Across the last two or three decades identity and desire have been ‘theorized’ relentlessly. Influences have been diverse: I remember especially the impact, for gay writing, of Barthes’ dream, or plea, in 1975, for a radical sexual diversity wherein there would no longer be homosexuality (singular) but *homosexualities*, a plural so radical it ‘will baffle any centred, constituted, discourse to the point where it seems … pointless to talk about it’.¹ And Derrida’s even earlier call for that Nietzschean philosophical affirmation which ‘determines the noncentre otherwise than as a loss of the centre’. That was thirty years ago plus 1966.²

But whatever the influences, we converged on this one conviction: desire and identity are not – must not be, can never be – fixed or essentialized. Identity is contingent and mobile, desire is fluid and even more mobile. To try to fix or naturalize things like femininity, masculinity or heterosexuality – to see them as stable, natural categories – was reactionary crap, at best the last throes of an obsolete humanism. For those of us thinking lesbian and gay theory, ‘nature’ and ‘essence’ were the metaphysics of the heteronormative.

Was ‘homosexual’ equally ‘non-natural’? There we were less sure. On the one hand, we quite liked the idea of being non-natural, even unnatural, but only on our own terms – which meant under strictly theorized limits – and if anyone else found us unnatural, well, that was rampant homophobia.

During all this, and somewhat unexpectedly, I found myself in a relationship with a woman. Experientially this was exhilarating, if somewhat bewildering, but I took consolation from the fact that I was at least on theoretically safe ground – after all, hadn’t we just proved beyond doubt the radical mobility of desire/identity, and wasn’t this being-surprised-by-desire exactly what the theory predicted? Actually I really should have asked for theoretical clarification before embarking on this relationship, because it quickly became clear that for some sexual politicians it marked me out as a traitor: one lesbian was heard to snarl that I’d gone straight, gone ‘nuclear’, and, worst of all, become a ‘breeder’. But the charge that *most* intrigued me was the one which said that I’d only ever been gay for my career. Initially I was tempted to say ‘well, you should have been at Sussex when Alan Sinfield and I launched that first gay MA programme, meeting with hostility not just from politicians and the press, but the powerful at the centre of our own University.’ But then I thought, hang on: any guy who could spend his life being fucked from pillow to bedpost by other guys, presumably faking perfect orgasms on the way, qualifies for a fabulous career. I for one can’t think of anyone more employable.

Anyway, I decided to lay low for a while. In truth it was something of a relief: now that I no longer needed to be a good gay object I found myself writing and exploring ideas which had hitherto been off limits. But eventually the phone started to ring again and I was asked if I’d write or speak on the subject of bisexuality. But, I said, hadn’t we already theoretically wrapped up the bisexual as the biggest hypocrite of all in the sex arena, a bullshitter, a hedge-sitter, someone who wanted the best of all worlds without committing to any? Yes, yes, came the impatient reply, but that was before. Before what? Before bisexuality was retheorized by queer theory. And, you know, he was right – books on the subject were appearing from Routledge, and the culture journalists were chattering it up.

What little credibility I managed to regain is owed entirely to the way queer theory sidelined some of the moralists in sexual politics, celebrating an erotic life somewhat closer to the theory. It recognized – or rediscovered – the complexity and diversity of human erotic life, the mobility of human desire, the unpredictability of human fantasy and, above all, our capacity to

**Wishful theory and sexual politics**

Jonathan Dollimore
make profoundly perverse identifications in the sexual imaginary. None of this was new, but it was useful to have it resaid and to see the judgemental sexual politicians either silenced or having to retool. That’s an unfortunate metaphor but one which, on reflection, I think I’ll keep.

But lesbians and gays of all descriptions were also being told by the new queer theorists that they had to retool. In 1996 Mark Simpson edited a collection of essays called *Anti-Gay*. Unashamedly controversial, it argued among other things that gay culture is bor-ingly mediocre, intolerant of criticism and bigoted when it comes to the sexuality of people who do not define themselves as gay. Predictably, it generated debate. A couple of years later Simpson was even more angry with ‘gay’. In a review in the *Independent on Sunday* (25 January, 1998) he lambasted the contributors to *Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Critical Introduction* as (again among other things) boring, irrelevant, middle aged, bitter, suffering from intellectual incontinence, and hilariously paranoid. I found this a hugely amusing review until I remembered that I was one of the contributors to the book in question. Simpson’s review was so OTT I simply failed to recognize the book he was reviewing was one I knew. It would be easy to take one side or the other in this debate, and send even more bitchy rhetoric up to the fan. The fact is that the contributors to *Anti-Gay*, some of whom were apparently unreconstructed lesbians and gays, had some very pertinent things to say, but Simpson’s framing broadside failed to make a hundred or more crucial distinctions on recent and past lesbian, gay and queer history. Related to this, the more fashionable Queer became, the more it was appropriated by those who wanted to be fashionable and the more inclusive and meaningless the term became. As I write, an anthology of literary theory arrives on my desk which reprints work of mine as representative of queer theory even though that work was written before queer was a glisten in anyone’s eye. A few days before that another book arrived, an introduction to the work of E.M. Forster, in which the author, Nick Royle, boldly explores the idea that Forster wrote not one queer novel but six. Somehow Nick, I don’t think so. But then, when the deco boys start to out-queer queer, maybe it’s time to move on.

**Out-queering**

Except that out-queering was always as aspect of queer, especially in relation to perversion. If a lesbian or gay man is foolish enough to be overheard saying some-thing incredibly old-fashioned like ‘I am attracted by the real person rather than their superficial attributes’ they are likely to be met with howls of derision by queer theorists. For them, such humanist, essentialist sentimentality is a huge sexual turn-off. They have great sympathy with the size queen who famously declared that he was in love with the cock but had to settle for the whole person. This is of course a quintessentially postmodern anecdote because, depending on who you tell it to, you can substitute bits of anatomy as you wish. Erring here on the side of caution, I settle for the penis.

And let’s face it, there’s an important sense in which queers were right about a certain kind of gay/lesbian activist of the 1980s whose radicalism was steeped in petty-bourgeois anxieties; for all the apparent radicalism, at heart he or she could only accept their own sexuality, and certainly other people’s, if it was respectable and self-policing, and represented to all in positive images. Their indignation at homophobia was genuine and justified, but was also intensified by, and helped to conceal, anxieties about aspects of homosexual behaviour – including maybe their own – by which they felt threatened or disgusted. Their counterparts today are those gays who want to square the circle with a homosexuality which is hugely subversive but at the same time politically correct.

Something comparable to the queer challenge to gay happened inside feminism some time ago. Some feminists imagined a unified movement around the so-called homosexual continuum – roughly, the idea of being women-identified without the lesbian sex. This was rather wickedly caricatured by the lesbian activist Pat Califia:

> After the wimmin’s revolution, sex will consist of wimmin holding hands, taking their shirts off and dancing in a circle. Then we will all fall asleep at exactly the same moment. If we didn’t all fall asleep something else might happen – something male-identified, objectifying, pornographic, noisy, undignified. Something like an orgasm.

More recently Julie Burchill, in her *Absolute Filth: An A to Z of Sex* tells us that orgasm is ‘The point, the whole point and nothing but the point of having sex in the first place. If what you want is cuddling, buy a puppy.’ Califia led a campaign to put sex back into lesbianism, whereas Burchill is here apparently speaking for everyone.

So the challenge of queer theory, rather like this earlier challenge, was something of an internal, family affair – queers arguing with gays rather than with the world at large. Upsetting the prescriptive agenda of one’s own radical (or not so radical) movements by...
promoting the sexual practices it ignored or excluded. And in the name of sexual libertarianism this strategy of upsetting the new normative agendas seems to be not only pleasurable but productive. I owe a debt of gratitude to it. But as the grounds for claiming a radical new theory of desire, or of the place of desire in politics? I think not. Sometimes I see little more than a libertarian politics which dovetails fairly conveniently with a lifestyle politics of the well-heeled and well-insulated metropolitan.

On a more philosophical level, Queer rehearses a familiar move whereby there is a rejection not just of the old religious idea of the soul (barely remembered anyway), but also the modernist secular soul-substitutes. So, for instance, even the idea of having a comparatively fixed sexual identity is rejected as too soul-like. Some queer writers will insist it is a form of self-oppression for gay people to claim or assume such an identity. This is of course exasperating for those who came to gay consciousness believing it was a form of self-oppression not to make such a claim. But times change, and today the radical agenda is less a question of what one is, more of what one does. As an early queer manifesto urged,

Queers, start speaking for yourself! … Call yourself what you want. Reject all labels. Be all labels. Liberate yourself from the lie that we’re all lesbians and gay men…. Queer is not about gay or lesbian – it’s about sex!

The following anecdote, apocryphal or not, wonderfully queers the relation between sexual identity and sexual behaviour. An American student eventually gets to meet a cult writer in the US lesbian S/M scene whom she admires greatly. The writer asks the student what kind of person she sleeps with. The student, grateful of the opportunity to do so, eagerly announces that she too is lesbian.

Writer, surprised: ‘Are you telling me that you never fuck men?’
Student: ‘Definitely not. Like I said, I’m lesbian. Like you.’
Writer (after reflective pause): ‘You mean you don’t even fuck gay men?’
Student: ‘Well no – I mean they’re still men, aren’t they? And anyway gay men don’t sleep with women.’
Writer (after further pause): ‘Well, you sound like a pretty straight dyke to me.’

The beauty of insisting on sexual practices rather than identity is that anyone can now be queer. It’s a very democratic form of radicalism. Now famously, Carol Queen once wrote:

Heterosexual behaviour does not always equal straight. When I strap on a dildo and fuck my male partner, we are engaging in ‘heterosexual’ behaviour but I can tell you it feels altogether queer, and I’m sure my grandmother and Jesse Helms would say the same.

Actually I doubt if ‘queer’ would be the first word which sprang to the lips of Granny and Jesse, and certainly not ‘queer’ as it has been refashioned by postmodernism. But you never know, and I certainly don’t want to be patronizing, at least not to Granny. But the real issue here is whether such sexual practices are in any sense politically radical. To imagine they are is to be closer in thought to Granny and Jessie than Queen realizes: after all, to regard a sexual practice as inherently radical is really just the obverse of regarding it as inherently evil or, indeed, as inherently normal.

One thing we learn from the history of dissidence is that the subversiveness of a dissident culture derives in part from the force which resists it. This has been a focus of my own thinking about this history – the violent dialectic between dissidence and domination as is exemplified in sexual deviance but also far beyond it. In a rather trivial sense this is apparent from Queen’s
If they are the victim of anything it is social discrimi-

But as we talk up our transgressions, let’s never forget

Hence that violent dialectic and all the broken people

But maybe I’m becoming too serious and missing

The transgression has to be regarded, discussed, known

Queer radicals, far from liberating the full potential

One of which is especially relevant here: they tend

In other words, sexual radicals are the agents of the

Queer radicals, far from liberating the full potential

Queer radicals, far from liberating the full potential

claim: somehow the ‘queering’ of that particular sexual

The transgression has to be regarded, discussed, known

about in order to be transgressive. Which is one reason

But as we talk up our transgressions, let’s never forget

that historically the working out of this dialectic has

involved the murder, mutilation and incarceration of

sexual dissidents. To repeat: the subversiveness of a

dissident culture derives in part from the force which

resists it, a force which is usually the stronger by far.

Hence that violent dialectic and all the broken people

left in its wake.

But maybe I’m becoming too serious and missing

the new queer insistence on the importance of pleasure

for the dissident agenda. I would indeed hate to be

associated with the puritanical attitude which used to

say that nothing pleasurable could be radical, and that

politically effective action had to painful. If it wasn’t

hurting either the activists or those they were trying

to change, it wasn’t working. Depending on its size,

maybe that couple with their dildo were upholding the

puritan political tradition after all. Of course there’s

nothing wrong in principle with the new insistence on

mixing politics and pleasure. The error is to pretend

that because it’s pleasurable, sexy and shocking, it’s

subverting patriarchy, heterosexuality, masculinity and

whatever else we don’t like – and of course it only

ever does subvert what we don’t like. It’s an obvious

point, but it seemingly needs saying: pleasure, sex and

shock are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions

for radical political effect. To want them to be so

corresponds to a more general move today whereby

the undoubted truth that sexuality is political through

and through has allowed many to delude themselves

into believing that sexuality is the only political focus

worthy of attention. This is a development which

goes hand in hand with an increasingly naive notion

of the political, and very probably an abdication of

the political.

Queer radicals, far from liberating the full potential

of homosexuality, tame and rework it in various ways,

one of which is especially relevant here: they tend

to represent themselves as personally immune to the

subversiveness of desire. It’s an immunity which comes

with being radical, since to be radical is to be liberated

(not repressed) and, via a simplification of Freud, it

is only the repressed who can be wrecked by desire.

In other words, sexual radicals are the agents of the

disruptiveness of desire but rarely, if ever, its victims.

If they are the victim of anything it is social discrimi-
nation against their desire – embodied in Jessie and

Granny – rather than the desire itself.

But perhaps the biggest problem with queer theory

is that it’s a version of wishful theory. Wishful as

in wishful thinking. It is a pseudo-radical, pseudo-

philosophical, redescriptions of the world according

to an a priori agenda. One in which the observation

that ‘we need to retheorize the problem of x or y’ too

often means ‘let’s use theory to redescribe, analyse

and describe the problem so that it goes away (for

us), or at least makes us feel better’. So, for example,

some have theorized male heterosexuality – it’s rarely

female heterosexuality – as so insecure as to be always

about to self-destruct under the pressure of the homo-

sexuality it is repressing. I say, dream on.

In wishful theory a preconceived narrative of the

world is elaborated by mixing and matching bits and

pieces of diverse theories until the wished-for result

is achieved. If anything in ‘reality’ offers resistance,

all you need to do is to splice in, or jump-cut to,

another theory better suited to erasing the difficulty.

Finally, the contrived narratives of wishful theory

insulate their adherents from social reality by screen-

ing it through high theory, and this in the very act

of fantasizing its subversion or at least its inherent

instability.

As an instance of what I mean I choose not an easy

target, of which they are many, but the work of Judith

Butler, a brilliant and justifiably respected cultural

theorist. Her now famous account of heterosexuality

seems to me a version of wishful theory. She argues

that heterosexuality is an impossible and panicked

imitation of itself, one which is always failing, and

exposed as such by homosexuality. I’ve elsewhere

given this theory the fuller description it deserves

and criticized it on several grounds, not the least of

which is the way it puts homosexual desire in such an

intense relationship with heterosexuality that it seem-

ingly has an antagonistic desire for it. Indeed, reading

Butler one occasionally gets the impression that homo-

sexual desire only realizes itself as the subversion of

heterosexuality.11 The additional point I want to make

here – one especially appropriate to the philosophical

context – is the bizarre, wishful logic of the argument.

For Butler, heterosexuality survives only because it is

endlessly panicked into trying to overcome its own

fundamental instabilities, its intrinsic sense of its own

tenuousness; trying to disavow or foreclose on the fact

that it always knows or feels itself to be on the verge

of being ‘undone’ by the homosexuality it excludes,

and so on. In short, ‘precisely because it is bound

to fail, and yet endeavors to succeed, the project of

11
heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repet-
tition of itself’.12
The evidence for Butler’s diagnosis of the per-
manent instability, panic and crisis of heterosexuality
is the very fact of its survival and persistence. But
when demonstrable historical ‘success’ becomes the
main evidence of radical theoretical failure, and
actual real-world perpetuation the theoretical sign
of an innate impossibility, things are getting wishful
in the extreme.

Perversion and the daemonic
Let’s recall what perversion is. Most significantly, it
works internally to the normality it threatens; some-
thing is perverted from the inside not the outside.
Because and not in spite of this, the normal may
demonize the perverse, trying to refigure it as utterly
alien. But the same original intimacy may enable the
perverse to subvert the normal; the perverse tracks
back to it, and does so along the same demonizing
trajectory whereby it was disavowed or ejected. I’ve
called this process the perverse dynamic.13 Further,
perversion can be a form of resistance which works
in terms of desire and knowledge. The pervert desires
deviation in a way inseparable from knowing what
s/he should not know.

This means that it is not enough for modern per-
verts to trace their history to – and repudiate – the
abject identities created within sexology and (some)
psychoanalysis. They must go back in time, ultimately
right back, to embrace – not repudiate – the archetypal
perverts, the heretic and the wayward woman, Satan
and Eve, whose crimes were, among other things,
crimes of desire and of knowing. In addition to these
perverts’ vicious, unregenerate desire, there was this
question of their knowing too much, or being infected
with heresy. That’s why, theologically, perversion is the
opposite of conversion. The pervert precisely defects/
deviates/errs. Thus Satan, and Eve too, who after all
desires the apple not from any old tree, but rather the
tree of knowledge, which is of course the one forbidden
her. Mythologically, that desire, death and knowledge
were all born in the first transgression. In the creation
of the modern pervert this connection of perversion with
dissident knowledge was largely but not entirely
eradicated. It is recoverable in the paradox that desire,
and perverse desire most acutely, is at once an effect
of history, and a refusal of history. Recall Kenneth
Burke’s dramatization of the perverse dynamic, circa
the eve of creation. God and Satan are discussing the
pros and cons of creation. Satan asks God if the earth
creatures will possess ‘a deviant kind of “freedom”’:14

The Lord: You would ask that, my lad! I see why I
love you so greatly. If my negative ever broke loose
from me, I’d know where to look for it.
Satan: Milord, I blush!
(pause.)

Never was a pause more pregnant with desire and
knowing; indeed, one might say of perverse desire that
it was born in that pause, on the Eve of Creation, when
Satan, because he already knew more than he should,
wanted to fuck with God. Here we see well enough
what it is that Satan as pervert knows: among other
things, that the other is always somehow within the
same; that what a culture designates as alien is never
actually so, never entirely other; that in a paradoxical
and complex way the other is integral to the self-same.
There’s more to learn about what it is to be a pervert
from the mythological history of Satan and Eve than
anything in queer theory.

Perverse desire lives across a separation of same
and other which is also a proximity, and knows that
it does. The history of homosexuality is, in some
respects, the history of this desire, and of this divide
which is also a proximity. Homosexuality is imagined,
positioned or represented as simultaneously utterly
alien and mysteriously inherent within. But remember:
we are talking here of a process at once psychic and
social, brutally material in its effects, mercurial and
contradictory in its representations. And the proximity
is the means of a fierce dialectic between displacement
and subversion.

In this longer and violent history of the perverse
we find the daemonic in desire. Just when you thought
you’d worked out a sexual identity, and built a lifestyle
around it, your desire disrupts both the identity and the
lifestyle. Magnified and intensified this is, of course,
a familiar theme in literature: human desire won’t be
contained by safe and reassuring cultural narratives
or the institutions they sustain. In literature desire is
dangerous, perverse, disruptive and destructive and
often the more seductive for being so.

To think of desire as daemonic is to think of it
as being to some defining extent not just incapable
of socialization, but deeply antagonistic to the social –
perhaps even to civilization. The daemonic in this
sense is powerfully expressed in some of the great
mythic oppositions of Western culture: the Greek one
between Apollo and Dionysus; the Renaissance ones
between Reason and Passion, Culture and Nature; and
most recently, Freud’s account of human history
as the unending antagonism between civilization and
instinct. Each of these far-reaching mythic opposi-
tions embraces a double, conflictual truth which is at
once social, political and psychological. On the one hand, civilization requires the education, control and suppression of certain desires, especially sexual ones. On the other, the more we try to contain and control sexuality the more likely it is that some part of it will escape or resist control, and probably return in some direct or distorted form to disrupt, and maybe even subvert, whatever or whoever is trying to control it.

In each case, too, the desire in question is obviously a life-force. It is, for instance, the Dionysiac, Passion, Nature, instinct, or drive. But this life-force is untamed, unsocialized and at heart non-human. Its amoral core becomes the more potentially destructive of the human as a result of human attempts to tame it. The romantic take on this is voiced by Georges Bataille: ‘eroticism is an insane world whose depths, far beyond its ethereal forms, are infernal’. More fundamentally still, this is a life-force indifferent to life itself. What this means, as Bataille realized, is that the life-force is also a force of death, dissolution and destruction. Eros and Thanatos are not enemies like God and Satan; they cohere together, but it is an embrace in which each is indifferent to the other. This is the heart of the pre- or non-Christian idea of the daemonic.

The daemonic is being hesitantly revived by some queer theorists, most of whom are vague about its history. One queer slogan a couple of years back was ‘put the homo back into homicide’. But its most controversial recent intellectual advocate has to be Camille Paglia, and she is very aware of its cultural history. I’m referring mainly to her influential book Sexual Personae, first published in 1990. Paglia resurrects the idea of human history as a struggle between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. For her the truth of civilization but its inversion. This is not unfettered desire potentially has a virulence which is not the opposite of civilization but its inversion. This is not unfettered desire which artists have explored (Thomas Mann in Death in Venice and Joseph Conrad in Heart of Darkness, for example): only the highly civilized can become truly daemonic. Freud remarked that the superego could be as cruel as the id. Renaissance and Enlightenment sceptics observed that corrupted reason was capable of an evil unknown to the non-rational or the irrational. Likewise desublimated desire mystifies remain intractable. I believe, against Paglia, that the daemonic is not pure nature returning to blast culture apart, but the return of a repressed desire so inextricably bound up with history it is impossible to distinguish between the two. And even if it were possible to tell them apart, I suspect the most recalcitrant kind of desire might be more socialized than ‘natural’. I could put this differently, in the form of a familiar paradox which artists have explored (Thomas Mann in Death in Venice and Joseph Conrad in Heart of Darkness, for example): only the highly civilized can become truly daemonic. Freud remarked that the superego could be as cruel as the id. Renaissance and Enlightenment sceptics observed that corrupted reason was capable of an evil unknown to the non-rational or the irrational. Likewise desublimated desire has a virulence which is not the opposite of civilization but its inversion. This is not unfettered pre-social libido indifferent to the civilizing restraint it has escaped. On the contrary, this is desire returning via the ‘civilizing’ mechanisms of its repression and violating them along the way. Because desublimated desire is violating the civilization which has made it what it is, and cannot at some irreducible level cease to be, it is therefore also violating itself.

Notes
not only as queer … but also … queerer than queer.’

5. Although, significantly, it has a precedent in Freud when he speaks of the women whose infantile wish for a penis changes in later life into ‘the wish for a man, and thus puts up with the man as an appendage to the penis’. ‘On Transformations of Instinct as Exemplified in Anal Eroticism’, in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Hogarth, London, 1955, vol. XVII, p. 129, his emphasis. I am grateful to Rachel Bowlby for this reference.


7. Julic Burchill, Absolute Filth: An A to Z of Sex, no place of publication, publisher or date given. Entry for Orgasm.


17. Ibid., pp. 4–5. Male sexuality is especially insecure, always haunted by the prospect of failure and humiliation (‘a flop is a flop’), and even when successful is inherently mutable, going from erection through orgasm to detumescence: ‘Men enter in triumph but withdraw in decrepitude. The sex act cruelly mimics history’s decline and fall.’ Which also means that male sexuality is inherently manic-depressive (p. 20).

theory and politics, to ask what kinds of theory and praxis we need to liberate individuals from institutional constraints, work settings and organizational processes. Some, but far from all, of these movements and transformations are taking place within queer theory itself, as queer scholars are increasingly directing their attention beyond discursive constructions of sexuality and gender towards multiple materialities and lived. And politics in order to interrogate how gender and sexual politics is played out through organizational practices. More specifically, we aimed to create a politically transgressive space, for challenging heteronormative forms of thinking, working and organizing in our scholarly field as well as in everyday work organizations. We encouraged contributions that. Thus, theorists utilizing queer theory strive to question the ways society perceives and experiences sex, gender, and sexuality, opening the door to new scholarly understanding. Throughout this chapter we have examined the complexities of gender, sex, and sexuality. Differentiating between sex, gender, and sexual orientation is an important first step to a deeper understanding and critical analysis of these issues. Understanding the sociology of sex, gender, and sexuality will help to build awareness of the inequalities experienced by subordinate categories such as women, homosexuals, and transsexuals. Sexual Politics is a 1970 book by Kate Millett, based on her PhD dissertation. It is regarded as a classic of feminism and one of radical feminism's key texts. Millett argues that "sex has a frequently neglected political aspect" and goes on to discuss the role that patriarchy plays in sexual relations, looking especially at the works of D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer. Millett argues that these authors view and discuss sex in a patriarchal and sexist way. In contrast, she applauds the