

Melissa Marie Bruno

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To Be Is Not To Be: An Analysis of Subversive [Inter]Play and Dependence in Queer  
Theory

As Michel Foucault delineates in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (1978), we will always be in the fold of power as we can never escape the parameters power that cannot escape. Accordingly, Judith Butler, in her article “Critically Queer,” reiterates that “freedom, possibility, agency do not have an abstract or pre-social status, but are always negotiated within a matrix of power,”<sup>1</sup> a matrix, she argues, that privileges heterosexuality. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler defines the “heterosexual matrix” as a “grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, heterosexual orientation/desire is considered to be the norm, a concept which Michael Warner calls “heteronormativity”—the political articulation of the normativity of heterosexuality as “the elemental form of human association...as the invisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society would not exist.”<sup>3</sup> Queer theory challenges and refutes normativity—any normative structure(s)—and places a specific focus on heteronormativity. As such, Queer theory is a politics of subversion. However, in order to be subversive, Queer theory necessitates a subject/concept, an other, to subvert. In this

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” *GLQ* 17. 32 (1993): 22.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 151.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Warner, “Introduction,” In *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxi.

respect, Queer theory can be considered a dependant, antithetical, even antagonistic theory insofar as it wants to destabilize hierarchies of power and queer concepts of normativity; thus, it is both indebted to and reliant on them in order to exist. Therefore, paralleling the Hegelian dialectic, Queer theory is bound to that which it opposes, because, without a norm, there would be nothing to queer. In this vein, Queer theory must be understood as a verb, *to* queer, not a noun, *to be* queer, as identifying one's self as queer serves to either reinforce (hetero)normativity or replace it.<sup>4</sup> As such, Queer theory rejects stability in favour of instability—it is a perpetual deconstruction, fluctuation, and oscillation: a permanent interplay. As Queer theory is mainly focused on identity politics, and identity politics are formed largely in part by conceptualizations of sexuality<sup>5</sup>, it is relevant to query into what is meant by the term “sexuality,” what it infers, and how it is understood, used, and deployed. To analyze and approach these questions, I turn to Martin Heidegger.

Hardly anything has been written on the possible relationship between Martin Heidegger and Queer theory. On many levels, Heidegger's theories do not support premises maintained by Queer theorists; however, Heidegger's reconceptualization of “Being” can serve as a useful tool for illuminating how concepts are [mis]used, abused, and, ultimately, embroiled within discourses of power, prejudices, and preconceptions

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Ed. Diana Fuss. (New York and London: Routledge, 1991) articulates this polemic stating “[t]here is no question that gays and lesbians are threatened by the violence of public erasure, but the decision to counter that violence must be careful not to reinstall another in its place” (19).

<sup>5</sup> Gender, race, and class are other contenders in identity politics; however, for the purposes of this essay, I will focus on limiting my analysis to sexuality.

couched within their deployment.<sup>6</sup> Substituting “sexuality” for “Being” within Heidegger’s work, *Being and Time*, can serve as a praxis for investigating how, like the concept of “Being,” sexuality is preempted, modulated, and infused with power discourses that predetermine and thwart its mobility/fluidity. As such, what is poised as a transparent, common term is a covert depiction for the subtle reinforcement/perpetuation of a discourse which seeks to fix and sustain meaning ulterior to what is immediately presented. For example, in discussing sexuality, heterosexuality is automatically assumed as the norm without mention, a phenomenon which will be explored later on in the course of this essay.

Returning to Heidegger, he begins *Being and Time* with a quote from Plato’s *Sophist*: “[f]or manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression ‘Being.’ We, however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed.”<sup>7</sup> “We” are perplexed insofar as “Being” no longer simply means “Being” as it is a term understood in relative terms (i.e., to be something rather than just be). Similarly, sexuality is now pejoratively used as a referent to heterosexuality, and/or is informed, even buttressed, by (an understanding of) heterosexuality; as such, within heteronormative discourse, we are perplexed by any other form of sexuality.

Continuously, Heidegger raises the question: “[d]o we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word ‘Being’? Not at all.”<sup>8</sup> Concordantly, do “we have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word ‘sexuality’?”

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that I do not plan on pursuing an analysis of ‘Being’ itself. Instead, I am more interested in using Heidegger’s framework for opening up and embarking upon a discussion of sexuality and identity.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1962), 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p.1.

As mentioned earlier, sexuality is a relative term. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, sexuality is defined as “[t]he quality of being sexual or possessing sex;”<sup>9</sup> in addition, it is deployed as “[a] person's sexual identity in relation to the gender to which he or she is typically attracted; the fact of being heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual; sexual orientation.”<sup>10</sup> In being a relative term, sexuality is not simply understood in terms of desire itself; rather, it is a way of classifying said desire. Sexuality is an inherently evaluative term used to characterize not only how one experiences desire, but to whom these desires are manifested. As such, it is reliant on the individual as much as it is on discourse to make sexuality intelligible. Thus, sexuality is a process/means of discriminating, qualifying, and labeling desire. Moreover, because it is a relative term, sexuality is contextual; it is registered, placed, and framed within discourse. Therefore, as heteronormativity is predominant in our discourse and is considered a normal/natural form of desire, by referencing sexuality, one automatically references heterosexuality. According to Foucault, sexuality is an “especially dense transfer point for relations of power.”<sup>11</sup> Within the frame of heteronormativity, everything is understood through and precluded by heterosexuality, making every other form of desire other and/or deviant.

Paralleling Heidegger’s analysis, “are we nowadays even perplexed at our inability to understand the expression ‘Being’? Not at all.”<sup>12</sup> In keeping with substituting “sexuality” for “Being,” no longer being perplexed with the question of sexuality insinuates that it is a concept that is understood. And in being understood, it invariably

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<sup>9</sup> “Sexuality,” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, [http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/cgi/entry/50221317?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=sexuality&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/cgi/entry/50221317?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=sexuality&first=1&max_to_show=10) [accessed May 30 2009]

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality, An Introduction, Volume I*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 103.

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1.

suffers a form of normalization. Therefore, as Heidegger proposes, we must “reawaken an understanding for the meaning of this question.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, we must unhook and unleash sexuality from its subjectivized bounds within the heterosexual matrix. In this respect, we need to return to the root of sexuality: desire, and not be trapped within how and what desire signifies, as any identity construct is a limitation afforded to each indemnificatory label. As such, identity categories seek to divide, fragment, and isolate. However, preference and expressions of desire are individualistic; what and how one desires is an individual phenomena. Therefore, it is not only suffocating to confine said desire into a normalizing, universalizing concept, but reductive.

Heidegger looks at the notion that “Being” is the “most universal concept,” stating that “[a]n understanding of ‘Being’ is already included in conceiving anything which one apprehends as an entity.”<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, sexuality is used universally (i.e., everyone experiences some form of desire). Moreover, what “Being” is to “entity,” “sexuality” is to “identity.” In this respect, sexuality and identity are not only fused together, they are inseparable. As such, any mobilization behind a specific identity category amalgamates people to make a claim about them. Moreover, this universalizing strategy of sexual identification purports to disseminate some form of information about said identity. In addition, this gesture suggests that we can become intelligible to others via our identifying categorizations.

Sexualized identity categories purport to convey some universal understanding and conceptualization. Moreover, as Heidegger continues, “so if it is said that ‘[sexuality]’ is the most universal concept, this cannot mean that it is the one which is

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.1.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

clearest or that it needs no further discussion. It is rather the darkest of all,”<sup>15</sup> for all universalizing terms are reductive ones. They predetermine and preclude through their all encompassing rhetoric/composition. They purport to absorb and totalize all categories of difference. And, if sexuality as a term is a precursor to and means for disseminating different sexual practices, then all sexual difference is referenced within the term itself—it references, concurrently, all sexuality and individual sexual orientation. As such, “sexuality” operates on both macro and micro levels by embodying a multifarious trajectory of signification. Therefore, through its “universality,” sexuality is simultaneously transparent and opaque; either way, meaning/clarity is obscured and subsumed. As such, one is left in the dark as to what is being referenced.

If asked why or how someone subscribes to and/or under any banner of sexual identification, one might list off how one has come to understand the concept, what characteristics one believes it to embody, what characteristics one believes to share with the concept. But, what does [hetero/homo/bi]sexuality mean? What does it imply? What does it necessitate? How is it the rallying point for desire? What is the difference between hetero/homo/bisexuality and sexuality itself? Does one claim a sexualized identity, or is one claimed by a sexualized identity? Who defines the requisites? Whose requisites? Where is the source of this information? Who disseminates it? Who maintains this discourse? Why is this discourse maintained? What is achieved by this discourse? Does this discourse provide information about someone? Or does this discourse create information? What is the purpose of this information? What understanding does this information impart? What does one benefit from this understanding? Who benefits from this understanding? Who does not? Why is there this understanding in the first place?

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

And, most importantly, what is understood? How is it understood? How is it intelligible?

In Butler's terms,

“can sexuality even remain sexuality once it submits to a criterion of transparency and disclosure, or does it perhaps cease to be sexuality precisely when the semblances of full explicitness is achieved? Is sexuality of any kind even possible without that opacity designated by the unconscious, which means simply that the conscious ‘I’ who would reveal its sexuality is perhaps the last to know the meaning of what it says?”<sup>16</sup>

As such, one could say that one can never make any statement about one's self (i.e., identity, sexuality, etc.) as any such statement is a mere facsimile of what one thinks or assumes one's self to be. When one assumes any identifying title, one is also, by extension, assumed by it. Thus, all forms of identification are merely approximations.

In keeping with the substitution of sexuality for Heidegger's “Being,” Heidegger asserts that, “even if we ask, ‘What *is* [sexuality]?’ we keep within an understanding of the ‘is,’ though we are unable to fix conceptionally what that ‘is’ signifies. We do not even know the horizon in terms of which that meaning is to be grasped and fixed.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, to claim that one is something is not only to be bound to what that “is” suggests, but is also to be subject to the meanings imbued and latent within said discourse. Simply put, to make any claim is to be fixed and confined to that which the claim affords. Moreover, raising the question “what *is* sexuality?” is also a means of raising the question of what it means to identify one's self sexually, and by extension, what it means to claim that identity. “Is” is a third person conjugation of the verb “to be”; *I am* is the first person conjugation. As such, Butler analyzes what it means to claim “I am” stating:

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<sup>16</sup> Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 15.

<sup>17</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 25.

“to claim that *I am* is to suggest a provisional totalization of this ‘I.’ But if this I can so determine itself, then that which it excludes in order to make that determination remains constitutive of the determination itself, in other words, such a statement presupposes that the ‘I’ exceeds its determination, and that even produces that very excess in and by the act which seeks to exhaust the semantic field of that ‘I.’”<sup>18</sup>

In other words, claiming “*I am*” also claims the autonomy of the “I” making the “I” the subordinate clause to the “am.” For, in claiming any identity, one precludes the freedom that the “I” had before “am” was claimed. By identifying one’s self within a[ny] discourse, one is [dis]barred from one’s own meaning, and one takes on other meaning[s] within the discourse: one is automatically subject to become other than that which one is.

Accordingly, Butler continues to state that

“where there is an ‘I’ who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that ‘I’ and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will. Thus there is no ‘I’ who stands behind discourse and executes volition of will through discourse. On the contrary, the ‘I’ only comes into being through being called, being named, interpolated...and this discursive constitution takes place prior to the ‘I’; it is the transitive invocation of the ‘I.’”<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, in participating within discourse, one becomes be intelligible within the confines/parameters of said discourse: the “I” is formed and subjectivized through discourse. Furthermore, participating in discourse is akin to taking and claiming the meanings within the discourse. When the “I” comes into being through being called and named, “I’s” signification other significations remain opaque and incomprehensible when claiming a definitive signifying agent. For example, “it is always finally unclear what is meant by invoking the lesbian-signifier, also because its specificity can only be

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<sup>18</sup> Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 15.

<sup>19</sup> Butler, “Critically Queer,” 18.



demarcated by exclusions that return to disrupt its claim to coherence.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, as much as one is defined by the meanings of the sign, one is also influenced by the meanings that one is not, for signifiers are just as unstable. In Derridian terms, “if signs are ‘arbitrary,’ then their meanings cannot possibly be fixed, and it will always be inherently unstable.”<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, to adopt a term, a signifier, and rally underneath it, one never can never ensure, let alone know, what is signified. As Ferdinand de Saussure delineates in *A Course in General Linguistics*, the basic unit of linguistics is the sign, defined as a physical entity consisting of a signifier (an acoustic image) and a signified (concept). According to Saussure, “the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary”<sup>22</sup> “in that [the signifier] actually has no natural connection with the signified.”<sup>23</sup> For example, the term lesbian is sought to summon the concept lesbian, but nowhere does it convey what a lesbian is nor does it possess a natural connection to lesbianism. Signification is merely a conceptual categorization. All categories of signification are illusory, imaginary, and constructed. In the words of Butler, “there is no necessarily common element among lesbians, except perhaps that we all know something about how homophobia works against women—although, even then, the language we use will differ.”<sup>24</sup> As such, Butler maintains that if she were to appear as a lesbian, she “would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely the sign signifies.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Butler, “Imitations and Gender Insubordination,” 15.

<sup>21</sup> Dave Robinson, *Nietzsche and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Totem Books, 2001). 37.

<sup>22</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, “Course in General Linguistics,” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. ed. Vincent Leitch. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc, 2001). 964.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 965.

<sup>24</sup> Judith Butler, “Imitations and Insubordination,” 17.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

No one fits into a compact palatable package. If one did, then one's identity would be fixed, confined, and suffocated. The accuracy and precision of any form of identification or classification necessitates a stasis. We can never have a totalizing subject that embodies every facet of our existence; if we did, that would be the death of the subject itself. Therefore, as Heidegger states, "[a]s long as [a human] is a Being, it has never attained its 'wholeness.' But if it does, this gain becomes the absolute loss of Being-in-the-world<sup>26</sup>. It is then never again to be experienced as a being,"<sup>27</sup> for "ending means stopping."<sup>28</sup> In other words, whenever we define ourselves, we stop "Being," and Heidegger likens this to death. Therefore, to consolidate under any identifying sign precludes everything that sign is not. In the words of Gloria Anzaldua, "the borders and walls that are supposed to keep undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behaviour; these habits and patterns are the enemy within. Rigidity means death."<sup>29</sup> Therefore, in attempts to secure an identity, one inflicts violence upon the self: one internalizes all that which comes with the identity. Therefore, the precincts that an identity affords soon become its jail and morgue. In other words, as soon as we define ourselves, we cease the process of creativing ourselves. As long as we are human beings, as long as we are to truly exist, the word "Being" must stand as a verb. As such, being is in a permanent state of *becoming*.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in Queer theory, queer, too, must stand as a verb.

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<sup>26</sup> In very basic words, Being-in-the-world is Heidegger's proxy for terms such as subject, object, consciousness, and world

<sup>27</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 220.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>29</sup> Gloria Anzaldua "La consciencia de la mestiza," in *Borderlands/ La Frontería* (San Francisco : Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 101.

<sup>30</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 225.

In Queer theory, “to queer” is an action; it is unfixated, transitive, being the perpetual verb, and never the label/noun. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the verb “queer” is “to ask, inquire; to question;”<sup>31</sup> in addition “to make a fool of, ridicule; to swindle, cheat; to get the better of...to puzzle, flummox, confound, baffle.”<sup>32</sup> It is to “cause (a person) to feel queer; to disconcert, perturb, unsettle.”<sup>33</sup> According to Butler,

“if the term ‘queer’ is to be a site of collective contestation, that point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes, and perhaps also yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively.”<sup>34</sup>

As such, as queer can never be “fully owned,” it cannot be a subjectivity which one controls. Rather, it is a technique, a method, a critical expression, a “discursive effect”<sup>35</sup> (e.g. I want to queer identity binaries). Therefore, like every verb, to queer requires a subject –it necessitates a target *to* queer. Queer is also an adjective meaning “[s]trange, odd, peculiar, eccentric. Also: of questionable character; suspicious, dubious.”<sup>36</sup> However, an adjective is rooted and fixed to a noun, or used in place of a noun within a sentence structure (e.g., what a queer thing to say?). According to Annamarie Jagose, “given the extent of its commitment to denaturalization, queer itself can have neither a

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<sup>31</sup> “Queer,” Oxford English Dictionary Online, [http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/cgi/entry/50194798?query\\_type=word&queryword=queer&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10&sort\\_type=alpha&search\\_id=Vtmo-1bl54V-5143&result\\_place=4](http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/cgi/entry/50194798?query_type=word&queryword=queer&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&search_id=Vtmo-1bl54V-5143&result_place=4) (Accessed June 2 2009)

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Butler, “Critically Queer,” 19.

<sup>35</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* New York: New York University Press, 1996) 99.

<sup>36</sup> “Queer,” OED.

foundational logic nor a consistent set of characteristics.”<sup>37</sup> As such, within Queer theory, it is problematic to identify one’s self as [a<sup>38</sup>] queer insofar as it could potentially be used as a marker/register/demarcation to promote some form of collective consolidation, even if it is in the form of a minority. Therefore, to characterize/categorize one’s self as queer runs the risk of creating an identifying label, a gesture counter to the project of Queer theory.

While minority groups by definition are part of the majority, they are still a grouping that purports to share an additional ground. As such, in order to participate within a minority group, or any group, one needs to subscribe to their standards, criterion, and customs. In his work, *Bound by Recognition*, Patchen Markell describes how heteronormativity names a manner of “patterning and arranging the world that allow[s] some people and groups to enjoy a semblance of sovereign agency at others’ expense.”<sup>39</sup> I might continue to add that any method of “patterning and arranging” serves to include some and exclude others. As such, this raises the question of inclusion and exclusion.

Concordantly, Warner cautions against speaking about “inclusion as though it were synonymous with equality and freedom. Exclusion plays exactly the same role for expressive pluralism that discrimination played for high liberalism; it reduces power to a formalism of membership.”<sup>40</sup> In her article “Outside In: The Failings of Alternative Communities,” Kim Nicolini delineates how “[t]oo frequently, gay and lesbian communities create a mirror image of the very mainstream society from which they have attempted to escape. These communities become a highly essentialized gay and lesbian

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<sup>37</sup> Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, 96.

<sup>38</sup> “Queer” has also been used as a noun to pejoratively reference homosexuality.

<sup>39</sup> Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition*. (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

mainstream, where you have to do all the right things to be in and to feel like you belonged.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, even minority groups embody their own exclusionary politics that determine who does and who does not belong. They do not want to be a minority, or even a majority. Queer Theory strives to negate status entirely, escaping/thwarting any attempts at community or shared existence. It is not a project of inclusion.

Queer theory evades and resists any attempts and advances for community. Warner problematizes the notion of community stating that “dispersal rather than localization continues to be definitive of queer self-understanding (‘We Are Everywhere’),” for “nearly every lesbian or gay remembers being such before entering a collectively identified space.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, one is aware of one’s sexuality before one is able to localize it, even within terminology. For instance, does being able to identify one’s self as homosexual reinforce one’s homosexuality? Does it provide a clearer understanding? No. Homosexuality is same-sex desire whether or not one identifies it as such. In saying that one is homosexual, one only enables one and others to discuss what one thinks about being homosexual. In other words, belonging [to any community] does not presuppose one’s being. However, in attempting to belong to a group, one is automatically subjected to the politics that come attached to any label. As Warner continues, “queer politics opposes society itself” for the “social realm [...] is a cultural form, interwoven with the political form of administrative a state and with the normalizing methodologies of modern social knowledge.”<sup>43</sup> As such, this is where Queer theory and Foucault diverge. Foucault, in his reconceptualization of power, suggests that as one is always going to be

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<sup>41</sup> Kim Nicollini, “Outside In: The Failings of Alternative Communities,” *Bad Subjects* 38 (May 1998) <http://bad.eserver.org/issues/1998/38/nicolini.html> [accessed June 6 2009]

<sup>42</sup> Michael Warner, “Introduction,” xxv.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Warner, “Introduction,” xxvii.

subject to power, one might as well exploit that source of power and band together to create one's own minority source of power. Conversely, Queer theory does not endeavour to create a subgroup to assemble and rally against power as that would, by default, create a grouping which would also be subject to criticism and attack. As such, Queer theory is not preoccupied with discourses of tolerance or acceptance. It does not want to fight for rights or make advances for equality. As Queer theory, essentially, is subversion, it is anti-establishmentarianism. Therefore, queer "rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal".<sup>44</sup> The rhetoric of tolerance serves to perpetuate and/or reinstate a system of normalization, substituting one form of violence for another.

Therefore, Queer theory's impetus is to "critique and deconstruct heteronormalizing practices and discourses"<sup>45</sup> and draw attention to 'those *fictions* of identity that stabilize all identificatory practices.'<sup>46</sup> Once more, I turn to Heidegger to buttress an understanding surrounding identity politics in Queer Theory. In continuing to substitute "sexuality" for "Being," and "identity" for "entity," Heidegger maintains that,

"our first step to understand the problem of [sexuality] consists in 'not telling a story'—that is to say, in not defining [identities] as [identities] by tracing them back in their origin to some other [identity], as if [sexuality] had the character of some possible [identity]. Hence [sexuality], as that which is asked about, must be exhibited in a way of its own, essentially different from the way in which [identities] are discovered... essentially contrasting with the concepts in which [identities] acquire their determinate signification."<sup>47</sup>

As such, in refraining to "tell a story" about one's sexual identity, one liberates it from a predetermined a discourse which restricts and modulates the fluidity of its play. In other

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. xxvi.

<sup>45</sup> Mary Louise Rasmussen, *Becoming Subjects* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.

<sup>46</sup> Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, 125. [my emphasis.]

<sup>47</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 26.

words, tracing one's sexuality through other manifestations of sexual identity serves to reinforce the politics surrounding sexuality. This gesture parallels Foucault's suggestion that refusing to confess the details, or more simply, refusing to talk about one's sexuality is a means of evading power<sup>48</sup>. This is a method which can be likened to Butler's gesture to "disclaim" identity categories as a "form of affirmative resistance to a certain regulatory operation of homophobia."<sup>49</sup> As such, "Queer's ambiguity is often cited as the reason for its mobilization."<sup>50</sup> Sexuality must "be exhibited in its own way" not through established identity categories which seek to make claims about the self (i.e., heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual framed within heteronormative discourse); one can just be sexual, period. Therefore, according to Mattilda (a.k.a Matt Bernstein Sycamore), the "radical power of Queer theory to enable everyone to choose their gender, sexual, and social identities, to embrace a radical outsider perspective, and to challenge everything that's sickening about the dominant culture that surrounds us,"<sup>51</sup> "create[s] something more delectable and devious."<sup>52</sup>

Butler suggests that "within queer politics, indeed, within the very signification that is 'queer,' we read a resignifying practice in which the de-sanctioning power of the name 'queer' is reversed to sanction a contestation of the terms of sexual legitimacy,"<sup>53</sup> As such, contesting all forms of 'sexual legitimacy' serves to not only destabilize and reveal the stigmatizations behind any identity politics, but it invariably subverts the discourse that legitimates and discriminates between sexualities (e.g., heteronormativity).

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<sup>48</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 101.

<sup>49</sup> Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 15.

<sup>50</sup> Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, 97.

<sup>51</sup> Mattilda A.K.A. Matt Bernstein Sycamore, "Reaching Too Far: An Introduction," *Nobody Passes* (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2006) 8.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>53</sup> Butler, "Critically Queer," 23.

As such, one might even go so far as to say that Queer theory is antagonistic, adversarial, anarchistic, insofar as it is a form of deconstructive/subversive vigilanteism. Queer theory seeks to pervert and debase all normative value systems, ideologies, and structures within discourse. However, herein lies the paradox inherent within Queer politics: Queer theory necessitates identity categorizations in order to dismantle them—Queer theory needs norms to attack. For instance, Butler articulates this playful project of problematizing privilege:

“I’m permanently troubled by identity categories, consider them to be invariable stumbling-blocks, and understand them, even promote them, as sites of necessary trouble, in fact, if the category were to offer no trouble, it would cease to be interesting to me: it is precisely the pleasure produced by the instability of those categories which sustains the various erotic practices that make me a candidate for the category to begin with.”<sup>54</sup>

As such, as much as Queer theory seeks to subvert normalizing structures, without an opponent there would be no contest. In other words, Queer theory needs a discourse of normalization to exist, because without it, there would be no debate.

According to Monique Wittig, “[t]o live in society is to live in heterosexuality... Heterosexuality is always already there within all mental categories. It has sneaked into dialectical thought (or thought of differences) as its main category.”<sup>55</sup> Therefore, as long as there is heteronormativity, there will be a form of power to deconstruct; there will be difference (as any normalizing claim automatically evokes that which is abnormal). So long as there is a category, there will be a clause to deconstruct. As such, deconstruction and Queer theory can be seen as extreme forms of perpetual critique.

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<sup>54</sup> Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 14.

<sup>55</sup> Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 40, 43.



In “Différance,” Jacques Derrida argues that “meaning” is always a product of the difference between signs, and it is a perpetual “difference” and “deferral” in a temporal structure that never comes to an end. Moreover, Derrida states that

“the play of difference...is the conditioning for the possibility and functioning of every sign...difference itself... can never be sensed as a full term, but rather [extends as] an invisible relationship, the mark of an inapparent relationship between two spectacles.”<sup>56</sup>

Therefore, meaning is created through interplay, between the attacker and the attacked. As such, this dialectic is a creative interlocking opposition of “differing” and “deferring” meaning back and forth in circuitous exchange and play; however, there is no meaning outside this interplay. An example of this phenomenon is Butler’s query into the notion of copy and origin:

“if it were not for the notion of the homosexual *as* copy, there would be no construct of heterosexuality *as* origin. Heterosexuality here presupposes homosexuality. And if the homosexual *as* copy *precedes* the heterosexual *as* origin, then it only seems fair to concede that the copy comes before the origin, and that homosexuality is thus the origin, and heterosexuality the copy...it is only as a copy that homosexuality can be argued to precede heterosexuality as the origin. In other words, the entire framework of copy and origin proves radically unstable as each position inverts into the other and confounds the possibility of any stable way to locate the temporal or logical priority of either term... The imitation does not copy that which is prior, but produces and inverts the very terms of priority and derivativeness.... Thus, ‘inverted imitations’ expose the fundamental dependency of ‘the origin’ on that which it claims to produce as its secondary effect.”<sup>57</sup>

The oscillation between the question of origin and copy will never be reconciled as they are mutually dependent concepts. As such, through the permanent contestation, the

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<sup>56</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans, Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982)  
<http://www.stanford.edu/class/history34q/readings/derrida/difference.html> [accessed May 31 2009)

<sup>57</sup> Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 22.

inflection of “differing” and “deferring” will repeat itself *ad infinitum*. For most, an upheaval into torrential limbo would be a source of anxiety as there is nothing definitive, and thus no meaning.

According to Jagose, Queer theory occupies and assumes “‘a zone of possibilities’...always inflected by a sense of potentiality that it cannot yet quite articulate,” and proposes that it “describes those gestures and analytical modes which dramatize incoherence in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire.”<sup>58</sup> Therefore, so long as there is “coherence,” there will be incoherence; so long as there is stability, there will instability. Therefore, in light of Queer theory, one is forever treading and never resting. As Queer theory is an apparatus to subvert and defy normalizing structures, there will never reconciliation.

As such, in being a politics of subversion, Queer theory is also indebted to the Hegelian tradition. For example, Queer theory is heavily invested in normalizing conceptions in order to fuel and launch an attack against them. In this vein, ‘queering’ is a delicate, even frangible, action insofar as it is bound to that which it opposes. It needs a dominant binary to attack and defuse. Binary thinking evokes the Master/Slave dialectic whereby both the Master and the Slave exist in relation to one another, sustaining their definitive existence through perpetual negation and deference. The Master needs the Slave to assert his mastery. Moreover, similar to deconstruction, the terms only generate meaning through their interplay: to be a Master necessitates a subordinate clause, and without that subordinate clause (i.e, the slave), “Master,” as dominant, is unintelligible. However, through this inversion, the power distribution shifts: the Master is as much enslaved to the Slave as the Slave is to the Master. Correspondingly, to reveal a norm is

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<sup>58</sup> Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, 2-3.

to reveal the weakness of it as a norm. According to Butler, “[t]he resignification of norms is thus a function of their inefficacy, and so the question of subversion, of *working the weakness in the norm*, becomes a matter of inhabiting the practices of its rearticulation.”<sup>59</sup> As such, a politics of subversion is inherent in any form of power insofar as the need to institute and reinforce [hetero]normativity elucidates its fragility, its weakness as norm. Heteronormativity is constructed and upheld through a repetition of its norms. However, these norms themselves become the site of subversion—their *own* subversion. For in being blind to its own discourse of power, heteronormativity is unaware of the oppositions needed to buttress its position through alterity as the dominant binary.

In “Against Proper Objects,” Butler asserts that “normalizing the queer would be, after all, its sad finish,”<sup>60</sup> a sentiment David Halperin echoes in stating that “the more it verges on becoming a normative academic discipline, the less Queer theory can plausibly claim to be.”<sup>61</sup> As Queer theory is essentially political, its deployment is a means to stimulate and innovate [social] change. Moreover, Queer theory is predominantly a technique, a way to queer. Therefore, in trying to disestablish normativity, in deconstructing power dynamics, Queer theory is dependent on differences in the imbalances of power. As such, in reframing the end of Queer theory by way of normalization suggests that difference has been dissolved. There would no longer be anything to queer as we have all been successfully and equally queered. We would no

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<sup>59</sup> Butler, “Critically Queer,” 26.

<sup>60</sup> Judith Butler, “Against Proper Objects”. *Differences. More Gender Trouble: Feminism Meets Queer Theory*. VI, 2/3 (1994): 21.

<sup>61</sup> David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Toward a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 113.

longer be encrypted, we would all just be. In addition to being the demise of Queer theory, is it not also its triumph—a utopian mosaic whereby is sexuality unhinged, disestablished, and, in which case, heterogeneity becomes homogeneity? But then again, ‘triumph’ may only be a term intelligible to a competition which seeks a result, whereas to queer is to be constantly competing, regardless of the outcome...

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