

QUEER IDENTITIES: RUPTURING IDENTITY CATEGORIES AND  
NEGOTIATING MEANINGS OF QUEER

by

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**Abstract**

Queer is a contested term with numerous meanings. This thesis explores how queer is taken up as a personal identity and asks why some individuals are choosing to identify as queer over other existing sexuality identities such as gay, lesbian, heterosexual, and to a lesser extent bisexual. The meanings attributed to queer by queer-identified people go beyond simply naming the sex/es of their partner/s. When invoked by the participants of this study the term queer can mean / be: something you are; something you call yourself; something you do; a way to think (theory); and a way to act – sexually and politically. Throughout the five sections which make up this thesis I will describe some of the meanings ascribed to queer, and explore the ways in which queer is understood and represented by people who claim, or have claimed, queer as their sexuality identity category.

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## 1

**Introduction- Reflexivity**

Queer theory is interested in exploring the borders of sexual identities, communities, and politics. How do categories such as 'gay,' 'lesbian' and 'queer' emerge? From what do they differentiate themselves, and what kinds of identities do they exclude? How are these borders demarcated, and how can they be contested? What are the relations between the naming of sexuality and political organization it adopts, between identity and community?

Ki Namaste (1996) in "The Politics of Inside / Out" (p.198-199)

In the article, "The Politics of Inside / Out," Ki Namaste (1996) suggests that a focus on the discursive production of social identities is useful. This thesis attempts to look discursively at the term queer; how it is taken up, refused, understood and negotiated by people who claim the term queer as an identity marker. In order to look at conceptions of queer, I set up a listserv intended to discuss understandings of queer. Although identification as queer was not a requirement to participate, the people who agreed to participate in the listserv were all people who currently identified or had identified as queer at one time. Experience is central to this thesis, as I examine my own experiences and those of the other participants as my source of 'data.' I do not view stories about experiences as offering the 'truth' about queer identities unproblematically. Rather I view these experiences as constructed by the discourses that are available to us, just as we are constructed by the discourses available to us.

Throughout the five sections which make up this thesis I will describe some of the meanings ascribed to queer, and explore the ways in which queer is understood and

represented by people who claim, or have claimed, queer as their sexuality identity category. In the first chapter, I explore my own understanding and use of the term queer. As my understanding is directly linked to the field of queer theory, I will provide a brief overview of this area. As queer is a term with many meanings, I will outline some of these uses in order to situate queer as a term with contested meanings. In the second chapter, I will provide a brief overview of where queer identity stands in relation to other literature. The third chapter focuses on the process of research and describes the format and running of the listserv, as well as my doubts and struggles. The fourth chapter looks at the content of the listserv. Specifically, I will examine the multiple meanings of queer presented on the listserv. Further, I will focus on four areas that I perceived to be themes of the listserv: queer and coming out; queer heterosexuality; the political implications of queer; and queer gender play. In closing, the final chapter looks at the implications of this research and some of the questions it raises for me. In order to locate myself within this research, I will begin by looking at how I first learned of the term, and I will articulate my own understanding of queer.

### **My Queer Identity**

My interest in queer identity and queer theory came out of my struggle to claim a non-normative sexual identity. I was not comfortable claiming the terms heterosexual, lesbian or bisexual for myself, for reasons that I will explain shortly. Through reading and hearing about the academic literature of queer theory, I had come to conceive of my own sexuality as queer because it seemed to challenge the current categories of both heterosexuality and homosexuality. My own sexual partners were first male, and then

female, and because of this, I felt that I was excluded from heterosexuality. In trying to claim a non-heterosexual orientation, I felt pressured to choose the category lesbian and to consolidate my sexual history into a path of errors leading up to my new 'correct' lesbian status. I also felt pressure to 'come out' as a lesbian. I was apprehensive, as the process of 'coming out' seemed to fix me as a lesbian forever. Since my interest had moved easily between males and females I was reluctant to try to fix my sexuality again for many reasons. If I accepted this new fixed identity, would I then be claiming a category that excludes women who are questioning their sexuality? Would I be expected to deny that my sexual partners had been male for the previous ten years? I also worried that I would confuse my family and lose my lesbian *and* heterosexual friends in the process of seeming to fix and unfix my sexual orientation. I was also concerned that lesbian and bisexual were categories that seemed to potentially exclude transgendered and transsexual people. Because I see gender and sexuality as mutually constituted, I was wary of categories that seemed to presume that there are only two sexes (*bisexual*) or that *same sex* desire is always just that simple. That is to say that although lesbians may play or 'fuck' with gender, it seems to me that there is an implicit assumption that lesbians are biologically female. In my mind this is exclusionary as it depends on uncomplicated discrete categories of male and female. For these and other reasons, I felt that in claiming lesbian or bisexual as a sexual category, I would be trading one set of unacceptable dominant categories and rules for an equally constricting set of marginalized ones.

I soon found that queer suited not only my personal sexual orientation but it was also useful as a verb, as in 'to queer' or 'que(e)ry'. To illustrate, I had long consumed popular culture that was intended for a heterosexual audience with my own queer agenda.

While each consumer will necessarily have their own take on popular culture, my consumption often involved watching for breasts and bodies that were not presented as available to me. I saw same sex desire where it was not clearly (/queerly) intended. Alexander Doty (1993) uses queer to describe “the non-straight work, positions, pleasures, and readings of people who either don’t share the same ‘sexual orientation’ as that articulated in the texts they are producing or responding to (the gay man who takes queer pleasure in a lesbian sitcom narrative, for example), or who don’t define themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual (or straight, for that matter)” (xvii). Doty’s example challenges the boundaries, as well as the territories, that sexual identities claim to mark and looks at the uncertainties and incompletions of our identities (Phelan, 1993, p.60). From understanding queer as a way of conceptualizing sexuality and gender, I discovered that academic queer theory was looking for ways to conceive of queer as a sexuality that exists between heterosexual and homosexual binaries. Therefore, the tenets of queer theory were central to the construction of my own sexual identity. As I was also a participant on the queer listserv, my current understandings and curiosities about queer will be detailed later in this thesis.

### **Queer Theory: A Brief Overview**

Queer theory and queer identity are relatively new concepts and I will explain my use of them here, by way of a brief overview. In the nineties, the term queer gained new acceptance within poststructuralist / postmodernist thought. In part, this was an attempt to move away from reproducing the heterosexist binary of heterosexual and homosexual. Queer theory contends that in order to challenge heteronormativity, we need to go beyond

replacing one restrictive category with another. To illustrate, queer theorists argue that in challenging heterosexuality with homosexuality, we are replacing one inadequate category, with another similarly inadequate category. Instead, queer theory offers a new conception of sexuality as a fluid and unstable category. Queer allows for a complex and changing sexual identity, where people locate themselves in different places at different times. Queer encompasses transgendered people, transsexual people, female, male, masculinities, femininities, same sex / other sex desire, same sex / other sex sexual practices, same sex / other sex fantasy, etc. It is seen as a category that can change the *form* of sexuality, rather than just the content. Queer, in this context, is also used as a verb, *to queer*. To queer is to seek to trouble, undo or unfix categories.

Many feminist writers such as Adrienne Rich, Gayle Rubin and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have argued that a non-oppressive *gender* order can only come about through a radical change in sexuality. Queer theory attempts to denaturalize and destabilize existing categories of sexual orientation, *and* of gender. Judith Butler (1991) argues “compulsory heterosexuality often presumes that there is first a sex that is expressed through a gender and then through a sexuality, it may now be necessary fully to invert and displace that operation of thought” (p.29). Within queer theory it is believed that gender and sexuality are mutually constituted, therefore gender must be denaturalized and viewed in much the same way as queer is; as a fluid category. Butler suggests that there is no “essence” to the self and displaces ideas of essentialism and authenticity with the notion of performativity. In other words, there are only acts of performance and repetition that make up gender. To illustrate, gender is a performance of a myth of masculinity and femininity. Through repetition and penalties for poor performance, we learn to invest ourselves in these

(heterosexual) myths, and thus we begin to identify with them. We learn to view them as our natural essence. Butler reminds us that if these are performances, we may also choose to divest ourselves of them or no longer continue to identify with them.

Queer theory is often presented in academic discussion as opposed to lesbian and gay studies, or as ‘going beyond’ these forms of study and thinking that focus on lesbian and gay identities. To illustrate, many people reject “lesbian” as an identity-stabilizing category, and embrace the identity-disruptive phrase queer in its place, often citing Butler on gender performativity in supposed opposition to identity politics. However, Butler is actually quite open to stable identities and strategic deployments of them. She sees both disidentification with regulatory norms, and identification with others outside social normalcy, as useful to political struggle (1991; 1993).<sup>1</sup>

Queer theory, lesbian and gay studies and feminist theory often dovetail together as they all reject the idea that sexuality is an essentialist category. While lesbian and gay studies and feminist theory focus largely on questions of gender and homosexuality, queer theory expands its scope of investigation to include anything that falls into normative and deviant categories. Queer theory poses a challenge to lesbian and gay studies and feminist theory as it suggests that it is meaningless to speak in general about “women” or “homosexuals” because this tends to collapse multiple identities into homogenous monolithic categories. Queer theorists prefer to see gender as a performance that is fluid and changing in different contexts and at different times. As well, queer

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler (1991) asks, “Is it not possible that lesbian sexuality is a process that reinscribes the power domains that it resists, that it is constituted in part from the very heterosexual matrix that it seeks to displace, and that its specificity is to be established, not *outside* or *beyond* that reinscription or reiteration, but in the very modality and effects of that reinscription” (p.17). She uses the example of using “the negative constructions of lesbianism as a fake or bad copy” of heterosexuality to call into question the claims of heterosexual priority and to work toward displacing hegemonic heterosexual norms (p.17).

theory assumes that identities consist of many different elements along with gender and sexuality, and troubles the notion that women or queers can be viewed as part of a monolithic category.

It is often argued that gay and lesbian identities are necessary for political action, and that queer theory is fruitless because it will not lead to practical action. As Mary Louise Adams (1994) writes, “Theoretically, this way of mobilizing broadly defined ‘queerness’ appeals to me very much. I’m much less clear about what it might mean in actual practice” (p.39). As Adams demonstrates, queer theory is sometimes seen as impractical and isolated from social change. This perception is quite removed from the origins of Queer Nation, the social movement that first reclaimed the word queer. Queer Nation was formed in 1990 as an offshoot of the AIDS activist organization ACT UP. Joshua Gamson (1995) describes Queer Nation as the start of a decentralized, local and often anti-organizational queer cultural activism movement consisting of street postering, parodic and non-conformist self presentation, and underground zines. He traces the origins of queer politics to the early 1980s backlash against the gains made by the gay and lesbian movement. He argues that this backlash pointed to the limits of the politics of minority rights and inclusion, specifically, the long simmering internal debates around race and sex, and the critique of lesbian and gay political organizing as reflecting a white, middle-class experience or standpoint (p. 393). Gamson locates the origins of the reclaimed term queer in the late 1980s when it served to mark a set of political movements and mobilizations, *and* a somewhat parallel set of academy bound intellectual endeavours now called queer theory. He describes queer theory as taking shape through several conferences in the late 1980s and continuing to operate “primarily in elite

academic institutions through highly abstract language” (p.393). While queer theory is criticized as impractical, it is also the case that queer was first used as a political category to mobilize against fixed identity movements [Gamson provides several references on Queer Nation specifically on page 393.]

Judith Butler (1991) argues for political applications of queer theory, rather than solely relying on lesbian and gay identities for political action. She asks if homophobia and heteronormativity ought to be allowed to “dictate the terms of the political resistance to them, and if they do, do such homophobic efforts to that extent win the battle from the start?” (p.19) She is suggesting that while lesbian and gay identities are useful politically, they are also complicit in silencing difference among people with non-normative sexual orientations. Butler does not want a politics of reaction, rather she is looking for a politics of possibilities. She questions whether we must focus solely on shoring up and protecting lesbian and gay identities, and asserts the possibility of making “use of a category that can be called into question, made to account for what it excludes” (p.19). While it is sometimes argued that gay and lesbian identities are necessary for political action, and that queer theory will not lead to practical action, queer theory has its roots in political activism and it maintains goals of continuing such action.

### **Queer as a Contested Term**

Queer is a term with multiple meanings and the usage put forth within queer theory is but one meaning. In January 2000, I took a graduate level course called Sexualities and Their Regulation. Within this class, there was a discussion over perceptions of the term queer that enabled me to question the uses and usefulness of the



term queer. It was within this class that I first learned that there were other understandings of queer, other than that presented within queer theory. One of my classmates indicated that she believed queer was the “most exclusionary sexual category.” This differed completely from my own definition of queer. Another classmate indicated that some “lesbians and dykes” called themselves queer for “personal, not political reasons.” This again was an entirely different notion from my view of queer as an extremely transgressive and necessarily political category and theory. As well, I would include more than just “lesbians and dykes” in my conception of queer.<sup>2</sup> Yet another classmate indicated that only “young people” would claim queer as a sexual orientation because people older than thirty would necessarily view queer as “a bad word.” I see queer as a reclaimed word that has a potential to have meaning for people of any age. Within this class, I began to wonder about the gap between my conception of queer and those of my classmates.

As queer is a term with contested meanings, I want to also provide a brief overview of popular meanings that I was able to find. I think that these descriptions are useful in recognizing how queer is a contested term with multiple meanings among those who do not claim a non-normative sexual identity, among those who claim non-normative sexual identities and among those who claim queer as part of their own sexual identity.

### **Popular Meanings of Queer**

In searching for uses of the word queer, I turned to the Internet. I thought that this might be a place to find a lot of information about the term queer for a number of

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<sup>2</sup> From my understanding these are comparable terms, aside from the fact that “dyke” is a reclaimed word.

reasons. Due to the connection between the term queer and non-normative sexual and gender identities, I suspected that the anonymity provided by the Internet would facilitate the circulation of (queer) information that tends to be ridiculed and excluded within the dominant discourse. The nature of homophobia creates an atmosphere where any access to queer information or locations can be / feel dangerous due to “gay-bashing” and other forms of harassment. I was also interested in looking at a slightly more democratic form of sources of text than published queer material.<sup>3</sup> As well, The Internet seemed like a ‘natural’ choice because queer is a recent term (in its reclaimed form) and its history coincides with that of the Internet. The Internet sites that I found were in English and had their origin in Canada or the United States. In searching for the word queer, I came across four uses: (1) Pejorative (2) Umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and transgendered people (3) Queer theory and (4) as an individually claimed sexual identity. I will briefly summarize these uses as they were presented on the Internet.

Queer as a pejorative term came up only one time in my searching, but I have included it as one of the four uses because the pejorative meaning is part of a history that was frequently alluded to when describing queer as a “reclaimed” word. This reference to queer being used as a pejorative term was a reference in the [www.comingoutstories.com](http://www.comingoutstories.com) site, where a young bisexual woman described being called queer in the hallway of her school. She named this as part of general harassment that was directed at her when rumours about her “being gay” spread. This story was very recent (year 2000) and this indicates that the pejorative use of the term queer is not only confined to history. Traditionally, the term queer was used by members of the dominant group as an insult

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<sup>3</sup> I use the word “slightly” because I believe that access to literacy, computer skills and the Internet is more readily available to people of the middle and upper classes than to people with long term low incomes.

toward people with non-normative sexual or gender orientations. However, during the 1980s, queer was taken up by people with non-normative sexual and gender identities and reclaimed as a source of pride and strength (Farajaje-Jones, 1995, p.122). The following occurrences of queer are a result of this reclaiming and are viewed as positive and empowering.

Overwhelmingly, the most common use of the term queer on the Internet was as an umbrella term for “lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered people.”<sup>4</sup> Queer was used as an alternative to listing these four identities. This usage of queer reflects a *collective identity*, which must be distinguished from the *personal identity* of “queer.” In order to be queer in the collective sense, you must first claim a sub-category (L/G/B/T). To, illustrate, queer would be displayed as part of the search heading, as in “Planet Out – Your Queer Community Site.” However, once I was in the site, the new heading was “the leading gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender online community”. In other words, once I was past the initial search list, queer was no longer used. In the queer web sites, I did not see a (queer theory) view of identities as unstable and as *not* determined based on some authentic essence. Many of the queer web sites were rooted in the assumption that people can be seen collectively on the basis of a non-normative sexual orientation, while queer theory asks us to challenge all notions of fixed identity.

A particular site that came up was “Queer Coming Out Stories”, which depicted and catalogued these stories (forcefully) under headings of gay, lesbian, bisexual male, bisexual female and transgendered. I found that it was impossible to come out as queer on this site. I emailed to inquire about their use of queer and asked where they would slot a

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the sites that I visited that used queer as an umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender were [www.planetout.com](http://www.planetout.com), [www.bgay.com](http://www.bgay.com), [www.outproud.com](http://www.outproud.com), [www.comingoutstories.com](http://www.comingoutstories.com), [www.eraticimpact.com](http://www.eraticimpact.com), and [www.lavendermagazine.com](http://www.lavendermagazine.com).

queer female or male, and received this brief reply from the webmaster, “Basically, queer can mean either gay, or lesbian. I don’t really use the word queer very much because it seems antiquated to me” (personal communication, April 23, 2000).

Among the sites referenced, transsexuals and transgendered people were often mentioned as part of the queer umbrella (transsexuals less so), but they were seldom represented or discussed. Gender was not a topic that was featured or contested; even drag was absent. Some limited attention was given to bisexuals and transgendered people, while transsexual people received little more than a nod. Queer identified individuals did not seem to exist on these web pages, rather there were only collective references to the “queer community” or “queer youth.” The primary focus in queer sites was on lesbians and gay men.

The site [www.erraticimpact.com](http://www.erraticimpact.com) had a “queer dictionary” in its “language” section. Their definition of queer is important because it enables an introduction to the other ways in which queer is used and understood. The Erratic Impact dictionary defines queer as: “Pejorative for some gays. Now being reclaimed by some gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people as a self-affirming umbrella term, **especially in academia** [bold in original text].” I was surprised to see that the Erratic Impact definition describes queer as an umbrella term “especially in academia.” My initial reaction to this description was that these people were misunderstanding queer as used in academia. However, when I thought of queer as a receptacle for meaning, it became important to realize that this is one understanding. Another web site QSTUDY-L run out of State University in New York, similarly describes itself as “a forum for academic discussions pertaining to queer theory, an umbrella term encompassing lesbian, gay, bisexual, and

transsexual / transgender studies.”<sup>5</sup> I chose to include this use of the term under the category of umbrella term, as queer is viewed and used as a specifically academic umbrella term, not related to queer theory.

The third way in which queer was used on the Internet was in reference to queer theory. Queer theory goes beyond seeing queer as an umbrella term. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, queer theory emerged and took the term queer in a new direction, as outlined earlier. While searching for queer, I found that I had to list “queer theory” specifically in order to find uses of queer that were compatible with my own (queer theory based) understanding.<sup>6</sup> The queer theory sites did not use queer as an umbrella term, rather it was always used in conjunction with the ideas related to queer theory.

The fourth usage of queer on the Internet, was as personal identity. However, throughout my searches, I was surprised to find that this was quite rare. The sole reference to queer as a claimed sexual identity was from a site called [www.worsethanqueer.com](http://www.worsethanqueer.com), which was a personal web site designed by queer identified Mimi Nguyen. Nguyen explains how her interest in queer theory led her to identify herself as queer. She does not tell us about her own sexual practices (what and with whom), rather she allows queer to be her label and she tells the reader what queer means to her. In Nguyen’s narrative, queer theory becomes an identity when she is unsatisfied with other labels and modes of activism, such as punk rock and identity politics. She says that although she is wary of the white dominance in queer theory, she sees it as anti-essentialist, strategic and critical. She describes herself as “bi-queer” and as a “Minnesotan-raised, refugee-tomboy with queer tendencies.” She writes, “I’m an

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<sup>5</sup> QSTUDY-L is located at [www.uky.edu/StudentOrgs/QueerInfo/qstudy.htm](http://www.uky.edu/StudentOrgs/QueerInfo/qstudy.htm).

<sup>6</sup> Some Internet sites that I found were [www.worsethanqueer.com](http://www.worsethanqueer.com), [www.theory.org.uk](http://www.theory.org.uk) and [www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/queertheory.html](http://www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/queertheory.html).

unnatural disaster, I make no (common) sense.” Nguyen views queer as a necessarily unstable category; she maintains that it can be strategically mobilized as a unified category (as in identity politics), but always with the awareness that this collective mobilization is currently a “necessary error of identity.”

Through the process of searching for meanings of queer, I have come to believe that the multiple meanings of queer exist as blocks that build upon each other, without ever displacing or erasing the one before. To illustrate, the reclaiming of the term “queer,” builds on the earlier pejorative meaning, just as queer theory builds on the reclaimed meaning of queer, and queer identity builds on queer theory. Each of the meanings continues to be intact today in its original sense. Queer is still used and felt as an insult sometimes, just as it is often a positive umbrella term. Queer theory signifies a particular meaning of queer, and queer identity is the movement of a theory into an identity. Each of these meanings is cumulative based on the last, but all continue to coexist at this point in history, in this particular context. These multiple meanings make up the current contested nature of the term queer.

### **My Research Goals**

It was my own interest in queer theory and queer identity, combined with the contested nature of the term within the Sexualities class that led me wonder how the term queer is taken up, negotiated, understood and refused. This was the goal of my research project and I will proceed by explaining the process by which I carried out this project, and I will explore the ‘findings’ discursively. From the information on the listserv, queer can mean / be: something you are; something you call yourself; something you do; a way

to think (theory); and a way to act – sexually and politically. All of these were explanations that were invoked at different times, by different participants. In order to situate this research with respect to related literature, I will provide a brief overview of writings concerned with queer theory, queer politics and queer identities. I will begin by focussing on the importance of language and meaning.

## 2

### Queer in the Literature

Having outlined four common uses of the term queer, I want to try to point to the ways in which any discussion of queer is framed by the language and the meanings that are available to us. Stuart Hall (in Jhally, 1997) calls the knowledge that allows us to communicate, our “shared conceptual maps.” A shared conceptual map is made up of language(s), representation (e.g. nonverbal communication, written language), values and concepts, and these make up systems of classification. It is these shared conceptual maps that tell me to, for example, sit on a chair and sit at a table for meaningful communication. Stuart Hall points out how such ‘maps’ are socially constructed, and culturally and historically specific. The uses of queer that I have outlined are shared concepts that help us to make sense of the world. While I recognise that there is no fixed meaning to any event, concept, object or word, I am interested in the negotiations that occur between our classifications and conceptions. It is this negotiation that I have attempted to explore in my thesis.

I want to look briefly at the literature that I reviewed for my thesis in relation to the information that was posted to the listserv. On the listserv, various meanings of the term queer were invoked by all participants. Their definitions of these meanings and the negotiation between these meanings seemed to provide fertile ground for the participants on the listserv to create new meanings of queer. In my readings of relevant literature, I was unable to find information about people negotiating queer identities, although I saw these negotiations taking place in my classrooms, in my discussions with other people



with non-normative sexualities and genders, and in my own personal negotiation of the term queer.

The literature that I reviewed focussed on a few particular queer related areas. As I have already explained, my interest in the topic began with the academic literature identified as queer theory. Much of the rest of the literature that I located and reviewed through a search for 'queer' material dealt with questions around the negotiation, acceptance and rejection of the ideas put forth by queer theory. These articles often articulated struggles between people who claimed gay and lesbian identities, and queer theory. Such struggles include: the incompleteness of popular and essentialist sexuality identity categories (Doty, 1993; Phelan, 1993); the interdependence of queer and gay and lesbian identity categories (Sedgwick, 1993); the deficiencies of identity politics (Dale, 1999); gay and lesbian identities rejection of queer identities as impossible or as undesirable (Engelbrecht, 1995; Grosz, 1993); using queer politics and identity politics as complementary strategies (Gamson, 1995); deficiencies of queer politics (Hennessy, 1993); and queer politics (Phelan, 1997). Some of the queer literature focussed on creating queer pedagogy that would seek to 'go beyond' pedagogy based on identity politics in order to try to challenge essentialist notions of sexuality and gender (Eyre, 1997; Francis, 1998; Johnston, 1995; Luhmann, 1998; Morris, 1998).

My research focus within this thesis is specifically in how queer is taken up, rejected, understood, claimed and negotiated on an individual level as an identity category. Catherine Mary Dale (1999), writing about the possibility of queer identities, supposed that queer identity is in itself incompatible with queer theory. She wrote, "One of the problems associated with thinking about queer is this tension between the

multiplicity of sexual relations and individual names but also between queer's own clamour and its use as designating an identity" (p.10). She proposes that identifying oneself as queer is incompatible with an ideal model of queer as identity breaks up the goal of fluidity and the hope for the continuous transformation of queer.

Within the literature that I reviewed, I found two instances of "bi-queer" identity. The first article concerning bi-queer identity was "Fluid Desire: Race, HIV / AIDS and Bisexual Politics," from an anthology pertaining to bisexual politics (1995). The second instance of bi-queer identity was on Mimi Nguyen's website that I described briefly in the introduction. As the research listserv that I set up focussed frequently on queer identity, I want to take a closer look at queer identity as it was outlined in the literature that I reviewed.

The first author, Elias Farajaje-Jones, focused his article specifically on gay and bisexual African Americans males, and black lesbian and bisexual females. Farajaje-Jones explains that the African American community has "a much more fluid spectrum of sexualities than the white community does" (p.122). He uses a variety of terms, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender in his article, but advises that he prefers the terms queer and "in-the-life" for himself. Regarding queer specifically, he writes that he is reluctant to impose the term because it is "highly controversial." He describes reclaiming the word queer as a source of empowerment, strength and pride. He makes quite clear in his explanation exactly who his definition of queer excludes and includes. For Farajaje-Jones, queer refers to a "radical tendency in our community to seek liberation and self-determination, not assimilation into the white, male-dominated, heterosexual culture" (p.122). He explains that queer is "inclusive of lesbians, gay men, bisexual women and

men, and transgender people.” Until this point Farajaje-Jones’ definition is similar to queer as an umbrella term, but he goes on to draw a parallel between queer and the phrase “in-the-life”:

For generations in African American tradition, “in the life” has denoted a broad spectrum of identities and behaviours, similar to those encompassed by queer: we can all be included in-the-life[...] “In-the-life” understands our struggle for liberation as being directly tied to those of oppressed peoples throughout the word, fighting against white supremacy, classism, imperialism, sexism, ableism, and all other forms of oppression (Harris, 1986, p.66 , as cited in Farajaje-Jones, 1995, p.122).

With this comparison, Farajaje-Jones seems to open up his definition of queer to recognize the necessary inclusion of all forms of oppression in the queer struggle for liberation. Farajaje-Jones’ use of the term queer, goes beyond staking a claim for queer on the margins of sexuality and gender. He argues that he is a black queer man and consequently his oppression “comes not only from the dominating culture, but also from within my own communities: In the black community, I am oppressed for being queer; in the queer community, I am oppressed because I am a man of colour” (p.123). Therefore, this identification is different than the identity politics assumed when queer is used as an umbrella term.

In asking how and why queer becomes an identity, it seems in the case of Farajaje-Jones, his queer identity comes from dissatisfaction with identity politics. He lives his queerness with recognition of his multiple identities and he sees his own liberation as tied in with other oppressed people through interlocking systems of oppression. In ‘coming-out’ as queer, Farajaje-Jones provides the reader with an explanation of what exactly he means: queer is not taken to be a self-evident category. By taking lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender to be categories with an assumed meaning,

Farajaje-Jones demonstrates the instability of the term queer by not assuming that it has a fixed and assumed meaning. However, it is unclear whether he intends for queer to remain an unstable category. He could be perceived as attempting to fix the meaning of queer, rather than clearly stating that he is offering a historically and culturally specific definition. In reading Farajaje-Jones, it is my belief that his 'fixing' of the term queer is strategic, rather than essentializing. That is to say that while Farajaje-Jones is delineating his conception of queer, he is not attempting to essentialize these limits as heterosexuality has been essentialized as 'natural' and 'normal.' Rather it seems important to note that fixing an identity can be strategic in a different way than essentializing an identity. This distinction becomes important because while queer theory seeks to avoid the fixity and exclusivity of identity categories, every category is necessarily based on the exclusion of others, and these others are implied in the articulation of queer. In order for queer to be strategic, it becomes necessary to articulate (in) opposition to 'normal.' Butler (1991) suggests that we look at sexuality identity markers as strategic provisionality rather than strategic essentialism so that sexuality identities are not essentialized and may be constantly revised.

I am aware that categories are constituted through the exclusion of 'others' and therefore, I was interested to see who is excluded from queer. Within the boundaries of queer Farajaje-Jones includes gay men, lesbians, bisexual women and men, and transgendered people. He signals a contingency when he uses the term queer in opposition to the political assimilation of queer people into white, male-dominated, heterosexual culture (p.122). He defines queer against normative culture. This is a unique

contingency as queer can also be defined in opposition to heterosexuality when it is used as an umbrella term.

The second reference that I found for queer identity was on the website [www.worsethanqueer.com](http://www.worsethanqueer.com), as mentioned earlier in the introduction. 'Worse than queer' is a personal website designed by queer-identified Mimi Nguyen. Nguyen explains how her interest in queer theory led her to identify herself as queer. She describes herself as "bi-queer" and as a "Minnesotan-raised, refugee-tomboy with queer tendencies." She writes, "I'm an unnatural disaster, I make no (common) sense." She describes her struggle to make sense of her many "alien" identities by first becoming a punk rocker; "How else (I thought) to counter the ways in which big-H History had thus far operated (war, dislocation, racism) on my small-h history but by becoming a different kind of alien?" She describes being exoticized and stereotyped within this scene and consequently she decides to move on and become an activist "operating under the sign of 'woman of colour.'" She describes her frustration with "the imperative to forge coherency and 'identity' according to those deemed necessary political imperatives, and the spectre of a unified 'community' popped up again as our excuse to issue such imperatives." Similar to Farajate-Jones' description, Nguyen's narrative describes her multiple identities and her subsequent dissatisfaction with the erasure put on them within identity politics.

Nguyen explains how queer theory gave her a framework to articulate her frustration with identity politics. She describes queer as pushing "the fiction of authenticity by the wayside where I think it belongs, and the logic of non-contradiction also gets the boot." Her description of queer is quite detailed,

Queer gets to be strategic, then. Gayatri Spivak suggests there are times we must mobilize the necessary error of identity while *simultaneously* attending to the exclusions any identity politics actively creates. Thus 'queer' – invoking non-normative sexuality, an anti-assimilationist stance, a radically theatrical politics, a mode of critical inquiry, and for some (and sometimes me), a problematically (so far) white episteme – gets around[...] And while the so-far universal subject of queer epistemes is whiter, richer and, uh, more male than I might like, I'd like to queer *that* particular norm. (I'm a different kind of queer.) It's impossible after all, to imagine that 'queer' only skews gender and sexuality, and not race or class or nation, as if we might line up our social categories like cans in a cupboard, as if they weren't just intersecting but mutually constitutive.

From this description, we can see that Nguyen views queer as a necessarily unstable category; she maintains that it can be strategically mobilized as a unified category (as in identity politics), but always with the awareness that this collective mobilization is currently a "necessary error of identity." She views the collective mobilization of queer as contingent and temporary. When considering the mobilization of categories of sexuality such as lesbian, gay, queer and bisexual, Butler (1991) asks "If a sexuality is to be disclosed, what will be taken as the true determinant of its meaning: the phantasy structure, the act, the orifice, the gender, the anatomy (p.17)?" Nguyen asserts that queer invokes much more than the options that Butler provides; she lists: non-normative sexuality, an anti-assimilationist stance, radically theatrical politics, a mode of critical inquiry and a problematically white theory of knowledge (/episteme). Nguyen's version of queer parallels Farajaje-Jones' belief that social categories are intersecting and mutually constitutive. It is unclear if Nguyen sees queer as a category that is open to change and redefinition, however her explication of the word suggests that it is currently an unstable term.

In Nguyen's narrative, queer theory becomes an identity when she is unsatisfied with other labels and modes of activism, such as punk rock and identity politics. She says

that although she is wary of the white dominance in queer theory, she sees it as anti-essentialist, strategic and critical. In “coming out” as queer Nguyen provides a lengthy description of how she conceives of queer. Like Farajaje-Jones, she does not tell us about her own sexuality (what and with whom), rather she allows queer to be her label and she tells the reader what queer means to her. Nguyen does not name as clearly as Farajaje-Jones the inclusions and exclusions of queer. Her definition of queer includes multiple identities and rejects claims that are essentialist or universalizing in nature. She bases her queer identity on and against ideas and approaches. These ideas and approaches include “non- normative sexuality, an anti-assimilationist stance, a radically theatrical politics, a mode of critical inquiry, and for some (and sometimes me), a problematically (so far) white episteme.” Nguyen points to the predominance of white queer theorists and asserts the existence of a white, rich, male, universal queer norm within queer theory.

I want to include an example of the way in which whiteness arises in the articulation of queer. I found an example of Nguyen’s description of the white, rich, male, universal queer norm in an article by Shane Phelan (1997) that evaluates the usefulness of queer as a political identity. He offers an “example of the disruption of hegemonic cultural texts and the construction of new spaces” (p. 70). This example of effective queer politics was initiated by Queer Nation, a group that focused on direct action and cultural politics rather than negotiation and legislative / legal politics. The strategy called the Queer Shopping Network in New York and the Suburban Homosexual Outreach Program (SHOP) in San Francisco had a goal of disrupting the invisibility of queers by simply holding hands while shopping. Phelan sees this strategy as confronting the revulsion and fear of same sex couples not by saying ‘we’re just like you,’ but by

acting just like themselves / ourselves. Phelan says that a common reaction to this strategy is, "I believe in equal rights, but they should keep their sexuality private." To this he responds by saying that queers are not asking for equal privacy, but claiming a monopoly on public expression of sexuality. An example of this might be the ways in which 'gay pride parades' challenge not only which sexual identities are recognized and celebrated, they also challenge norms of sexual expression through nudity and overt displays of sexuality and sexual practices. Phelan says that such strategies do not work as liberal approaches do to better communication between queers and non-queers. Rather, through claiming equal rights to intimacy and visibility queers are demanding that queer differences and specificities be understood even when they challenge heterosexual understandings. While understanding between queers and non-queers is the ultimate goal, Phelan says that this understanding must be the product of confrontation, rather than an alternative to it (pp.70-71). While I appreciate that this example has value, one of my problems with this example are the danger that some couples would face by holding hands in public. Certainly, some couples will be in more danger than others due to racism, gender codes and classism. I think that this strategy presumes a particular subject / participant, and I suspect that white and wealthy (and urban-dwelling) individuals would have greater access to such a strategy because of the safety afforded by privilege. I see Phelan as articulating whiteness in his presentation of SHOP as an example of transgressive queer politics. Just as whiteness arises in the articulation of queer, 'colour' also emerges when queer is articulated as part of identities that are multiple and diverse. As Nguyen (1999) describes, "It's impossible after all, to imagine that 'queer' only skews gender and sexuality, and not race or class or nation, as if we might line up our social



categories like cans in a cupboard, as if they weren't just intersecting but mutually constitutive."

In my reading of queer theory, like Nguyen, I have also found that most of the theorists are white. It was thus surprising to me when I discovered that the people who wrote about being queer were two people of colour. These two articles demonstrate that people of colour are writing in the area of queer theory, and that they believe they may be acceptably represented within it. However, it is important to note that this is not a 'sample' and unfortunately it does not change the fact that the majority of currently published queer theorists are white.

It is also important to note that the two people who wrote these queer narratives identified as *bi-queer*. As bisexuality is often marginalized and stigmatized within gay and lesbian culture (Hemmings, 1995) it seems unsurprising to me that it is people who are already marginalized and existing between the binaries of heterosexual and homosexual, who are taking an interest in queer theory and identity.

An important aspect of Farajate-Jones (1995) and Nguyen's (1999) queer identity is recognizing the interlocking nature of oppression. Mary Lou Fellows and Sherene Razack (1998) describe interlocking systems of oppression: "this 'interlocking' effect means that systems of oppression come into existence in and through one another" (p.335). Attempts to dismantle one system, such as homophobia, necessarily entail working to dismantle other systems such as racism, classism, sexism and hierarchies of ability and normalcy. It is relevant to mention that Farajate-Jones and Nguyen describe the importance of recognizing systems of oppression, whilst failing to discuss their points of privilege. Fellows and Razack argue that for political movement to be fruitful, we must

recognize that while we all have points of penalty, we also have points of privilege. They remind activists specifically to consider how we are implicated in the subordination of others. I think that this analysis of power should be integrated into queer identity in order to facilitate future (queer) community or coalition building. The literature on queer identities serves as a reminder that it is necessary to consider all aspects of marginalization when examining queer identities. Issues of race, class, disability and gender have to be taken into consideration.

Farajaje-Jones (1995) and Nguyen (1999) offer individual accounts of queer identity. The listserv that I set up, focussed on queer identities and the ways in which people who claim queer identities define them. In order to introduce the research listserv, I will now focus on the way in which my research evolved into a listserv, focussing on how queer identities are understood and represented. I will also describe the process of applying to the Ethics Committee, launching and running the listserv, as well as my own doubts and struggles that arose throughout the duration of the listserv.

### 3

#### **Researching Queer / Queering Research**

After figuring out generally what it was that I wanted to research, it was necessary to figure out how I would access this information. I was interested in using my Sexualities class as a sample and inquired if anyone would be interested in participating in a discussion about queer. Everyone was interested, however, approximately half of the people in the class lived outside of Toronto and were not sure that they would be able to come in for a focus group. I asked if we might have this discussion via email, and everyone was agreeable to this medium.

#### **Methodology**

The first step in the bureaucratic process to be able for conducting this research was to pass a proposal by the Student Education Ethics Review Committee of the University of Toronto. In this initial proposal, my advisor and I assumed that participants would use their own names on the listserv and then aliases would be used in writing up the final thesis. Anonymity between participants was not a concern, as the initial group of proposed participants had agreed to participate and they already knew each other. The participants had already discussed face-to-face what we were now proposing to discuss via email. We felt that the subject matter would not be sensitive to necessitate aliases, because we proposed to look at discourses around queer, and we were not asking for any sort of personal information or life history from participants.

In a letter dated June 22, 2000, the Ethics Committee responded by requesting more security in the study due to “the confidentiality and security issues raised by the

study.” They worried that “possibly sensitive information” would be discussed and there was a significant “risk that participants will ‘break the rules’ and leak information regarding the discussion to others.” The Ethics Committee recommended that I should “encrypt” the messages<sup>7</sup>, have all participants use aliases and remove all identifying material from each email before re-sending it to the listserv. As I already had participants willing to participate and they had no concerns about their anonymity, it seemed strange that the Ethics Committee would be so concerned about security risks. This was a subject that the participants had already discussed at some length in a face-to-face classroom setting and so having to “warn participants that the information cannot be controlled” felt unnecessary. I felt that by imposing these moves toward anonymity, I would be suggesting that this was some shameful and top-secret subject matter that we would be discussing. In other words, that which was okay to discuss in person, was now very sensitive. At that time (July 05 2000) I described their response in my journal:

It consists of legalistic paranoia anticipating negative consequences. It is a typical conservative self-defence manoeuvre. With hilarious language such as ‘security issues’, ‘sensitive information’ and ‘a significant risk that participants will leak information.’ I can’t even see my research in this feedback. It appears that I am conducting some sort of CSIS operation. Is this a result of the queer content? Or would they be so cautious with any email exchange. Kari wondered if I were researching people’s thoughts on the term green, would they be so concerned? They have also recommended the full ethical review process rather than the expedited process due to issues of confidentiality between participants and security issues due to the listserv. These concerns are puzzling to me as the participants were all in a class together and agreed to participate knowing that they would be recognizable to each other. They will essentially be expressing views via email that they have already expressed to each other face-to-face during our class discussion of queer. I feel a little sheepish with the changes that [the] ethics [committee] is asking me to make. I feel as though my very guarded approach will signal that this is a bad / naughty / shameful topic. I do not see it that way at all, and judging by the classroom discussion, neither do the

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<sup>7</sup> This would involve all of the participants using email programs that would convert our messages into code in order to prevent unauthorized access.

participants. We are discussing a theory; a word; a politic; a social group. This subject becomes 'sensitive' when the ethics committee treats queer as shameful.

This was *my* initial reaction to the response that I received from the Ethics Committee. In conversation with Dr. Njoki Wane, the second reader for my thesis, I learned that she had a rather different reading of the Committee's response. She felt that perhaps they were uncomfortable with the use of the term queer and that their response might be a matter of maintaining the status quo. She thought that I might have fared better using already accepted terms such as gay and lesbian, as these are somewhat familiar and comfortable by now. She speculated that perhaps the Committee was not comfortable stepping outside of the already defined social categories into a subject that seeks to rupture these categories.

In order to satisfy the requirements of the Ethics Committee, I would have to change my letter of consent significantly in order to include the many warnings about "leaking," "security risks" and "sensitive material." The letter of consent is the point of entry to the research for all participants and I worried about how this (paranoia) might frame the research project. I was concerned that people might have the impression that I felt that this was a shameful and secretive subject, when of course, I see it as a subject that is not shameful at all, and I am critical of the way queer is treated as a shameful subject. I wondered how the Ethics Committee had come to the decision that this was "potentially sensitive material." I want to note that the concern of anonymity and confidentiality is one that is imposed on virtually all social science research. So while the Ethics Committee seemed to me to be unreasonably worried about my research, they are very concerned about this in all research. My encounter with the Ethics Committee raises

issues about how research on / about sexuality comes to be viewed as especially sensitive within a context that has become very cautious. If I had been researching discourses around heterosexuality, would they have been so concerned? As my advisor said, perhaps these are the problems of doing queer research in a straight system.

In hindsight, it is important to note that I complained a fair amount about the requests of the Ethics Committee, and my advisor agreed for the most part with my complaints, yet it did not occur to me to take my complaints to the Ethics Committee. I was reluctant to 'get into it' with the Ethics Committee as I worried that if they knew more about my research, they might be more reluctant to approve it. I believed that the less I said, the better chance I would have. Dr. Njoki Wane pointed out to me the subtle and powerful way in which silencing occurred here. My own fears anticipated the (possibly homophobic) fears of the Ethics Committee, and I kept quiet, hoping to appear non-threatening and 'safe' to the Committee. Njoki suggested that the experience with the Ethics Committee highlights how institutions maintain, preserve and protect certain knowledges and how new knowledge, or the intention to produce new knowledges, is blocked. In a sense, by proceeding to appear to make the changes as requested by the Ethics Committee, I see myself as taking a very un-queer approach to this queer research. If queer seeks to challenge the norm, then I have only reinforced it through conforming. As my advisor, Dr. Kari Dehli wrote in some feedback around this issue, "...to assert a project / politics it's very tempting to delimit – 'play along' – with conventional / normative notions of respectability." I played along, and re-submitted my proposal. I made the requested changes to my subsequent proposal to the Ethics Committee and it was passed.

## Methodology

By the time the study was passed by the Ethics Committee it was already summer and my intended sample had drifted away. This meant that I had look elsewhere for participants. I began by sending out information email messages about the research to people I knew, asking them to consider participating, and asking them to forward the message on to others. Through this snowball effect, eight participants and myself made up the sample.

I initiated the listserv with an email that contained the script of a gender fashion show called “Gender Euphoria.” This script was written by a group in Winnipeg, called Queer Invasion. Upon sending out this first email I wrote in my process notes that I felt as though I was hosting a party and hoping that someone would show up. I offered people some suggested questions to respond to, or ignore. These suggested questions were “How do you understand queer? How did you come to understand it in that way? Where did you hear of queer?” As well, the consent form explained that I was interested in looking at queer and “how it is used, understood, refused, negotiated and so on.” Initially, most of the listserv responses focussed on these questions and then conversations diverged from there.

Through the process of ‘snowball sampling’ I ended up with some participants that I knew and some that I did not know. Most of the participants were from the greater Toronto area, except for two participants, one was in Alberta and the other was in British Columbia. All of the participants identified as queer in some way, although I had actively tried to recruit people who were not queer identified because I was interested in many

perspectives on queer, not only the perspectives of people who were queer-identified. All of the people I contacted about the research who did not identify as queer (mostly heterosexual identified) advised that they did not know enough about the topic and that they did not feel that they had anything “worthwhile” to say. These responses were interesting to me because I felt sure that they had some impression of the word queer, but they were still unwillingly to participate for many reasons. Some of the reasons given were that they felt intimidated and unsure if they would be accepted on the listserv. They described the subject area as “unknown territory” and worried about “looking stupid.” This was, in itself, was a point to illustrate that people who occupy a normative position do not have to ‘know’ or find out. In having a normative sexuality, they are allowed a kind of sanctioned ignorance. In hindsight, there was no need to try to recruit ‘diversity’ in the sample, as there was (of course) plenty of diversity within the group of queer identified people.

### **My Role as Researcher / Participant**

In the context of the listserv, I was both a participant and the researcher and this put me in a unique position in relation to other participants. On the listserv, it was known to all of the participants that I was Stiles. This stemmed from my dislike of the guidelines set out by the Ethics Committee (as I genuinely was not concerned with my anonymity with regard to this subject matter). At times, my positions as participant and researcher restrained my participation on the listserv. To illustrate, I am typically very interested in this queer topic and frankly, very interested in other people’s views. However, serving both roles on the listserv, I participated actively, but also kept quiet when I had



something to say, because I did not want to dominate the ‘conversation.’ I felt that if I participated ‘too much,’ I might be trying to subtly control the discussion without consciously realizing it. I remembered hearing from a Ph.D. student who had made a list of class participation and found that the professor responded to every comment made by a student and thus her list read, “student, professor, student, professor, student, professor.” The student commented to me that this professor was very controlling, and I was wary of becoming this way myself. I was also shy about challenging other participants on their points of view. I worried that it would appear that I had invited these people to share their views, and then I was going to quiz or interrogate them on the appropriateness of their beliefs, according to my beliefs. I did not want to set myself up as, or be perceived as an authority on queer. Had I been solely a participant, I think that I would have felt free to challenge other participants on their views and the implications of their views.

### **The Queer Research Listserv: Struggles and Curiosities**

I want to focus briefly on the method of ‘data collection’ that I chose, the listserv. I want to describe some of the difficulties that I found with this method in order to provide information to anyone who may be considering using email for collecting information. Although the limitations of the listserv may not relate directly to queer as a topic, I believe that the form of the listserv shaped the information that was posted and consequently influenced the information that I am using to explore the meanings attached to the term queer. To illustrate, I emailed a participant who had agreed to participate, but who had not yet posted to the listserv. Due to temporary problems with my email, I worried that her message had been bounced back to her. I recorded her response in my

journal (August 02 2000), she “advised that she has composed something to post to the listserv but she wants to read it over again. This feels so strained. I could write an entire thesis on process.” I received similar comments about writing and revising from other participants. One participant even mentioned in a private email that she felt pressured to be “clever” when posting to the listserv. This perceived pressure to compose and be clever may explain why I had many animated private conversations and email exchanges with participants about the research subject, while such discussions and debates never appeared on the listserv. I wonder if the listserv format as I set it up, leant itself to people providing information about what they did know, as opposed to the ‘free-form’ conversations of broken sentences and gestures that I had with other participants when we were struggling to articulate queer territories that we knew little about. From my experience and from the feedback that I received from participants, it seems that for many people, writing email to a listserv may not lend itself to that sort of ‘verbal fishing’ and speculative conversation. For these reasons, I wondered many times if it might have been wiser to have held a focus group or individual interviews / discussions instead of the listserv. As well, I have wondered about this connection that seemed to be made between queer and clever. In a conversation with my friend Leah Dolmage (personal communication, October 14, 2000) she speculated that clever might be part of queer performativity. Perhaps a (good) performance of queer is expected to be clever, or a queer individual is expected to put on a performance of cleverness. Her comment rang familiar to me, and I was reminded of an episode of the British television series ‘Queer As Folk,’ in which a gay male character enters a heterosexual bar and comments ironically to his gay friend with whom he is speaking on his cell phone, “It’s just like

they say it is, there are washrooms in which no one has ever had sex, and people are speaking in sentences that don't end in punchlines." It is possible that this connection between queer and clever relates to a similar association made between gay men and cleverness with humour and wit. Or perhaps cleverness is somehow integral to a position that seeks to disrupt / challenge norms and identity categories. It may take a kind of cleverness to challenge and disrupt and be read as queer rather than simply as 'out of it' or incomprehensible. Dr. Njoki Wane speculated that the expectation to be clever might stem from expectations often put on marginalized people to be / perform 'better than' in order to be accepted. As marginalized people are often assumed to be undeserving of certain rights, privileges and positions, there is an expectation that they / we must perform better than the norm in order to *earn* that which is readily given to others. Njoki wondered if there might be an expectation that if you are going to be queer then you must work to be entertaining and clever as well.<sup>8</sup>

An interesting moment of insight and anxiety came for me after I, (Stiles), had posted a large email to the listserv looking at queer communities ("is there such a thing?") and the prevalence of white Western viewpoints in queer theory (as described by Mimi Nguyen at [www.worsethanqueer.com](http://www.worsethanqueer.com)). I wondered how the introduction of race to listserv would play out as it had been conspicuously absent on the listserv until that point. I considered how in my undergraduate and graduate classes, the introduction of race, would often result in the shutting up and shutting down of white students. I wondered if this was similar to the heterosexual people who would not participate in my queer research because they didn't believe that they knew anything about the subject, in that

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<sup>8</sup> We also speculated that the queer and clever connection might also (partially) stem from the colonial legacy of marginalized people as 'entertainers'.

white people are often in a position to imagine that they have nothing to say about race. We see ourselves as being neutral / un-raced, due to our position of racial privilege and supremacy (Frankenberg, 1993). As well, Fellows and Razack (1998) describe 'the race to innocence,' which occurs when people who occupy some positions of marginality refuse to recognize their positions of privilege and hold solely onto their positions of marginality. Due to my previous reading and experiences, I wondered if the participants might be predominantly white and I wondered if they would be silent on this issue. These were my initial and hypothetical worries.

The next posting that I received after posting the aforementioned email was marked personal, not for the listserv. The participant wrote, "I don't know about everyone else, but for me, some of the topics in your project are way over my head... a bit too much pressure to be clever and way too much information... seems to me, most listservs are more casual..." At this point in the process, I received this email with interest, confusion and speculation. I wondered if this email signalled an unwillingness to discuss topics other than gender and sexuality. Or might it signal, a distinction between participants with a background and familiarity with academic queer (theory) and those for whom the subject of queer was solely 'I am queer because I...'? I worried that I might be alienating people who did not have the academic language to 'interrogate the ways in which the categories of race and queerness are produced, performed and engaged.' While these are words that I am comfortable with, I had overlooked how alienating and elitist they are. This struggle continued to play out when the next email to the listserv was from Rosemary's Baby, describing his experience of being stereotyped and fetishized as a gay Asian male. His email contained plenty of academic language. I wondered how I might

attempt to strike a balance on the listserv that would create space for both Rosemary's Baby and the participant who had been feeling that the topics were over their head.

In the process of trying to compose the perfect listserv posting to extend the conversation to all voices on the listserv, I wished that the first email had been posted to the listserv. I think that if this email had been posted to the listserv initially it would have been interesting to see what attributions other participants might have made for this individual indicating that the discussion was over her head. Perhaps other participants would have indicated that they were feeling the same way. I wondered if any of my theories (academic 'vs.' non-academic, or 'white student who does not want to discuss race') were partially correct, and if I would ever know. I was interested in knowing how other participants were feeling, but I wanted to keep the first email message private as requested. I felt compelled to proceed in such a way that would conceal the concerns the participant had raised, and therefore I sent out two emails to follow up: One responding to Rosemary's Baby with my thoughts on queer and racial privilege; and a second email describing sights that I have perceived as queer and asked for other people's contributions. I hoped that this attempt would open up the discussion while at the same time returning to the participant who had been feeling over their head. The struggle that I have described here is interesting to me, because I cannot say with any confidence, what it demonstrated. Perhaps this exchange illustrated that there are layers to how people understand queer and these layers are difficult to articulate and negotiate. While I have several theories, it is my hope that through sharing this story, I might demonstrate how there was much more to this research than that which appeared on the listserv as 'data.' I

also hope to shatter any notions of me as an 'objective' researcher by rendering explicit how my knowledge and ideas influenced my roles as researcher and participant.

On August 21, 2000, I made the following note in my journal, "I am having difficulty choosing gendered pronouns for some of the people on the listserv, so I am going with the sex that they claim ('Asian male,' 'married woman'). I am making certain assumptions based on (fallibly) fixed categories, for example if someone says that they first came out as a lesbian, I am assuming that they are female etc." On the listserv, certain participants, including myself, moved between describing ourselves as "boys," "girls," "men" and "women." To illustrate, one participant, Joey Jeremiah, posted this email on the listserv, "well, i have been called a lady, and a woman, and even a little girl (by my daddy), and i have been called a boy. i have come to realize though, that in my mind, i am a man. i am the man who will open your door, pay for your dinner, bring you flowers, help you out of the car, and write you a poem-- i am the man who will do anything to swoon you. i am the man." At times, my instinct would tell me to call someone a 'he' or a 'she' based on their own gendered description of themselves, while other information they provided suggested that this person was not of the sex that was assumed to correspond to the gendered description. Most of the time I assumed the pronoun that reflected the sex the person identified as, over the gender they identified with. This was always a tough call for me, and I viewed this as disrespectful in many ways. I came to this conclusion after asking Joey Jeremiah which pronoun I should use in reference to her, and she replied that absolutely she was a 'she.' I chose to use Joey Jeremiah's response as a guide in selecting pronouns for other participants in future. I

will discuss the implications of this relationship between assumed sex and gender play in more detail later on in the thesis.

I wanted to describe my experience of the listserv research process in order to share parts of the process that are not evident in simply reading the listserv exchanges. Now I will focus directly on the listserv discussion. I will begin by describing the participants' individual understandings and representations of queer. Then I will look specifically at particular themes that emerged on the listserv.

## 4

**Queer: Mapping Meanings**

One of the prospective participants in the listserv emailed me several times individually to say that he was very intrigued and interested in the subject of queer politics and queer identities, but he was having difficulty deciding what to say and how to say it. Ultimately he sent me a photograph via email (personal communication, August 14, 2000). He had titled the photo “pink cops” (see the following page). The email read,

I thought that this would be for me a good example of ‘queer’ behaviour, and a great visual protest. what do you think. not sure why this image caught my attention as much as it did. pink cops occurred to me after a few days fermenting the question ‘what is Queer?’ Originally a photo in the globe, it struck me instantly as something outside the ‘norm’. a quick scan and deconstruction in Photoshop, resulted in an image i would say gives the impression of a ‘Queer’ protest. it’s pretty too. that’s about it. good juxtaposition of roles. –squeegee.

In looking at this photograph, I think that Squeegee has chosen a queer image and has also queered this image. In trying to sort out what to do with this image and information, I contacted Squeegee and he agreed to let me use the image and text in my thesis. This is a version of queer that seems to suggest an anti-authority, beautifully rebellious view of queer. The image of the dancing figure seems so incredibly free with arms outstretched with abandon and hilarity. The dancer is transgressing norms which say that she should be afraid and docile in the face of the police, and covering these (macho) men in a colour that is associated with femininity, strikes me as a queering of the image. For me, turning these cops pink suggests that queer is transcending this moment, taking it over.





*Becky Stark, a 24-year-old dancer, performs outside the Staples Center, where Democrats are expected to nominate Al Gore for president during the third day of their convention tomorrow.*

PHOTO BY AP/WIDEWORLD

## CONVENTION NOTEBOOK

In exploring the meanings of queer as they were invoked and explained by each of the participants on the listserv, I will focus on particular themes that I see as marking the borders of queer. These themes are: queer and coming out; queer heterosexuality; the political implications of queer; and queer gender play. In using the language of ‘mapping’ and ‘borders,’ I want to clarify that while these terms imply fixity and stasis, I view this mapping as a process of outlining the views expressed on the listserv. My intention is not to fix these meanings, but rather to open them up and provide a temporary description of the ways in which queer was taken up on the listserv.

In presenting the information from the listserv, I have chosen to present the participants in the order in which they initially contributed, and I will begin by summarizing each participant’s contributions to the listserv. I have chosen to include a complete recording of the listserv in the appendix. As I am presenting only one / my version of the material, I wanted to provide the opportunity for others to read the full listserv exchange because there is much more interesting information on the listserv than I was able to look at in this thesis. As well, I want to invite others to have their own reading of the listserv information by having access to the original exchange. For a complete recording of listserv activity, please see Appendix A.

## **Stiles**

I will begin by introducing my own involvement on the listserv. Within the context of the listserv, I went by the name Stiles. I launched the listserv with a “gender fashion show” script written by a Winnipeg based direct action group called Queer

Invasion. I hoped that the fashion show script might be more inspiring than simply asking participants for their reflections on queer. In introducing the fashion show, I explained, “i am always interested in how queer is interpreted and can play itself out politically and culturally.”

My understanding of queer emerged in bits and pieces over the course of the listserv. It was often only in response to someone else’s remarks that I came to articulate my own sense of queer. It slowly became clear that queer is what I think that I am and what I call myself. I claim queer as my sexuality identity category. I also see queer theory as a way to think generally, and specifically about normalcy, sexuality and gender. For me, queer is also a way to act – sexually and politically. In response to issues raised by another participant, Rosemary’s Baby, I wrote “i too think that queer must be a head thing that is hopefully tied to some (tangible / vocal) critique and resistance of heteronormativity, heterosexism, essentialist notion of sex, sexuality and gender and as you say, a critique of other systems of oppression, race, class, disability.” My understanding of queer was not limited to people with non-normative sexualities in theory, rather I viewed queer as a “head thing” hopefully tied to some form of political activism. I defined queer in opposition to heterosexism and heteronormativity, rather than in opposition to heterosexuals. I made this distinction because I was interested in moving away from the identity politics that have been popularized by the contemporary gay and lesbian movements. This distinction parallels being opposed to racism, but not white people, opposed to sexism, but not men. I imagine that queer does not seek to present non-normative sexualities as homogeneous and monolithic and I see queer as a more inclusive category and movement than gay and lesbian identity politics have been.

My first contact with queer was in the process of claiming a non-normative sexuality. As I explained in the introduction, I did not feel that the existing sexuality identity categories (lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual) were adequate to describe my sexuality. Although, I cannot remember exactly, I suspect that I first heard of queer through academic related contact with postmodernism and Women's Studies. I think that queer was explained to me in the context of postmodernism and I immediately believed that this accurately represented my fluid experience with sexuality and romantic love. For me, queer was presented as a concept, received as a nice fit for my sexuality identity and slowly evolved into a politic and a process of looking critically at sex, gender, sexuality and the ways in which social categories are mutually constituted. Since my first exposure to the term, I have been struggling with practical curiosities around queer politics and identities. On the listserv, I asked what a queer space looks like or might look like. This question stemmed from a night spent in a gay bar, and I decided that this felt like a decidedly un-queer space because "it seems like a (necessary) extension from the 'different but equal' politics. it is difficult to know when such politics / spaces result in ghetto-izing of homos, and when this is just realistic given the pathetic / hostile nature of most straight clubs. so what would a queer space look like i wonder?" Although I appreciate spaces designated for people with non-normative sexualities, I also struggle with the "difficulty of negotiating between a world designed for neat categories with corresponding identity politics, and queer lived experiences." My understanding of queer is one that would challenge the ghettoizing of people with non-normative sexualities by moving into and queering 'straight' spaces. However, as I wrote on the listserv, I can also appreciate "the difficulties of setting up queer spaces within worlds that are always

already hierarchically defined. that is to say that it is difficult to see couples who look straight and privileged in a marginal space where we are almost forced to exist because we are not welcome elsewhere due to non-normative sex / sexuality / gender.” My understanding of queer wants to challenge ‘heterosexual spaces’ and ‘homosexual designated spaces.’ However as my writing on the listserv suggests, I have difficulty imagining negotiating such queer spaces. I recognize that any space, heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual and queer, will come to create its own norms of inclusion and exclusion, how to behave, speak and look. It is clear from my contributions to the listserv that I struggled with attempts to connect my queer identity (“i came to queer because i did not fit in anywhere else”) and my understanding of queer theory up with so-called practical applications of queer. I was curious about queer spaces, queer politics, language around queer identity and queer as it intersects with other points of privilege and penalty within identity. I was also often confused by what I felt was a slippery slope between my ideas of queer theory in practice and utopian ideals. Somehow I was inclined to conceive of queer as a politic or project that works to address all systems of oppression, rather than just sexuality. Because of that inclination I was often confused when the listserv seemed to often focus on sexuality and non-normative gender performances. I was also struggling with whether or not I was comfortable with conceiving of queer as a broadly based equity movement with fluid conceptions of sexualities and gender (e.g. queer is about multiple identities, not about sexuality and gender), or if it queer was better suited as an equity based politic recognizably rooted in people with non-normative sexualities and gender performances (e.g. I choose queer as a way to explain my sexuality and gender, just as I choose anti-racist politics as a way to understand my white privilege). I wrote, “do i

conceive of queer as the larger utopian project, or as a part of the larger utopian project that includes battling racism, sexism, ableism, classism? i am wary of erasing / subsuming these other -isms into queer, but if queer is conceived of as working to address all of these issues... seems like there is an answer here, and that perhaps i am perceiving a contradiction where none should exist. is anyone following here?" My difficulty here is evident, and I am suspicious of my construction of what I suspect are false dichotomies (utopia vs. queer, and queer politics vs. queer identities). In trying to negotiate between queer identities and a queer politic, I had no difficulty understanding where I fit in to each of these categories (I am queer and I believe in what I consider to be a queer politic.) But within the context of the listserv, I had difficulty seeing how queer identity and queer politics were linked for me, and for other participants. Rosemary's Baby, another participant on the listserv referred to finding himself "within a matrix where [each of us are] simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged, [and] run[ning] the risk of erasing my own/everyone else's experiences of oppression.." My writing on the listserv suggests that I too have difficulty conceiving of a collective queer movement that effectively recognizes individual penalty and privilege according to differences of race, class, disability, gender and sex within its participants.

In the following descriptions I will refer to myself as Stiles, in the third person. In my writing, I have found that this has been easier for me in putting a slight distance between what I know about myself, and what I wrote on the listserv. Within the context of her memory work research, Frigga Haug (1992) recommends writing in third person in as a deliberate strategy for self-critique and reflection. I will now focus more on the information that was shared by other participants on the listserv.

## Stressed

The first person to email the listserv identified herself as “STRESSED!” Stressed wrote often about trying to finish her graduate level thesis this summer, and she chose her alias to reflect her current state of mind. Stressed related how her claiming of queer as an identity category came through her coming out process. She explained that she rejected the term lesbian in order to avoid “a discussion of the mechanics of [her] brain” and chose queer instead. Evidently, for Stressed queer does not relate to the “mechanics of the brain” and I assume that she is pointing to the way in which queer seeks to de-essentialize sexuality and see it as socially constructed. She said that she describes herself as queer because she doesn’t think that LGBT quite fits her or other people she knows. She found that queer seemed “to roll off [her] tongue more easily than lesbian or bisexual.” Stressed invoked queer as an identity category first in opposition to heterosexuality, during her coming out process, and then in opposition to other non-normative sexuality categories. She said simply that the other categories did not seem to fit. From the listserv, it seemed that queer was frequently defined in opposition to ‘normal’ (/ heteronormativity) when the participant realised that they themselves were no longer considered to be ‘normal’ sexually. Thus queer seems to be firmly planted as a non-normative sexuality identity category. However, it is important to note that queer is frequently referenced in opposition to other non-normative sexuality identity categories. Stressed clearly does not see queer as a synonym to LGBT identities. Her meaning of queer is not entirely clear, but she holds it as a preferred alternative to other sexuality categories, normative and non-normative.

Queer theorist Shane Phelan (1997) sees queer identity as a process of calling into question sexual identities such as gay and lesbian. He argues that the inclusion of bisexuals, transgendered people and transsexuals in queer identity is one manifestation of this challenge to gay and lesbian identities. While Phelan focused on the challenge posed by these inclusions, Stressed focused on the limits of "LGBT" identity categories as they don't quite "seem to fit." Phelan argues that queer identity seeks the recognition and acceptance of queer acts such as lesbians sleeping with gay men, or any other acts that signal a deviation from fixed sexual or gender identity (p.56). I suspect that when Stressed described LGBT identities as a poor fit, she may have been referring to the queer acts that Phelan describes as points where individuals are in excess of lesbian and gay identities.

Stressed was planning to start a teaching position in the upcoming fall, and in her last message to the listserv she expressed her concern about the need to overhaul the entire educational system. She wrote that because such an overhaul was unlikely, she planned to try "queering it from within." She would queer the existing educational system by seeking out "either current educational initiatives or programs outside of the ed system (with people who will be willing to enter such a system to do some work) that actually take into account social exclusion/inclusion that actually acknowledges racist, sexist, colonialist, heterosexist pedagogies and systems..." She described this queering of the system as her "utopian vision." She wrote, "I have an idea this will all end in heartache, but can't give it up yet on the utopian vision..." Although her articulation of queer was mostly related to personal identity, she named "queering" as part of an educational project that would "actually" take into account racism, sexism, colonialism and



heterosexism. I assume that Stressed did not see the current educational approach as successful in taking into account the issues she named. Here we can see queer as a way to think (theory) and a way to act politically.

In some of the comments on the listserv, there was often an unexplained leap between 'queer is the category that I am most comfortable with' and 'queer is a term that has political potential to be disruptive and challenging.' Stressed demonstrates this when she moves from using queer as a category she claims, to using queer as a verb, "to queer" the educational system in order to challenge racism, sexism, colonialism and heterosexism. This slide between identity and politics suggests that for some people, queer is seen as a term that is directly connected to politics. It is a good example of the way in which the act of naming is a necessarily political process. The identity and the politics are not separate, rather it seems that the identity informs the politics one adopts, and vice versa. The process of claiming and naming are political, and the reclamation of queer demonstrates the power and politics of naming. Farajaje-Jones (1995) describes the reclamation of the term queer as a source of empowerment, strength and pride (p.122). Often the processes of naming and claiming are contingent upon political movements. Once a group or issue has been named, it becomes possible to launch a political movement on the basis of a name or a claim. The formation of Queer Nation is one example of the co-emergence of a political movement and an identity claim.

If I were to try to build a bridge from Stressed's comments that 'queer is the category that fits me', to queer as part of an educational project, I would guess that for Stressed the other sexuality categories do not satisfactorily address the political issues of racism, sexism, colonialism and heterosexism, and therefore she prefers the category that

she perceives as attempting to address these issues. It seems that she prefers the politics associated with queer over the politics that are currently presented in the educational system. Queer signifies more than a non-normative sexuality category to Stressed, it also represents a movement or theory with political potential in areas other than sexuality.

### **Rosemary's Baby**

Another participant on the listserv was Rosemary's Baby. Rosemary's Baby described queer as "a contested term." He explained that he has heard it used as "a simple, and politically benign, synonym for gay, lesbian, bisexual, what have you..." Other times, I've heard it used to mean postmodernist theory as it relates to gay, lesbian, bisexual... or other 'transgressive desires.' " He described his own use of queer as a "political stance - resistance to heterosexism (along with other forms of oppression). Intentionally emancipatory. Interrogating the social world that is ordered along heteronormative biases thereby rendering other forms of social relations as silent or perverse [...] But, also I would argue for an activist component- someone who promotes transformative social change to those sexually marginalized." Rosemary's Baby views queer as a way to think and as a way to act politically. Here he is in keeping with Stressed's comment on queering the education system. He places primary emphasis on resistance to heterosexism and promotion of transformative social change to those who are *sexually* marginalized. Within brackets, he also includes queer as resistance to other forms of oppression. This is similar to Stressed's notion of queering the education system. Rather than saying queer is what I call myself, Rosemary's Baby is saying queer is about what I do or what needs to be done. His understanding of queer included action,

such as resistance to heterosexism, interrogation of the social world and the promotion of social change for those who are socially marginalized.

Rosemary's Baby described his impression of queer when responding to a question that Stressed wrote inquiring about a link between queer and age. He explained that he had initially been resistant to a queer identity because he believed that people were either homo or hetero, and "anything in between was believed to be a lie." He wrote, "I viewed queerness as FAR too 'unstable,' radical, and well... overwhelming for someone like myself who walked the straight and narrow (in both sexual and political thought) for so long." Rosemary's Baby contrasts queer with heterosexuality *and* homosexuality here. Again, queer is positioned against these categories, as the "unstable" alternative that is "believed to be a lie" because it exists "between" heterosexuality and homosexuality. It seems to me that the concerns that Rosemary's Baby raises when he explains why he did not like the term queer originally, are the same aspects of queer that Stressed liked about the term when she was coming out.

### **Joey Jeremiah**

The next participant who contributed to the listserv claimed her name from a goofy and likeable teenage boy character from the Canadian teen television show *Degrassi Junior High*. In her first email to the listserv, Joey Jeremiah explained that she had first heard of the term queer about two years ago. She described how she had spent most of her life "being queer" and that it was through the process of coming-out to friends and family that she realized that her desires were associated with a whole new (lesbian) identity for everyone else. She explains that she was not comfortable with the

term lesbian, but went with it because it seemed to help her friends and family make sense of her new sexual relations with women. Joey Jeremiah explained that she has come to prefer the category queer because it seems to fit her better. She uses queer as an identity marker because she believes that it fits with her sexuality and gender practices, as she explained, “i have to say that i think that i am queer because it is the easiest way for other people to understand me. Sometimes, i think i would feel comfortable in simply telling people that i like girls...oh, and i guess i am dressed like a boy today.” She described her life-long queerness in this way:

I would daydream for hours about being the boy who bought the girl flowers, the boy who got to hold a girl's hand, the girl who was seduced by other girls (occasionally Madonna), the girl who was seduced by a boy in my school, and the person who made my two school male crushes kiss...I fantasize about being a man, a sleek dark-haired boy. I love it when my female partner calls me 'girly'. I wear make-up. I get along well with guys and get nervous around women. I love cars- I would love to be a tough mechanic boy.

In explaining her queerness, Joey Jeremiah describes a series of sexual and gender ‘roles,’ and seems to see the category lesbian as precluding some of them. She chooses the category queer over the category lesbian because she sees queer as allowing for her desire of women, her desire to play man to the woman, her desire for men, her desire for queer men, and her desire to be the man to another man. She explained that she feels that this term “allows other people to understand something about [her] (if someone dares to ask).” Her assertions that the category queer helps other people to understand her non-normative sexuality and gender performance, suggests that queer “explains” or encapsulates sexuality and gender. It also suggests that queer is a category that people recognize and can use to order and make sense of these non-normative identifications.

Joey Jeremiah seemed to be unsure about the queer theory end of things. She claims queer as an identity category, while keeping queer theory at an arms length. She writes, “i think that i have been a living breathing queer since i have known myself... without any theory to denounce ‘heteronormative practices’ to inspire me or for me to refer to.” Later on in the same email, she goes on to explain in more detail, “i suppose that i am more interested in living queerly in my interactions with other individuals, in my attire, in my manner, etc., than in theory, because i feel that the theory sometimes gives justification and reason for why people like me challenge gender stereotypes and normative sexual relationships.” To me, these comments suggest a wariness of queer theory. She seems to say, I am queer, now what does queer theory say about me? She may also be objecting to the idea that her desires and practices have to be explained. This is different than Rosemary’s Baby, who draws directly upon queer theory in order to construct his own queer politics. In contrast, queer theory is not an authority for Joey Jeremiah and she almost seems to invert / subvert the statement “I am queer” by saying “queer is me.” She reiterates that queer is an identity marker that she chooses for herself because it helps *others* to order and understand her sexual practices and gender performances. She does not need or want “theory” to explain who or what she is.

### **Piglet**

The next participant to join the listserv was Piglet, and she only logged in once to put her thoughts on the listserv. She explained that about eight years ago, before she “came out as a dyke,” she spent some time reflecting on the word queer. She felt that claiming queer as a personal identity allowed her to work against homophobia and be

seen as an ally, while not yet claiming a non-normative sexuality. She wrote that she “had been searching for ways to be less ‘in the box’ all the time and for words, phrases, and cultures that had embedded in them a sense of the impossibility of capturing and fixing meaning. Queer seemed to fit the bill.” She explains her ideas here,

I liked the sense that I could work against homophobia and be seen as an ally - a strong enough ally that I could be a "part" of things ... maybe even claim the same name and bits of identity. I don't mean to say that I thought that I was homosexual and could then ‘really-know-what-it’s-like’ to suffer the effects of homophobia. Rather, because of my attitude and practices around issues of homosexuality and homophobia that, well, I could claim some sense of queerness and maybe wouldn't have to prove myself over and over again.

She viewed queer as being open to a heterosexual ally. She also viewed it as open to change and open to differences. She explains that about five years ago, she “came out as a dyke” and since then she hasn’t spent nearly as much time thinking about queer and what it means. With Piglet, it sounds as though queer offered room for her, as a straight ally, to claim space as a ‘legitimate’ ally in working against homophobia. Her claiming of queer related to her positive attitude toward homosexuality and her interest in working against homophobia. Her story suggests that she was not seen as a part of things because she was not a homosexual, and therefore had to ‘prove herself’ in order to be accepted into the communities of resistance that work against homophobia. Piglet saw queer as open to her as a straight ally and ultimately she chose to change her identity marker to the more stable marker, dyke, when she ‘came out’. It is possible that in this case queer may have been regarded in much the same way as bisexual often is<sup>9</sup>, as a flexible / unstable conduit for questioning, and eventually to claiming a fixed / stable gay or lesbian identity marker.

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<sup>9</sup> In the case of bisexuality, this is an unfortunate belief as bisexuality is often viewed as a state of experimentation or flux, rather than as a legitimate and lifelong sexuality.

## Sheila

Sheila was the next participant to join the listserv and she started off her entries by relating to Joey Jeremiah's comments about the boy with tits and a vagina. Sheila explained that she is frequently read as a male and consequently other women will direct her to the 'correct' (men's) washroom or give her strange looks. With this information in mind, Sheila ironically chose her alias with the following explanation, "Sheila – (my alias, for although it's also the one on my driver's license, i sure didn't pick it)." Sheila described her process of coming to claim queer as an identity marker. She 'came out' and claimed lesbian as her identity marker because she was "too afraid of the implications of any other words." Two years later she claimed dyke and later queer. She explained this claiming here: "i adopted dyke and a bit later queer, as terms of my own making, and as terms constantly being remade by those who adopt them." Sheila explained that after claiming lesbian, she still felt "tossed about by gender." She explains this in more detail here:

so like joey, i feel like queer has been a way of experiencing the world long before the theory came whacking me in the head with a good old SO THAT'S WHAT'S GOING ON HERE! in fact i was a transgendered five-year-old. i remember clearly wishing to be a boy so that i could like girls, and even after i learned that i was a plain old pervert, i still felt tossed about by gender.

For Sheila, queer seemed to be a coming together of non-normative sexuality and gender performance, while lesbian apparently captured only her non-normative sexuality.

Sheila explained that for her, queerness is not about rejecting 'being straight' and all that this is supposed to entail. Rather she views queer as pointing to practices such as being straight in order to reveal the instability of the terms. She explains her ideas in detail here;

to point out that 'straight' is in as many ways continuous as discontinuous with 'gay', and that 'gay' or 'lesbian' are not in themselves stable terms. my lesbian might not be the same as yours. sometimes my lesbian may even conflict with my dyke. and sometimes my dyke is really a little straight boy with a cunt. or a silicon dick, for that matter. the physical, the acts become important in the ways that they create meaning.

Sheila's comments are complicated. She seems to point to the way in which straight is not a stable term or category; nor is it the 'opposite' of homosexuality. This differs from the way in which heterosexuality is primarily presented as stable, essential and normal, in contrast to homosexuality that is presented as entirely separate and abnormal. I imagine that Sheila is looking to point out the overlaps that occur between heterosexuality and homosexuality, such as the many straight people who have romances and / or sexual relations with people of the same assumed sex as themselves, and homosexuals who have romances and / or sexual relations with people of the 'other' assumed sex. She is upsetting the assumed stability of these terms; heterosexual, homosexual, dyke, lesbian, gay, straight. As Sheila wrote, "the physical, the acts become important in the ways that they create meaning." She suggests that body parts and sexual practices are, unto themselves, meaningless. It is the terms, meanings and categories that we attach to them that offer meaning. In trying to understand Sheila's comments, I turned to Stuart Hall (1997), as he seems to struggle with this idea in his article on "The Centrality of Culture" when he asks, "[d]on't objects exist in the world independently of our language about them?" (p.22). He gives the example of a stone, indicating that a stone exists regardless of our descriptions of it. He goes on to say, "[o]utside of meaning-systems... objects certainly exist; but they cannot be defined as 'stones,' or indeed as anything else, unless there is a language or meaning-system capable of classifying them in that way and giving



them a meaning by distinguishing them from other objects” (p. 221). Hall explains that our identification and interpretation rests on systems of classification that make objects meaningful. Similarly, Sheila seems to view queer as pointing to practices of meaning making, and examining how categories that are presented as essential, are discursively produced. I understand her to be saying that through de-essentializing these categories, she is able to challenge (or queer) the positive (‘normal’) and negative (‘perverse’) meanings that are attached to them. For Sheila, queer is: something that she is (sexuality and gender performance); something she calls herself (identity category); something she does (to queer the notion of what a female / male is); and queer is a way to think (about practices of meaning making); and a way to act politically (through challenging notions of essentialism).

### **Michelle**

Michelle was the next person to enter the listserv discussion. She explained that she describes herself as bi and queer. She is married and sometimes jokingly refers to herself as a married lesbian, because, as she wrote, “I’m quite satisfied with my marriage so I haven’t wanted another man in my life but I crave being with women and that is the only ‘extramarital’ sex I want.” Michelle plays in the realm of BDSM (bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism) and explains that she is queer for loving sex and relationships with other women, for her polyamorous leanings and for enjoying “unusual” sex practices. Michelle described queer as:

[...]a simple thing: If you’re not straight you’re queer. That means if you’re not a [dyed-in-the-wool] heterosexual you qualify. Act now! <grin> Seriously, if you’re a lesbian, or gay, bisexual, asexual, omnisexual, transsexual, or whatever and/or identify as polyamorous or even if you prefer sex only solo, I say you qualify.

In contrast to earlier participants who defined queer in opposition to heterosexuality *and* homosexuality, Michelle defined queer strictly in opposition to heterosexuality. Later on in another email, Michelle commented on Stiles' (/my) comment about not liking the use of queer as an umbrella term for l/g/b/ts/tg. In her response, Michelle explained her understanding of straight and queer in this way:

My feeling is that as long as politicians and religious leaders try to tell us that the only 'normal' way to live is to have sex for procreation (which basically means all people are straight and they're only straight to have children), anything else is queer. That means that anyone who subscribes to that politicoreligious ideal is not queer and so everyone can't be queer. Those of us who identify as queer are saying that the idealized notion of straightness does not always apply.

For Michelle, queer people do not believe in or fit into the idealized (heterosexual sex for procreation only) notion of normal sexuality. Anyone who believes in and lives this ideal is straight, and the rest of us are queer. Michelle's comments seem to have aspects in common with the other understandings of queer, and some aspects seem to disagree. It seems that other people also defined queer in opposition to idealized notions of straightness, but their views differed from Michelle's because they were not so sure that m/any people would actually fit the idealized notion of straight. Michelle seems to argue that such people exist, while others (Rosemary's Baby, Beaker, Sheila, Stiles) seem sceptical that anyone has only straight practices / fantasies / desires / politics / beliefs. So while these ideas seem similar (defining queer against heterosexism / hetero norms and defining queer against straight people), they are different in describing who can be queer. This is a tricky space though, because while Michelle's idea (defining queer against straight people) seems to preclude the idea that anyone can be queer, it seems possible

that in her definition everyone could be queer, if they just stopped being straight. Perhaps the distinction between Michelle's view and the view that defines queer in opposition to heterosexism is that some participants might argue that no one is really straight and we should just admit that and get on with being queer, while Michelle might argue that some people really are straight, and they are not / cannot be queer. Maybe the crux of this difference is the question of whether straight people actually exist, or if they are just a myth made up of a set of discourses and practices. In my mind, this begs the question do straight people really exist? Also, do our conceptions of queer have 'real' referents in the world, and whether and how that matters? In my mind the 'real' referents are differentiated by Michelle's description of 'real' people as queer, and others descriptions of normative discourses with 'real' consequences. It seems to me that a conception of queer that includes the impact of normative discourses includes an understanding that real people are queer, but the description that real people are queer does not necessarily suggest to me an understanding of normative discourses. I will consider further whether and how this distinction matters later on in my thesis.

In reading Michelle's understanding of queer, it is interesting to frame her claiming of queer within the gay and lesbian discourses of "coming out." The discourse of queer that Michelle invokes makes it possible for her to play with queer because her everyday life is a heterosexual marriage. I don't want this to be critique of Michelle as a person, but it is interesting that queer as a discourse allows her to enjoy the privileges of being viewed as straight in a heteronormative society, while enjoying the pleasures of 'othered' sexual practices and identifications. I want to contrast with the popular discourse of gay and lesbian identities that emphasizes the need to "come out" as gay, or

as a lesbian. Michelle's conception of queer allows her to be viewed as straight in a heteronormative society, while popular discourses around gay and lesbian identities advocate actively against such practices. Gays, lesbians and bisexual women and men who retain heterosexual privilege are slighted in comments such as "don't be a tourist." Heterosexuals are not required to "come out" because of their normative sexuality, and Michelle's conception of queer fits in better with the heterosexual discourse that allows her to retain privilege, than with the gay and lesbian discourse that insists that she divest herself of this privilege.

### **Beaker**

Beaker was the next contributor to the listserv. She explained that although she is not a huge fan of labels, she uses the term queer to describe herself. She offered this explanation:

Like other people have said, for me queer just seems to fit. It's a headspace. Most days I don't like labels at all and other days I am inclined to check all of the above: "asexual grrrl bi baby dyke queer lezzie boy gender pirate." In a sense, I understand/use queer to be expansive and it can be about finding pride in not fitting and exposing the restrictions imposed on people by the hetero norm.

It is interesting that it is possible for Beaker to be averse to labels and then label herself as queer. How is it that queer can be a comfortable 'fit' yet it is not seen as a label? This is similar perhaps to Nguyen's (1999) description of the "necessary error of identity." This is where we can "mobilize the necessary error of identity while simultaneously attending to the exclusions that any identity politics actively creates" (Nguyen, 1999). Beaker specifies the "expansive" nature of queer allows her to be all categories, but is also a category from which she can critique the hetero norm. This relates to the way in

which naming and claiming provides a launch for political movements and critiques. It seems that the discourse of queer can be simultaneously a useful label, and an anti-label stance. The discourses around gay and lesbian identities have been very pro-label and again the discourses around 'coming out' emphasize this point. The claiming of a gay or lesbian identity is described as being politically necessary to 'the movement.' While the claiming of queer seems to be a rejection of labels in a way that claiming gay and lesbian are not. The claiming of a bisexual identity is something that I know less about, but bisexual is a label that is frequently put down in discourses around gay and lesbian identities, it seems to me that bisexual is a rejection of heterosexual, gay and lesbian identities, without having an anti-label connotation.

Like many others, Beaker sees the category queer as a nice fit for her in opposition to other non-normative sexuality categories and in opposition to 'the hetero norm.' This is different, in my mind, than Michelle's definition which positions queer in opposition to people who believe in and live the hetero norm. Beaker defines queer in opposition to a hetero *norm*, while Michelle defines queer in opposition to *people* who believe in and live the idea / myth of heterosexuality. These distinctions have potentially unique implications. To define queer in opposition to heterosexuals might result in excluding someone like Piglet, a hetero ally, from queer. Beaker's view, on the other hand, points not to the exclusion of people from queer, but rather to the restrictions imposed on people by heteronormativity. All people are 'put upon' by heteronormativity, and thus Beaker opens the door for all people to struggle against heteronormativity. It is important to note that all identifications imply / effect exclusions, but these exclusions *and* attitudes toward exclusions will differ. To illustrate, Nguyen (1999) explains that for

her queer attends to exclusions and is constantly open to challenge and redefinition. This differs from heterosexuality, which actively guards and polices its rigid borders and seems to celebrate the exclusion of non-heterosexuals. While the exclusions from each category will differ, similarly, the attitudes toward the exclusive nature of identity categories will differ. In this way, Beaker's conception of queer as an expansive term can be contrasted with heterosexual discourses that shore up the exclusive nature of heterosexuality and heterosexual identity.

Beaker's comments often addressed the instability of the term queer, and her struggles in "performing" such an unstable identity. She responded to a comment objecting to queer as an umbrella term for l/g/b/ts/tg because it implies that you must first claim a sub-category before being 'allowed' to be queer. She wrote, "This is interesting, because queer is a shake up for people, I've had comments like 'okay, you're queer, but what does that really mean, are you bi or lesbian?' Inquiring minds want to know, they would like a neat little box to put me in. Like queer is window dressing and underneath the 'real me' will reveal it's fixed identity, but I can't distil myself like that." Beaker referred to queer as "expansive" and as "a headspace." She was critical of the need to pick only one identity category in order to have her sexuality make sense to others. In claiming queer she sees herself as being able to be an "asexual grtrl bi baby dyke queer lezzie boy gender pirate" without having to pick only one identity / category.

Beaker addressed the tension between performing a recognizably non-normative sexuality identity and performing the instability of queer. She related a recent incident when a lesbian co-worker asked Beaker if she was gay. The woman explained that her gaydar was usually good, but she couldn't quite peg Beaker. Beaker responded by saying,

“I’m queer and one of the reasons is because I don’t want to be pegged.” Beaker pondered whether she was somehow “not performing up to par [...] because it wasn’t ‘obvious’ to her that I was not straight. [...] Like there is some essential queerness that I have failed to exude. This of course rings to me as total crap, but still it was my reaction.”

Beaker points to a tension between refusing an identification that confines and being preoccupied with getting queer performance “right.” This points to the difficulty of presenting / performing an unstable sexuality and gender identity, and the desire to still be recognized as having a non-normative sexuality and gender identity. I locate this tension within the context of heteronormativity, where people tend to be presumed to be heterosexual unless they prove, or are proven, otherwise. This facilitates a need for people to demonstrate that they are not heterosexual. Around this need has sprung up a host of codes that are thought to signal a non-normative, often gay or lesbian, sexuality. Such codes are both stereotypes (e.g. masculine women being coded as lesbians) and tools for communicating a non-normative sexuality identity (e.g. rainbow paraphernalia) just as Beaker has suggested. To illustrate, it may prove useful to display a gay or lesbian stereotype or code in order to be recognized by others with similar sexuality identities, particularly within a context of heteronormativity. At the same time, Beaker seems to point to the ways in which this effort reinforces the primacy and centrality of heterosexuality. While performing the ‘other’ disrupts the assumption that everyone is heterosexual, it also does not disrupt the ‘otherness’ of those with non-normative sexualities. The ‘others’ are still given the responsibility of distinguishing themselves while society is allowed to continue on with the practice of heterosexism. It seems that there is a tension between the heterosexual discourses that say everyone is straight except

for those poor or sick deviants / 'others'; the lesbian and gay discourses that seek to disrupt the presumption of heterosexuality and shame of homosexuality through claiming a positive homosexual identity; and the discourse of queer that seeks to disrupt the presumption *and* centrality of heterosexuality while refusing the confines of identification. It is these tensions that Beaker seems to be actively negotiating. This tension between refusing a confining identity and creating a recognizably queer performance reminds me of the ways in which queer has come, will come or might come to have its own norms regarding how to behave, speak and look.

### **Pixie**

Pixie was the last participant to join the listserv, and due to problems with her email account she had difficulties sending email and in the end, we completely lost contact. Pixie identified as bi and queer. She says that she has found that queer is the best 'definition' for her sexuality, which she described as, "a dyke that likes to fuck men every so often, a woman who is happy being a woman but who likes to play around with gender roles a lot. don't even get me started on how being into leather would be perceived here..." She described her recent move from Toronto, Ontario, to a small island on the West Coast of Canada. She attended a group there for Gays and Lesbians assuming that this was just an "old fashioned turn of phrase" and expected that such a group would be open to bi, trans and queer people. When she attended, she was advised that the group doesn't like the term queer and is afraid / uncomfortable around bi and trans people. She explained that while she finds queer to be the best descriptor for her sexuality, it is not one that is accepted in the rural gay and lesbian community that she is currently in. For



Pixie, it sounds as though she uses queer as an identity marker because she has a non-normative sexual orientation and enjoys playing with gender roles and leather. From her description, she seemed to define her queerness (on the listserv) in opposition to “middle of the road” / “straight’ gay and lesbian people.

Pixie introduces something very material with regard to the social conditions of possibility for queer to become a part of the way she can be recognized in daily life. Within this designated gay and lesbian space, Pixie’s sexuality is not recognized in the sense that she is viewed as ‘other’ within this context. Her identity makes the gay and lesbian participants of this particular uncomfortable and / or afraid and thus she is pressured to conform or be quiet. She wrote, “don’t even get me started on how being into leather would be perceived here... ‘queer’ is the best definition for my sexuality I have found but I’ve found it’s not accepted outside of the city.” Her story speaks to the limits of tolerance within this particular gay and lesbian community. It seems that gay and lesbian identities are meant here to include people with *only* ‘same-sex’ partners (not bisexual), while viewing sex and gender ‘violations’ (trans) and non-normative sex practices (leather) as frightening and excluded. This construction of gay and lesbian identities seems similar to discourses of heterosexuality where it is only acceptable to have an ‘other sex’ partner who obeys dominant gender codes and sex practices. These discourses hold closely to the dominant constructions of ‘normal’ sex, gender, sexuality and sex practices. Within these contexts, queer is ‘off the scale’ and does not measure in the discourses around gay, lesbian and heterosexual, except as the contingent and scary ‘other.’ Pixie explains that her queer identity was accepted in a larger urban setting, but now is unacceptable in her new rural setting. This difference in setting changes the social

conditions of possibility for Pixie to describe herself and be recognized as queer. I think that Pixie demonstrates the difficulty of asserting an identity that encompasses more than that which is acceptably discussed. That is to say that if gender constructions are not challenged within this gay and lesbian community, it becomes a difficult subject to broach because Pixie may first be required to argue that gender is a construction before she can even say that she enjoys playing with gender. As well, we can see some postmodernism in language here as queer shifts from having a positive connotation for Pixie, to having a negative connotation for the gay and lesbian group she came into contact with. The discourses around queer are clearly quite different here.

I want to shift now to focus on some of the themes that emerged on the listserv. The content on the listserv was often overwhelming and I found it to be useful to sort them into general categories. The themes that I have chosen to focus on are: queer and coming out; queer heterosexuality; the political implications of queer; and queer gender play. I do not mean to suggest there was consensus around these themes, rather they were topics which came up on the listserv often.

### **Queer and Coming Out**

A common theme throughout the descriptions of queer was the process of coming-out. It seemed that many of the participants became aware of the term queer in their process of coming-out. As queer is often described as a political identity that is open to anyone who chooses to be politically queer, it was interesting to me that all of the queer identified participants had non-normative sexualities. I wondered why there were no “queer heterosexuals / allies,” with the exception of Piglet. In exploring the meanings

of queer, most of the listserv participants wrote that descriptions of queer “fit” them and their sexuality. These (queer) descriptions were seen as useful in coming-out to others: “attempting to describe myself to my mother” (Stressed); “my sister and my friends” (Joey Jeremiah). Joey Jeremiah asked specifically, “why did my queerness come alive when I started dating women?” In tracing the connection between the claiming of a queer identity and non-normative sexualities, it would seem fairly obvious that heterosexuals are not in a position to be searching out information that might be useful in trying to explain their sexuality. Whereas, people who claim a non-normative gender performance or sexuality are put in a position of having to explain them. I think of this as ‘coming in to queer’ in the process of coming-out of heterosexuality, heteronormativity and heterosexism. Heterosexuals do not need to explain their sexuality because they are seen as “normal,” and normal is seen as self-explanatory. I see coming-out as a queer boundary of sorts, as it often corresponded with participants’ discovery of the term queer. This is the old story of ‘the figure in dominance’ who gets to organize the categories through which everyone else is known, where these categories are based on the dominant figure’s presumed normalcy, a normalcy that is not called into question.

Eve Sedgwick (1993) warns that it is impossible to conceive of queer outside of the specific experiences of lesbians and gays. She argues that to do so would deny homophobia and heterosexism as material and discursive realities. She advises that these must be acknowledged as constraints that affect people of all sexual orientations, preferences and identifications. According to Sedgwick, queer begins with an identification with gays and lesbians, and then seeks to disrupt these identity categories by focusing on that which is in excess of these categories.

## Queer Heterosexuality

Rosemary's Baby points out that the question, "Who can be queer?" begs to be asked when queer is defined as a way to think and as a way to act politically. He responds by writing that he believes that "marginalized sexual identities CAN BE queer (but are not inherently so)." He then queries the role of heterosexuals and of sexual practices within his definition of queer: "What about heterosexuals? [...] Possibly... maybe... kinda... At least the idea of queer heterosexuality works in theory." Rosemary's Baby's question about whether heterosexuals can be queer, suggests a common theme that comes out of the view of queer as a way to think and act politically. This question reflects the idea that although queer is based in non-normative sexuality identities, it also attempts to move beyond fixed non-normative sexuality identities and the corresponding identity politics. The question of whether heterosexuals can be queer, tells us that heterosexuals do not have unconditional legitimacy within queer, and their claiming of the term queer is contested. Rosemary's Baby provided an example of the terms under which heterosexual inclusion is debated when he wrote,

how 'queer heterosexuality' and 'straight heterosexuality' differs in (sexual) practice remains unclear, although I certainly know 'straight' identified or at least non-gblt men and women who are FAR more queer (politically) than some of the most queeniest of gay men or the butchiest of lesbians that I know. After writing all this, I'm wondering if sex has anything to do with it at all... Uh oh, I think I'm heading towards a postmodern void again...

The tensions that Rosemary's Baby described here seem to point to some of the difficulties of trying to separate queer from the shared non-normative sexuality (and

gender<sup>10</sup>) experience from which queer arose. Thus in theory, queer becomes an alignment of political interests for Rosemary's Baby, not related to a shared non-normative gender or sexuality experience. When he writes that he is beginning to wonder if sexual practices have anything to do with being queer at all, it seems that he is having some difficulty separating his definition of queer as "a political stance" from the experience / practice of a non-normative sexuality. He seems to make the assumption that it is necessary to make this separation between queer as a political stance and queer as sex practices.

In order to make the tension that Rosemary's Baby describes between queer as an alignment of political views and queer as a shared non-normative sexuality (and gender) experience clearer, I want to make a parallel to an earlier debate within feminist cultural politics that I see as being similar. In the early 1980s, there were debates over what constitutes 'feminist' art (Barrett, 1999). These debates arose out of concerns that art and 'crafts' created by women was being taken up by feminists and presented as feminist art while others argued that this art lacked 'feminist' content. This led to questions of whether feminism is an alignment of political interests separate from a shared female experience, whether there is such a possibility of a shared female experience, and whether feminism might be a political sub-heading beneath the necessary component of the assumed, shared female experience. Similar questions to the ones that Rosemary's Baby asked arose in this debate over feminism, such as: Can men be feminists?

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<sup>10</sup> I include gender in parenthesis because Rosemary's Baby does not directly address the issue of non-normative gender at this time. However, I am wary of appearing to suggest that the reclaimed version of queer resulted from only from the shared experience of having a non-normative sexuality. I also use the term "shared" lightly here, as I do not want to suggest that these experiences are similar. Rather, I see them as similar or shared only to the extent that non-normative sexualities are experienced in opposition to heterosexism and heteronormativity.

(Rosemary's Baby asked, "Can heterosexuals be queer?") Are all women feminists? (Rosemary's Baby wrote that not all people with non-normative sexualities are queer.) In defining feminism according to political interests, rather than common experiences, will the category of woman become dispensable? (If queer is a political stance then can anyone be queer?) This debate over feminist cultural politics seems to parallel the quandary that Rosemary's Baby struggled with in trying to define queer as a politic, while still using the language and reference points of non-normative gender performances and sexualities ("the most queeniest of gay men or the butchiest of lesbians"). Stressed expressed similar views in describing her thoughts on queer generally, she wrote "so at first I figured [queer included] everyone who was a little bent and happy with it... then I thought, hmmm can heterosexuality fit under queer.... well maybe... if into SM, or if queer positive, or... well, not sure I understand queer..." Although her description of queer seemed different than that of Rosemary's Baby, she too struggles here with the inclusion of heterosexuals in queer. I will not list the solutions that were suggested in the feminism debates, rather I want to let the tensions that Rosemary's Baby and Stressed described stay as part of the mapping of queer. It seems as though they cannot fully disconnect their views of queer as a political stance from non-normative sexualities / sexual practices. As well they seem to have difficulty accepting that queer as a political stance means that 'normal' heterosexuals might be queer within his definition. Within the mapping of queer, (queer) heterosexuality is a contested boundary.

In articulating her views on queer heterosexuality, Sheila made a distinction between liberal heterosexuals and queer heterosexuals. She saw liberal heterosexuals as accepting of homosexuality / homosexuals, and imagined that queer heterosexuals (she

prefaced this with, “if they exist...”) would go further than accepting, by acknowledging the displacement of heteronormativity from the centre. Sheila’s articulation of queer requires queer heterosexuals to hold a particular view that critiques and displaces ‘normal’ from the centre. She draws a line between being empathic to queers, and being able to view heterosexuality as yet another (unduly privileged) social construction in the long line of many.

I think that the participant Michelle is an example of a married queer woman who perhaps fits into Sheila’s definition of a queer heterosexual who “displaces heteronormativity from the centre.” While belonging to the norm in the sense of being in a heterosexual marriage, Michelle also challenges what it means to be in a heterosexual marriage by being bisexual and practicing polyamory and BDSM. From another perspective, Michelle could also be seen as excluded from queer heterosexuality when Stiles calls for a “divesting of heterosexual privilege.” While Michelle challenges the idea of what it means to be a heterosexual woman, she also holds onto and maintains her heterosexual privilege through her acceptance of, and participation in, heterosexual marriage. She is simultaneously in accordance with regulatory norms (e.g. heterosexual marriage) and outside of these norms by being bisexual, and practicing BDSM and polyamory. Michelle’s claiming of a queer identity is an example of an area that is contested, and seemingly contradictory as there is an identification and a disidentification at work. As I mentioned earlier, such distinctions and disputes have implications for the ways in which queer plays out as an identity category, and the ways in which queer might play out politically. The links and overlaps between queer identities and queer politics

came up frequently on the listserv and it was often clear that identity and politics were often one and the same.

### **The Political Implications of Queer**

Through the process of separating out the themes on the listserv, I have separated out what I have called the political implications of queer. I want to be clear that I view all of the themes as political, but I wanted to focus specifically here on discussions that focused directly on questions of organizing and struggle around a collective queer identity. As well, I will explore some of the political visions that were described as hopes for a queer future.

In questioning an aspect of the political implications of queer, Rosemary's Baby responded to a comment written by Joey Jeremiah, in which Joey Jeremiah explains that she is more comfortable with queer in practice, than in theory. Joey Jeremiah had wondered what queer theory would say about her when if ceases to perform masculinity, and chooses instead to perform femininity. She asked, "Am I giving in to normative practices? What does the theory say about that, and am I supposed to feel bad about this?" Rosemary's Baby responded to Joey Jeremiah's comment by re-articulating his own (dichotomous) struggle with queer as practice or politic. He explained that if queer was to become "just another word for 'other'" then it is not something that he is interested in. He saw this outcome as being a possible result of an understanding of queer that is not infused with critical queer politics. This is one of the points where it is useful to think of the various positions that people take up as integral to or possible in different discourses. Joey Jeremiah positions herself as a "living, breathing queer" who will not be



influenced or judged by queer theory. Joey Jeremiah's queer identity taps into the discourse that says that queer is what I am. The 'queer in theory' is seen as describing and possibly limiting and disapproving of the 'queer in practice.' Rosemary's Baby took up queer in a different way as he was not willing to accept that 'queer in practice' is the only queer worth listening to. He sees this idea as possibly leaving queer as yet another position of marginality without disrupting normalcy. While Joey Jeremiah seemed to say that queer is what she is, with or without theory, Rosemary's Baby shifts this idea by suggesting that such an idea might slide politically into an acceptance of queer as marginal to 'normal'. His discourse of queer will not allow him to accept this place of "other." Rosemary's Baby tackled social-constructionism, marginality and power in response to Joey Jeremiah's comments, and seems to offer a version of what a queer informed politic looks like for him. I will quote him at some length.

For me, queer was about seeing myself within a context (ordered along gender, race, class, sexuality...) and that my experiences, feelings... my very own sense of self... are given meaning by that context. For those outside the privileged norm(s), meanings are given to them that are hardly liberating. For me, being queer is about troubling the taken for granted terms--for instance, identifying how power operates within our current meanings and sense-making strategies; exploring the implications of our current meaning making strategies; and finding new ways of making meanings. (Does this make sense or do I sound like that last few paragraphs of my master's thesis??)

He then goes on to say that it is for the reasons as quoted above, that he continues to struggle with the question of whether queerness is a prescribed set of acts (possibly he sees Joey Jeremiah as advocating this) or whether it is not about acts at all. He brings in the issue of queer heterosexuality again and wonders whether queer heterosexuality makes sense or if it is even helpful at all to the (non-normative sexualities) 'movement.' However, after this he writes that if queers continue to define themselves against

heterosexuals then queer becomes just another word for 'other.' Queer as a new word for 'other' does not interest Rosemary's Baby at all, and he argues that an approach focussing solely on acts would "mimic the minoritizing politics of lesbian / gay identities." In referring to minoritizing politics, Rosemary's Baby points to a distinction that is also made within queer theory. Queer theory does not seek assimilation or separatism, as gay and lesbian identity politics are sometimes seen as seeking. Rather queer theory seeks to re-imagine and reshape the public and private spheres to give presence and new meaning to non-heterosexual desires and non-normative gender performances. Rosemary's Baby jokes wryly at the end of this email about the ongoing discussion / debate that he has going with himself over this question of whether queer is about acts or politics. He closes his email by writing, "There are, of course, other days when I would disagree with myself..." Rosemary's Baby seemed to be sorting through the ways in which he is positioned within different discourses ("gender, race, class, sexuality...") that are at times in conflict, yet he is occupying positions in several places. It seems that within this perspective, where these discourses are seen as separate and sometimes in conflict or competition, that it is not surprising that Rosemary's Baby would disagree with "himself." This experience of sorting through positionings in different discourses might relate to the ways in which Rosemary's Baby is marked on the body, so to speak, through practices of racialization and gender.

In questioning the inclusivity that queerness purports, Rosemary's Baby described how race and sexuality have intersected in how he is perceived as a "gay Asian male", by gay white males; "Think Geisha in the un-queered worlds." He writes, "Clearly, our fabled communities are not untouched by racism, sexism, classism, along with the entire

gambit of unspoken oppressive 'isms.'” He offered a critique of his own political understanding of queer by stating, “Infusing political intentions into specific sex acts doesn’t seem like the best way to go about analysing the situation. But then, nothing changes... I’m certainly open to new ideas on this.” Rosemary’s Baby seems to suggest that his version of queer falls short of practically addressing how he is treated as a gay Asian male within gay communities, real or cyber. He describes white dominance within the gay community and the way in which Asian men specifically (and presumably, men of colour generally) are exoticized and viewed as having a particularly fixed sexuality that is peripheral to (and contingent upon) the white dominant norm. He explained that while he is encouraged by certain sites that aim to address intersections of race and sexuality, he is also critical of how they are limited by their audience: “an esoteric group of privileged western academics.” Rosemary’s Baby hits upon a common critique of queer theory as inaccessible to many people, and ineffective in changing dominant attitudes within gay (and straight) communities. As Mary Louise Adams (1994) writes, “Theoretically, this way of mobilizing broadly defined ‘queerness’ appeals to me very much. I’m much less clear about what it might mean in actual practice” (p.39). This raises the questions of who is queer for, and what does it accomplish?

In questioning the motives of white people who claim the term queer, Adams (1994) asks, “I wonder, for those of us who are white, how much of this is a response to our racial identities? Is there a part of queerness that is an attempt to distance ourselves from other aspects of our lives where we have social power? Is queerness sometimes based in a romanticization of marginality?” There is an echo back here to the position that Michelle is able to take up (though not attributed to any ‘wrong’ intentions on her

part). This also seems to be about different degrees of investment and risk in taking a political stance and of claiming an identity. Along the same lines, but in response to Rosemary's Baby's email, Stiles wrote, "the last email reminds me that sometimes i think that queer solves all of the -isms, but really it is quite the opposite. it should be about acknowledging them and taking responsibility for (racial / class / ability / gender / etc) privilege, rather than just claiming (homo) penalty. it has been pointed out to me elsewhere that queer is sometimes used to evade privilege." Similarly, Beaker wrote in her introduction of herself, "being queer doesn't erase race or class privilege or negate the ways I am implicated in systems of oppression, but it does make me want to work harder to identify and call myself on these things, to expect criticism, to change, and to work more broadly towards an inclusive world." Here we can see that queer is sometimes seen as a space in which privilege must be acknowledged and individuals are called to be accountable for the ways in which we are implicated in systems of domination. Such politics are sometimes held in opposition to identity politics where race, class and disability are viewed as distractions from the 'real issue' of sexuality. Queer seems to be, in theory at least, an attempt to move away from viewing identities as always separate and singular issues, and being critical of the way in which gay and lesbian issues have been asserted via representations of gays and lesbians as white, middle-class, able(d) bodied people. A striking example of the treatment of sexuality as an identity that should be separated from race, gender and class, can be found in the writing of Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen (1990). Kirk and Madsen argue that concerns over *other* issues such as racial, gender or class inequality, are "distractions" from "the" gay movement. They see difference within the gay movement as divisive and dangerous, and consequently

they do not recognise multiple social locations and refuse alliances. Kirk and Madsen are not alone in their views (see Bawer, 1993; Nava & Davidoff, 1994), and the participants who wanted to shift the focus of sexualities movements from solely on marginality, may have been writing in reaction to such beliefs and movements. Shane Phelan (1997) criticizes Kirk and Madsen and characterizes their focus as a narrow goal of change for white, middleclass, gay males. The listserv participants who wrote about recognizing difference among queers named accountability for and recognition of privilege as factors in their queer politics.

In a similar vein, Beaker explored whether her choice of the term queer might be the result of internalized homophobia but she counters that with her view of queer as a political project. Beaker wondered if perhaps she had chosen the nebulous term queer to describe herself as a result of “internalized homophobia and the invisibility of options growing up in small town, Catholic high school... But these things don’t go away according to what I call myself.” From her comments it appears that queer can also be seen as a potential cop-out or a safe and possibly non-threatening term to hide behind. Initially, this made me wonder if Beaker saw queer as an apolitical term, but she explained that she is “wary of tendencies that use or criticize queer as apolitical, I know it’s not for me, it wasn’t in the queer fashion show, there is a definite message there, assumptions are being called into question and challenged.”

Beaker was also wary of queer being used as a term to hide behind in order to evade recognizing privilege. I will reiterate a quotation from Beaker that I quoted earlier: “being queer doesn’t erase race or class privilege or negate the ways I am implicated in systems of oppression, but it does make me want to work harder to identify and call

myself on these things, to expect criticism, to change, and to work more broadly towards an inclusive world.” In describing an inclusive world, Beaker responded to a discussion on the listserv about setting up a (“utopian”) queer community. The discussion focussed around disability and parallel education streams. She links her ideas to her conception of queer politics to resisting “alienating, racist, sexist, colonialist, heterosexist pedagogies and systems.” Beaker’s description takes a few twists and turns and I will quote her here at some length:

The attitudes upholding this kind of apartheid (the parallel system) are so entrenched. Yet these attitudes are connected with / supported by alienating, racist, sexist, colonialist, heterosexist pedagogies and systems and I think this gets silenced when people don't want to acknowledge their own privilege or feel trapped in a spiral of competing marginalities. Since this dream is a utopian vision, one I think is worth working towards that should fit into a queer invasion, the proper imagining is a big part of it. Although I do wish at times that there was 'an isle of lesbos' to run to, I am torn knowing the limitations of separatism while also feeling like dominant society is not going to redeem itself any time soon. People are generally unwilling to give up privilege voluntarily. On a small scale we can create/participate in supportive, skill sharing, creative spaces, but for me it is important to attempt this in the communities we already move in, and to recruit.

It seems to me that Beaker sees separatism as tempting and okay in the short term, but believes that long-term system overhaul is preferable. Acknowledgment of privilege is important to Beaker, and this is often a critique levelled at the gay and lesbian identity movement. As well, by tying queerness into a struggle against racism, sexism, colonialism and heterosexism, Beaker again differentiates queer as a project that she hopes will look beyond sexuality and gender marginality in order to address privilege and marginality in other areas.

In wondering about queer as a project that looks beyond sexuality and gender marginality, Stiles posted to the listserv a dream that she had in which she and her sister

were working to set up an alternative queer community. Stiles explained that in the dream they were both struck by the vast need for re-imagining and overhaul everywhere in society, from transportation to education to wages. Stiles explained,

so in the light of day, i am left wondering how this queer community that i imagined had to do with a giant utopian project... do i conceive of queer as the larger utopian project, or as a part of the larger utopian project that includes battling racism, sexism, ableism, classism. i am wary of erasing / subsuming these other -isms into queer, but if queer is conceived of as working to address all of these issues... seems like there is an answer here, and that perhaps i am perceiving a contradiction where none should exist. is anyone following here?

It seems as though Stiles is struggling here with viewing queer as a large utopian project with goals of restructuring society in search of equity, and viewing queer as attempting to subsume other marginalities under the 'queer umbrella' (as if it were possible). I think that in imagining queer as solely a political and theoretical project, it begins to seem possible that a queer movement might somehow eclipse other marginal movements. It appears that this is seen as undesirable, but theoretically possible (which is not to say that it *is* theoretically possible). I think that Stiles is also demonstrating here, the difficulty of conceiving of a movement that attempts to acknowledge multiple shifting identities and goals, when we are used to asserting one identity at a time in order to gain political legitimacy step by step, identity by identity.

The final entry from Rosemary's Baby addressed concerns around negotiating individual points of privilege and penalty within collective movements without erasing one's own / everyone else's experiences of oppression. He asks a familiar question around queer organizing, "...how do we act collectively, even if only temporarily, when our sense of 'communities' are forever stratified and fragmented by countless 'differences' and power differentials?" From this question, it seems as though

Rosemary's Baby points to the conception that groups that currently and historically organize collectively, do so on the basis of similarity without acknowledging differences and power differentials. Certainly, ignoring power differentials has been / is a major problem in collective organizing (see so-called 'first wave' and 'second wave' feminism for examples of this ignorance / ignoring), but it is also interesting to see how acknowledging these differences is also seen as a potential barrier to organizing (queer) collectively.

Stiles described a similar concern about managing points of privilege and penalty when she discussed the difficulty of sharing 'queer' spaces with people who *appear* to be heterosexuals. She described reading an article in a local lesbian - bi woman newspaper in which a woman wrote in describing her experience of being in the lesbian community for many years and then starting to date a transsexual male. The author explained that now when she is out with her partner, she no longer receives recognition from lesbian couples and she feels upset about this. The author described being given dirty looks when she and her partner attended lesbian spaces and speculated that they were now being read as straight voyeurs in a lesbian bar. Stiles responded to this article on the listserv,

i think that this woman's experience speaks to the very un-queer nature of such spaces. i read her letter and felt that i too could be indicted under her descriptions and for me she points to the difficulty of negotiating between a world designed for neat categories and corresponding identity politics, and queer lived experiences.[...] . i know that the letter writer was not writing as a proponent of queer, but she does point to the difficulties of setting up queer spaces within worlds that are always already hierarchically defined. that is to say that it is difficult to see couples who look straight and privileged in a marginal space where we are almost forced to exist because we are not welcome elsewhere due to non-normative sex / sexuality / gender.



Stiles points to perceived tensions around practicing the political theory of queer within an already stratified society.

Although queer was seen by some of the listserv participants as being an alternative to identity based political movements, it was not clear how queer as a political discourse and political identity provides / might provide places and modes of making political claims in ways that are more open than gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or transsexual labels. The politics of queer on the listserv was often limited to ways in which the participants could accurately name themselves and conceive of their sexuality as more than just an isolated or isolate-able variable unconnected to discourses of race, class, sex, gender and disability. It was also discussed how one might be politically queer on an individual basis, for example when Sheila described actively challenging gender roles. As well it was described that one might 'queer' educational systems and curriculum by creating schools that fully integrate people with disabilities into all classrooms, rather than having a separate and unequal system. How queer could be or is used to make such political claims was not a subject that was discussed on the listserv. While we discussed claims that we would like to make, it was unclear how we might make them politically in the name of queer. This is not to belittle the claims that we said that we would make, but it would be useful to think about how they might be asserted in the name of queer in order to wonder about what might be lost or excluded when politics are organized through a frame of queer. Perhaps what was lost or excluded on the listserv was a conception of how queer might be mobilized in order to make political claims.

## Queer Gender Play

Playing with gender was one of the more popular themes on the listserv. Some of the participants seemed to infer that their non-normative gender performances made them feel more comfortable choosing the term queer, over other sexuality categories. In introducing herself to the listserv, Joey Jeremiah explained her process of coming-out as a lesbian (because this was the word that other people chose for her) and then wondering if she fit into this category for “women who like women.” She explained,

So, where do I fit in? I fantasize about being a man, a sleek dark-haired boy. I love it when my female partner calls me 'girly'. I wear make-up. I get along well with guys and get nervous around women. I love cars- I would love to be a tough mechanic boy.[...] I have found a partner with whom I can 'act out' all of these roles-- this is a nice arrangement. I feel that I choose queer because it allows other people to understand something about me (if someone dares to ask).

It seems as though for Joey Jeremiah, lesbian did not quite seem to reflect her preferred gender performance. As quoted earlier in the paper, Joey Jeremiah wrote that she would prefer to dispense with categories altogether on favour of saying “I like girls... and oh yeah. I guess I’m dressed like a boy today.” Similarly, Sheila wrote,

i am a self-proclaimed boygirl, or girlboy, depending on the occasion, although long before i was self-proclaimed i was certainly pegged as at least ungirl. so like joey, i feel like queer has been a way of experiencing the world long before the theory came whacking me in the head with a good old SO THAT'S WHAT'S GOING ON HERE! in fact i was a transgendered five-year-old. i remember clearly wishing to be a boy so that i could like girls, and even after i learned that i was a plain old pervert, i still felt tossed about by gender.

In part, queer theory changed the way in which Sheila experienced her gender “ambiguity.” She explained that instead of dreading remarks about her ambiguity (such as those she receives in women’s washrooms), she plays on them. She now does drag

performances and does drag in her everyday life. She now will get on her 'gender soapbox' and respond to comments made to her with replies such as "well i am a girl and i look like this so how can you tell that YOU look like a girl?" She now chooses to deliberately challenge, or queer gender. She describes this in detail here:

the queering of gender for me is in the failure to repeat norms of either 'male' or 'female'. if i am taken as a boy and treated (as i usually am when this happens) with that extra respect that for age old excuses is awarded to boys, and do not disrupt the reading somehow, i feel not so queer at all. passing in ways that privilege me only reinforce such privilege. i like to dislodge the reading; that way, people suddenly are thrown off and at least in some small way are forced to re-evaluate what it is that made them read me and subsequently treat me in a specific way.

For Sheila, the queering of gender is more than passing as the gender that is not assigned to your assumed sex. She explains that to queer, is to blur and confuse the assumed boundaries between female and male, feminine and masculine.

Stiles posted a question about the language used in gender play on the listserv.

She wrote,

i have a query about language. so yesterday, someone spoke to me about asking a new person in her life about being butch or femme. i realized that these are not words that i use myself and i think that all of us have made references to being girls and boys in our email. so i was thinking today that sometimes i'm a boy and sometimes, i'm a girl. and sometimes i am a woman, but never am i a man. i wonder about this masculine arrested development of mine. it seems that the term boy gets thrown around a fair amount (boys like her), but we never seem to become men.

Stiles speculated that this was "like accessing the boy privilege to girls and sexual interest, while evading the nastiness of becoming what men have come to represent in modern society." Joey Jeremiah replied to the comment by Stiles about the prevalence of the word boy and the absence of the word man, in the gender play taking place on the

listserv. Joey Jeremiah responded by explaining that in her mind, she is a man. She writes, "I am a man. I am the man who will open your door, pay for your dinner, bring you flowers, help you out of the car, and write you a poem-- I am the man who will do anything to swoon you. I am the man." She goes on to explain that she is conflicted about this desire because she "would slug any guy who would make a woman feel that she cannot do these things for herself...and certainly, I am known as this woman. I am not sure how I settle this conflict of identities in my mind." Joey Jeremiah seems concerned here about reproducing the dominant and oppressive version (/myth) of masculinity within heterosexual relationships. I think that Judith Butler would say that Joey Jeremiah's version of the queer 'gentleman' differs significantly from a male performance of the heterosexual gentleman. Butler might see Joey Jeremiah's performance as an excellent and strategic parody or transgression of the assumed norm that only a male can and should play the role of the gentleman. It also shows the performative nature of the gentleman role. Joey Jeremiah's concerns reflect an awareness of where this performance fits into structures and customs that give power to men and passivity to women.

Joey Jeremiah described how the category queer was a nice fit for her preferred gender practices and "transgressive desires" (as Rosemary's Baby calls them), but she explained that she is not entirely sure what this category means / entails. She writes:

I have recently begun to question how me being queer translates into the definition of my sexual practice. Does this mean that I have the potential to fuck a boy? Well, actually, I do fuck a boy and she has tits and a vagina, and sometimes, when I am lucky, a cock. Or, does my queer identity mean that I find solace in behaving in an androgynous manner? Is my queerness wrapped up in gender-play? And, why did my queerness come alive when I started dating women?

Joey Jeremiah asks if being queer means that she will now be expected to fuck / desire boys. This is a struggle that came up elsewhere on the listserv where people expressed a lack of desire for people of the 'other sex' while (queer is seen as) advocating for the fluidity of sexual desire. This suggests the perception of sex as fixed discrete categories of male and female. This differs from queer theory's views of biological sex as a myth. In response to the question of whether she has the potential to fuck boys, she queers the notion of gender and of what a boy is, by saying that she fucks "a boy and she has tits and a vagina, and sometimes, when I am lucky, a cock." It seems that queering is reserved for gender, rather than presumed / assumed "bio-sex" (male / female). Joey Jeremiah goes on to ask if queer is about her preference for behaving in an androgynous manner, or if it is wrapped up in gender-play. Gender role violations seem to be an important part of a queer identity for Joey Jeremiah. She signed her first email to the listserv, "So much fun for this shy young boy – Joey Jeremiah."

Playing with gender was described as being a very pleasurable activity for most of the participants on the listserv. The gender fashion show script likely helped to set a tone for discussing gender, but I believe that the conversations on the listserv differed from the script in one significant way. The gender fashion show works to undermine the constructions of female / male sex with narration such as,

I never know *what* to wear anymore. When I was born, they couldn't say if I was a boy or a girl. It seems I came equipped with all the hardware. Did you know there's no difference between a really big clit, and really small prick? My parents decided I had a small prick. They made the choice for me. And they assumed a choice had to be made. That kind of thing happens to everyone, but my parents did it with a knife... they chose my sex, my gender, and my orientation the day after I was born. And that happens in hospitals every day, fully covered by every insurance plan in North America, hidden behind names like urethral anomaly correction or genital malformation. But what about you? You may have had this

choice made for you. I didn't find out until I was thirty. Most people don't ever find out. And what if you were the parent? Would you flip a coin?

On the listserv, it was only Stressed who seemed to play with assumed sex when she wrote, "about the woman with 'boy' [tattooed] on her shoulder...sure it wasn't a boy with a growth in the form of a woman?" Otherwise, gender play took place without challenging fixed biological notions of male / female sex. Participants spoke often with great pleasure about their non-normative gender performances, but usually these stories were supported by the assumed fixity of their own sex. Gender play seemed fun in contrast to our own assumed sex, for example, I perform masculinity, and this is queer because I am a female.

Traditional research by sexologists<sup>11</sup> has presumed heterosexuality as the norm and sought to find reasons for why some people desire others of the same sex and / or why they act outside of the prescribed gender role for their pre-assigned sex. These sexologists saw biological sex as unproblematically categorized as either biologically female or male. Such approaches resulted in psychoanalytic, genetic and endocrine explanations of 'deviant' sexes, gender performance and sexualities. I want to distinguish the participants' uses of male and female, from those of the early sexologists. From reading the listserv, it is my belief that while participants relied on their biological sex as a stable point of entry into queer gender play (e.g. I am a female who performs masculinity) they did not believe that their biology provided explanations for their non-normative sexualities and gender performances. It is my belief that male and female sex was relied upon because assigned biological sex defines our material and discursive

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<sup>11</sup> Sexologists study sexual life and / or relationships.

realities. I will say more about the implications of this reliance upon biological sex and who has access to it in the conclusion of this thesis.

### **Rupturing Existing Identity Categories and Negotiating Queer Identities**

In trying to rupture existing social categories and flesh out a queer identity, we can see a distinction between those who are only comfortable with queer in practice, and those who wanted / needed to engage with queer in theory. This perhaps points to the ways in which creating new spaces can offer varying degrees of comfort to different individuals. For those who were comfortable with queer in practice, there is a commitment to engage with queer up to the point that they are able to personally embody 'queerness.' Beyond this personal engagement, there was perhaps some apprehension to attempt to chart a new space beyond themselves, at the point in time when the listserv took place. For those who were engaging in queer in queer theory, there were frequently attempts to rupture more than one social category at once. For example, Mimi Nguyen, Elias Farajaje-Jones and Rosemary's Baby all identified as queer people 'of colour,' and each of these individuals was struggling to disrupt and create new spaces beyond sexuality categories. They were also struggling against the ways in which they are racialized both inside and outside of the queer communities. The engagement of the people of colour was with queer in theory and in practice, and perhaps this was due to the need to rupture several social categories at once.

As my thesis suggests, it was impossible to come to one definition of queer identity that was equally informed by each person's experience. Dr. Njoki Wane pointed to a parallel situation in her 'Black Feminisms' course. The course was ending, and the

class had not yet agreed upon a definition of Black feminisms that was satisfactorily informed by and reflective of everyone's experiences. Similarly, I think that each of the participants' personal experiences necessarily informed our engagements with queer in unique ways. Whether some of the participants were comfortable with queer in practice, or queer in theory, reflected our own personal experiences and the difficulties of taking these experiences beyond the terms and categories that we are already comfortable with. This again speaks to an overall reluctance to create new spaces beyond those that directly impinge upon us. So, not only is it difficult to rupture existing categories, it is difficult to negotiate new spaces, *and* it is difficult to get people to challenge existing social categories and create new spaces beyond that which feels physically and / or emotionally 'relevant' to them. Relevant, in this case, seems to indicate points of privilege and penalty; where penalty is felt and challenged, and privilege is not felt and not challenged.

Although there were many other interesting themes and stories on the listserv, in the interests of time, I had to choose some at the expense of others. I want to focus now on the various discourses around queer and describe the ways in which these discourses are also descriptions of the ways in which queer is seen as opening up possibilities for new identifications and meanings. I want to provide a cursory view of some of the discourses of 'sex' that were used on the listserv, and briefly consider where and how queer discourses have been made visible and available in recent history.



## 5

### Queer Discourses as “Opening Up”/ Opening Up Queer Discourses

I hope that it has become clear through the previous descriptions that the queer identified people on the listserv chose queer as a preferred label over, and in relation to, other existing sexuality categories. Throughout the course of the listserv we can see that the discourses around queer signal that queer can mean / be something you are, something I call myself, something you do, a way to think (theory), and a way to act (sexually and politically). These discourses of queer are seen as opening up possibilities for new meanings and identifications. I want to look specifically at the various discourses around queer and describe the ways in which these discourses are also descriptions of the ways in which queer is seen by queer identified people as opening up possibilities for new identifications and meanings. I also want to provide a cursory view of some of the discourses of ‘sex’ that were used on the listserv. These discourses viewed sex as concerned with and / or signifying: sex practices (leather, BDSM); assumed sex of (desired) sexual partner/s; number of partners (polyamory); sex practices and assumed sex and gender (violations); non-normative sexualities and questioning heterosexism; privately and publicly claiming a non-normative sexual orientation; sex practices and assumed sex; and racialization and sex practices; and marginality due to sexual orientations or gender identifications as linked to other systems of oppression. These discourses on sex were mobilized when people on the listserv tried to make sense of terms such as queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual, and tried to negotiate which of these terms they might take up, refuse and so on.

Within the context of describing the various discourses of queer, I want to try to look at which discourses of sex were taken up in relation to each discourse of queer. When looking at the discourses of 'queer is something you are,' queer is described as both internal / personal as in queer is "a good fit for me," and external / relational as in "I am queer in relation to the dominant norm." While external and internal have a fuzzy and permeable border, I use these terms to suggest that there might be a slight distinction to be made between these descriptions, but they are contingent parts of the discourse of queer as something that you are. Regardless of this distinction, queer is viewed here as a way to claim a broad identity that encapsulates more than just the sex of one's partner/s. This broad quality is viewed as preferable to the discourses of gay, lesbian, heterosexual, and to a lesser extent bisexual identities, which are perceived within the discourses of queer as being limited to signifying the sex of the person one has sex with and/or attraction to. In this sense queer is seen as opening the range of significations that can be made through one sexuality category. All of the discourses on sex that I have outlined above (e.g. sex practices, assumed sex of sexual partner/s, number of partners, etc.) were taken up in this discourse on queer and I think that this actually is the point of this particular discourse on queer. In reflecting on this particular discourse of queer as related to discourses of sex, it is possible to see the overlap between queer is what I do, for example polyamory, and queer is what I am, polyamorous. While I am presenting these discourses as though they are separable, the overlaps demonstrate the ways in which discourses are separable, without ever being separate.

In the discourses that say 'queer is something I call myself,' queer is used as an identity category and / or signifier. It is described as an open social category, open to

redefinition, open to 'allies' and also signalling a disidentification with labels. In this sense queer can be seen as opening up and challenging the category of 'label' by not accepting the often presumed fixity of labels. Queer can also be seen here as opening up the range of people who can acceptably claim a non-heterosexual identity, this is evident in Piglet's claiming of queer to signal her alliance with and support of non-heterosexual communities and anti-homophobia educators. Again, the entire range of discourses pertaining to sex were taken up in relation to this queer discourse. I think that this might relate to the assumption that if queer is what I am, then queer becomes what I call myself.

When 'queer is something you do,' 'to queer' is described as a process of decentring or de-essentializing heteronormativity from its position as invisible norm. Within this context, queer is seen as opening up possibilities for challenging the primacy and presumed normalcy of heterosexuality. Within this discourse on queer, the queer individual seeks to move away from defending and educating about gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and transsexual identities and instead focus on undermining the hetero norm and showing it to be but one possibility within a range of possibilities. Queering was not limited to decentring heterosexuality on the listserv, but rather involved an overall challenge to normalcy. 'To queer' intersected with the discourses of sex that pertained to gender violations and play To illustrate, Sheila and Joey Jeremiah queered what it is to be a woman, a man, a boy and / or a girl. The discourse of 'sex practices and sexual orientations as related to other systems of oppression' came up here in describing the ways in which one might queer the educational system. Certainly, the related 'sex' discourse of 'questioning heterosexism' is central to queering. I think that while the other 'sex' related discourses such as sex practices, sex of partners and privately and publicly

claiming a non-normative sexual orientation were viewed as queer in relation to the norm, these discourses did not try to intentionally queer the norm.

In the discourse of 'queer as a way to think (theory),' queer seems to open up the possibilities for understanding, challenging and making new meanings within the discourses around sex, gender and sexuality. The discourse of queer as a way to think (theory) seems to frequently relate to queer theory. From the listserv, it seems clear that this discourse is often limited by its accessibility; specifically access to queer academic language and access to academia. While academia generally, and graduate school specifically seem to create conditions (discursive and material) where it is possible to articulate and identify as queer, these conditions are limited often to the spheres of academia. The intersections between queer as a way to think and discourses about sex took place most clearly in the area of sexuality and gender marginality as linked to other systems of oppression. This connection seems quite unique to me because links between sexuality and other forms of oppression have often been purposefully overlooked in favour of a sexuality based politic or platform. Such a connection opens up room for strategic alliances between marginalized groups. The discourse of 'queer as a way to think' came up frequently in opposition to non-normative sex practices. These two ideas were seen to be in competition with each other in defining who and / or what is queer. These debates seemed to centre around whether these were each necessary components of a queer identity (non-normative sexuality / gender practices, and queer as a way to think) or whether one or the other could reliably define 'a queer.' Again, questioning heterosexism was an important component here as well as undermining essentialist

categories in the contexts of sex and racialization, and assumed sex and gender violations / play.

The discourse of 'queer is a way to act (sexually and politically)' opens up a range of 'violations' of dominant norms of sex, gender, sexuality and sex practices that can be signified by a sexuality category. Queer as a way to act politically seems to be perceived as opening up the range of political alliances and actions that might take place through the frame of a sexuality identity category. In sorting through the various discourses pertaining to queer, it seems that these discourses are described as making different and new kinds of meaning and identifications possible. I see this particular discourse as again intersecting with all of the various discourses on sex that I have named as this is an all encompassing discourse that shows the links made between sexuality and politics and the often political nature of sex practices (e.g. polyamory).

In trying to consider where and how queer discourses have been made visible and available in recent history, I was able to pick out three sources that came up on the listserv. These sources were academia, word of mouth and popular media related specifically to 'queer' communities. Within the listserv, it seemed that academia circulates a discourse of queer related to queer theory (Stiles, Rosemary's Baby, Beaker, Sheila). A second source of discourses about queer was word of mouth in particular communities, although these communities were also related to academia. Stressed named the campus women's centre and Piglet mentioned anti-homophobia education as the original source of their awareness of queer. These communities seem to circulate a version of queer that views queer as a more 'open' alternative to gay and lesbian identities (Joey Jeremiah, Stressed, Piglet). A third source of discourses around queer is

the popular media related specifically to 'queer' communities. This source of discourses about queer circulates queer primarily as an umbrella term for people with same sex partners / desires and / or non-normative sex practices (e.g. queer fetish nights at clubs). These sources tend to use queer as another word for 'not straight' (Michelle). As Pixie pointed out in one of her comments on the listserv, not all spaces are conducive to claiming a queer identity. The three sources as named above, and the listserv, are examples of spaces where discourses about queer circulate and they each allow for the possibility for people to claim a queer identity.

I will now look at some of the questions that this research raises for me and some of the questions it answers. Further, I will look at some of the difficulties I had in studying this topic and how this research has re-framed some of the ways that I think about queer identities.

## 6

### Discussion and Conclusion

As a personal anecdote, I am currently helping to organize a university-based conference looking at “queer issues on campus and in communities.” Within this queer conference, my use of queer, and those of the other participants on the listserv, seems to be entirely absent from the planning stages and the presentations. This academic conference is working from a position of fixed identity politics, and they are ‘pushing boundaries’ by including trans issues and people, and by trying to organize a conference that is racially diverse. This is an interesting experience for me because I work all day on my own queer ideas, and then I go into a ‘queer’ space in which I have never bothered to assert my own version of queer. Most days, it just seems like far too much to explain. I imagine myself saying to the rest of the conference steering committee, “As I see it, queer is an identification with lesbians, gays and bisexuals, as well as a disidentification from heterosexist regimes. It is also an identification with other sexual and gender ‘deviants’ while disidentifying from mainstream gays and lesbians. It is sort of intended to blur the lines of identification through challenging the grounds of heterosexual and homosexual communities. So...” In my imagination, I never know where to go from there, and neither do they, so we revert back to familiar identity categories, and I quash my attempts to mediate between my impulses to deconstruct established sexual and gender categories and my feelings that these categories need to be considered because they represent important cultural and political positions.

I think that this anecdote speaks to the ways in which some institutional spaces make ways of talking about queer seem more 'normal' and possible than others. It is in the process of organizing a conference – a very particular type of space – and worrying about trying to be inclusive, that these questions of queer should come up. But they don't, and why not? An institutional space such as my graduate seminar on 'Sexualities and Their Regulation' allowed for discussions of queer identities, while the 'queer' conference does not allow for such discussions. Perhaps it is that within the context of a conference with a focus on issues of gender and sexuality, queer is used in its most unproblematic and palatable sense, meaning the umbrella term that best fits the already existing template for gay and lesbian identities and politics. It is also possible that the need to draw boundaries grows when links are made between collective mobilization, collective politics, and sexuality and / or gender identities. This might be partially explained by the assumed 'distance' between theory and practice. Queer discourses and theories are sometimes said to cloud the 'real' issues facing 'homosexuals'. So while an institutional space such as this conference seeks to address "queer issues on campus and in communities" these issues may be an already prescribed set of issues that does not include questioning the basis from which we presume to have commonality. This points to the ways in which talking about queer can be made difficult or impossible. After studying the understandings of queer put forth by other queer identified individuals, I am curious to see if queer identity is a 'trend' that has caught on, or will catch on, and how this might alter identity politics, sexual politics, anti-homophobia education and organizing around sexuality and marginality generally.



Having said that, I think that my difficulty in articulating queer to people who are unfamiliar with these ideas relates to the ways in which my queer identity is rooted in academic queer theory. As queer theory is an emerging discipline, it utilizes and creates language that at this point in time is inaccessible and intimidating to many people (e.g. heteronormative practices and gender performance). Because of my unique academic link to queer identity, the relationship between queer theory and queer identities on the listserv is interesting to me. My guess from being on the listserv, and from speaking to participants, is that Rosemary's Baby, Sheila and Beaker, all appropriate some of their ideas from queer theory. Meanwhile Joey Jeremiah and Stressed both signalled an awareness of and dislike of queer theory as inaccessible to your 'average queer.' Michelle and Pixie seemed to draw upon queer as an umbrella term for 'sexual others.' As I have not seen much literature on queer identities, I was interested to see where queer theory stood in relation to these individual queer identities. I can now appreciate that the dislike of queer theory is sometimes understandable, as both participants signalled a dislike of inaccessible academic language. This dislike reminded me that queer identities are not borne of queer theory, rather queer theory stems from identities which are in excess of the identity categories of heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, male and female, and refuse to be seen as peripheral anymore. I realise that I tend to imagine queer theory as preceding the claiming of queer identities, as this was my experience. This is to say that I view queer theory as stemming from a queer political movement that sought to challenge the exclusivity, fixity and politics of existing identity categories. So while some queer identities, such as mine, as strongly rooted in queer theory, I feel compelled to recognize that queer identities existed before and exist outside of queer theory. In stating that queer

identities refuse to be peripheral anymore, I think that this takes place on at least two fronts. First, I think that identities that are in excess of existing social categories help to shed light on the flawed assumptions made by social categories. For example, gay, lesbian and bisexual identities help shed light on the presumption that all people are heterosexual. Similarly, gays, lesbians and bisexuals of colour point to the ways in which gay, lesbian and bisexual identities have often been conceived of and asserted as white categories. Such a process of 'shedding light' should and often does lead to a re-conceptualization of social categories. Queer identities refuse to be on the periphery of gay, lesbian and bisexual identities anymore by asserting their own identity under queer. Second, I view queer identities as refusing to be peripheral to heterosexuality and heterosexual identity. This is different from the ways in which gay and lesbian identities have been strategically launched as a palatable other while still 'respecting' the heterosexual norm. The queer identified people that I spoke to were interested in dislodging the centrality of heteronormativity rather than seeking to make 'legitimate' claims with heterosexuality as the template for legitimacy.

In proposing my thesis research idea to a professor at O.I.S.E., I received the response, "So what? Who cares?" While this professor was being somewhat facetious, I want to try to briefly answer these questions here. To the question of "So what?" I believe that my research suggests that heterosexual, gay and lesbian identities are perceived to be exclusionary by people who claim queer identities. Due to the number of participants who claimed bi-queer as their identity, it seems that bisexual is viewed as an acceptable category, but perhaps lacking the connotations of BDSM, leather and polyamory which these participants specified in describing their bi-queer identities. As an

alternative to claiming heterosexual, gay, lesbian and bisexual, some people are starting to choose queer as their sexuality category. This is a new phenomenon, in the sense that this queer identity is now clearly attached to more than simply acting as an umbrella term for gay and lesbian identities. This new emerging term is imbued with meanings that point to the perceived deficiencies of the other sexuality categories. While each participant offered a unique representation of their queer identity, some of these queer identified individuals viewed queer identity as: more inclusive of non-normative gender performances; a movement that tries to recognize differences of race, class, gender and ability among queers and work toward equity in each of these areas; trying to be more accountable for points of privilege, rather than focussing solely on marginality; reflecting people who participate in BDSM, leather and polyamory; and simply a better fit for their experience of their sexualities and gender performances. As I wrote earlier, from the information on the listserv queer can mean / be: something you are: something you call yourself; something you do; a way to think (theory); and a way to act – sexually and politically. All of these were explanations that were invoked at different times, by different participants. As I will explain when I answer the question “who cares?” these definitions become important when we recognize what happens when people are forced to accept and live by categories that do not fit them.

“Who cares?” I think that those who claim queer as their sexuality identities obviously care enough to seek out, understand and define this new sexuality category for themselves. It seems to me that participants found a sense of accuracy in the term queer, and this accuracy seemed to open up the ways in which they could represent themselves. I view this accuracy as very important, as I believe that it often determines what is said

and known, and what cannot be said and often remains unknown. This business of accuracy is also important in another way, in that it is located in institutional practices (such as the university or the school) which almost require people to be able to be accurate about who / what they are in order to claim a right to speak. I want to return to comments that I made in the introduction about my own queer identity, in order to reinforce this point. For most of my life I dated men, and when I started to date women I was called and considered to be a lesbian by other people. In my new role as 'lesbian', I was chastised for having had and having enjoyed my relationships with men. Even just last weekend, I expressed an interest in the good looks of a male actor, and another person commented, "But you're a lesbian, how could you find him attractive? He has a penis." This comment was followed by a concerned comment directed at my female partner. "How do *you* feel about that?" Such assumptions of what I am allowed to like and not like are stifling and work as a process of shaming me into being whatever my assigned category (and the category police) dictates. So back to the question of "Who cares?" I feel confident in saying that those who do not, and cannot, and will not, fit in care a great deal. Not fitting in has a very real impact on what you can (acceptably) be, do, believe, think, know and say.

Having described the importance of studying categorical exclusion, I see my research as suggesting that sexuality should be taught and researched with an integrative view of social difference (race, class, gender, disability and sexuality), rather than focussing on sexuality as yet another 'independent variable.' It is my belief that such a singular view of sexuality has real implications for the ways in which people feel excluded from sexuality categories for reasons of race, class, gender and disability. I

believe that these exclusions have implications for the pedagogy employed in teaching sexuality and sexualities. My research suggests that queer identified individuals feel excluded from heterosexual *and* gay and lesbian identities for reasons of: race (e.g. all categories pertaining to sexuality are perceived to be white dominated categories where people of colour are fetishized or invisible); relationship preferences (e.g. polyamory); sexual practices (e.g. BDSM or leather); and non-normative gender identifications and performances (e.g. heterosexual, gay and lesbian identities have all tended to be hostile toward transvestites, transgendered people and transsexuals). I am interested in further exploring queer identities and the implications that they have for the teaching of sexuality, and sexualities. For example, how might BDSM and polyamory be discussed within programs that aim to address sexuality and sexualities? What might a post-identity conception of sexuality look like? Is a post-identity identity possible? Can a queer approach to teaching and to teaching sexuality unfix oppressive sex, gender and sexuality categories that are fundamental to Western societies modes of thinking? How might queer theory and queer identities be used to compliment the current mainstream anti-homophobia / anti- heteronormative approaches? How might sexuality be taught that does not present all 'others' as peripheral to an unexamined norm? How might an understanding of how race, class, sex, gender, sexuality and ability are interdependent, historically constructed and structurally reinforced be integrated into 'sex education'? Certainly many people are working on these questions and I would be interested in looking at whether the participants on the listserv could add anything or shed led on gaps and exclusions in the area of sexualities education and to the study of queer pedagogy.

While I have said a good deal about the exclusivity of heterosexual, gay and lesbian identities, I have learned that queer identity has its own points of exclusion and contestation. I think that the contestation over queer heterosexuals demonstrates that although queer attempts to be a fluid and inclusive category, boundaries will be drawn according to who or what queer is seen to be. I do not see these boundaries as a 'confounding' aspect of queer identity, rather I see queer as a commitment to realising and re-thinking these boundaries. To illustrate, within the literature that I reviewed, a lesbian author expressed concern over "queer acceptance of incest, rape and pedophilia" (Engelbrecht, 1995, p.81). Engelbrecht is troubled over the co-identity between these behaviours that she "abhors," and the social group she ostensibly sees herself as belonging to, queers. While I think that her concerns and questions are understandable, I think that queer is not insisting that she accept every activity with a smile. Rather, I see queer as asking questions about behaviours and bodies defined as other to the norm. How did these behaviours and bodies come to be other? What sensibilities about normal are we invoking in our condemnation of others? How did these sensibilities come to be experienced as truth? I think that these ideas are worth discussing and that they are intriguing for the obvious challenge that they propose. I view queer as a commitment to think about sexual deviance (/deviants) without passing immediate judgment. In my mind, this queer commitment to consider and re-evaluate our boundaries signals a category that is labile.

In considering the questions around queer gender play and the fixity of male and female as points of reference, I have to wonder why gender play is seen as fun, while playing with 'bio' sex seems difficult. While I am tempted to reference queer theory and

say that we are 'bad queers' for not undermining essential notions of biological sexes, I think that I would be mistaken in this indictment. In re-reading the listserv, I think that identification with female and male (her and his) is used to illustrate the subject position that the individual has been assigned, rather than any belief in essentialism. As none of the participants mentioned problems I suspect that perhaps none of the participants were in a position where their position as male or female has ever been contested. So while this reliance on female and male does not signal a belief in essentialism, I am not sure that it is as simple as reflecting the material and discursive realities of their assigned sex either. I think that the uncritical reliance on female and male categories may signal that each of the participants was in a position to be able to uncritically rely on these categories. That is to say that perhaps we were uncritical here because we were all in normative positions in relation to discrete biological sex categories. We made these assumptions because we could. I can only assume that we were all in positions of dominance in relation to biological categories of sex. That is to say that 'biologically' or 'anatomically' we were told that we fit comfortably into the proscribed biological and anatomical categories. As discussed earlier, 'the figure in dominance' is given the privilege of fitting in and is often unlikely to call into question the categories that allow for their / our dominance. Just as heterosexuals may uncritically accept heterosexism, white people may uncritically accept white supremacy, able(d) bodied people may uncritically accept spaces and systems designed for one type of person, and middleclass people can uncritically accept consumer culture; because we / they can. As discussed earlier, the figure in dominance gets to organize the categories through which everyone else is known, where these categories are based on that figures presumed normalcy, a normalcy that is not called into question. I

think that this uncritical reliance on biological sex signals an area of normalcy and exclusion (see Nanda, 1994) that was often overlooked by me and the other participants. I am now interested in doing more reading on the social construction of 'biological sex'. As the gender fashion show illustrates, I would like to seek out other examples of the ways in which these biological categories are undermined and their social constructedness is revealed.

In trying to understand and articulate information about queer identities, I have frequently reached the borders of my knowledge and language. On numerous occasions I have considered dropping an idea or a paragraph from this thesis because I cannot understand my own thoughts or I feel the need to resolve a contradiction that I find myself in. I feel sure that these 'contradictions' are actually moments when I am running up against discourse/s that I have not yet recognized and / or deconstructed. Frigga Haug (1992) argues that these contradictions are valuable material for study as they reveal "the social construction, the mechanisms, the interconnections and significance of our actions and feelings" (p. 17). She proposes that researchers seek out these confusing contradictions and investigate them collectively in order to attempt to make visible the discourses that we are unknowingly relying upon. With regard to the contradictions that I have experienced in writing this thesis, I suspect that in these moments I am not ready to let go of discourses that I have taken to be 'truth,' 'normal,' 'natural' or 'logical.' In writing this, I want to point out the ways in which my writing has been shaped by discourses that say that contradiction and confusion are bad. I have tried to articulate and include my confusion in this thesis and have attempted to leave contradictions unresolved. I hope that this process might queer theory-making, as such making is often



compelled to come to resolutions, while queer theory promises (in principle) to keep concepts open and to make contradictions visible. I think that I could have written another thesis exploring only these points of confusion and contradiction, but instead I have chosen to focus on that which I can grasp and articulate. By including a copy of the listserv communication (Appendix A) I hope that I might leave room for others to explore the ruptures and silences within this thesis.

In the category of 'things requiring more thought,' and related to the questions of gender play, I have come to wonder about the phrase 'to play.' On the listserv, gender play was described as a pleasurable activity. It seemed to mean 'to play' with gender, you do not adhere to the idea that assumed biological sex dictates an appropriate and natural gender experience and performance. Rather, it becomes possible to 'play' with notions of gender, take them on and off, manipulate, parody and mock. In my mind this suggests a 'lightness' of gender. In contrast, a participant on the listserv commented to me that they "can't get with hets who play with queerness. the ones who visit, but don't stay." In this context 'play' is seen as taking sexuality too lightly. It is as though non-normative sexualities require a commitment in away that gender roles do not. It becomes important to invest in a non-normative sexuality, and important to not invest in a normative gender role. It is interesting to me that while I agree with both of these ideas, they strike me as somehow contradictory, and I will leave them that way for now.

In the category of 'really unresolved', another area that I often felt that I was not giving enough thought to was the place of bisexuality and trans identities in relation to queer identities. I hope that I have made it clear that bisexual seemed to be the most accepted existing sexuality category as it was a category that Pixie, Michelle, Nguyen

(1999) and Farajaje-Jones (1995) used in combination with queer in order to describe themselves as bi-queer. It is my hunch that the work done in the area of bisexual and trans identities and politics parallels to some extent the emergence and subsequent politics of queer identities. In future I would be interested in paying closer attention to the ways in which bisexuality, trans identities and queer identities are similar and different. I wonder sometimes if a queer identity might be chosen over a bisexual or trans identity, simply because of the stigma put upon bisexuality and trans identities by gay and lesbian identities that are uncomfortable with the 'instability' and possibility for privilege and normalcy within bisexuality, and the challenge to sex and gender that trans identities represent. While I have identified my own difficulty with the phrase bisexuality (as it suggests that there are only two sexes), I am wary of lumping bisexuals, transgendered people and transsexuals into "gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans identities." I think that like queer, bisexuality and trans identities are often seen as peripheral to the so-called 'real' issues that are faced by gays and lesbians. I suspect that queer identities and the corresponding politics should study the literature related to bisexual and trans identities, movements and politics in order to learn from the arguments and theories put forth by this similarly marginalized group. Unfortunately I have felt throughout the process of writing this thesis that I have not done justice to bisexuality or trans identities, because they seem to fall, like queer, into an area that is less easily articulated than gay, lesbian and heterosexual identities. It felt like quite enough effort to flesh out the subtleties of queer identities, and consequently this meant that other areas in my thesis were left lacking attention. I suspect that like queer, bisexuality and trans identities do not easily fit into the hard and fast language of social categories. As with my comment on being

unable to bring up queer within the context of the 'queer' conference steering committee, I suspect that the comparison between lesbian, gay, heterosexual identities and bisexual identities and trans identities and queer identities felt like I would be operating with too many discourses. I kept saying to myself, "Bisexuality, trans and queer will be another whole paper altogether." Again this notion of too many discourses is quite ludicrous to me even, but I think that it again speaks to assumed contradictions and the difficulty of articulating that which is not taken to be 'truth,' 'logic,' and 'common sense.'

## Epilogue

Upon reviewing my thesis, Dr. Njoki Wane pointed out that in many ways I end up where I began. I began my thesis trying to flesh out what a queer identity looks like and how it might be articulated in the world. And I ended up with a story in the conclusion describing the ways in which I could not articulate my identity within the context of a queer conference. In a sense, I have come full circle in struggling to articulate a queer identity. Njoki explained that in her reading of my thesis it begins optimistically; I am looking for something. She felt that it ended 'heavy' with knowing how difficult it is to rupture the categories that we are comfortable working with. While gay and lesbian are marginal categories, they are also familiar, comfortable and acceptable terms, even for people who are not comfortable with what these categories represent. Queer, on the other hand, continues to be an uncomfortable category, with 'uncomfortable-making' implications and possibilities. I think that my thesis points to the ways in which it is difficult to rupture, let alone displace, the existing social categories that we work with. Using the example of the conference, Njoki pointed out the ways in

which certain experiences can be silenced in subtle and supposedly unintentional ways. While the queer conference steering committee did not deliberately set out to keep my experience unspoken, the effect was still one of silencing. Again this speaks to the difficulty of creating spaces beyond those that have already been established.

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## Appendix A

**Sender: Stiles**

**July 31 2000 1:18 am**

**Subject: fashion stiles**

i want to post the script from a gender fashion show that i attended a while ago. it was put on in winnipeg by a group called queer invasion. i enjoyed this fashion show and thought that we might discuss it. i am always interested in how queer is interpreted and can play itself out politically and culturally. the show was called gender euphoria, and the following is what the narrator read while members of queer invasion and their friends modelled. i have photos from the event that i could try to scan and post if anyone is interested. ch-ch-ch-check it out.

The following script is copyrighted by Queer Invasion:

Gender Euphoria. An evening of performance and music. mucking about with gender.

1. Completely androgynous person (cat and marlo)

This is Chris sporting triple-washed indigo boot cut blue jeans with a serviceable navy blue jacket. This savvy and urban look is designed by up and coming contemporary designer, Bob Blahblah. People often ask Chris where they get their pants. Do they come from Randy River, or do they come from Suzy Shier. That's one way of asking 'what are you?'. Or 'who are you?'. Or however it is that people phrase that insidious question. They also always want to know if Chris is short for something. Christopher? Christine? But what if Chris doesn't tell? Then what are you gonna do? You have to know because if you don't, you don't know how to treat them. In our world it makes all the difference. So, are you going to look for the curve of the hip, or the bulge of a breast?. Or maybe lower? How about the jaw line or the adam's apple? Can that tell you anything? Does Chris have any facial hair? And if they do? Are their shoulders broad, are their wrists thick, their hands dainty? What do their ankles look like in high heels? Do they fit right? Will you look for muscle tone or bulging veins in calves, forearms, and

biceps? Are there one or two earrings? That used to be a clue. What if I told you Chris works in a daycare? Or drives a delivery truck. Or that they want kids someday. Or wishes their girlfriend would propose. And what if I asked you if you think Chris is cute. I think so. Don't you? I bet you do. And what does that make you?

## 2. Someone giving off strong male and female cues simultaneously (michelle)

This is Lucy, wearing a beaten up denim jacket, white t-shirt, leopard skin skirt, and army boots. Her whole outfit cost ten dollars at the sally ann. She's been wearing it for two years. Lucy can't get a job, even though she has an engineering degree and good references. Why not? Well for starters, what washroom would she use? How would you feel if she walked into your washroom? Have you ever tried to hold it all day long? Even if you don't drink coffee, an eight hour work day requires at least one trip to the bathroom. And this assumes Lucy got past an interview. Past that awkward moment when the person behind the resume doesn't fit anyone's expectations. And this is assuming she even made it safely to the interview at all. It seems a lot of people get angry, and some, even violent when they see Lucy. She doesn't leave her house as often as she'd like to. Never mind the neighborhood. And what do you do when you see Lucy? Do you meet her eye and smile? Do you keep your head down and pretend you haven't seen her? Do you get embarrassed for her? Or for yourself? Do you get angry? Or do you ask? Lucy wishes you wouldn't...

## 3. Someone stripping from male to female. (Clarissa)

Come out wearing a suit and tie.

Today, Erin is wearing a soft, yet structured black jacket, designed by the avant garde fashion maven Luigi Squeegee. By the time Erin was ten years old he'd given up expecting the football he'd been asking for since he was seven. The first Christmas he

asked for a football, his parents bought him a doll that peed, with a stroller he could push himself. When his parents weren't looking, he would kiss the doll on the lips. The second Christmas he asked for a football, they bought him the little miss 'I'm so pretty make-up kit'. The kind with the disembodied head you're supposed to apply lipstick and eyeshadow to. He tried using it as a football, but it never threw right. The third Christmas he asked for a football, his parents bought him an E Z bake oven. It didn't throw very well either.

#### 4. Dumpster grrl (Caroline)

Today, Carolyn is wearing flowers on her bosom. This is an original number supplied by the dumpsters of the 400 block of Langside. Carolyn, who prefers to be addressed by her royal title Princess Caroline, Lady of Leisure, spends her time commandeering the Princess Carolyn Molotov Cocktail Society and acting as the authoritarian figurehead of Princess Carolyn's Army. When not engaged in these activities, she enjoys laughing and relaxing on a mound of pillows.

#### 5. "bio-woman" and mtf dressed alike think about what's the same/different (gwen and freda)

Today, julia and felicity are making a statement with these elegant green evening gowns, by Petronella, timeless beauties that cunningly display their female charms.

One of these things is not like the other. But they both belong.

What if one of these women has a penis? Would that mean they weren't a woman? Are we talking about gender, or are we talking about sex? One way to put it is that sex is between your legs, and gender is between your ears. Then again, if you change what's between your legs, whether or not you're a woman is still in question. Then you have to deal with the whole idea of REAL women. As rikki ann wilchins says, "real is what your gender is until the minute you realize you've been performing it". In essence, everyone is in drag all the time. So if there's no such thing as a real woman, then what *is* a

woman? Is a woman someone who is softer, sweeter, nicer, weaker? Or is it the ability to bear children, and does that mean ovaries and a uterus? What about women who are born without those things? Or who can't conceive? Ok, then, is it breasts? What about that uncle of yours who by all appearances could have used a D cup? Or the aunt who couldn't? What's left? Do we need to do a panty check?

Well, maybe it's Chromosomes, then, xy or xx? Let's see a show of hands. Who's actually seen their chromosomes? At some point doesn't it just cease to matter?

Ok, we'll ask again, so *what* if one of these women has a penis?

#### 6. Pregnant person. (shauna)

This is Frankie, wearing an extra large shirt and maternity pants with a big elastic pouch. There needs to be lots of room for the little one to grow. I wonder what it will like? Will it like blue or will it like pink? It's only supposed to like one or the other. And a particular one at that. It seems that most people can't count past two. But frankie wishes the gender continuum was curved at both ends and then she'd buy the little one a skateboard so they could ride to their heart's content. If she gives birth to a baby with a penis... that's all it means. Her baby has a penis. And it's not necessarily a boy... Fact is, she doesn't know what it is because it hasn't told her yet. And there needs to be lots of room for the little one to grow.

#### 7. Clark Institute Psychiatrist (Evan)

This is Dr. Gunther Evanson from the Clark Institute, Canada's leading gender reassignment clinic. Today, he is wearing a white silk lab coat designed by Proctor and Gamble and his glasses are Calvin Klein with a black, stylishly lightweight frame, perfect for peering over condescendingly. When he's not enforcing gender stereotypes, Dr. Evanson enjoys long walks on the beach in his customized turquoise paisley Speedo, and applying electro convulsive shocks to small, helpless rodents.

## 8. Transitioning

woman being mtf (nat)

**Narrator:** Today Samantha is wearing a stunningly fruitacious frock designed by lulu lalonde. When Samantha was seven and her older brother Evan was nine, they used to use their hands to bulldoze the snow against the six-foot fence in their back yard. When it was all freshly piled they would take turns running up the snow and jumping over the fence. (then one time...)

Evan: No Samantha, light your cigarette with your elbow down, not out to the side.

**Narrator:** Then one time, evan didn't ...

Evan: And next time ask for a light, or fumble in your purse until a man offers you one.

**Narrator:** One time, Evan didn't make it all the way to the ground. His jacket was caught on the fence! He(was stuck...)

Evan: Samantha, you're holding your cigarette like a man. Fingers, not knuckles!

(Samantha attempts to correct herself, but drops the cigarette and bends to pick it up).

Everyone can see down your shirt when you bend that way! Bend at the knees, not at the waist. If you want to pass as a woman, you need to take this more seriously. You have to really want this.

**Narrator:** (exasperatedly) Anyway, Samantha at first tried to help her brother get down. But it didn't work, and she eventually got tired with helping. So, she stole his boots and threw snowballs at him until she got bored, and went into the house and forgot about him.

Samantha: (giggles, and then in a fake whisper to the crowd) It never happened that way, / was the older brother.

Evan: Don't think the institute will approve your surgery if you're not even going to put any effort into this.

(Samantha walks off angrily)

Evan: Smaller strides, you're walking with too much confidence.

(Samantha flips him the bird.)

Evan: Oh, so now he's a feminist.

#### 9. Bus shack boy (cam)

This is Cam, he has other things on mind besides fashion. We discovered him sleeping in a bus shelter on the way to the show, and so admired him that we were inspired to bring him along. While patiently waiting for the trickle down, cam tells us his trick for surviving the cold Winnipeg winters and combining functionality with an aesthetic grandeur involves insulating his wardrobe with the daily news. Smart, dapper, and sleek, this ensemble is also environmentally responsible, and allows cam to be a visible reminder to those who would prefer that poverty goes unseen. As an added bonus, it allows cam to keep abreast of the dire international news.

#### 10. Fag (Vanessa and jason)

For their wedding, Vanessa will be looking suave in this elegantly cut tuxedo designed by Alexander Montage... and Jason will be wearing.... exactly the same thing. Fags? It's funny isn't it... in a male dominated world, anything that isn't overtly female, is assumed to be male. Whether you want to be or not. Take vanessa here... she once took a cab all the way from transcona to the airport and talked to the driver the whole way but when she handed him the money at the end, he said "thank you *sir*". Almost half an hour of talking in a cab, and the driver still never figured it out. Stuff like that happens all the time. And it's not that vanessa particularly wants to be a woman... or a man for that matter... but either way, people want to know what's in your pants and how long it's been there.

Being trans is hard for the person who's trans... and then there's their partner. What *is* jason? Is he a fag? Someone obviously thinks so. Or is he straight? And who gets to say?

#### 11. Intersex

And here's where it all goes out the window. Living proof of more than two sexes. I never know *what* to wear anymore. When I was born, they couldn't say if I was a boy or a girl. It seems I came equipped with all the hardware. Did you know there's no difference between a really big clit, and really small prick? My parents decided I had a small prick. They made the choice for me. And the assumed a choice had to be made. That kind of thing happens to everyone, but my parents did it with a knife... they chose my sex, my gender, and my orientation the day after I was born. And that happens in hospitals every day, fully covered by every insurance plan in North America, hidden behind names like urethral anomaly correction or genital malformation. But what about you? You may have had this choice made for you. I didn't find out until I was thirty. Most people don't ever find out. And what if you were the parent? Would you flip a coin?

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attention ethics committee: **my alias is stiles**

all my love,  
stiles

**Sender: Stressed**

**Date: August 03 2000 10:43 am**

**Subject: Re: fashion stiles**

ME- and lots of others who don't quite think lgbt fits....so at first I figured everyone who was a little bent and happy with it....then I thought, hmmm can heterosexuality fit under queer....well maybe....if into SM, or if queer positive, or....well, not sure I understand queer...but it does seem to roll off my tongue more easily than lesbian or bisexual....dyke's not bad...

and how did you come to understand it in that way?

taking to friends. girlfriends, women's centre collective people, short bouts of insomnia...attempting to describe myself to my mother...

where did you hear of queer (busta rhyme)?

Oops, what I said in response to the last question...plus posters...

STRESSED! (my alias, for this summer at least)

**Sender: Rosemary's Baby**

**Date: August 03 2000 7:55 p.m.**

**Subject: Re: fashion stiles 2**

Here's my two cents,

> > how do you understand queer?

Now there's a contested term. Often times, I've heard it used as a simple, and politically benign, synonym for gay, lesbian, bisexual, what have you...

Other times, I've heard it used to mean postmodernist theory as it relates to gay, lesbian, bisexual... or other "transgressive desires" (do I get points for using the D word first?).

For me, queer is, I would argue, a political stance-resistance to heterosexism (along with other forms of oppression). Intentionally emancipatory. Interrogating the social world that is ordered along heteronormative biases thereby rendering other forms of social relations as silent or perverse (Pssst!... I'm getting my degree!). But, also I would argue for an activist component-someone who promotes transformative social change to those sexually marginalized.

The question begs to be asked, "Who's doing the resisting, emancipating, or interrogating?" In other words, who can be queer? Is it open to everyone?

The debate rages on... For me, I think marginalized sexual identities CAN



BE queer (but are not inherently so). What about heterosexuals (as Stiles ponders?) Possibly... maybe... kinda... At least the idea of queer heterosexuality works in theory. However, how "queer heterosexuality" and "straight heterosexuality" differs in (sexual) practice remains unclear, although I certainly know "straight" identified or at least non-gblt men and women who are FAR more queer (politically) than some of the most queeniest of gay men or the butchiest of lesbians that I know. After writing all this, I'm wondering if sex has anything to do with it at all... Uh oh, I think I'm heading towards a postmodern void again...

> >and how did you come to understand

> >it in that way?

I read Foucault.

Academia seemed to be the only space where queer was discussed as an epistemology (or something beyond "gay," "lesbian" etc.). Even within the gblt social service agencies in which I have worked/volunteered, incorporating queer into the daily lingo was used with hesitation.

>

> >where did you hear of queer (busta rhyme)?

I'm assuming that your asking where was the first time I heard the word queer, however defined? I recall queer used liberally among friends as an ingroup/outgroup thing. My first exposure to queer, in its most academic definition of the word, was in a literary crit. undergraduate course. I reread *Catcher in the Rye* by JD Salinger as a "coming out story." (Ya know, finding queer desire within a context presumed heterosexual... yadda yadda).

Forevermore,

Rosemary's Baby

**Sender: Joey Jeremiah**

**Date: August 04 2000 1:04 am**

**Subject: Girls Just Wanna Have Fun**

Stiles!

The script of the gender fashion show left me quite aroused and interested in exploring my idea of queer-- especially why I choose it as a label for myself.

I came across the term probably 2 years ago. To me, I was not quite ready to identify as a lesbian- although everyone (my friends, and my sister) began asking me 'So, are you like a lesbian?' To avoid a discussion of the mechanics of my brain, I was inclined to say yes. Me, dating women, for the first time, was associated with a whole new identity for everyone else but me. All I knew was that I would daydream for hours about being the boy who bought the girl flowers, the boy who got to hold a girl's hand, the girl who was seduced by other girls (occasionally Madonna), the girl who was seduced by a boy in my school, and the person who made my two school male crushes kiss.

So later on in life I learn that there are lesbians, and I am told that they are women who like women. So, where do I fit in? I fantasize about being a man, a sleek dark-haired boy. I love it when my female partner calls me 'girly'. I wear make-up. I get along well with guys and get nervous around women. I love cars- I would love to be a tough mechanic boy.

I have found a partner with whom I can 'act out' all of these roles-- this is a nice arrangement. I feel that I choose queer because it allows other people to understand something about me (if someone dares to ask). I have found that people are more inclined to challenge my naming of myself as queer than as lesbian.

I have recently begun to question how me being queer translates into the definition of my sexual practice. Does this mean that I have the potential to fuck a boy? Well, actually, I do fuck a boy and she has tits and a vagina, and sometimes, when I am lucky, a cock. Or, does my queer identity mean that I find solace in behaving in an androgynous manner? Is my queerness wrapped up in gender-play? And, why did my queerness come alive when I started dating women?

So much fun for this shy young boy-

Joey Jeremiah

**Sender: Stressed**

**Date: August 04 2000 12:29 pm**

**Subject: Re: Girls Just Wanna Have Fun**

joey J,

what you said works for me too, I think...but a bit different...

>identify as a lesbian- although everyone (my friends, and my sister) began asking me  
>'So, are you like a lesbian?' To avoid a discussion of the mechanics of my brain, I was  
>inclined to say yes.

for me, to avoid a similar discussion, I was inclined to say, no, "queer"....lots of confusion  
for mom who still expects a son in law (from me and not my little brother)

>So later on in life I learn that there are lesbians, and I am told that they are women who  
>like women. So, where do I fit in? I fantasize about being a man, a sleek dark-haired  
>boy. I love it when my female partner calls me 'girly'. I wear make-up. I get along well  
>with guys and get nervous around women. I love cars- I would love to be a tough  
>mechanic boy.

yup, just helping my girlfriend move last weekend and having her touch my bulging (well, we all can dream, no?) biceps as I schlepped her stuff gave me a real high. Two weeks ago when she lifted my skirt I felt the same way.....so I too have found a partner with whom I can act out these roles...growing up she was butch, now more femme...depending on the day...the fact that one of us engages in this play opens things up for the other..

STRESSED!

**Sender: Piglet**

**Date: August 04 2000 1:35 pm**

**Subject: Re(5): begging is good for the soul**

One of the reasons I like the word queer, is that my introduction to it as meaning anything other than "weird" or "strange" was after I had already begun to be aware of the constraints that language puts on our ability to communicate with one another. I had been searching for ways to be less "in the box" all the time and for words, phrases, and cultures that had embedded in them a sense of the impossibility of capturing and fixing meaning. Queer seemed to fit the bill.

It seemed to describe a state of being that was open to change, and open to differences. But then again, this was before I came out as a dyke. And I liked the sense that I could work against homophobia and be seen as an ally - a strong enough ally that I could be a "part" of things ... maybe even claim the same name and bits of identity. I don't mean to say that I thought that I was homosexual and could then "really-know-what-its-like" to suffer the effects of homophobia. Rather, because of my attitude and practices around issues of homosexuality and homophobia that, well, I could claim some sense of queerness and maybe wouldn't have to prove myself over and over again.

It's interesting that since I came out I haven't spent nearly as much time thinking about queer and what it means. I don't know if it means the same thing to me now (having been out for 5 years) as it did then (8 years ago).

Piglet

**Sender: Sheila**

**Date: August 04 2000 3:21 pm**

**Subject: re:re:re:rah:raw:roi**

word on the boy with tits and a vagina, i'm there with you. and oh yes, the bathroom scenes... i want to tell you all a funny story about public washrooms. for millions of years (ah, what is time about?) these cultural aboniations were the bane to my existence! now it's hit and miss, if i'm up to it, i hop on my soap box and inform all nay-sayers that indeed this is the correct washroom, and why are you not hopping at the chance to wipe my ass, thou lowly ingrates! if i'm not up to it, i just walk in casually and hope for the best. the best, being, of course, raised eyebrows, hurried departures and perhaps, if i'm really lucky, a little girl tugging at her mommy's coat saying, "mommy, mommy--" and being urgently shut up before any fightin' words can emerge. but-- oh, but--

here's the scenario:

last night i'm in this pub that lies in the heart of what was once the queer/punk/artist/theatre area of this city, but is now yuppie central crawling with raging heteros with cell phones and boob jobs. walking into the washroom behind one lovely young woman, i'm considering just waiting a minute or two until she is finished, but naw, why not flaunt my boyishness? well as soon as i walk in she turns and squawks "OH MY GOD IS THIS THE MEN'S?" i look at her calmly and say, no. and she's like "OH I AM SO SORRY I JUST SAW SHORT HAIR AND JEANS AND I AM SO-- I JUST WALKED INTO THE BAR AND THERE'S MY SORTOF BOYFRIEND AND THERE HE'S SITTING WITH HIS EX-GIRLFRIEND, AND I'M LIKE OH! AND I'M HAVE PISSED AND I DON'T KNOW IF I'M COMING OR GOING, I DON'T KNOW IF I'M

COMING OR GOING, HOW D'YOU LIKE THAT? WELL, I THINK I'M GONNA CRY. I AM CRYING, I AM SO SORRY..."

so like with all of this gushing, i have completely lost the nerve to give this chick some kind of political rundown about how i hope i have shaken her paradigm, and i turn into some kind of sisterfriend, saying, "oh that sucks," and she's still talking/squawking in that i-may-say-half-pissed-but-really-i'm-hell-and-gone tone "AND SHE'S GORGEOUS, SHE'S LIKE A HUNDRED POUNDS LESS THAN ME" and i'm consoling and insulting, "ooh, that's not gorgeous, give her ten years and she'll have little flaps of skin hanging off her bony face" and she's like "YOU REALLY THINK SO? AM I THAT BAD?" and i say, "no, you're gorgeous, honey" and this strange woman whom only moments ago i was ready to tear into with gender jargon jumps up and hugs me!

so am i still queer?

-sheila (my alias, for although it's also the one on my driver's license, i sure didn't pick it)

--

**Sender: Stiles**

**Date: August 04 2000 4:07 pm**

**Subject: life's a riot, between the wars**

so i am going to send out a cursory message of curiosity now and follow up properly a little later.

Rosemary's Bebe and STRESSED! i'm with you on the hets in queer question. i think that i too am currently defining queer in opposition to heteronormativity (het as the assumed norm) and heterosexism rather than in opposition to het people. for me that still remains an interesting area and since i don't meet any straight queers (so to speak) i'm a little at a loss to be theorizing on their behalf. i would also like to see a little shirking of het privilege from this camp. maybe someone else can shed some light on this.

which brings us onto joey j. i too came to queer through the process of claiming a non-normative sexual orientation so yeah, what's up with that? possibly a process of having to finally see outside of invisible assumed sexual norms and realizing that normal as you have been told about it is a myth. lots more to say here, but i'll leave it at that.

it's lunchtime here, and you know what that means...

stiles

**Sender: Sheila**

**Date: August 04 2000 5:38**

**Subject: a queer blue sunny sky**

last post i completely forgot to actually address the idea of how i came to queerdom, i got so wrapped up in the bathroom. like piglet, i was used to hearing queer as a term of weirdness, especially in regards to sexuality. i grew up catholic and before i renounced god i was actually pretty devout, although it makes me kind of laugh now. i was very homophobic, but i think it was mostly for show, because the first time i heard someone else i knew say that it might be okay to be gay i knew this was the person i was going to come out to, and i did a year later. at the time i was strictly "lesbian", i was too afraid of the implications of any other words. i had taken sixteen years to get used to lesbian, i didn't realize that accepting and embracing dyke would be as easy as overcoming my own fear. that took me awhile, about two years during which i tried the label tentatively, often to the dismay of straight friends (i only knew two dykes, and hardly at that). now i look at it and think it very funny how liberal heteros (not to be confused with queer hets, which i really hope exist) can become more offended by small things than queers ourselves. i adopted dyke and a bit later queer, as terms of my own making, and as terms constantly being remade by those who adopt them. it's that old reclamation thing. when these straight friends were offended by my own usage of the words, i always had to wonder whether they were battling their own queerphobias and simply misunderstanding the point of reclaiming, or whether they were still clinging to my victimhood under the power of these "insults", so that they could therefore consider themselves rather noble as

far as hets go. this is my reasoning for differentiating between liberal and queer hets. queer goes further than accepting, queer acknowledges the displacement of heteronormativity from the centre. i think there are straight people who certainly work for such displacement, without necessarily practicing more commonly recognized queer activities such as s/m or polyamor!

**Sender: Stiles**

**Date: August 05 2000 6:18 p.m.**

**Subject: loungin' in my queer pantsuit**

saturday stylistic,

so last night i went out to a homo bar and i was left with a few thoughts that i thought i might put out here. (it's always good to put out.) so yeah, i'm left thinking that attending a homo bar is not a particularly queer experience. it seems like a (necessary) extension from the 'different but equal' politics. it is difficult to know when such politics / spaces result in ghetto-izing of homos, and when this is just realistic given the pathetic / hostile nature of most straight clubs. so what would a queer space look like i wonder? i read an article in the local lesbian - bi woman rag and a woman wrote in describing her experience of being in the lesbian community for many years and then starting to date a TS male. she said that now when she is out with her date, she no longer receives recognition from lesbian couples and she feels sad about this. she also described being given dirty looks when her and her date attended lesbian spaces such as pope joan and the like. she suspects that she and her date are now being read as straight voyeurs in a lesbian bar. i think that this woman's experience speaks to the very un-queer nature of such spaces. i read her letter and felt that i too could be indicted under her descriptions and for me she points to the difficulty of negotiating between a world designed for neat categories and corresponding identity politics, and queer lived experiences. like this woman, i came to queer because i did not fit in anywhere else. i know that the letter writer was not writing as a proponent of queer, but she does point to the difficulties of setting up queer spaces within worlds that are always already hierarchically defined. that is to say that it is difficult to see couples who look straight and privileged in a marginal



space where we are almost forced to exist because we are not welcome elsewhere due to non-normative sex / sexuality / gender. i'm with rosemary's baby with the comment that queer heterosexuality works in theory... and again i say, let's keep pursuing it in practice. i was sent the following email recently and i will include it here. this is a cyber community and it sounded pretty queer to me. i am a luddite and consequently will never visit any cyber community (except for [www.sissyfight.com](http://www.sissyfight.com) - ha) so i wonder how if other see these ideas as queer principles, (i.e. "if you are concerned about being hit on by someone of the 'wrong' gender, then this is not the place for you") and how such a community interests or doesn't interest you. i am not interested in cyber communities but i am intrigued with this site because i am not sure how i might react to living this experience (minus the ancient egypt theme). while i am not keen on being hit on by straight men in real life i think that i want to be open to giving it all a chance. anyway, let me cut to it:

All Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersexed (LGBTI) people and their straight friends and allies are invited to participate in Alexandria of the Flesh and Spirit talker. Alexandria is a bisexual erotic talker for people 18+ who enjoy playing out sexually explicit fantasies. Alexandria welcomes all forms of consensual erotic expression, including BDSM, fetish, zoophilia, ageplay, polyamory, objectification, sensual magic, roleplaying, etc. We expressly encourage historical and mythological roleplaying, but discourage science fiction -- Alexandria's theme is pre-1920s Egypt and participants are encouraged to work with the theme.

In Alexandria absolutely anything can happen anywhere, between anybody, at anytime. No matter what people do between themselves, with whatever body parts or toys, it's all right as long as all parties involved are enjoying themselves. This includes all PUBLIC rooms, even the very streets you walk in. If the idea of getting hit on by a person of the 'wrong' gender bothers you, don't log in. If the idea of witnessing adventurous and unusual sexual activities offends you, don't log in. If it is illegal to view such content in your jurisdiction, or you are under the age of 18, don't log in. Alexandria is open to everybody of all races and backgrounds. All languages are welcome, however, the

dominant language is English. Admin staff are of diverse orientations, ethnic backgrounds, gender expressions, and speak English plus several other languages, including Spanish, Swedish and German, and to a lesser extent, Portuguese and Japanese. Absolutely NO harassment will be tolerated. This talker was made for people to enjoy themselves in, so please respect all others you meet here. Please visit our web site for more information, and mail you membership request to: [oriens@alexandria.betterbox.net](mailto:oriens@alexandria.betterbox.net)

Handy Addresses:

URL: [alexandria.betterbox.net](http://alexandria.betterbox.net)

TELNET: [alexandria.betterbox.net:9999](telnet://alexandria.betterbox.net:9999)

EMAIL: [oriens@alexandria.betterbox.net](mailto:oriens@alexandria.betterbox.net)

has anyone been to a queer cyber space?

has anyone been to a not cyber queer space?

i think that the gender fashion show created a queer space for me.

the sci-fi community in 'woman on the edge of time' by marge piercy was a queer space if anyone has read this book...

okay and i also wanted to post something else that was sent to me in order to discuss how queer is perceived as another site for white Western middle class subjects. rosemary's baby asked the question earlier ' who can be queer?' and i think that this question can be asked again here. who feels comfortable under the title of queer? i think that the question "what does it mean, in the context of uneven race and class relations, to become queer in opposition to other queers?" is one that i need to think about. your thoughts here would be appreciated and definitely check out [www.worsethanqueer.com](http://www.worsethanqueer.com) if you haven't already. mimi nguyen offers some very interesting (excellent) views there. also maybe someone is interesting in submitting here. here it is:

PERFORMING UNNATURAL ACTS: CRITICALLY QUEERING RACIAL  
CULTURAL STUDIES

> >

> > As the editors of a new anthology tentatively entitled, *Performing Unnatural Acts: Critically Queering Racial Cultural Studies*, we seek submissions interrogating the ways in which the categories of race and queerness are produced, performed and engaged. Not surprisingly, most queer scholarship assumes the white Western middle-class subject as its sole referent, to queer theorizing's privileged subject/object and deconstructing the heteronormativity of much ethnic studies scholarship—especially trajectories invested in nationalist frameworks-- we hope to examine the intersections of and slippages between discourses of sexuality and discourses of race, racialization, and ethnicity. To paraphrase Norma Alarcon, we want to know: what does it mean, in the context of uneven race and class relations, to become queer in opposition to other queers?

We are informed by multiple strategies (queer, feminist, poststructuralist, and critical race theories) and are interested in the politics of performativity and performance, cultural production, the politics of identification, and of course, the politics of politics. Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

> >

> > CLAIMS TO CITIZENSHIP AND NATIONALISMS: Black Nations, Queer Nations, defining nationhood, borders, immigration, post-nationalisms, modernity, transgression, domesticity, postcoloniality. PUBLIC SPACE AND MORAL PANICS: sex panics and white flight, zoning laws in urban neighborhoods, public displays of queerness, criminality, crossing borders.

> >""

> > DECONSTRUCTING (QUEER) WHITENESS

> > QUEER IN THE ACADEMY: visibility politics, disciplinarity.

> > REPRESENTATION AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION

> >

and we encourage submissions reflecting a broad range of historical locations, areas of study and theoretical positions." floppy disk in either Mac or PC format, a brief biographical statement, and a stamped self-addressed envelope to the address below. We are presently deciding on a publisher for this volume. The deadline is

>November 15, 2000. For questions, please contact the editors via e-mail:

> > [unnaturalacts@hotmail.com](mailto:unnaturalacts@hotmail.com).

> >

Queer Ethnic Studies Working Group

506 Barrows Hall, University of

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> > Karina Cespedes

> >

> > Mimi Nguyen

> > Mattie Richardson

> >

> > Visit the Queer Ethnic Studies web-site at:

> > <http://www.worsethanqueer.com/conference>.

> > Not yet updated, but soon revised!

okay so that's a fuck of a lot to think about for a saturday afternoon. these are just things that i need to think about and i thought that someone else might be interested in helping me out.

anyway, to rewind a bit. sheila, you asked at the end of your excellent story if you are still queer. i think that yours was a very queer story and that i should love to see such a queer sight in a ' women's' washroom. the business of commenting on another woman's looks in order to comfort your lady friend is sad news, but otherwise your story made me smile. i thought that it was pleasantly queer.

i want also to return to rosemary's baby's que(e)ry of "i am wondering if sex [acts] ha[ve] anything to do with it at all." and i'm with you there. i too think that queer must be a head thing that is hopefully tied to some (tangible / vocal) critique and resistance of heteronormativity, heterosexism, essentialist notion of sex, sexuality and gender and as you say, a critique of other systems of oppression, race, class, disability. this is a tall order non? but i stick by it. what does anyone else think about the whole tying of identity to political action that i have just done. sheila, i take it from your story that maybe you

didn't feel as queer because you didn't act in an overtly politically challenging way with your lady friend. or am i way off base? i am wondering if this is a necessary link (queer with political action) in your chain (so to speak). anyone else?

i am writing a virtual (fucking) essay here, so i quit.

stiles

**Sender: Rosemary's Baby**

**August 06 2000 9:42 pm**

**Subject: 10000111101001**

AAArgh! Regis, I'd like to use a lifeline please!!! Tooooo....

muuuuuuch..... innnnfooooormasshun...

I wonder about the inclusiveness that queerness purports. Clearly, our fabled communities are not untouched by racism, sexism, classism, along with the entire gambit of unspoken oppressive "isms." Although such "isms" are hardly unique to queerness, I have on occasion become somewhat shocked and dismayed by their new formations that have emerged when intersected with sexuality. For me, as a brown (eyed?) girl, I am amazed at how sexuality has intersected with race-in my case of the Asian variety-and transfigured into a whole new set of assumptions, which I have found...rather unsettling. Once, I met a white gay male who told me that "he doesn't get turned on by Asians." For this particular individual, the hows and whys did not require further analysis and, for him, was simply a matter of personal choice and individual preference. This is, unfortunately, nothing new as whiteness is typically presumed the standard in both the gay and straight worlds. And yet, I am hardly placated by another white gay male who told me that he has a "thing" for Asian men. Such a statement begs the question "why?"

While in bed with this man, I soon found out the reason. Apparently, he believed, Asian gay males embody a very specific form of eroticism, sexuality and sex role play. Think Geisha in the un-queered worlds. For me, it was the absence of negotiation specifically

and all out presumption in general-that my race presupposes a particularly fixed sexuality-that I find off putting, but is nonetheless pervasive. And yet, I wonder if or how I (and other non-white queers) have become complacent within these sexual discourses. For example, I certainly enjoy "bottoming" and find nothing wrong with it. Infusing political intentions into specific sex acts doesn't seem like the best way to go about analysing the situation. But then, nothing changes... I'm certainly open to new ideas on this.

Turning to the web has come with mixed bag of results. Speaking to some gay men on IRC, message boards, or what have you, have amounted to little more than "bathhouse politics" where cock, ass, and yes... race, largely determines the attention you will get. Other spaces, like Mimi's, provides insightful and provoking ideas and all around radical thinking, but nonetheless are only accessible to an esoteric group of privileged western academics.

Rosemary's Baby

**Sender: Stiles**

**August 07 2000 1:28 am**

**Subject: so clever for an infant**

the last email reminds me that sometimes i think that queer solves all of the -isms, but really it is quite the opposite. it should be about acknowledging them and taking responsibility for (racial / class / ability / gender / etc) privilege. rather than just claiming (homo) penalty. it has been pointed out to me elsewhere that queer is sometimes used to evade privilege. (in the anthology, resist! articles against homophobic culture) mary louise adams asks, " i wonder, for those of us who are white. how much of this is a response to our racial identities? is there a part of queerness that is an attempt to distance ourselves from other aspects of our lives where we have social power? is queerness sometimes based in a romanticization of marginality." [thanks to beaker for lending me this article.] ideally queer should be based on reflexive politics (politics where you

implicate yourself in the webs of power is one possible definition here). it seems like this is a point to be practiced. i am definitely going to think more on this subject... and your point about mimi's website is so true, and this listserv as well. a few other people have commented that they did not want to be a part of it because they felt intimidated by the topic, and this is a disturbing thought for the purportedly "most inclusive category."  
hmmm.

movie pick of the weekend: but i'm a cheerleader  
playing in toronto at the carlton cinemas.  
[www.butimacheerleader.com](http://www.butimacheerleader.com)

stiles (is having a slow long weekend evidently)

**Sender: Stiles**

**August 07 2000 3:10 pm**

**Subject: burning schoolhouse**

i have been making a (short) list of things that i think are queer:

- at the toronto dyke march there were men in the audience dressed in jeans, t-shirts and vintage women's hats (with veils and the like)
  - saw a woman with 'boy' tattooed on her shoulder
  - the tribe 8 concert with strap-ons, blowjobs, etc
  - my (seemingly) straight neighbors who have a large rainbow flag hanging in their front porch
- any thoughts?  
stiles

**Sender: Stressed**

**Date: August 07 2000 6:48 pm**

**Subject: Re: burning schoolhouse**

Hey stiles...

phew much more my pace...

OK seemingly straight neighbors with a large rainbow flag----you never know....I know of a minister who thought a triangular rainbow on a church was a lovely reminder of the holy trinity mixed with Noah's ark, my mother has hidden her rainbow coloured candles since I told her about the significance of rainbows to queerness. maybe they're queer, maybe they're seemingly straight queer + / straight and queer, maybe they just really like rainbows....

tribe 8, fun concert, really open-minded band- still, noticed when I read about it in a zine-- someone was upset with the seemingly traditional folk at a punk concert!....me in the gap tank top and gap shorts might of been one such folk...

about the woman with "boy" on her shoulder...sure it wasn't a boy with a growth in the form of a woman? not sure what to do with the veils.

stressed!

(ps. Foucault who?)

**Sender: Sheila**

**Date: August 07 2000**

**Subject: Re: loungin' in my queer pantsuit**

stiles wrote:

>the business of commenting on another woman's looks >in order to comfort your lady friend is sad news, but >otherwise your story made me smile.



yeah, tell me about it. that's what i meant when i said i turned into a girlfriend for a minute. totally shocked right out of my principles, i reverted straight (no pun intended) into some scene i probably learned on degrassi junior high! i have long believed that women are taught to gain personal strength by forfeiting collective strength; i.e. being pit against each other, and i was shocked at my own easy slip into such behavior. years of training which i had thought i had successfully untrained.

>sheila, i take it from your story that maybe you >didn't feel as queer because you didn't act in an >overtly politically challenging way with your lady >friend. or am i way off base?

well, i actually feel pretty queer. i do relate queerness to a political standpoint, but in a very different way than intellectual pursuit. it's different from, for instance, the "political lesbianism" of the radical feminist movement, in which lesbianism was defined almost solely among perviously un-lesbian women as a way of escaping the power of men. i.e. through sexual unavailability. many political lesbians would have as accurately described themselves as abstinate (although not all, of course). queerness i see differently. it is not the rejection of a certain set of practices, such as "being straight" and all that this is supposed to entail. it is more of a pointing to practices such as "being straight" in order to reveal the instability of the terms. to point out that "straight" is in as many ways continuous as discontinuous with "gay", and that "gay" or "lesbian" are not in themselves stable terms. my lesbian might not be the same as yours. sometimes my lesbian may even conflict with my dyke. and some times my dyke is really a little straight boy with a cunt. or a silicon dick, for that matter. the physical, the acts become important in the ways that they create meaning.

-sheila

**Sender: Stiles**

**Date: August 09 2000 3:13 pm**

**Subject: in the look or the looking?**

greetings team,

just to let you know,

i intend to shut down this (mini) listserv next wednesday august 16 2000.

so say it all now. i am participant, hear me roar.

you can email me any time after this date, but i thought i should plan for a closing date since i said around two weeks total.

stressed, that queering of my queer sights that you did was most excellent.

i will not look at that rainbow flag in the same way after your bit of information, that's fer sure.

now i lie awake at night worrying that they are rainbow-loving christians or something twisted like that. before starting this whole process i was asked to ask the listserv group if queer is in the look or in the looking.

sheila, that was a fantastically clear explanation and yeah, i get it.

although, as you say, my getting it will not be your getting it... (see rosemary's baby for definition of postmodern void).

so i am wondering if there are definitions / uses of queer that people are not so sure about, dislike, cannot stand or have to negotiate before feeling comfortable?

stiles

**Sender: Stiles**

**Date: August 09 2000 3:14 pm**

**Subject: i forgot to sign the last email**

love stiles

**Sender: Stressed**

**Date: August 11 2000 6:34 pm**

**Subject: Re: in the look or the looking?**

People have been so quiet....It has occurred to me that I have nothing to say on the issue of anything really, other than WHY DO PEOPLE DO GRAD SCHOOL?...this is the last degree for me, I'm thinking at the moment... So...Maybe we can queer some topic other than queer discourse?....anybody up for it? Conversation would be pleasurable....any conversation really...pleasure....hmmm, I seem to recall something about guilty pleasures....sound of music or grad school.....today, I'm thinking Maria holds all THE answers.

so, a question or 2?

Why do grad school?

Why theorise things that are so much more fun to live? (can you tell I'm working on my thesis and need out?)

How does it function to theorise things that are sort of by their nature immune to theory? (little bunny Foucault has returned...see Mad Cow, issue 8 I think..for a reference)

Why is indigo my favorite colour today when clearly, deep purple was my favourite colour last week?

Is queer in anyway linked to age or perceived age,?

stressed!

**Sender: Stiles**

**Date: August 13 2000 8:42 pm**

**Subject: [blank]**

well, i had thought that i might keep quiet for a while, but i have extra time and i am intrigued by stressed's comments.

let's start with guilty pleasures:

my latest guilty pleasure:

pretending (around the house) that i am the first queer much music veejay.

why grad school for stiles?

a couple of reasons:

hated my job as a social worker. could not hack it any more.

i have seldom had jobs that i have enjoyed. so school is preferable to working and i have been lucky with getting in to school and staying afloat financially. so i hate working basically, and school is like not working, for me. it's blissful really.

why do you dislike grad school so?

queering the sound of music.

i know a woman who has long been infatuated with julie andrews (pre victor victoria even).

i never had the feeling that maria ever really liked mr.von trapp anyway.

she seemed much happier hanging about with the nuns.

the sound of music is quite camp, i think. all that frolicking, singing and dressing up.

(wo)men in uniforms. children dressed in curtains, (wo)men in habits.

i'd like to see brigitte and friedrich get together.

why theorize things that are much more fun to live?

hmmm yes. because theorizing things that are not fun to live is so droll, hahaha (i'm just being an ass).

with regard to this / my research, yeah it's fun to live as a queer,

but i would love to see queer take off in some larger cultural, political and social way.

yet, sometimes i find it difficult to be queer outside of my head and my voice.

so i am personally motivated to look at queer, while i work on living it.

what's immune to theory? i can't think of anything...

queer and age? i think that this is an issue of perceptions of queer. i have heard a number of people say that queer is a term for younger people, not older people. the idea seems to be that if you remember when queer was a powerful pejorative, you will never choose to reclaim it. so i think that there is often an association with queer being young (and hip - harkens back to your tribe & story here).

in a similar vein, i have a query about language.

so yesterday, someone spoke to me about asking a new person in her life about being butch or femme. i realized that these are not words that i use myself and i think that all of us have made references to being girls and boys in our email.

so i was thinking today that sometimes i'm a boy and sometimes, i'm a girl.

and sometimes i am a woman, but never am i a man.

i wonder about this masculine arrested development of mine.

it seems that the term boy gets thrown around a fair amount (boys like her), but we never seem to become men. personally, i think that i am reluctant to be associated with being a man for lots of patriarchal reasons, and i am okay with being a boy sexually or in appearance because i am acting like the teenage boy that i have always been, but never could be. follow? it's like accessing the boy privilege to girls and sexual interest, while evading the nastiness of becoming what men have come to represent in modern society (oppressors of women, nature, etc). any thoughts?

stiles

**Sender: Michelle**

**Date: August 07 2000 9:44 pm**

**Subject: Hi, I'm Michelle and I'm Queer!**

Hi, all. Like the subject says, I'm Michelle and I'm queer as the day is long.

I'm a 35 year old woman who identifies both as bisexual and as queer. I'm married but sometimes I half-kiddingly refer to myself as a "married lesbian" as well. I say that because I'm quite satisfied with my marriage so I haven't wanted another man in my life but I crave being with women and that is the only "extramarital" sex I want.

So how do I define queer? At the heart of it, I see it as a simple thing: If you're not straight you're queer. That means if you're not a died-in-the-wood heterosexual you qualify. Act now! <grin> Seriously, if you're a lesbian, or gay, bisexual, asexual, omnisequal, transsexual, or whatever and/or identify as polyamorous or even if you prefer sex only solo, I say you qualify. Queer originally meant something odd or unusual, so I think it fits from a lexicographer's point of view.

On the other hand, I know some people who think it's only if you sleep with people of the same gender as you... and then I know others that consider both gender and sexual orientation completely fluid and prefer not to label it at all.

But for me, queer has an even deeper meaning. You see, I also play in the realm of BDSM (bondage, discipline and sadomasochism) and my sexuality is not limited just by WHO I have sex with but also how I'm creative with it. So in reality, I'm queer both for loving sex (and relationships) with other women, for my polyamorous leanings and for enjoying unusual sexual practises.

I've been reading some of the other stuff people have written here. I'm really enjoying them. I'll comment on one I saw today:

-- yesterday, someone spoke to me about asking a new person in her life about being butch or femme. i realized that these are not words that i use myself and i think that all of us have made references to being girls and boys in our email.

In addition to having a fluid definition for my sexuality, I also think of myself neither as butch or femme. Sometimes I feel more like one and sometimes the other. I know some butch dykes that call themselves bois or boys and some femmes that call themselves womyn, women, wimmin.... whatever. I just dress and act according to my mood. If I feel butchy I dress accordingly, put a swagger in my step and don't take any shit. If I feel femmy I get all dolled up and sway my way through the day, giggling and letting people open doors for me.

In the lesbian world that I've been in during the past year or so I find that butch and femme lines are often very clearly drawn and there is an observable social culture relating to greeting each other, lighting cigarettes, getting drinks, etc. Those who choose not to define one way or the other appear to confuse those who do and the question is often ask what side you're on. Since I'm on neither people don't know how to take me. Butches don't know if they should be attracted to my femminess and femmes don't appear to recognize me for my butchiness (not that it always has to attract an opposite but it often does).

Anyway, I've rambled enough. Thanks for letting me join in late!

/Michelle

**Sender: Michelle**

**Date: August 14 2000 9:59 pm**

**Subject: Re: several questions**

guilty pleasures:

sleeping in until 2:00 p.m.

what's immune to theory?

That there is life and death and there is both night and day. That's all I can think of.

-- queer and age?

I agree to some extent that older people won't use the term queer because they have a negative association with it, but I think younger people taking it up with pride changes that and only the most staunch haters of that word don't use it. It's like the word "chick" being taken back but strong women.

/Michelle

**Sender: Sheila**

**Date: August 07 2000 11:23 pm**

**Subject: Re: in the look or the looking?**

yeah. grad school and i had a brief moment of flirtation but i declined... it's funny how people react to this, coming from me. i was always the smart kid, but i realized curing the end of my undergrad degree that i didn't have to go to grad school, which i hadn't really noticed before. i could just not go, even though i had been rewarded all of my life on academic achievement and was evaluated as a productive human being mostly according to school averages. i was well trained; school leads to school and more school, and while this is not always a bad thing, it is also not my thing--at least right now. like stiles, i enjoy writing academic stuff, doing research, getting into the play of theory, and i actually think that theorizing in some ways is living queer; that is, i don't think the two are mutually exclusive. theory is something i do. it is not the only thing i do, however. thus i have quit the school cycle for now and may never return, much to the dismay of my parents and most of my profs.

but enough of that i am on vacation. my question/anecdote is this:



i used to work in a kitchen on campus; most of the cooks were men, especially during my shift, when i was the only female except the prep girl in the back. on line we were full of jokes, and my big joke was to extend sleazy come-ons to the one cook (whom i really didn't like at all, but who for reasons i shall explain was a perfect object of such flirtation). he would get all man-manly and make jokes about converting the lesbian (which he half-beleived, as he was very arrogant and propositioned me every time he had a few to drink, hoping to bring me around to his right-wing christian views--and this i believe he would not have cared to do were i not a dyke, for i am quite simply not his type). so he would make these jokes and say things like "sheila, i think you're turning straight". and he would gloat and look all happy with himself, until i replied, "no \*paul\*, i'm always queer, just sometimes i'm a boy". at which \*paul\* would get all squeamish and grossed out.

so what's up with that?

-sheila

ps \*paul\* is an alias. his real name is \*joe\*. just kidding.

--

**Sender: Joey Jeremiah**

**Date: August 14 2000 12:49 am**

**Subject: Re:**

once again stiles. you have tickled me into wanting to disclose way too much information.

hmmm... the boy or man thing... well, i have been called a lady, and a woman, and even a little girl (by my daddy), and i have been called a boy. i have come to realize though, that in my mind, i am a man. i am the man who will open your door, pay for your dinner, bring you flowers, help you out of the car, and write you a poem-- i am the man who will

do anything to swoon you. i am the man. i know it is gross. i cannot help it. a possible explanation: growing up, i listened to a lot of R&B 'romancie' guys, like Ralph Tresvant. (Ralph who?)so i often wonder why i have this in my mind when i would slug any guy who would make a woman feel that she cannot do these things for herself...and certainly, i am known as this woman. i am not sure how i settle this conflict of identities in my mind. i guess there is some privilege and relief in simply 'playing' the man, while disliking men. i wonder if this fair to say, knowing that i know people who want to biologically become men. i wonder how they would feel about comments like that.

another point that i have come to realize is that my 'gentleman's' behaviour is apparent in almost all other areas of my life, and hence, my queerness is not simply tied to my sexual practice. i think that i have been a living breathing queer since i have known myself...without any theory to denounce 'heteronormative practices' to inspire me or for me to refer to. once again, i have to say that i think that i am queer because it is the easiest way for other people to understand me. sometimes, i think i would feel comfortable in simply telling people that i like girls...oh, and i guess i am dressed like a boy today.

so, i suppose that i am more interested in living queerly in my interactions with other individuals, in my attire, in my manner, etc., than in theory, because i feel that the theory sometimes gives justification and reason for why people like me challenge gender stereotypes and normative sexual relationships. but what about the days when i do not? i am giving in to normative practices? what does the theory say about that, and am i supposed to feel bad about this?

alright, enough.

stressed: why do we go to grad school? for nights like these: i am completing my final m.a. draft and i need to rant on things that i feel have the potential to a) constrain people and b) explain people. (i have spent hrs. trying to explain the way in which women represent themselves politically- ha ha).

final thoughts: i have actually never seen the sound of music but i am intrigued with stiles' infatuation, and the whole nun-thing.

my guilty pleasure: i think that people would probably classify all of my taste in music as a guilty pleasure-- my girlfriend recently surprised me with the new CD by 'Pink'.

Joey Jeremiah

**Sender: Michelle**

**Date: August 14 2000 7:56 pm**

**Subject: Re: ego-ridden cook**

> i used to work in a kitchen on campus; most of the cooks were men <snip> he would  
>get all man-manly and make jokes about converting the lesbian <snip> so he would  
>make these jokes and say things like "sheila, i think you're turning straight". and he  
>would gloat and look all happy with himself, until i replied, "no \*paul\*, i'm always  
>queer. just sometimes i'm a boy". at which \*paul\* would get all squeamish and grossed  
>out. so what's up with that?

Well, sounds like he just couldn't take the idea that someone female was not interested in him. Some guys are just so ego-ridden that they think that if they're charming enough (and don't get me started on what they think is charming) they'll somehow make a dyke forget that silly business of wanting only other women. As IF!!

/Michelle

**Sender: Sheila**

**Date: August 14 2000 9:58 pm**

**Subject: Re:**

i dunno, i am sorta with stiles on the man/boy split, although i don't really like sticky dichotomies. in fact i don't think stiles' description was a dichotomy, just the way i wrote it (man/boy) looked like one on my screen--yikes!!! i am a self-proclaimed boygirl, or girlboy, depending on the occasion, although long before i was self-proclaimed i was certainly pegged as at least ungirl. so like joey, i feel like queer has been a way of experiencing the world long before the theory came whacking me in the head with a good old SO THAT'S WHAT'S GOING ON HERE! in fact i was a transgendered five-year-old. i remember clearly wishing to be a boy so that i could like girls, and even after i learned that i was a plain old pervert, i still felt tossed about by gender. the difference now is that instead of dreading those remarks on my ambiguity (like in the public washroom!). i play on them. i do drag, whether in the performative stage scene, or even playing with street perceptions of my appearance. sometimes i respond with the "well i am a girl and i look like this so how can you tell that YOU look like a girl?" or sometimes i let myself be a boy for awhile, which is especially fun when halfway through the conversation i stretch or make some similar move which makes my breasts apparent and throws people for a loop. the queering of gender for me is in teh failure to repeat norms of either "male" or "female". if i am taken as a boy and treated (as i usually am when this happens) with that extra respect that for age old excuses is awarded to boys, and do not disrupt the reading somehow, i feel not so queer at all. passing in ways that privilege me only reinforce such privilege. i like to dislodge the reading; that way, people suddenly are thrown off and at least in some small way are forced to re-evaluate what it is that made them read me and subsequently treat me in a specific way.

-sheila

**Sender: Stiles**

**Date: August 14 2000 11:31 pm**

**Subject: my hobbies include rephrasing, rewriting and retracting**

with regard to my comments about men and (bad) male power:

my conscience reminds me to mention that all men are certainly not structured equally within the social construction of masculinity and maleness (the gay geisha experience as described by le bebe de rosemary illustrates this well) . certainly male privilege and power is given most readily and unconditionally to white, heterosexual, able(d) bodied (etc) males... this was an after thought that i felt compelled to clarify.

i am queerly uninspired tonight,  
although i was called a fucking lesbian today by a stranger...

(he can) blow me,  
stiles

**Sender: Beaker**

**Date: August 15 2000 11:42 pm**

**Subject: ro-o-ol with the punches...**

As I write, this is my first foray into the queer discussion, one of my neighbours is having quite the time with Van Halen's "might as well jump..." On repeat. I must say that for the first few times I was suitably impressed and quite content to accompany them on air guitar (good to know I'm not the only one to play queer vj round here), but I must say that by this the eighth consecutive playback I am growing a little tired. Anyway, having perused some of the emails I am quite intrigued by the many directions that people are interested in discussing (or not) things queer. I'm not exactly sure which direction to go (nothing new) so I'll tell a little story and see what else spews out in the meantime.

A few weeks ago a lesbian coworker, asked me, "so are you gay?". Hmmm. This had been puzzling her for a while because usually her gaydar could read people pretty well and she "just couldn't peg me." I told her, well, I'm queer and one of the reasons is because I don't want to be pegged. I joked about how I would prefer to assume/hope that everyone is queer until proven otherwise. I'm open to a wide range of possibilities for

intimacy and sex and relationships but right now I'm stuck in my own little world and not looking for anything in particular. Like other people have said, for me queer jus seems to fit. It's a headspace. Most days I don't like labels at all and other days I am inclined to check all of the above: "asexual grrrl bi baby dyke queer lezzie boy gender pirate." In a sense, I understand/use queer to be expansive and it can be about finding pride in not fitting and exposing the restrictions imposed on people by the hetero norm. I am wary of tendencies that use or criticize queer as apolitical, I know it's not for me, it wasn't in the queer fashion show, there is a definite message there, assumptions are being called into question and challenged. Sometimes I wonder if queer is limited by its oppositional stance? There sure is a lot to oppose, as far as how the world is structured and who is excluded and included, and the conventions of normality within which some of us and our freaky families will never find comfort. Still, I was surprised to find myself thrown by the 'are you gay' question, and not so much because she used 'gay' a term I've never used for myself, but because it wasn't 'obvious' to her that I was not straight. Like I am somehow not performing up to par. Like there is some essential queerness that I have failed to exude. This of course rings to me as total crap, but still it was my reaction. There doesn't seem to be much point in holding myself up to some standard by claiming an identity which has the potential to shift and rearrange the very standards of 'acceptability' that have had such a huge regulating force in peoples lives. I do at times also wonder whether queer for me is a reaction to internalized homophobia, and the invisibility of options growing up in small town, Catholic high school. . . But these things don't go away according to what I call myself. Also, being queer doesn't erase race or class privilege or negate the ways I am implicated in systems of oppression, but it does make me want to work harder to identify and call myself on these things, to expect criticism, to change, and to work more broadly towards an inclusive world.

Now that I'm not sure what else to write, I wonder what happened to Van Halen.

Quackily, beaker

**Sender: Stressed**

**Date: August 15 2000 12:14 pm**

**Subject: Re: my hobbies include rephrasing, rewriting and retracting**

>although i was called a fucking lesbian today by a stranger...

you too?

Little would he know....I've had no time to fuck! ...much to the dismay  
of my cutie....

stressed!

OH, stiles about the question about why I am not currently so pro-grad school...I actually like it, just not the pressure I've given myself....Must start teaching full time September 5th in a system that may just stifle me if I don't get my rest and hoping to write a whole dissertation in 3 weeks....Still making notes...haven't started writing....more of a time thing than an anti-grad school thing....

**Sender: Stiles**

**Date: August 15 2000 1:26 pm**

**Subject: follow any tangent for there are many**

hello team,

beak beak, perfect timing to enter the ring.

i think that my current thoughts might fit in with your question, is queer limited by its oppositional stance? on the other hand, i may just think that it fits... it fits with your linking in to other systems of oppression. (rephrase, rewrite, retract)

regardless, last night i dreamt that my sister and i were working to set up an alternative queer community and we were putting up flyers and discussing what the school system would look like (she's a teacher) and how we could change the system from having a parallel system for people with disabilities to one system that is properly imagined. we

were both struck by the vast need for re-imagining and overhaul, everywhere in society: school, property, transport, employment, etc.

so in the light of day, i am left wondering how this queer community that i imagined had to do with a giant utopian project... do i conceive of queer as the larger utopian project, or as a part of the larger utopian project that includes battling racism, sexism, ableism, classism. i am wary of erasing / subsuming these other -isms into queer, but if queer is conceived of as working to address all of these issues... seems like there is an answer here, and that perhaps i am perceiving a contradiction where none should exist. is anyone following here?

sheila (my parents also wanted to name me sheila) the questions that you pose at the end of your excellent stories always make me study your stories and wonder about why you ask the questions you ask (you would make a good teacher). anyway, so i am left wondering about the approach of using homophobia to fight homophobia. is this your question? for you to make such a crack to the fucker cook is tres sassy, because you are playing with gender in a very clever way. but it's a tough call because maybe the comment plays on / reinforces his homophobia toward males.

what do people make of the queer suggestion of doing away with gendered pronouns (he / she / him / her), and using 'they' instead? see the gender fashion show to regardez how this looks in action.

also i asked earlier if there were any uses of queer that people are not so sure about, and i am not so sure about queer as an umbrella term for l/g/b/ts/tq. for me this takes away the destabilizing aspect of queer. as though you have to claim a fixed category (l/g/b/ts/tg) in order to be queer. this doesn't sit well for me. it also seems to exclude the possibility that everyone is / could be queer.

if everyone's queer... no one's queer,  
stiles



**Sender: Pixie**

**Date: August 15 2000 12:35 pm**

**Subject: Re: in the look or the looking?**

I don't really know. Why do I get so stressed out about the fact that I don't have an undergrad degree when I like my work and I'm successful without it? Why do I get so envious of people taking graduate courses?

>Why do grad school?

>Why theorise things that are so much more fun to live? (can you tell I'm

>working on my thesis and need out?)

**Sender: Pixie**

**Date: August 15 2000 1:02 pm**

**Subject: new home**

I just moved from Toronto to a small, island on the west coast. There is a group here for Gays and Lesbians. i figured that that was just an old fashioned turn of phrase. i figured that bi, trans, queer people would be welcome. apparently I was mistaken. i haven't had any problems there (yet) but then i also haven't been in a situation to raise any issues. i was told by an older dyke that the group is very very middle of the road and doesn't like the term queer, is afraid/uncomfortable around bi and trans folk. I noticed how uncomfortable the group got when they realized that a woman had shown up to the event was actually a straight ally!

so just like in university (years ago) when I came out to the gay and lesbian group as bi without knowing that was a huge big deal, i find myself one of very few queer people in a group of well meaning but very "straight" Gay and Lesbian folk. No room here for me, a dyke that likes to fuck men every so often, a woman who is happy being a woman but who likes to play around with gender roles a lot. don't even get me started on how being into leather would be perceived here...

"queer" is the best definition for my sexuality I have found but I've found it's not accepted outside of the city.

lucky for me I'm happy in myself and don't need this group's support. I'm just fine being me.

- Pixie

**Sender: Pixie**

**Date: August 15 2000 1:08 pm**

**Subject: Re: several questions**

>-- queer and age?

>I agree to some extent that older people won't use the term queer because

>they have a negative association with it

... to the point that a friend's mom once told me my t-shirt was offensive ("it's a queer world after all" - from my march on washington) even when I told her that "queer" had been reclaimed by the community. my argument was how could the t-shirt offend when i was part of the group that had been hurt by the word but had now taken it back. the mom couldn't see that. she's too concerned about people's rights and justice to see that changes to attitudes can come from within a movement, not just through protests.

- pixie

**Sender: Michelle**

**Date: August 15 2000 5:13 pm**

**Subject: Re: ro-o-ol with the punches...**

[beaker said] In a sense, I understand/use queer to be expansive and it can be about finding pride in not fitting and exposing the restrictions imposed on people by the hetero norm.

That's pretty much the way I use it. It simply means "not straight".

[beaker said] I was surprised to find myself thrown by the 'are you gay' question, and not so much because she used 'gay' a term I've never used for myself, but because it wasn't 'obvious' to her that I was not straight. Like I am somehow not performing up to par. Like there is some essential queerness that I have failed to exude.

I totally get you on this score. I have the opposite problem. I don't look queer. I look pretty straight and I'm married, so I have to go out of my way to identify myself as queer (usually I tell them I'm bisexual) so people don't make the assumption that I'm straight.

Is there anybody else on this list who does something similar? Do you go out of your way to identify yourself as queer or do you just let people make their assumptions?

/Michelle

**Sender: Michelle**

**Date: August 15 2000 5:43 pm**

**Subject: Re: follow any tangent for there are many**

stiles said] do i conceive of queer as the larger utopian project, or as a part of the larger utopian project that includes battling racism, sexism, ableism, classism. i am wary of erasing / subsuming these other -isms into queer, but if queer is conceived of as working to address all of these issues... seems like there is an answer here, and that perhaps i am perceiving a contradiction where none should exist. is anyone following here?

Here's the conundrum: If we subsume all these isms there will be nothing to

illustrate the differences between us and only words to illustrate what makes us the same. I think the problems of racism, sexism, ableism, classism, lookism, etc. are simply not possible to erase from society and at least this way we have language to describe the different types of separateness that exists.

[stiles said] what do people make of the queer suggestion of doing away with gendered pronouns (he / she / him / her). and using 'they' instead? see the gender fashion show to regardez how this looks in action.

I am a major lexophile. I love words. The idea of changing singular gender pronouns to the plural, ungendered approach of 'they' would simplify matters, but it is grammatically incorrect and means we are allowing subject-verb disagreement to solve the problem. It's something I struggle with, but I do find it simpler to use the plural pronouns.

[stiles said] i am not so sure about queer as an umbrella term for l/g/b/ts/tg. for me this takes away the destabilizing aspect of queer. as though you have to claim a fixed category (l/g/b/ts/tg) in order to be queer. this doesn't sit well for me. it also seems to exclude the possibility that everyone is / could be queer. if everyone's queer... no one's queer

My feeling is that as long as politicians and religious leaders try to tell us that the only "normal" way to live is to have sex for procreation (which basically means all people are straight and they're only straight to have children), anything else is queer. That means that anyone who subscribes to that politicoreligious ideal is not queer and so everyone can't be queer. Those of us who identify as queer are saying that the idealized notion of straightness does not always apply.

My cousin picked up something at this year's Dyke March that I wanted to share. It's a post-card with a picture of a baby on it, over which is the following in big red letters. It was great food for thought.

Heterosexuals Use Mind Control to recruit their children

How do they scare people straight? threaten rejection from family and society, justify hate in the name of god, spread myths about perverts and molesters, incite fear about disease, spread lies about human sexuality, threaten rejection from work and community, propagate lies about sin, publically humiliate queers, withhold information about sex, erase queers from history, allow homophobia on television, deny queers equal protection under the law, promote family values, promise happiness to those who conform.

/Michelle

**Sender: Michelle**

**Date: August 15 2000 5:46 pm**

**Subject: Re: new home**

-- I just moved from Toronto to a small, island on the west coast. There is a group here for Gays and Lesbians. i figured that that was just an old fashioned turn of phrase. i figured that bi, trans, queer people would be welcome. apparently I was mistaken.

It always amazes me how a group that is looking for so much societal acceptance, such as gays and lesbians, will reject anything that doesn't fit into their idea of the "right" kind of gay and lesbian. Sigh.

/Michelle

**Sender: Beaker**

**Date: August 16 2000 7:43 pm**

**Subject: Re: follow any tangent for there are many**

hi everyone,

this is somewhat lengthy, which may have something to do with that essay i should be writing but i keep procrastinating.

(stiles) last night i dreamt that my sister and i were working to set

- > up an alternative queer community and we were putting up flyers and
- > discussing what the school system would look like (she's a teacher) and
- > how we could change the system from having a parallel system for people
- > with disabilities to one system that is properly imagined. we were both
- > struck by the vast need for re-imagining and overhaul, everywhere in
- > society: school, property, transport, employment, etc.

I've often daydreamt about this, and work with some community groups advocating inclusive education, but I am frustrated with the way that for some inclusion is exclusive referring only to disability (mostly this is white, middle or upper class parents who want change one kid at a time). It seems people feel it is too big a project to overhaul the whole education system and there is so much work to do and so many kids are in abusive/segregated settings. The attitudes upholding this kind of apartheid (the parallel system) are so entrenched. Yet these attitudes are connected with / supported by alienating, racist, sexist, colonialist, heterosexist pedagogies and systems and I think this gets silenced when people don't want to acknowledge their own privilege or feel trapped in a spiral of competing marginalities. Since this dream is a utopian vision, one I think is worth working towards that should fit into a queer invasion, the proper imagining is a big part of it. Although I do wish at times that there was 'an isle of lesbos' to run to, I am torn knowing the limitations of separatism while also feeling like dominant society is not going to redeem itself any time soon. People are generally unwilling to give up privilege voluntarily. On a small scale we can create/participate in supportive, skill sharing, creative spaces, but for me it is important to attempt this in the communities we already move in, and to recruit.

- > (stiles responding to sheila) so i am left wondering about the approach of
- > using homophobia to fight homophobia. is this your question? for you to

- > make such a crack to the fucker cook is tres sassy, because you are
- > playing with gender in a very clever way. but it's a tough call because
- > maybe the comment plays on / reinforces his homophobia toward males.

I don't know, it's possible, but I also know gay men who have used this same approach. Humour, sarcasm, exposing how ridiculous some of the homophobic things people say are by firing something back that is unexpected or unsettling can work, whereas a stern talking to won't or people will think you're condescending to them. Sometimes when homophobia rears its ugly head I'm not prepared, and all the snappy comebacks disappear (that's mr. dyke to you). I also think that in cases of really hateful stuff like that spewed by the religious right it doesn't matter what you say they will twist it to justify their hate. I don't like this but think it's a pretty big issue we need to strategize about, and am open to suggestions. As an example, I was at a protest/counter protest in BC where the teacher's federation was endorsing gay/straight alliances. The right-religious parent group (protesting) had signs saying 'homosexuals can change' and we (counter protesting) chanted 'bigots can change' or they had 'educate don't indoctrinate' and we said '2-4-6-8 how do you know you're kids are straight'. But I was left feeling that this wouldn't make it any easier for their kids who might be queer. Although we made a point and people could see that the number of people supporting the teachers was far greater. Yet I don't think that completely ignoring the bigots is the best solution either. I guess it is these kinds of concerns I'm stuck on with my question "is queer limited by its oppositional stance?" Yet there is always so much more going on. Another example from the protest was the way the police were distributed, twice as many surrounded the queers, and a friend of mine who was wanting to 'do a faggy dance' through the crowd of parents was pulled back by cops saying they couldn't be responsible if he got hurt and they couldn't let him through (the we're here from your own good thing again). He then pointed out that why were there so many cops around us if they had just acknowledged that if there was going to be violence it would come from 'the other side'. I don't know what the cop said then, but it was particularly disconcerting when at the end of the protest one of the organizers of the queer contingent thanked the police. Oh the contradictions and many strains of conservatism.

- > what do people make of the queer suggestion of doing away with gendered
- > pronouns (he / she / him / her), and using 'they' instead?

I prefer to use they, and used to hate it when teachers would want me to change it due to grammatical incorrectness. I also use hir in some writing but am more hesitant to use it academically (possibly due to remnants of the above). I have found writing poetry a good place to play with language queering, but in everyday speech 'hir' doesn't sound any different than 'her', and shim doesn't seem to work. Anyone have other words or ways? Of course body language is another way to complicate/fuck with gender which brings about a whole different set of imaginaries as revealed by people's stories about playing with gender.

- > also i asked earlier if there were any uses of queer that people are not
- > so sure about,

I know of queer sometimes being taken up to mean 'hip' in a yuppy kind of way which seems to neutralize it's personal/political possibilities. Like it's a catch phrase bound to go out of style.

I don't like it when it's hurled out of car windows or behind people's back as an insult. That's homophobia. i don't like it when the religious right uses it in their propaganda to justify their hate. I saw one webpage ranting about queers in school recruiting children where they were basically saying, hey they even call themselves that so of course they're all perverts and deviants and we have to protect our children.

and i am not so sure about queer as an umbrella term for

- > l/g/b/ts/tq. for me this takes away the destabilizing aspect of queer. as
- > though you have to claim a fixed category (l/g/b/ts/tg) in order to be
- > queer.



This is interesting, because queer is a shake up for people, I've had comments like "okay, you're queer, but what does that really mean, are you bi or lesbian?" Inquiring minds want to know, they would like a neat little box to put me in. Like queer is window dressing and underneath the 'real me' will reveal it's fixed identity, but I can't distil myself like that. It's interesting how in some places q is being added to the list, which could be queer or questioning.

> if everyone's queer... no one's queer,

what about that utopia?

beaker

**Sender: Sheila**

**Date: August 17 2000 1:51 pm**

**Subject: Re: my hobbies include rephrasing, rewriting and retracting**

yeah i hate that fucking lesbian line. the word's dyke (at least for me), loser. and fucking? well, not at the moment, but as often as possible, yes, why, jealous???

-sheila.

**Sender: Sheila**

**Date: August 17 2000 2:12 pm**

**Subject: Re: follow any tangent for there are many**

hey hey!

stiles, i want to respond to your comment that i was fighting homophobia with homophobia with that cook. i didn't feel that i was, really. i do feel "like a boy" (whatever that means, really) quite often. and the point i was trying to make with him was to point out that even if i, the only established "dyke" working in that bar (or that he had met, for that matter), am to mention and act upon my attractions to men, i am not necessarily

"turning straight". i think we all know about all of that fluidity in this list (kudos to michelle the queer-bi gal), but after surrounding myself with queer-minded folk of all sexual persuasions (including straight) for so long, it still surprises me that such a comment would arouse such disgust in this guy. i guess i thought he was cooler than he was under his hypermasculine exterior and would allow me to poke fun at his heterosexist training. beyond enacting a queer mentality in which a dyke-identified-dyke doesn't necessarily always have to like/love/fuck/fantasize about/ flirt with ONLY women, i was trying to point out that whatever my choices, even if by some freak i were to suddenly be attracted only to men for the rest of my life, i would not be "turning straight", at least not in the sense that "straight" is a stable and fixed (and of course, normal) category. do you understand what i am getting at?

okay that took a lot of space, but i want to respond to one more thing. you also said "i am not so sure about queer as an umbrella term for >l/g/b/ts/tq. for me this takes away the destabilizing aspect of queer. as though you have to claim a fixed category (l/g/b/ts/tg) in order to be queer. this doesn't sit well for me. it also seems to exclude the possibility that everyone is / could be queer."

i agree with you there.

that is all.

-sheila.

**Sender: Stressed**

**Date: August 17 2000 2:14 pm**

**Subject: Re(2): follow any tangent for there are many**

beaker.

replying to a tangent or two...

>

- >I've often daydreamt about this, and work with some community groups advocating
- >inclusive education, but I am frustrated with the way that for some inclusion
- >is exclusive referring only to disability (mostly this is white, middle or
- >upper class parents who want change one kid at a time).

Yes, I've noticed this...try to do an ERIC search on inclusive education and you will get exclusively articles about middle class white folk who want the special needs of their own child to be taken care of in classroom. ...keep trying to find either current educational initiatives or programs outside of the ed system (with people who will be willing to enter such asystem to do some work) that actually take into account social exclusion/inclusion that actually acknowledges racist, sexist, colonialist, heterosexist pedagogies and systems, but have been completely frustrated in my search. At the same time overhauling the whole ed system won't likely happen, because even if it were destroyed tomorrow, those stakeholders who currently have power that they imagine stems from their superior fixed abilities, would not disappear....for this reason (and the fact that I need an income and will be starting to teach in a couple of weeks in this system), and the fact that people will continue to send their children to school come september regardless of what we say on this list, I can't completely give up on queering it from within...I have an idea this will all end in heartache, but can't give it up yet on the utopian vision....my idealism will die soon, I'm sure...any ideas about how to do this would be greatly appreciated....

>

- >On a small scale we can create/participate in
- >supportive, skill sharing, creative spaces, but for me it is important to
- >attempt this in the communities we already move in, and to recruit.

Yes, a good point...

>

>

- > Another example from the protest was the way the police were distributed, twice as many surrounded the queers, and a friend of mine who was wanting to 'do a faggy dance'

through the crowd of parents was pulled back by cops saying they couldn't be responsible if he got hurt and they couldn't let him through (the we're here from your own good thing again).

yup, was recently at a very white pride in london where 6 neo nazi skinheads, with "100% Canadian" written on their backs, came with signs for straight pride... a 6 year old in a rainbow t-shirt sprayed one of the straight pride protesters with a water gun (on a day of torrential downpours)...guess who the cops decided to protect? I felt quite queasy but most people around me seemed to think this was somewhat commonplace. I don't think anybody thanked the cops though....

>

>>> if everyone's queer... no one's queer.

>

>what about that utopia?

well said.

stressed!

>

**Sender: Stiles**

**Date: August 17 2000 5:46 pm**

**Subject: you are all my therapist**

hello team,

yes, sheila i had a definite sense that i was misunderstanding your gist based on the other things that you had written, so i am glad that you followed up on it. the beak also took up my comments and i heartily agree with those ideas on irony and the failure of lecturing as well. funny. back to the beak, if everyone's queer, no one's queer, yes the utopia, how soon we (i) forget... i was imagining that if everyone was queer, then queer could become "obsolete" in a sense. but it needn't ever become that if it remains open to redefinition

and instability. so i am wondering if / where other people draw the line between queer as sexuality / gender orientation (this is a linguistic challenge for me - what irritating categories to reinscribe today?) and queer as headspace and queer as connected to other social movements against oppression (do not feel that lines need to be drawn, i just think that generally some people draw a line and others do not). (today) i think that for me, queer is a part of other movements as much as other social movements will necessarily include queer/s. so to see these movements as seperate is as much of a mistake as trying to see parts of an individuals identity as seperate. hmmm. i guess for me the dominant gay and lesbian movements have sought to see sexual orientation as a free standing identity unaffected by diversity. i have written a lot more, but i am whacked on caffeine and pain killers at the moment so i am going to cut and paste it elsewhere because i am beginning to feel strange and it is time to flee the computer.

no proof reading today.

i leave that in your capable hands.

stiles

**Sender: Stiles**

**Date: August 17 2000 9:16 pm**

**Subject: negotiating 'the matrix'**

stiles is very out of sorts and would like to follow up once again.

further to my last email, i think that people have actually been quite clear about how far their queer extends to / beyond sexual practices, sexual orientation, headspace, sexual politics, politics generally, etc. in hindsight, i suspect that i am the one who is having difficulty with this area and my own negotiation between queer identity, queer politics and being careful to be accountable and not ignore the ways in which i am privileged in other ways (race and class).

Stiles

**Sender: Stressed**

**Date: August 17 2000 11:05 pm**

**Subject: Re: negotiating 'the matrix'**

stiles is far too hard on stiles' self....doing a fabulous job

stressed!

**Sender: Rosemary's Baby**

**Date: August 18 2000 1:08 am**

**Subject: Re: [aug 14 12:49 am]**

- > so, i suppose that i am more interested in living queerly in my
- > interactions
- > with other individuals, in my attire, in my manner, etc., than in theory,
- > because i feel that the theory sometimes gives justification and reason
- > for
- > why people like me challenge gender stereotypes and normative sexual
- > relationships. but what about the days when i do not? i am giving in to
- > normative practices? what does the theory say about that, and am i
- > supposed
- > to feel bad about this?

For me, queer was about seeing myself within a context (ordered along gender, race, class, sexuality...) and that my experiences, feelings... my very own sense of self... are given meaning by that context. For those outside the privileged norm(s), meanings are given to them that are hardly liberating. For me, being queer is about troubling the taken for granted terms--for instance, identifying how power operates within our current meanings and sense-making strategies; exploring the implications of our current meaning making strategies; and finding new ways of making meanings. (Does this make sense or do I sound like that last few paragraphs of my master's thesis??)

Anyway, that's why I'm continually struggling with the questions whether queerness is about a prescribed set of acts per se or whether a "queer heterosexualtiy" makes sense or if it's even helpful at all to the "movement."

However, if queer is just another way of saying "other" than I think a queer identity would start to lose its lustre, for me. Such a definition wouldn't bring anything new to the table and would simply mimic the "minoritizing" politics of gay/lesbian identities.

There are, of course, other days when I would disagree with myself...

Rosemary's Baby

**Sender: Rosemary's Baby**

**Date: August 18 2000 1:09 am**

**Subject: Re: several questions [aug 13 9:59 pm]**

Guilty pleasures--"Survivors" (Was pretty upset when Colleen got voted of the island... So shoot me!)

what's immune to theory?--Can't think of anything.

queer and age?--At the start, I was pretty resistant to a "queer" identity. Oddly enough, during the time when I was trying to find my "place in the universe," academia (or at least the brand of academia I was a part of) discouraged queer thinking. I remember believing that you were either hetero or homo, gay/lesbian or straight. One or the other. Anything in between was believed to be a lie. Of course, now I try to challenge these assumptions as much as possible, but way back "in the day", I viewed queerness as FAR too "unstable," radical, and well... overwhelming for someone like myself who walked the straight and narrow (in both sexual and political thought) for so long.

Rosemary's Baby

**Sender: Rosemary's Baby**

**Date: August 18 2000 1:09 am**

**Subject: Re: negotiating 'the matrix'**

- > stiles is very out of sorts and would like to follow up once again.
- > further to my last email, i think that people have actually been quite
- > clear about how far their queer extends to / beyond sexual practices,
- > sexual orientation, headspace, sexual politics, politics generally, etc.
- > in hindsight, i suspect that i am the one who is having difficulty with
- > this area and my own negotiation between queer identity, queer politics
- > and being careful to be accountable and not ignore the ways in which i am
- > privileged in other ways (race and class).

I find myself tackling a similar conundrum--seeing myself within a matrix where I am simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged. Conceptualizing social positions in this way, I run the risk of erasing my own/everyone else's experiences of oppression.

Moreover, how do we act collectively, even if only temporarily, when our sense of "communities" are forever stratified and fragmented by countless "differences" and power differentials?

Rosie's Baby

p.s., my thoughts are semi-lucid tonight so I'm not feeling very talkative.  
more after these commercial messages...

**Sender: Michelle**

**Date: August 18 2000 4:32 am**



**Subject: Re: follow any tangent for there are many**

[beaker] "is queer limited by its oppositional stance?"

I think it is. I think that as long as there is separation between straight and queer as "not straight" there will always be something to oppose and therefore always something to have limits around. As soon as you define one thing as separate from another you define limits for the separation and an oppositional stance from which to argue.

-- I also use hir in some writing but am more hesitant to use it academically (possibly due to remnants of the above). I have found writing poetry a good place to play with language queering, but in everyday speech 'hir' doesn't sound any different than 'her', and shim doesn't seem to work.

I have seen this in queer poetry but since there is nothing that I've found that was written about what pronoun replaces which I'm not always clear on whether they are singular or plural, objective or subjective, etc. They're just presented on their own for me to try to interpret and I find them awkward to the ear and the mind. I almost wish there was something completely different that sounded nothing like the original pronouns. I almost wish that he/she was replaced by zik, him/her was by zork and his/hers by zark. That's not to say I'm recommending those specific words but they don't currently exist and they're enough far removed from the originals that there would be less confusion. For myself, I usually use s/he, him/her, his/hers even though it's somewhat awkward, just for gender parity.

I've also been known to tell university professors to remember when they are referring to male gender pronouns that (usually a man) that he should remember that there is a whole range of humanity that includes women. I ask them to replace man (as in humans) he/him/his with inclusive people/humanity related language.... and I never accept the argument that a professor is too old to change, which one guy tried to tell me once.

>> if everyone's queer... no one's queer,  
[beaker] what about that utopia?

Yes, what about that? I actually prefer the idea that there be no disparity between queer and not queer - that we are all just people with our own definition of attraction.

I was talking about the subject of defining queer with a friend of mine today. Mine was (as you may recall) "not straight and monogamous" or even not "vanilla" to go even farther with it. Hers was even more inclusive. She defined anyone who ever questioned their sexuality, even if they chose the straight path, to be queer. She figured that there was an open-mindedness that qualified someone to be considered queer even if they did not identify as les/bi/gay/ts/tg. I thought that was interesting and while I agreed with her that it was one way to look at it I did not agree with her far enough to change how I define it.

Michelle

**Sender: Michelle**

**Date: August 18 2000 4:52 am**

**Subject: Re: you are all my therapist**

-- if everyone's queer. no one's queer, yes the utopia, how soon we (i) forget... i was imagining that if everyone was queer, then queer could become "obsolete" in a sense.

Perhaps "queer" would be obsolete because it wouldn't be needed. If open-mindedness about fluid sexual orientation is universal then the definition becomes moot. On the other hand, this is definitely a utopian vision that I have a hard time believing will become a reality in my lifetime.

-- for me the dominant gay and lesbian movements have sought to see sexual orientation as a free standing identity unaffected by diversity.

I agree with you there. There are some seriously strict definitions for "lesbian" and "fag" (to differentiate it from the more inclusive term gay) that exclude diversity of definition such that anything outside the clearly defined parameters is considered unacceptable. That's not to say everybody feels the same way, but the prevailing culture(s) appear that way to me and it always astonishes me how those who want inclusion can be so exclusive.

/Michelle

**Sender: Michelle**

**Date: August 18 2000 5:07 am**

**Subject: Re: when was I queer?**

-- queer and age?

You know, once I realized I was bisexual and didn't fit into the straight stereotype (never did from a personality point of view anyway), while I didn't identify with the word Queer I certainly didn't have any problem identifying as bisexual or at least "not straight" right from the beginning. It was like, "Oh THAT's what's going on with me. Okay, I get it," and then I began coming out pretty much right away with certain people.

-- but way back "in the day", I viewed queerness as FAR too "unstable," radical, and well... overwhelming for someone like myself who walked the straight and narrow (in both sexual and political thought) for so long.

I've certainly noticed that there is somewhat more open-mindedness now with

regard to sexualities that are more fluid such as polyamory and non-monogamy, BDSM, bisexuality, ts/tg, etc. Certainly there's still a ways to go, but it seems to be getting better. Would anyone disagree?

/Michelle

**Sender: Stiles**

**Date: August 19 2000 6:45 pm**

**Subject: cunnig stunts**

since i am shutting this deal down tomorrow night, i have a few thoughts to put out.

michelle had asked earlier if anyone dresses in a particular way in order to look queer. well, apparently i look like a lesbian, since strange men on the street tell me so. and was that a conscious choice i made at one time, to look like a lesbian? i can't say for sure, i have short hair and geeky glasses, and this leaves me coded as a lesbian. i also have short hair and glasses while romantically involved with men, so of course, the coding is necessarily flawed. i was flaming long before i was queer, (sheila's tg 5 yr old rings familiar here) but i was also queer before i was queer, and flaming because i liked it... all to say that i am not sure if i look like a lesbian because i always wanted to look like a lesbian, or if i am just one of those people who would look like a lesbian anyway. believe it or not, that is only an introduction to me saying that lately i have been trying to think about ways in which to look more queer, less lesbian. and this so far has resulted in some silkscreening (starting very overtly) of t-shirts - "girlboy - refuse to be caged, inhabit a queer space" and grocery bags "i look like robert deniro, i drive a mitsubishi zero." anyway, as the beak mentioned, it sucks to LITERALLY have to wear a t-shirt that says i'm queer, because, well doesn't that kind of undermine some kind of point? well, i think that as sheila wrote, it is necessary to disrupt normal or risk perpetuating it (as in the exposing of cleavage in order to disrupt a reading of oneself as a boy). looking queer (as differentiated from looking like a lesbian - which in my mind reinforces binary

oppositions i am interested in undermining, i.e. het / homo, male / female, feminine / masculine. etc.) is a tough and puzzling one for me, and i have to admit that it is something that intrigues me somewhat.

pixie mentioned something earlier about queer being more of an urban rather than rural term, in her experience. as an urbanite, i hadn't given any thought to that possibility. while i am not looking to make hasty generalizations, i am interested in what other people know about this.

beaker asked about any other genderless pronouns and i will throw in marge piercy's selection from 'woman on the edge of time,' and that it per. "give it to per" or it "per said..." i think that per is short for person. anyway, that is to replace the gamut: her, him, she and he.

also i want to thank rosemary's baby for saying in five lines, what i had been trying to say for two prior email. perhaps you would like to write my thesis (for a small fee). i mean, i'm open to the idea.

finally, i was interested in what people made of the listserv experience overall. many people told me that they would have been happier talking in a group and felt embarrassed about putting ideas in writing because they "didn't know enough" etc. i too felt that i could have definitely done with some face-to-face discussion as i think that conversation moves things along at a quicker pace. not that i'm in a hurry, but i am a two finger typist and consequently i think faster than i write. as well, my experience of the listserv is different than that of others because i am also the researcher and because i am not anonymous to most of you (wendy = stiles) and i saw a few of you last night and i will see others of you tonight. so i have wound up having some really excellent discussions about queer and many of them took place with participants outside of the listserv context. as well, i am reluctant to fix our ideas in time or as truth or anything as certain as that, and the email feels as though it might do that a bit.

please feel free to post your thoughts on the listserv, on the listserv.

if anyone wants to email me after the listserv shuts down, i can be reached at wpeters@oise.utoronto.ca or mothersmartmouth@yahoo.com. these should both be up and running forever.

you are all rockstars,  
stiles wenderson peters

**Sender: Michelle**

**Date: August 20 2000 3:14 am**

**Subject: Re: cunning stunts**

[Stiles said] was that a conscious choice i made at one time, to look like a lesbian? i can't say for sure, i have short hair and geeky glasses, and this leaves me coded as a lesbian.

That's an interesting question because some dykes make a conscious choice to have the "look" and some don't. I've actually noticed that I'm developing "bi-dar" - I can often now identify women (not men yet) who look like they might be bisexual. The main factor? There are elements of both butch and femme in varying degrees but neither is identifiable.

[Stiles said] beaker asked about any other genderless pronouns and i will throw in marge piercy's selection from 'woman on the edge of time,' and that it per. "give it to per" or it "per said..." i think that per is short for person. anyway, that is to replace the gamut: her, him, she and he.

I sort of like that. It's certainly much more simple.

[Stiles said] finally, i was interested in what people made of the listserv experience overall. many people told me that they would have been happier talking in a group

I must admit it's easier to do that for faster feedback, but I do compose my thoughts better in writing than in person and since I also type fast I can express myself pretty well in this forum. One thing I sort of wish is that this discussion could continue until it seems natural to end it (like when we stop talking about queerness because we've run the gamut of the topic).

Anyway, it's definitely been a blast and a learning experience.

/Michelle