldúa, who also refused to conform, in Karl Marx's words, to a history not of our making:

> And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror, one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is, and formed one's point of view. In great pain and terror, because, thereafter, one enters into battle with that historical creation, oneself, and attempts to re-create oneself according to a principle more humane and more liberating, one begins the attempt to achieve a level of personal maturity and freedom which robs history of its tyrannical power, and also changes history (Baldwin 1966: 171).

Ultimately, our hope is that our research begins to make some organic sense of the personal, political and transnational experiences we have both traversed. It is our assumption that these experiences and lessons far from denying reality, as was the mainstay of our upbringing, will broaden the picture of the complex world and cosmology lived in the Americas before (as well as after) the conquest. We are quite aware that we will never know exactly what it was like in the past but we definitely hope to provide more clues to how it was not. Perhaps through that re-reading of the narrative palimpsest expressed in the material culture left to us, we

allow 'an-other' histories and 'an-other' realities to permeate our otherwise hegemonic Western imagination:

> The successes of history belong to those who are capable of seizing these rules, to replace those that had used them, to disguise themselves so as to pervert them, invert their meaning, and redirect them against those who had initially imposed them: introducing themselves into this complex mechanism, they will make it function in such a way that the dominators find themselves dominated by their own rules (Foucault 1998: 378).

And that is the ultimate catch, how does one construct a congruent, alternative and inclusive history that doesn't end up enclosing us all in a singular monolithic past.

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María Fernanda Ugalde, O. Hugo Benavides

Tony Duvert:
A political and theoretical overview

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Abstract: The late French writer Tony Duvert gave voice, scandalously, to the child-lover he never hid he was. He outlined, with rare precision, a desiring subjectivity struggling for existence in a hostile society, which portrayed him as a criminal. The right to homosexuality; the battle against the condemnation and the repression of underage sexuality; the deconstruction of the scary image of the 'paedophile', a bugbear typically represented as a rapist ogre; the invective against parents (the actual source of violence and of the castration forces deployed against children) and the institution of the family (the backbone of a morbid and unjust society); the ferocious criticism towards sexual and emotional capitalism, parenthood and the "bourgeois economic scheme of libidinal investment": those are some of the themes Tony Duvert deals with in his essays, and on which we focus in this paper.

Keywords: intergenerational sex; childhood; literature; politics; modern history; mass culture.

Tony Duvert's theoretical writings and ideas belong to a generally overlooked, muted story that deals with a taboo issue even within queer studies: that of 'paedophilia'. Yet, in this paper, we focus neither on children's right to sexuality nor on child lovers' claims as such. We do not want to speak through the personae of people we are not, once more ventriloquizing children – and also child lovers, who are deprived of their voice through the strongest stigmatization we can imagine nowadays. We shall consider the destiny of Duvert's texts, which sank into oblivion a long time ago, as a perfect synecdoche for the repression of the very questions raised by those texts. To state it plainly, we are concerned with the recent history of adult discourses (and silences) about childhood; and with the evolution of a system of power-knowledge which deeply marks children's bodies and minds.

In such a field of force, amongst other things, we can see two powerful processes at play which Duvert himself fully explored: that of the naturalization of historical categories; and that of the political exploitation of collective fears. Indeed, these processes widely exceed our subject, being coextensive with the development of modernity and mass culture. Nevertheless, in the untoward domain of paedophilia and children's sexuality

these processes show up with such intensity that, over and again, one feels compelled to question their political purchase in general. Following Duvert, the fate of his works and the process leading to the almost absolute discredit of his memory, we will sketch a complex and disorganic apparatus made of narratives, laws and court cases, media representations, sex-education manuals, interviews and so on. All these discourses and apparatuses compose a field of force, having a specific *image* of childhood as their untouchable gravitational center, where the specter of the paedophile ogre, haunting our allegedly grown-up, rational minds, has a fundamental role to play: that of the villain.

1. Tony... Who?

Tony Duvert was a novelist and essayist rather well known in the 1970s. The start of his career was very sudden: he published his first novel, *Récidive*, in 1967, aged only 22, for the renowned Éditions de Minuit. Jérôme Lindon in person, head of the publishing house and great promoter of the Nouveau Roman – of Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon and others – approved the manuscript of *Récidive* and continued to publish Duvert's writings until the latter retreated into silence in 1989.

In the 1970s, Duvert was the director of *Minuit*'s journal, and he had a column in the famous gay magazine *Le gai pied*. Though he never became a massively popular author, Duvert was recognized as one of the finest stylists of the French written word. He won the prestigious Prix Médicis in 1973, thanks to the involvement of Roland Barthes, with an experimental and disturbing novel, *Paysage de fantaisie*. Duvert was all but politically correct: during the dinner celebrating the prize, he had a violent altercation with his very patron, Roland Barthes, on the issue of "children's rights" (Sebhan 2010: 78). The rift between them, allegedly, will be irreparable.

Tony Duvert always claimed he was a child-lover. However, as he stated during an interview conducted by Guy Hocquenghem and Marc Voline, he did not want to "stand up for the current sexuality of a paedophile, or of a homosexual, or a heterosexual, or a man or a woman". "For me", Duvert stated, "they are all by-products of the State's control on sexuality". Indeed, he believes that paedophiles, like the rest of society, treat children as dolls: something he could not swallow. "I do not stand at all by the paedophilia I see. I make common cause with counter-struggles: it is evident we must commit ourselves to a combat *against* the laws, *against* institutions. But

not *for* paedophilia, for sure. The fight to be led is for the total separation of State and sexuality, it is for the nonexistence of a State or an institution having a shadow of a relationship with sexuality". Neither what he strived for was the liberation of childhood as such. He knew that childhood was adults' phantasm, which first emerged during the 18th and 19th centuries and then developed during the 20th, within the liberal-bourgeois paradigm. So that children, *these* children, can never be free for Duvert. What he positively wanted, through his writings, was to reveal an ideological marginalization, and to open up a political ground to debate the relationships between adults and children. "I have something very simple, not to affirm, but to open up for discussion by others than me", says Duvert. "It is essential that [intergenerational] relations become part of a culture; and it is essential something happens in them that is neither parental nor pedagogic. We need the creation of a civilisation"[1] (Hocquenghem *et al.* 1979).

2. The Seventies

At a first glance one may label a similar view as incurably utopian, which fact is open to argument. The point is these issues *are not* open to argument. But, for a time and in a certain cultural and political milieu, they were: when Duvert writes his more accomplished texts, say between 1973 and 1979, he is not a lone knight in combat. We can give some examples of the sources that inspired Duvert, and evoke briefly the French intellectual landscape within which his works were created and circulated.

L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime, originally written in 1960 by Philippe Ariès, was reprinted twice in the 1970s, specifically in 1973 and 1975. Here, the historian details the stages of the "discovery of childhood", as he calls it, as well as the management of the progressive transformation of children's subjectivity. According to Ariès, in the 17th century the child was still regarded as a shameless little animal one could sexually play with. Yet, in 18th- and 19th-century Europe, on the one hand a new sense of guilt was slowly sowed onto children through the confessional *dispositif*, and on the other adult portrayals of children as innocent and pure multiplied sharply, leading to an ever more careful segregation of people into age classes (Ariès 1975).

At the same time, in 1974 René Schérer, with *Émile perverti*, inaugurated

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[1]   All translations into English, if not otherwise stated, are the authors'.

a series of radical books devoted to childhood. In particular, *Co-ire* (Schérer *et al.* 1976), written in collaboration with Guy Hocquenghem, describes childhood in such a radical and provocative way that it seems impossible one could publish it today. And of course we cannot avoid recalling the release of the first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1974). Here Foucault sees in the body of the child "a 'local center' of power-knowledge", that is, a crucial element to understand "the pattern of the modifications which the relationships of force imply by the very nature of their process" (Eng. tr.: 98, 99). According to the philosopher, through children's bodies, through the surveillance of their sexuality, medical and social institutions entered the family, modifying it and using it to support biopolitical maneuvers, the "medicalization of sex and the psychiatrization of its non-genital forms" (100). Jacques Donzelot followed Foucault's suggestion in *La police des familles* (1977), where he detailed the process of transformation of the family from the middle of the 18th to the 20th century, showing that the protection and control of this *new* childhood was the fulcrum of power-knowledge levers.

We must also mention the famous *Lettre ouverte sur la révision de la loi sur les délits sexuels concernant les mineurs* of 1977. The letter demanded the liberation of three men, at that time in preventive custody for three years, and in doing so criticized the law criminalizing sexual relations between minors and adults. The defendants were accused of having offended, without violence, the decency of a few under-fifteens who, moreover, had declared their consent. Among the signatories were Deleuze and Guattari, Barthes, Lyotard, de Beauvoir (Becchi 1981: 35-36). Foucault returned to the issue in 1978, when he took part in a radio broadcast with Guy Hocquenghem and the lawyer and writer Jean Danet. It is not by chance that this speech, later published as *La loi de la pudeur* (Foucault 1978), was thoroughly discussed by Judith Butler (2012), for it elaborates fundamental reflections about the question of consent. Here Foucault also expresses his concern over a vicious trend that unfortunately would consolidate in years to come:

> On the one hand, there is childhood, which by its very nature is in danger and must be protected against every possible danger, and therefore any possible act or attack. Then, on the other hand, there are dangerous individuals, who are generally adults of course, so that sexuality, in the new system that is being set up, will take on quite a different appearance from the one it used to have. In the

past, laws prohibited a number of acts, indeed acts so numerous one was never quite sure what they were, but, nevertheless, it was acts that the law concerned itself with. Certain forms of behaviour were condemned. Now what we are defining and, therefore, what will be found by the intervention of the law, the judge, and the doctor, are dangerous individuals. We're going to have a society of dangers, with, on the one side, those who are in danger, and on the other, those who are dangerous. And sexuality will no longer be a kind of behaviour hedged in by precise prohibitions, but a kind of roaming danger, a sort of omnipresent phantom, a phantom that will be played out between men and women, children and adults, and possibly between adults themselves, etc. Sexuality will become a threat in all social relations, in all relations between members of different age groups, in all relations between individuals. It is on this shadow, this phantom, this fear that the authorities would try to get a grip through an apparently generous and, at least general, legislation and through a series of particular interventions that would probably be made by the legal institutions, with the support of the medical institutions. And what we will have there is a new regime for the supervision of sexuality; in the second half of the 20th century it may well be decriminalized, but only to appear in the form of a danger, a universal danger, and this represents a considerable change. I would say that the danger lay there (Eng. tr.: 280-281).

Since childhood is considered as constitutively in danger, as a "high-risk population" says Foucault, the legal and medical power-knowledge apparatus, and especially psychology and psychiatry, must preserve the paradoxical virginity of child sexuality at any cost, even against the desires of the non-adult him- or herself. Indeed, if children feel attraction for an adult, this desire must be considered pathological. It seems that, after all, this is the main reason why, in Foucault's view, the question of consent is elided by the medical and legal apparatus. Foucault exposes the fact that non-adults do not have the possibility to be believed, when they speak about their relations, feelings, contacts: "They are thought to be incapable of sexuality and they are not thought to be capable of speaking about it. [...] And to assume that a child is incapable of explaining what happened and was incapable of giving his [sic] consent are two abuses that are intolerable, quite unacceptable" (284), Foucault concludes.[2]

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[2]   This constituent impossibility to be heard, taken seriously and chose autonomously, especially in matters of sexuality and violence, applies also to other subjects – most notably women, especially if racialized and in connection with sexual labour. All differences considered, the relation between the construction of childhood, of femininity and of (homo)sexuality is foundational to the apparatus analyzed here.

It is in such a context of widespread, radical debate that Duvert's works were inserted. A debate that dealt not only with issues of sexuality and childhood, but more broadly with the repression and control of bodies and sexual orientations, parental authority and the disciplining role of the patriarchal family. In *Le bon sexe illustré* (1974) one can read analogous ideas to those found in the texts referenced above. But one also has to note the influence of Georges Bataille's writings, and in particular the notion of expenditure. Which is evident for instance in the fact that *Le bon sexe illustré* is more directly anti-capitalist and libertarian than the texts we mentioned so far.

Indeed, Duvert recognizes in proprietary right one of the two pillars of the bourgeois sexual order (the other being the duty to procreate, and thus the reproduction of the same order). According to Duvert, the sexual order expressing itself through medical-legal apparatuses, bourgeois and familial morals, ecclesiastical pressure, and sex-education manuals (of which *Le bon sexe illustré* is a thorough analysis), captures and redirects the nomadic desire of children. A desire that does not naturally reproduce the established order, and that would be able to crush the "bourgeois economic scheme of libidinal investment" and the discriminatory medical ideology according to which sexuality is founded on biological grounds – and therefore, first of all, on the complementarity of reproductive organs. "The genital organs", writes Duvert, "become the only place of sexuality because in twelve or thirteen years of life one learns to prevent desire to dwell in whatever place, genitals included. But puberty makes genitals 're-surface'. The rest of the body will be locked forever" (1974: 84-85). So Duvert agrees with Schérer, Hocquenghem, Lewinter, Groddeck and many others, on the fact that "the original and complete sexuality is child sexuality" and that "purely genital sexuality, especially in its phallic form, is an *ideological perversion*" (Schérer *et al.* 1976: 91).[3] Duvert states it openly, when he portrays psychology and psychoanalysis, two fundamental mechanisms of the power-knowledge apparatus orienting sexuality, as a sort of fictional drama, composed following a 'principle of inversion', whereby:

> [Psychology and psychoanalysis] describe the interiorizations of Order that the child experienced as if they were natural stages of his development; the cultural,

[3] The idea of a whole, unrepressed sexuality is of course rather problematic. Here, we just intend to show how Duvert's ideas on this point were not at all unique to him. On the contrary, they were current in some intellectual and psychoanalytical circles of the time.

repressive and socio-familial data are not a system of pressure able to explain these stages, they are only an interesting scenario in which every child develops [...]. Medical discourse legitimizes, universalizes and eternalizes these actions of the social order (DUVERT 1974: 141).

3. THE CONFESSIONAL TRAP

One can easily find propositions of the same kind elsewhere, for instance in the *Anti-Oedipus* by Deleuze and Guattari (1972). Yet, in spite of the fact that his ideas were part of a wider debate in the 1970s, Duvert's thought later became taboo – as Gilles Sebhan, the author of the only existing monographs on Tony Duvert, rightly wrote in 2015. Sebhan himself received friendly warnings not to write about Duvert, if he wanted to stay out of trouble (2010). It seems that Duvert's fame as a child-lover (a 'paedophile', i.e. a monster in the public imaginary) earned him a fate of *damnatio memoriae*. But, in order to contrast and undo such censorship, one runs the risk of reproducing a sort of morbid curiosity for the details of Duvert's conduct, an operation which in reality reinforces the morality underlying such censorship. Even Sebhan, acting with the best of intents, falls into the biographical-confessional trap: he ventures into the darkness of intimacy, trying to dissipate the shadows enveloping the 'real life' of a dead man who cannot acknowledge or refute anything. In a sense, Sebhan tries to make the paedophile Duvert confess his guilt in order to absolve him after death.

This is not what we are seeking to do. On the contrary, we attempt to turn off the confessional machine. We do not want to produce any truth about Duvert's private life. We will not wonder whether Duvert, besides his sexual preferences, was disturbed or not; whether in his novels he elaborated on some biographical material; whether he told the truth, speaking about himself in his non-literary compositions; or whether he fostered on purpose the myths surrounding the extremely bashful person that he was. Indeed, the temptation to transform Duvert's life into a novel is strong. But we do not mean to elicit empathy for someone who was unanimously condemned by society, made into a scapegoat, even. We just want to *speak* about his texts and ideas, without concealing the fact that Duvert unceasingly fought for his own desires and his form of life through writing.

4. A disorderly retreat

The battle was uneven; Duvert lost it ruinously; and the signs of this defeat mark his texts. One cannot help notice the degradation of his theory and prose after 1979, eventually inducing him to total silence. Comparing his three main theoretical writings, *Le Bon sexe illustré* (1974), *L'Enfant au masculin* (1980), and *Abécédaire malveillant*, his last book, published in 1989 after seven years of silence, the difference between them leaps off the pages. In *Le bon sexe illustré*, one grasps immediately the existence of a general, coherent theoretical plan, a political commitment, hopes. Then the theoretical frame starts to disarticulate, the texts become more and more fragmented, up to the appearance of a collection of aphorisms organised in the most arbitrary way one can imagine: the alphabetical order. Duvert is aware of that, and one can easily find textual evidence of his disillusionment.[4] He knows that he has become repetitive and violent and spiteful. He has lost his self-control and hopes; it looks like he no longer believes in arguing on intellectual grounds. He is worn out; he is disgusted. He shouts; he outrages the self-righteous. Then he retreats into silence.

Of course, such an involution seems to reflect the dramatic changes affecting the European political context between the Seventies and the Eighties, a brief temporal transition which nevertheless marked a decisive turning point. A season of great mobilizations, libertarian claims, daring ideas and revolutionary attempts was quickly fading away. A book such as *L'Enfant au masculin*, which is wildly subversive in its contents, but where every proposition seems to vibrate with fierce impotence, resonates with the rallying cries against an overwhelming counterrevolutionary process that Duvert was *living out* tragically. As far as Duvert's personal struggle for the reframing of the relationship between children and adults is concerned, *L'Enfant au masculin* appears also as a sort of premonition of what will happen two years after its publication:

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[4]   Consider for example the following passages, appearing at the very beginning of *L'Enfant au Masculin* and of *Abécédaire Malveillant*, respectively: "Je me résigne à composer des essais qui méritent vraiment ce nom: des choses modestes, humbles, fragiles, des opinions à vif" (Duvert 1980: 5); "Un recueil de petites opinions, de remarques, d'idées, est un catalogue de généralisations abusives. Bien sûr, tout ce qu'on peut dire de général est faux: mais excitant comme une médisance. Une revanche. Quinteux, calomniateur et rancunier: voilà qui tu es. Et tu aimes ça" (Duvert 1989: 9).

the violent erasure of any possible political space, the silencing of people *like him.*

In 1982, the Coral affair erupted in France. The Coral was a *lieu de vie*, a place where libertarian education and anti-psychiatric practices were freely carried out. Claude Sigala, Alain Chiapello and Jean-Noël Bardy, part of the staff of the Coral, were accused of sexual abuse on children. The affair eventually turned out to be a colossal media bubble, a judicial fabrication exploited for political purposes, a dirty victory for the reactionary movement against anti-psychiatry. Even René Schérer was in some way involved, along with Jack Lang, at that time minister of Culture, whom the accuser blackmailed. Someone circulated fake documents implicating Michel Foucault and Félix Guattari. The Coral affair is the epitome of a dawning new era, and it seems to have been the *coup de grace* on Duvert's morale. Thereafter, he kept silent for 7 years. In 1989 he published *Abécédaire malveillant,* and was strongly attacked by the few literary critics who did not ignore him. Then silence until his lonely, pitiful death in 2008.

5. Absolute evil and the child

Indeed, we live in a time when people like Duvert are considered as nothing less than monsters. He has not merely been forgotten after 'history defeated him'; rather, he has been metamorphosed into a beast, becoming unrecognizable. We should acknowledge that, seen from our perspective, his writings and ideas have become equally unrecognizable, getting substantially obscured by Duvert's 'paedophilia' (a word which probably has never sounded more disgusting to someone's ears than to our own). In a way, his voice has been taken away from him because of the stigma he bears. Even when we actually read Duvert's works, unmentionable spectres of violence inflect our perception of them. There is a sort of spell on us, a spell we need to break if we want to recover the possibility of collectively addressing the issue of paedophilia. We unwittingly associate a paedophile with a corruptor of innocent children. The very word, paedophile, arouses images of evil seducers, rapists, psychopaths, murderers and so on. That is why, as all persecuted persons do, child-lovers, even the nonviolent ones, are obliged to hide and live in the dark. Thus, more and more 'they' seem to scheme secretly, deserving persecution in the eyes of those who are afraid of them.

Stories and fears flourish thanks to mystery. Therefore, the spectral power of the paedophile villain is commensurate with his actual flimsiness, and feeds on the very mediatised overexposure and moral panic which paradoxically hides him from view.[5] Of course, the existence of disturbed persons and of actual abuses is not at all under question. But it is undeniable that the paedophile ogre is, first and foremost, a sort of folk-tale character, that conceals the very individual who over and again appears to perform its role. When this embodiment of the cliché by a real-life person happens, it is almost impossible to take off the mask of the monster, to wash away the stigma, to make the person's voice heard. This is exactly what makes the false cases of abuse so upsetting: the formation of a sort of "violent unanimity", as René Girard would say, against the presumed paedophile; the triggering of an infernal machine whose functioning is well explained visually by Andrew Jarecki's *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003) and by Thomas Vinterberg in his *The Hunt* (2012).

In a sense, we do not expect anything else but something awful happening, so that we can rightfully and vehemently reel off into the real world a huge mass of horrible images, in a paranoid loop. This is what happened during the Nineties in western Europe, especially following the surge of moral panics in relation to the heavily mediatised Dutroux affair,[6] eventually bringing about a change in the everyday life of millions of people (on this point cf. at least Duclos 1997). Catalyzed by the monster of the day, collective fears produced new legal measures, new safety precautions, new behaviours and trends. In 2010 Claude Olivier Doron summarized the effect of the anti-paedophile wave and of the Dutroux affair in France as follows:

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[5]   We are using the masculine pronoun intentionally, since normally the paedophile is imagined as a man. Once again, this reflects an idealised vision of femininity as intrinsically maternal, domestic and incapable of aggression (and therefore ultimately also as the property of a prototypically 'weak' subject to be protected, just like the child) – something which the feminist movement also contested. A critique of such vision of femininity often appears in Duvert's own writings and interviews, most notably in his virulent attacks against mothers' social role (cf. for instance Duvert 1974; 1979; 1980).

[6]   Marc Dutroux, named "le monstre de Marcinelle", was arrested in 1986 for kidnapping and raping minors. Convicted to 13,5 years of prison, he was set free on parole in 1992. Along with some accomplices, he reverted to raping and kidnapping children and teenagers: amongst his victims, Eva Mackova, Henrietta Palusova, Julie Lejeune, Mélissa Russo, An Marchal, Eefje Lambrecks, Sabine Dardenne and Laetitia Delhez. Dutroux was arrested again in 1996, and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2004. The Dutroux affair had a vast echo in the media across the whole of Europe and beyond.

> The Dutroux affair completes the process of convergence – which started at the beginning of the Nineties – of different problematic lines that previously defined a common and many-sided object: "paedophilia". […] Besides, the Dutroux affair makes the arguments developed since the Seventies […] definitively inaudible. […] Now paedophilia is considered as the "absolute evil", the intolerable structuring the moral economy of our societies. […] Facing this "absolute evil" the mirror-image of a completely undeniable absolute victim emerges: the child. [In France], the fight against child abuse is declared "grande cause nationale" in 1997. And, indeed, 1997 records a great boost in the exposure and broadcasting of paedophile affairs (BLANCHARD *et al.* 2010: 269, 270, 272).

The spectral existence of the paedophile is no less real than the concrete case. Instead, the former anticipates the latter, because it offers a ready-made interpretative model which reduces the complexity of the events and incorporates them into preconceived discursive schemes. The paedophile ogre, as a belief system, realizes itself, creating a consonant social and political environment. Recently, Selene Pascarella – a former crime correspondent, who in her *Tabloid Inferno* (2016) gives extensive coverage to cases of paedophilia – has showed how much the toxic narrative schemes sprawling in the infosphere poison Italian jurisprudence. Not to mention family life. Parental love, as well as the desire of owning children, has received so much fodder, that it has blown up into a veritable phobia, parents fearing a world where every child left alone for a minute risks being kidnapped, raped and maybe murdered. Many evocations, many mysterious sightings magnified by social media call the spectre haunting family hearths. Here, on the one hand, folk tales about the bogeyman, the white van, the international paedophile conspiracy prosper, and appear as children's stories in which the grown-ups started to believe; on the other hand, in the family homes the ogre actually lives, since the vast majority of actual abuses on record happens within the extended family circle.

Duvert is right when he says that the Stranger, the paedophile embodying absolute evil, the Marcinelle monster, is the double of the violent, castrating father, who psychologically or physically abuses the sexuality of his daughters and sons (DUVERT 1974: 104-107). The paedophile ogre is also the negative of the perfect dad, the spotless protector of the pureness of children. In fact, the contemporary ogre would not exist as such in the absence of the image of the angel-like child, i.e. a naturalized

ideological fetish. Since childhood is constitutively at risk, permanently under a sort of terrorist threat, the control and the management of children's lives become meticulous, transforming 'the rights of the child' into a war machine enlisting new-borns into the trenches of normative social life. Indeed, in order to confirm their angelic nature, adults decide that children *must* live in an Edenic reality, where nothing can tarnish them. They have to be set apart, at least ideally, from anything the adults have not previously bowdlerized. Ultimately, the ogre summons the little angel and vice versa.

6. The profanation

The strength of this ideological Ouroboros emerges through the impossibility to drift away from current orthodoxies. For instance, nowadays it is practically impossible to work with children without being an advocate, if only implicitly, of a "frigid pedagogy", as Egle Becchi would call it (1981: 7-35). In addition, the silence surrounding paedophilia transforms it into an extremely powerful political weapon: in fact, no-one can deny the political manipulations surrounding the Coral affair in France, or the Vallini case in Italy[7] – without mentioning that of Bambini di Satana, eventually leading to the censorship and the recalling of every copy of a lucid book about the facts: Luther Blissett's *Lasciate che i bimbi* (1997).

More appropriately, we should say that such political exploitation of paedophilia works because our Janus-faced fetish separates the objects it invests from public space, like all things 'intimate' and 'private' in the liberal-bourgeois, patriarchal and heteronormative paradigm, here brought to its extremes. Paedophilia, as a belief, seems to have the capacity to envelop everything it applies to into a sacred enclosure, a non-political space. Moreover, what paedophilia affects, even when it is a spectre incapable of affecting anything, is not only the real or suspected paedophile, but it is always, necessarily, childhood as well; and, through childhood, it casts its shadow on society as a whole.

As feminism also taught us, we must profane this sacred enclosure – at

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[7]   In 1993 Francesco Vallini was arrested, together with fellow members of Grouppo P (a group that debated and promoted consensual sexual relations between adults and teenagers). Vallini was also one of the editors of the gay magazine *Babilonia*. All where accused of conspiracy and alleged sexual intercourse with minors. Vallini was acquitted of the charges of sexual violence, but convicted for conspiracy on the basis of his activities with Gruppo P.

least because the wall of silence, the unspeakable horror or disgust the paedophile's image provokes, gives an aura of supernatural power to the object of hatred. The horror mystifying paedophilia conceals desires and potentialities that can and should be rescued, unleashed, developed or at least talked about and worked upon. Repression as a concept might conceal the productive side of power, as Foucault convincingly argued, but it also works in a very real sense as a dispositif within a specific mode of subjectivation (cf. Rubin 1984: 277).

Duvert's was an almost desperate attempt to overcome the shame that society would like him to feel unbearably. Thus he showed that if 'paedophilia' is love for children, then everybody should be a 'child-or-teenage-lover'. All the more so if one wants to be a revolutionary, and end the abuses that are perpetrated every day upon an oppressed and silenced humanity. On the one hand, the 'paedophile' Duvet speaks of oppressed childhood, and on the other he talks about his own oppression, about the impossibility for the emotional subjectivity of child-lovers to flourish, especially if not wealthy and/or not aligned to the bourgeois logics of the libidinal market. Duvert the child-lover offers the vivid, bleeding outline of a subjectivity struggling for its own emergence.

Duvert's case seems to expose an aspect of struggles for sexual self-determination that should not be underestimated: the fact that, when we claim the revolutionary efficacy of our desire to be-come, struggling subjectivities are not free from 'rubble', as Duvert's resentment reveals. At any rate, it appears as if in order to obtain the recognition of other sexualities, for a long time LGBTQ movements for the most part have avoided dealing with the thorniest of issues – that which would have led to open confrontation, arousing blind media aggression and, once more, casting upon queer sexualities the stigma of depravation and perversion, from which they have been trying to liberate themselves. In the end, however we may look at it, the issue of 'paedophilia' involves queer, feminist and LGBT movements not only theoretically, but also historically.

On a parallel, Duvert's polemic and sharp invectives also had the merit of keeping the issue of sexuality closely tied to that of class and capitalism as central to processes of subjection and oppression – another somewhat controversial issue for queer movements today. This is a significant elision in many analyses as much as in praxis, which should give

us pause and lead us to question the extent to which our struggles for freedom may be founded on privilege, and enable us, in keeping with our aims, to make difference productive rather than exclusive.

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Queering the box(e)

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Abstract: this analysis starts with an ethnographic research (participant observation as a data collection method) that aims to compare two types of boxing gyms: a "commercial" gym (a gym that does not prepare a competitive level athletes but offers a fee based courses) and a "community" gym (usually in occupied spaces, often for free and it is based on shared values among athletes such as anti-fascism, anti-racism, anti-sexism and anti-ableism). The purpose of this part of the research is to investigate the construction of masculinity and femininity through the exercise of this discipline that is traditionally considered a masculine one in the two different contexts. The second part of the research will focus on the specificity of the "community" boxing gyms that are spreading more and more in recent years in Italy and that are forming a national network redefining the lines of this sport. In particular, the aspect on which we will focus is the discussion on the categories of masculine and feminine in the matches. The proposal is to form the sports categories according to different parameters from those of biological sex and gender, in this particular case based on weight and height. This because biological sex does not necessarily match the gender and these are not binary. Unhinging these binaries would allow on the one side to avoid the medicalization practices still provided by IALF and by the CIO to bring certain bodies through the exercise of this discipline that is traditionally considered a masculine one the two categories (we refer here to the cases of intersex people undergo mandatory to hormonal treatments to confirm their competition category) and on the other to untie the sports categories from those gender. Can "community" gyms change the rules of the sport? What is the relationship between sports categories and gender categories in the broadest sense? Does seconstructing the first have an effect on the latter?

Keywords: queer theory in sports; boxe; bodies; masculinity; femininity.

Introduction

This analysis starts with an ethnographic research that aims to compare two types of boxing gyms: the first is a so called "commercial gym" (a gym that does not prepare competitive level athletes but offers lessons at a fee), the second is a "community gym" (usually an occupied space that often offers free training to athletes who share common values such as anti-fascism, anti-racism, anti-sexism and anti-ableism).

To begin with, I will try to give a definition of these two types of gyms and see which are the differences between them.

After a first general definition, I will focus on the issue of gender construction.

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The purpose of this first part of the research is to investigate on the construction of masculinity and femininity in the two different contexts through the exercise of boxing, traditionally considered a masculine discipline. For this reason, studies on masculinity are fundamental in this analysis.

Following the results, in the second part of the research I will focus on the specificity of community boxing gyms that are recently becoming more widespread in Italy whilst also making a national network that redefines the way to practice the sport, including gender perspective.

In particular, the aspect we will concentrate on is the discussion of male and female categories in sports.

The proposal, existent in some cases, is to create sports categories based on different parameters other than biological sex and thus gender, focusing instead on weight and height. Proposed in belief that biological sex does not necessarily match gender and that the two are not binary (Bernini 2010).

Dismantling these boundaries would avoid the medical practices still provided by the IAAF[1] and the IOC[2] aimed at matching an individual with one of the two categories (we refer to cases of intersex individuals which undergo mandatory hormonal treatments to confirm their competition category).[3] This would also divide sports categories from gender

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[1]   The International Association of Athletics Federation was born in 1912 in Stockholm (as International Association of Athletics Federations and it was founded as the world governing body for the sport of track and field athletics. The IAAF was founded "to fulfill the need for a world governing authority, for a competition program, for standardized technical equipment and for a list of official world records" [...] athletics is no longer just about high performance, gold medals and records, but also about "sports for all" and about ensuring that the maximum number of citizens are able to partecipate in athletics". The IAAF has a number of athletic educational program in order Although this it shown a medicalizing attitude toward intersexual people in the past. A new plan has been presented in Durban by the former IAAF vice president, then president of the CIO medical commission Arne Gunnar Gunnarsson Ljundqvist, who stated that there is a rule, in force since 2000, which sets out the possibility of undergo athletes to certain examinations to verify their sex, in case of doubt. Now this rule has been implemented, after some studies made by CIO medical commission, and parameters have been established to determine the hormonal levels necessary to race in the masculine or feminine category. If beyond those levels, athletes need to undergo to some therapies to balance hormones, to *be included* in the *right* category. This is a choice that tries to *normalize* bodies, figure them in categories that somebody has built, rather than create rules based on the reality of existing bodies.

[2]   The International Olympic Commitee. On its website is even declared: "The goal of gender equality is enshrined in the Olympic Charter, which compels the IOC to "encourage and support the promotion of women in sport at all levels". The Women in Sport pages display the IOC's commitment to gender equality in sport.

[3]   Several athletes have been subject to the wrongly called by IAAF "gender tests", with the

categories, focusing instead on the construction of dominant masculinity and femininity.

Can we think of community gyms as places to change the rules of the sport? What is the relationship between sports categories and gender categories in its broadest sense? What effect would deconstructing the first category have on the latter?

Methodology

As already mentioned, the method used to conduct this research was participatory ethnography.

The analyses were conducted from July 2016 to December 2016, period in which I trained twice a week in a commercial gym and 1 to 2 times a week in a community gym.

The first is a neighborhood gym on the northern outskirts of Milan, the second one is a community gym in an occupied space close to the city center.

Since, as we shall see, the community gym does not have a unique definition and every gym is very different (much more than commercial gyms), the training did not take place in a single gym but in 4 gyms that are part of the same network in Milan.

In addition to regular training it was important to partake in other normal aspects of gym use and membership such as discussions in dressing rooms, social dinners or meetings in the case of community gyms.

At an early stage of the research interviews had not yet been conducted since it is at first considered necessary to build relationships of trust with the individuals that take part in the research itself in order to be able to ask personal questions and receive meaningful answers; all the research depends heavily on informants and their acceptance (Satta 2007), their role is not merely passive (Fabietti 2000).

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aim to verify if their sex was masculine or feminine. We say wrongly called because these exams are used to test the sexual belonging through analysis that refer to chromosomal tissue. It would be better to talk about sexual tests, as the investigation is on sex, on the biological structure that concerns hereditary determination of sexuality and that identifies us as male, female or intersexual. These tests don't investigate on gender that, as we will deepen in the next chapter, concern the so called cultural and social aspect of being male or female and it's not verifiable through chromosomal tissue examinations, although sex and gender are equivalent for many. As we will see further, these exams are the expression of a power trying to classify and discipline bodies, as Foucault would say, through medicine.

The definition of the research subject is the result of the negotiation of a theory previously drawn up by the researcher (coming from a philosophical background) on sexual binarism and the survey conducted in gyms.

The devices implemented are the classics of ethnographic research, namely the drafting of field diaries and notes related to everyday life that takes place in and outside the gym.

Along with these methods, extensive literature was utilized, such as magazines, boxing literature, filmography as well as gender studies and queer theory literature.

The methodology was face-to-face direct observation and interaction as a primary analysis tool (Goffman 1969), analyzing the gym like a theater in which the actors' positions are never random.

It is necessary to take into account the positioning of the researcher.

The path and training to become *boxers* allowed us to use our body to better understand what it means to actually be *boxers* and what it means to embody the role of a woman boxer in different gyms.

Knowing the technical details of the physical discipline required in boxing has allowed me to ask questions and discuss with training partners topics such as the body and its sensations, its performance and its performativity.

The feminine gender of the researcher on one hand excluded her from certain areas such as men's dressing rooms, but on the other it has allowed her to view matters from the opposite perspective (Woodwark 2004). My feminine body made me observe even more closely the construction of masculinity especially in its relation with heteronormativity.

As a final methodological question it should be noted that the analysis was conducted with an intersectional perspective, taking in account not only gender as a factor, but equally so class, race and sexual orientation.

The commercial gym

The commercial gym increases its popularity during the Eighties (the same period of its birth), together with the neologism "fitness center", which sums up the idea of an activity that produces better physical shape and well-being; It is thus distinguished from gyms that prepare the athlete for a specific competitive discipline (Sassatelli 2000).

Historically this type of gym can be placed in a historical process whereby the disciplining techniques of the body, linked to the emergence

of national states and liberalism, have spread to areas of recreation and leisure (Foucault 1977).

The body is disciplined through the growth of its capabilities without any form of repression. More so, the disciplining techniques, which also include the heterosexual norm and gender binarism, extend to leisure time (Vigarello 1978). At the beginning, the body disciplining techniques used to have institutional and collective purposes (it concerned for example health, public hygiene, morality), that we could define biopolitical inside the national states. This tendency saw its peak in the totalitarian regimes.

Beside these activities, especially after the fall of totalitarian regimes, other activities were developed with the aim of self entertainment and self enhancement, for example the bodybuilding gyms.

During the Fifties sports were depoliticized, they shifted from being political to individual and finally commercial, although always remaining disciplined. For these reasons the subject of neo-liberalism is willing to pay a price to achieve a "beautiful body", hence it becomes the reward of discipline itself (Turner 1984).

According to the commercialization of disciplining techniques, subjects pay for themselves, and this leads also to the construction of the neoliberal subject.

Some scholars judged the spread of these gyms as a democratization process which involved also women, less involved in sports before, others defined it as a contemporary hedonist mirror, most of them as the spread of body culture. The body, young, thin and firm, efficient and dynamic, became a powerful and very common image of consumerist culture, in which gym and sport are fundamental elements. The "clients" mainly belong but are not limited to the middle class. During research I had the chance to meet people from very different professions, almost all the individuals were however Italian. This context favors the construction of that type of virility, perceived as an "abstract political ideal that marked profoundly for more than a century the languages, images, behaviors of male subjects" and which concerns a "dimension of a social construction of the imaginary that we could define collective, public, normative". This type of virilism is "generically connect to the principles of social hierarchy, gender and race; order and authority; and to an idea of compact strength nationality" (Bellassai 2011: 9-10).

As noted by various scholars, there are in fact a series of rhetorical

strategies that aim to connect masculinity, youth, and national identity. Violating a gender rule, not having a normative masculinity, is tantamount to violating the norm of national identity (Benadusi 2005).

The coach is a key figure: on one hand he has to present all the physical activities as meaningful and customized, on the other he has to promote them to be as accessible as possible to the public.

Group exercises require coaches to reinforce the impression of equality among members, hence the equality between males and females. However, sometimes this equality is perceived both by male and female athletes as forced.

The areas dedicated to the various exercises are defined as areas in which the body loses its sexual connotations and becomes purely a tool, so the male and female body are recognized as equivalent in the physical exercise.

Being now officially eliminated from the training areas, the relevance of the sexual binary code may be re-introduced, like a watermark, in the ancillary interactions regarding the execution of the exercises. These can be loaded with aesthetic and sexual connotations linked to the sphere of seduction according to a heterosexual matrix. If on one side, inside the gym there is an incessant construction of hierarchies of masculinity and boundaries that work to exclude women from male homosocial spaces (as traditionally a boxing gym is), on the other side, the athletes readmit women in this space only as an object of seduction.

The dressing rooms are transformative environments where one's own social role can be summarized before returning to the outside world. In the women's dressing room, the boxers stressed the traits of their femininity through the use of cosmetics and clothing as well as through language and the chosen topics of conversation.

On the other hand, the male changing rooms are experienced as an exclusive space, the background for the construction of masculinity. In this space, masculinity is strengthened by the exchange of jokes about sex and women and confidences between men, which establish and reinforce the alliance between men that allows them to preserve their dominant position.

The community gyms

Community gyms are one of the many activities offered by social centers in Italy, a project inserted in a particular sub-culture which attempts to rethink sports.

The question we are trying to ask is: today, how sport activities affect social order? If we intend this as an "ongoing practical achievement", as Garfinkel defines it (1967), we do understand the importance that many recognized on the *implicit social pedagogy* in sport practice. With this term we refer to a double process undergoing the sport process. Firstly, toward the production of legitimacy of action courses, of representations, of social relations that happens in the situated action contexts. Secondly, the term refers on how sport experience affects others decisions – choices and sense attributions – which build the subject. This leads us to further investigate the relation with reality, the contemporary social and cultural context, and the smaller sport community, in this case represented by the popular gyms. In other words, how the practice of these kind of gyms affect the external world?

Born within the anti-fascist, self-managed and occupational movements, community gyms are interesting projects that not only reflect and ponder the use and the concept of the sport, but also the inclusion of the body in society as a political body that can and must be reasoned upon and recreated.

The phenomenon is not new as it sees its birth in the 70s, related to the expansion of the social left wing movements. What makes a contemporary analysis rather interesting is the current speed and success that these projects are having in the last few years.

Since 2000, inside the squats and housing occupation European movement, gyms have multiplied, in opposition to the "commodification of the cultural consume" *trend*, (Sassatelli 2000), and on the other side in opposition of the growth of neofascist movements, replying to the economic crisis which took place in the last decade.

Starting from concepts of "incorporation" and "habitus", we can see how the activities of community gyms actually unveil a dualistic purpose. Indeed they manage to escape from the logic of normed incorporation by proposing a new form of incorporation.

By offering sports activities at no cost, community gyms manage to non-market sport and succeed at the same time in escaping from the emulation and consumistic logic, thus remaining inserted in a form of incorporation which is completely in line with the ideological position of social centers offering sports activities.

Boxing (together with other similar combat sports) is the key sport through which community gyms create their own identity.

Since boxing is a widely encoded sport (Wacquant 2002), consolidated institutionally and extremely overloaded with narratives, we sought to investigate how boxing is perceived, especially in relation to gender in Milan's community gyms. Is it an alternative to federal boxing clubs or does it reproduce the activities of a federal club? What are the effects of subjectification?

The construction of masculinity in gyms

Starting from the concept of masculinity and gender identity in general we can see how both are constructed inside the two gyms.

Assuming that gender identities are not natural but formatted in the repetition of their gestures (Butler 2006), we can say that trying to be masculine by being bearers of "indicators of masculinity" (Flood 2008) shapes the lives of males by influencing their attitudes and behaviors, whether they adhere to a hegemonic ideal of masculinity or are built in reaction to it. Hegemonic masculinity is the "dominant" way of being human, the most desirable in a given society (Connell 1996) characterized by a decisive heterosexuality and aversion to everything that is feminine or homosexual. In the same manner, on the opposite side, also femininities are constructed (Halberstam 2010).

Because masculinities are socially and culturally constructed, they need contexts to exist; although experienced singularly by individuals they are in fact created and modeled collectively, thus being kept in use in the institution's practices.

Within the debate of critical studies on masculinity, the core concept is "hegemonic masculinity" which describes masculinity not as a natural characteristic, but as a *habitus*, changeable in time and space, and determined by gender relations. Specifically, hegemonic masculinity is something that gives form and legitimacy to a specific hierarchy in which man is placed in a dominant position (Messerschmidt 2012), well known as patriarchy. Therefore, masculinity is understood here as the set of social norms that represents the ideal to which men refer in the construction of their masculinity (Connell 2005). However, it is only one model, one type of possible masculinity, created through the exclusion of all other possible ways of being male (defined as subordinate masculinities). In particular, homosexuality and effeminacy are characteristics that are excluded in the construction of masculinity in general, and in particular, in that achieved through boxing.

Given the role that homosociality and competition have in dominant masculinity, some places are traditionally considered "more masculine" than others (Camoletto e Bertone 2017): the sporting context surely being one of them (Flood 2008).

As emphasized in his research, Messner (1990) says that the analysis of the relationships between social actors allows us to understand the process of the production of genres. In particular, a research concerning the construction of adolescent masculinity through sport shows us the importance of socialization among men. Although boxing training isn't reserved for men only, in many moments (changing rooms, certain exercises) it recreates a homosocial environment.[4]

Certain practices, in fact, serve the construction of hierarchies of masculinity and boundaries that exclude women from male homosocial spaces (Campbell 2000).

In fact, it is not a matter of spaces exclusively reserved to males, but in the gymnasiums, it is a matter of highlighting how there is a priority given to the links between the males and the relationships with subjects belonging to the opposite sex. Building masculinity for men is "Homosocial enactment, in which the performance of manhood is in front of, and granted by, other men" (Flood 2008: 341).

Boxing gyms are environments generally permeated by masculine values – respect, courage, competition, physical strength – claimed inside the gym as if related to a specific gender belonging (Woodward 2004).

Women boxers in the gym are few, and even fewer are those who set foot on the ring.

The male presence that characterizes the gym is considered natural by all its members, unlike the female one which in turn is exceptional and that must be discussed and legitimized (Scandurra and Antonelli 2010), in particular in commercial gyms.

The female body in a boxing gym continues to be perceived as a foreign body, acceptable only if de-feminized, only if it has less accentuated feminine traits and if the female boxer "hits like a man".

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[4]   Very often homosociality is directly related to homophobia, an instrument that serves the construction of the hegemonic and limitless masculinity that marks which relationships between men are legitimate and which are not (Kimmel 1994), what behaviors can athletes have among them? In sport, especially in contact sports such as boxing, it is difficult to understand what kind of physical contact is "allowed" and what is not, how to embrace the opponent at the end of a match and how to say hello when you arrive at the gym.

Particularly in commercial gyms there are continuous displays of manhood seeking gestures to confirm the image of strong men that many young boxers want to give of themselves – talking to each other frequently about women as sexual objects and displaying possessive feelings towards their significant other, particularly in areas outside the gym dedicated to socializing.

During our research we have identified several factors by which masculinity is constructed differently in the two types of gyms:

– The division of space: as we have already mentioned, the dressing rooms have an important role. It is very marked in commercial gyms, on the other hand you can't often find it in the community gyms, also for practical reasons. A first division between genders is thus eliminated, albeit with some reluctance by some women, in particular the very young ones. The absence of dressing rooms also alters the passage between gender role outside of the gym and the one taken during the workout. From a meeting made by the athletes of the community gyms on this subject, it emerged that the mixed dressing room was a path to be faced together. Nobody felt comfortable at first, but it was a common decision to continue on this path. Many women have also perceived it as a path of liberation of their body and their physicality, feeling at that time an athlete and not a sexualized body.

– Clothing: in commercial gyms female and male clothing are extremely coded and functional to highlight their bodies, unlike what happens in community gyms where clothing is rather equal between genders.

– The exercises and *sparring*: in both cases the workout is technically equal for men and women, even the exercise partners that practice boxing are chosen based on height and weight and not based on gender. Only a few phrases said by the coach (always a male) push men to continue the exercises, to "not to give up", whilst instead inviting women not to try too hard. However, talking to athletes, they show that sparring with a person of the opposite sex is not easy: sometimes men make it easier for women, underestimating them. A large part of women prefers to sparring between them because they feel more comfortable. In this problem the coach takes a key role, their task is to encourage the mixed sparring without forcing it.

– Music: an element that is often missing in community gyms, it is al-

ways present in commercial gyms where hard rock music serves to motivate those who are training.

The results of the research show that the construction of dominant masculinity is much more pronounced in commercial gyms. In community gyms, even if it is not entirely absent, there is an attempt to change this trend and make it a subject of reflection. More and more the community gyms reserve spaces for assemblies to address this issue, and debates are organized. On many occasions men have told their experience, they said that these moments of discussion and the practice of a mixed and conscious training, allowed them to see what sexist behaviors were taking place and of which they did not realize. Therefore, they recognize the need for a moment of reflection to build new practices together.

"Social symbolic autonomy" (Thonton 1995) of Boxing practiced in popular gyms compared to federal Boxing cannot be complete. Sport techniques and reference exercises are the ones of official Boxing. Of course the difference lays in the context in which this sport is practiced (Vigarello 1998) and the value position of who trains in the popular gyms. Who enter these gyms has already something in common with regular clients, there are political premises, above similar economical and often social conditions. On the other side there is a big distinction between subjects that attend the gym, with different backgrounds. If it's true that there is a common value system, it's also true that this is discovered during the training. Anti-sexism, for example, is a common value but different aspects, practices, and hints are discovered and elaborated together during the gym session.

Deconstructing categories

The research conducted during workouts in community gyms and during meetings which are regularly carried out by them has therefore shown that there is an awareness of the construction of gender identity in boxing.

For this reason community gyms have questioned the very concept of sport gender category and are currently looking for solutions to undermine these categories in sports and consequently in society.

Some authors and scholars who have dealt with the inclusion of intersex people in sports categories have already started a few years ago (following the imposition of hormone treatments on the part of the IOC and IAAF to

intersex athletes who had to fall into the male or female category) to think about alternative solutions.

A project by Prof. Stefano Scarpa seems to propose possible and viable solutions to this problem (Scarpa 2012), and one in particular is close to what community gyms would like to adopt.

This contemplates that the categories should be organized according to sports standards regardless of gender, thus destroying traditional sports categories (Virgili 2012).

This solution seems to somehow be in line also with the reflections of the American philosopher Judith Butler.

The scholar published an interesting article entitled *Wise Distinctions* on the LRB blog the day after the IAAF's decision not to give the gold medal to the intersex athlete Caster Semenya. In the article she claims to be happy with the decision taken by the federation, a decision that in principle has supported the need to separate the issue of the athlete's true sex, which is to be decided in a definitive way, from the one more closely linked to the category in which to compete. A decision, says Butler, which honors the complexity and vulnerability of a person. At the same time she reiterates that gender is linked more to cultural representation and society than to sex, which is perceived as a biological fact.

Butler says in her article, and we agree, that the issue of sports sexual categories must be kept separate from those of a person's gender. In short, the characteristics to belong to a certain category should be based on sports standards inherent to physical capability, which in the case of boxing may be weight and height.

The community gyms put these practices into action on a daily basis during workouts, as well as organizing mixed gender matches (always within their circuit). The idea of the mixed meeting initially encountered many difficulties within the community gym: the first concerns the real effectiveness of categories based on weight, height, experience; the second concerns the non-explicit fear of the male athlete of being defeated by a woman or the risk that a man would hold back in order to not hurt the female opponent, starting from the prejudice that a woman athlete is weaker.

Starting from this problem, also the concept of victory has been questioned. The problem remains the lack of female athletes who want to get in the ring, despite the fact that the number of women at workouts is consistent. This is a problem they are thinking a lot about: what is still hindering

women? Women athletes often think they have to be good "at least as much as a male" to get in the ring, they feel a lot of pressure to have to prove something. Many female athletes attribute they reticence to combat to their personal disposition (shyness, fear), while this position is socially built. Women are socially accustomed to a role, not as protagonists and society expects them to be less aggressive and less competitive. To this is added a practical question that many athletes underline: the care work that they often have to deal with does not allow them the necessary constancy of training.

The thesis brought forward is that the deconstruction of sports categories does not only affect sports.

On one hand, those who practice sports in this manner begin to incorporate gender in a different way inside and outside of the gym, on the other hand, public matches held in this fashion contribute to a different, non-normative perception of masculinity and femininity.

The question still non replied concerns to what extent the practices conducted at the popular gyms succeed affect society outside of them.

Although the construction of the hegemonic masculinity seems to have permeated much of the analysis carried out here, the practices put in place in community gyms leave other possibilities open: multiple forms of masculinity. As Anderson (2010) argues, the socially legitimate forms of masculinity are changing to the detriment of hegemonic masculinity as we have known so far. More "inclusive" forms of masculinity are emerging that foresee behaviors that until now had been excluded from the norm. Different types of masculinity can coexist, even if a hierarchy persists, especially in certain areas. In the commercial gyms it is certainly not possible to say that all types of masculinity are experienced in the same way, in fact they remain subordinate masculinities.

Is it enough that there may be different types of masculinity and that these do not crush us or should there not be masculinity (and femininity) at all? Deconstructing categories, starting with sport, means having as many categories as possible or not having them at all?

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Voci aliene

Viaggio di un uomo trans del XX secolo nell'estetica degli evirati cantori

Egon Botteghi

Abstract: Per volontà di Sisto V, alla fine del cinquecento, fu proibito alle donne in tutto le Stato Pontificio di esibirsi nei teatri e di cantare durante le funzioni liturgiche. Per quasi tre secoli la scena bel cantistica italiana fu dominata quindi dagli evirati cantori, uomini *cisgender* che venivano castrati prima della muta della voce, in modo da mantenere la loro capacità di cantare nel registro acuto, sopperendo alla mancanza delle donne sui palcoscenici e nelle chiese. Sebbene in questa pratica non ci fosse la volontà di creare un terzo sesso, il grandissimo successo di questi cantanti, oltre che alle indubbie capacità vocali, era fortemente legato al perturbamento di genere che provocavano nel pubblico. In questo lavoro mi prefiggo, attraverso il mio particolare sguardo di uomo transessuale, attivista, studioso e cantante per diletto del repertorio barocco, di far emergere i punti di convergenza tra la fruizione della voce e dei corpi dei cantori con quelli delle persone transessuali del nostro tempo e di riflettere su alcune questioni di genere in musica, basandomi anche sulla questione di chi si ritiene oggi l'erede di questi artisti quasi mitologici.

Keywords: music; Baroque; gender issues; castrati; transgender.

1. Molti storici indicano l'inizio della diffusione della castrazione a *scopo canoro* con il papa Sisto V, che alla fine del cinquecento proibì alle donne di cantare in chiesa e di esibirsi nei teatri nello stato pontificio, interpretando quanto scritto da San Paolo nella prima lettera ai Corinzi (San Paolo 14, 33-35). In effetti Sisto V stabilì nel 1588 la presenza nella Cappella musicale pontificia di castrati spagnoli[1] e dieci anni dopo i primi due soprani italiani, Pietro Paolo Folignate e Girolamo Rossini, sono registrati nell'istituzione. Ricostruire le vicende storiche e le origini di tale diffusione in Europa non è semplice per chi lo voglia fare al di là dell'aneddotica, avendo i castrati costituito per lungo tempo una vergogna: "un numero consistente di bambini sono stati castrati non in un altro continente e non in chissà quale tempo antico, ma in Europa, nel cuore della cristianità ed all'inizio della modernità" (Rosselli 1998).

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[1] Nel 1588 con la bolla *Cum pro nostri temporale munere* Sisto V riorganizzò il coro di S. Pietro allo scopo di ammettere castrati nelle sue fila

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Da sempre c'è stata la tendenza a considerare il castrato come qualcosa di esotico, che viene da lontano, della cui barbara mutilazione qualcun altro si può incolpare:

> ogni tradizione d'Occidente, a partire dalla Grecia e fino alla discendenza moza-rabica dei castrati della cappella, ne vede collocata la creazione in luoghi remoti da quello in cui si registra la loro presenza, per cui a tutti gli effetti nel mondo classico essi furono simbolo di una corruzione dei costumi squisitamente orientale (Scarlini 2008: 22).

Significativa la descrizione che nelle *Storie* ne fa Ammiano Marcellino (IV secolo d.C.) affermando che:

> vedendo questa schiera di *mutilati* maledirà la memoria di Semiramide (l'antica regina), la prima a castrare i maschi in giovane età, come per far violenza alla natura.

Quale migliore combinazione di maleficio: orientale, contro natura e donna!

In questa "geografia della discolpa" (Finucci 2003) gli Italiani stessi *alterizzarono* questa pratica, considerandola un'usanza orientale approdata in Italia attraverso gli Spagnoli, che a loro volta l'avevano *ereditata* dalla dominazione dei *mori*. Divenendo quindi l'Italia il centro di produzione e di formazione di cantanti castrati, ogni provincia italiana indicava in un'altra il luogo dove la castrazione effettivamente veniva praticata.[2]

Nel nostro paese saranno infatti la commedia e l'opera buffa ad accogliere la descrizione della figura del castrato, in chiave esplicitamente farsesca:

> Si tratta di un coro, di un peana: tutti sono d'accordo che in sostanza si tratti di una figura ridicola per molti aspetti, fuori luogo quasi sempre, tutti gli attribuiscono tratti di freddezza, di distacco, di una sfrenata mania per il pettegolezzo e per il complotto, un infantilismo irrimediabile (Scarlini 2008: 28).

La pietra di paragone del disprezzo è rappresentata da un accostamento continuo all'animale, da un *animalizzazione* programmata verso gli evirati cantori:

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[2]   Burney, storico della musica italiana, racconta di un viaggiatore inglese che voleva raccogliere informazioni sui centri dove si praticasse la castrazione: a Milano gli dissero di andare a Venezia ed a Venezia lo indirizzarono verso Bologna. Una volta a Bologna lo mandarono a Firenze e da Firenze a Roma dove gli dissero che le operazioni si facevano a Napoli. Tutto ciò lo spinse ad annotare nel suo diario che, con ogni evenienza, la castrazione, oltre ad essere contro natura era anche contro la legge e che gli italiani se ne vergognavano a tal punto che ogni provincia ne addossava la responsabilità a quelli di un'altra (cfr. Burney 1987).

lo stigma sociale è dato, spesso, dal ricorso ad attributi tratti dal regno animale, in un fiorire di paragoni avicoli di vario genere, ma comunque sempre umilianti (dal cappone all'usignolo) laddove il sostantivo *animale* è assai spesso utilizzato a indicare l'irragionevolezza e di nuovo l'infantilismo degli evirati cantori (Scarlini 2008: 19).

Il pubblico, che nel teatro andava il visibilio per i loro trilli e gorgheggi, nella vita quotidiana li discriminava e li emarginava in quanto diversi. I musici cantori erano spesso oggetto di satire e caricature, scherniti e chiamati con disprezzo *capponi, eunuchi, puttini, manierati, storpiati, castroni, coglioni e spadoni* (Sole 2008: 26-27).

I castrati provocavano reazioni omofobiche ed erano vittime di abusi (fisici, psicologici e verbali), chiamati *evirati, non integri* e con vari appellativi di origine animali (Finucci 2003: 250).

Interessante è per me registrare come alcuni di questi termini spregiativi siano ancora oggi utilizzati in Italia per indicare ed apostrofare le donne transessuali.

Non è quindi un caso che nell'opera che è considerata una delle testimonianze simbolo degli usi e costumi del Settecento italiano, l'autobiografia di Casanova, l'autore parli dei castrati come di un "miserabile rifiuto della società o piuttosto una sciagurata vittima di usanze crudeli".

Gli esempi di descrizione grottesche nella nostra letteratura, e nella musica stessa, si sprecano; Scarlatti ha musicato un libretto satirico di Girolamo Gigli *Dirindina o il maestro di cappella,* dove tutto è giocato sull'equivoco di un improbabile unione tra un' alunna di canto dello svampito maestro di musica don Carissimo ed un castrato, chiamato non a caso Liscione.

Quando il maestro di musica, travisando assolutamente una scena che crede di aver visto e pensando che la sua alunna sia incinta di Liscione, propone ai due un matrimonio riparatore, questi gli rispondono in duetto:

Dirindina: Ferma ch'io son pollastrina, ma tal coppia non combina, e l'uovo mai non fa.
Liscione: Ferma, ch'io son cappone ma tal coppia non combina e l'uovo mai non fa.[3]

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[3]   *La Dirindina*, Intermezzi per Musica, libretto di Girolamo Gigli, musiche di Domenico Scarlatti, prima esecuzione 1715, Roma

Un altro grandissimo compositore dell'epoca, Benedetto Marcello, ironizzò sull'argomento. Nel *Lamento dei Castrati*, nella prefazione all'esecuzione, scrive:

> Il primo madrigale si canta da Tenori e bassi, li quali annunziano à Castrati una disgrazia terribilissima. Questi nel sentire il fatale decreto, prima di intenderne la ragione, interrompono con note acutissime [...] alludire poi la ragione evangelica per la quale devono ardere nel foco eterno, non fanno che strillare AHI AHI, quasi che allora si trovassero tra le fiamme, overo in quel punto restassero stesticolati; alludendosi con le due semibrevi degli Alti alli testicoli appunto ch'hanno perduti.[4]

In un altro *Lamento del castrato,*[5] questa volta anonimo, un castrato difende la sua *ars amandi* dalle altrui e diffuse accuse di impotenza, cantando in registro sopranile un susseguirsi di allusioni sul fatto che, proprio perché privato dei testicoli, il fallo accresce la propria potenza e diventa più desiderabile, mettendo al sicuro da gravidanze indesiderate.

D'altronde non manca l'autoironia da parte degli stessi protagonisti, che spesso parlano della loro condizione giocando sullo stesso registro dei loro detrattori e della società che dileggiava la loro menomazione.

Il castrato Filippo Balatri (1676-1756), attivo presso la corte dei Medici, nelle sue preziose memorie, così spiegava la sua origine al Khan dei Camalucchi, sciorinando una sequela di interessantissime metafore su galli/uomini, i norcini, capaci di generare e su uova/capponi:

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[4]   Segue il testo del madrigale: "No che lassù ne Chori ali beati non entrano i Castarti!
        Perchè è scritto in loco:
        -Dite dite, che è scritto mai?-
        Arbor che non fa frutto arda nel focolaio-Ahi, ahi"
        Lamenti Barocchi, 1995, Vol. 2, Solisti della Cappella Musicale di S. Petronio, direzione Sergio Vartolo, Naxos.
[5]   "Qaundo tal'hor mi discopro amante d'un femminil sembiante, tal'un si move al riso e ciascun veder ch'io non ho pelo in viso, mi tiene per un inerme ed impotente, e prende sovente a diri così di me: 'Quest'è l'amante, ohibò! E che giammai far può quando arrivi all'amoroso amplesso privo delle due parti di se stesso?'. Così ciascun si crede che nel regno di Amor fabbricar la mia fortuna indarno tenti mentre non ho strumenti [...] per mia fè non è così. Anzi l'essere non intero fa ch'io valga tanto più, che sta nel mezzo la virtù. Quando tagliansi i ramo di una pianta divien più grosso il tronco. [...] O come diletta a bella ritrosa oprar una chiave sì piena di ingegno ch'apre tutto senza lasciar il segno [...] Ma di sentir già parmi che m'otteggi più d'un ch'in guisa sempre son fiacche e mal temprate l'armi! O falsa opinione! E chi potrà giammai aver arma migliore d'uno spadone? E se dice tal'un ch'io sparo a vuoto, gli rispondo che nel mondo per nascita e per feste e per piacer, sparano senza palle i bombardieri" *Lamenti Barocchi,* cfr. *supra* n2.

Incomincia col farmi domandare
se maschio son o femmina e da dove,
se nasce tale gente (ovvero piove)
con voce ed abilitade per cantare.
Resto imbrogliato allor per dar risposta:
se maschio, dico quasi una bugia,
femmina, men che men dirò ch'io sia,
e dir che son neutral, rossore costa.
Pure, fatto coraggio, al fin rispondo
che son maschio, toscano, e che si trova
galli nelle mie parti che fanno ova,
dalle quali i soprani sono al mondo;
che li galli si nomano norcini
c'ha noi le fan covare per molti giorni
e che, fatto il cappon, son gli uovi adorni
di lusinghe, carezze e quattrini (BALATRI 1921: 70-71).

In un altro punto delle sue memorie Balatri confessa, questa volta senza rossore, di essere neutro e che la società ha reso neutro anche il suo nome, chiamandolo *signora*:

> et essendo io veramente neutro, han reso ermafrodito il mio nome col scrivere sui biglietti che in capo alle liste e ricevute dattemi, Signora, o al più, Signora Philippi (BALATRI 1921: 23).

Balatri combatte sempre il senso di imbarazzo con l'ironia, dicendo di essere un "cappone" che fa rima con "castrone"; non smette di prendersi in giro neanche immaginando l'ora della sua morte, nel suo goliardico testamento, quando prova a descriversi il senso di disgusto, pettegolezzo e morbosa meraviglia che potrebbero avere le suore che ricomporranno il suo cadavere: egli si ritirò infatti in un ordine monastico dopo aver viaggiato in lungo ed in largo l'Europa.

Evidentemente, visto le sue esemplificative esperienze presso la corte medicea, il cantante era ben consapevole di essere considerato un *Freak*.

Fu infatti al servizio del granduca di Toscana, Cosimo III, il quale aveva una grandissima curiosità per l'insolito, e quando mandò il giovane musico in missione diplomatica a S.Pietroburgo si fece spedire in cambio persone di diverse razze, ad alimentare la sua passione di collezionare stranezze e rarità.

Trovo che un'immagine simbolo di questo *milieu* sia il dipinto di

Gabbiani A.D (1652-1726) *Ritratto di tre musicisti alla corte medicea.*

Il quadro infatti racchiude nella stessa cornice tre musicisti (uno dei quali è stato forse identificato con il castrato Francesco Dè Castris) ed un servitore nero con un pappagallo in mano, emblema di esotismo.

I castrati quindi condividono lo stesso spazio, che si offre allo sguardo dei committenti/fruitori, con una persona *razzializzata* ed un animale, dando quindi una chiave di lettura sul loro posto nella società: persone che non sono più totalmente persone avendo perso la loro virilità stanno insieme a persone che non lo sono essendo di altra *razza e* sono entrambe accostate all'animale che simboleggia qual è il piano dell'esistenza e cioè quello sub umano ed al servizio del piacere dell'umano.

Anche grandi musicisti che hanno lavorato, stimandoli, con cantanti castrati, hanno lasciato testimonianze di disprezzo verso questa condizione, appellandosi proprio alla *perdita dell'umanità,* come si può leggere in una lettera di Padre Giovanni Battista Martini, che, scrivendo di un castrato che non aveva fatto un buon lavoro, dice che dimostra l'ignoranza tipica del suo stato, avendo perduto la sua umanità con la castrazione (Martini 1888: 194)

Metastasio, nel suo affettuosissimo carteggio con Carlo Broschi, non è incredibilmente esente da questo doppio registro, facendo battute circa la *castrazione*, la *circoncisione*, scherzando sulla possibilità che il suo corrispondente fosse *incinto* e chiamandolo, anche se in maniera affettuosa: "mostro marino"

> Mostro, *monstrum*, cioè prodigio, qualcosa che esce dal comune, un essere straordinario.

Il castrato era quindi un mostro:

> mostri, che come ricorda Cicerone, si chiamavano così da monstrant, perché ammonivano e mostravano una via da non seguire (Sole 2008: 27)

Il *topos* del mostro è quindi fondamentale per capire la fortuna dei castrati:

> I castrati, i divini castrati, erano considerati metà uomini e metà donna. La loro mostruosità doveva essere confinata, ma allo stesso tempo ostentata, perché avesse una funzione educativa (Sole 2008: 27).

Vi sono molti elementi che ci inducono a pensare che il successo dei castrati non fosse legato tanto alla voce, ma al fatto di essere castrati [...] tutte le società costruite sul genere maschile, in un modo o nell'altro, hanno bisogno di ostentare e rappresentare la castrazione [...] Tutti i maschi vivono nel continuo terrore che la loro virilità possa andare perduta o essere gravemente compromessa. [...] La paura profonda della castrazione è negli individui e nelle società. Le società fondate sulla figura del maschio, vivono un complesso di castrazione che affiora quando viene minacciata l'identità sessuale [...] proteggono il fallo con ogni mezzo a loro disposizione, ma non possono sfuggire alla castrazione, poiché non può essere eliminata per sempre quale problema maschile, perché la sua minaccia sta sempre dietro l'angolo e dalla sua paura non si guarisce (Sole 2008: 26).

Se le strade del tempo erano piene di uomini con genitali incidentati (Finucci 2003: 247-248), questa paura doveva essere molto reale.

La figura dell'evirato cantore serviva a sanzionare il primato maschile su quello femminile, era la testimonianza vivente di chi non si assoggettava all'autorità del padre: il suo corpo e la sua voce rappresentavano una barriera contro il pericolo che il maschio potesse diventare femmina. All'universo che non era maschile veniva lasciato un immenso potere, ma legato alla deformità [...] I castrati mostravano la cupidigia, l'impurità, il disordine. La fase primordiale, dominata dagli istinti e dal caos, non era mai stata superata, in mancanza di regole, l'uomo poteva precipitare in qualsiasi momento. I castrati erano tutto ciò che stava negli abissi pronto a riemergere per avere il sopravvento sul cosmo, rappresentavano il possibile ritorno dell'uomo al disordine, erano la personificazione della lussuria istintiva e insaziabile [...] Mostravano la minaccia di chi poteva mandare in frantumi l'ordine sociale, l'irreparabile rovina a cui andavano incontro coloro che non rispettavano le regole (Sole 2008: 27).

Non si aderisce qui evidentemente all'idea che la fortuna dei castrati sia legata all'importanza della funzione angelica delle loro voci acute,[6] ma piuttosto che

l'ostentazione degli evirati cantori sui sagrati delle chiese o sui palcoscenici rispondeva ad un bisogno ideologico della società di rappresentare la castrazione. L'edificio patriarcale sacrificava alcuni figli e li costringeva a calcare le scene per mostrare che l'integrità degli uomini poteva essere minacciata in qualsiasi momento e che un individuo valeva solo se condivideva gli ideali e le finalità del gruppo.

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[6]   Per un esempio di trattazione sul significato delle voci acute nei componimenti musicali cfr Miller 1995 e Poizat 1986.

Il castrato era funzionale al sistema ma rappresentava anche la ribellione ad ogni forma di regola morale, infrangeva le leggi ed anelava all'indipendenza, rovesciava valori culturali e dava sfogo alle pulsioni inibite, liberava desideri repressi opposti alle norme e ai vincoli sociali. Gli uomini […] da una parte temevano e criminalizzavano i castrati, dall'altra ne erano attratti, perché esprimevano voglie vietate dalla società. Gli evirati cantori apparivano come figure inquietanti e affascinanti, torbide e sublimi, oggetto di desiderio e di scherno. Erano espressione di sessualità, voluttà, passioni e lussuria che si concretizzavano in una dimensione mitica e reale (Sole 2008: 30).

L'autore qui abbondantemente citato racchiude queste riflessioni in un capitolo del suo libro intitolato *Ermafroditi e travestiti*, entrambe parole rifiutate oggi dalla comunità LGBTQI più radicale, ed afferma chiaramente che "gli evirati cantori, antesignani dei moderni travestiti, suscitavano una forte attrazione sessuale" (Sole 2008: 30).

Vi sono altri autori che tracciano questo legame tra erotismo, perturbamento di genere e fortuna dei castrati:

Le continue satire indirizzate alla categoria dei castrati, in sede di narrativa letteraria come di farse metateatrali, il proliferare di aneddoti e motti di spirito sulle potenzialità sessuali di tali giovani sottoposti alla castrazione in età adolescenziale, per impedire che lo sviluppo virile distruggesse l'asessuata voce degli angeli, sono tutti sinonimi di un interesse licenzioso per l'ambiguo e il diverso, di un'attrazione incontrollata e assecondata verso quell'androginia ch'essi incarnavano, cui né donne né uomini sapevano sottrarsi (Beghelli 2000: 132).

Pare una verità troppo spesso taciuta che la fortuna del castrato debba imputarsi in primo luogo alla carica ambigua erotica che questi esprimeva più che alla sua qualità vocale (Daolmi *et al.* 2000).

Tali autori si domandano inoltre se le accuse spessissimo rivolte ai castrati, di fomentare l'amore omosessuale, non fosse "l'operazione più semplice […] di prendere per causa il vizio: ovvero spostare sul castrato il focolaio del vizio, pregiudizio agevolato dalla possibilità di scaricare colpe infamanti su persone che forse non erano più persone" (Daolmi *et al* 2000) in quanto, come abbiamo visto, *animalizzate e reificate* ed in questo senso, a me pare, vicini alle persone trans contemporanee.

Per altri autori invece, i castrati del XVII e XVIII secolo vedevano se stessi come uomini e non come sessualmente ambigui ed *ermafroditi,*

spiegazioni a loro parere diventate popolari in epoche successive.

Erano piuttosto degli uomini che avevano sacrificato qualcosa per acquistare altro:

> rinunciando alla pubertà e alla progenie, i castrati ottenevano la possibilità di acquistare uno squisito livello di competenza musicale ed una altissima specializzazione professionale (Feldman 2015).

Interessante per me notare come Feldman parli di questo sacrificio come una *rinascita* e che ponga gli evirati cantori in una relazione particolare con i loro *creatori* (chirurghi, maestri di musica, protettori), proprio come alcune persone transessuali parlano di *rinascita* una volta intrapreso il percorso di transizione e mantengono un forte legame affettivo nel ricordo dei chirurghi che le hanno operate e delle città dove l'operazione è avvenuta.

Una cosa è però indubbia: la fruizione estetica di questo repertorio è legato al continuo riecheggiare di un genere in un altro e nell'abilità di incarnare questa duplicità senza scioglierla mai del tutto, come vedremo parlando anche della eredità che ci hanno lasciato questi interpreti ormai mitici.

2. Proprio come nella loro vita reale il lascito dei castrati costituiva un dilemma ed una preoccupazione, impossibilitati come erano ad avere una discendenza diretta, così anche la loro eredità artistica deve per forza di cosa incorrere in aggiustamenti e compromessi, non essendoci più un interprete al giorno d'oggi con le loro caratteristiche fisiche.

Il medico e musicologo Gullo (2015) afferma che non possano esistere oggi eredi dei castrati da un punto di vista fisiopatologico.

Secondo la sua descrizione un castrato è per un medico un individuo sano sottoposto in età prepuberale all'ablazione dei testicoli, che comporta un ipogonadismo ed un ipergonatropo permanente.

Il cantante castrato quindi sarebbe stato un soggetto con ipogonadismo indotto in età prepuberale, con il sistema endocrino intatto, selezionato per doti musicali e sottoposto ad un training intensivo fin dall'infanzia: tutte caratteristiche impossibili da trovare, nello stesso tempo, in esecutore moderno.

La loro pubertà sembra non fosse del tutto bloccata ma avveniva dominata dagli androgeni deboli e questo tipo di sviluppo non aveva fine.

Per questo i castrati andavano incontro ad uno scurimento della voce con

l'età e questa loro capacità di cantare anche nel registro grave, possibilità che non sussiste nei bambini, era dovuta al lavoro degli androgeni deboli: durante la pubertà infatti il dimorfismo sessuale della laringe diventa evidente dando scurezza e forza alla voce maschile.

Si chiede allora Fussi, foniatra specializzato nel trattamento dei cantanti, se

> quella del castrato era forse l'unione di tre voci in una? È forse per questo che nell'unica registrazione a noi pervenuta di un castrato, il Moreschi, oltre una più ampia gamma di colori e volumi rispetto al falsettista odierno percepiamo un imbarazzante ma netto scivolamento tra registri o modalità fonatorie diverse? Cosa che invece non notiamo nella più modesta (a livello di volume e ricchezza armonica) ma più timbricamente omogenea (fino ad apparirci noiosa ed incolore) voce del falsettista. [...] Nell'antico simbolismo di Pitagora l'ermafrodito è un tre: il tre unisce dunque l'arte di fondere l'uno e l'altro, e così pure le frequenze acute della voce sopranile ai toni gravi dello speech maschile. Per i seguaci d'Orfeo, l'ermafrodito era l'inizio delle cose e poteva risolvere le dicotomie (Fussi s.a.).

Queste premesse sono importanti per capire chi oggi si contende, e perché, l'eredità esecutiva dei musici, proprio come immaginava il castrato Balatri nelle incessanti caricature di se stesso, descrivendosi come un maiale, quindi una volta di più *animalizzato*, disprezzato e scansato in vita, a cui nessuno dispensa cure e carezze, ma che acquista valore appena morto, di cui ogni pezzo ha un prezzo e sulle cui carni tutti si avventano.

Cosa per me interessante è che, grazie alla ripresa di questo repertorio, un campo come la musica, che si tende a ritenere universale e s*uper partes*, possa essere largamente interrogato sulle questioni di genere e della sua performatività.

Il progressivo declino dei castrati iniziò dalla metà del 1700.

Le critiche verso la loro *mostruosità*, verso la loro inaccettabile mutilazione, verso il loro strapotere sulla musica del tempo, verso la loro presunta omosessualità e quella dei loro estimatori, si fecero sempre più insistenti.

Da un certo momento in poi i castrati cominciarono a diventare uno dei simboli della *vergogna patria,* l'emblema della mancanza di carattere degli italiani e della loro *effeminatezza*, dove *effeminatezza* aveva il senso di *mollezza*, eccessiva attenzione all'interesse personale e assenza di attenzione per l'interesse collettivo e scarsezza di spirito di sacrificio (Chiappini 2012).

Quindi per mettere in scena le opere barocche, scomparsi i musici

evirati, una delle soluzioni adottate dagli esecutori fu quella di affidare i ruoli principali che erano stati ricoperti dai castrati alle donne, contralto o mezzo soprano *en travesti*, oppure affidarle a uomini *integri* che cantavano in falsetto.

L'altra soluzione poteva essere quella di trasportare la scrittura delle parti dei castrati e riadattarli al ruolo del tenore, cosa che da alcuni musicologi venne e viene considerata sensata, in quanto i grandi compositori di allora scrivevano sui cantanti che avevano a disposizione.

Questa seconda soluzione viene però oggi osteggiata dalla maggior parte dei musicologi, registri e direttori, proprio perché depotenzia il senso di meraviglia e ambiguità di genere tipico dell'opera barocca ed essendo anche la meno corretta filologicamente, dal momento che al tempo in cui quelle opere vennero scritte, quando la produzione non si poteva permettere l'alto costo di un cantante castrato, si ripiegava solitamente su una donna o su di un falsettista.

La partita si gioca quindi essenzialmente tra le donne e i controtenori, che si sono conquistando un ruolo di primissimo piano in questo tipo di esecuzioni, proprio perché ritenuti filologicamente più adatti ad incarnare la fascinazione di un perturbamento di genere.

Noto come ci sia una sorta di *guerra di genere* tra cantanti donne e cantati uomini per accaparrarsi i ruoli che furono dei castrati, e che questa *guerra* si giochi con le armi dell'*ambiguità* vocale e fisica, oltre che sulle doti interpretative, giocando con la *meraviglia* e il *perturbamento* nel pubblico.

Noto inoltre come le cantanti donne sembrano riflettere apertamente, più dei loro colleghi, sulle implicazioni *queer* di queste loro interpretazioni, di come questo loro interpretare sulla scena ruoli del genere *opposto,* costruisca anche il loro modo di vedere il genere e dica qualcosa sulla *performatività* del genere stesso anche nella vita di tutti in giorni.

Il mezzosoprano italiano Cecilia Bartoli, una delle indiscusse protagoniste contemporanee a livello mondiale della interpretazione del canto di bravura ed agilità che fu dei castrati, nel suo cd *Sacrificium* (2009) rende omaggio proprio a tali cantanti, alludendo sin dal titolo alla loro *perdita per avere* e sceglie una immagine di copertina molto ambigua, un fotomontaggio dove il suo viso è prestato ad una antica statua romana chiaramente virile ma mutilata.

Bartoli ha percorso da allora questa strada fino a cantare il ruolo che da il nome all'opera di Händel *Ariodante,* a Salisburgo nel 2017, presentandosi

con un ampio vestito da donna e con una fluente barba, in una *mise* che molti hanno accostato a Conchita Wurst, ma che evidentemente viene da molto più lontano.

Sarah Connely, importante interprete händeliana, anche lei mezzosoprano, gioca apertamente con la costruzione del genere di tipo butleriano, nella scelta della copertina del suo cd *Heroes and Heroines* (2004).

Interpretando infatti sia ruoli femminili che maschili, così come facevano anche i castrati, Connelly si fa ritrarre in copertina mentre si specchia come donna ed il riflesso che le viene rimandato è della stessa persona ma dall'apparire fieramente maschile, riflesso che non guarda la sua immagine speculare femminile, ma fissa direttamente lo spettatore, con occhi gagliardi.

Interessante che chi ha scelto questa posa abbia reso la parte femminile trasognante e persa nella sua immagine maschile, quasi innamorata di quel che vede, mentre la parte maschile la ignora e guarda direttamente chi la sta guardando.

Altre importantissime mezzo soprano e contralto italiane, interpreti rossiniane e händeliane, come Daniela Barcellona e Sonia Prina, in alcune loro interviste facilmente reperibili nella rete, parlano chiaramente di quello che ha significato per loro interpretare ruoli maschili, di come questo le abbia portate a riflettere sulla performatività del genere, su come abbiano scoperto come vestire il maschile e sui privilegi che questa vestizione comporta.

Alice Coote, famosissimo mezzosoprano britannico, ha riflettuto moltissimo sul *gender bender* tipico del suo lavoro, lei che è specializzata nei ruoli degli eroi barocchi e si è consapevolmente avvicinata alla teoria della costruzione del genere e della realtà transessuale.

Nel 2015 ha rilasciato per *The Guardian* un'intervista coraggiosamente intitolata *My life as a man* in cui dice di passare molte sere a settimana fasciandosi il petto, vestendosi come un uomo, amoreggiando con altre donne, tutto ciò mentre canta atleticamente musica elaborata e senza microfono e davanti a centinaia di persone. Se togliamo la musica e le gente che guarda (forse non per tutti) potrebbe essere il ritratto di un FtM a cui piacciono le donne e che è evidentemente ricambiato.

Coote confessa di aver fatto una minuziosa opera di *kinging*, lunga decenni, in cui ha dovuto separare la mente dal corpo e immaginarsi di un genere differente, con diversa struttura, sensazioni, qualità e desideri.

Ha dovuto cambiare il suo modo di stare nello spazio e di muoversi in esso.

Si è resa conto che quando canta da *uomo* la qualità del suo tono e del suo fraseggio è diversa rispetto a quando interpreta ruoli femminili.

E quando finisce di lavorare, si toglie il costume e torna a casa e torna nel suo genere, "è veramente capace di farlo?" si domanda.

Più di una volta, dice, ha sbagliato bagno e si è infilata in quello degli uomini! (ah, la questione del bagno, tanto presente nella vita delle persone trans).

Come le persone che transizionano devono contrattare a quale livello di femminilità e maschilità aderire, così anche lei, a seconda del ruolo e della produzione, sceglie che tipo di uomo vuole impersonare.

Nonostante questo *kinging* consapevole, Coote dice di non tollerare e non accettare quando un regista vorrebbe che indossasse un *packer* sotto il costume per rendere il suo uomo più maschio, considerando l'uso di tale protesi offensivo per la sua parte maschile.

Nella sua esperienza si è accorta personalmente di come il *gender-bender* sessualizzi il cantante, avendo ricevuto molte forme di apprezzamento erotico, specialmente da donne e da uomini gay.

Alla fine Coote si domanda in cosa consista la sua femminilità: quando è sola si definisce come donna o piuttosto come un essere più neutro? Il suo corpo biologicamente femminile può definire la sua identità?

Dopo due decenni di *kinging* Coote si sente di rispondere negativamente, percependo che la parte più reale di sé risiede in uno spazio non limitato dai concetti binari e che ci rende sia uomini che donne. Per cui dice che è per lei un privilegio ed una gioia uscire dal suo genere e lasciare che la parte neutrale di se canti (Coote 2015).

La stessa propensione a parlare di travestitismo, ruoli di genere, performatività, transessualità non l'ho riscontrata con egual facilità negli interpreti maschi.

Nonostante i controtenori siano consapevolmente scelti per interpretare le opere barocche anche a causa dell'ambiguità di genere che rievocano, c'è spesso la tendenza a tacere questo aspetto e mettere in rilevanza solo le qualità vocali, quasi si volesse fuggire al fantasma dell'omosessualità e della castrazione: l'associazione tra la voce acuta nel maschio e la castrazione, la non virilità e la non eterosessualità è infatti ancora oggi temuta, se un controtenore professionista mi rivela che alcuni suoi colleghi durante

tournée internazionali si affannano a presentarsi con mogli e figli onde dissipare qualsiasi dubbio!

Uno dei più grandi controtenori in attività, Franco Fagioli, ad una domanda diretta sull'argomento e cioè su come si possa cantare con voce femminile questi eroi barocchi, con una forte dose di androginia, risponde che quando canta non pensa all'ambiguità del ruolo, e che interpreta soltanto, senza nessun concetto in testa, ribadendo un' idea di musica disincarnata ed in ascolto solo di se stessa. Anche se dice di rendersi conto dell'effetto perturbante dell'androginia sul pubblico, per lui solo la musica è importante e di questo parla nelle sue interviste, senza investigare il genere come invece fanno molte sue college donne (CHIAPPARA 2013).

Eppure, essendo un esperto del repertorio, sa benissimo che al tempo dei castrati non era tanto importante l'omogeneità vocale come nel gusto di oggi, anzi quello che veniva percepito come interessante era proprio sentire la diversità della voce, gli incredibili sbalzi di registro, le famose tre voci in una di cui parla il foniatra Fussi.

E di questo tra l'altro Fagioli è un interprete straordinario, di cui si possono ascoltare innumerevoli esempi, come nella cadenza di *Spesso di nubi cinto* tratto da *Carlo il Calvo* del maestro Porpora.[7]

Fagioli tra l'altro non ama definirsi controtenore, ma piuttosto mezzosoprano uomo, compiendo uno notevole salto tra i generi dal momento che, dal XX secolo fino ai nostri giorni, il mezzosoprano doveva essere intrinsecamente una donna. Di più, chiede ai registi di fare lo sforzo di andare al di là dei generi e di scritturare mezzosoprani uomini per ruoli che erano stati scritti per donne *en travesti*.

Nonostante quindi alcuni controtenori, o come alcuni di loro preferiscono definirsi mezzosoprano uomo o soprano uomo, vogliano allontanare lo spettro di questa ambiguità sessuale descrivendo le loro voci come legate alla fanciullezza, come una continuità mai interrotta dalla muta vocale con il loro modo di cantare da bambini, oppure narrando l'inizio della loro carriera come falsettisti legata ad uno scherzo, ad una goliardica imitazione di voci acute, c'è anche chi non esita a dichiararsi il diretto discendente dei castrati, per delle peculiarità fisiche che hanno impedito il normale cambiamento della voce.

Ed è forse contro queste pretese che si scaglia il medico Gullo, dichiarando,

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7   Fagioli F., *Il maestro Porpora,* Accademia Montis Regalis, Alessandro De Marchi, 2014, Näive.

come abbiamo visto, che non possono esistere al giorno d'oggi individui che possano pensarsi come i castrati.

Radu Marian, per esempio, sopranista o meglio soprano uomo, si considera un castrato naturale o endocrinologico, in quanto, a causa di un particolare assetto cromosomico, non ha avuto la muta vocale. E' interessante il fatto che, una condizione che solitamente è purtroppo vissuta con imbarazzo, venga qui orgogliosamente ostentata a fini artistici, per accampare più diritti sull'eredità dei castrati.

Un altro sopranista di talento, Michael Maniaci, dice di non aver avuto la muta vocale per un nervo paralizzato (ma ci tiene a chiarire che per il resto è un maschio sanissimo).

Tra i controtenori più giovani troviamo però esempi come Kangin Justin Kim, dotato di una androginia straordinaria, che gioca invece apertamente sullo scambio dei generi, dando vita ad una di quelle trasformazioni al quadrato che tanto erano amate dal pubblico barocco.

Costruendo infatti il personaggio di Kimchilia Bartoli, e caricando su YouTube dei video dove ironizza sulle interpretazioni di Cecilia Bartoli, cantando con maestria un'aria di agilità, sembra proprio chiudere il cerchio, in uno spassosissimo giochi di specchi.

Ma il paludato mondo dell'opera, si sta aprendo pian piano anche a chi i generi li ha attraversati anche nella vita reale.

Emily di Salvo, per esempio, è stata la prima donna transessuale ad essere ammessa ad un conservatorio italiano, nel 2007 a Lecce.

Esclusa al primo tentativo perché non avrebbero saputo, lei con voce baritonale e presentazione femminile, come classificarla, è stata ammessa tre anni dopo, presentandosi questa volta con voce da controtenore (e quindi più collocabile).

Interessante è anche la storia di Holden Madagame, cha ha transizionato da donna a uomo, da mezzo soprano a tenore, e che si sta costruendo una promettente carriera di cantante d'opera facendo del suo lavoro anche una modalità di rivendicazione per i diritti delle persone trans.

Esempio di cantante d'opera transgender già affermata a livello internazionale lo troviamo nella statunitense Tona Brown, mezzosoprano e violinista, che è stata la prima donna di colore transgender ad esibirsi, nel 2014, nella prestigiosa Carnegie Hall.

Non è detto comunque che l'eredità dei cantanti castrati dell'epoca barocca debba essere necessariamente spartita tra gli esponenti del registro

aulico della musica classica e non debba invece essere cercato anche ad un livello di musica *pop.*

I castrati furono infatti un fenomeno molto popolare al loro tempo, anche se legati all'ideologia della classe dominante.

Ernesto Tomasini, cantante di cabaret che canta sfruttando una estensione di tre ottave e giocando con tutti i colori della sua voce, nativo di Palermo ma *emigrato* a Londra da vent'anni e *performer* famoso in tutto il mondo, paragona il teatro del settecento, dove la gente andava per ascoltare i *divi* del momento, ma anche per mangiare, parlare, giocare, all'odierno cabaret, e considera se stesso legato alla figura del castrato, ma un castrato di un livello professionale più basso, di quelli che si racconta finissero a cantare nei bordelli.

La sua voce acuta, però, vuole essere allo stesso momento la rivendicazione di una appartenenza al maschile: il falsetto per lui è una voce assolutamente maschile, che da la possibilità di interpretare una maschilità alternativa rispetto allo stereotipo del maschio aggressivo e testosteronico.

Interpellato spesso sull'eredità dei castrati, anche lui indica, accanto ai moderni controtenori, gli esponenti della musica pop, che vanno da Sylvester, che ha usato l'ambiguità della voce acuta in un uomo per affermare delle rivendicazioni, attraverso la musica disco, per le persone LGBTQI, a Micheal Jackson, divo dalla fisicità straniante come i castrati e amico, come loro, di regnanti e potenti.

In questa carrellata che potrebbe essere infinita, mi piace terminare ricordando una figura che portò alle estreme conseguenze l'idea del castrato come voce aliena e che fu Klaus Nomi (Klaus Sperber), falsettista, *performer* e cantante di musica synth-pop.

Nel 1981 creò una interpretazione indimenticabile di un'aria di Purcell T*he Cold song,* rendendola famosa anche al pubblico pop, area che in realtà è scritta per basso-baritono, ma che Klaus rese perfettamente trasportandola nel registro acuto di falsetto e con il quale ci ha portato "nel mondo astratto dei falsettisti, dell'anarchismo performativo di un piccolo robot asessuato, canterino di un crepuscolare post-rococò" (Di Vincenzi 2014: 73).

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Performare la specie

Animal drag, eteronormatività, riconoscimento

Marco Reggio

Abstract: In the novel *Birdy*, William Wharton tells the story of a boy who wants to become a bird. The process of building a non-human subjectivity on the part of the protagonist can be explored through some conceptual tools attributable to queer theory, in particular that of "performativity" developed by Judith Butler. These theoretical constructs will be reviewed in relation to the construction of the species binarism ("performativity of species", "animal drag", etc.) and the processes through which the human and non-human identity, and their relationships, emerge. The reinterpretation of *Birdy* will consider the fluctuation between failure and success of parody, between subversion and reinforcement of hegemonic norms of human exceptionalism. The destabilization of species boundaries cannot be undertaken individually: this fact highlights the role of animal agency and the relational feature of the transition as process developing around the recognition of a non-human subject. Taking into account the intersection of species and gender matrixes – the protagonist embodies a particular type of resistance against heteronormativity –, I will try to investigate the conditions under which it is possible to speak of animality as an "action" rather than as an "essence" or an "attribute".

1. Introduzione

Nel romanzo di William Wharton *Birdy* (1978), noto soprattutto per la trasposizione cinematografica di Alan Parker (1984), l'omonimo protagonista è ossessionato dall'idea di apprendere a volare e, successivamente, dal proposito di diventare un uccello ("Birdy" – "uccellino" – è in realtà il soprannome che tutti utilizzano: questo aspetto sarà discusso oltre, in relazione al tema del riconoscimento). I suoi tentativi di trasformazione del corpo e della psiche costituiscono l'elemento centrale della sua adolescenza, vissuta nella provincia statunitense accanto ad un unico amico, Al, prototipo della mascolinità eterosessuale degli anni precedenti l'intervento americano nella Seconda Guerra Mondiale. I due amici, inviati su fronti diversi, si ritroveranno in un ospedale militare, dove Birdy passa le giornate rinchiuso

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comportandosi come un uccello. Al, sfigurato al volto da una bomba, elaborerà il proprio trauma mentre cercherà di far comunicare l'amico sotto la vigilanza di uno psichiatra militare. Il tema centrale dell'opera è il tentativo di trasformarsi in uccello da parte di un giovane umano, un tentativo che si intreccia sia con la resistenza ai riti della soggettivazione umana maschile, sia con lo sviluppo di relazioni complesse e ambigue con i volatili (piccioni prima e canarini poi), che Birdy cattura, acquista, alleva, accudisce utilizzando le norme tipiche del rapporto fra umani e uccelli selezionati e allevati a scopo di riproduzione, ma anche reinterpretandole, risignificandole, sovvertendole in modo originale.

La vicenda è narrata alternativamente dai due protagonisti. Il primo narratore, Al, giustappone il racconto delle sue visite nel manicomio che si svolgono nel tempo presente alla rievocazione del rapporto adolescenziale con Birdy che si dipana in ordine cronologico, da quando hanno fatto conoscenza fino alla loro separazione. Anche Birdy alterna i pensieri relativi al presente con la narrazione degli anni trascorsi con l'amico. Le due voci forniscono dunque, spesso in parallelo, i due punti di vista sugli stessi episodi. Tale struttura narrativa mette il lettore/trice nella condizione di conoscere fin da subito due elementi centrali: il fatto che Birdy si creda un uccello e il fatto che sia stato rinchiuso in un ospedale psichiatrico. La struttura in cui è prigioniero e il punto di vista di Al (che all'inizio è quello predominante, quasi l'unico) suggeriscono a chi legge di adottare, inizialmente, la prospettiva egemonica secondo la quale un umano che si crede un uccello non può che essere mentalmente malato e che non esiste alcun senso in cui si possa dire che egli è un uccello, o che non è del tutto umano. Successivamente, il punto di vista di Birdy diventa via via più centrale (anche in virtù dello spazio che acquisisce la sua narrazione rispetto a quella dell'amico). Questo fatto, insieme ad alcuni elementi introdotti dalle narrazioni in forma di "flash-back", rende meno "stabile" tale assunto. Inoltre, anche nel presente, la disposizione d'animo di Al muta e le sue riflessioni mettono in discussione alcuni aspetti della propria identità che in una prima fase appaiono invece del tutto ovvi.

La costruzione della soggettività di Birdy può essere interpretata alla luce del concetto butleriano di performatività, chiedendosi a quali condizioni sia possibile parlare di performatività di specie, oltre che di genere, cercando di spiegare in che senso la performance di specie di Birdy sia destinata a fallire, sia nel senso di "fare l'uccello" che di "costruirsi come umano

(maschio)". Sia l'introspezione del protagonista, sia la rete di relazioni intra- e interspecifiche delineate dall'autore, lette attraverso il prisma butleriano, pongono alcuni quesiti ineludibili: perché la performance di Birdy è votata al fallimento? Che forma di resistenza alla normatività umana riesce, ciononondimeno, a mettere in circolo? In che modo la teoria della performatività, che per alcuni autori e autrici si applica alla costruzione del soggetto umano, può essere utilizzata anche per spiegare la costruzione di soggetti non umani? In che senso la specie, più che qualcosa che "si è" o che "si possiede", è un processo, qualcosa che "si agisce", come il genere (Butler 1999: 143[a]; Birke, Bryld, Lykke 2004: 173)? Accanto a tali domande, accennerò ad altri quesiti apparentemente collaterali ma necessari per affrontare il tema: in che modo intervengono le strutture di relazione violenta con gli animali? Come si intreccia l'*animal drag* con la performance di genere dei due personaggi principali?

2. Specie e performatività

L'idea butleriana di una performance di genere è, secondo alcuni/e, applicabile nei suoi elementi fondamentali alla costruzione del soggetto umano in quanto distinto dalle altre specie animali, nonché al soggetto animale stesso. È importante ricordare che la performatività non è da intendersi in senso esclusivamente linguistico, come sottolineato da vari autori (Barad 2003: 802; Birke, Bryld, Lykke 2004; Dell'Aversano 2010; Estebanez 2013; Filippi, Trasatti 2013; Filippi 2016: 203-272; Iveson 2012: 21-22[b]; Mallory 2008; Preciado 2008; Simonsen 2012; Zappino 2015) e suggerito dalla stessa Butler: "Performativity is not just about speech acts. It is also about bodily acts" (2004: 198[c]; inoltre, 2015: 75[d]). In particolare, Dell'Aversano ha suggerito di utilizzare i termini "specie biologica" [*biological species*] e "identità di specie" [*species identity*] in modo analogo, rispettivamente, ai termini "sesso" e "genere" (2010: 80). Secondo Dell'Aversano, la descrizione butleriana del processo di produzione del genere attraverso l'esclusione e la negazione di rapporti fra sesso, genere e desiderio non compatibili con la norma eterosessuale è applicabile alla produzione sociale dell'identità

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[a] Trad. it. 159. Le note contrassegnate da una lettera ([a], [b], [c]…), forniscono la traduzione italiana del testo citato o ne indicano le pagine nella versione consultata dall'autore, come da bibliografia finale.

[b] 54-55.

[c] "La performatività non riguarda solo l'atto linguistico, ma anche quello corporeo" (293).

[d] 122-123.

di specie. Anche molti aspetti specifici della teoria della performatività del genere sono centrali per comprendere come avviene la costruzione sociale dell'umano e del non umano. Ad esempio:

> Just as the "production of sex as the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by *gender*" (Butler 1999: 10), the production of biological species as the prediscursive ought to be understood as a major, and pernicious, effect of the cultural construction we have chosen to designate as *species identity* (Dell'Aversano 2010: 89[a]).

Ritengo importante, a tal proposito, richiamare alcuni aspetti della performatività che permettono di definirla in modo più puntuale e che sono pertinenti all'analisi del testo di Wharton. Anzitutto, "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual" (Butler 1999: XV[b]), "ritualized repetition of conventions" (Butler 1997: 144[c]). Inoltre, tale ripetizione ritualizzata deriva la sua forza dal fatto che costituisce una citazione di norme preesistenti il soggetto. In questo senso, "Our 'humanity', as well as the 'animality' of animals, is a performance forced on unwilling actors, kept up by what we as humans do to differentiate ourselves from animals, and by what we compel animals to do in order to keep them as radically separate as we can from us" (Dell'Aversano 2010: 91[d]). Infine, così come il genere è un costrutto che occulta il suo stesso carattere di costruzione sociale, presentandosi come *naturale*, l'identità di specie non viene riconosciuta come il frutto di una lunga catena di ripetizioni di norme, come suggerito nella riformulazione che Dell'Aversano (91) fa del pensiero di Butler sulla performatività di genere: "If gender [species identity] attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural significazione, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which

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[a] "Proprio come la 'produzione del sesso in quanto pre-discorsivo dovrebbe essere intesa come effetto di quell'apparato di costruzione culturale designato dal termine *genere*' (Butler 1999: 13), la produzione della specie biologica come prediscorsiva dovrebbe essere intesa come un maggiore, e pernicioso, effetto della costruzione culturale che abbiamo scelto di designare come *identità di specie*".

[b] La "performatività non è un atto singolare, ma una ripetizione e un rituale" (xiv).

[c] "Una ripetizione ritualizzata di convenzioni" (137).

[d] "La nostra 'umanità', così come l''animalità' degli animali, è una performance imposta a degli attori senza il loro consenso, sostenuta da ciò che noi umani facciamo per distinguerci dagli animali, e da ciò che costringiamo gli animali a fare per mantenerli il più radicalmente possibile separati da noi".

an act or attribute might be measured" (Butler 1999: 180[a]).

Tuttavia, l'accento sembra spesso essere posto, nella maggior parte dei lavori menzionati sopra, sulla soggettivazione *umana,* sul fatto, insomma, che l'umano sia una performance, al pari della mascolinità o della femminilità. Dell'Aversano argomenta che anche la soggettivazione animale è performativa. Secondo quanto ipotizzato da quest'ultima (2010: 85) e da Piazzesi (2015: 9-22), così come l'assoggettamento degli animali da reddito si gioca sull'iscrizione di precise norme egemoniche sui corpi, e in particolare sulla creazione di corpi docili, la stessa soggettivazione degli animali è il risultato di un processo di citazione continua di norme (linguistiche e non) che si iscrivono nei (e materializzano i) corpi stessi. Molte forme di animalità ("da allevamento") emergono dall'applicazione delle pratiche zootecniche: selezione genetica, somministrazione di farmaci, tecniche di contenimento e repressione della resistenza degli animali (tutte norme non linguistiche che vengono talvolta espresse sul piano linguistico). Inoltre, la costruzione della specie e del binarismo umano / non umano sono fortemente legate anche a una serie di norme di tipo giuridico che sanciscono, per non citare che l'esempio più emblematico, che alcuni animali sono macellabili e altri no.

È anche probabile che la costruzione del soggetto umano sia intrecciata con quella dei soggetti non umani, in particolare con gli animali "da reddito" e "d'affezione", e viceversa, e con i soggetti che, come Birdy, mettono scandalosamente in discussione tale dualismo (Dell'Aversano 2010). Naturalmente, la matrice di specie si interseca in modo ancora più complesso con quelle di genere, di razza, di classe (Butler 1993: 18[b]; Iveson 2012: 22-26[c]).

3. Animal drag

Può rivelarsi utile guardare alla pratica del *dragging* per illustrare la performatività di specie (Seymour 2015). Il *drag* non è la performatività, bensì è un particolare tipo di performatività (Butler 1993: 230-231[d]), ma leggere la vicenda di Birdy come pratica di *dragging* è forse utile a illustrare come la costruzione del soggetto umano sia di tipo performativo. Infatti, così come le performance *drag* mettono in luce il carattere di costruzione sociale dei

[a] "Se gli attributi e gli atti di genere [di identità di specie], ovvero i vari modi in cui un corpo mostra o produce la propria significazione culturale, sono performativi, allora non c'è alcuna identità pre-esistente, in base alla quale un atto o un attributo potrebbe essere misurato" (199).

[b] 18.

[c] 55-59.

[d] 172-173.

ruoli di genere altrimenti percepiti come fissi, ben definiti e "naturali", l'utilizzo di abiti, posture e comportamenti considerati propri di una specie non umana da parte di un corpo umano può rivelare quanto l'identità umana sia fragile e quanto l'*idea* corrente di umanità sia di fatto irraggiungibile. Il *dragging*, seguendo l'analisi che Butler fa di tale pratica, è anzitutto una pratica pubblica – nel senso che viene messa in atto di fronte ad altre persone – che mette in scena le norme di genere e il loro funzionamento. Attraverso la rappresentazione di tali norme, esso rivela "*the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*" (Butler 1999: 175[a]). Il *drag* è un'imitazione del genere, ma nel senso che "*reveals the imitative structure of gender itself*", ed è quindi "an imitation without an origin" (175[b]).

Costituisce dunque una "parodia di genere" [*gender parody*], nelle parole di Butler. Occorre sottolineare come la parodia non sia l'imitazione di un originale, ma piuttosto "of the very notion of an original" (175[c]). La ripetizione parodica dell'originale "reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original" (41[d]). Un ulteriore punto degno di nota per l'utilizzo del concetto di *drag* nell'analisi del testo di Wharton è che il *drag* non è l'espressione di una verità interiore del soggetto (Butler 1993: 234[e]), a differenza di quanto avviene spesso con il *passing* e la transizione di genere (si veda più avanti). Sotto questo aspetto, dato che Birdy oscilla fra la percezione di sé come uccello in un corpo umano e quella di umano che si traveste da uccello, se queste ultime pratiche possono essere chiamate in causa per spiegare il modo in cui egli cerca di conformare il proprio corpo a un'identità vissuta come autentica, il concetto di *drag* è utile per mostrare in che modo egli possa, invece, inscenare un corpo e dei comportamenti non umani senza presupporre un'identità non umana "originaria". Inoltre, secondo Butler, esso può essere letto interrogando la malinconia di genere: "gender performance allegorizes a loss it cannot grieve. [...] Drag exposes or allegorizes the mundane psychic and performative practices by which heterosexualized genders form themselves through the renunciation *of the possibility* of homosexuality" (235[f]). Tale

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[a]   "*La struttura imitativa del genere, nonché la sua contingenza*" (195).
[b]   "*Rivela implicitamente la struttura imitativa del genere stesso*"; "un'imitazione senza un'origine" (195).
[c]   "Della nozione di un originale" (195).
[d]   "Svela che l'originale non è altro che una parodia dell'*idea* del naturale e dell'originale" (48).
[e]   176.
[f]   "La performance di genere allegorizza una perdita che non può essere pianta [...]. Il *drag*

caratteristica del *drag* è importante nel caso dell'identità di specie se si considera che, come sostenuto da Dell'Aversano, anche l'identificazione con la specie umana si fonda sull'esclusione di una serie di possibilità di identificazione (altre identità di specie) e di una serie di modalità di relazione fra umani e non umani che risulteranno relegate nella sfera dell'impensabilità o dell'abietto. Come si vedrà approfondendo la lettura del testo, la performance di specie mostra come l'identità umana sia costruita sull'esclusione del desiderio per i non umani, secondo una modalità che, parafrasando Butler, potremmo chiamare "malinconia di *specie*".

Leggere *Birdy* (anche) come storia di *animal drag* permette di discutere l'oscillazione complessa fra sovversione e "reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms" (Butler 1993: 125[a]) e di norme di specie nella performance *drag*. Birdy, infatti, si traveste letteralmente da uccello, confezionando un costume da piccione con una calzamaglia dipinta di blu e alcune penne di piccione cucite sopra, cui aggiunge dei guantoni e dei calzettoni colorati come le zampe dei piccioni e un cappuccio piumato con un becco finto, e lo utilizza per recarsi nella colombaia (Wharton 1978: 6[b]). Successivamente, Birdy progetta e costruisce una macchina volante (l'"ornitottero"). Cattura i piccioni e compera canarini da allevamento per studiarne il peso, la densità e le tecniche di volo (85-86[c]). Per costruire la macchina, si ispira a un modellino funzionante (90-92[d]), poi riprodotto su scala maggiore. Per un anno, si allena a battere le ali meccaniche, segue una dieta per diminuire il proprio peso e si allena a cadere da altezze crescenti. Prova quindi a farsi lanciare con le ali da una bicicletta guidata da Al (94-98[e]): per un attimo vola, poi precipita. Approfondisce lo studio di forze, vettori, cadute; affina gli esercizi. Tempo dopo, esprime apertamente il fatto che il volo è una tecnica: "Something like flying isn't easy even for birds; it takes practice and effort" (146[f]). Il volo, secondo lui, viene appreso per imitazione. Osservando i piccoli che stanno imparando, sente di trovarsi nella stessa situazione, con la differenza che a lui serve un aiuto

espone o allegorizza le pratiche psichiche e performative reali con le quali i generi eterosessuali si formano rinunciando alla *possibilità* dell'omosessualità" (177).
[a] "Re-idealizzazione di iperboliche norme eterosessuali di genere" (115).
[b] 13-14.
[c] 102.
[d] 105-107.
[e] 109-113.
[f] "Volare non è facile neppure per gli uccelli; occorre pratica e fatica" (164).

meccanico (un motore), che tuttavia rifiuta (146ᵃ). Prende appunti, traccia disegni accurati (149ᵇ); studia più approfonditamente peso e densità sul corpo di un uccello morto per cause accidentali (163-164ᶜ). Mentre modifica il proprio fisico tramite le attività ginniche per volare, qualcosa cambia a livello di percezione di sé: "Squatting, I get the feeling of being a bird" (164ᵈ). In seguito, condurrà esperimenti anche cruenti sugli uccelli (181ᵉ) per progettare delle penne meccaniche (188-189ᶠ). Gli interventi sul proprio fisico per poter volare (ginnastica) modificano però l'aspetto di Birdy in modo più profondo. Per esempio: "My shoulders and neck are beginning to get bumpy. If I'm not careful, I walk around with my head sticking out in front of me" (189ᵍ).

Nonostante l'avvertimento dell'amico Al in manicomio possa far sembrare il contrario ("he [the psychiatrist] doesn't know you're a bird", 194ʰ), Birdy non "passa" per un piccione, né per un canarino. "Passare per" è infatti ben diverso dal mettere in atto una performance *drag*, se intendiamo il *passing* nell'accezione comune di "riuscire a essere percepiti come individui appartenenti al genere (o alla specie) con cui ci si presenta". "Passare" implica che i soggetti che osservano l'individuo non siano a conoscenza della sua precedente identità (di genere o di specie) e che chi intende passare voglia occultare l'esistenza di un processo di transizione. Occorre chiedersi, a questo proposito, se Birdy sia intenzionato a essere percepito come un uccello, e da chi. In altre occasioni, oltre a quella citata, l'amico sembra, per un attimo, vederlo come un uccello, come quando osserva: "In the back of the loft, in dark shadows, squatting, sometimes he'd look like a real pigeon" (6ⁱ); o quando utilizza con la massima spontaneità, in manicomio, espressioni come "a baby bird being fed" (22ʲ), o "his wings [...] coming away from his sides" (152ᵏ). Tuttavia, è evidente che Birdy sa di

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ᵃ   165.
ᵇ   168.
ᶜ   182-183.
ᵈ   "Accosciato, ho la sensazione di essere un uccello" (184).
ᵉ   199.
ᶠ   208.
ᵍ   "Spalle e collo mi stanno diventando bitorzoluti. Se non ci sto attento, cammino con la testa protesa in avanti" (209).
ʰ   "Lui [lo psichiatra] non sa che sei un uccello" (213).
ⁱ   "Nel retro della colombaia, accovacciato al buio, certe volte sembrava davvero un piccione" (13).
ʲ   "Imbeccato come un piccioncino" (32).
ᵏ   "Scosta le ali" (172).

non poter essere considerato come canarino dagli umani, ed è per questo che nasconde accuratamente la pratica del sogno controllato con cui cerca di diventare un uccello. Infatti, dopo essersi accorto di aver sognato di trovarsi all'interno della gabbia come uccello, Birdy mette in atto una serie di tecniche per ricordare il sogno (come mettere una sveglia sotto il cuscino per svegliarsi durante il sogno – 199[a]), indurre nuovamente analoghi sogni (forzandosi a pensare ai ricordi del sogno e rievocandolo minuziosamente) e cercare di scoprire in che modo la realtà influenza il sogno (per esempio, collocando dei foglietti di carta con alcune frasi nella gabbia, o inducendo il sé-uccello del sogno, durante la veglia, a porre specifiche domande agli altri uccelli). Al tempo stesso, però, è ragionevole affermare che egli sia mosso dal desiderio di passare per un canarino *con i canarini*. Tale desiderio è espresso ad esempio attraverso la paura di non essere riconosciuto come appartenente al gruppo: "They don't recognize me at all, except as Birdy, the boy. It makes me feel rejected, alone" (200[b]). Più esplicitamente, parlando dei suoi incontri onirici con la canarina di cui è innamorato, Perta, dichiara: "I want […] her to think of me only as a bird" (212[c]). In tal senso, in diversi momenti del romanzo Birdy viene accolto in sogno fra i canarini come conspecifico, ma occorre considerare che tali animali costituiscono una produzione della sua mente umana. Nella prima parte del romanzo, in cui ha a che fare unicamente con uccelli reali, Birdy non è mai in grado di "passare" per uno di loro – se si eccettua un episodio in cui viene corteggiato da una cornacchia (9[d]) – sebbene riesca a riprodurne accuratamente le vocalizzazioni, la postura e lo sguardo.

Possiamo dunque osservare due modalità di messa in discussione dell'identità di specie. Nei confronti dei canarini, in sogno, Birdy cerca di passare, sfruttando il fatto che, come nel *passing* di genere, questi non conoscono la sua identità "di partenza". Nei confronti degli umani (e di Al in particolare), invece, egli agisce in un contesto in cui gli altri hanno cognizione del suo essere umano, e pertanto mette in scena, più propriamente, una performance *drag*. Quest'ultima, però, fallisce, nel senso che è oggetto di repressione da parte della norma umana, la cui manifestazione concreta

[a]   217.
[b]   "Loro mi ignorano. Non mi riconoscono affatto, tranne che come Birdy, il ragazzo. Mi fa sentire solo, emarginato" (219).
[c]   "Voglio […] che pensi a me solo come uccello" (233).
[d]   17.

è la reclusione manicomiale con cui l'effetto di de-naturalizzazione che il *drag* può ottenere è annullato e ricondotto all'ordine del discorso psichiatrico. Qui, l'aspetto decisivo non sono tanto i limiti fisici quanto il fatto che, pur svolgendosi di fronte a degli spettatori, la performance avviene in un contesto in cui non esiste un consesso che le conferisca legittimità. Al contrario, la società umana sancisce la non accettabilità di tale pratica rinchiudendo Birdy in una cella e decretandone lo stato di malattia mentale.

L'insuccesso della sua performance è il fallimento dell'idea volontaristica di scegliere la propria specie, proprio come avviene per il genere (BUTLER 1993: x[a]):

> For if I were to argue that genders are performative, that could mean that I thought that one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night. Such a willful and instrumental subject, one who decides *on* its gender, is clearly not its gender from the start and fails to realize that its existence is already decided *by* gender. Certainly, such a theory would restore a figure of a choosing subject – humanist – at the center of a project whose emphasis on construction seems to be quite opposed to such a notion.

L'esistenza di Birdy è già decisa dalla specie. L'*animal drag* qui esprime comunque potenzialità di sovversione dell'eccezionalismo umano nel senso che "questions the 'naturalness' of what we might call the *species* role system" (SEYMOUR 2015: 262[b]). Anche in questo caso, non si tratta di un mero travestimento: "It is not that nonhuman morphology is simply placed on the human body. Rather, animality is viscerally, painfully, and transformatively encountered or enacted by the human body" (263[c]).

La messa a nudo del carattere di costruzione del soggetto umano si accompagna alla critica delle coppie concettuali animali/natura e umani/cultura.

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[a] "Perché se dovessi dimostrare che i generi sono performativi vorrebbe dire che io penso che uno si alza la mattina, indugia davanti all'armadio per scegliere il proprio genere, lo indossa per tutto il giorno, poi lo ripone ordinatamente la sera. Tale soggetto volitivo, che decide *del* proprio genere, chiaramente non appartiene al suo genere fin dall'inizio e non si accorge che la sua esistenza è già decisa *dal* genere. Certamente, una teoria di questo tipo ripristinerebbe la figura umanista di un soggetto che sceglie, al centro di un progetto la cui insistenza sulla costruzione sembra dichiarare l'esatto contrario" (XVIII).
[b] "Mette in dubbio la 'naturalità' di quello che potremmo definire sistema dei ruoli di *specie*".
[c] "Non è che la morfologia non umana venga semplicemente collocata sul corpo umano. Piuttosto, l'animalità viene visceralmente, dolorosamente e trasformativamente incontrata e messa in scena dal corpo umano".

Per esempio: "Canaries living in a cage are like human beings in that they're not living a completely natural life" (WHARTON 1978: 120[a]). Birdy illustra quindi alcuni esempi di azioni a suo parere "non naturali" (120-121[b]). Le sue riflessioni fanno riferimento al fatto che i canarini in cattività, a differenza degli uccelli selvatici, non agiscono in modo puramente istintivo: "Canaries are like human beings; they're not in a natural state so they do some stupid things" (124[c]). Il veicolo di questo sconvolgimento delle categorie umanistiche è il rapporto con una specie, quella dei canarini, collocati a metà fra natura e cultura in quanto uccelli da riproduzione, nati in cattività e letteralmente prodotti come soggetti dagli allevatori, secondo tecniche complesse che includono il controllo della sessualità e della procreazione, la selezione genetica, il regime dietetico, le tecniche di cura corporee, la gestione delle relazioni e degli spazi vitali. L'autore del romanzo, infatti, documenta in modo dettagliato il modo in cui Birdy si procura i canarini, le tecniche con cui vengono allevati dai diversi venditori cui si rivolge. Wharton mette in scena, inoltre, la trasmissione delle conoscenze fra questi allevatori, perlopiù amatoriali, e Birdy stesso. Quest'ultimo descrive minuziosamente le procedure che mette in atto, in particolare, per far accoppiare i canarini. Da questo punto di vista, i canarini devono essere considerati in modo radicalmente diverso dal loro "corrispettivo" selvatico, analogamente a quanto sostenuto da Birke, Bryld, Lykke (2004: 173-174) in relazione ai cani e ai cavalli addomesticati e ai topi e ratti da laboratorio. Nel caso dei canarini, lo status di questi soggetti è differente sia da quello dell'animale "da compagnia" che da quello dell'animale "da lavoro" (BOBBÈ 2008: 47; FILIPPI, TRASATTI 2013: 44-47). Inoltre, questa categoria di uccelli non è riducibile a nessuna delle due polarità "selvatico" / "domestico", ma si situa in uno spazio in cui naturale e artificiale costituiscono dei punti di riferimento ideali in grado di contaminarsi (BOBBÈ 2008: 60). Occorre, anche a partire da questo elemento, dare conto del fallimento della performance di Birdy.

Anzitutto, la tensione del protagonista verso un ideale di libertà nel volo si scontra proprio con la realtà degli uccelli in cattività. L'idea umana di uccello è in effetti costruita su un forte richiamo simbolico alla libertà, ed è

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[a] "I canarini che vivono in gabbia sono come gli esseri umani, non vivono una vita completamente naturale" (137).
[b] 138.
[c] "I canarini assomigliano ai cristiani: non vivono secondo natura e quindi fanno alcune stupidaggini" (142).

a questa che fa riferimento Birdy al livello del desiderio, oscillando significativamente fra l'aspirazione a essere un canarino, quella a intraprendere un'attività caratteristica degli uccelli (volare, cantare), il desiderio di Perta, la canarina di cui è innamorato. Questo carattere indefinito del desiderio è fondamentale, perché in sostanza non siamo mai in grado di dire se Birdy sia innamorato degli uccelli, del volo o del canto in sé, o di Perta. Il volo sembra essere, inizialmente, l'oggetto di desiderio centrale, un elemento che attraversa tutto il romanzo:

> I knew I had to fly [...]. It would be worth everything to learn this. If I could get close to birds and enjoy their pleasure it would be almost enough [...]. If I could get close to a bird as a friend and be there when it flies and feel what it's thinking, then, in a certain way, I would fly. I wanted to know all about birds. I wanted to be like a bird and I still wanted to fly; really fly (WHARTON 1978: 25[a]).

Ancora: "The first time I flew, it was being alive. Nothing was pressing under me. I was living in the fullness of air; air all around me, no holding place to break the air spaces. It's worth everything to be alone in the air, alive" (20[b]). Il desiderio di volare, che in questa fase è ancora facilmente comprensibile con il metro di misura umano, diventa in seguito un desiderio che si confronta dappresso con i canarini e il loro mondo: "I know I want to fly at least as much as any canary" (147[c]). Il volo è un oggetto di desiderio difficilmente isolabile dal rapporto con gli uccelli e dall'innamoramento: "I'm crazy in love with the way he flies" (66[d]). L'altro elemento degno di nota è il canto, che viene ascoltato e riprodotto da Birdy, e che determina lo spostamento del suo interesse dai piccioni ai canarini. Il canto è particolarmente importante per la negoziazione dell'identità di specie del protagonista: "I don't want to talk. When you've been a bird, talking seems crude as grunting" (210e). Altri aspetti della vita da uccello sono poi fonte di

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[a]   "Capii che dovevo volare [...]. Niente varrebbe quanto imparare questo. Se potessi avvicinarmi agli uccelli e godere dei loro piaceri, già questo basterebbe [...]. Se potessi accostarmi da amico a un uccello ed essere là quando lui vola e provare ciò che prova, ebbene in un certo senso volerei. Volevo sapere tutto sugli uccelli. Volevo essere come un uccello e volare; volare sul serio" (35).
[b]   "La prima volta che volai, era essere vivo. Nulla premeva sotto di me. Io vivevo nella pienezza dell'aria; aria tutt'intorno a me, nessun punto fermo che rompa gli spazi dell'aria. Niente vale quanto esser solo in aria, vivo" (29-30).
[c]   "So che desidero volare, come lo desidera qualsiasi canarino" (165).
[d]   "Sono pazzamente innamorato del modo in cui vola" (81).
[e]   "Non mi va di parlare. Quando sei stato uccello, parlare sembra rozzo come grugnire" (231).

fascinazione, come la capacità di rigurgitare il cibo per imbeccare i propri simili (225[a]) o il modo peculiare in cui i canarini fanno il bagno, cosa che necessita, per Birdy, di un impegnativo processo di apprendimento la cui conclusione è particolarmente gratificante (213-214[b]). Se osserviamo come si esprime l'attrazione per il bagno dei canarini, però, possiamo notare il modo in cui si intreccia con l'attrazione per Perta: "I'm watching her because of the pleasure it gives me, also to learn how to take a bath as a bird" (214[c]). L'amore per la canarina sembra a tratti sostituire la passione per il volo o per il canto: "I look at her. I love her so. What she is saying [to have a nest together] is what I've been thinking, dreaming, singing. It is more than flying" (227[d]); "She's with me in my boy life and in the dream-dream, too. I'm hoping she'll be in the real dream tonight. I'm even more excited about it than flying" (211[e]). D'altra parte, Birdy si innamora di lei proprio in virtù del suo modo di volare e cantare. In questo senso, questi molteplici desideri si influenzano e si rinforzano a vicenda.

Il *drag* necessita di un complicato processo di apprendimento di come si costruisce l'identità di specie dei canarini, un processo fatto di osservazione, di tentativi di imitazione e soprattutto di dialogo con gli uccelli. Questo dialogo, nelle modalità in cui viene intrapreso dal protagonista, si svolge più agevolmente all'interno di una gabbia: Birdy ha bisogno di controllare le fasi della riproduzione, stabilendone i tempi e verificando in dettaglio tutti gli aspetti del corteggiamento, dell'accoppiamento, della comunicazione fra individui collocati a tale scopo nella stessa gabbia, o separati quando necessario. La gabbia è dunque un setting preferibile, ma evidentemente non è un ambiente neutro (ACAMPORA 2006). Via via che Birdy acquisisce la capacità di sentire come un uccello, le sbarre diventano qualcosa da superare, tanto che si può sostenere che la transizione è prima un assoggettamento ad un regime di reclusione, e poi un processo di evasione.

Per comprendere il fallimento di Birdy, bisogna osservare come la deumanizzazione intrapresa dal protagonista non possa essere condotta come impresa volontaristica, proprio perché non preesiste un soggetto senza

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[a]   248.

[b]   234-235.

[c]   "Io la guardo per il piacere che mi dà e anche per imparare a fare il bagno da uccello" (236).

[d]   "Io la guardo. L'amo tanto! Quello che dice [mettere su un nido insieme] è ciò che io ho pensato, sognato, cantato. È più che volare" (250).

[e]   "Lei è con me nella mia vita di ragazzo e nel sogno dentro al sogno. Spero che stanotte venga nel mio sogno vero. Ciò mi eccita più che volare" (232).

identità di specie che *poi* cercherebbe di "essere" un canarino. La fase di mimetismo fisico, in cui Birdy modella i propri muscoli, la propria fisionomia su quelle di un'altra specie, illustra molto efficacemente la presunzione di divenire uccello semplicemente con uno sforzo di volontà. In un certo senso, questa fase viene superata quando Birdy riconosce alcuni limiti fisici insuperabili (Wharton 1978: 188-189, 242-243[a]), fra i quali quello più significativo è dato dalla densità, cioè dal rapporto fra peso e volume (che negli uccelli è molto minore per via delle ossa cave). Nel primo tentativo con l'ornitottero, il protagonista cade subito; poi cerca di affinare lo strumento, provando a capire in che misura un canarino riesca a volare anche se ha un peso maggiore di quello "standard", ma non riesce a far volare i modellini senza una spinta iniziale (189[b]). A questo punto, egli dovrà rimodulare il proprio progetto di transizione: "I stop doing the flying exercise. If I can fly in my dreams, I don't need to fly in the real world. I'm ready to accept the fact that there's most likely no way I can actually get myself off the ground, anyway" (200[c]).

L'aspetto forse decisivo è però quello del carattere individuale delle azioni di Birdy, dato che la performance *drag* necessita, per acquisire un carattere sovversivo, di un contesto collettivo (Butler 1999: 178-179[d]). Il livello dell'azione individuale non viene mai veramente superato, mentre la possibilità e l'importanza di tale superamento – superamento che assume un carattere di sovversione politica vera e propria – vengono richiamate laddove Birdy si allea con i canarini per aiutarne la fuga, utilizzando tanto il suo essere uccello quanto il suo essere "ragazzo" (questa la parola usata da Birdy per descrivere la propria identità umana).

La vicenda si sviluppa proprio a partire da una tensione fra due modalità, quella del passaggio da un'identità di specie fissa a un'altra altrettanto fissa e quella della commistione fra l'identità umana e quella non umana, suggerendo che uno degli strumenti per leggere il romanzo, accanto al concetto di *animal drag*, sia quello della narrazione transessuale (Arfini 2007: 51-83; Hayward, Weinstein 2015). Ampie parti del testo, del resto, richiamano il diario di una persona che prende coscienza del fatto che *la sua specie cromosomica non corrisponde alla sua specie psichica* e che trascrive il

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[a]   208-209, 268-269.
[b]   209.
[c]   "Smetto di esercitarmi nel volo. Se riesco a volare in sogno, non occorre che voli nel mondo reale. Sono pronto ad accettare il fatto che non c'è comunque modo, per me, di staccarmi da terra" (219).
[d]   198.

proprio percorso di *riassegnazione di specie*. Se la categoria del *drag* si può applicare principalmente al modo in cui Birdy gioca con la propria identità di specie di fronte agli umani, per dare conto del suo rapporto con i canarini è più corretto parlare di tentativi di passare per un uccello, ma anche di effettuare una sorta di transizione di specie.

In seguito alla svolta costituita dal primo sogno, Birdy inizia a parlare di sé come di un uccello: "I remembered being in the cage *as a bird* (Wharton 1978: 198[a], corsivo aggiunto); "I felt like a bird" (198[b]); "I am a bird" (203[c]). L'espressione "da uccello" [*as a bird*] ricorre con una frequenza significativa (198, 205 – due volte –, 209, 213[d]). Cessa la paura di volare che l'aveva accompagnato per buona parte dei mesi precedenti. Si consideri che Birdy narra di una doppia vita (la veglia in cui è umano e il sonno in cui è uccello), ma fin da subito la seconda assume uno status particolare: "the realest thing is the dream" (199[e]). Quando parla di sé durante il giorno esprime un crescente sentimento di estraneità per il proprio corpo umano: "My hands, my feet, are grotesque. I'm becoming a stranger in myself" (200[f]). Per comprendere come la realtà influenzi il sogno, scrive un biglietto e lo deposita nella gabbia. La frase che sceglie è: "Birdy is a bird" (202[g]). Inizia poi a parlare espressamente di due identità, riferendosi, per esempio, al sé-uccello come a "some part of me, the bird part" (209[h]). Attribuisce alcune sue lacune nel performare i comportamenti da canarino ora ad aspetti particolari della sua identità da uccello, ora alla sua identità umana:

> It's time for me to feed her. I'm the same as Alfonso [the canary that has long observed in reality, discovering that it possesses the particular characteristic of not knowing how to regurgitate food]; I can't do it. I want to, but I can't bring food up into my mouth. I've always hated to vomit. The boy is getting in the way of the bird (225[i]).

[a]   "Ricordai di essere stato in quella gabbia *da uccello* (217, corsivo aggiunto).
[b]   "Mi sentivo un uccello" (218).
[c]   "Sono un uccello" (223).
[d]   217, 225, 230, 235.
[e]   "La cosa più reale è il sogno" (219).
[f]   "Le mie mani, i miei piedi sono grotteschi. Sto diventando straniero a me stesso" (219).
[g]   "Birdy è un uccello" (222).
[h]   "Una parte di me, la parte uccello" (230).
[i]   "Tocca a me imbeccarla, adesso. Ma sono come Alfonso [il canarino che ha a lungo osservato nella realtà, scoprendo che possiede la particolare caratteristica di non saper rigurgitare il cibo]: non so farlo. Vorrei, ma non riesco a rigurgitare il cibo dal gozzo. Ho sempre odiato vomitare. Il ragazzo, ora, intralcia l'uccello" (It. tr. 248).

L'identità, di fronte a Perta, perde stabilità: "I'm trying to decide how to tell her what I am. I'm trying to decide what I am, too" (226[a]). Il proposito di "passare" viene quindi abbandonato, allorché cerca di rivelare a Perta il rapporto fra sogno e realtà, il fatto che egli è in realtà un umano, coincidente con la figura demiurgica del ragazzo che i canarini vedono fuori della gabbia intento a portare loro il cibo, introdurre nuovi uccelli e sistemare gli spazi. Ma questo tentativo di razionalizzazione del tutto umano vacilla: "I stop. I can't understand what I'm saying myself. I'm too much of a bird to understand. My boy brain makes up the ideas, the words, but my bird brain can't understand them" (228[b]). La sensazione di essere un uccello assume un carattere molto materiale: "I feel my strength as a bird spreading through me. The blood is circulated in warmth out to the tips of my feathers, to the ends of my toenails" (229[c]). La figura del ragazzo, a tratti, diventa un vero e proprio estraneo: "I know then that the boy does not really want Perta to know" (229[d]).

Le azioni del protagonista presentano molte delle ambivalenze che si ritrovano nella transizione di sesso, a partire dal rapporto complesso fra accettazione/contestazione di un binarismo più o meno esplicitamente naturalizzato: Birdy accetta e rinforza la dicotomia umano/non umano o, performativamente, allenta la rigidità della barriera di specie? O, addirittura, contesta la naturalità de "l'umano"? Il *passing*, come abbiamo visto, non funziona nei confronti dei piccioni e dei canarini, prima per via di limitazioni fisiche e poi, quando viene tentato in sogno, riesce soltanto a tratti. All'interno del consesso umano, neppure la transizione è riconosciuta come tale. L'autorità che ha il potere di sancirne l'ammissibilità, lo psichiatra, non riconosce neanche l'intenzione di diventare o impersonare un uccello (Al fa riferimento esplicito al fatto che questo aspetto è noto a lui, ma non al medico). Inoltre, se anche ciò avvenisse, la situazione sarebbe molto diversa da una transizione di genere, in cui il soggetto si rivolge alle autorità sanitarie spontaneamente – o quantomeno in virtù della conoscenza

[a]   "Sto cercando di decidere in che maniera dirle chi sono. Sto cercando di decidere chi sono, anche" (250).
[b]   "Taccio. Non capisco neanche io ciò che le dico. Sono troppo uccello per capire. Il mio cervello di ragazzo mette insieme parole e concetti, ma il mio cervello d'uccello non riesce a capirli" (251-252).
[c]   "Sento, come uccello, la mia forza diffondersi in me. Il sangue mi circola caldo fino alla punta delle ali, fino alla punta degli unghioli" (253).
[d]   "Capisco allora che il ragazzo non vuole, veramente, che Perta sappia la verità" (253).

del carattere quasi obbligato di tale scelta – e tali autorità dispongono di protocolli in grado di decodificare, seppur parzialmente, i sentimenti e i desideri all'origine della richiesta di transizione, di trattamenti medici o di diritti civili. Al esprime in modo molto chiaro che cosa accadrebbe se lo psichiatra si rendesse conto del fatto che Birdy vuole essere un uccello:

> When he figures that one out, you're in trouble. He'll probably have some kind of giant bird cage made for you, with perches, feeding cups, and everything. He'll search out that old pigeon suit of yours and have you shipped air […] to the big conference. He'll keep you in this cage and lecture on the "bird boy". When he's finished with you he'll probably sell you to a circus (194[a]).

Se il successo e il fallimento sono qui facilmente valutabili, altrettanto non si può dire per l'effetto parodico ottenuto da Birdy tramite il *drag*. In questo caso, occorre definire "successo" e "fallimento" in modo più preciso, facendo riferimento alla capacità che la performance *drag* ha, secondo Butler, di lavorare a favore di una conferma o di una sovversione delle norme di genere. Vorrei chiedermi quindi se gli atti di Birdy riescano a rendere meno stabile l'identità di specie, svelandone il carattere di costruzione sociale, o se al contrario falliscano, riaffermando l'ineluttabilità della corrispondenza fra specie biologica e identità di specie. Se riformuliamo la questione con le parole di Iveson – "the very possibility of passing *as* real, that is, of artfully reconstituting an apparently natural effect, inevitably serves to *de*naturalize those very same norms which otherwise compel belief and thus apportion 'realness'" (2012: 21[b]) – dobbiamo chiederci se Birdy sia in grado di suggerire implicitamente ad Al che è *possibile* passare per un canarino, pur non riuscendovi egli stesso. La vicenda mostra anche, però, un altro tipo di fallimento, quel fallimento che secondo Butler è connaturato alle norme di genere, e che possiamo considerare come inevitabile anche nel caso della specie: nessun tentativo di identificazione con la specie umana da parte di un individuo appartenente alla specie *Homo Sapiens* riesce del tutto:

[a] "Appena se ne accorgerà, saranno guai per te. Magari farà costruire apposta per te una gigantesca gabbia per uccelli, con trespoli, mangiatoie e tutto. Farà cercare quel vecchio costume da piccione e lo farà spedire per via aerea […] a quel congresso di psichiatri. Ti terrà in gabbia e, lui, terrà conferenze sul ragazzo-uccello. Poi, magari, ti venderà a un circo" (213-214).
[b] "La possibilità di passare *come* reali, ossia di sviluppare in modo artificioso un effetto apparentemente naturale, comporta inevitabilmente una *de*-naturazione proprio di quelle norme che in altri contesti servono a imporre credenze e a conferire 'realismo'" (53).

> The injunction *to be* a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated. [...] This failure to become "real" and to embody "the natural" is, I would argue, a constitutive failure of all gender enactments for the very reason that these ontological locales are fundamentally uninhabitable (Butler 1999: 185-186[a]).

Non è possibile fornire una risposta univoca alle domande di cui sopra, ma è evidente che viene ottenuto un forte effetto di messa a nudo di tale presunta naturalità: "Only from a self-consciously denaturalized position can we see how the appearance of naturalness is itself constituted" (140[b]). Nelle parole usate da Birdy quando smetterà di fare l'uccello in manicomio: "I was pretending. I pretended I was a bird; now I'm pretending I'm me" (Wharton 1978: 287[c]). Come vedremo, Al è giunto a conclusioni simili sul carattere di costruzione sociale della propria identità di maschio eterosessuale.

4. Gender trouble

Anche se al centro del processo di soggettivazione descritto da Wharton c'è una sorta di *trouble* di specie, non è possibile dare conto del modo in cui ciò avviene senza fare riferimento, almeno in parte, ad altre matrici, altre norme che vengono sconvolte, a partire da quella di genere. Il romanzo è infatti attraversato da una tensione erotica che coinvolge sia i due amici – destrutturandone l'eterosessualità *attesa* – sia i canarini. Da un punto di vista superficiale, la vicenda sfida l'eteronormatività mettendo in scena una relazione fra due giovani maschi, uno dei quali, Al, costantemente impegnato a performare una maschilità "standard", ipernormale e ipereterosessuale. È su quest'ultimo che agisce il potere perturbante del rapporto con l'amico, mentre su Birdy incombe lo spettro dell'omosessualità per via del suo disinteresse nei confronti delle ragazze. Al giunge a mettere in dubbio, retrospettivamente, la propria eterosessualità: "I'm even beginning to wonder if the way Birdy and I were so close all those years

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[a] "L'ingiunzione a *essere* un dato genere produce necessariamente dei fallimenti, una varietà di configurazioni incoerenti che, nella loro molteplicità, eccedono e sfidano l'ingiunzione che li genera [...]. Questo fallimento nel diventare 'reale' e nell'incarnare il 'naturale' è, credo, un fallimento costitutivo di ogni attuazione del genere, proprio perché questi ambienti ontologici sono fondamentalmente inabitabili" (205-206).
[b] "Soltanto da una posizione consapevolmente denaturalizzata possiamo cogliere il modo in cui viene costituita l'apparenza stessa della naturalità" (156).
[c] "Facevo finta. Fingevo di essere un uccello. Adesso invece fingo di essere me" (321).

wasn't a bit suspicious. Nobody else I've ever known had such a close friend; it was if we were married or something" (Wharton 1978: 69-70[a]). Al termine della vicenda, esprime apertamente il disfacimento della propria identità smascherandone il carattere di costruzione sociale:

> All my life, I've been building a personal picture of myself like body building in *Strength and Health*. Only I didn't build from the inside, I built from the outside, to protect myself against things. Now, a big part of this crazy structure is torn apart (246[b]).

Sempre superficialmente, l'effetto è quello di un fallimento della performance eterosessuale nei termini illustrati da Butler (1999; 185-186[c]), un fallimento legato anche al fallimento della performance umana di cui abbiamo dato conto. Infatti, se ci poniamo dal punto di vista di Birdy, quella che sembrerebbe una strategia di resistenza all'eteronormatività giocata sul disinteresse per le ragazze e sull'indifferenza al fatto che tale disinteresse faccia pensare a un suo orientamento omosessuale appare come un tentativo più complesso, una messa in scacco del desiderio eterosessuale a partire dall'emergere di desideri *non umani*. Birdy è incapace di avere un rapporto sessuale con una ragazza *non* perché desidera un uomo, ma perché è innamorato di Perta, una canarina. Ed è innamorato sia della canarina reale, da ragazzo durante il giorno, sia della canarina onirica, da uccello durante la notte: "You are the bird in my dream-dream and you are the bird I love as a boy" (Wharton 1978: 227[d]). Quando esce con una ragazza, Doris, spinto dall'amico e dai genitori – un'occasione in cui avverte un'eccitazione sessuale che descrive però come puramente meccanica –, evita di avere rapporti sessuali con lei proprio perché è innamorato della canarina: "I want to fuck Doris. At the same time, I start thinking of Perta. I want to do it the first time with Perta" (223-224[e]).

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[a] "Comincio a chiedermi se il modo in cui io e Birdy eravamo amici, in quegli anni, non fosse un tantino sospetto. Nessun altro che io conoscessi aveva un amico così intimo; era come se fossimo sposati o che" (84).

[b] "Per tutta la vita, mi sono costruito un'immagine personale di me stesso come si plasmano i muscoli, seguendo le norme di una rivista per culturisti. Solo che non mi costruivo dall'interno, bensì dal di fuori, per proteggere me stesso da ogni sorta di cose. Ora, una grossa parte di questa folle struttura è crollata" (273).

[c] 205-206.

[d] "Tu sei l'uccello che io sognai in sogno, e sei l'uccello che amo, da ragazzo" (251).

[e] "Ho voglia di scopare Doris. Al tempo stesso mi metto a pensare a Perta. Voglio farlo con Perta, la prima volta" (247).

Quello che fallisce, insieme alla possibilità di incarnare il "maschio standard", è la soggettivazione di Birdy come *umano* standard. L'umanità è infatti, come sostenuto da Iveson (2012: 23-25[a]), una norma egemone quanto il genere o la razza, più che il semplice effetto aggregato di tali norme. Un passo emblematico del legame fra desiderio non umano e sovversione dell'eteronormatività è il seguente: "I can't figure what she [my mother] thinks is unhealthy about birds. Does she want me to spend all my time chasing after girls at school or making myself the strongest man in the world, like Al; or maybe hopping up cars and tearing them apart" (Wharton 1978: 41[b]).

Analogamente a quanto rilevato da Dell'Aversano (2010), l'affettività fra umani e altri animali è in grado di perturbare la barriera di specie. Se però la descrizione che Dell'Aversano fa dell'affettività interspecifica sembra essere desessualizzata, il desiderio di Birdy per Perta è carico di pulsioni sessuali, che irrompono nella "vita reale" sottoforma di eiaculazioni notturne durante i sogni su Perta (Eberwein 2007: 63; Wharton 1978: 209, 229-230[c]). L'oggetto stesso del desiderio è ambiguo poiché Birdy, in quanto canarino, è attratto da una femmina, ma, in quanto ragazzo, è attratto da un'altra specie. Sebbene, attraverso la scelta di un oggetto di desiderio appartenente al sesso opposto, il protagonista riconfermi un'economia eterosessuale, fondata sulla famiglia "tradizionale" e sulla riproduzione, l'attraversamento della barriera di specie è un aspetto altrettanto significativo, anche perché l'altro protagonista non è a conoscenza dell'attrazione verso Perta ed è dunque portato a leggere la mancanza di interesse per le femmine umane come manifestazione di omosessualità. E, soprattutto, lo slittamento dell'attrazione dall'oggetto umano a quello non umano è collegato al rifiuto dell'erotizzazione del corpo femminile suggerita dal regime eterosessuale incarnato dall'amico:

> I've tried watching girls' legs to find out what the excitement is about, but they all look the same to me [...]. And women's asses. They're just flesh around an asshole like everybody else. It's only an overdevelopment of the gluteus maximus, to make it possible for people to walk on two legs, and sit down. To me, anything sitting down is ugly. A bird usually stands when it isn't flying. It never sits except

[a]   56-58.
[b]   "Non capisco cosa [mia madre] trovi di schifoso negli uccelli. Vorrebbe che passassi il tempo a correre dietro alle ragazze o a mettere su muscoli, come Al? O magari a smontare motori e a correre in macchina?" (Wharton 1978: 54).
[c]   229, 254.

to hatch eggs. That's beauty. Then, tits. What a dumb development for feeding babies (217[a]).

Inoltre, l'appagamento del desiderio necessita di una trasformazione corporea, emotiva e cognitiva radicale (*sentire* come un canarino), tanto che il desiderio è desiderio per il proprio corpo de-umanizzato – desiderio di ali, coda, becco, ma soprattutto *desiderio di desiderio*: volere ciò che vorrebbe un canarino (come abbiamo visto: fare un bagno, sgranchirsi le ali, fare l'amore come lo fanno i canarini, ecc.).

Come leggere dunque la mancanza di attrazione per le femmine umane, questo particolare malfunzionamento della costruzione di un sé eterosessuale? La nozione usuale di omosessualità non è l'unica a non darne conto: anche gli approcci teorici che scompaginano tale schema binario, come nel caso del modello sesso-genere-desiderio di Butler sembrano non cogliere del tutto la natura di questo fallimento dell'incarnazione della mascolinità. Bisogna piuttosto considerare che femminile e maschile non si limitano a co-costituirsi, ma si confrontano con "a wider range of possible identity positions, including those corresponding to nonhuman identities" (HERMAN 2014: 428[b]). Poiché è comunque vero che, se il desiderio non discende chiaramente dal sesso o dal genere del soggetto, quest'ultimo non è intelligibile (BUTLER 1990: 23-24[c]), un desiderio che travalica i confini di specie è ancora più invisibile, e chi non incarna adeguatamente "l'umano" viene punito (DELL'AVERSANO 2010: 89-90). Birdy, dopo la guerra, finisce in manicomio, ed è quindi sottoposto agli effetti di un dispositivo di esclusione/patologizzazione/animalizzazione. Come suggerisce Al, il suo destino in quanto animale potrebbe essere persino peggiore, proprio perché la sua performance lo colloca, come gli uccelli, all'incrocio dei diversi ruoli assegnati dagli umani agli altri animali: la scena prefigurata dall'amico, citata sopra, mescola infatti lo zoo,

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[a]   "Io ho tentato di guardare le gambe delle donne per scoprire cos'abbiano di tanto eccitante, ma a me sembrano tutte quante uguali [...]. E poi i culi delle donne. Soltanto della carne intorno al buco, come chiunque altro. Si tratta solo di supersviluppo del gluteus maximus, il che rende possibile alla gente di camminare su due gambe e di sedersi. Per me, chi si siede è brutto. Un uccello di solito sta ritto, quando non vola. Non siede mai, se non per covare. Questa è bellezza. E le tette, che stupido aggeggio, per allattare i figli" (239-240).
[b]   "Un più ampio spettro di possibili posizioni, incluse quelle corrispondenti alle identità non-umane".
[c]   27.

il circo, il laboratorio scientifico (WHARTON 1978: 194[a]).

La vicenda di Birdy, per gli aspetti che possono essere letti come transizione di specie, richiama quella di Venus Xtravaganza nel documentario *Paris is Burning* commentato da Butler (1993: 121-140[b]) e Iveson (2012). Un breve raffronto con la storia di Venus può offrire alcuni spunti per comprendere il particolare tipo di resistenza agita da Birdy. Proprio come nelle competizioni documentate in *Paris is Burning*, il criterio di valutazione della buona riuscita della performance di Birdy è l'"*effect* of naturalness" (21[c]). Il fatto di costruire la naturalità per sembrare reali mette in crisi il carattere naturale delle norme, sia nel caso di Venus che in quello di Birdy. Tuttavia, Venus cerca di cambiare sesso e razza non solo a livello di percezione di sé o nella ristretta comunità delle competizioni *drag* dei locali di Harlem, ma a livello sociale. Desidera, insomma, essere riconosciuta come donna bianca *autentica*. La pratica trasformativa di Birdy, come abbiamo visto, se si considera il suo rapporto con gli altri umani, è rivolta "all'interno", nel senso che non mira al riconoscimento di un'identità non umana da parte degli altri umani, ma a sentirsi compiutamente a proprio agio in tale identità. Tuttavia, se si considera il suo rapporto con gli uccelli, il suo desiderio è quello di essere accolto fra loro come membro del gruppo. La differenza più significativa fra il suo caso e quello di Venus è però un'altra. Se per quest'ultima la riuscita della performance significa accedere ai privilegi della borghesia bianca, per Birdy diventare un uccello (da allevamento) significa letteralmente finire in gabbia. L'omicidio di Venus mostra l'impossibilità, da parte di un cliente di quest'ultima e più in generale del consesso sociale, di accettare un corpo non conforme alla performance, di confrontarsi con ciò che tale performance svela. Ma la violenza psichiatrica subita da Birdy non è così lontana da tale dinamica: in entrambi i casi, "there are cruel and fatal social constraints on denaturalization" (BUTLER 1993: 133[d]).

In primo luogo, Birdy de-natura l'umanità, mostrando che è possibile costruire un soggetto non umano, almeno fino a un certo punto, utilizzando qualcosa di simile alle "tecnologie del sé" foucaultiane (FOUCAULT

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[a]   213.
[b]   111-127.
[c]   "*Effetto* di naturalità" (53).
[d]   "I limiti sociali alla de-naturazione sono crudeli e letali" (122).

1984: 16[a]; 1988: 17-18[b]), come suggerito da Wharton stesso in un'intervista (Chmlielewski 1997: 2). Quello di Birdy è infatti un progetto di soggettivazione a partire da pratiche ben definite. Birdy si esercita con le braccia per prepararsi al volo; modella il proprio fisico controllandone il peso e le forme; struttura tempi e spazi per l'osservazione degli uccelli; costruisce macchine per il volo; esercita la forza di volontà in vista della possibilità di volare. Ma è solo quando abbandona il volontarismo e si rende conto che nel mondo reale non potrà volare, che compare la tecnologia più potente, il sogno controllato. Il protagonista raggiunge in breve tempo una padronanza di tale tecnica sufficiente a costruire un sé onirico in grado di portare a compimento la transizione di specie fino in fondo, giungendo alla percezione del mondo dal punto di vista di un canarino, e al contempo conservando il contatto con "Birdy-ragazzo", che nei sogni costituirà egli stesso un elemento fondamentale per agevolare il *passing*. Quando Birdy dovrà ricominciare a comportarsi come un umano per poter uscire dal manicomio, il processo di transizione di specie avvenuto in sogno avrà ormai prodotto effetti sulla vita reale tali per cui sarà necessario un vero e proprio ri-apprendimento attraverso alcune tecniche speculari a quelle usate per divenire uccello, come (re)imparare a mangiare con il cucchiaio (Wharton 1978: 153[c]). Mangiare con le posate è infatti parte della performance di specie, uno degli atti reiterati che ci consentono di costituirci come "non-animali".

In secondo luogo, la sua performance ottiene anche dei parziali successi, rilevati in particolare dai lapsus di Al, per cui l'amico in manicomio viene "imbeccato" (22[d]), oppure "scosta le ali" (152[e]), e anche dal corteggiamento di una cornacchia (9[f]). Ma Birdy, come Venus, viene richiamato all'ordine di una materialità corporea percepita ostinatamente come essenza ultima e portatrice del senso più profondo – là il pene di Venus, qua le braccia inadatte al volo di Birdy.

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[a]   18.
[b]   13.
[c]   172.
[d]   32.
[e]   172.
[f]   17.

5. Il riconoscimento oltre la specie

Come emerso sopra, per comprendere in profondità le implicazioni della transizione di specie nel romanzo di Wharton, è importante ricordare che la performatività non è un processo individuale, neppure nel senso della costruzione parallela dell'"umano" e dell'"animale". Come sostengono Birke, Bryld e Lykke (2004) è necessario dare

> a closer look at the participation of the animal actors, and focusing on the performativity of the two participants in relationship to create something that transcends both – a higher order phenomenon. Thus, there are three kinds of performativity [...]: of animality, of humannness, *and of the relationship between the two* (176[a]).

Infatti, se è vero che le tecniche usate dal protagonista del romanzo per diventare un uccello sono sostanzialmente individuali, occorre notare che egli tesse una complessa trama di rapporti con i canarini, nella realtà e nel sogno. La capacità di "passare per" un canarino si misura sempre nel rapporto con Perta, con i figli accuditi insieme a lei, e con gli altri canarini in gabbia. Il presupposto di tale interesse per queste relazioni è la credenza in una sorta di mondo segreto dei canarini, non accessibile agli umani (Wharton 1978: 98[b]). Acquisire il linguaggio degli uccelli è una tappa ineludibile per rispecchiarsi nell'altra: "I'm trying to decide how to tell her what I am. I'm trying to decide what I am, too" (226[c]). L'importanza di un riconoscimento da parte di Perta è espresso da Birdy in modo molto lucido:

> Perta is watching me. She is telling me that I am a bird; that I am to forget all this nonsense of the boy [...]. If I can see myself with her eyes, then I am a bird in her world. I leg go. I settle deeply into the life I've always wanted. I become, I rebecome, a bird in this world of the dream (229[d]).

[a] "Uno sguardo più da vicino alla partecipazione degli attori animali, concentrandosi sulla performatività dei due partecipanti alla relazione tesa a creare qualcosa che li trascenda entrambi – un fenomeno di ordine superiore. Pertanto, vi sono tre tipi di performatività [...]: quella dell'animalità, quella dell'umanità *e quella della relazione fra le due*".

[b] 114.

[c] "Sto cercando di decidere in che maniera dirle chi sono. Sto cercando di decidere chi sono, anche" (250).

[d] "Perta mi sta osservando. Mi sta dicendo che io sono un uccello; che devo lasciar perdere sciocchezze da ragazzo [...]. Se riesco a vedermi con i suoi occhi, allora sono un uccello nel suo mondo. Lascio perdere. Mi accampo nella vita che ho sempre desiderato, mi ci radico. Divento, ridivento, un uccello in questo mondo di sogno" (253).

Del resto, Perta viene prima "creata" in sogno, e poi, instaurato un rapporto, viene cercata nel mondo reale. Birdy la trova quindi in uno degli allevamenti amatoriali che frequenta. Viene creata almeno due volte: la prima come idea di partner di Birdy-uccello, la seconda come esemplare selezionato dalle tecniche di allevamento. Inoltre, Perta *diviene ciò che è* grazie alle pratiche di Birdy-ragazzo, che la colloca in gabbia, la fa accoppiare, riproducendo le condizioni di vita del sogno, e soprattutto le conferisce un nome proprio.

Ed è il nome che sancisce la prima forma di riconoscimento, dal momento in cui la canarina chiama Birdy in sogno con il suo nome, pur non sapendolo (214-215[a]): "The use of language is itself enabled by *first* having been *called a name*, the occupation of the name is that by which one is, quite without choice, situated within discourse" (BUTLER 1993: 122[b]). Analogamente a quanto accade nel caso dei/lle transessuali – ma qui a maggior ragione, poiché non viene scelto dalla persona –, il nome acquisisce una particolare importanza soltanto nella relazione con l'altro, nella possibilità di essere interpellat* con il proprio nome (ARFINI 2007: 58). Proprio perché "recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject" (BUTLER 1993: 226[c]), questo passaggio sancisce la soggettivazione di Birdy-uccello, che ora è libero di agire socialmente da canarino, accedendo a ulteriori forme di riconoscimento, in cui il suo desiderio si rispecchia in quello di Perta e di altri canarini, dando vita a un processo di apprendimento e di innamoramento al tempo stesso: "There is a transfer of feeling, knowing, one to the other" (WHARTON 1978: 229[d]). Anche il sé-ragazzo è un polo di riferimento, la cui importanza è esemplificata nella funzione quasi-divina di colui che apre e chiude le gabbie. Quando nel sogno Birdy-uccello non riesce a comunicare con il "ragazzo", le conseguenze sono radicali: "So I don't exist" (242[e]).

Ma anche nel rapporto con gli umani la questione del nome è centrale. "Birdy", infatti, è solo un soprannome. A differenza di quanto accade con Al (diminutivo di Alphonso), il vero nome di Birdy non viene mai rivelato. In contrasto parziale con l'immagine iniziale di un "semplice" malato di mente che si crede uccello, il fatto che tutti usino questo soprannome

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[a]   235.
[b]   "L'utilizzazione della lingua è autorizzata dal fatto che si sia, *in precedenza*, *ricevuto un nome*. L'occupazione di un nome è ciò che, senza possibilità di scelta, ci colloca all'interno del discorso" (112).
[c]   "Il riconoscimento non è […] conferito a un soggetto, ma forma il soggetto" (168).
[d]   "C'è un trapasso di sentimenti, di cognizioni dall'uno all'altra" (253).
[e]   "Quindi non esisto" (268).

rafforza l'identificazione di Birdy con gli uccelli e sancisce una ambigua forma di riconoscimento sociale che comprende però, accanto al riconoscimento della centralità del suo desiderio di divenire uccello, una forma di ridicolizzazione di questo stesso desiderio. In ogni caso, il soprannome richiama ancora l'umanità del protagonista. Quando finalmente riuscirà a volare all'aperto, in sogno, egli abbandonerà anche questo nome: "I'm forgetting I'm Birdy; I'm a real bird and it isn't a dream" (244[a]). A differenza del caso del nome scelto dalle persone transessuali, che sancisce una rottura con l'identità di genere attribuita alla nascita, nel caso del nome associato all'identità di specie bisogna considerare che la prerogativa di attribuire nomi è umana, e pertanto la transizione verso un'identità di specie non umana può configurarsi come la semplice rinuncia a un nome.

Birdy abbandona abbastanza presto una concezione del mondo improntata a un ingenuo realismo, in cui gli uccelli sono dotati di esistenza indipendente da lui e dai nomi che gli umani conferiscono loro (98[b]). Il fatto che successivamente egli concepisca Perta come un prodotto dei suoi sogni potrebbe far pensare a una negazione assoluta dell'*agency* di questi animali, incapaci di vita propria. Tuttavia, occorre ricordare alcuni fatti. Per esempio, fra gli episodi inaugurali dell'interesse del protagonista per gli uccelli, vi è quello in cui è lui stesso a essere scelto da due piccioni, e non viceversa (4-5[c]). Inoltre, l'imprevisto emerge più volte nel corso della narrazione proprio sotto forma di *agency* animale, laddove piccioni e canarini introducono la propria imprevedibile volontà nella relazione.

Queste relazioni fra Birdy e gli uccelli sono caratterizzate da una tensione irrisolvibile fra cura e innamoramento, da una parte, e sfruttamento ed eterodeterminazione, dall'altra. Le azioni che denotano una propensione alla cura si manifestano, soprattutto nella seconda parte del romanzo, in molte occasioni. Non si tratta solo del fatto, di per sé ovvio, che l'allevamento comporti alcune forme di cura come nutrire, predisporre spazi abitabili o preoccuparsi delle condizione di salute e di stress degli uccelli. Birdy compie anche azioni consapevolmente in contrasto con il proprio interesse economico. Per esempio, sceglie di non far fare un'ulteriore covata alla coppia di canarini riproduttori, Birdie e Alfonso, per preservarne la salute, poiché è entrato in rapporto piuttosto stretto con entrambi: "I hate it when people

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[a]   "Dimentico di essere Birdy. Sono un vero uccello e non è un sogno" (271).
[b]   114.
[c]   11-12.

tell me they're doing something for my own good, and here I am doing it to Birdie e Alfonso" (168[a]). Quando sperimenta sui canarini applicando loro dei pesi per studiarne le capacità di volo, Birdie e Alfonso vengono esentati in virtù di questo rapporto "speciale". Ma è soprattutto quando si rende conto della differenza fra la vita in gabbia e quella all'aria aperta che si adopera per migliorare la vita dei canarini in evidente contrasto con quanto richiesto dall'allevamento in quanto attività a scopo di lucro.

Accanto a tali aspetti, occorre considerare che l'idea stessa di intraprendere l'allevamento per la riproduzione come attività redditizia emerge, in primo luogo, per giustificare agli occhi dei genitori il possesso di diversi esemplari di canarino nella propria stanza. Indubbiamente, però, Birdy sfrutta gli uccelli per la riproduzione, ne vende i figli, decide chi deve accoppiarsi con chi, dove e quando. Per sperimentare le capacità di volo, oltre ad applicare pesi alle zampe, giunge a strappare diverse penne ai canarini (188-189[b]). La contraddizione fra cura e sfruttamento emerge chiaramente quando dovrà vendere alcuni dei piccoli in sovrannumero: "I hate to think about selling them, especially the children of Birdie and Alfonso. Still, making money is the excuse I have for keeping my birds" (236[c]).

Tale tensione fra due modalità di relazione viene significativamente influenzata dalle azioni dei canarini. Gli uccelli sono attori a pieno titolo sia nel senso di partner che in quello di soggetti in grado di mettere in campo tutto l'armamentario della resistenza non umana al dominio (Cappellini, Reggio 2014; Colling 2017). La collocazione altalenante del protagonista fra "amore" per gli animali e loro sfruttamento subisce, non a caso, uno spostamento significativo da quando egli cattura i piccioni, sperimenta (anche in modo cruento) sui canarini (Wharton 1978: 56[d]) o sistematizza la propria attività di allevamento, a quando esprimerà sia una presa di coscienza della propria posizione economica e politica dominante ("I feel like a slave trader"; 186[e]), sia una solidarietà attiva. Tanto l'aspetto relazionale della transizione di Birdy quanto il ruolo attivo dei canarini meritano di essere sottolineati come aspetti fondamentali.

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[a]   "Odio chi mi dice che fa qualcosa per il mio bene e io, ecco, adesso faccio questo per il bene di Birdie e Alfonso" (188).

[b]   208.

[c]   "Non ci posso pensare, a venderli, specie i figli di Alfonso e Birdie, tuttavia far dei soldi è la scusa che ho per tenere gli uccelli" (262).

[d]   71.

[e]   "Mi pare di essere un mercante di schiavi" (205).

6. Conclusioni

Per quanto emerso sopra, la comprensione delle implicazioni delle azioni di Birdy passa inevitabilmente dalla domanda sul loro successo o fallimento, e sui motivi che lo determinano. Si fa qui riferimento alla prima accezione dei due termini, discussa sopra, secondo la quale il successo di una performance *drag* risiede nella sua capacità di favorire la sovversione della norma egemonica, mettendone a nudo il carattere non naturale, mostrando il funzionamento delle performance che presiedono alla costruzione dell'identità di genere (o specie) e svelando l'impossibilità di incarnare compiutamente la norma stessa. In tal senso, ci si può chiedere se Birdy sia in grado – e fino a che punto lo sia – di smascherare la costruzione del soggetto umano in quanto "non animale" tramite l'*animal drag*, di svelare il carattere performativo e violento della rigida corrispondenza fra specie biologica e identità di specie e se riesca a mettere in discussione la possibilità di incarnare perfettamente l'idea di umano, o se al contrario la sua performance non finisca per riconfermare la netta distinzione fra identità di specie umane e non umane, rassicurando il lettore sulla stabilità di tali identità. Tuttavia, sarebbe fuorviante porre tale questione pretendendo una risposta semplicemente affermativa o negativa. Al contrario, si potrebbe dire, usando proprio le parole di Butler (1993) a proposito di *Paris is Burning*, che *Birdy* "documents neither an efficacious insurrection nor a painful resubordination, but an unstable coexistence of both" (131[a]).

Ed è proprio questa coesistenza che può fornirci degli importanti elementi di riflessione sul modo in cui si forma la soggettività umana e quella animale, ma soprattutto su come esse si co-costituiscono in una relazione in cui non c'è un solo attore, ma almeno due. La particolare forma di *agency* di cui si può parlare tenendo conto della non esistenza di un soggetto preesistente alla propria specie (né al proprio genere) caratterizza sia umani che canarini. In tale relazione, la lezione foucaultiana relativa all'inscindibilità di soggettivazione e assoggettamento viene confermata sia per quanto riguarda la soggettivazione umana che per quanto riguarda quella non umana: il ruolo delle tecniche di allevamento, per esempio, va ben al di là della loro applicazione sui corpi degli uccelli, dato che informa il processo di costituzione del soggetto-Birdy attraverso un complesso gioco fra relazione con singoli

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[a]   "Non documenta né una efficace insurrezione né una dolorosa ri-subordinazione, ma una instabile coesistenza di entrambe" (126-127).

canarini (Perta e altri), proiezioni ideali relative alla "natura" di queste specie in cattività, utilizzo di tecniche di gestione del corpo umano (reclusione manicomiale, esercizi di riadattamento alle abitudini umane, ecc.).

Per esplorare il modo in cui si forma l'idea *politica* di specie occorre tenere presente la relazione fra meccanismo di umanizzazione e di animalizzazione (senza contare che, al posto di animalizzazione sarebbe più opportuno parlare di *animalizzazioni*). In tal senso, il romanzo di Wharton fornisce molti spunti utili per illustrare la complessità dei meccanismi di soggettivazione umana / non umana. Gli strumenti utilizzati per analizzare il romanzo si sono rivelati preziosi sia per comprendere la costruzione dell'"Umano" che per mettere in discussione la rigidità oppressiva del binarismo di specie. Anche se nessuno di questi costrutti teorici esaurisce, da solo, le modalità con cui Birdy negozia la propria identità con le norme, il romanzo di Wharton, letto attraverso tali strumenti, illustra l'analogia fra performatività di genere e di specie, e permette di approfondire alcuni aspetti di tale parallelo presentati nei precedenti lavori sul tema, come l'importanza dell'*agency* animale, il peso della relazione fra soggetti umani e non umani e il rapporto fra *trouble* di genere e *trouble* di specie, fra desiderio non eterosessuale e desiderio interspecifico. "Animale" non è tanto qualcosa che "si è", quanto qualcosa che "si fa", ma soprattutto è qualcosa che si fa *insieme*.

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in memoriam
Paola di Cori as a queer feminist intellectual and scholar

Marco Pustianaz

Fig. 1 – Paola Di Cori

At the time of the CIRQUE conference in L'Aquila, Paola already suffered from mobility problems. She had accepted the invitation to submit a paper, but later called me to say that she didn't feel like traveling, really. Cancer was taking its toll, making her weaker. Repeated bouts of chemical treatments, too, and the exhausting experience of dealing with medical institutions and clinical protocols left her at times with little or no energy, despite her indomitable passion for life, intellectual work and networking.

I understood. Then, she said to me, "Why don't you present my paper on my behalf?". I didn't expect this, but I knew it was a way for her to attend the conference, by passing through my voice. This is how her paper found its way to the conference: through a friend's voice, mine. On November 6ᵗʰ, 2017 Paola left us from her temporary bed in a Roman clinic. The last time I visited her was slightly unsettling: as the body was preparing itself to death, her mind was spiraling out into visions of new projects, one of which was her intention to revise the first draft of her paper on "Queer Narratives of Cancer". Still bigger projects involved her passionate interest to further develop a working group on the medical gaze, formed mainly by patients: the group had already met a few times and had started producing early sketches of reflections. Paola just would not give in to her illness. As soon as cancer had started to bite into her, she was ready to face the challenge and fight it with her own preferred weapons: intellectual curiosity, passionate indisciplinarity and political engagement. This is what she had taught me ever since we met, more than twenty years earlier, while she was lecturing at the University of Turin.

The way her body and her mind flew into wildly different directions, on that bed where she was confined in her final days, stirred in me conflicting feelings: in a way, I clearly anticipated her death, but had to suppress its impending presence in front of her bursts of apparent vitality. A vitality without purpose, it seemed to me. I felt a bit angry, even. Angry at my 'superior' knowledge, useless in itself. Angry at her childish ignorance of her own limits: in other words, angry at her blessing. Moreover, where would all that energy go once she had left us in this world? I felt I could never be equal to that unvoiced request: to carry that energy and conviction further, to keep on animating other people, even when the end is near, already upon us. I went home, back to Paola's paper to which I had lent my voice in L'Aquila. I recalled when she first told me about the topic she had chosen. I was half moved, half appalled. I could see she had decided to deal with cancer by displacing it through Eve K. Sedgwick's writing about her own cancer, added as a side note to his friend's battle with AIDS. I thought: how typical of Paola not to indulge in personal details, trying the utmost not to draw attention to herself! Thus, her cancer became relevant only as a pointer to a history of cancer, of breast cancer in particular, to a feminist history of the body. This way, her cancer ceased to be just her own. This way, it could be made good (I shudder at using this expression, but I still

dare say it), shareable in that it merged with a host of other cancers. However, this was no ordinary, shameful way of closeting one's illness into the secret of privacy; on the contrary, it was a way to turn one's own private illness into one that could speak, and be spoken of, as part of a collective discourse. Seen in this light, Eve's cancer could very well stand for her own cancer, too, if Paola so decided. So she decided.

A strategy of indirection. Your life and your words always go through the lives, and the words, of others. Sometimes you can choose which lives and which words will speak together with your own. To Paola, a child of 1968 as she would often describe herself, that collective voice had belonged to the project of feminism. She had devoted the best part of her life to the utopia of feminism. As a historian, though, she was always deeply conscious of the gaps, the discontinuities, the imperfect labor of memory, and the mishaps in the transmission from one generation to another. She believed that feminism could only survive if it got transformed anew by the younger generations. There was an irrepressible urge in Paola not only to fight against any authority principle, including that of established feminists, but also a burning desire to avoid placing 'women' in any given place, or identity. There was nothing which could prescribe in advance what women could be, would be or would do, or what they might do, or where they might go. This made her even more passionate about feminism. At least, this is what I understood of her allegiance to feminism: a passion about a subject that was in the making, coupled with an unwavering belief in anti-authoritarianism, with indisciplinarity and nomadism. Born in Argentina of a Jewish family, Paola lived most of her life in Italy, especially in Rome, but she preserved a transnational, even diasporic, perspective – rooted in her knowledge of Spanish, French and English – that often sat ill at ease within the Italian national context. As she points out in the short entry written for *Queer in Italia*: "I have to confess I have felt very isolated [in Italy], which is why I have spent long periods in the United States, England and paid short visits to Australia (between 1979 and 1990 I spent 5 years outside of Italy, a total of 10 in 30 years!)" (Di Cori 2011: 70). In the same text, she spoke of her frequent journeys to Argentina in the 1990's and her connections with the queer scene in Buenos Aires, in particular the trans activist group ALITT led by Lohana Berkins. Re-reading that text, I also find one of the rare instances of Paola's (sexual?) positioning, when she defines herself in passing as "an

aging hetero-queer feminist (Di Cori 2011: 74).

In a way, Paola had always assumed that gender and queer studies (and activism) were contiguous, part of the same wider field of alliances. She clearly recognized that queer theory was one of the outgrowths of Anglo-American feminism, itself developed as part of an intense transatlantic conversation that had merged 'French theory', post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and so on. She was nomadic, I believe, less because of her own transnational connections than because in her eyes feminism itself had grown out of national contexts while far exceeding those boundaries. Therefore, while deeply sensitive to the contingent limits (and situated opportunities) of 'place', Paola never thought of it as inherently bounded: more as a porous and workable social terrain. This belief would lead her to investigate the work of Michel de Certeau (with her only book project nearly completed at the time of her death). Speaking of herself, however, she repeatedly identified as one "out of place", who also actively contributed to her own out-of-placeness wherever she was: in the university, even in feminist circles, especially in Italy. Maybe, it was for this reason that the term 'queer' fit her so well, or at least I thought so, even though she used it so sparingly in her writings. To feel placed and yet deny the integrity of that place, to work at odds with one's own place, yet with people who belong to you, in that they move about and share your 'place'. This was the restless nature of Paola's inherent nomadism, less marketable than others, for sure, but deeply insisted upon, doggedly even. She interpreted such a (dis)location as queer, the common place attracting those subjectivities that make a place different to itself, turning themselves as both displaced *and* displacing agents.

In the late 1980s, Paola helped introduce gender studies in an Italian context that was highly resistant to it: she translated Joan Scott's influential essay "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" and started heralding a renewal of feminist thought in Italy, entertaining a constant dialogue with what was happening elsewhere, especially in Anglophone feminism: from the post-colonial debates to the "sex wars", and finally the "queer moment". When we first met in the mid-Nineties, she was deeply into Foucault and introduced me to a queer reading of his work. She was the right sort of feminist that could empower my queer thinking. Indeed, she was such an avid reader that throughout her life she would always be quick in recommending something to read that would help my thinking,

rather than just her own. Yet, nothing would be spared by her critical sharpness, not even the most interesting new approaches from the Anglophone world. Even when championing gender studies, for instance, she would invariably start from carefully teasing out their historical, cultural and political implications, pointing out the erratic path of translating terms from one context to another (cf. her essay in *Generi di traverso*, DI CORI 2000). She was always wary of embracing the newest ideas coming from abroad, not because of any conservatism, but because of her overarching interest in transmission and translation: what to do with those ideas in this context, for whom and with whom? It seemed that for Paola feminist utopia had to be tempered by political wisdom, a sense of pragmatism that was all the more necessary because of the fragility of any non-, or anti-institutional movement. Nothing else would secure the preservation of such heritage but the careful working out of ways to pass it on. Most of her feminist cultural politics dealt with issues of memory, affect and memory making (therefore, with teaching and pedagogy, too).

When I proposed to publish Paola's paper in the first issue of *Whatever*, I was acutely aware of the ethical implications of such a transmission. I had only a draft with me, though fairly structured and with a handful of bibliographical notes and references. I knew that this writing, like the paper in its oral delivery before it, would have to go through my hands once again. She had trusted me enough to present it through my voice the first time. Would she trust me again, though no longer living, to take it into my hands and prepare it for its next stage? On her deathbed, she had anticipated working on it, which made it harder for me to take over. On my last visit to the clinic, I did not have the courage to ask her permission to publish the paper as a draft, because by asking such a question I would have doubted her own faith in recovery. So here I am, this time without permission, once again taking her words and shifting them ever so slightly. I have corrected a few mistakes, added missing information, struck out a few repetitions, changed place to a couple of paragraphs, amended some English. I have taken liberties with an unfinished text, while imagining to negotiate with Paola some small strategies to produce a second (no less unfinished) version, one which inevitably carries not just her voice, but mine too. I don't know, really, if this is ok. I have been thinking of Paola, of her cancer muted (transmuted, rather) behind Eve's cancer, itself only a small part of an essay that foregrounds Michael Lynch's white glasses

and his AIDS-worn body. In Sedgwick's essay, his friend is temporarily recovering, while she has discovered in the meantime that she is sick with cancer. Paola's (provisional, unfinished) reading of "White Glasses" starts with a breast (Eve's, her own, all women's, both sick and healthy, raped and assertive), then lingers rather longer on Eve's Bardo, the transitional state between life and death. Indeed, through a certain shift in the use of her critical sources, "Queer Narratives of Cancer" toys with cultural history but increasingly turns into a meditation on Sedgwick's movement towards death, on her transitional state of being. Thus, she ends up performing her own belated obituary of Eve, while experiencing a bodily connection that bridges the temporal gap between the two queer feminist scholars. A cancerous, affective proximity amplified by the gaps opening between reading and writing, between a draft version and a published one.

Was she in some sort of Bardo (between herself and Eve, trans-identifying with her, like Eve did with her friend Michael?) when she wrote this paper? In Paola's text. "White Glasses" is often referred to as a paper, rather than an essay, even though the version she read could not be the paper delivered at the MLA conference, but the version finally published, first by Duke UP, then by Routledge. I am noticing only now that I have normalized the oscillation, so as to make it consistent with the 'historical truth' of "White Glasses" being accessible only as an essay in *Tendencies*, as opposed to its previous state of conference paper being read. By interfering with this oscillation, by interpreting it as a 'mistake', I am interrupting the shifting suspension between paper and essay, orality and writing: did Paola wish to *hear* "White Glasses" from Eve's voice, rather than *read* it from the book? What is remarkable is that the 'mistake' in Paola's draft paper is also one of temporality, as though Paola was haunted by Eve's paper, i.e., by its previous, contingent performance at the MLA conference. This queer moment, overlapping with the doubleness of cancer in both writers, helps Eve's published essay revert impossibly to its oral form. In Paola's paper and thanks to her slippage, Eve's "White Glasses" is at the same time the paper and the essay by the same name, asynchronously. (Paola's collected volume of essays bears the title *Asincronie del femminismo*, "feminist asynchronies"). My normalizing move, on the other hand, performs a different queer temporality. By removing the traces of incompletion, error and uncertainty, I am attempting the impossible: to turn her *paper*, fractured by Paola's death, into an *essay*, something that it will never become, lingering

forever in its own Bardo. In doing so, I inscribe my own affect, pushing this paper towards a foreclosed future, in the same way that Paola was over-hearing the audible traces of Eve's paper coming from its past.

In doing so, I realize I have also inscribed my own obituary of Paola, by using her own (indirect) obituary of Eve. Passing on life, across the (friendly) abyss of death.

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Queer narratives of cancer:
Eve K. Sedgwick's "White Glasses"

Paola Di Cori

(Buenos Aires 1946 – Roma 2017)

Abstract: Through a reading of "White Glasses", an essay included in Eve K. Sedgwick's *Tendencies*, this paper invites a double perspective: on the one hand, a comparative approach to feminist narratives of cancer (from Audre Lorde to Gayatri Spivak reading and translating Mahasweta Devi); on the other, a reflection on Sedgwick's contribution to queer thinking on temporality. It is also an attempt to broaden our own perception of Eve K. Sedgwick by turning to her later interest in Buddhism and textile art. Thus, the focus on "White Glasses" shifts between the temporal scale of Sedgwick's lifetime and the wider cultural history of feminist body politics in the 1980's and early '90s. This is the decade when feminism increasingly became queered, a shift that is followed here through the lens of AIDS, illness and bodily transformation – a nexus powerfully interrogated, and embodied, by Eve K. Sedgwick.

Keywords: cancer; breast turn; E. K. Sedgwick; feminism; queer temporality.

As it has happened to other heroines of 'queerland', Eve K. Sedgwick has been read and interpreted as though she were several different personalities in one, each heading in different directions. She was a brilliant literary critic, a specialist in late 19thC American, British and French literature, and a sophisticated interpreter of Henry James in particular. Moreover, she has been unanimously considered the founder and one of the leading characters of queer theoretical thinking, one of the initiators of the affective turn in the humanities. Together with Susan Sontag and Audre Lorde, Sedgwick has also been among the earliest feminist intellectuals to write about her personal experience of breast cancer, the pioneer of an original genre of autobiography combining poems, personal memories, her shrinks' notes, and much more.

The paper "White Glasses" was delivered in 1991 at an MLA conference as a homage to her friend and writer Michael Lynch, who was dying of AIDS. Soon after she began writing the paper, Sedgwick was diagnosed a breast cancer. A famous sentence from this text has often been quoted: «Shit, now I guess I really must be a woman». Indeed, Sedgwick's diagnosis

opened up for her a totally unexpected scenario: before knowing she was ill, Sedgwick's identification with her friend had been based on sharing a gay identity; after the cancer news arrived, her identification changed because of the life-threatening disease. Illness became for Sedgwick what falls "across the ontological crack between the living and the dead" (Sedgwick 1994: 252). Her female body and her political and sexual labels as feminist and gay no longer defined her identity: now her breast cancer did. Previously, Sedgwick had identified herself as a gay man married with a heterosexual man; she came to be associated with the term "queer" only after 1992, when the word began to spread outside gay and feminist circles.

"White Glasses" is included among the essays of *Tendencies* and provides a highly provocative analysis of the permanent instability of gender, age, race, sexuality when facing a mortal illness; it also gives an insightful account of the affective dimensions of people living with cancer. As usually, Sedgwick manages to ceaselessly question boundaries across disciplines and accepted identity classifications. Her paper lingers in a kind of hybrid space: a personal confession, a public homage to a colleague and friend, a way of taking position on issues of general interest from a theoretical and political point of view.

"White Glasses" is not an ordinary essay. It does not have any of the features of the papers that are generally written, delivered and listened to in conferences and seminars. First of all, it is written in the first person, which is unusual in academic contexts. The use of first personal pronouns characteristically began to be adopted in the 1970s, as one of the many effects of the increasing insistence by feminist, gay and lesbian, black and anti-racist activists on the equation: the personal is political. In fact, Sedgwick's essay has several focuses and it is not always clear which is paramount. On the one hand, Sedgwick is paying a special tribute to her friend Michael Lynch who was dying of AIDS, and offering a kind of obituary *avant la mort*. Moreover, Sedgwick had recently been diagnosed of breast cancer herself, so the essay is also a public personal confession about her own illness. Last but not least, the essay has also the theoretical ambition to reflect on the changes to sexual identity as a result of the illness being diagnosed: her breast has now become central in her life; cancer and mastectomy are key to an understanding of what female identity is about. As Sedgwick writes in "Queer and Now", the 1991 essay included in the same collection *Tendencies*:

> It's probably not surprising that gender is so strongly, so multiply valenced in the experience of breast cancer today. Received wisdom has it that being a breast cancer patient, even while it is supposed to pose unique challenges to one's sense of "femininity," nonetheless plunges one into an experience of almost archetypal Femaleness (SEDGWICK 1994: 12).

On the other hand, the paper is also a call concerning AIDS and activism in order to exert pressure for new drugs and better information.

As a result of all the many directions it is heading to, the essay has a sort of fluctuating movement. It begins with a healthy friend wishing to pay homage to a sick friend who is dying; yet, after a few pages the scene changes abruptly and turns upside down. The healthy friend Sedgwick has received a cancer diagnosis and is now sick, while the dying Lynch has regained some health and seems full of energy. The whole text swings back and forth, going through a constant oscillation between health and illness, physical decay and strength, life and death. To Sedgwick the inspiration to describe the intermediate state between life and death came from Sogyal Rinpoche's *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (1992). In this text, the concept of Bardo – indicating an intermediate state between life and death – is central.

To all this, I would like to add another crucial aspect: the focus on female breast. It is interesting to note the different role female breast played in theoretical debates on gender and sexual identities in the 1980s and 1990s. A few years before the publication of "White Glasses", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak had been debating the literary work of Mahaswetha Devi, the great Indian writer, in particular Devi's *Breast Stories* (DEVI 1997). In the 1970s and '80s, Devi wrote three short tales, subsequently translated into English by Spivak. Two of them are discussed at length in the well-known collection of essays published by Spivak in 1987, *In Other Worlds* (SPIVAK 1987). I will briefly refer to them as a sort of earlier echo, an anticipated response, to Sedgwick's paper from another geographical area.

If we take a look at the theoretical debates on sexual identities in those years, it is easy to realize that they were characterized by a kind of 'breast turn'. Very abstract debates on gender identity went hand in hand with important contributions advanced by empirical research in the social sciences, by body art and bodily performances.[1] Most importantly, this took

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[1]   The second half of the 1980s and early 1990's was a very rich period of theoretical contribu-

place at a crucial moment in the history of gay and lesbian communities. When "White Glasses" was presented as a paper, the fear of AIDS pandemic was at its peak; this was particularly true for gay and lesbian groups in cities like New York or San Francisco. The late 1980s and early 1990s can be seen as a very dramatic period in the history of these communities in the Anglophone world: AIDS panic was spreading. In the year 1987, AIDS killed almost 60,000 people worldwide and more than 40,000 were found HIV-positive in the United States alone. "ACT UP" – the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power – was founded in 1987 at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in Manhattan, New York, with the goal to provide support and information about the disease. The premiere of the well-known play by Tony Kushner *Angels in America* – a story about New York's gay community life in the 1980s – took place in New York in 1991.[2]

As Lisa Diedrich has shown (Diedrich 2006), Sontag's insistence on metaphors and ideas about cancer was in contrast with Sedgwick's focus on affect and affective strategies to deal with illness in general, in particular with AIDS and cancer. An important conference at Stony Brook in 2002 and the book that grew out of it – *The Voice of Breast Cancer in Medicine and Bioethics* (Rawlinson-Lundeen 2006) – have shown that self-reflection and humanist critique were not isolated efforts in their interest in breast cancer. At the time, there existed a great variety of

tions on sexual identities: Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" was first published in 1984; Leo Bersani's *The Freudian Body* in 1986, the same year as Joan Scott's essay, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis"; *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler came out in 1990. The first important monograph signed by Eve K. Sedgwick, *Between Men. English Literature and Homosocial Desire*, was published in 1980. The same period was also marked by an interest in breast cancer, as evidenced by Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals* (Lorde 1980) and by the first edition of *Dr.Susan Love's Breast Book* (1991) – the book that *The New York Times* described as "the bible of women with breast cancer" and one of the books that Sedgwick had open on her desk together with books by J. L. Austin, Henry James, and Mme de Sévigné (Sedgwick 1994: 9). Jo Spence's highly provocative photographs taken after her breast cancer diagnosis were exhibited in 1982 (*Cancer Shock*) and 1982-86 (*The Picture of Health?*). Mona Hatoum's exhibition *Corps Étranger* at the Centre Pompidou came in 1994. In 1997, Marilyn Yalom published *A History of the Breast* – a thorough survey of the cultural history of the female breast across the centuries (Yalom 1998).

[2]   Well-known films about cancer, AIDS, and the communities of friends and family support were released in those years: John Erman's *An Early Frost* (1985), *Les nuits fauves* by Cyril Collard (1992), Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia* (1993), *Jeffrey* by Christopher Ashley (1995), Jerry Zach's *Marvin's Room* (1996), adapted from the play by Scott McPherson (who died in 1992). The debate on queer theory and queer identities was just at its beginning. A special issue of the journal *differences* – now considered as a sort of inaugural manifesto – entitled "Queer Theory: Gay and Lesbian Sexualities" and edited by Teresa de Lauretis, was published in 1991.

interpretations, reactions and responses as a result of the rise of cancer figures in the United States, and of huge changes in health policies and medical treatments of the illness.What seems to me worthy of attention is that Sontag, Lorde and Sedgwick – in different ways and each with different purposes in mind – succeeded in merging intimate anxieties, clinical results, health policies, and political strategies, and transferring them into the public arena. The last two decades of the twentieth century showed an increasing 'coming out of the closet' of topics concerning sexual habits, unmentionable diseases, and the strategies of pharmaceutical industries. Highly provocative books such as Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, Lorde's *Cancer Journals*, Sedgwick's *Between Men* and *Epistemology of the Closet*, disclosed entire new worlds of thinking and looking at issues concerning life and death, personal identities, health and illness. Feminist and queer experiences of first-person narratives were key in showing the importance of the construction of public, legitimated voices on these matters. This is why Sedgwick commented on the changed meaning in the use of "I", both in the first pages of *Tendencies* and in her remarkable psychoanalytic/autobiographical diary *A Dialogue on Love* (1999).

It is interesting to emphasize the different focus on breast and cancer in Spivak and Sedgwick: whereas Spivak focuses on breast and its putrefaction by cancer, Sedgwick focuses on cancer and the breast's disappearance. To Sedgwick, breast is crucial to female identity: it becomes particularly so when it disappears as a result of mastectomy. Devi and Spivak both agree that breast is the essence of femininity and rots away because of patriarchal and capitalist violence. Cancer has different functions in Sedgwick's "White Glasses" and Devi's "The Breast-Giver". In Sedgwick's paper, cancer diagnosis has also, as it were, a liberating function, as it reveals an identity that had remained enigmatic until that moment; in Devi and Spivak cancer is the inevitable consequence of male violence, turning into a monument decrying the postcolonial and patriarchal strategies against the women of the Third World.

In the Western world, female naked breasts have been for centuries symbols of motherhood, religious devotion, eroticism. Since the 1960s and '70s breasts have undergone a big transformation: they have ceased to be imprisoned by bras and corsets. Women living in the Western world have started to exhibit their naked breasts on the beach, under T-shirts, and in the streets during political demonstrations. Breasts are located at the

center of the body, in the chest – the place of the heart, as they say. However, in the decades since the 1960s they have been represented not only as beautiful, rounded and fleshy parts of young bodies – as in the tradition of the Christian iconography of the Virgin –, they have also been shown as diseased body-parts, mutilated and injured.

An important shift occurred in the use of bodily parts as a political symbol: the displacement from vulva to breast. In the early 1970s the focus was predominantly on the vagina – as was shown by the monumental artistic installation *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago.[3] During the 1960s and '70s the most famous feminist gesture was the sign for the vagina, the triangle with the thumbs held upwards and the index fingers of both hands about to touch or pressed against each other. In the late 1970s through the '80s, this hand gesture was increasingly replaced by breast display. This way, the breast has undergone a profound transformation and become a complex bodily component: from being the center of religious devotion, erotic desire and artistic creativity, it has turned into a site of violence, the locus of mortal diseases, a disposable and replaceable part of the female body. Most importantly, it has become a political and theoretical weapon, an instrument capable of exerting criticism. Feminist demonstrations in recent years have shown women exhibiting their naked breasts as weapons, such as the Ukrainian group Femen. This trend can be found all over the world: on 7th February 2017 Argentinian women marched with their bare breasts in a demonstration ("Tetas Libres") campaigning for topless sunbathing in Buenos Aires.

In Spivak's and Devi's writings we read about a deeply material breast: it is the post-colonial breast of the subaltern Asian woman, naked, raped, wounded, bleeding, torn apart. In the last pages of Devi's "The Breast-Giver", we read:

The sores on her breast gaped more and more and the breast now looks like an

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[3]   Produced between 1974 and 1979, first exhibited in 1979, the installation table is now on permanent display at the Brooklyn Museum, New York. It consists of 39 place settings arranged along a triangular table that measures 48 feet (14,63 m) on each of the three sides and prepared for three groups of historically famous women, each of them consisting of 13 historical characters – from Theodora of Byzantium to Virginia Woolf and Georgia O'Keeffe. Each plate depicts a colored vulva with the woman's name and bears images related to her accomplishments. The installation has provoked innumerable controversies and critical responses by feminists and non-feminists, art critics and visitors (Jones 1996).

open wound. It is covered by a piece of thin gauze soaked in antiseptic lotion, but the sharp smell of putrefying flesh is circulating silently in the room's air like incense-smoke" (Devi 1997: 65).

When we read Sedgwick, however, we never look at the real breast, since it has disappeared after the mastectomy. Yet, we think intensely about this disappearance and the abstract substitution that has taken its place. Although an imaginary healthy breast and/or a sick breast are implicitly referred to, we never see either of them: there is no description of the sick breast, for instance, except for a few medical details of some oncological treatment. On the other hand, it is precisely because it is invisible that we can speculate about sexual identity.

Jane Gallop has recently written an important essay on the two books published by Sedgwick in 1992, *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Tendencies* (Gallop 2011). Gallop deals with some important issues raised by Sedgwick's "White Glasses", in particular one that is crucial for AIDS literature and cancer narratives, as well as being a favourite topic of Sedgwick: time and temporality. Indeed, everyday temporality is here essential. This is one of the many differences between Spivak's and Sedgwick's perspectives. While Spivak measures time in terms of centuries of colonialism and subaltern postcolonial agency, always looking at everyday life in terms of the inheritance of colonialism, Sedgwick focuses on the day-by-day progress of the illness in herself and among her friends. She accurately draws a kind of timeline in her essay: from a pre-obituary celebration of her friend Michael, to her cancer diagnosis; from working, living and sleeping with Michael, to the temporal span of illness. This oscillation allows her to construct a new dimension, a 'queer temporality'.

Sedgwick is interested in writing about this special way of experiencing time: "the temporality of the queer moment", as Barber and Clark have put it in the introduction to their book on Sedgwick (Barber, Clark 2002). They are referring to a poem written by Sedgwick in 1994, in which she mentions "the rack of temporalities". The poem is about AIDS: here temporality displays a tormented pace, a distorted twist due to the disease. Sedgwick will return to this queer moment in her writings on Proust. Beside her homage to Michael Lynch in "White Glasses", there is another brief obituary and homage in the book *Tendencies*, one dedicated to Craig Owens, who had died of AIDS in 1990. As Gallop comments, what is so interesting

in the time-twist that is typical of Sedgwick's queer moment is not just a reference to death, but also to reading and writing.

As a matter of fact, "White Glasses" is shot through and intersected by comments on temporal contradictions while writing her paper. They are related to health and disease, life and death:

> When I decided to write "White Glasses" four months ago, I thought my friend Michael Lynch was dying and I thought I was healthy. Unreflecting, I formed my identity as the prospective writer of this piece around the obituary presumption that my own frame for speaking, the margin of my survival and exemption, was the clearest thing in the world. In fact it was totally opaque: Michael didn't die; I wasn't healthy [...]. So I got everything wrong (SEDGWICK 1994: 250).

Found at the end of *Tendencies*, "the unsettling temporality of 'White Glasses' is in a way the temporality of the entire volume" (GALLOP 2011: 70). Again, the dedication of the book – "in memory of Michael Lynch" – plays with someone who was at the time of writing still alive. Therefore, the book itself is located in a sort of uncanny time: this is precisely the "continuing moment", "the moment of queer to be sure, and of gay men dying of AIDS" (GALLOP 2011: 70). Therefore, the "continuing moment" of queer temporality is, as it were, a sort of oxymoron, an anachronistic element within general temporality. Moreover, as Sedgwick said in an interview in 2000, we have to add the urgency that is typical of a mortal disease. Such an urgency had been anticipated by the first essay of *Tendencies*, "Queer and Now", whose very title indicates an insistence on time, the felt need to do things very quickly. Yet, what is central here is also an aspect belonging to Oriental culture, which I have mentioned earlier on: the concept of Bardo from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. It refers to an intermediate, transitional state, an in-between state referring to the existence between one's own past and future lives on earth. Metaphorically, it describes the moment when our way of life becomes 'suspended', as in periods of illness, or in states of intense meditation.

In the last part of her life, Sedgwick traveled to Asia and immersed herself in Buddhism, attracted by its ever-shifting relationality and metamorphosis. As a consequence, she began to abandon writing in favor of textile work. Her exhibition *In the Bardo* was presented at the CUNY Graduate Center in 2000. As Maggie Nelson – Sedgwick's doctoral

student who reviewed the exhibition – put it: it is an installation of fiber art, "in the form of a dozen or so stuffed figures hanging from the ceiling, clothed in different kinds of cloth, paper, felt, in varying shades of indigo blue" (Nelson 2000). Sedgwick's hanging figures represent aspects of her experience in the Bardo: "the disorienting and radically denuding bodily sense generated by medical imaging processes and illness itself", on the one hand, and "the material urges to dress, to ornament, to mend, to re-cover, and heal" on the other.

From "White Glasses" onwards, that is, from the public announcement of her cancer diagnosis, Sedgwick began to reflect increasingly on time and temporality. Moreover, she radically changed her main intellectual references, too. Jason Edwards's excellent book on Sedgwick takes the reader through the various new aspects of her life and thought: the changes brought about by her illness, mastectomy, lymph and spine cancer, her travels to Asia, her depression and psychoanalytical experience, her textile art and Buddhist interests, her poetry (Edwards 2009). Last but not least, as Edwards writes, it is important to emphasize the changes undergone by Eve's use of the personal pronoun 'I' throughout all these years, from her AIDS militancy to the cancer diagnosis, throughout the different stages of the disease, to her new interests in Buddhism, Melanie Klein and affect theories.[4]

Sedgwick's writings of the 1990s open up new ways to understand subjectivity and identity. "White Glasses" (indeed, the book *Tendencies* as a whole), the autobiographical account *A Dialogue on Love* (1999) and *The Weather in Proust* (the posthumous book edited by Jonathan Goldberg in 2011) are all key stages in the attempt by this extraordinary woman and scholar to confront theoretical and political conflicts, and deal with personal and intimate emergencies at the same time. Recently, Robyn Wiegman has captured this predictive and prefigurative element in Sedgwick's thinking through writing, and suggested an eighth axiom to the seven field-defining axioms that open *Epistemology of the Closet*: "it is impossible to know in advance how anyone will need to travel the distance

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4   "Living at the threshold of an ever more extinguished identity, Sedgwick is no longer seeking to grasp at the first persona as though it were a specimen to be immobilized rather than a vagrant place-holder. She has also become increasingly unconcerned with things that isolate or immobilize potential selves and now embraces a profound consciousness of impermanence." (Edwards 2009: 134-35).

between her desire and the world in which those desires must (try to) live" (Wiegman 2012: 159).

As Judith Butler has summed up in her own essay on Sedgwick: "she is profoundly conceptual, although the concepts are very often staged in a certain relation to one another that produces dissonance and insight. They are also, almost always, inextricable from figures, from tone, from a form of political lyricism" (Butler 2002: 109).

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Fig. 2 – Eve K. Sedgwick in the 1980s

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