

# FEELING QUEER: IT'S NOT WHO YOU ARE, IT'S WHERE YOU'RE AT

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

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Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive— recurrent, eddying, *troublant*. The word "queer" itself means *across*— it comes from the Indo-European root *-twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*.<sup>1</sup>

At the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Annual General Meeting on 30 July 1994, the "decision to require applicants for membership (which means everyone who buys a party ticket) to declare their sexual identity"<sup>2</sup> was debated by members. It was argued that this position would send "a strong message that we affirm the lesbian and gay content of Mardi Gras".<sup>3</sup> On 12 November 1994, a public forum debated the issue further "when over 1000 gay men and lesbians call[ed] for straights to be banned from Mardi Gras parties".<sup>4</sup>

This debate foregrounds, with particular clarity, the problematic position of identity in contemporary gay and lesbian politics. Indeed, it is indicative of a more generalised sense of discomfort, uncertainty and complexity in relation to the political practices of identification and the intersubjective processes of identity formation. The suggestion of enforcing the disclosure of individual sexual identity as an entrance requirement to parties highlights not simply the politicisation of pleasure in a culture inflected in its entirety by homosexual/heterosexual definition. It serves, as well, as an empirical reminder of the centrality for Western thought of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has stunningly phrased an "epistemology of the closet".<sup>5</sup>

The injunction of identity disclosure for Mardi Gras parties, a performative act of producing subjects through naming, functions strategically as a metaphorical reiteration of the Gay Liberation 'coming out' story. For those supportive of such a measure, the compulsion to 'come out' serves more than one function. Important issues pertain to the control of homophobic violence, to the creation of gay/lesbian spaces in the incomprehensible totality of heterocentric cultural space, and to the ever-present threat of co-optation, appropriation and thus marginalisation, to name only a few. While these concerns are not to be underrated, the allegory of the closet serves another function: to

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reproduce homosexual identities amidst the threat of their obliteration. That is to say, an epistemology of the closet for many gay men and lesbians was the discursive means which provided them with visibility in the first place. To insist on its terms, therefore, is to guard against gay and lesbian erasure, to guard against the return of the repressed (or the return of the forces of repression) which is the closet itself.

Neither are fears of obsolescence or obliteration to be taken lightly. One needs only to be reminded of the recent psychiatric and psychoanalytic attempts at ridding societies of homosexuals through the 'tasteful' 'therapeutic cures' of aversion therapy and even lobotomy.<sup>6</sup> Not to mention the latest and sickening enthusiasm surrounding the absurd claims of Dean Hamer and his 'gay gene' fantasy.<sup>7</sup> Just days following the report of his 'research' in *The Age* was a story detailing the welcoming of the 'findings' by The Advisory Cabinet of the Chief Rabbi of Britain. Medical ethics adviser for the Rabbinical Cabinet, Dr Nisson Shulman, endorsed the outrageous statement by former Chief Rabbi, Lord Jakobovits, who said that:

If we could by some form of genetic engineering manage to eliminate these trends we should— so long as it is done for a therapeutic purpose.<sup>8</sup>

The important point here for antihomophobic activists and theorists is not so much one of misplaced fears of homosexual extinction, but of the dangers and implications that such erroneous logic may very well produce for bodies marked 'homosexual'. This is not to imply that 'coming out' no longer has a place in society. Insofar as Western modes of thought are framed through the operations of the homosexual/heterosexual binary it is often both a contextual necessity and a subjective inevitability. However, it is to suggest a necessary problematisation and critical interrogation of the political uses of identity categories and the processes of identification.

Affirming the lesbian and gay content of the Mardi Gras— the issue animating the Annual General Meeting— is an empowering move, but one which exacts a heavy theoretical and political price. It is made possible through a series of repressions and exclusions, stripping the 'gay' of Gay Liberation, of its earlier inclusive connotations and deconstructive potential. For what partakes of the *lesbian and gay content*? In other words, which contents figure within this new affirmation? Are bisexuals, heterosexualised post-operative transsexuals, faghags, straight-identified homosexually active men and women, or queer

straights, for instance, part of this *lesbian and gay content*? For this content is certainly no rigidly bounded and monolithic entity; but is rather, and in fact always has been, a fluid, intermingling and intersecting set of cultural forms, identities and practices, each caught in a matrix of mutually implicating and interacting terms. If sexual identification were to be the criterion for inclusion we would see a significant reduction of what has always been a part of this content and culture.

Fortunately, the motion to ban straights from the Mardi Gras parties was rejected, and with it, the reactive and stifling forces of rigid identitarian politics. One could perhaps put forward the tentative suggestion that "the moment of queer" has arrived in Australia.<sup>9</sup> This in no way signals the obsolescence of gay/lesbian identities, but reflects a growing sensitivity to the multiple relations of sameness and difference within and between identities. It underscores the need in specific contexts of suspending identity, of affirming, rather than denying or concealing, the contradictions and cross-identifications inherent to the fractured nature of all identities; and of formulating strategies more responsive to their political articulation. As a deontologising move, this kind of queer political sensibility has a wide ranging productive appeal. The deferral of identity is generative of inventive and resourceful forms of coalitionism where identities figure as effects of political practices and not their point of departure. This represents a tactical and self-reflexive use of identity motivated not by questions of:

'What does it *really* mean?' or 'Who owns it and are they good or bad?', but [by asking] 'What does it *do*?- what does it make happen?- what (in the ways that it is being or *could be* used) does it make easier or harder for people of various kinds to accomplish and think?'<sup>10</sup>

Queer, as we understand it, is offered neither as a substitute to gay and lesbian identity politics, nor as the addition of yet another unified identity to the pile of marginal categories. It is, as Sedgwick proposes, "antiseperatist as it is antiassimilationist. Keenly, it is relational, and strange".<sup>11</sup> Queer exists as much alongside gay and lesbian as it does inside and outside them both, simultaneously. Indeed, it cuts across, *transverts*, the axes of identification that inflect us all. The promise of much queer work, to quote Sedgwick again, is that it:

spins the term outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial and nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example.<sup>12</sup>

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Queer functions to enact the 'crisis of identity' which is identity itself. Not concerned with the *replacement* of Identity, queer is interested in its *displacement*. Eschewing a relationship of dependency to the closet (in contrast to gay/lesbian epistemologies which pivot on its oppositions),<sup>13</sup> queer works to rupture the very terms of the epistemology of the closet. The trope of marginality is discarded, grounded as it is, on relations of the closet; instead, queer is installed through a process of *disidentification*, inverting and appropriating the strategies of heteronormative identity formation, and thus effecting a reinscription through the figure of the centre. Queer *is...what it is not*.<sup>14</sup>

*Critical inQueeries* is the first academic journal of queer theory in Australia. Positioned within a field of ever-expanding interdisciplinarity, we intend to offer queer readings which explore the vicissitudes of identity and its effects within the shifting terrain of theoretico-political social and cultural practices. With this in mind, articles will address and complicate the interrelations and interdependencies between the analytic axes of class, race, gender, age, sexuality, nationality, and so on. The aim of the journal is to problematise static and pregiven identity concepts and axes of identification in order to incite border dialogues, to encourage boundary crossings, and to engage discussions of fluidity and interimplication in relation to identity categories.

We hope to promote the hybridisation and cross-fertilisation of theoretical frameworks and thereby strengthen the crucial project of interdisciplinarity by challenging rigid disciplinary paradigms, by offering insights into their points of critical convergence, and to examine the mutual implication of disciplinary approaches. Rather than a pluralistic focus on relations of *binarised difference* between identities and theoretical models, essays in *critical inQueeries* will investigate the inevitable relations of sameness within difference and difference within sameness. We hope to offer readers of this journal richly textured readings more attuned to the complicated relations between a broad range of cultural identities and perspectives.

With the ever-increasing tendency towards obsolescence in this period of post/modern hypercommodification and boundless consumerism, Sedgwick resists the notion that queer is the latest cultural fad by suggesting that "something about *queer* is indistinguishable".<sup>15</sup> The essays in this inaugural issue of *critical inQueeries* mark queer moments within a dis/continuum that is *queer*.

- <sup>1</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1993, p.xii.
- <sup>2</sup> *Outrage*, no.136, September 1994, p.5.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.5.
- <sup>4</sup> *Outrage*, no.140, January 1995, p.34.
- <sup>5</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1990.
- <sup>6</sup> In the 1970s Neil McConaghy was the Australian 'expert' in aversion therapy. The technique was thought to create "conditioned aversion" by either of two methods: 1) applying painful electric shocks after patients read aloud homoerotic scenarios, followed by a relief from the electric charges after reading heterosexual scenarios; or 2) through the injection of the nauseating drug amorphine whereby subjects in a nauseated state were shown pictures of males. See Neil McConaghy, "Penile Response Conditioning and its Relationship to Aversion Therapy in Homosexuals", *Behaviour Therapy* 1, 1970, pp.213–221. Despite his track record, McConaghy's current work on biological theories and 'sexual orientation' at the Prince of Wales Hospital is considered worthy in some circles. Recently he presented a paper at the Symposium on the "Biological Basis of Sexual Orientation and Sex-Typical Behaviour", Minot State University, Minot, North Dakota, May 25–27, 1995. As is apparent from the title of the conference, there are still many biologicistic theorists of sexuality oblivious or wilfully neglectful of any other work outside their own narrow biological arena. Such theorists, of course, cannot entertain the more complex debates that have been taking place predominantly within the humanities throughout the past 25 years. To do so would no doubt render their work obsolete.
- <sup>7</sup> Dean Hamer, et al, "A Linkage Between DNA Markers on the X Chromosome and Male Sexual Orientation", *Science*, Vol.261, 16 July, 1993. This article formed the basis for his recent book co-written with Peter Copeland, *The Science of Desire: The Search for the Gay Gene and the Biology of Behavior*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1994.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Age*, 27 July, 1993, p.8.
- <sup>9</sup> This is Sedgwick's phrase, *Tendencies*, p.xii.
- <sup>10</sup> Sedgwick, quoted from the Internet in Clare Hemmings, "From Lesbian Nation to Transgender Liberation: A Queer Project", *Journal of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identities*, August 1995.
- <sup>11</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, p.xii.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, pp.8–9.
- <sup>13</sup> See Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, "Introduction: Axiomatic", pp.1–63, esp.p.11, for a discussion of these oppositions in relation to the "epistemology of the closet".
- <sup>14</sup> For a discussion of queer identity-framing through the process of negation, see "Rethinking the Political" in this issue.
- <sup>15</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, p.xii.