

HPRS5042/6042 COMPLEX BODIES: QUESTIONING GENDER, RELIGION, & SEXUALITY

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QUEER THEORY

In the last lecture we began by looking at the transition between feminist theory, Judith Butler's work, and the inception of Queer theory in the work of those like Adrienne Rich, Gayle Rubin, and Judith Halberstam

In this lecture, we will extend the work of these thinkers into the body of what is called "Queer Theory" – a set of theories that aims to systematise and explore the nature of social construction in the context of sex, gender, and sexuality.

QUEER: DEFINITIONS & THEORY



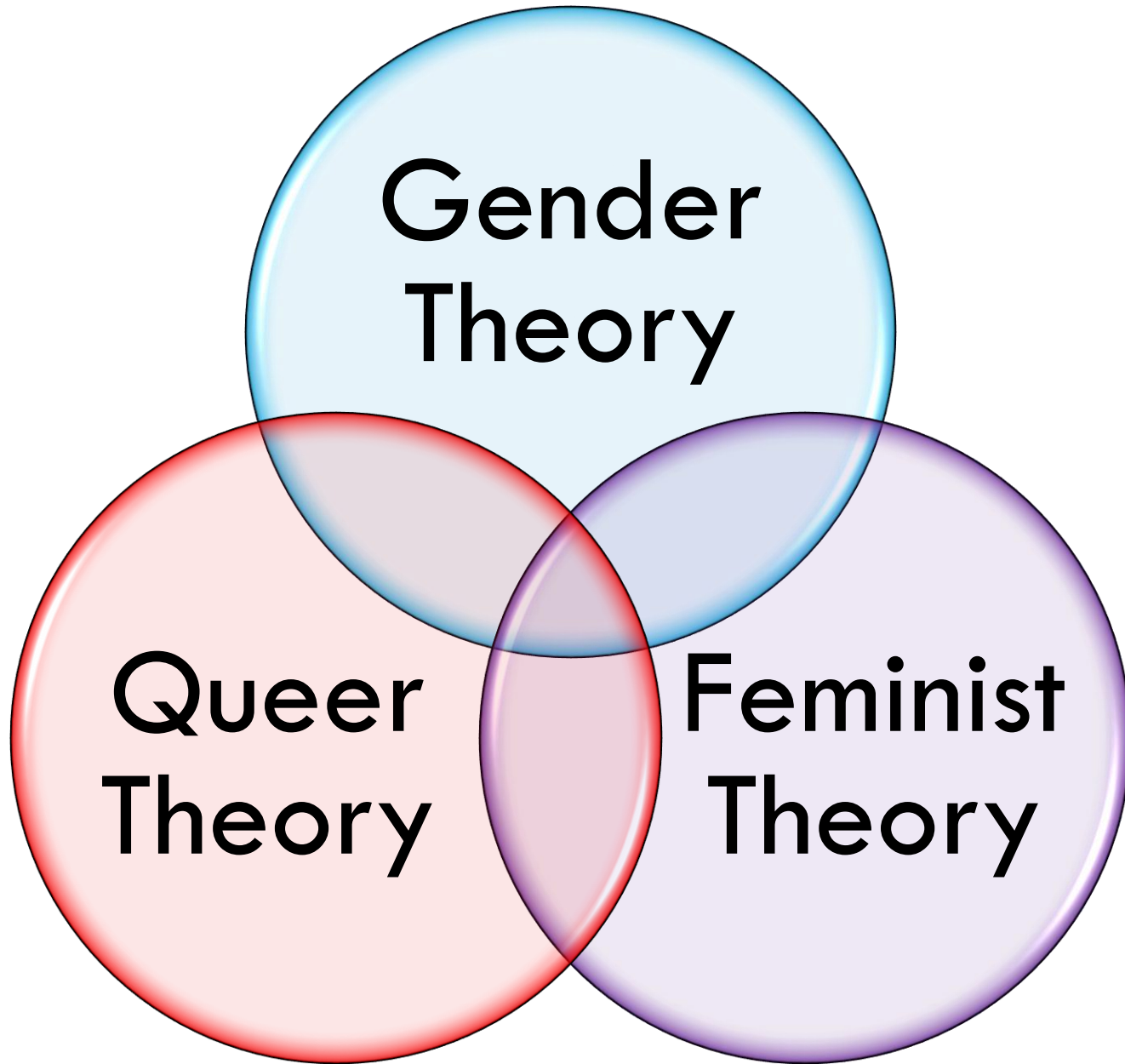
QUEER THEORY

Queer theory takes the insight of feminist scholarship on the nature of gender/sex, Foucault's work on power/knowledge, and Butler's work on binaries, and combines them into an overarching analytic and critical position.

As feminism highlighted the contrast between gender and sex – queer theory offers the view that all identities are social constructions (male/female, black/white, tall/short) and are forms of power dynamic.

In doing so, it draws together insights about the nature of power in society, its formation and maintenance of social hierarchies, and the moral and ethical assumptions that uphold it.





Focus: Power as a result of male domination

Focus: Power as a result of adhering to / rejecting gender roles

Focus: Power as a result of binaries, including but beyond, gender

QUEER THEORY

As the previous diagram sought to show, each of these three areas of work on sex, gender, and sexuality identify and seek to grapple with the social construction of society which arises from the location of power — whether this is located in sex, gender, or sexuality.

In doing so, these critiques are not to be seen as opposed to one another, or seeking to contradict each other — rather their foci are differently located and often operate in connected binary structures.



QUEER THEORY

“Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence.”

D Halperin, U. of Michigan

Identity is free-floating.

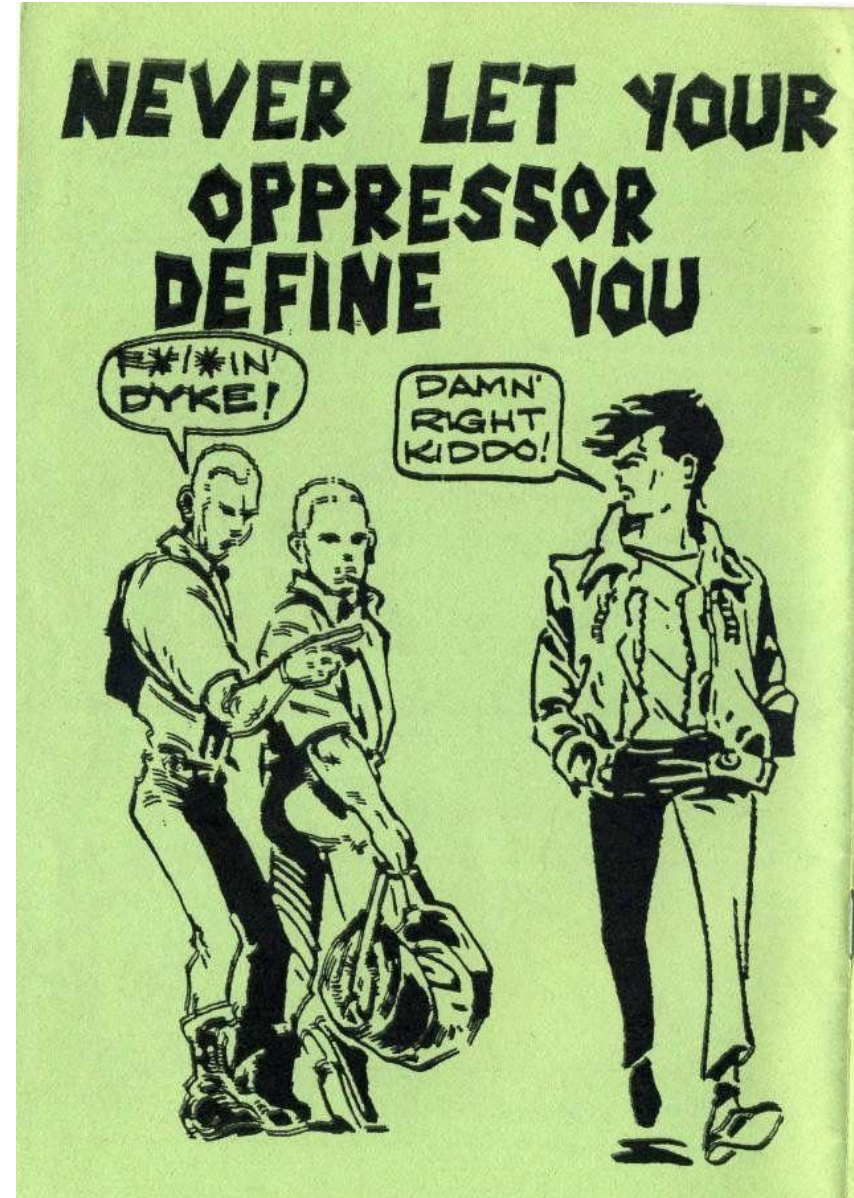
Identity is a performance and, thus, not the “essence” of oneself.

Queer Theory rejects sweeping assertions about groups of people, such as “All men think this way,” or “All women believe that”.

It challenges *all* notions of fixed identity, and thus seeks to destabilize binary oppositions such as male/female, gay/straight, husband/wife, etc.

QUEER THEORY

Isn't queer theory just about gays though?



QUEER THEORY

Queer theory emerges out of Gender Theory like Judith Butler, because of a concern for the heteronormative character of assuming a gender binary.

Lesbian and Gay scholars were uncomfortable with the idea that power was all about sex/gender and that sexuality or desire was ignored.

The experience of being outside the binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine, and heterosexuality made these issues very prominent for LGBT+ scholars



 **GOBLINKO**

QUEER THEORY

Isn't queer a
bad word?



B BEEMYN & M ELIASON (EDS) — *INTRODUCTION TO QUEER STUDIES*, P. 5

The process of ascribing new, positive meaning to the word “queer” though, has to be seen within the context of the ever-changing terminology that same-sex sexual communities use to describe themselves. In general terms, we have moved from the “homosexuals” of the first half of the twentieth century to a small number of “homophiles” in the 1950s: from “gay liberation” in the early seventies to the lesbian and gay movements of the mid-eighties and early nineties to contemporary lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender or “queer” activism. These changes reflect the dynamic nature of both sexuality and the political organizing that has developed around it.

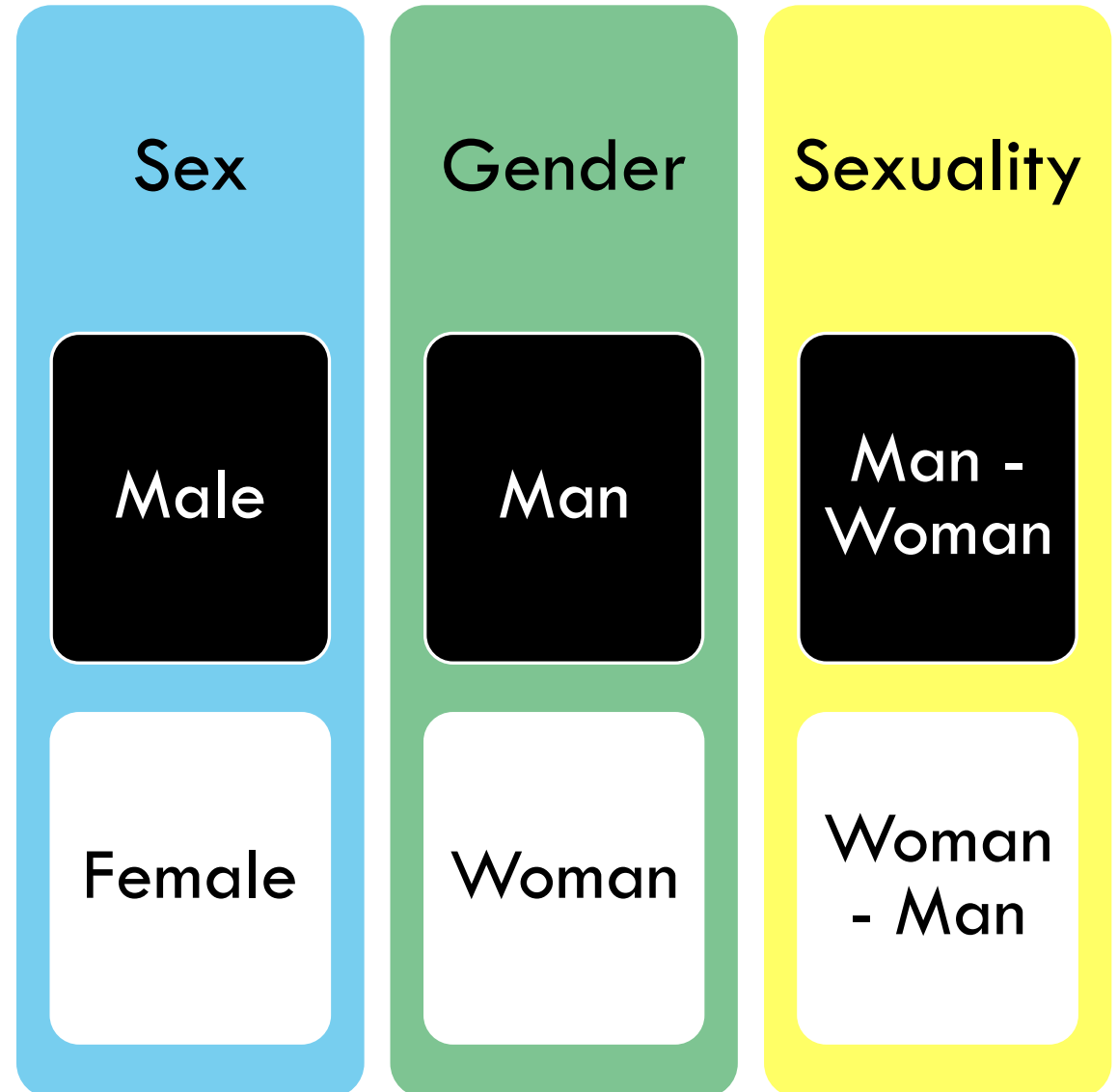
QUEER THEORY

Ok, so what does Queer theory do?

Fundamentally Queer Theory aims to do two things:

1) Challenge the normalisation of structured binaries between sex, gender, and sexuality, in order to build space for non-normative expressions

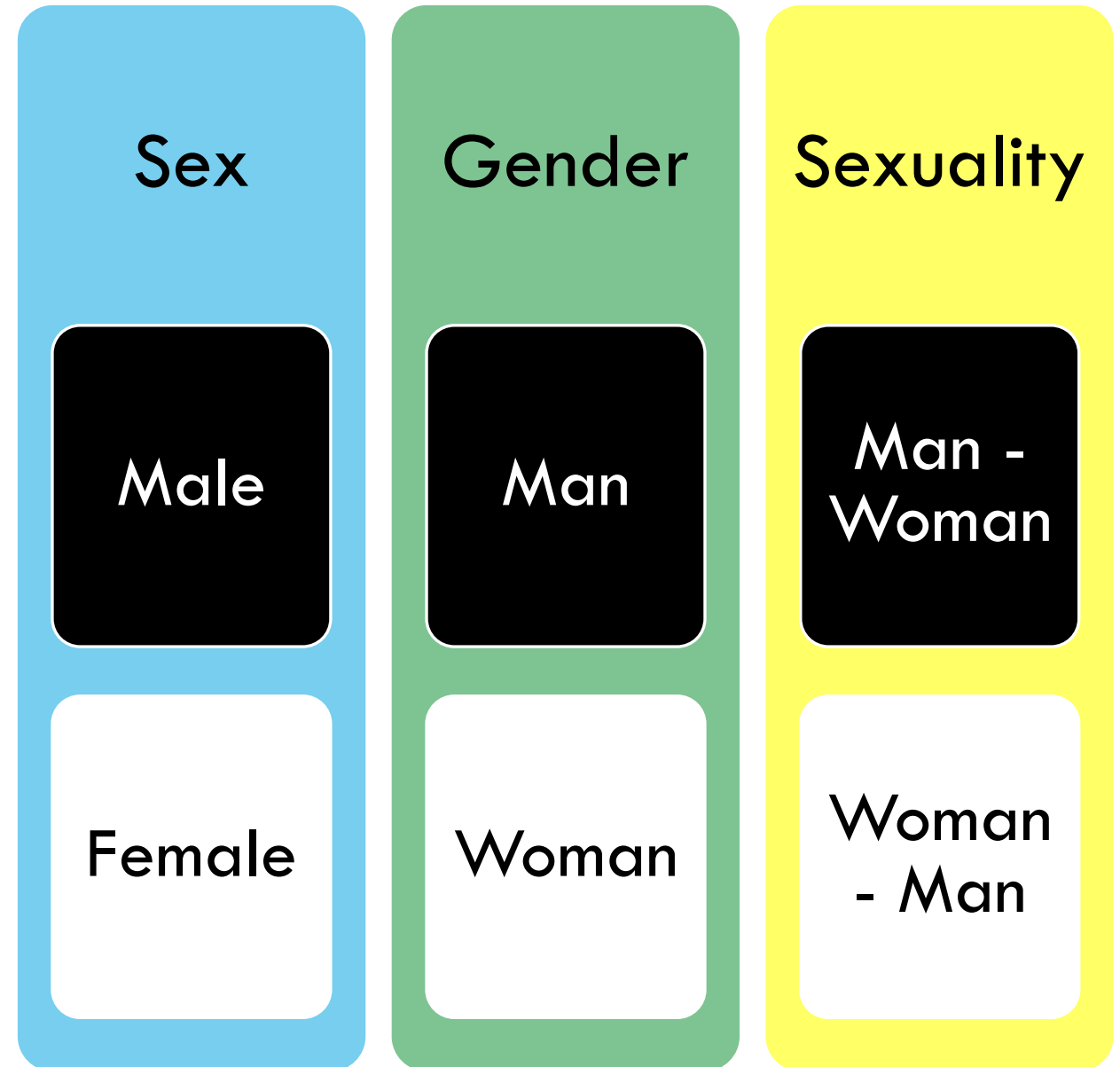
2) To go further and challenge all assumptions of innate, necessary, or natural qualities posited by those in power in society



QUEER THEORY

For queer theory, the connections posited *between* these binaries are just as important as those developed *within* them – there are social categorisations operating not just internally to the sex, gender, or sexuality binaries, but also operating externally, to connect the positions express within those binaries to positions on other binaries.

We can see this from work, such as Rubin's, where, for example, masculinity is associated with heterosexuality in a major way.



T LAURENTIS (1991) — *DIFFERENCES*

In a sense, the term Queer Theory was arrived at in the effort to avoid all of these fine distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any one of the given terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities but instead to both transgress and transcend them—or at the very least to problematize them.

A JAGOSE, *QUEER THEORY: AN INTRODUCTION*, P. 3

Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherences in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability—which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effects—queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire

R HENNESSY (1993) — QUEER THEORY, *SIGNS*, 18, P. 964

Queer theory calls into question obvious categories (man, woman, latina, Jew, butch, femme), oppositions (man vs. woman, heterosexual vs. homosexual), or equations (gender = sex) upon which conventional notions of sexuality and identity rely...

K RUBY (2000) — QUEER THEORY AND FEMINISM IN *WOMEN STUDIES*, 29, P. 197

Being queer is not a matter of being gay, then, but rather of being committed to challenging that which is perceived as normal. There is no fool-proof membership criteria for queerness other than the willingness to seek out sites of resistance to normalcy in any possible location.

QUEER THEORY

This location and definition makes queer theory's target quite easy to identify – it is the ideal of the 'normal' to which queer theorists take exception.

This means that while queer theory does emerge from a position of counter-cultural sexuality, it is not limited to only critiquing aspects of the presentation of normative sexuality – because, as we have seen, notions of 'normal' sexuality are deeply bound up not just with notions of sex and gender, but also notions of politics, economics, history, or religion etc.



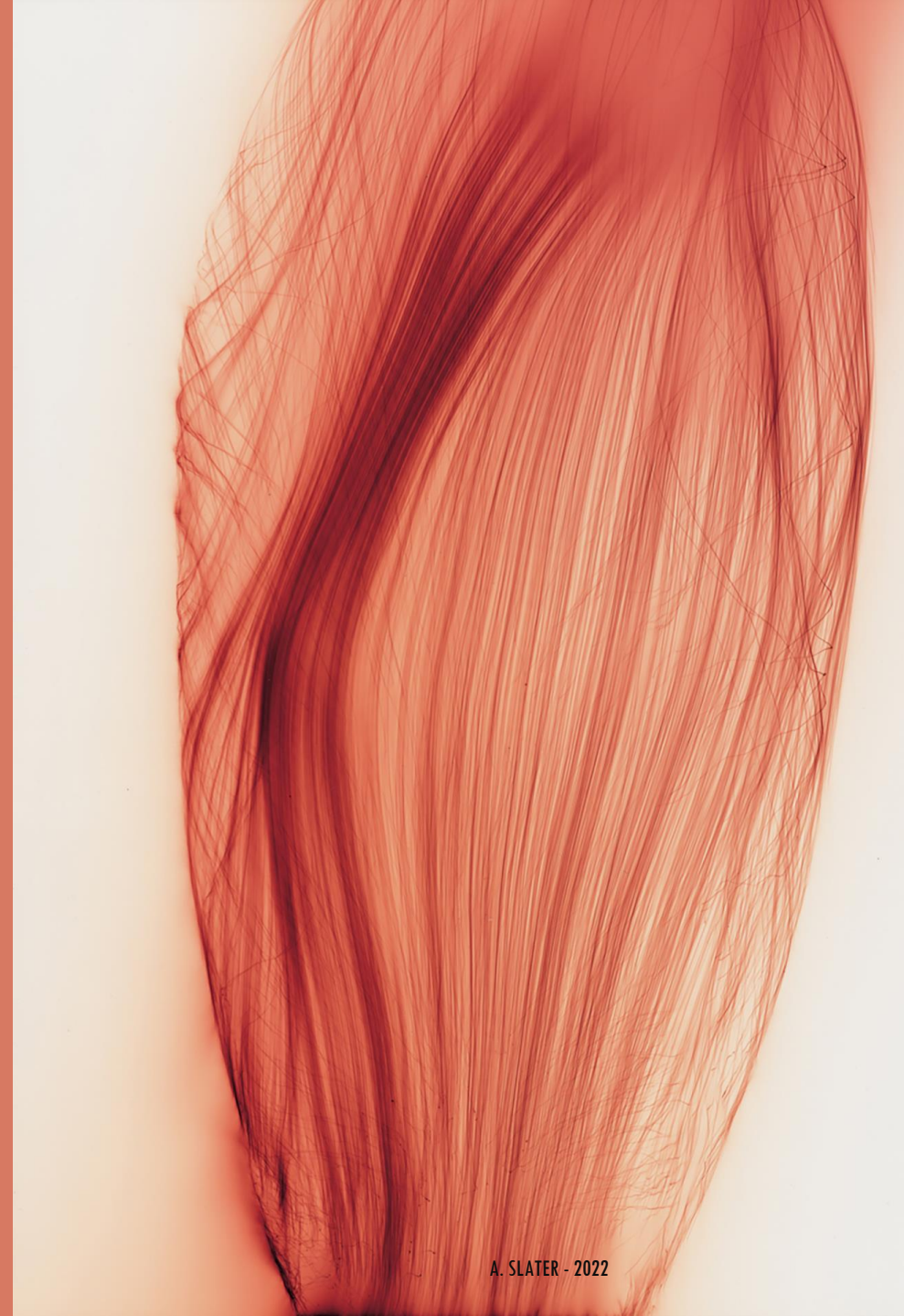
QUEER: PRACTICE & POLITICS



QUEER POLITICS

If queer theory seeks to challenge the basis of assumed “normality” within society over matters of sex, gender, and sexuality, then this is an innately political project.

Queer theory uses political protests and activism to highlight the way in which our assumptions of binaries do damage to people by marginalising them and to reject the notion of “respectability”



QUEER POLITICS

This has included fighting back against systems of physical power that oppress marginalised communities, like the police, but also against more diffuse expressions of power, like the assumption of heterosexuality.

This has lead queer politics to largely be focused on the idea of liberation, particularly liberation from sexual expectation, but also liberation from all forms of oppression

YOU ONLY
GAVE US RiGHTS
COS WE
GAVE YOU RiOTS



GENDER-FUCKING

One specific way in which queer identity is often performed is through the explicit rejection of gender expectations, in order to disrupt them, and highlight the unnaturalness of these expectations – remember Judith Butler’s notion of ‘genderfucking’?

While we may expect someone who we believe to be female to dress in a feminine way, there is no specific reason for this, no natural requirement, no necessity – and therefore we can undercut the association of naturalness through deliberate (non-) performance





GENDER-FUCKING

Gender-fucking is an example of the disruptive aim of queer politics, aiming to shock and provoke in order to cause a re-adjustment on the part of society towards more plural, diverse, understandings of things like gender / sex / sexuality.

Queer theory aims to challenge these unthinking assumptions that, while to the majority seem harmless, are deeply oppressive to those who cannot or will not conform.

DISCUSSION

- 1 – On the previous slide, the banner read “Queer Liberation not Rainbow Capitalism”. Why would Queer Theory likely take issue with forms of capitalism?
- 2 – Is this because of the nature of capitalism, its current social positioning, or both?
- 3 – What would be the dangers of a “rainbow” capitalism?
- 4 – What is at the core of difference between capitalist ideal forms and queer expressions of sexuality?



QUEER POLITICS

This commitment to challenging normative accounts of social behaviour (and even the notion of 'normal') on the part of queer theory also lead to two further commitments that are often seen to be highly political in nature – because they challenge established power dynamics that preserve aspect of social privilege within society.

The first of these is a commitment to the inclusion of those outside of the established sex and gender binaries, for example Trans-, Inter-, and non-Binary accounts of identity.

TRANS / INTER / NON-BINARY / AGENDER

Transgender and gender variant bodies challenge the very notion of stable, concrete identities and sexualities, by queering the association between biological sex and socially expressed gender.

This illustrates the problematic nature of assumed identities and binaries e.g:

Intersexuality transcends the binaries of male/female.

Bisexuals defy the categorization of the heterosexual/homosexual binary.

Transgender individuals challenge social accounts of gender.

TRANS / INTER / NON-BINARY / AGENDER

In adopting this position, queer theory does not seek to abolish identity categories that people use and feel comfortable with, but rather to free people from categories in which they may not feel comfortable – it is a polydoxical proliferation of identities, not a *tabula rasa* of dissonance.

Instead, Queer Theory argues for a denaturalization of established categories and the proliferation of sites for identification

In doing so, these categories become less oppressive for those who do not fit them, opening up space for individual expression and identity formation, while, perhaps, preserving them as loci for resistance and organisation.



DISCUSSION

- 1 – Is queer theory more or less positive about identity categories than Judith Butler?
- 2 – How does this formation of Queer Theory relate to things like intersectionality?
- 3 – What is important for Queer Theory about identities and our identification with them?
- 4 – What makes a category good for Queer Theory?

SEX-POSITIVITY

Given Queer Theory's focus on matters of sex, gender, and sexuality, it is no wonder that the role and purpose of sex has occupied a central location in Queer Theory.

Given the rejection of expectation, particularly that of heterosexuality, Queer Theory seeks to reimagine and live out sex without expectations of things like pro-creation, monogamy, and heterosexuality.

This mirrors and extends Rubin's work on the charmed circle of sexual practice into the arena of activism, deploying sex as a tool by which social construction can be challenged and de-normativised.

SEX-POSITIVITY

The account of sex within queer theory, as we have alluded to so far, is one that is opposed to any 'moral' programme that passes judgement on sexual behaviors or practices that take place between consenting individuals.

We can see this in operation in the support for non-normative sexual sub-cultures within queer theory, celebrating their escape from the confines of hetero-patriarchal codes of assumed morality.

We will come back to this when we examine some examples of hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine gender performance later in the module, such as drag culture, gay Leathermen, and butch-femme lesbian dynamics.



SEX-POSITIVITY

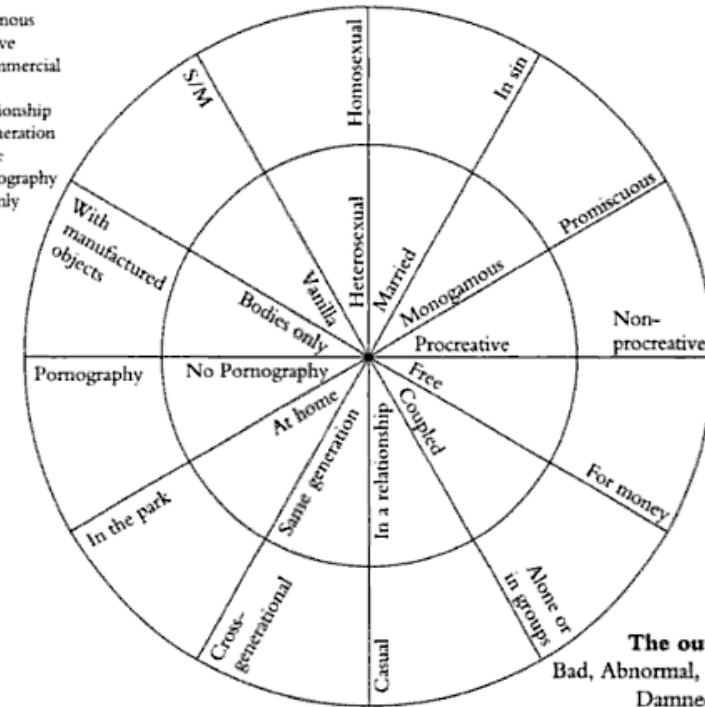
This account of sex, following from Rubin's exploration of what a de-centred form of sex would look like, foregrounds and prioritises sexual pleasure as the key factor by which 'good' and 'bad' sex can be judged —what makes one feel good is good, so long as it does not make someone else feel pain.

This deconstructs the binary given in Rubin of good/moral/healthy sex vs. bad / immoral/deviant sex – highlighting, in a politically powerful way, who gets to decide those distinctions and for what purpose

The charmed circle:

Good, Normal, Natural, Blessed Sexuality

Heterosexual
Married
Monogamous
Procreative
Non-commercial
In pairs
In a relationship
Same generation
In private
No pornography
Bodies only
Vanilla



The outer limits:

Bad, Abnormal, Unnatural, Damned Sexuality

Homosexual
Unmarried
Promiscuous
Non-procreative
Commercial
Alone or in groups
Casual
Cross-generational
In public
Pornography
With manufactured objects
Sadomasochistic

FIGURE 1. The sex hierarchy: the charmed circle vs. the outer limits

DISCUSSION

- 1 – Have a look at Rubin's charmed circle of sexuality again. How would this differ if it represented a queer theory approach to sexuality?
- 2 – Why is consensuality a critical aspect of queer theory's vision of 'good' sex?
- 3 – What is the connection between 'morally good' sex and 'actually good' sex in contemporary society and in queer theory's understanding?



READING

Today, we have moved further into the theoretical and practical terrain of Queer Theory, looking at its definition, purpose, and political methods for pushing for change.

As we have finished the current section of the module, there are no readings following this session. Use this additional time to either catch up on the reading of theory up until this point, or to prepare for your assessments.

