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Queer as a Political Concept

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Academic Thesis

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Abstract

The subject of this study is the term: “queer” which I analyse as a political concept. In many English-speaking countries “queer” has been a common abusive term for homosexuals and other sexually non-normative individuals. From around the end of the 1980s the term was picked up by many activists and academics as a tool for political engagement. Initially “queer” was politicized in the context of the AIDS crisis but soon afterwards, the term was used to address political, social and cultural marginalization of sexual minorities. “Queer” has ever since remained one of the most significant concepts in contemporary sexual minority politics.

I examine how “queer” became a powerful political signifier and I study political messages that the term carried. My study focuses on multiple uses of “queer”, rising from various forms of direct political activism to numerous academic publications. I argue that the term often functioned as a type of alternative identity, a basis of community, an incitement for political action and even a philosophical category. Rather than trying to establish common elements between the uses of “queer”, I present the multiplicity of routes by which “queer” was mobilized politically.

The research here described investigates an underexplored topic in the academic literature, as most publications to this day offer analyses of queer theories or activism, while the very concept “queer” has often been overlooked. By discussing the political uses of the term, my study therefore goes beyond the scope of so-called queer theory. Instead, I analyse these theories from a novel standpoint, reflecting on the conceptual politics that “queer” performs in various texts.

This thesis traces the conceptual change that “queer” underwent to become an umbrella term for various political claims. At the end of the 1980s, “queer” was used by ACT UP activists and, subsequently, by other groups and individuals to express disagreement with mainstream U.S. sexual politics. From about 1991 “queer” enters academia. I study texts by Teresa de Lauretis, Michael Warner, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lee Edelman and several others. I offer conceptual analyses of their use of “queer” as a political concept. I also engage in discussion about the consequences of certain political claims for sexual minorities.

My findings indicate that “queer” was one of the central concepts used in academic debates concerning sexual minorities in the 1990s. For instance, Teresa de Lauretis used the term to criticize the previous lesbian and gay discourse and to incite development of a new language that would accommodate the multiplicity of experiences of lesbian and gay people. Judith Butler used the term to address intersections of sex, class and race. For Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick “queer” is a specific deconstructive term, whereas for Jack (Judith) Halberstam it is an anarchic term that opens a horizon of an alternative politics.

Over the past recent decades there have been countless uses of “queer” as a political concept. My thesis analyses the most influential ones. I present a variety of political purposes the concept serves and point out the importance of this concept within contemporary sexual minority movement and thought.

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Introduction

I present here a study of one term “queer”. I analyse how this term became political and how it functioned as a political concept within the context of lesbian and gay activism as well as within the academic context. My argument is that “queer” is a contingent political term that has been used in various situations and by various agents. The term signifies a variety of topics and, particularly within recent decades, there has been no single way of using it. This conceptual heterogeneity is a primary focus of my study. I analyse how people engage in politics with the term “queer” either in various forms of direct actions or through academic debates and publications.

Up until the end of the 1980s the word “queer” in English-speaking countries had commonly been used as a derogative term to address mostly homosexual men. Within the recent two decades the word “queer” has achieved an immense popularity even across different languages. It has been broadly applied to academic discussions, used by different types of activists, organizations and individuals, and it has even appeared in a variety of commercial contexts. From at least the end of the 1980s, “queer” has been used by many activists as an identity category. At the same time, many academics working on non-normative sexualities have taken the term “queer” to describe their work, and many individuals have described themselves through this term.

“Queer” has been used in various types of publications, such as leaflets, manifestos, community journals and, finally, in formal academic articles and books as well as companies and mainstream movies. My analysis focuses on particular uses of “queer” that I identify as political. Approximately from the end of the 1980s “queer” was a site of identification. People adopted the term to describe themselves. The term also became further politicised as a mark of a new collectivity, a movement. It became an umbrella term for members of different sexual minority groups that expressed their disagreement with the current political status situation in the U.S. Moreover, this term had an important role in shaping internal politics of sexual minority groups. This study shows how “queer” was applied as a powerful critique of established lesbian and gay organisations that were concerned primarily with gaining visibility and rights by lesbians and gays.

“Queer” has been almost immediately picked up by academics and for many of them this term has functioned as a powerful critique of the current social, cultural and political order. I suggest that in academia the political aspect of “queer” is complex because this term was used within various academic discourses and it was related to multiple topics. “Queer”, for instance,

was used to address explicitly political topics such as identity, healthcare and discrimination but, more importantly, “queer” has also been used to develop a set of complex discourses that created a new politics of sexuality.

In this study I present how “queer” achieved political meaning and I examine a variety of political meanings of this term. “Queer” functioned in multiple types of narrations; some of them were in contradiction to others. Not all of them were political. I analyse how certain activists and academics applied “queer” in political contexts or used this term in a political manner. My study differs from several other studies of queer theory that have been published in recent years (e.g. Jagose 1997, Sullivan 2003) in that I do not focus on “queer theory” and I do not analyse ideas related to this construct. Rather, I focus on selected uses of “queer” as a political concept. This is not a study of “queer” as an idea; instead I trace specific uses of the term in political contexts and ideas related to the use of this term. My focus is on selected texts in which “queer” functions politically.

Although within the recent few decades “queer” has become a concept that is very potent in mobilizing people to protest, to form groups and organisations and to write countless articles and books, the use of the word has not yet been systematically analysed. It is clear that “queer” has an important political aspect and this aspect has not been an object of systematic study informed by conceptual history.

Following this approach, my interest is not in attempting to fix one meaning of “queer” or prescribing any correct way to use the term. Rather I take advice from poststructural thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes in claiming that meaning is something that cannot be fixed or even thoroughly analysed. We are left with different usages of words but importantly we have the possibility of multiplying and challenging them. In this respect, my study is broadly inspired by such works as *S/Z* (1970) and *A Lover's Discourse* (1977) by Barthes or *Limited Inc* (1998) by Derrida. Rather than chasing and trying to establish the meaning of concepts, a more productive might be to look at concepts in motion, to look at how they are used and how agents create action with them. Some concepts are used to create personal stories and they are also used in texts that can be seen as testimonies of groups and communities. These concepts are deeply political as they are signs of the struggles of these groups and individuals with reality.

In my analyses of “queer” as a political concept, in particular, I focus on the multiplicity of uses and applications of “queer”. The work is done within the field of gender studies but as I study a multiplicity of uses of “queer” it is also related to such fields of studies as conceptual history. On the level of conceptual analyses, my methodology is informed by the works of

historians of concepts such as Quentin Skinner (1996), Tuija Pulkkinen (2003), Kari Palonen (2006, 2008).

Nevertheless, my study exceeds the field of conceptual history as I engage in several discussions about the political usage of “queer”. As this word has been used in so many ways, my work examines selected applications of “queer” in their political contexts and analyse their political consequences. I study texts, primarily but not exclusively academic ones, in which “queer” appears as a political signifier. I offer a study of the multiplicity of ideas related to the uses of “queer”. The issue at stake here is how people engage in politics with the word “queer” and how certain applications of this term become politically potent. On a more general level, through analyses of various uses of “queer”, I present a reflection on the politics of the very concept. The way the notion of “queer” functions in academic and non-academic discourses can be described as the politics of this concept because “queer” changes, challenges, displaces and relates in various ways to other existing political concepts. The introduction of “queer” into political language is a redescription not only of the very concept but also of other political terms that are present in debates on sexual minorities. The texts that have used “queer” often pose a challenge to previous political discourses that were used to describe sexual minorities.

In order to work on any terms one needs to localise them. Probably every work on a concept is in some sense the geography of this concept. I analyse the development of “queer” in the United States and I refer almost exclusively to the activism and theorists from that part of the world. The exceptions are a few references to British authors that relate to the discussions in the U.S. Concepts have their own history, which is always the history of their uses and it is bound to a specific time and location. In Europe “queer” has also been used in many academic debates but a full survey of these debates would be beyond the scope of this thesis.

My analyses show that “queer” has a specific relation to the politics and theories of sexual minorities. From approximately the end of the 1960s when homosexuality was highly politicised in the U.S., sexual minorities have been searching for a language that can express their political demands. Marxism or Neo-Marxism, which was traditionally used to discuss social exclusion, was insufficient for the reason that homosexuality could not be theorised as a class, purely in terms of economic exploitation. At least since the end of the 1960s, there has been a need for new theoretical approaches and new concepts that would tackle the issues related to sexual minorities. “Queer” became a part of the political language that differed from debates concerning sexuality and gender that were dominant in the U.S. during the 1970s and 1980s. In this study I examine the evolution and flexibility of political language in which “queer” was engaged. “Queer” was used in relation to a specific understanding of politics but

also in relation to particular topics and methodologies. For instance, the uses of “queer” in street performances, theatrical actions in public spaces, amusing advertisements and ironic pamphlets have brought into politics a *ludic* element.

“Queer” only recently became a political term, yet people who used it were very successful in mobilising various signifiers around this concept. Although there is a variety of topics and metaphors around which “queer” was deployed in texts, in this study I identify certain topics to which “queer” has been most frequently attached. My study shows, for instance, that identity and utopia are the signifiers to which “queer” in different ways frequently relate.

The analyses of various uses of “queer” show how this signifier has for at least two decades been constantly politically redescribed. The first act of redescription that informed the recent history of the term came about when the abusive and diminishing term “queer” became an empowering word. This act of redescription is in itself a powerful political act and it occurred on two levels, political praxis and theory. “Queer” was applied to demonstrations that used performance and play as political tools, and the term was also introduced in academic discussions that used a new vocabulary of cultural critique that was not yet present in political debates of the 1980s. The moment of transition of “queer” from activism into academia is a particular focus of this research.

My study traces “queer” in its conceptual history as a political term that was initially deployed by AIDS activists and subsequently applied to academic texts. At this point my study differs from others such as Turner 2000 or Huffer 2009 in that in these studies “queer” is analysed as a function of “queer theory” or as an extension of a certain philosophical tradition. Primarily, I present textual analyses of “queer” as it has been used by selected activists and academics from about end of the 1980s until recently in the U.S. Apart from the transition of the term from activism to academia, which is one of the key points of this work, another crucial point is to explore how the users of “queer” engage in politics with this term. Academics and activists used “queer” to engage in debates on topics such as representation of sexual minorities, citizenship, homophobic violence. I suggest that “queer” has been deployed as a political term in a certain way that challenges political language and even the meaning people give to politics itself.

“Queer” is contingent upon its uses and this contingency of the concept is the focus of my study. The term has been used by various agents and it has been attached to multiple subjects. The sense of this contingency is clear when one reflects on how many various political issues were addressed through “queer”. I concentrate on a few issues that, as my

analyses reveal, are most crucial in the political usage of “queer”. These are: identity, community, negativity and intersections of sexuality, class and race. “Queer” has also been used to debate the shape of the politics of sexual minorities as well as forms of political engagements. Although, the term is primarily connected to sexuality, politically “queer” has functioned within an extensive semantic field and it has remained open to various connotations. I suggest that some uses of the term opened up new fields of inquiry that have not been previously examined by sexual minorities, among them is the relationship between sexual practices, sexual identity and class and ethnicity.

I argue that although there are a whole variety of topics related to “queer”, there are some specific themes that reoccur when “queer” is used as a political signifier. For instance, “negativity” is a marker of a specific political stand. For many activists and academics “queer” was a call for a politics of withdrawal. I suggest that authors such as Michael Warner (1993) and Lee Edelman (2004) deploy “queer” as a sign of radical contestation. Through the concept of “queer”, they do not aim at engaging in reforming social institutions but rather at opposing any form of institutionalised politics. “Queer” functions for them as a sign of radical negativity towards normative politics. Others, such as David Bell and Jon Binnie (2000) and Shane Phelan (2001) have attached “queer” to the theme of “citizenship”. My study shows that their political approach is to use the term “queer” to engage in reforming and redefining social institutions.

There are many other political approaches, topics and metaphors around which “queer” was used. For many activists “queer” is deeply connected with performance as a form of political action (Shepard 2010). For some e.g. Teresa de Lauretis (2008) “queer” is related to the metaphor of “death”. Judith Halberstam (2005) uses “queer” as an anarchic signifier that marks an alternative culture.

For many academics and activists “queer” marks a search for new ways of articulating politics and political action. They used “queer” as a part of various strategies and methodologies, some of them were previously not even considered political. This study examines how the term was applied to many different methodologies. For instance, David M. Halperin (1995) and Lynne Huffer (2010) attach “queer” to the Foucaultian philosophical tradition. Lee Edelman (2004) and Teresa de Lauretis (2008) use the term within psychoanalytical tradition. Judith Butler (1993) deploys “queer” as part of a poststructural political framework and Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick (1993) brings out the political potential of literary criticism when using the term “queer”.

To study “queer” as a political concept one has to start with a few basic questions. It is important to know initial signifiers related to the terms “queer” and “political” and finally one

needs to ask whether “queer” is a political concept. This introductory question is in itself quite challenging.

Politics is traditionally understood as activities which are related to making and changing law. Inspirational for me is the description of “politics” proposed by Chantal Mouffe. She writes that “politics” “refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and to organise human coexistence in conditions which are always potentially conflicting” (Mouffe 2013, 2-3). I also follow her understanding of hegemony. In this context, many have used “queer” as a way to oppose various hegemonic orders. Nevertheless, as one of the functions of “queer” is to be a form of personal and collective identification, the above description seems to be insufficient. In my study I follow a comprehensive understanding of politics as activities that people engage as individuals, groups, communities or even nations in order to create or challenge the world in which they live. Politics can be theorised in this context as a project of world making/challenging that people engage in by forming specific groups. Thus, a preliminary working definition of politics is: interventions that contest hegemonic order and aim at establishing new ones.

Although in general I find it fruitful to think of politics through the notions of action and collectivity, sometimes an individual act can be deeply political. However, an individual act is often made in the name of a group of people or a community. A disputable issue, specifically in the case of the use of “queer”, is the use of “political” in relation to various works of art and performances, especially considering that “politics” is attached to groups and their interests. Frequently artists claim that their work is political, as do academics in their analysis of works of art such as literature or film. My intention is not to say who has the right to use the term “political” to describe their activities or which articulation of “political” is correct. Clearly, when applied to works of art and their analysis, the connotation of “political” has a different dimension. It refers to objects that can potentially change or challenge our understanding of social reality. My study of “queer” is based on a heterogenic understanding of politics, not on one specific articulation of “politics”. “Queer” is related to various individual and group actions but it also refers to artistic or academic works. One thing is certain and that is that this term in most of its uses is not neutral, but instead occurs as part of a specific political judgement.

Personally, I believe that politics is an activity that is close to people’s lives therefore in my thesis I criticize uses of “queer” that, according to me, lose relation to lives and experiences of LGBT people. In this regard, I think that the adjective “political” can be graded, certain acts

or theories can be more political or less political, depending on their connection and potential impact on lives of individuals.

This study presents a specific history of the use of “queer” as a concept that mobilises various agents to express through it various political claims. During the last decades of the 20th century “queer” went through a semantic “revolution”. It was redescribed through its political usage. Particularly in the United States during the 20th century, “queer” was used as a derogative and highly offensive term for homosexuals. The appropriation of this term by a sexual minority was an act of linguistic revolution. People who had formerly been humiliated by this term started using it in an affirmative and empowering fashion. This was an act of taking the harmful connotation of the word and turning it into a positive. People who started using “queer” in a political context overwrote the semantic history of this term. This political redescription of the term is at the heart of this study.

I do not assume any privilege articulation of “queer”, but instead analyse this concept as a product of its uses. Various academics who have adopted the term “queer” for political purposes have treated this term as a very elastic signifier that can be used in multiple contexts. My study shows that because “queer” is a highly contingent concept it can be articulated and rearticulated in different ways.

The choice of research material is always partly a disputed matter. Particularly in the case of a term such as “queer” that has within recent years been so widely used. I critically analyse publications that have been crucial for the development of “queer” as a political concept and I study usages of “queer” that have been part of many important and heated academic debates for the last few decades. I have chosen to analyse texts that within recent decades were the most influential for activists and academics. I also critically engage in some of the debates.

The other issue in this context is that it is disputable which uses of “queer” are political and which are not. Depending on the theoretical standpoint the answer would change. I present my selection of political uses of “queer” and I argue that these were the most influential uses and I also engage in discussion about the politics of selected usages of “queer”. My choice is based on criteria that are not openly normative. For my analyses I have selected texts that have been highly discussed and significant both in academic and activist circles.

At the core of my research are the academic texts of authors such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Teresa de Lauretis and several others. In addition, I study other texts such as activists’ publications. My aim is to provide a critical analysis of how “queer” was applied in different debates as a political term. This study is based on a selection of usages of “queer” that

in my view best exemplify how this term functions among other political signifiers. I trace the uses of “queer” within academia and outside it that relate to political issues and debates. My analyses focus on uses of “queer” that are engaged in transforming social reality.

Applications of “queer” have been countless and occur in a wide variety of contexts. The term has become a sign of identity, political movements, protest, contestation of academic paradigms, an umbrella term for various marginalised identities and an umbrella term for various political claims, and a utopian promise of a better future. I have selected the uses that are to me the most powerful in their originality, influencing and challenging the current academic and political status quo. Perhaps in the future these connotations might be changed or even completely lost by very different uses of the term. Political terms constantly evolve when they are used in different circumstances and by different agents.

The politics that I analyse is not the politics of LGBT organizations or activists. It is the politics of the concept. I follow the concept of “queer” in the ways it functions in various texts, acquiring certain connotations and opposing other concepts. I focus on textual politics that do not always immediately translate into direct political action. This work offers an insight into political language, into how its terms are formed, and how they function and evolve. “Queer” is an example of a political term that has developed relatively recently. I provide analyses that trace applications of this term into the political sphere. On a general level while analysing textual politics of “queer” I rely on Pulkkinen’s concept of the political (Pulkkinen 2000 and 2013), which she has developed into politics of philosophy and politics of concepts¹. She writes: “The nature of the political is intervention” (Pulkkinen 2000, 105). “Queer” as a concept is an intervention into several discussions within and outside of gay and lesbian studies and communities. When applied to various discussions and texts, “queer” acts politically in specific ways. By this I mean that the term was often used to challenge other political terms or to introduce new terms or thematics, such as the politicization of AIDS or the intersection of sex, race and class. Moreover, “queer” is also an intervention into the meanings that are prescribed in politics. Through this term various actions, issues and other concepts that were not previously considered political were introduced into politics. This study presents the key features of discussions in which “queer” is used as an intervention. A good example is offered by discussions which circulated around new forms of citizenship in which “queer” was used as a call to redefine the existing concept of “citizenship” in the United States and the UK. One of

¹ The approach has been applied and developed within the research team Politics of Philosophy and Gender (PPhiG) <http://www.coepolcon.fi/pphig/?c=pphig-a-research>

the aims of this study is to unpack what kind of debates use “queer”, and what kind of intervention “queer” represents in various debates.

The results of this study show that “queer” has been used in connection with particular themes. One of the main uses is in the issue of identity and identity politics among sexual minorities. “Queer” has been used by many individuals and groups to question the dominant model of identity and political representation that has been used by many LGBT communities. The application of “queer” to internal critiques within sexual minorities has been related to this. “Queer” has also been a term that was applied by activists and academics as a tool for self-reflection on the politics of LGBT groups and the organization of communities of sexual minorities. The other crucial connotation of “queer” has been the politics of anarchy. For many “queer” represented the political utopia of anti-norms or the rejection of norms as such. The first important political use of “queer” was within AIDS politics. Many activists and academics have subsequently responded to this connection. Another theme that I explore is the topic of negativity. In this context, “queer” represented for theorists such as Edelman (2004) or Halberstam (2005) what is excluded. I argue that politically it was a peculiar form of idealizing abjection. In different texts some of these themes overlap and some appear in distinct contexts.

The first two chapters focus on the historical development of political concepts that were used by sexual minorities in the United States. In the first chapter I analyse the terms of political debates concerning sexual minorities that were used during the 1970s and the 1980s. My aim is to map the terrain, into which the new political term “queer” entered in the end of 1980s. The terms that sexual minorities used for political engagement underwent changes and this transition of the terms used is a particular focus of my study. I draw in this chapter a historical overview of political debates that were opened after the Stonewall riots and continued until the AIDS crisis. I present analyses of terms, topics and ideas which framed debates on sexual minorities and which influenced the development of “queer” as a political signifier. This chapter offers a study of the politicization of homosexuality at the end of the 1960s and the rise of post-Stonewall gay and lesbian movements and traces the debates and terms that preceded the actual politicization of “queer” at the end of the 1980s. I argue that the debates that started after the Stonewall riots together with feminist and New Left thought paved the way for the development of “queer” as a political concept. I study the main discussions among sexual minorities that influenced this development.

One of the first directly political uses of “queer” was by activist and academic Paul Goodman in 1969 but even before some authors would occasionally use this term in a political

way. I would not extensively analyse these uses as they are rather exceptional for their time but it is worth revisiting these voices, as they are part of the history of sexual minorities.

My observation is that the gay and lesbian movement had various inspirations starting from the New Left and anti-racist and Hippie movements up to the human rights and women's movements. This chapter follows the development of gay and lesbian politics in and outside of academia up to the late 1980s and the AIDS crisis that resulted in the development of "queer" as a political concept. I argue that "queer" was a result of internal tensions among sexual minority communities concerning the language that was to be used for political purposes, political strategies, political representation and also more generally concerned the very idea of sexual identity.

In the second chapter I focus on early uses of "queer" in activist circles. My contention is that at the end of the 1980s "queer" became a sign of a new confrontational politics at the time of the AIDS crisis in the U.S. Initially, "queer" was a politicized term which acted as a form of identification for activists. I argue that this identification was a complex issue, as for some it was an identification which implied a socially excluded position, for others it implied a form of empathetic identification with the victims of AIDS and for others it was an identification with the political aims and strategies that "queer" represented.

For many activists the term was a sign of disappointment with existing lesbian and gay organizations when the AIDS crisis was at an early stage. "Queer" became the basis of a new form of political agency that was based not so much on a special connection between agents, as in the case of Afro-American identity, but rather on a strategic agreement to act together politically. "Queer" has been introduced as a militant term that targeted not only Reagan's social politics but also the internal politics of the major lesbian and gay organizations. My observation is that the term was associated with politicization in various ways, and activists used it as a sign of protest and contestation. I argue that the term offered activists forms of identification that they considered to be an alternative to the dominant identifications during this time. "Queer" was a concept around which a new political community was built through attachments to various other ideas but also through the affect or political passion that "queer" generated among activists. I argue that activists used "queer" in connection with several topics that influenced further applications of this term, the most important being "identity", "AIDS" and the contestation of norms.

In chapters three, four and five I discuss selected academic texts from the United States in which the term "queer" appears as a political signifier. My contention is that many academics that found feminist language overly occupied with issues related to gender picked up

the notion of “queer”. They aimed at developing a new approach that would allow them to theorize sexuality from a new perspective. In this part I discuss authors who have crucially and in different ways influenced the development of “queer” as a political concept. At the core of these chapters are analyses of the authors that are commonly associated with the term “queer”, yet my approach differs from the common ones that assume “queer” to be already a function of “queer theory”. Common approaches do not show how “queer” functions as a term in texts but instead analyse the theories and ideas of authors such as Judith Butler or Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and present them as “queer theories”. My ambition here is not to offer a thorough analysis of these authors’ work but rather to focus directly on their application of the term “queer” on a textual level, which means looking at how much they use the word itself, in which grammatical forms and in connection or contrast to which other terms.

In the third chapter I focus on early uses of “queer” in academic texts. This moment of transition of the concept of “queer” from activism to academia is at the heart of this study. Even though “queer” was initially used by activists during street protests and other actions, it did not catch the attention of political theorists. Instead, in the U.S. academia “queer” was at first more consciously used as an academic term by scholars who were trained in cultural criticism, such as Teresa de Lauretis (1991) or Sue-Ellen Case (1991). Interestingly, although the first authors who at the beginning of the 1990s started using “queer” in academic texts were not political theorists, they used the term as a potentially powerful political criticism towards the current political discourse.

In this chapter I analyse influential authors who used the term “queer” during the early 1990s. This is the time when this term began to be applied to academic debates. I analyse in detail an essay by Teresa de Lauretis (1991) in which she proposes to use “queer” as an incitement to develop new forms of theorising lesbian and gay identity and experience. Following de Lauretis, Sue Ellen Case (1991) also offers “queer” as a specific literary term that can reveal homosexuality coded in text. Case presents more than a lesson in literary criticism. She aims at establishing “queer” as a category that would work against the idea of assimilation of homosexual people into the mainstream of society. She proposes to embrace the negative position that is implied by “queer” and contest established representations and identities. My contention is that the way in which de Lauretis and Case use “queer” has little connection with the AIDS crisis or street activism but it has instead become a term that can serve politically in literary criticism. My analysis shows that the politics of this term in essays by de Lauretis and Case is to disturb the established narration of lesbian and gay politics of representation.

Another significant author that I analyse in this chapter is Michael Warner. He is an influential figure in new developments in U.S. lesbian and gay social and cultural analyses. He promotes the use of “queer” as a sign of new radical politics that can challenge the neoliberal logic of politics. Warner (1993) describes “queer” as an opposition to the norms of neoliberal society. In his use “queer” acquires political connotations as not merely a sign of a sexual minority and its struggle for recognition but also as a more general sign of disagreement with the current politics. I argue that the use of “queer” by the authors discussed in this chapter incurs the risk of an idealization of the excluded positions. There is also a certain assumption of agency as an autonomous individual subject. I argue that this assumption has its origin in classical liberalism, but it also seems to underlie the project of radical opposition to norms.

In the forth chapter I study Judith Butler’s use of “queer”. People commonly connect Butler to the term “queer” and her own theory is often described as “queer theory”, but my analysis shows that the actual usage of the very term in Butler’s work is not frequent at all, and it does not as such constitute a coherent theory. My study reveals that Butler rarely uses “queer” in relation to performativity and instead she uses the term in a very specific way in relation to race, class and sexuality (1993). This approach, later often known as “intersectionality”, subsequently became very widely used in many academic publications and debates. Nevertheless, my contention is that Butler does not prescribe any stable meaning to “queer” but instead she treats this concept as an open signifier that can be temporarily related to certain issues and subsequently attached to other problems. In her essays after 1993, Butler rarely uses “queer” but when the term appears it is related to various topics and issues that were interesting to Butler at that time. My analysis reveals that for Butler the function of “queer” is to be a form of critical intervention.

Chapter five is dedicated to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s use of “queer”. She is one of the most prominent scholars that used “queer” in her texts and her work is an inspiration for a whole generation of literary scholars who have focused on sexuality. She has also influenced researchers from other disciplines. My analysis shows that Sedgwick brings into her texts a completely new accent concerning discussions of identity and sexuality. I argue that she applies “queer” as a specific mode of critique of the terms in which identity is theorized. This critique of identity terms reveals that any terms that are used to describe identity are accidental and limited. Sedgwick uses “queer” as a quasi-literary term that opens up literary texts for reinterpretations, but the term is also a tool to make a political statement about contemporary social reality. My contention is that “queer” becomes for Sedgwick a deconstructive term that has a political potential of challenging established ways of describing sexuality and self. In

Sedgwick's texts "queer" signifies different things and is related to a variety of issues; it can be an identity or even an affect. My argument is that by introducing "queer" into cultural criticism Sedgwick questions the existing academic ways of theorizing gender and sexuality. Through "queer" Sedgwick develops a conceptual politics that challenges other concepts and narrations and proposes an alternative approach to sexuality.

While chapter six examines "queer" in the context of the thematics of negativity, chapter seven focuses on the application of "queer" to issues directly related to political theory. These two trajectories of "queer" are clearly visible in publications over at least the last decade. One situates "queer" within the vocabulary of cultural critique and the other within the language of political theory. I observe that these two applications of "queer" stand in a diametrically different relationship towards the concept of "identity". Among the political theorists that I discuss "queer" would stand for the identity that is socially and politically marginalized. In the framework of negativity, however, "queer" resembles the idea of an empty signifier. In my opinion identification with empty signifier is problematic.

During the late 1990s and later "queer" was used by some political theorists, such as Shane Phelan (1997) or Lauren Berlant (1997), who applied it to explicitly political issues. The term also started to function as a literary concept that was rather unrelated to activism or any concrete political action. This application of the concept to two different academic discourses reflects the contingent usage of "queer". In these final two chapters I discuss two different approaches to the concept of "queer". I argue that the first represents a utopian political thinking and the second engages with a more traditional political debate that is focused around the idea of "citizenship". In these two chapters I argue that certain uses of "queer" in academia went so far from traditional political debates that it is hard to consider them political anymore.

In chapter six, I analyse an example of such use of "queer" in Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004). The theme of negativity is very elaborately developed in relation to the concept of "queer" but it forecloses any directly political applications of the term. What Edelman aims to do, however, is to change the terms of the debate about sexual minorities. I also engage in discussion with Judith Halberstam (2005) and Teresa de Lauretis (2008) about the politics they construct with the use of "queer". My contention is that although some of these uses seem to offer a radical approach towards the theorization of sexual minorities, they are based on the common liberal idea of individual agency and they run the risk of depoliticizing the struggle with sexual exclusion.

In chapter seven I discuss the selected uses of "queer" in relation to the topic of citizenship. I argue that "queer" has a powerful political potential when it is applied to debates

that aim at challenging and reforming democratic institutions such as citizenship. I critically examine the works by Lauren Berlant (1997), David Bell and Jon Binnie (2000) and Shane Phelan (2001). By using “queer” they all in different ways argue for opening up the concept of “citizenship”. My analysis in this chapter reveals the potential of “queer” to function as an element of traditional political debate that focuses on a crucial issue for the current functioning of democratic society.

As a political concept “queer” appeared in the context of AIDS activism, so that the harmful and oppressive power of the term was reversed in order to create a political community. At the end of the 1980s people started to use “queer” to describe themselves, to form groups and to organize protests or different direct political actions in public spheres. The term was also used politically in order to create internal debates within sexual minority communities about representation, identity, sexual practices and a variety of other issues. In academic texts the political aspect of “queer” is deployed when this term is related to issues of community, agency, identity and its relation to the state.

I believe that analyses of the uses of “queer” can provide an insight into the theory and practice of current political protest movements. The term is an example that might help us to understand the many-sided processes of minority struggles for recognition. My contention is that “queer” is relevant for understanding the contemporary development of sexual minority movements and thought but also more broadly for understanding recent changes in political discourse that describes sexual minorities.

At the heart of my thesis is the argument that the connection between “queer” and “politics” is highly productive. The texts in which “queer” functioned have brought to light several important issues that previously were rarely discussed among sexual minorities and in the mainstream of political debates. Among them were the question of the intersection of sexual orientation, race and class; the conceptualisation not only of sexual identity but also of sexual practices; the critical conceptualization of rights and identity discourse; and finally the critical evaluation of political language that is used to discuss sexual minorities. I believe that in academic texts the most politically productive uses of “queer” are those that do not forget the activism that lies at the origin of this concept but, at the same time, engage in conceptually developing new forms of counter-hegemonic strategies that aim at transforming social reality. I am against utopian theories that, as an answer to social problems, propose an anarchic withdrawal from the social. I sustain that a politically more efficient strategy than radical contestation is engagement in transforming social institutions.

In some contexts “queer” does not stand for concrete political claims. The concept has functioned for many as a counter-hegemonic perspective, as it has an ability to articulate various things and oppose static order both in political activism and in academic discourse. Generally, the term has not been used in discussions on LGBT rights. “Queer” instead connotes a specific politics of resistance. “Queer” functions in various accounts and, if there is something that is common between them, it is perhaps the acknowledgement that people are different; people define themselves in various ways and engage in politics in multiple way. The use of the term “queer” suggests the flexibility of political language and of politics itself.

Chapter 1: The politization of homosexuality in the advent of “queer”

The term “queer” started to be used more commonly as a political concept at the end of the 1980s. However, as with every political concept, it did not come out of nowhere; it has its own genealogy and is rooted in earlier political and theoretical movements. In this chapter I analyse the historical situation, various influences and debates that created the background in which “queer” appeared as a political signifier. “Queer” began to be used politically in the context of AIDS activism, sexual minorities politics as well as theories inspired by post-structuralism. In order to understand how “queer” came to be used as a political term, I analyse the historical and theoretical developments that determined the development of sexual minority politics.

Any concept is localised and needs to be seen within specific geographical limits. I analyse “queer” as a political concept in the U.S. Even though “queer” had already begun to appear in the UK in the context of activism and subsequently also in academic debates at the beginning of the 1990s, in the UK and in many other countries, “queer” was not as meaningful politically and culturally and neither was it as popular a term as in the U.S. The British historian and sociologist of sexuality Jeffrey Weeks states that during the 1980s and early 1990s in the UK, similar topics were discussed within gay and lesbian scholarship and activism but these were not included under the umbrella of “queer” (Weeks, 2007). I am uncertain to which extent these topics were actually similar but it is clear that “queer” as a political concept is strongly tied to the history of the U.S. sexual minorities.

The gay and lesbian movement and more broadly, sexual minority movements, became politically self-aware in the USA after the Second World War. As in many such cases, it is hard to exactly locate in time the beginning of the LGBT movement in the USA. Symbolically, many activists and theorists consider the Stonewall riots in 1969 to be the beginning of the contemporary political sexual minority movement. The pre-Stonewall organizations and various homosexual groups were referred to generally as the “homophile movement”.² With some exceptions, these organizations and groups were not very active politically. The “homophile movement” was a term coined subsequently for various groups that appeared after the 2nd World War in major cities in the U.S. These were rather small groups not arranged in a formal way. The most significant ones were Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis that

² John D’Emilio, a historian of contemporary sexual minority movement in the US, distinguishes between the “homophile movement” and the later “gay liberation movement”. Other scholars such as Jeffrey Weeks or Margaret Cruikshank also follow this conceptual distinction. For them, the homosexual social and political movement in the 20th century before 1969 is classified as the “homophile movement” and after 1969 as the “gay liberation movement”.

appeared in the 1950s. The emergence of these organizations was crucial for the formation of gay and lesbian political consciousness. These organizations were focused on community building but they also took part in small-scale lobbying. Outside of lesbian and gay communities, the issue that some of them tackled was lobbying for the decriminalization of homosexuality. Viewed conceptually, the “homophile movement” is often opposed to the “gay liberation movement”. The latter represents organized political groups that were in various ways active in the public sphere.

Whereas the homophile movement used the term “homosexual”, the new movement around the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s replaced this term with the word “gay”, a fresh and positive label for open and proud lesbians and gay men. This was an important act of redescription that reshaped the sexual politics of the time. Another crucial redescription appeared at the end of the 1980s with the introduction of the term “queer”.

Initially “queer” was adopted by sexual minority activists and only subsequently it was picked up by academics. In order to shed light on the lesbian and gay activism that preceded and influenced the construction of “queer” as a political term, in this chapter I primarily rely on the works of historians who have written extensively on the gay and lesbian movement and thought. The works of Jeffrey Weeks (2000, 2007), Jeffrey Escoffier (1998), Margaret Cruikshank (1992), Ken Plummer (1992, 2003) and John D’Emilio (1992, 2002) are particularly important in this context. Lisa Duggan (1995), Annamarie Jagose (1997) and Sheila Jeffreys (2003) have also presented significant lesbian perspectives on the development of the concept of “queer”.

The theoretical background for “queer”³ was mostly provided by feminist thought in the 1980s. Post-structuralism and in particular deconstruction shaped much of academic research in the field of gender and sexuality during the 1980s providing the crucial background for the theoretical development of “queer”. In the U.S. the Yale School of Criticism popularized deconstruction as a method of cultural analysis and proved to be very suitable for analyses that aimed not only at describing social reality in objective terms, but also at challenging this reality and making political interventions into it. Furthermore, post-structuralism provided many gay and lesbian academics with the tools to analyse social reality and identities as a particular type of fiction. Moreover, Lacanian psychoanalysis became popular as a tool for identity and

³ There is no common agreement about this claim. Some feminist theorists who oppose any use of the concept “queer” e.g. Sheila Jeffreys (2003) claim that the concept “queer” appeared at the end of the 1980s in strong opposition to feminist thought of the 1980s. I understand her claim to be made on the grounds of one current of normative feminism at that time. Nevertheless, it provides an example of the debates that accompanied the first uses of “queer” in feminist and lesbian contexts.

discourse analysis. This theoretical turn was essential to those scholars who aimed at denaturalizing identities, sex and desire during the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Prominent representatives of these scholars who started their academic careers in the 1970s and the 1980s are Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Lee Edelman. I closely study their theories in the following chapters.

This chapter explores two conceptual changes that shaped the 20th century sexual minority movement in the U.S. and also significantly influenced lesbian and gay movements in Western countries. I briefly present the politics of sexual minorities between these two conceptual changes. The first conceptual change was around 1970 when the word “homosexual” was replaced with “gay”. It involved the immense politicization of issues related to sexuality and in particular to marginalized sexualities. The second conceptual change occurred at the end of the 1980s during the time of the AIDS crisis, when the term “queer” was introduced in place of “gay”. These two conceptual changes came with crucial changes in approach towards activism and theories concerning sexual minorities that reshaped gay and lesbian politics. Moreover, they also introduced a new range of discourse that described community, agency, identity, sexuality and even politics itself in different terms.

1.1 “Queer”: between political movement and philosophy

“Queer” appeared as a concept that had cultural and political potency around the year 1990. Prior to that time, it functioned as an abusive term for homosexual people. In some contexts, for instance in many schools in the U.S., it functions in this way to this day. To look at the roots and genesis of the new use of “queer” as a sign of pride and of anger, as a political signifier and as a new identity, I will turn to the history of the gay and lesbian movement, and at the same time, to influential intellectuals who were crucial at the beginning of queer activism and theory.

The concept of “queer” is also connected to new ways of engaging in the social and the political, and to a particular cultural semiotics. “Queer” functioned in codes that were both political and cultural. It also appeared in the context of American culture, which has a strong historical tradition of social movements. Non-governmental organizations were for a long time one of the bases for the social organisation of the North American society, and minorities and their struggle for recognition in a diverse society are also an important characteristic of the US culture. Therefore in this chapter I also look at the development of gay and lesbian organizations.

In the U.S at the end of the 1980s several models of social resistance and political contestation existed. Many of them were developed throughout the latter half of the 20th century and at the time they were primary inspirations for sexual minority activists. Since the

1960s, perhaps the most influential examples for gay and lesbian activists have been the black, left, anti-war and hippie movements. Sheila Jeffreys refers to the “new movements” in the 1960s that had a huge impact in the beginning of the gay and lesbian liberation movement. “These new movements were feminism, youth liberation, black liberation, Paris 1968 and the student movement. Socialist and feminist ideas infused gay liberation from the outset” (Jeffreys 2003, 9).

Another essential element for the development of “queer” was feminist thought and the cultural critique that was present in the writings of many feminists and lesbians from the 1980s onwards, and even earlier. Activists, people who engaged in direct political actions such as demonstrations and different community events, were influenced by intellectuals, even if only indirectly. Moreover, particularly in the case of the gay and lesbian and feminist movements, political theories and political practice were very closely related. Indeed, many theorists were activists as well. Their theories frequently focused on current political problems, and these theories were also a way of making political interventions. For example, in her introduction to *Sex Wars*, Lisa Duggan suggests that from the perspective of writing on sexuality, the division between theory and activism is superficial. Duggan argues that for her, the task was “to find ways for theories and activism to learn from each other in the joint effort to re-form the institutions and practices that shape and constrain us all” (Duggan 2006 [1995], 13). This can be claimed for many of the publications concerning sexual minorities starting in the 1960s and after. The writing was very politically engaged, activism and academia influencing each other and crossing each other’s traditional borders.

In the case LGBT issues there was no clear distinction between political practice and theories. Many gay and lesbian activists were academics, and many feminists working at universities were politically engaged. Intellectuals provided ways for self-understanding and self-expression that activists were looking for and the movement was a strong inspiration for academics to rethink the very terms of political debates at that time.

In order to briefly describe the historical context of politization of homosexuality in the second part of the 20th century in the United States, I will outline main events, ideas and authors that shaped contemporary sexual minority politics. Following, I will point out the main ideas that were important for the establishment of “queer” as a political concept in activism and academia.

Among sexual minorities “queer” was established as a political term as a result of countless debates on political activism but also more general discussions about forms of political representation and about the shape of identity that sexual minorities should embrace. A

crucial initiating moment was the Stonewall riots and the new gay liberation movement. Together with the development of the feminist movement, the gay liberation movement with its broad political agenda set the stage for “queer”. Historically, a key event that happened just before “queer” and was broadly used for political purposes was the AIDS crisis.

1.2 Queer activist before queer movement

Before “queer” started to be widely used at the end of 1980s there were several authors that adopted this term for political purposes. Two of them, Paul Goodman and Donald Webster Cory, are particularly worthy of attention as they relate the term “queer” to some themes that subsequently became important in activism and academia. Although currently both of them are rarely mentioned in debates in queer theory, it is interesting to go back to these authors as their works contain several characteristics of “queer” that would be common themes within the recent decades.

Edward Sagarin is definitely a person that deserves to be mentioned here. He is considered by many to be a key figure in the homosocial movement, though Sagarin personally never engaged in any form of activism. During the 1950s, under the pseudonym Donald Webster Cory, he published several books related to homosexuality. The most important publication is *The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach*, published in 1951. He claims there that homosexuals are a minority and as a group they deserve civil rights. Interestingly, this book mentions the term “queer”. Cory (Sagarin) writes: “It is, perhaps, in the baffling character of the unknown that there can be found the origin and significance of the word *queer*” (Cory 1951, 22). In *The Homosexual in America* no explicitly political content is connected to the term “queer”, but what is intriguing in the quoted sentence is that the author looks for other meanings of “queer” than just an abusive term for homosexuals. The book had a huge political impact during the time because it theorized homosexuals as a separate oppressed minority that should acquire rights and legal protection. Cory identifies a lack of recognition as the biggest problem for homosexuals in the U.S. Although currently *The Homosexual in America* has only historical value, it was a crucial publication that informed the pre-Stonewall gay and lesbian movement and paved the way to gay and lesbian politics.

Paul Goodman, a prominent figure in the New Left movement, was an academic, psychologist but was primarily known as an anti-war campaigner, anarchist and homosexual activist. In an essay originally published in 1969 as “Memoirs of an Ancient Activist” and later revised in 1977 as “The Politics of Being Queer”, Goodman talks unapologetically about his sexual relations with men and uses the term “queer”. Although Goodman is not directly involved in the subsequent queer movement or queer theory, I see him as a forerunner that a

generation earlier noticed a political potential in the term. He also links “queer” to themes such as non-normativity, which later became an important element in the uses of queer as a political signifier.

Goodman sees being queer as part of a broader struggle in which homosexuality is only one part; it is a struggle with the state but also with conventional morality and norms that aim at prescribing individuals’ lives. He relates being queer to anarchism, to the struggle with economic and racial exclusion, and to the peace movement. “Queer” has a revolutionary-utopian element for Goodman. The concept offers alternative values and an alternative way of engagement with social reality. This has an interesting resonance with later uses of “queer” by authors such as Michael Warner (1993, 1999, 2005) or José Esteban Muñoz (2009). The thematic of “utopia” and “non-normativity” became an important political connotation of “queer” and I will analyse them in detail in the following chapters.

Goodman writes: “... queer life has some remarkable political values. It can be profoundly democratizing, throwing together every class and group more than heterosexuality does. Its promiscuity can be a beautiful thing (but be prudent about VD)” (Goodman 1977, 222). It is interesting that Goodman describes here something that he calls “queer life”. Although it is clear from the essay that he identifies with this position he does not say “my life” or “queer politics” or “queer theory”, instead “queer life” seems to be for him a utopian position that can be inhabited by agents that do not fit into the mainstream of society. This position, according to Goodman, carries political weight.

Goodman describes “promiscuity” as a democratizing value. For him, promiscuity is one of the main characteristics of “queer life” and in this context he discusses ideas of community and belonging. Goodman appears to be critical of homosexual communities of the time for being exclusive and elitist (Goodman 1977, 219). He also uses the term “queer” as a tool to tackle the problem of the construction of homosexual communities and their politics. The point he makes is that promiscuity represents alternative values and an alternative way of building relations and communities. One can see in Goodman’s essay a certain degree of influence of the hippie ideology of liberating sexuality that was popular during the time. Goodman is pro-sex and he considers spontaneous sexual acts as a way of challenging society. However, his politics of “queer” is more than an idealization of sex, it is primarily a call to rethink ideas of equality and social justice. Sexuality for Goodman is an important element of the political struggle. It is noteworthy that although the essay was written before the HIV/AIDS epidemics, Goodman warns against STIs, a surprising aspect in this type of pro-sex manifesto.

“The Politics of Being Queer” is critical towards gay and lesbian organizations of the time. Goodman writes: “What we need is not defiant pride and self-consciousness, but social space to live and breathe” (Goodman 1977, 219). He criticizes established gay organizations such as The Mattachine Society for separatism but he does not fully identify with Gay Liberation activists either. He distances himself from the Gay Liberation movement on account of what he calls the “fanaticism” of the activists, who are almost entirely focused on a distinct gay identity. “Queer” for Goodman is a term which suggests the freedom to be different. Thus, he opposes a strong gay identity and instead proposes to build a movement among people who feel excluded. This movement or rather these individuals consists of those who have struggled with social values and norms through pursuing their own way of life. Goodman opposes a self-awareness understood as a distinct homosexual identity to what he calls a “space to live”, by which he means a possibility to have sexual practices in a way one chooses without being bothered by the state. He is against a gay movement that would be exclusively focused on gay issues. Thus, “queer politics” would mean for him a politics of coalition among oppressed people. For Goodman the priority in political activism is not liberation, understood as the rights and recognition for a distinct group of people, but class struggle. He argues that economic exclusion is politically primary and sexual exclusion is a subsequent issue that should not be considered separately. Goodman is critical towards a distinct homosexual identity and instead calls for a broad political struggle aiming at deep changes in society. The critique of identity would be an important issue raised by several queer theorists during the 1990s, among them Judith Butler (1993). Her application of “queer” and its relation to the question of identity will be examined in chapter five.

Goodman’s essay is written in the form of a personal confession. This type of diary/manifesto in which the term “queer” appears, strongly connects the term to first-person use. Later Sedgwick (1993) argues that “queer” makes sense politically only when it is attached to a first-person form.

On the theoretical level it would appear that Goodman’s essay is inspired by Herbert Marcuse, although Marcuse is not explicitly mentioned in the essay. The text is written in what could be characterized as a neo-Marxist style. In any case, queer politics for Goodman is not about claiming rights but about one’s individual life. The author is primarily an anarchist, and is therefore suspicious of the state and its institutions. Queer politics is about persistently living one’s own project of life even if it is against society as a whole. For Goodman, “queer” is also a promise of a radical democracy in the sense that sexual experiences open people to different ways of experiencing community and identity.

Goodman's approach and language is strongly rooted in the tradition of individualism common in the U.S. It is as though Goodman had just finished reading Thoreau's *Walden*. For me, this type of individualism is troubling. I readily admit that there is something empowering about Goodman's utopian vision of liberation through sex, but I would suggest that it is also politically dangerous, as it runs the risk of depoliticization of sexual minorities' struggles. If we assume that politics is merely about individual resistance or individual contestation of the system and if we do not consider the state apparatus with its institutions, laws and mechanisms through which it operates, we simply run a risk of being utopian or even apolitical. I do not believe that individualism is a sufficient political strategy. It merely displaces and at the same time replicates the oppressive ideology.

I find Goodman's essay very important in that he was the first to use "queer" in a radically political manner. He is an uncompromising critic of the state and "queer" for him functions as a broad term that opposes the state and its organization. But I suggest that at the same time we cannot forget that we live in institutionalized societies and politics is an intervention made inside society. We also live in communities and politics is both about building communities around shared values and principles, and about challenging and questioning values and principles that are exclusionary and violent. Although I find Goodman an important pioneer of queer politics, I think that he speaks from a position that has clear limitations. One can contest the state when one has the luxury of not depending on state institutions. I argue that if one needs protection from violence or healthcare, one should rather aim at reforming state institutions that can provide these services, rather than rejecting them. The politics of radical contestation is to some extent either utopian or it is a luxury that not everyone can afford. The tension between individual resistance to norms and transformative politics is at the core of queer politics in the 1990s and later. The motive of radical contestation is also analysed in chapter six in relationship to the work of Judith Halberstam and Lee Edelman.

There is no direct link between Goodman's and Cory's political uses of "queer" and activists and academics who, a generation later, used the term for their political purposes. Goodman and Cory were, however, important figures in their time and by their radical stance they influenced the political history of sexual minorities. They were progenitors of queer as a political concept.

1.3 Stonewall: homosexuality as a political issue

During the 1960s discussions on sexuality were brought into mainstream public debates, and here the role of the hippie movement cannot be overestimated. An important debate during that

decade concerned interracial marriage. It ended with the 1967 Supreme Court decision ruling unconstitutional any ban on interracial marriage. That debate was important as far as it politicized the institution of marriage. Nevertheless, even during the 60s many would claim that sexuality was not an issue that politics should be preoccupied with.

Paul Goodman was an exceptional voice during the 1960s and 1970s. He wrote explicitly on sexual orientation and sexual practices as political issues. His reflection on sexuality as a political matter was a rare voice during the time, particularly considering that Goodman not only wrote academic texts but was also engaged in various political movements of the time. With the exception of Goodman and several other individuals sexual orientation was not highly politicized until the end of the 1960s.

According to John D’Emilio (1992) homosexuality was not a highly debated political problem in the US at least until the second part of the twentieth century. Even homosexuals themselves did not consider their sexual activities to be the basis for a political stand. There were no major gay and lesbian organizations until the late 1960s and the existing ones were rather local platforms for socializing than organizations with an explicitly political agenda. Nevertheless, these small organizations and a few activists and intellectuals from the 1950s and 1960s played an important role in forming a basis for the subsequent political engagement of gays and lesbians.

An important political movement of sexual minorities arose around the end of the 1960s. Several factors influenced it and the historical situation at the time was a good background for yet one more protest movement. Many authors claim that the groundbreaking event that initiated the movement was the Stonewall riots. Margaret Cruikshank, for instance, suggests in her book *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement* (1993) that the Stonewall riots symbolically started a new political movement for homosexuals. Jeffrey Escoffier in *American Homo* (1998) also observes: “After the 1969 Stonewall riots, a homosexual emancipation movement emerged” (Escoffier 1998, 58). It is Stonewall that marks the emergence of the community in the sense that after the riots many people felt united under a single identity. This identity was based on sexual orientation but it went beyond that and became the basis for political opinions, lifestyles and a specific culture. Sexual minorities organized themselves in order to combat homophobia, to gain visibility, and to influence politics. They shared particular ideas and values. In other words, being homosexual was no longer merely about sexual activities. Indeed, homosexuality became an identity and a political category in a manner that it had never before been witnessed in history. What started to appear at the end of the 1960s was an immense production of knowledge, norms, cultural codes and different forms of

communities. David Carter, who focuses on the significance of the riots, claims in *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution* (2004) that the event had a huge impact not only on homosexuals but on the whole of American society and on the politics of that time and later.

John D’Emilio emphasizes in several of his books (e.g. 1992 and 2002) that, although Stonewall has an immense symbolic meaning in gay and lesbian history and the cultural imaginary, it did not appear instantly. Up to that point, several homophile organizations had been working on getting homosexuality removed from the list of mental disorders and to decriminalize it. Moreover, already in the 1960s in large cities in the U.S., there were lesbian and gay communities that were active politically. In his writing, D’Emilio aims at highlighting the background which made Stonewall possible. Nevertheless even he, a historian of the pre-Stonewall homosexual movement in the United States, acknowledges that: “Stonewall initiated a qualitatively different phase of gay and lesbian politics” (D’Emilio, 1992, 85). D’Emilio emphasizes that when considering Stonewall as a groundbreaking event in the history of the homosexual movement, we need to situate it in the earlier homophile movement and in the political atmosphere of the 1960s:

The Stonewall Riot in New York in June 1969 was able to inspire a nationwide grass-roots liberation movement of gay men and lesbians because of the mass radical movements that preceded it. Black militants provided a model of an oppressed minority that rejected assimilation and aggressively transformed their “stigma” into a source of pride and strength. The New Left, antiwar movement, and student movement popularized a critique of American society and a confrontational style of political action. The counterculture encouraged the rejection of the values and lifestyles of the middle class, especially its mores. Above all, the women’s liberation movement provided a political analysis of sex roles and sexism. (D’Emilio, 1992, 85)

D’Emilio stresses that although the modern political gay and lesbian movement begun with Stonewall, it has a contingent background. He points out that no social movement emerges from a social or political vacuum. During the 1960s, many politically engaged radical social groups were connected. D’Emilio also states that many activists of the early gay and lesbian liberation movement were previously active in other leftist and antiwar groups and they gained experience in activism by participating in these groups. Based on D’Emilio’s work, it is clear that the emergence of the gay and lesbian political movement, which was marked by the Stonewall riots, was the fruit of the political atmosphere of the 1960s.

The enduring significance of the Stonewall riots has been remarkable. As D’Emilio writes: “The Stonewall Riots has come to assume mythic proportions among gay men and lesbians” (D’Emilio 1992, 239). The riots became the topic of countless publications and several movies. The Stonewall Inn was a bar located at 53 Christopher Street in Greenwich

Village, New York City. The bar was opened in 1967 and became a meeting and cruising place for homosexual men. At the end of the 1960s in New York City, and in many other major cities in the US, the police organized regular raids on venues where homosexuals gathered. Generally, they would make everyone leave the place, and some people would be arrested and often released on the following day. Since approximately 1959, many gay bars were closed and the ones that survived or were newly opened had to pay bribes to the police or to the mafia. On June 28, 1969 when the police raided Stonewall Inn, people responded with violence and resistance to the police intervention. Cruikshank writes: “Stonewall unleashed the fury of those no longer willing to be victims” (Cruikshank 1992, 3). This was the beginning of a few days of riots that became somehow the founding myth of the contemporary LGBT movement.

During November of the same year the first gay pride march took place. From the following year onwards in several big cities in the US, anniversaries of the Stonewall riots were marked by gay pride marches. Politically, these gay marches had a profound meaning. They were organized to demonstrate the presence of sexual minorities to the heterosexual majority. These marches were also a claim on the public space made by gays and lesbians.

The Stonewall riots and the movement that grew out of it have similarities with queer movements. Especially, the issue of access to the public sphere and in general the presence of LGBT people in the public eye was strongly raised by queer activists at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. This was done by different kinds of demonstrations, performances in public spaces and artistic events. In addition, heated debates were held among sexual minorities about forms of participation in the public. This also relates to the issue of identity and representation that would come back in different forms in queer politics and theory. The issue of sexuality and public space has, for instance, been discussed by Lauren Berlant (2007), Shane Phelan (2001) and Michael Warner (2005), who all use the concept of “queer”. Moreover, the political language of early post-Stonewall activists and queer activists, although coined from different terms, bears similarities. As discussed in subsequent chapters, they all shared a similar confrontational and militant rhetoric.

As many authors have noted (e.g. Margaret Cruikshank 1992, Torie Osborn 1997, Eric Marcus 2002, David Carter 2004), Stonewall was an empowering event for sexual minorities in the United States. Soon after the Stonewall riots, the first openly gay and lesbian organization that was explicitly political – the Gay Liberation Front - was established in the U.S.⁴ This was a

⁴ Before the Stonewall riots there were gay and lesbian organizations in the US that are often described as homophile. They were not using the expressions “gay” or “homosexual” and generally they were non-political in terms of their rather closeted character and focus on community building rather than open social activism.

radical organization that, as D'Emilio (1992) observes, aimed at revolutionary, deep structural changes in society. This was a politically utopian organization that wanted to fight capitalism and social injustice. They shaped their aims and language based on the model of the leftist movement, which was popular in the 1960s. Several other authors (Jeffreys 2003, Piontek 2006) suggest that, around the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, no major divisions existed between the different LGBT group members, and that their ideas were not limited to a few practical postulates but reflected the broad ideas of the New Left and of feminism. I tend to think that this claim might require future research and investigation as many authors tend to idealize and romanticize the Stonewall riots. The fact is that these early post-Stonewall organizations were not very big and probably their radical agenda did not reflect political opinions of the majority of the gays and lesbians in the U.S. From my perspective Piontek's suggestion is important, namely that the spirit of immediate post-Stonewall radicalism is echoed in queer activism (Piontek 2006, 23).

Dennis Altman is an academic and an activist whose work was highly influential for the early Gay Liberation Movement. Based on his work, the queer movement seems to be radically distinct from the post-Stonewall movement. In a book entitled *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1971) Altman wrote that the post-Stonewall movement, the new gay liberation is "concerned with the assertion and creation of a new sense of identity, one based on pride in being gay" (Altman 1971, 109). For Altman the term "gay" marks the launching of a new political conscious that is a basis for a distinct social group. This social group or a movement has its political aims. The new "gay" identity, according to Altman, was different from the previous identification with the term "homosexual". Altman is an important author because he writes in the early 1970s from the perspective of an activist and academic. Moreover, his writing is strongly political. Altman argues that the new gay identity should be based on pride and, importantly, it is a distinctive identity comparable to, for instance, class or even ethnic identity. According to him, gay people should be active in the public and open about their sexuality. This sense of political engagement based on a discrete identity was a part of the connotation of "gay". In his book Altman emphasizes that the task of the gay liberation movement is a broad critique of society and its relations. In short, it is not just about rights. Several authors (D'Emilio 1992, Jagose 1996, Jeffreys 2003) find this point an important characteristic of the early post-Stonewall movement.

Decades later Altman maintains his opinion about "gay" although he does not seem to believe in the deep social changes that the gay liberation movement brought to society. Importantly, he is sceptical about political usages of "queer". In *The End of the Homosexual*

(2013) Altman writes that “ ‘queer’ quickly took on a variety of uses, united by the desire to escape specific identities while retaining a sense of opposition to the dominant sexual and gender order” (Altman 2013, 128). I suggest that for Altman, particularly in his publications from recent years, “gay” represents a conceptual opposition to “queer”. He perceives “queer” as a representation of a political utopia of broad alliances and fluid sexuality, whereas “gay” stands for organizational and transformative politics that can have an extensive impact. Altman seems to be critical towards the term “queer”, stating: “There is an irony in the way that queer simultaneously promises a radical sexual politics while denying any specific behaviours or identities, thus allowing anyone to proclaim themselves as queer (...)” (Altman 2013, 133). To me, Altman represents the old school gay activism that focused on the fight for rights and recognition. For him at the heart of lesbian and gay politics should be a sense of distinct identity. Altman’s point about the consequences of using the terms “gay” and “queer” for the politics of sexual minorities is characteristic also for other critics of the term “queer”, such as Elizabeth Grosz (1994) and Sheila Jeffreys (2003). For them the term “queer” is not political as it lacks specific content, instead for these scholars “queer” reflects merely a fantasy of fluid sexuality.

The term “gay” very quickly gained an immense popularity among sexual minorities at the beginning of the 1970s and subsequently thereafter. This does not mean that the term “homosexual” was completely replaced by “gay”. The two terms functioned within different vocabularies and had quite different connotations and often even opposite political consequences. Jagose writes: “A gay identity was a revolutionary identity: what it sought was not social recognition but to overthrow the social institutions which marginalised and pathologised homosexuality” (Jagose 1996, 37). The new term also marked a different relation to the public. After Stonewall, it became very important to be publicly out as gay. In many gay communities of the time it became a type of moral imperative. These early post-Stonewall activists wanted to be visible in public spaces and have the right to be open about their sexuality in public. Moreover, they initiated different campaigns among sexual minorities based on feminist programmes of consciousness-raising. The production of new knowledge was a priority for these activists. Jagose states: “The assertion of homosexuality as politicised identity and insistence on the validity of gay-inflected knowledges are both enabled in the liberationist model by an emphasis on ‘coming out’ and consciousness-rising” (Jagose 1996, 38).

The Stonewall riots were also very important for the reason that not only did this event symbolically introduce new forms of activism and strongly politicized homosexuality and

sexuality in general, but it was also the beginning of the globalization of homosexuality and, in particular, the globalization of the gay and lesbian, and subsequently the LGBT movement. This is the claim that Dennis Altman formulates in his book *The Homosexualization of America, The Americanization of the Homosexual* (1982). Gay and lesbian organizations, predominantly in developed countries, began to cooperate, using a similar political language. The new understanding of community and identity spread rapidly to Europe and beyond.

Following the Stonewall riots, many more organizations began to appear in the United States and in European countries, and soon afterwards the influence of the Stonewall riots reached all of the Western world, marking the emergence of a global gay identity. From the British perspective, Jeffrey Weeks shares Altman's claim on the globalization of a particular political vision of homosexuality after Stonewall. Weeks writes: "The American influence post-Stonewall has swept the world, giving rise to a hegemonic notion of what the modern homosexual is, or should be" (Weeks 2000, 241). Even if, considered merely as a historical event, the Stonewall riots did not have direct implications for general politics, as a symbol it marked the time of globalization of a homosexual identity and a very strong politization of homosexuality, particularly but not exclusively in the Western world.

Therefore, the Stonewall incident symbolically represents the beginning of modern homosexuality as a distinct subculture which gained visibility during the 1970s. This subculture began to describe itself in terms that were often borrowed from other minorities, particularly from ethnic minorities. An important point is that, compared to previous homophile organizations, Stonewall marks the beginning of a radically different movement. Jagose writes about Stonewall activists: "They articulated notions of self-determination. They were militant in their expression of political disquiet" (Jagose 1996, 31).

I do not suggest that there is a straight line connecting queer activism in the gay liberation movement. Clearly, the gay liberation movement is a pre-condition of a new generation of activists that came about at the end of the 1980s. The language of these activists was partly inspired by the radical rhetoric of the gay liberation movement but the new movement came also out of disappointment with this language that at its heart had "gay" as a quasi-ethnic identity concept.

1.4 After the Stonewall riots and before the HIV crisis

D'Emilio writes: "On the eve of Stonewall, some fifty gay and lesbian movement groups existed; by the end of 1973, there were upwards of a thousand" (D'Emilio 1992, 244). After 1969, according to D'Emilio, new organizations appeared very quickly, as did lesbian and gay magazines, books, community services and even companies that were offering their services to

gay and lesbian clients. These new organizations and groups shaped the contemporary vision of homosexuality and provided people with a sense of community and identity.

After the Stonewall riots, homosexuality strongly entered politics through the appropriation of the language of leftist organizations and feminism and subsequently also of human rights that began to be used by the main organizations of that time, such as the Gay Liberation Front or the Gay Activists Alliance. In his classic book, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement* (1987), Barry Adam highlights the importance of the Stonewall riots by noticing that within two years following the riots interest in political activism, particularly in lobbying for gay rights, emerged among different lesbian and gay groups in most American cities and in many other Western countries (Adam 1987, 89).

From the beginning of the 1970s new LGBT organizations began to be established very quickly. Unlike those before Stonewall, these organizations were not only social groups, but they had explicit political agendas as well. More and more gay newspapers and magazines began to be published and discussions on homosexuality also entered the mainstream media such as national television stations, major newspapers and magazines, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Newsweek* (Escoffier 1998, 118-141).

Perhaps politically the most significant change in the 1970s, something that might be considered to be a key point in the Stonewall riots' legacy, was that sexual minorities started claiming their place in the public space and in major public political debates. For example, the annual Gay Pride Marches spread to many cities in the US and even abroad. Sexual minorities also started organizing other public demonstrations and happenings. In other words, homosexuality became a political identity that has been publicly manifested in the Western world since 1969, particularly in the major cities.

My study is a story about terms, particularly about the term "queer". Therefore I see the change from "homosexual" to "gay" not merely as a substitution of one word for another. When there is a conceptual change in politics, it has various consequences that exceed language. In the case of an appropriation of "gay" for political purposes, it was a deep conceptual transformation that brought also new forms of political activism. In the new "gay" political discourse one can notice the appropriation of the language used by Afro-Americans and by other ethnic minorities in the U.S. In addition, the discourse of rights was used for the purpose of public debates and political lobbying as well as for the purpose of creating solidarity among the community. Jeffrey Weeks (2000) also points out the sense of new political self-understanding emerged that from the end of the 1960s in the U.S. and Europe:

The social movements concerned with sexuality that have emerged since the 1960s, the feminist and lesbian and gay movements especially, implicitly assume that it is through social involvement and collective action that individuality can be realized and identity affirmed. (Weeks 2000, 184)

The new identity, “gay”, that appeared at the end of the 1960s was cultivated by different practices that were symbolic as well as concrete. The process of building this identity was at the collective level but it also created a means of identifying individually with a set of values, norms and political ideals. Moreover, as Cruikshank argues, this new identity was deeply political⁵. Crucial in this context was emergence of new non-governmental organizations and community centres that were often located in city centres.

It is noteworthy that the term “gay” rapidly started to be used in other countries, even non-English speaking ones. The term travelled fast beyond any geographical borders and by the 1970s was appropriated in many Western countries and subsequently even in other places in the world.

During the course of the 1970s sexual minorities were not able to develop a political agenda that would be satisfying for multiple agents participating in the movement and the movements started dividing. As John D’Emilio writes: “The gay male subculture expanded and became increasingly visible in large cities, and lesbian-feminists pioneered in building alternative institutions and an alternative culture that attempted to embody a liberatory vision of the future” (D’Emilio 1993, 467). Along with D’Emilio, several other authors mention the divisions among the sexual minorities that emerged strongly during the 1970s and 1980s.

Mark Blasius in *Gay and Lesbian Politics* (1994) states: “From World War II until the Stonewall Riots of 1969, when this repression was greatest, lesbians and gay men worked together in the same or allied organizations” (Blasius 1994, 102). Blasius adds that soon after Stonewall, intensive debates and divisions took place among the different communities of LGBT people. This means that it was no longer one community but various groups with competing political agendas and ideas about sexuality and politics. These groups were often engaged in passionate arguments. Jeffreys also comments that the post-Stonewall time was marked by “withdrawal of lesbians in large numbers from gay liberation, in order to concentrate their energies on lesbian feminism” (Jeffreys 2003, 16). Jagose, adds to this picture the following claim: “Initially gay liberation understood its own goals to mesh with these of other social movements and assumed that the different liberationist struggles of the counter-

⁵ About her use of the term “gay” Cruikshank specifies: “In this book “gay” is used to signify homosexuals and homosexual life after Stonewall; it is a political term” (Cruikshank 1992, 3).

culture were connected” (Jagose 1996, 34). Nevertheless, this did not last long and Jagose notices that heated debates divided sexual minorities. The authors quoted above observe that although immediately after the Stonewall riots there was a strong impulse to jointly act for a broad social change, already in the 1970s, different groups of sexual minorities perceived their aims, strategies, and even their identities and communities as being radically different from each other. For example, many lesbians thought that, as women, they were much more connected to feminism than to the gay and lesbian movements in which they were underrepresented or misrepresented. Furthermore, many activists thought that the connection with leftist organizations and ideas was too strong because they perceived the radical left as utopian, and they therefore wanted to focus on more pragmatic political aims and strategies. The term “gay” provided provisional ground for a broad identification and political action but very soon this term became a label for the mainstream of middle class lesbians and gays. As early as the 1970s among many smaller groups of sexual minorities, there was a sense of disillusion about the politics pursued under the name of “gay” and many divisions emerged, formed on various grounds.

D’Emilio writes that the radicalism of the early post-Stonewall activists did not last long and in the 1970s two main political currents that dominated sexual minorities activism up to the time of the AIDS crisis developed. These were: “a gay right movement, largely male in composition and reformist in its political orientation; and lesbian feminism, an initially radical movement that became increasingly utopian with the passage of time” (D’Emilio 1992, 246). According to D’Emilio, gay organizations such as the Gay Activists Alliance or the National Gay Task Force were single-issue NGOs that completely focused on the problems of homosexuals. These NGOs were able to address mostly problems of middle class homosexuals from big cities and present them in the national media to a broader audience. To accomplish this, they partly adopted a language of pride but instead of talking about liberation, they preferred to focus on the issues of rights. Some of their main priorities was increasing visibility and creating a positive image of homosexual people in U.S. society. These organizations did not have broad ideas concerning deeper changes in the society and they offered no thorough critique of American society.

Contrary to these major organizations, lesbians created smaller groups in the 1970s that focused on community building. Many of them did not want to be included into mainstream society but cultivated ideas of separatism. D’Emilio claims that most of the lesbian organizations never built a coherent political agenda: “Community-building, in other words, has eclipsed political engagement” (D’Emilio 1992, 254). Whereas they wanted to combat

sexism and male domination, they did not have many practical political claims like those of the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) or National Gay Task Force (NGTF). Lesbian communities cultivated utopian radical leftist ideas and many of them rejected any participation in major campaigns for rights and inclusion of sexual minorities.

During the 1980s, the term “gay”, for many, represented predominantly values and lifestyles of the middle class white male urban subculture. The term did not carry any more early post-Stonewall radicalism. Politically, it was used to build a positive image of sexual minorities in U.S. society. “Gay” functioned within the rhetoric of human rights and as such was used by organizations of the time for political lobbying purposes.

I argue that the subsequent queer movement appeared in opposition to the major gay and lesbian organizations that emerged during the 1970s. The queer movement emerged because many activists had perceived most important gay and lesbian organizations as too exclusive and they were no longer able to represent the variety of problems that the members of the sexual minorities communities encountered. The term “gay” became a mark of these mainstream organizations, and people who were disappointed with the politics of these organizations searched for other terms to describe themselves. In the late 1980s “queer” was used as a sign of new radicalism and for many it would represent an opposition to “gay”.

1.5 Gay, lesbian and feminist thought after Stonewall

When analysing the conceptual history of “queer”, it is important to look not only into the political activism of sexual minorities, but also into the development of gay and lesbian and feminist thought from the end of the 1960s to the end of the 1980s. Here I will highlight a few important authors and some of the ideas that were politically potent for sexual minorities during the advent of “queer”.

Beginning in the 1970s in the U.S., courses in Women’s Studies and subsequently, in Gay and Lesbian Studies began to be introduced into the curricula at major universities. According to Escoffier (1998), during the 1970s there was an explosion of new publications concerning sexual minorities. Most of these publications came from universities though outside universities LGBT topics were discussed as well. Many of these publications reflected the current state of the LGBT community and the internal debates within this community. The 1970s brought in an interest in gay and lesbian history. A significant number of these projects focusing on the history of sexual minorities were carried out at universities but even more were conducted within the communities. Similarly, in addition to academic publications, there were many other books, leaflets and magazines that analysed the histories of gay and lesbian people. Duggan (2006 [1986]) states that for lesbians the crucial event during the 1970s was the

foundation of Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York in June 1975. She adds that, during that time, several periodicals developed a historical consciousness among gays and lesbians: “Newspapers and periodicals, such as Boston’s *Gay Community News* and Toronto’s *Body Politic*, have promoted historical awareness as an integral part of the building of gay politics and community” (Duggan 2006 [1986], 138).

Following Escoffier’s and D’Emilio’s research, I will highlight here a few publications from between the 1970s and 1980s, a time that is crucial for the development of the large-scale organized movement of sexual minorities in the U.S. Many of these publications were formative for the new generation of gays. In his book *American Homo*, Escoffier sees a very strong link between the community and academia. However, he might slightly overestimate the influence of academic publications on the formation of gay and lesbian communities. There is no straightforward relationship between publications and the development of new ideas within communities. Often communities initiated new thoughts that were subsequently described in publications. Nevertheless, particularly for minorities, academic research and publications concerning them can be strongly influential, sometimes even disturbing, but rarely indifferent. As for the sexual minorities in the US during the 1970s, the formation of new organisations and communities was definitely interconnected with new publications and research that was ongoing at the same time.

According to Escoffier, until the mid 1980s, much of the new gay and lesbian knowledge production took place outside academia. Among the important issues discussed in the 1970s within the LGBT communities were problems involving coming out, identity and the history of homosexuality. In several of the essays in *American Homo*, Escoffier states that the 1970s were marked by a powerful call from the communities to come out and to engage socially and politically.

Escoffier claims that an important impulse for gay and lesbian thought came from leftist intellectuals such as Herbert Marcuse (*Eros and Civilization* published in the US in 1955, and reprinted multiple times during the 1960s). The 1960s in the US also brought with it an interest in Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. As a result, several of his important works on sexuality were translated and published in the US during that time, e.g. *Civilization and its Discontents* (1962), and *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1962).

Escoffier (1998) and Weeks (2000) mention the publication of an article “Homosexual Role” (1968) by Mary McIntosh as a breakthrough for contemporary gay and lesbian studies. In addition, Jeffreys (2003) and Jagose (1997) suggest, but without explicitly mentioning McIntosh, that social constructivism and the contestation of gender roles were among the main

theoretical standpoints shared by activists at the time of Stonewall and shortly afterwards. McIntosh claims that homosexuality is not an essential or natural condition but rather a social role, and to understand homosexuality one needs to focus not only on sexual acts exclusively, but much more on the social construction of gender roles. For Jagose, the critique of gender categories by early post-Stonewall activists is an important link with the queer movement. Jagose states: “denaturalization of gender is perhaps the most compelling connection between liberationists and later queer theories” (Jagose, 1996, 43).

In his book *American Homo*, Escoffier mentions two more publications that he considered to be “extremely influential” for the formation of the LGBT community at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. These are: *Life against Death* (1959) by Norman O. Brown and *Growing up Absurd* (1960) by Paul Goodman. The orientation of these two books was a leftist sensitivity and although they did not focus directly on homosexuality, they had a major impact on homosexuals for the reason that these works commented on the repression of sexuality and the need for political resistance.

The publications that followed in the 1970s were explicitly focused on homosexuality. Dennis Altman published *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* in 1971, the focus of the book being on coming out. Interestingly, coming out became the key motif of LGBT politics throughout the 1970s and 1980s. As Altman argues, coming out is seen as an identity-building strategy and it also politicizes gay identity. This book is crucial for that moment in time because, as Weeks notes, it was “about forging a new language of homosexual politics” (Weeks 2000, 76). It is important to note that Altman writes from the perspective that was available just after the Stonewall riots. He is very political and discusses the gay community, identity and normativity. For Weeks that was the book that was responsible for the popularization of the radical sexual agenda during the 1970s.

It might be that Weeks overestimates the meaning of Altman’s book. He tends to see the influence of Altman on the work of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, although none of these authors mention explicitly Altman’s work. Weeks interprets Altman’s focus on homosexual roles as being a type of pre-performativity theory. To Weeks, there is a link between queer politics and theory and Altman’s work: “The spirit of some of the radical queer politics is, in fact, remarkably close to that of early gay liberation, as expressed in Altman’s book” (Weeks 2000, 83). Whichever way we interpret *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, it is clear that this book is one of the crucial publications of the 1970s that shaped LGBT thought and politics. Many other authors who focus on the contemporary history of the

LGBT movement, such as Plummer (1992),⁶ Cruikshank (1992), and Escoffier (1998), find Altman's work crucial for the formation of LGBT community and politics.

During the same time, the 1970s, several works focusing on the history of homosexuality were published. According to Escoffier, the most important one was *Gay American History* (1976) by Jonathan Ned Katz. He is a distinct writer of that time for the reason that, as Escoffier puts it: "Katz adopted a contradictory approach, on the one hand presenting a history of homosexuals as a distinct and fixed minority and on the other espousing the radical historicism that all homosexuality is situational" (Escoffier 1998, 61). Duggan also highlights the importance of Katz's work:

The appearance of John Katz's pioneering *Gay American History* in 1976 inspired a bevy of researchers to dig out records of the lesbian and gay past in conventional libraries and manuscript collections, while institutions like the Lesbian Herstory Archive provided a model for subsequent efforts to collect materials from previously untapped sources. (Duggan 2006 [1986], 137).

Some of the Women Studies programmes that appeared during the 1970s at U.S. universities also included courses concerning homosexuality. Nevertheless, the exchange between women's studies and gay and lesbian thought was limited for a long time, up to the end of the 1980s, for the reason that women's studies were so strongly focused on theorizing gender and not as extensively on sexuality. For many frontiers of the new gay and lesbian movement, a focus on sexuality and a distance from gender perspective was crucial for the reason that theories of gender seem to justify the hypothesis of inversion that was seen in the 1970s as repressive for homosexuals since the late 19th century. Altman, for instance, writes:

Indeed it is only in the past two decades that the Western understanding of homosexuality has become largely divorced from gender – that is, that lesbians are seen as other than women who want to be men, and male homosexuals as other than effeminate men wanting to be women. These changes were expressed in the creation of gay/lesbian communities and political movements since the 1970s in most Western countries. (Altman 2001, 101)

It also seems to be clear in Butler's essay "Against Proper Objects" (1997) that the strong emphasis on gender was a problem for many interested in gay and lesbian studies and for many members of the LGBT communities. Nevertheless, the feminist focus on the concept of difference and its impact on the formation of debates within the community in the 1980s cannot be overestimated. During the 1980s, many gay and lesbian scholars (Wittig 1982, Crimp 1982,

⁶ Ken Plummer in *Modern Homosexualities* (1992) writes: "The most prominent early text of gay male theory was Denis Altman's (1971) *Homosexual: Liberation/Oppression*, which set up a range of debates to be constantly refined over the next twenty years." (Plummer 1992, 6)

Rubin 1984, Bersani 1988),⁷ particularly the radical ones, were interested in theorizing sexuality, with a strong emphasis on different sexual practices, rather than on the traditional topic for feminism, namely gender oppression. In 1985, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick published *Between Men*. This book broke away from the historical and anthropological tendencies that were strongly present in gay and lesbian studies up to the 1980s. Moreover, it also took a step away from the language of equality and rights. Instead, it proposed something that was peculiar for that time, the theorization of desire based on American literary criticism, French philosophy and psychoanalysis.

During the end of the 1970s and in the 1980s many books and articles by Michel Foucault were translated into English and published in the U.S. The most important for gay and lesbian thought was the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, published in English in 1978. It might come as a surprise to some that neither Escoffier nor Weeks or Duggan find Foucault to be particularly important in the formation of LGBT thought and politics. These authors merely mention Foucault a few times in their books but they do not offer a detailed analysis of his influence, nor do they highlight his importance. The influence of Foucault's thought becomes clear only during the 1990s, when many authors who use the term "queer" mention Foucault.

Lynne Huffer (2010) emphasizes that from the end of the 1970s and particularly in the 1980s Michel Foucault's writing increasingly influenced gay and lesbian activists and particularly theorists. As other authors do not confirm this claim, I am slightly sceptical towards this point. Nevertheless, it is clear that the influence of Foucault was slowly growing. It is possible that Huffer exaggerates Foucault's impact on the movement during the 1980s, but already in the 1990s Foucault was widely known among not only gay and lesbian academics but also among activists. Importantly, Huffer sees a direct link between Foucault's writing and the development of the concept of queer in American academia. Certainly, some gay and lesbian theorists read Foucault in the 1980s but historians of the homosexual movement such as Weeks, Escoffier, D'Emilio or Duggan, do not acknowledge Foucault's influence to be particularly important.

⁷ The texts that I refer to here are all articles that appeared in the 1980s and were very influential for later queer theorists. The authors distance themselves from the feminist perspective of theorizing gender oppression and search for new ways of theorizing sex and desire. Wittig, Monique; "The Category of Sex" in *Feminist Issues* (Fall 1982): 63-68; Crimp, Douglas; "Fassbinder, Franz, Fox, Elvira, Ervin, Armin and All the Others" in *October* 21 (Summer 1982): 63-81; Rubin, Gayle; "Thinking Sex" in Carole Vance, ed. *Pleasure and Danger*, Routledge 1984; Bersani, Leo; "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in Douglas Crimp, ed. *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*. MIT Press 1988.

According to Jeffreys (2003), what became a line of division between feminism and the gay movement from the 1970s on was the stronger emphasis on gender by feminists, and subsequently several other political differences arrived. Jagose (1996) agrees partly with this claim, and she also states that for many lesbians since the 1970s, the main category of identification was gender and not sexuality. However, what Jeffreys describes as the general trend of that time, for Jagose it represents instead a sidetrack of lesbian feminism. She claims that there were many lesbians during the 1970s and 1980s who favoured coalitional politics and that they postulated theories that focused on the relationship between gender, sexuality and the mechanisms of oppression. Examples of this lesbian thought can be found in essays by Wittig from the 1980s (Wittig 1992) and in the influential book by Diana Fuss entitled *Essentially Speaking* (1989). Moreover, for Duggan, the influence of feminist thought from the 1980s is crucial for the emergence of the concept of queer. She claims: “It is precisely from within feminist theory, however, that a “queer” critique of the dominant categories of sexuality and gender is emerging most imaginatively and persuasively” (Duggan 2006 [1991], 160). In this context, Duggan considers Teresa de Lauretis and her work *Technologies of Gender* (1987) to be the most influential contribution to the new way of thinking about sexuality that later developed into queer thought. Furthermore, other authors from the 1980s mentioned by Duggan as being examples of radical thinkers, who disrupted the opposition between academia and activism but also overcame the theories of gender oppression and, therefore, created the necessary space for queer politics are Gloria Anzaldua, Kobena Mercer, Douglas Crimp and Gayle Rubin.

Jeffreys states that there was little exchange between the gay and lesbian movement and the lesbian/feminist movement, as the gay and lesbian movement that began in the 1970s, came to be dominated by gay men, while lesbians were not properly represented in that movement. Moreover, Jeffreys claims that the differences were much deeper than the problem of the proper representation of lesbians in the gay and lesbian movement. In *Unpacking Queer Politics* Jeffreys writes from the position of a feminist. She states that for her and for many others like her, and supposedly for every lesbian that is a true lesbian and not indoctrinated by the liberal system or by male domination, the emphasis in political struggle is not so much on sexual freedom, but on combating male domination. Jeffreys represents a radically normative feminist thought that had an impact on feminist debates during the 1980s. One of their main aims in the 1980s was also to achieve a ban on pornography. Jeffreys’ work is a good example of how polarized the political standpoints among sexual minority groups were during the 1980s.

At this point, heated debates and divisions arouse within feminism. These are described by Duggan and Hunter as “Sex Wars”. D’Emilio describes this as follows:

The pornography issue sparked an acrimonious debate within the lesbian community – and among feminists more generally – about a broad spectrum of sexual matters. As some lesbians expressed reservation about the pornography crusade, they found their “credentials” as lesbian-feminists questioned. (D’Emilio 1992, 260)

Many lesbians in the 1980s also found traditional feminism to be too conservative and restrictive. Duggan describes their radical position as always being in favour of freedom of sexual expression. She and many other lesbian feminists were against feminist campaigns against pornography, claiming that pornography is a complex issue and in many cases, it can even be transgressive (Duggan, Hunter, Vance [1985] 2006, 43-64).

D’Emilio (1992) mentions that until the 1970s, gays and lesbians of colour were neither properly represented in organizations nor in the publications of that time. In the 1970s, only a few small organizations focused on sexual minorities of colour. According to D’Emilio, only at the end of the 1970s did the bigger organizations begin to be more aware of the distinct problems of gays and lesbians of colour. The first academic and non-academic publications addressing the experience and identity of gays and lesbians of colour date from about the same time.

Altman and Escoffier claim that during the 1970s, most LGBT knowledge production was outside academia. There were independent LGBT media where community intellectuals published and where debates took place that shaped the community. Many authors (Plummer 1992, Weeks 2000, Altman 2001) suggest that the early 1970s was a time of community building and most publications focused on this aspect. At the end of the 1970s, more thorough research on homosexuality at universities and also more publications about LGBT minorities began to address the heterosexual majority. In addition, more publications started to address diversity among sexual minorities and divisions among them.

The first major academic conference focusing exclusively on homosexuality took place in 1973 in New York. In 1974 the *Journal of Homosexuality* was founded. Predominantly, but not exclusively, it presented psychological research on homosexuality. In addition, some other academic journals, such as *Social Problems*, were more open to topics related to sexual minorities. Escoffier writes that the first Center for Gay and Lesbian Studies was established at Yale University in 1986. After that, several other leading American universities started organizing study programmes and conferences that focused on sexual minorities.

Undisputedly, in the advent of “queer” the lesbian thought of the 1980s provided the LGBT movement with a sophisticated intellectual cultural critique. Plummer credits Adrienne Rich for “the most developed theoretical analysis of homosexuality” (Plummer 1992, 6). Indeed, Rich’s concept of compulsory heterosexuality (1980) was influential for many of the queer persuasion. Moreover, the first publications by Teresa de Lauretis date from the 1980s. At the same time, there was a decline of what Escoffier characterizes as the post-Stonewall generation.

1.6 Just before “queer”

Escoffier reports in *American Homo* that during the 1970s there were lesbian and gay organizations in almost every American city. They began as community organizations but slowly they started political lobbying and acted to increase the visibility of homosexuals in American society. In the 1980s, there were a fair number of local LGBT organizations and there were also a few on the national level. A former ACT UP activist, Deborah Gould, claims that among many national lesbian and gay organizations there was a lack of what she calls “oppositional politics,” these organizations, instead, became very good in political lobbying and media campaigns (Gould 2009, 118). In the 1980s, although conservatism was growing, LGBT communities began to appear in the main national media and even in television series. Jagose (1996) describes the dominant pattern of gay and lesbian communities during the 1970s and 1980s as the ethnic model:

Constructed as analogous to an ethnic minority – that is, as a distinct and identifiable population, rather than a radical potentiality for all – lesbians and gays can demand recognition and equal rights within the existing social system. (Jagose 1996, 61)

They adopted strategies that the black movement used in their struggles and they were partly successful in achieving greater visibility and broader social tolerance, particularly for white middle class gays and lesbians living in big cities. Gays and lesbians were more present in the mainstream media in the U.S. and the organizations that represented them were gaining political influence.

Nevertheless, for many members of sexual minority communities, the ethnic model of identity was normative and limiting. They found the focus of major LGBT organizations on identity too limiting; moreover, many found that these organizations were promoting a narrow representation of homosexuals.

Another critical issue for the politics of sexual minorities of the time was the AIDS crisis. In the 1980s “gay” politics, which was preoccupied with building identity and raising the visibility of homosexuals in public was unable to answer to the sudden rise of conservatism and

issues related to HIV/AIDS. The AIDS crisis made it even clearer that the political vocabulary developed around the term “gay” was insufficient when facing not only the real illness and death of people from AIDS-related infections but AIDS as a cultural plague. The language of lesbian and gay organizations of the time was too focused on issues related to identity building, representation and human rights that it proved to be incapable of addressing new challenges such as access to health care for people infected with HIV. There was a need for a different type of political action and a different rhetoric that would respond to the cultural stigmatization of people with AIDS.

It seems that during the 1980s, most of the sexual minority organizations and communities were not as radical as the early post-Stonewall activists. This radicalism I understand here as a broad utopian political agenda that aims at redefining the society and very term of social interaction. In the 1980s many NGOs adopted politics of small steps that focused on dealing with cases of explicitly discriminatory laws and practices. Although there were already some debates concerning inclusion and representation of people of colour, these organizations generally addressed problems of middle class people in big cities.

D’Emilio states that AIDS had an immense impact on the sexual minority communities in the USA. “The virus, which struck the gay male community with special force, has thoroughly reshaped lesbian and gay politics” (D’Emilio 1992, 262). D’Emilio claims that AIDS caused a huge mobilization among the members of sexual minority communities, which had not been seen since Stonewall. This also resulted in new links and networks. Moreover, for people with AIDS, it was very difficult to remain closeted. D’Emilio writes that more people came out because of the AIDS crisis and consequently, gay and lesbian organizations became more diverse and mixed. Upper-middle class people together with the low-classes sought help and support at community centres and joined in protests against the government. New grass-roots organizations began to appear among which the most important was ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), which was founded in 1987.

During the Reagan administration, when faced with growing conservatism in American society, many lesbians decided to join campaigns, protest and finally found organizations that supported people with AIDS. D’Emilio writes:

Politically, lesbian-feminism offered sharper analytical tools for comprehending the full significance of the AIDS epidemic from its earliest years. The confrontation with sexism that was at the heart of feminism made most lesbian activists – whether separatist, reformist, or somewhere in between – acutely conscious of the systemic nature of oppression. Few had ever bought the notion, common in gay rights politics, that minor adjustments in law and public policy would bring freedom. (D’Emilio 1992, 264)

Another problem for activists of that time was that the strongly right-wing U.S. government was less willing to create and maintain a dialogue with sexual minorities, and as a result, many thought that it was a time for stronger action than merely lobbying.

HIV/AIDS activism took many forms. For example, there were small community organizations that provided care and mental support. Then there were other organizations which were trying to gain access to the national media in order to attract greater attention from the public towards AIDS. Finally, there were the different networks between NGOs, doctors, informal organizations and individuals. The most important organization focusing on HIV/AIDS was ACT UP.

It is important to note that AIDS was not only a deadly disease that required medical help and funding for clinical research, it was also a cultural problem. In a widely-quoted essay from 1987 Paula A. Treichler calls AIDS “an epidemic of signification” (Treichler 1987, 263-305). Many religious groups used it as an opportunity to get publicity for the conservative values that the American society was more prone to, and the fear of AIDS became a potential catalyst. Furthermore, AIDS had an immense impact on the LGBT communities. Suddenly sex became risky and dangerous, and the community had to rethink its approach to sex and develop safer sex practices. Thus, as Piontek writes, AIDS was a defining point for gay male history (Piontek 2006, 30).

According to Jagose, it was the AIDS crisis and the various theoretical debates of the time that generated the concept of “queer” and its political power. Jagose observes:

If post-structuralist theory can be claimed as a part of the context of queer, then queer’s emergence as a diacritical term can be linked just as plausibly to developments outside – but not discrete from – the academy. The most frequently cited context for queer in this sense is the network of activism and theory generated by the AIDS epidemic, parts of which have found that queer offers a rubric roomy and assertive enough for political intervention. (Jagose 1996, 93)

The AIDS crisis required a response not only in the form of a new radical activism, but also new conceptual tools in the form of new theories that would be able to face the cultural phenomenon that AIDS created in the United States. Many essays and books that dealt with this issue began to be published at the end of the 1980s. Perhaps the most famous of these was the essay *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1988) by Susan Sontag. Moreover, in the context of the advent of the concept of “queer”, essays by Simon Watney and Douglas Crimp were also essential for the reason that they provided theoretical links between academia and activism and they analysed AIDS as a broad cultural and political problem.

In my opinion, AIDS and the growing homophobia in American society during the 1980s forced sexual minority communities to again cooperate but at the same time, the differences among the various communities were seen as a very important development of the gay and lesbian movement since the Stonewall riots. For many, the concept of “queer” was seen as the term that would build a basis for joint activism without annihilating the differences between sexualities, genders, races and classes. Furthermore, the AIDS crisis required a comprehensive answer. Sexual minorities needed organizations that would campaign for access to medication and health care for HIV positive people, there was a need to fight cultural stigma, and finally there was a need to open debates about internal exclusions among sexual minorities. For many, “queer” as a political concept was sufficiently powerful to be used in public demonstrations, rallies and pickets and to unite people around this term. In other words, for many radical activists of the time the term “gay” did not seem to be convincing enough to face the AIDS crisis.

1.7. The influence of new cultural studies

In the 1970s, what is referred to as French theory became popular in U.S. academia. Previously, there were not as many translations of French philosophical texts into English and the few Americans who were fluent in French took part in the discussions concerning poststructuralism, but these debates were limited to a narrow academic discipline. The situation changed during the 1970s when several translations into English were published in the U.S. One of the most important was *Of Grammatology* by Jacques Derrida translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1976. In addition, several other books and essays by Derrida were translated during the 1970s, namely *Speech and Phenomena* (trans. 1973) and *Writing and Difference* (trans. 1978). Interestingly, several of Derrida’s translations were made by feminist scholars such as Spivak, Johnson and Ronell. At the end of the 1970s, a new wave of cultural critique that was influenced by Derrida became popular in English departments at many American universities. Escoffier mentions that this new cultural critique formed a new generation of gay and lesbian scholars in the 1980s.

David Halperin (1995) states that beginning in the 1980s, the ideas of Michel Foucault became increasingly popular, not only among scholars, but also among activists. Foucault’s work was not directly related to the Yale School or to deconstruction but it definitely had some impact on them. Halperin claims that the publication of the translation of *The History of Sexuality* in 1978, and later, the publication of other books and essays by Foucault during the 1980s, made many gays and lesbians more critical towards identity categories, and subsequently this also influenced gay and lesbian activism and scholarship. Although sceptical

towards his theories, even Duggan in one of her essays (1995) mentions Foucault as a figure who began to popularize gay and lesbian topics in American academia in the 1980s.

Even more influential in the 1980s was the Yale School of criticism and more broadly, post-structuralism. For Jagose (1996), post-structuralism created the academic context in which the concept of queer appeared. Along with Derrida, the main representatives of this thought were Paul de Man, Harold Bloom, Jonathan Culler and J. Hillis Miller. The Yale School was predominantly focused on literary criticism, but the next generation of scholars influenced by the Yale School applied these theories to create a broad cultural and political critique. In the 1980s among the young generation of scholars who combined an interest in sexual minorities with poststructural methodology were Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Barbara Johnson, Lee Edelman and D.A. Miller. Many of them later became strongly associated with queer theory. I discuss several of these authors in other chapters.

The Yale School scholars provided tools for a powerful critique of concepts such as natural, origin, norm and identity and they theorized these concepts in relation to literature, although the same concepts were at the heart of gay and lesbian studies and their political struggle. Jagose (1996) suggests that the rhetoric of difference embraced by radical activists at the end of the 1980s was influenced by post-structuralism:

Access to the post-structuralist theorisation of identity as provisional and contingent, coupled with a growing awareness of the limitations of identity categories in terms of political representation, enabled queer to emerge as a new form of personal identification and political organisation. (Jagose 1996, 77)

Jagose also highlights the importance of other French thinkers for gay and lesbian scholarship in the 1980s, and these included Althusser, Barthes, Freud, Lacan and Saussure.

Elizabeth Freedman⁸ (2010) claims that there was a difference between post-Stonewall activists and the new generation of activists that emerged at the end of the 1980s. The crucial aspect was that the appearance of this new wave of activists was not preceded by major mass protest movements and that the cultural context was different. New activists sought new ways to express their protest and disagreement with the political situation. Many of them found art an important means of protest, triggering the production of many new experimental films accompanied by similar trends in photography and theatre. Freeman gives Isaac Julien, Cecilia Dougherty and organizations such as Guerilla Girls and ACT UP as examples of these new activists.

⁸ Freedman argues for this particularly in her Introduction but this perspective is also found in other chapters.

It seems to be clear that in the 1980s, many debates on topics related to sexual minorities, which were previously almost exclusively found within the communities, were introduced into academia. At universities, gay and lesbian topics achieved theoretical sophistication that for some (Escoffier 1998) was a threat to the concrete political action that was required during the AIDS crisis. In other words, deconstruction was a controversial methodological ally for many gay and lesbian scholars, but it proved to be fruitful in producing a large number of studies that presented a new view on the oppression of sexual minorities and on many political issues concerning them. During the 1980s, academia offered a safe place for many gay and lesbian scholars to engage in political debates. In the U.S. minorities had limited access to public political debates during the time of the Reagan presidency, and Weeks (2007) suggests that this might be a reason why many debates within gay and lesbian communities moved to academia and there attained a high theoretical level.

It is difficult to summarize the few moments in the contemporary gay and lesbian movement that were essential to the development of the new political concept of “queer”. I have presented analyses of several historians of the homosexual movement and they seem to have a few points in common. First, the contemporary political movement of sexual minorities symbolically began with the Stonewall riots. This event occupies a special position in the gay political imaginary and therefore several authors, particularly those in favour of the concept of “queer”, stress the connection between the emergence of “queer” as a critical political term and the rebirth of Stonewall energy. For those that are critical towards the use of “queer”, e.g. Jeffreys (2002) and Weeks (2007), there is no such connection.

The change in vocabulary that happened around the time of the Stonewall riots had an immense impact on the movement of sexual minorities. The old term “homosexual” was considered to be too formal and too strongly connected to discourses that considered homosexuality to be a medical condition. The new term “gay” was a call to come out and be active politically. This change in terminology was also a sign of a deeper change in self-identification, in the role and perception of the community, and in political consciousness that was informed by knowledges available during this time.

The new term “queer” reflects mistrust towards the public institutions and political concepts that were dominant during the time. “Queer” never replaced “gay”, primarily because it was never fully accepted by the majority of sexual minority members. The term has been, and remains, controversial for many. The social, cultural and academic context at the end of the 1980s was different from 1969. “Queer” was influenced by the post-Stonewall movement, but people who used it from the end of the 1980s were also aware of the limitations that the utopian

revolutionary movement had in the early 1970s on the one hand, as well as the limitations of the ethnic model of identity and community building that became dominant after Stonewall on the other. Main gay and lesbian organizations conceived of homosexuals as a group that had a specific interest, similar to an ethnic group. This idea was developed during the 1970s but from the final years of the 1980s more and more activists found this model deeply insufficient and they searched for a different ground for their political expression on the level of theory and action.

In the face of the growing conservatism and religious movements in the United States many activists strove to build a broad political platform that could confront the new wave of oppression. As stated by several authors that I have quoted above, there were many heated debates between the different groups of sexual minorities during the 1980s. The LGBT movement and feminism, for example, were very divided and often unable to act together politically. The AIDS crisis required a powerful response from sexual minority communities. AIDS was medically as well as culturally such a shock for the gay male communities that, as Piontek (2006) states, in gay narrations produced after the discovery of AIDS it was common to divide time into before and after the disease. AIDS reshaped the attitude towards sex and community, but it also changed the political attitudes of many gays and lesbians. It would seem that the established gay and lesbian movement with its assimilationist rhetoric of human rights was unable to meet these challenges. “Queer” was, as Duggan writes, “the promise of new meanings, new ways of thinking and acting politically – a promise sometimes realized, sometimes not” (Duggan 2006 [1991], 149). Contrary to Weeks (2007) who states that: “despite an activist flirtation with queer, in Britain queer theory has largely remained confined to the academia (...)” (Weeks 2007, 151), Duggan emphasizes that in the U.S. “queer” was not primarily an academic term, but it emerged at the crossroads of gay and lesbian scholarship and activism. Historically, there was a requirement for new forms of action and thinking that could confront the new problems, but also deal with the existing problems within the gay and lesbian communities, which were strongly divided and barely able to agree on political claims. “Queer” therefore emerged in the context of the internal clashes of sexual minority communities and the fear of AIDS. Adopting “queer” was not an attempt to reunite the different groups under a new umbrella identity, but rather to mobilize them to act together politically.

“Queer” as a political concept did not appear in a conceptual vacuum. The term started to be used as a form of opposition to the more established gay and lesbian movement of the time. Uses of “queer” as a political signifier have been influenced by various factors, among them the most crucial being the AIDS crisis, debates among sexual minorities concerning their

identity, feminist discussions of the time and new theoretical developments in social and cultural criticism in the U.S. academia.

Chapter 2: Queer Activists

In this chapter I focus on the early uses of “queer” as a political concept by activists in the United States. Firstly, I will present three reflections on the term by three activists at the time of the AIDS crisis: Douglas Crimp, Michelangelo Signorile, and Deborah Gould. In the second part of this chapter, I will analyse documents and materials from ACT UP and Queer Nation. In these organizations, “queer” emerged as a political term. I will focus on the political uses of “queer” in various documents published by these organizations, including leaflets, flyers and manifestos. My choice of documents presented in this chapter might seem somewhat accidental. However, my aim has not been to systematically analyse every text of ACT UP and Queer Nation that uses the word “queer”. Instead, I study a selection of texts that exemplify the political uses of “queer”. In the third part of this chapter, I analyse the trajectory of “queer” from AIDS activism into the academia. At that point I will provide examples of academics, such as Lisa Duggan and Lauren Berlant, who in the early 1990s brought “queer” into academic discourses.

I demonstrate that from the end of the 1980s among activists the term “queer” primarily served as a powerful critical tool within the internal debates among sexual minority groups. This chapter brings an insight into the political language of sexual minorities of the time. The most debated issue during this time was the AIDS crisis but “queer” also related to other issues such as identity and representation. There is a rich literature concerning AIDS activism but this chapter does not focus on activism itself but rather on the uses of “queer” among activists. I analyse the context and politics of the application of this term in various discussions.

At certain points in this text, I use a form of hypostasis of the word “queer”, namely when I closely follow the way activists and theorists use the term. In their use, “queer” very often appears as a quasi agent capable of acting on its own, a type of magical spell that has a power to change reality. In the more critical parts, when I do not merely present the sources, but rather try to draw conclusions from them, I focus on the more conceptual aspect of how “queer” functions politically.

I would suggest that the political history of sexual minorities in the U.S. is marked by two major events that defined its course. The first is the Stonewall riots and the second is the AIDS crisis. For me the important aspect is the conceptual change that accompanied these events. The Stonewall riots brought with them a new political language. With its core concept “gay” it slowly substituted previous discourse centred on the word “homosexual”. After 1987 with the ACT UP activists came the second crucial conceptual change. This time the new

political term “queer” came to function in opposition to “gay”. The tension between these two terms was productive and it effected in countless discussions among activists and academics of the time. “Queer” has never replaced “gay”. “Gay” has remained the dominant term in the politics of sexual minorities; “queer” instead has functioned as a word that was often used to challenge gay politics and to offer alternatives to this politics.

2.1 The early story of “queer” as a political term

On April 1st 1991 *Gay Community News* in Boston changed its name to *Queer Community News* and published an issue dedicated to the activist group Queer Nation. The third page of this weekly newspaper contained the article “The Etymology of ‘Queer’”. In the upper corner of the article is a photo showing part of the definition of “queer” from an old dictionary, probably a 19th century dictionary, for the definition has no connection to homosexuality. I quote here the definition from *The Century Dictionary* (1889):

queer 1 (kwer), a. and n. [Formerly also quire; < LG. queer, quer, cross, transverse (> quere, obliquity), = MHG. G. quer. cross, transverse (> quere, obliquity), OHG. MHG. taer, cross, transverse (> twer, obliquity); a variant, without the final guttural, of OHG. dwerah, dwerih, dwereh, dwerh, thwerah, thtrereh, twerh, MHG. dwerch, twerch, G. zwerclt- = AS. thweorh, cross, transverse, = Sw. trar = Dan. trier, cross, obtuse, = Goth. thwairlix, angry, = Icel. thverr, neut. thrert, > ME. thwert, thwart, E. thwart, transverse, transversely: see thwart, which is thus a doublet of queer.] I. a. 1. Appearing, behaving, or feeling otherwise than is usual or normal; odd; singular; droll; whimsical; quaint.⁹

What is interesting is that the author of the article recalls the definition of queer from the 19th century, one which has no reference to sexuality. This reference only appears during the course of the 20th century.

The word “queer” in the English language used to mean “strange” or “weird” and it has quite commonly been used as an abusive term to refer to homosexual people, particularly in the US, but also in other English speaking countries. The dominant semantic element of the word in the 20th century was sexual perversion and beginning in the 1960s it came to be used almost exclusively to describe homosexuals as being abnormal, asocial and perverted. Pupils in schools in the U.S. for example, have used the term “queer” to bully other children whom they suspected of being homosexual. Approximately during the 1960s (but sporadically also earlier), “queer” began to appear in the arts in a more ambiguous semantic position. Its meaning was

⁹ This definition taken from *The Century Dictionary* (1889) is longer in the original, but for the purpose of this text I took only the first part of the definition.

linked to being an outsider or being beyond everyday social norms; it also carried a strong sexual content but the implication was not necessarily morally degrading.¹⁰

Only beginning in the late 1980s did the term “queer” begin to be used more commonly by homosexuals themselves as a specific alternative identification and a political statement. One of the first uses of the term in this new provocative manner appeared as an attempt to address the problem of violence against homosexual people. LGBT organizations coined the expression “queer bashing”, which was promptly adopted by academics in the 1980s, but it seems to be rather a sidetrack to the political uses of this term.

As mentioned earlier, the political use of “queer” began as a response to the AIDS crisis during the 1980s and to the inability of many of the major LGBT organizations in the U.S. to react to it. During the 1970s, many LGBT organizations adopted human rights discourse in political lobbying for gay and lesbian rights, a good example of such an organization being the Human Rights Campaign, founded in 1980. Another leading organization during that time was the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Both of these organizations found the language of human rights to be the most effective tool to achieve a broader acceptance for LGBT people in U.S. society.

In the beginning of the 1980s many LGBT organizations avoided discussing the HIV/AIDS crisis because they were afraid it could damage their public reputation. In addition, in the early 1980s many of the smaller organizations did not know much about HIV and AIDS and were confused about how to address the issue.¹¹ Smaller groups, such as the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, were formed in response to the U.S. government’s ignorance of the problem posed by AIDS.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new generation of activists¹² formed ACT UP and started using “queer” as an affirmative term for identification. Deborah Gould argues:

ACT UP’s intervention posed a powerful challenge to conventional understandings of homosexuality and of sexuality more broadly. Indeed ACT UP gave birth to a new *queer* generation that shook up straight *and* gay establishments with defiant, sex-radical politics. (...) ACT UP could be credited as well with the birth and explosion of queer theory in the academy. (Gould 2009, 5)

While Gould was herself an ACT UP activist whose subsequent goal was to create a history of ACT UP’s politics of emotions, thereby being possibly prone to overestimate the role

¹⁰ See, for example, William S. Burroughs *Queer* 1953 (published 1985), and Benjamin Britten’s opera *The Turn of the Screw* 1954.

¹¹ Based on Gould 2009.

¹² I do not restrict the meaning of “new generation” to the age of activists, because in ACT UP there were both young and old people, but “new generation” here means such activists represented a new quality in LGBT activism.

of ACT UP in the sexual politics of that time, many other authors¹³ and sources nonetheless confirm that ACT UP was a groundbreaking change in the contemporary LGBT movement.

From a small group of activists in New York City that used the term “queer” among themselves, the word spread very quickly across the country and by the early 1990s was commonly used not only within the community, but also outside of it, as a new identity category that expressed pride and anger at the time of the AIDS crisis. According to Chris Woods:

In the late 1980s, US gay and lesbian activists begun using the term “queer” to designate a hardcore politics, militant anger vented both externally (at the Republican Bush administration, the rise of Christian fundamentalism, the AIDS crisis) and internally at the apathetic gay establishment seen to be failing in the light of these factors. (Woods 1995, 29)

In 1990, Queer Nation was founded. Initially it was a subgroup of ACT UP but very soon it became a separate organization which focused on broader issues, rather than relying only on AIDS-related campaigns. One of their main slogan was: “We are everywhere, we want everything”. Queer Nation popularized the term “queer”, addressing through it the whole spectrum of problems which were almost absent in internal LGBT discussions as well as being unknown to the public at large. The term “queer” was now being used in addressing discrimination based on race, class and gender. Queer Nation also used it in opposition to the discourse of rights that was based on an ethnic understanding of sexual minorities, which was common among the largest LGBT organizations in the 1980s. Queer Nation argued that the community should redefine the terms of the debate, rather than blindly follow the current political rhetoric. One of the crucial issues at stake was the understanding of identity. The ethnic model that was adopted by mainstream lesbian and gay organizations of the time offered a rather homogeneous idea of identity based on the model developed by Afro-Americans. Queer Nation aimed at opening up the discussion concerning the political agency and identity of non-heterosexual people.

The crucial concern for Queer Nation was the public sphere. Their aim was to regain the public sphere, to re-sexualize it, to open it to alternative values and to different ways and forms of participation. Through various performative actions members of Queer Nation aspire to redefine the very idea of the public sphere. Queer Nation was openly critical to most of the established LGBT organisations, as one of the main activists of the time states:

Queer Nation seems to be a response to the current gay mainstream NGLTF [National Gay and Lesbian Task Force] and GLAAD [Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against

¹³ For instance: Cohen 1998, Crimp 1990, Kramer 1994, Watney 2000.

Defamation]. These organizations can't do direct actions and street theater or zaps. That's not their agenda. (Vito Russo in Trebay, 1990, 37)¹⁴

2.2 Queer in the eyes of activists

“Queer signifies a rebirth of energy, the spirit of activism that happened in the '70s. This is a newer, hipper generation.” This is how Dave Fleck, a Queer Nation activist, explains why activists adopted a new term “queer” and what it meant for them.¹⁵ According to Fleck, “queer” proved to be a sufficiently flexible term to accommodate many different sexual minorities but, most importantly, it was used as a militant term. “Queer” was a call for activism and it mobilized people to gather around common political aims. “Queer” was considered by many activists of the time to be a flexible and politically useful term because previously the term was rarely used in a political context and therefore did not have a history of political use. However, its semantic connotations to strangeness, oddness and singularity provided a potential to overwrite the abusive use of the word and develop political usages.

The AIDS Coalition to Unleash the Power (ACT UP) was founded in New York City in 1987. This was an alternative direct action organization, which focused directly on the HIV/AIDS crisis. For many authors, such as D. Crimp (2002) and D. Gould (2009), it was a turning point in gay and lesbian activism and politics. ACT UP did not rely on traditional lobbying, but they contested the very political system that privileged a particular kind of agent, while others, such as those infected by HIV, had no voice within this system and could die without state support.

As Gould (2009) suggests, the reason behind the reluctance of many LGBT organizations to focus directly on the problem of HIV/AIDS may have been the fact that in the US during the 1980s AIDS for many came to symbolize a plague, God's punishment. These organizations were frightened of being marginalized in the eyes of the mainstream media and politicians because of the connection to AIDS. They thought that the only way to fight homophobia would be a long path of gaining positive visibility through the media and lobbying. The intention was to show that LGBT people are similar to mainstream American citizens and the aim of most of the organizations was to assimilate LGBT people into American society. ACT UP radically rejected this approach. Of course, ACT UP too had contact with the press and politicians, but their main activities were actions in public spaces in the biggest cities in the U.S.

¹⁴ Quoted in Michael R. Fraser: “Identity and Representations as Challenges to Social Movement Theory: A Case Study of Queer Nation” in *Mainstream(s) and Margins*; ed. M. Morgan and S. Legett, 1996, p. 33-34.

¹⁵ The quotation is from an article by A. Stanley “Militants Back ‘Queer,’ Shoving ‘Gay’ the Way of ‘Negro’” *The New York Times*, April 06, 1991.

The term “queer” was only occasionally used in the documents that ACT UP published to inform the public about HIV/AIDS, and the word does not appear in most of the official ACT UP documents. However, from the end of the 1980s it started to be used internally among activists and it also started appearing on flyers, posters and leaflets.

Michelangelo Signorile, an ACT UP and Queer Nation activist, uses the term “queer” in his book *Queer in America* (1993) generally as a synonym for gays or lesbians. The term is used as a noun with a clear reference to homosexuals. This term functioned as an identity category. Signorile rarely uses “queer” as an adjective in his book. The author mentions that the term was first used by activists. It rose from the need for a new identification, a need that was strong among activists at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s (Signorile 1993, 70). According to Signorile, reclaiming this term by LGBT activists was also their strategy to “bash back”.

Signorile sees the term “queer” as temporal, something that came into use during a particular time. Whilst *Queer in America* could be seen as a sentimentally charged diary of a political activist of the time, lacking academic and political depth, it is, nevertheless, interesting in that it represents some uses of the term “queer”, one of which is close to the primal political deployment of “queer” within the LGBT activist community. One of the main connections of the term “queer” in *Queer in America* is with activism, particularly with a new radical movement focusing on the HIV/AIDS crisis and on anti-homophobic street activism represented by Queer Nation.

Another HIV/AIDS activist and academic at that time who used the term “queer” in his essays is Douglas Crimp. As an academic, unlike Signorile, Crimp is more careful in adopting and using different terms and concepts and he is particularly conscious of this in the case of “queer”. It is significant that for Crimp, the term “queer” is in opposition to the term “homosexual”. In 1989 Crimp wrote:

Even to have used terms like *queer* or *fag* would have been understood to be in a politically viable line of appropriations of terms of oppression by the oppressed themselves, to say “Yeah, we’re faggots, so what?” Homosexual, however, has a very different resonance, because, as Watney argued, it is the term of a confining essentialism. (Crimp 2002, 112-113)

In this quote it is clear that “queer” is part of a political strategy to confront oppression. For Crimp “queer” would represent a quasi-identity term, but it would not be a type of essential identity. The term is not used to design a group similar to a class or an identity defined as a new self-understanding of agents. Crimp states that “queer” is used in opposition to essentialist identity terms. He does not reflect in detail on what this non-essential politicized identity

means. Nevertheless, from the context it is apparent that according to Crimp “queer” is a more flexible term that refers not only to sexuality, but also to a political position that is against the dominant political system and its values; “queer” can also refer to alternative or to marginalized lifestyles and values in contemporary society. In several of the essays that Crimp published in the late 1980s and in the early 1990s, he emphasizes the fact that “queer” is not one more identity category, but it is instead a deeply political act to use a term of oppression to affirm the position of those who are oppressed.

The term “queer” is also used by Crimp to reflect critically on current LGBT organizations, movements and internal debates:

It was our inability to form alliances with those movements¹⁶ identifications with which secured our own identities, as well as our inability to acknowledge those very same differences of race and gender within our own ranks, that caused the gay and lesbian movements to shift, on the one hand, to an essentialist separatism and, on the other, to a liberal politics of minority rights. The AIDS crisis brought us face to face with the consequences of both our separatism and our liberalism. And it is in this new political conjuncture that the word *queer* has been reclaimed to designate new political identities. (Crimp 2002, 189)

In “Rosa’s Indulgence”, an essay published in 1994, Crimp is aware that during that time, the term “queer” was mostly used in academia, as a part of *queer theory*. According to Crimp, this theory aims at destabilizing and de-essentializing sexual identity. Crimp notices a division between queer theory and activism, and he wishes this divide would be bridged.

In *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fights against AIDS*, Deborah B. Gould often uses the term “queers” interchangeably with “activists”. This connection between “queer” and “activism” is also strong in Signorile’s *Queer in America*. “Gays and lesbians”, on the other hand, refer to politically unengaged homosexuals or to the previous generation of homosexuals. Gould does not dwell theoretically on “queer” as a term, but her manner of using it is clear in her book. Moreover, Gould claims that ACT UP helped the term “queer” to be reborn and politicized.

Gould writes about ACT UP from her own activist’s perspective and combines it with a broader academic approach. In *Moving Politics* she approaches ACT UP analytically from the point of emotions and from the perspective of the political engagement of emotions within the movement. The perspective of politics of emotion also gives her an interesting insight into the use of the term “queer” by ACT UP. Gould often uses the concept of *queer sensibility* in order to address the activists’ approach to sexuality, politics and the social. She writes:

¹⁶ Crimp refers to feminism and Black Panthers

Queer wove together the new emotional habitus and the movement's oppositional politics and sex-radicalism, creating a collectivity that set queer-identified folks apart from the more establishment-oriented gay leadership and institutions. (Gould 2009, 256)

The interesting point here is that the focus is on “queer” in opposition to the established LGBT movement. In other words, “queer” differs from “gay” not only as a new form of identification or the formation of a new collectivity; it is instead a new *emotional habitus*. This *emotional habitus* is driven primarily by anger. Gould analyses how this anger is able to create a community and to empower it in order to transform politics:

Queer, in the moment of rebirth circa 1990, might best be understood as an emotive, an expression of self and collectivity that created and regenerated feelings that were a powerful and alluring response to lesbian and gay ambivalence about self and society: fury and pride about gay difference and confrontational activism, antipathy toward heteronormative society, and aspirations to live in a transformed world. (Gould 2009, 256)

Following Gould, for members and people inspired by ACT UP, “queer” was a sign of resistance to the norms of established politics and its discourse. “Queer” was also used to articulate the emotions and differences that were muted or stigmatized at that time. Finally, as Gould suggests, “queer” was a promise of a new type of community that would be based not on shared elements that constitute a particular identity, but on a recognition of the differences among community members.

Other important aspect of “queer” as a new identity category was to address the anxiety regarding the growing homophobia and religious fundamentalism in the U.S. during the Reagan and Bush presidencies. As mentioned before, the language developed around the concept of “gay” was not sufficient to respond to the crisis of AIDS and to the rise of conservatism. Politically “gay” was developed around the language of human rights and one of the aims of using this term was to increase the visibility of lesbian and gay people, but in the time of AIDS crisis and growing homophobia visibility was not a priority. At the end of the 1980s health care, community support and education about HIV/AIDS were much more important. Gould claims that “queer” was able to provide an emotional response to the crisis through giving people a sense of anger and pride, based on a common disagreement with the current shape of U.S. politics. Pride and anger were emotions that were creative for this new queer identity that, as Gould puts it, “offered emotional, political, and sexual ways of being” (Gould 2009, 256).

The political context in which “gay” appeared and functioned up until the 1980s was very different than the one in which “queer” was developed into a political term. The vocabularies in which these terms functioned were discrete. While “gay” functioned as an

identity term similar to others such as “Afro-American” or “Latino”, “queer” appeared as a call for collective solidarity that was based not on shared qualities or history but on the need to respond to certain problems, the most crucial at the time being AIDS. The AIDS crisis was more than just a health issue, it was also about the symbolic stigmatization of HIV positive people and about the growth of conservatism during this time. It was thus related to several political issues.

During the AIDS crisis, there was a need for a response that would not only advocate the protection of those infected, but a response that would confront the cultural stigmatization of people with HIV/AIDS and the associated growing homophobia. ACT UP provided the response that was an aggressive confrontational activism based on direct action in public spaces. The activists also developed a different discourse than that used by mainstream lesbian and gay organizations of that time. For those who formed ACT UP the language of LGBT organizations was rather conciliatory, the aim being the assimilation of lesbian and gay people into society. They promoted a positive image of lesbians and gays as decent and valuable citizens that with their hard work and taxes contributed to society at large. ACT UP decided to use a different political strategy and developed confrontational language that highlighted the differences between sexual minorities and mainstream society. Moreover, as Gould claims, ACT UP offered a new sense of solidarity and community among LGBT communities. In ACT UP and among people influenced by the movement the term “queer” began to be a sign of a new relationship to society and its norms and as well being a new vision of themselves.

In her book about ACT UP, Gould often refers to members or people connected to the movement as “queer folks”. In ACT UP “queer” was a politically potent term because it became the basis for a community that was organized in terms of its shared values, namely the political fight concerning AIDS, and more broadly the fight against homophobia. Yet, according to Gould, ACT UP was an anti-identity movement in the sense that it contested traditional identity categories, and “queer” created a feeling of belonging for the various agents who participated together in ACT UP. For Gould, *queer sensitivity* was a new approach not only towards activism, which in ACT UP was direct, confrontational and militant, but also a new approach towards sexuality. She describes the cases of people who believed in sexual fluidity, such as certain lesbians in ACT UP who might have sex with gay men, and people who were HIV negative who would have sex with those tested positive. I suggest that at this point Gould perceives “queer” as a term that revives the utopian dream of sexual freedom from the end of the 1960s. Other authors that describe the activism of this time do not mention this sexual fluidity among ACT UP activism, so it would appear that these cases were not

particularly common. However, what does seem to be clear is that “queer” was not deployed as a moralistic term in the time of the AIDS crisis. Although there was a certain ethics included in the uses of this term, what is most apparent is that the term implied a sexually positive category that even at the peak of the AIDS crisis was used to affirm various non-normative sexual behaviours. My contention is that when Gould calls “queer” an anti-identity (Gould 2009, 165) she situates this term in opposition to terms such as “lesbian” or “gay”. At the same time she aims at establishing through this term a different relationship to self and community than that found within the lesbian and gay movement of the time. My contention is that probably for many activists of the time “queer” carried a utopian promise of new sexuality, alternative forms of attachments to one’s own body and to others, and idea of a new type of community. It is clear that people who used the concept in activist contexts developed a form of politics organized around a specific set of emotions, and “queer” was a sign of these emotions.

The struggle with American conservative politics was combined with an internal struggle to newly shape sexual minority politics. Gould writes, “The new queer sensibility unabashedly drew sex and militant politics together” (2009, 257). In other words, the task was not only to present a radical front towards conservative political movements, but also to radicalize the LGBT community and combat conservatism among them.

ACT UP aimed at re-sexualizing LGBTs. This sexualization was intended to transform normative agents who were subjected to the current political system into revolutionary outsiders who could represent alternative values. My contention is that this utopian impulse served to construct a politics of radical contestation. ACT UP produced images such as a T-shirt depicting lesbian oral sex and other explicitly sexual materials, not only to shock heterosexuals, but also to challenge normativity within the LGBT communities. The way in which Gould describes *queer sensibility* is reminiscent of the hippie movements of the 1960s. Several of the members whom Gould quotes in her book acknowledge that ACT UP was a forum which changed their self-understanding, for it was a space where they could experiment with their bodies and sexuality. “Queer” implied a new way of outing oneself, both sexually and politically. Gould writes:

Intense affective states of eroticism and sexiness, exuberance and euphoria, pride and self-respect, now attached to the term *queer* and animated identification with and the embrace of both this new sensibility and ACT UP, the site where new queer selves were being publicly and passionately enacted. (2009, 264)

Gould does not reflect critically on the conceptual status of “queer” as a political term, but she does provide plenty of examples of how “queer” was used among ACT UP members and what

role it played in the movement. It is clear from her book that “queer” had a strong utopian dimension. Primarily “queer” was a concept that motivated people to act together against the conservative politics of Reagan’s government towards the HIV/AIDS crisis. However, the term quickly became a very broad identity-type category that was used by many as a sign of their protest against general norms that limit human sexuality. It was used as a sign of a new fluid sexuality that was liberated from the constraints of society. Among the members of ACT UP and others influenced by them, “queer” symbolized a hope for different way of experiencing sexuality in individuals’ lives as well as in society and politics at large.

Furthermore, this term was a community-building word that was able to mobilize people to start acting politically. The members of ACT UP who identified as “queers” organized many demonstrations; they went to straight places in groups and kissed there, they did performances in public places about HIV and homophobia, they organized protests in churches and next to houses of prominent politicians, they also outed homophobic public figures who were closet gays. The term “queer” was often used in the context of all these actions; it empowered people and gave them a feeling of community and hope.

To sum up, from the beginning of the 1990s, “queer” started to function as a quasi-identity term referring to people with non-mainstream sexual identities and their lifestyles. But according to Gould, Crimp and Signorile this term signified much more: “queer” was a powerful incitement to political engagement. Under this sign, people organized groups and gathered in protests against the current politics.

In the texts of all three authors mentioned above, it is evident that “queer” is interpreted as a term that is creative for joint political action. All of the authors see the source of this action in the emotions that “queer” was able to evoke and be mobilised and transformed into passionate politics. Unlike these authors, however, I would say that it is not a quality of the concept itself; this passionate politics was not an effect of “queer”. Concepts do not act on their own accord, but instead “queer” has been used as a crucial element in the political mobilization of sexual minorities. “Queer” was a political identification that was not only the basis for the political community but also for political action. It seems that the emergence of “queer” as a political concept during the rise of the AIDS crisis reflects the difficulty in articulating the experience through previously existing identity categories. The term “queer” did not replace previous identity categories; they were present among sexual minorities, but “queer” was an impulse to rethink these categories and it was a strong incitement for political engagement.

2.3 “Queer” and the politics of ACT UP and Queer Nation

Gould (2009) and Signorile (1993) mention that people who joined ACT UP and Queer Nation came there for different reasons, some because they were angry about the government's reaction towards the AIDS crisis, some because they wanted a different kind of community than the one they lived in, and some because they wanted to find new friends or lovers. The reasons why people take part in political movements are not essential for understanding the movements themselves and these reasons are not necessarily political. For the purpose of this study, my understanding of political is a broad one and one that comes from the tradition of feminism. Here the notion of "political" can be any action that is public and potentially transformative as well as something that directly or indirectly can challenge the current law or, even more broadly, the social organization.¹⁷ Following this line of thought, action that challenges cultural, social or political presumptions is often political. Therefore, many actions by ACT UP or Queer Nation that were forms of contestation of U.S. cultural and political system can be seen as political. Excellent examples of these political actions are provocations and acts of civil disobedience. ACT UP also organized various community building events and even though these were not directly political events, they were politically meaningful as they e.g. advocated a new and more critical understanding of community. These community building events promoted a different language and a different self-understanding than the one provided by the mainstream of lesbian and gay organizations of the time.

In this part of the chapter I analyse the actual political materials from approximately 1989-1993 that use the word "queer". I discuss the texts, posters, leaflets and stickers that were produced predominantly by Queer Nation but also by ACT UP in order to provide a vivid picture of the use of the word. I have selected the materials that I believe present the political potential of "queer" when the concept was applied in the contexts of AIDS activism but more importantly in internal debates among sexual minorities concerning questions of identity and community.

In her essay "Queer Problems / Straight Solutions" (1997), Lisa Bower analyses the politics of Queer Nation. She states: "the location of what counts as political practice is shifted to the enactment of social practices and cultural codes that become vehicles for affirming the identities of marginalized groups" (1997, 282). In this context she quotes Chantal Mouffe. Considering Mouffe's understanding of politics with its emphasis on conflict, it can be assumed

¹⁷ This concept of the political is based on a tradition of thinking derived from Hanna Arendt (*The Human Condition* 1958, *The Promise of Politics* 2005) and is continued by the classics of feminist activist thinkers like: Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (Firestone 1971); Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (Millett 1970); and Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful* (Morgan 1970).

that politics as a particular contest and political practice of Queer Nation would here be perceived as acts of cultural subversion or contestation of dominant norms.

As mentioned earlier, “queer” functioned among activists as a term for community building. This aspect of the term seems to be particularly important during the early years when the term was developed into a political signifier. “Queer” functioned as a sign of a specific group, an alternative community that was built in opposition to the existing lesbian and gay communities. The term became a sign of a specific sensitivity and emotions that were mobilized for political purposes. In addition, “queer” also signified specific values and the term was an expression of hope for political change.

Even before ACT UP other organizations and individuals were talking about “queer bashing” while addressing different forms of violence against the LGBT community. The term “queer bashing” was adopted in order to make visible homophobic violence, yet this term did not signify a broad hope for political change but it was instead a sign of anti-violence politics. “Queer” begins to function explicitly as a political term when it is used in protests against U.S. homophobic politics. ACT UP and subsequently in Queer Nation used the term to mobilize people to go out on the streets and fight for their rights. For many activists, “queer” has been a part of the rhetoric that is oppositional and militant, but it is also strongly focused on ideas of community and sexual freedom.

2.3.1 ACT UP and the beginning of queer politics

As an oppositional, anger-driven, confrontational AIDS activist organization, ACT UP not only inaugurated a new era in AIDS and lesbian and gay politics, it also gave birth to a new queer identity that was embraced by lesbians, gay men, and other sexual and gender outlaws across the country. (Gould 2002, 16)

Gould credits ACT UP for the rebirth and development of “queer” as a political concept. Currently, many people share this thought, but my findings indicate that in fact ACT UP hardly used the term, at least in its official documents. It is also good to remember that “queer” was not a term that was commonly used by sexual minorities. The term was instead appropriated by groups of activists in the major U.S. cities but for many, terms such as “lesbian” or “gay” remained the primary identification categories. The materials that Gould analyses came from organizations active in major cities in the U.S. which explains, in my view, her exaggerated claim that a new queer identity spread throughout the country. Nevertheless, the political importance of this “queer identity” is significant.

In ACT UP’s documents that date back to the 1980s that are available at the New York City Public Library in the archives and rare books section, “queer” rarely appears. I have not

found even a single occurrence of the term in ACT UP's official documents about HIV/AIDS. Moreover, "queer" hardly appears in ACT UP's materials published on their website, and it is not to be found on any documents dating from the end of the 1980s. The term started appearing in ACT UP's internal posters that informed, for instance, about some new action or party. My contention is that at least initially when the term "queer" was used by activists at the end of the 1980s it was a community building term. It marked the internal politics of sexual minority communities that originated from opposition to the existing ethnic model of lesbian and gay identity and to assimilationist politics of the major lesbian and gay organizations. ACT UP at the end of the 1980s proposed a language that was more inclusive and focused on community building.

By 1990 the situation had changed, and the use of "queer" had become widespread. From 1990 onwards ACT UP and particularly the newly-founded Queer Nation often used "queer" in their leaflets, posters and brochures. Some individuals within ACT UP were slightly more hesitant about the term. A proof of this might be that some leaflets and posters like "QUEERS UNITE TO TAKE BACK THE NIGHT AGAIN" from 22nd of June 1991, were printed in two versions, the second one without the word "queer".

Based on Gould's research on ACT UP, it is clear that by the end of the 1980s "queer" was used frequently among activists. "Queer" stood for a new militant quasi-identity, or rather a new political affiliation. It was a sign of activism and indicated in some ways an opposition to the mainstream gay communities. In addition, for many activists "queer" also meant being sexually liberated and radical. For them an important part of political activism was experimenting with sexuality.

In this context I would call "queer" a quasi-identity as the identification with this term was quite different than the identification with the term "gay" or other identity categories such as "working class person", "Afro-American" or "Latino". Among activists around 1990 "queer" functioned as a sign of specific political engagement. "Queer" was related to the idea of being alternative or an outsider. The term also functioned within a framework of the language and values shared by activists of the time. Many identity terms do not explicitly evoke a particular political standpoint or values. From another perspective "queer" is an identity, as people can choose this term to describe themselves through it, believing that it expresses that they belong to a certain group or have certain characteristics. The very question whether "queer" is an identity, a quasi-identity, a non-identity or an anti-identity has been elaborated since the 1990s. It has become a prominent issue that have produced countless debates among

activists and academics. The answer, however, depends on the political and theoretical standpoint of the person who uses the term.

Beginning in the 1990s, “queer” was used more directly in a political way by ACT UP. Gould offers an example from the Chicago ACT UP’s speech during the Lesbian and Gay Pride Parade 1992:

Fighting the AIDS epidemic must go hand-in-hand with fighting for queer liberation... We need to celebrate our sexuality, our erotic innovations created out of this epidemic, our fantasies and fetishes, our particular ways of fucking, sucking, and licking. It is our queer love that has made us capable of fighting the insurance industry, the drug companies, the government, the bureaucracies, the gay-bashers, the right-wing zealots, the AIDS crisis. (ACT UP/Chicago 1992, 5)

Contrary to Gould, on the basis of my reading of archival documents, I would argue that the term “queer” was never a crucial concept for ACT UP, although it did gain a political meaning among ACT UP activists and it carried a significant political message. The above quotation illustrates a kind of utopian idea that sexual practices transcend the political system. A more nuanced reading would emphasize that the use of “queer” here had the potential to mobilize individuals to engage in collective actions against homophobia and socio-economic discrimination. This fragment of a speech from the Gay Pride Parade uses “queer” as a term that describes non-normative sexual practices combined with a specific political engagement.

I suggest that the term “queer” was related to ACT UP’s idea of community and sexuality but the term served also as a part of direct political activism in public sphere. As Peter F. Cohen (Cohen 1998) claims, ACT UP activists understood politics as a contest in the public sphere. Around 1990, this idea of a radical contest between different norms, values and lifestyles was important for the deployment of “queer” as a political concept.

2.3.2 Queer Nation and the popularization of “queer”

Among many of the members of ACT UP in New York City, there was a growing feeling that the organization should be more radical and open to broader problems, such as violence and homophobia in general. Many activists thought that the focus on HIV/AIDS was needed but that it made the movement’s scope too narrow. Some members, for instance, Michelangelo Signorile, postulated broader and more radical activities. In April 1990, they created a sub-group within ACT UP which aimed to increase the awareness and visibility of gays and lesbians. Their intention was to fight homophobia by radical provocative action in public places. Shortly afterwards, they established themselves as independent from the ACT UP group, although they still continued to cooperate by participating in many activities. In May 1990, the members adopted the title “Queer Nation”, a name that had previously often been

informally used by many of them.

For Queer Nation activists “queer” became a major political concept and the activists further proliferated its uses. They used guerrilla theatre tactics and other forms of public provocation. Within LGBT communities, they were strongly against the assimilation of gays and lesbians into mainstream society. The movement was not well organized, however, and did not have a central structure, although by the summer of 1990, spontaneously in several big cities in the U.S., different groups, inspired by Queer Nation New York, began appearing and organizing direct confrontational actions in public places. The famous Queer Nation slogan: “We’re Here! We’re Queer! Get used to it!” was coined by a member of Queer Nation San Francisco in the summer of 1990.

Queer Nation promoted the term “queer” as a concept that could reunite the different groups with non-normative sexualities in joint action, but could also be used as a weapon against homophobia. The term as a confrontational political concept was adopted in almost every public action by Queer Nation. Good examples of the uses of “queer” in 1990 are provided in the Queer Nation manifesto, which was distributed during the New York Gay Pride Parade in June 1990.

The manifesto, entitled ‘QUEERS READ THIS’, is anonymous. It addresses readers directly and assumes that its readers identify as “queer”. The rhetoric almost resembles at points the language used by some Christian churches; the readers are addressed, for instance, as brothers and sisters, and it aims to create a strong emotional identification with the text.

The manifesto offers not only an explication of the meaning of “queer” but also an explanation of why at that moment “queer” was such a potent term within the LGBT community:

Well, yes, “gay” is great. It has its place. But when a lot of lesbians and gay men wake up in the morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So we’ve chosen to call ourselves queer. Using “queer” is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It’s a way of telling ourselves we don’t have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized in the straight world. We use queer as gay men loving lesbians and lesbians loving being queer. Queer, unlike GAY, doesn’t mean MALE. And when spoken to other gays and lesbians it’s a way of suggesting we close ranks, and forget (temporarily) our individual differences because we face a more insidious common enemy. Yeah, QUEER can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe’s hands and use against him. (Queer Read This 1990, paragraph 7)

This excerpt makes clear that “queer” is supposed to be a comprehensive means of establishing an identity. It also makes evident that “queer” was introduced into LGBT discourse as a powerful emotional response to the homophobia of the time; it is a means of expressing anger

but also of transforming it into political action. According to the manifesto, the political action against homophobia should be a platform where the differences between various non-normative sexualities matter but are not an obstacle for joint action, and “queer” was adopted as a sign of this temporal strategic unity. What is expressed at the end of the paragraph is also important: “queer” is “a sly and ironic weapon”. The element of irony has been present in this term since the very beginning of its political use. Irony is reflected in the identification with an abusive term and in the formulation of political claims in the name of this term, such as a call for state protection of LGBTs against violence. The ironic element in the use of “queer” has been subsequently picked up by such academics as Lee Edelman (2004), and I shall analyse this further in Chapter 6.

The manifesto uses militant language. Many sentences are couched in imperatives, such as “BE OUTRAGED!”, “DO SOMETHING” “GET UP, WAKE UP SISTERS” “IF YOU ARE QUEER, SHOUT IT”. The objective of the manifesto seems to be to motivate LGBT communities into political action. The beginning of the text states, “Rights are not given they are taken, by force if necessary”, and the greatest threats to the community are identified as the immobilization and passivity of gays and lesbians themselves. In other words, “queer” should unite people and empower them to fight an oppressive system. Activism is directly connected to the term “queer”.

Being queer is not about a right to privacy; it is about the freedom to be public, to just be who we are. It means everyday fighting oppression; homophobia, racism, misogyny, the bigotry of religious hypocrites and our own self-hatred. (Queers Read This, 1990, first page)

This passage argues for a strong focus on the public sphere and does not offer any essentialist qualities of queerness; no specific positive content defines one as queer. Being queer is instead defined by action: if you fight you are queer. This fight is related to several broad issues, including homophobia and several other forms of exclusion and oppression.

The manifesto has a strong utopian dimension. On the first page it states: “AN ARMY OF LOVERS CANNOT LOSE”, and there are motifs of self-creation and sexual fluidity, “Everyone of us is a world of infinite possibility” (Queers Read This, 1990, first page). The manifesto’s message seems to be that through embracing queerness one can transcend social norms or that one will have the power and the strength to no longer care about norms and oppression. I understand here “queer” as an idealized value that is set as an aim for individuals, “queer” becoming a ground for an ethical stance. Manifestos depict or imagine chances and opportunities for change, and in this context, politically “queer” stands for the hope of change.

An interesting and distinctive aspect of “QUEERS READ THIS” is the exaggerated, almost ironic language. “QUEERS READ THIS” often uses normative arguments of the majority and twists them or reformulates them from the perspective of the LGBT community. It proposes, for example, that heterosexuals should be banned from queer clubs. The culmination of this ironic guerrilla manifesto is the last part entitled: “I HATE STRAIGHTS”, which calls for bashing straights back.

It might be striking that those who identified themselves as queer decided to name the activist organization “Queer Nation”. Probably, they were against national ideologies,¹⁸ but it is part of their ironic tactic. Queer Nation was using the language of nationalism, of religious organizations, of popular advertisements in order to destabilize their messages.

The manifesto states that “queer” is a “life at war with straight America”. Queers are an army that cannot lose. All queers are brothers and sisters. The manifesto does not give space for distance or reflection: the “queer we” is omnipresent and it calls on agents to join it in a common action to make every space “queer”.

“Queer” as an identity concept mobilized those who described themselves by that term in the early years of the 1990s in order to abandon the language of the passive victims of homophobia and to embrace anti-assimilation and the militant language of activism. The following are a few examples of slogans from posters and stickers from the period 1990 - 1993 produced by Queer Nation:

We're here, we're queer, you fuck with us, we'll fuck you up!
You've been bashed by the QUEER TERRORIST NETWORK!
QUEERS WITH STICKS!
OUT TO BASH HETEROSEXISM!
QUEER TERRORIST NETWORK

Here we can clearly see the exaggerated form in which “queer” functions in order to confront heterosexuals directly with reversed homophobic language. It is hard to determine today to what extent these posters and stickers were considered to be ironic and to what extent they were taken seriously. These two aspects are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The fact is that ironic

¹⁸ In the essay “Queer Nationality” (1997, originally published 1992) Berlant and Freeman suggest that Queer Nation opposed national ideology by the ironic use of its rhetoric. For Pulkkinen (2000) the relation between “queer” and “nation” is productive as it further politicizes both of these terms. Jasbir K. Puar (2007) suggests that the queer movement incorporated elements of Western nationalism. Although I did not find in Queer Nation documents anything that would openly suggest any elements of national ideology, nevertheless the question remains partly open and requires further research. Each chapter of ACT UP and Queer Nation had their own tactics, and they organized political actions separately. These were not hierarchical organizations and while e.g. Queer Nation in NYC was predominantly a white people's club, Queer Nation in LA did much to incorporate Latin and Afro-American communities into their organization, and the problems of these groups were part of the Queer Nation political agenda in LA.

posters and leaflets were a powerful force for engaging in political action against homophobia and in creating a community.

I suggest that community building was more important for this generation of activists than it was for the major lesbian and gay organizations during the 1980s that prioritized political lobbying and building a positive image of sexual minorities. For both of them, raising the visibility of sexual minorities was an important political tactic but in the case of the major lesbian and gay organizations of the time visibility was a means of assimilating sexual minorities into society, while in the case of ACT UP and Queer Nation visibility was needed to highlight the differences between the majority of society and sexual minorities. Their political self-understanding was based on separatism. For many of them “queer” was a sign of this separatism in relation to mainstream U.S. society but also in relation to the mainstream of gay and lesbian communities.

Also representative of the activist language of the time is this excerpt from “The Queer Nation Newsletter”, LA January 5, 1991, which presents a self-definition of Queer Nation:

Queer Nation is... (YOUR DEFINITION HERE). It is a grassroots movement of women and men coming in all colors, sizes and ages who are interested in confronting heterosexism and homophobia/homohatred on all levels in our society through direct public actions. **QN** is a militant and uncompromising group dedicated to subverting compulsory heterosexism in all its political and cultural manifestations through direct public actions which will celebrate and flaunt sexual diversity. Without pandering to heterosexual angst, Queer Nation is open to Queers of all persuasions. So in many ways, **QN** is only what you want to make it: nothing more, nothing less. Come change the way America and the world thinks about Queers, and come change the way Queers think about each other.”

The passage seems to suggest that being queer is connected more with activism and with a certain attitude towards sexual norms in America than with homosexuality itself. In other words, for these activists “queer” seems to be a type of political choice rather than an essentialist individual identity, as it is with the term “homosexual”. The term “homosexual” does not carry within itself any clear political stance; during the 1980s it was rather a politically neutral term for one’s sexual orientation. In comparison, during that time “gay” could also be considered a political term but unlike “queer”, “gay” was concerned with gaining rights that would secure the equal participation of sexual minorities in society. “Gay” was not a militant term but rather its aim was to present sexual minorities as valuable and good citizens. “Queer”, by contrast, stands for very clear political choices and political engagement. It is a sign of protest and contestation against the norms and values of mainstream U.S. society.

2.3.3 Queer and the community

The following extract, an anonymous document published by Queer Nation Los Angeles, includes another description of “queer” by Queer Nation. This undated document is entitled: “Consensus Statement From the Queer Nation Process Group”:

In patriarchal culture, “queer” is everything that is “Other”; that is, what is not white, Christian, hetero, male. Because we are Queer, because they fear us, we have, each of us, been denied our right to be WHO WE REALLY ARE. Therefore, let’s avoid recreating patriarchal models of “democracy” that fail to give power to “odd” or “different” voices.

This extract reflects the strong influence of feminist thought, particularly from the 1980s. This influence is pervasive on the level of language in that it defines “queer” in opposition to patriarchal culture. “Queer” signifies a common experience shared by all the people who identify as queer, as would be the case in a typical identity concept. The starting point is the experience of oppression, but “queer” signifies more than experience of oppression, it stands for the common struggle with norms and with current U.S. politics. Queer politics is not merely about sexual liberation, it is also about a broad political struggle for a more just and democratic society. Economic rights are also at stake. The language of this document resembles the early gay liberation movement (just after the Stonewall riots). In 1969 and immediately after many lesbian and gay activists were also engaged in other political movements, considering the fight against homophobia to be part of a broad fight for comprehensive social change. During the 1970s major organizations such as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force decided to isolate political issues directly related to lesbians and gay and focus their political activities around them. “Queer” was part of the rhetoric that intentionally resembled the early gay liberation movement, therefore this term was seen by activists as militant and authentic as it was bringing back the idealized notion of activism from the end of the 1960s.

The archival materials that I have studied indicate that ACT UP and Queer Nation were organized differently than major gay and lesbian organizations of the time. Queer Nation, for instance, did not have a formal structure nor did it set up rules in advance. Rules and structures were temporary and flexible, and there was no central group of leaders. In every city where there were Queer Nation activists, independent decisions were made as to the form the movement would take, the actions that would be organized, and the direction the movement would take. In Los Angeles, for example, they were more sensitive to racial difference. In Queer Nation San Francisco they also addressed problems of racism within LGBT communities. In Philadelphia they were strongly anti-Republican. The individual focuses depended on local needs and on the motivation of the activists, and very few actions were carried out by several groups working together. Usually the activities were local, on the level of

particular cities or states. The various chapters of Queer Nation had different political priorities, but what constituted them as one movement was a specific political attitude and language in which the term “queer” played a central role.

In some cases “queer” stands for a more inclusive term for sexual minorities that could accommodate different groups without erasing their specificity. One leaflet distributed by Queer Action Philadelphia states:

[Queers are] ... lesbians, gay man, bisexuals and homosexuals, transsexuals, transvestites, ambi-sexuals, effeminate men and masculine women, gender-benders, drag queens, bull dykes and cross dressers, lezzies, diesels and bruisers, marys and faeries, faggots, buggers, hairy pit-bulls, butches and fems. (Quoted in Fraser 1996, p.34)

By listing different sexual minority groups this leaflet aimed at highlighting the diversity of agents that can be united under the umbrella term “queer”. For Queer Action and other activists of the time, it was important to give voice and visibility to smaller groups among sexual minorities. The point was not to build a unified group under the umbrella of “queer” but precisely the opposite, to allow more marginal voices to be heard and represented within a broader platform of political activism. “Queer” was not an alternative for other identity terms, as it functioned very well with them. The long list of various identity terms that are classified as “queer” is a political reminder to the community about its diversity.

Several authors (e.g. Bower 1997, Watney 2000) emphasize that the term “queer” was not used among activists, and also among many others, as a new identity. Instead, it was intended to serve as a critique of the politics of identity that conceived sexual identity based on an ethnic model that was applied by Afro-Americans and Latin communities in the U.S. In addition, “queer” was a call to reformulate the idea of the LGBT community. Bower writes:

Aspirational communities such as those developed by Queer Nation effect a critique of the vision of community peculiar to a politics of “official recognition” (...) They do so by enjoining us to take seriously the role of identification, as compared to identity, in constructing citizens’ affiliations. (1997, 285)

As activists did not discuss theoretical problems related to the concept of “identity” in detail, it may be that Bower’s interpretation is based on her own theoretical stance, which is critical towards the identity politics represented by major gay and lesbian organizations of the time. Nevertheless, the notion of differentiating “identity” from “identification” is a significant one. It seems that for Bower “identification” is weaker term than “identity”. “Identification” is related to affiliation to a group that can be temporal and not long lasting. It is not about being someone but rather about identifying with certain values and political ideas. It might start at

some point when there is a need for political change and stop some time later when circumstances change. Bowes offers a useful way of theorizing Queer Nation but it does not fully explain the phenomena of “queer” that was used among sexual minorities to open up several critical discussions concerning representation, visibility, political strategies and other issues related to various internal exclusions that appear among sexual minorities.

Although Bower makes an interesting point that highlights the specificity of Queer Nation, I would argue that she unnecessarily divides communities into “aspirational” and other kind of communities that believe in their natural or authentic status. I would argue that this is not productive, as any community is formed by some kind of identification of certain agents with some qualities, ideas or other characteristics shared by others. In a sense all communities are “aspirational” as an individual can never entirely share the characteristics with which one identifies. The unity of a community and the identity of a community are always imagined. Bower suggests that “identification” is open to everyone, while “identity” is restricted to individuals who share specific qualities. Queer activists aimed at keeping “queer” a broad open signifier that everyone could potentially embrace. To me this is an idealistic view. “Queer” has been used by activists in various ways and in this sense it has not had a fixed meaning, but this does not mean that the meaning of the term is completely open. Not everyone can identify as “queer”. The term has its boundaries. It functions within a specific political ideology and a distinct rhetoric.

The term “queer” spread rapidly from the AIDS activists to other sexual minority groups, as shown by gay and lesbian magazines of the time. As mentioned earlier, the oldest Gay and Lesbian weekly newspaper in Boston, *Gay Community News*, first published in 1973, changed its name to *Queer Community News* in April 1991. The editors did not feel the need to justify their decision to readers by providing theoretical or philosophical arguments. They just remarked ironically that ““Queer” is a really trendy word right now, and we like that about it. (...) “Queer” is happening, it’s short, it’s ’90s. (...) “Queer” is cool and that means hot (...) “Queer” used to be a taunt, but now it’s a badge, and we wear that badge with queer pride. (At least we’re ‘Queer Community News’)” Apart from these ironic remarks about the word “queer”, the issue raises an important point regarding the exclusion of women within gay communities, and the problems of people of colour.

“Queer” prompted much of the discussion among LGBT people and it was discussed in LGBT publications as well as in other media. As early as August 1990 in the article “A Queer Manifesto” (*The Village Voice*, August 14, 1990), Esther Kaplan presented critical voices towards “queer”: Robert Garcia, AIDS activist, was doubtful whether “queer” might have the

same political potency in the Latino LGBT community as it had for white activists from urban areas in the U.S. It would also seem that in New York at the beginning of the Queer Nation movement most of the participants were gay men. Alessandra Stanley, in her text on “queer” for *The New York Times*,¹⁹ quotes several older generation activists who expressed their concern about the political use of “queer”. For some, “queer” was too offensive to designate as something positive. These critical voices might come as a surprise because “queer” was not used as an alternative to other identity concepts, nor was it aimed to replace them, but it was instead a term that marked a new form of political activism. It can be easily understood that for some older generation activists “queer” sounded offensive but there was the deeper issue of a change in a sexual minority’s politics and its language and even of the very idea of a sexual minority’s community, and this was probably worrying for some.

Among the LGBT communities “queer” was used politically to draw attention to internal differences like class. The term was used to stress that depending on factors like class or race, oppression and identity were not experienced and felt in the same way. The experience of being e.g. lesbian depended on the social situation of an agent. The identity of lesbian was experienced differently by white woman from a major city in the U.S. and differently by Afro-American woman from a rural area in the U.S. For middle-class people from big cities it was often easier to assimilate into the mainstream. Queer Nation opposed ideas of assimilation and stressed that assimilation was not available for everyone. It was possible to perceive many of their actions as a form of class critique, as pointed out by Meyer:

The emergence of the queer label as an oppositional critique of gay and lesbian middle-class assimilationism is, perhaps, its strongest and most valid aspect. In the sense that the queer label emerges as a class critique, then what is opposed are bourgeois models of identity. (Mayer 1994, 2)

“Queer” was used politically mostly within sexual minorities in the US cities. Furthermore, organizations that were using it, such as ACT UP or Queer Nation, were active only in major cities that already for decades had strong communities of sexual minorities. To me this signals that perhaps in order to use the oppressive term for a positive identification, agents already have to be at some level of emancipation. Those who used “queer” as a positive identification must have felt at least to some extent safe and confident.

This is further suggested by the fact that no such term as “queer” was really used in Latino LGBT circles. I found in the Chicano archives at UCLA a sign that Queer Nation LA

¹⁹ A. Stanley “Militants Back ‘Queer’, Shoving ‘Gay’ the Way of ‘Negro’” *The New York Times*, April 06, 1991

had tried to introduce the word “raro”²⁰ as a Spanish counterpart to “queer”, and it appeared in several brochures and posters. Another word used as a translation of “queer” was “maricona”. The problem was that “raro” does not actually contain the same history and abusive connotation as “queer”. “Maricona”²¹ or “puto” are words that could more closely semantically resemble “queer”. The Latin LGBT communities had to face oppression and violence more often and more directly than white lesbians and gays, and often it would have been unthinkable for a Latino gay man to call himself “puto”,²² because the term was too painful for him, and therefore it could not be easily adapted for political or ironic uses. Nevertheless, “queer” became an umbrella term that also at least partly covered racial and class differences. Queer Nation Los Angeles was particularly sensitive to these issues. They used English and Spanish in many of their publications, in some they translated “queer” into Spanish as “maricona” or “raro”, but the translation did not come into use on a broader scale.

All in all, the emergence of the term “queer” among AIDS, gay and lesbian activists around the year 1990 was a truly ground-breaking phenomenon for LGBT communities. This was not only because “queer” was made to function as a powerful critique of homophobia, but most importantly because it was employed to motivate thousands of people to engage in confrontational political actions. It is also very significant that “queer” was used in internal LGBT debates about identity, ideology, differences and problems with exclusion within the LGBT communities. For these reasons “queer” incited self-reflection among gays and lesbians. Finally, with “queer” came new tactics and strategies of activism that greatly proliferated the whole field of LGBT activism.

2.3.4 Queer political strategies and tactics

Two activists, Jeffrey Escoffier and Allan Berube wrote:

These queers are constructing a new culture by combining elements that usually don't go together. They may be the first wave of activists to embrace the retrofuture/classic contemporary styles of postmodernism. They are building their own identity from old and new elements- borrowing styles and tactics from popular culture, communities of colour, hippies, AIDS activists, the antinuclear movement, MTV, feminists, and early gay liberationists. Their new culture is slick, quick, anarchic, transgressive ironic. They are dead serious, but they also just wanna have fun. If they manage not to blow up in contradiction or get bogged down in process, they may lead the way into new forms of activism for the 1990s. (Jeffrey Escoffier and Alan Berube, 1991, 16)²³

²⁰ “Raro” as used in Spanish means rare, odd, unusual.

²¹ The Spanish maricón or maricona is equivalent to faggot or sissy

²² In Spanish “puto” most commonly means male whore, but for many Latin people it is also an offensive word for homosexual male person.

²³ This short essay was first published in OUT/LOOK 3 no. 3 1991. It was one of the first essays from Queer Nation. Quoted from *American Homo*, Escoffier 1998, p. 203.

The style of Queer Nation, was aggressive but at the same time ironic and campy. In their activities, particularly through their often exaggerated theatrical style, they showed that existing political discourse was not sufficient. The available categories were not enough for them to express what they wanted to say and who they wanted to be. Bower writes:

Queer Nation rejects the dominant culture's categorization of homosexual bodies to assert the positivity of a queer sexuality which is public, political, and particular. Queers reject "right to privacy" arguments which are asserted to invalidate anti-sodomy laws; they reject their status as disembodied subjects of the public sphere; they refuse the historical, cultural, and legal terms used to frame sexuality; and they reconfigure the public sphere as a potential site for the articulation of multiply sexed subjects." (Bower 1997, 282)

I interpret this excerpt to be a longing for alternative forms of political engagement. "Queer" according to Bower expresses a rejection of traditional ways of thinking about sexuality, but at the same time the term has a potential to express a need for new politics. Moreover, for Bower, "queer" has a potential to initiate this politics by rejecting the claims of the traditional emancipatory politics of the time. If Bower does indeed place such hopes in the term "queer", he constructs it as a type of magical spell. What is significant is that during the 1990s some activists and academics saw some special political power or potential in the very word "queer". It seems as if for them the word itself had some politically disruptive agency.

ACT UP and Queer Nation organized political actions in public spaces, and because of their strategies and tactics they significantly differed from many other organizations that were also publicly active and visible during that time. Queer Nation and ACT UP used campy style and language in order to express their disagreement with the politics of the time. These organizations attempted to challenge the very language used in political debates. The language of contestation that they presented was based on aggressively exaggerated forms of homophobic discourse. I suggest that this broadened the understanding of what counts as political action. ACT UP and Queer Nation mobilized various artistic forms of expression in order to make a political statement. Moe Meyer claims that these organizations also politicized Camp. He writes:

In the last decade, Camp, or queer parody, has become an activist strategy for organizations such as ACT UP and Queer Nation, as well as a focus in utopian movements like Radical Faeries. As practiced by these contemporary groups, Camp is both political and critical. (Meyer 1994, 1)

For Meyer, Camp was a crucial tool that activists could use in their political struggle and it seems that for him the connection between "queer" and "camp" was very strong. In many

posters, public actions and demonstrations “queer” was used in a highly parodic way. This parodic use functions as a radical political contestation of homophobic language.

In the U.S. during the early 1990s, “queer” was not used in traditional political debates where logical arguments would be exchanged. The term became popular in various types of street protests. During these protests some activists used “queer” as a highly performative concept that was not a mark of any essential identity as it was in the case of “homosexual” or “gay” but a sign of a particular relation to the cultural mainstream, namely contestation. Also for Sally R. Munt the emergence of the concept of “queer” among activists as a particular strategy was crucial. She writes:

Queer Nation coalesced around a new generation who were both angry and ironic, it assembled around an anarchist aesthetic which mobilized a ‘cultural happening’, a momentary incursion into the domain of representation. Queer Nation practiced a form of cultural terrorism on the American nation by incursion into the public realm of sexuality that attempted to “queer” the nation body. (Munt 2007, 66)

In the early political uses of “queer”, an ironic, parodic and highly theatrical way of using it was crucial. It was not only a way for activists to contest and destabilize homophobic discourse but also to strongly and often hyperbolically explicate their own political agenda of diversity. My contention is that the use of strongly exaggerated language was a method that both gained greater visibility and was a strategy to contest the very language of public debates that was shaped by a specific political discourse. The political engagement of activists was not aiming at achieving any particular rights. As Munt suggests, it was rather an anarchic politics that was aiming at opposing the established political order. Queer Nation was not an organization that would engage in the process of forming or advocating changes to the U.S. legal system. Many Queer Nation activists seemed to believe that “queer” served as an anarchic signifier that when displayed in various forms of protest would in some way destabilize the political system.

2.4 Activism enters academia

Around 1990 “queer” began to be used as a strategic means of identification. The ground for it was shared oppression but this identification with “queer” created a political community that consisted not only of shared oppression but of shared political goals and joint political actions. In this form, “queer” enters academia and becomes one of the most prolific academic terms of recent decades.

1993 marked the publication of several works that constituted a new field of research called “queer theory”. Among them were *A Fear of Queer Planet* edited by Michael Warner, *Tendencies* by Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick and *Bodies that Matter* by Judith Butler. All these authors drew on the tradition of activism in their use of “queer” and for all of them “queer” was

not simply a theoretical concept but also a political term. Moreover, they challenged the division between academia and politics. However, at the same time “queer” disappeared from use on the streets. During 1993, in almost all cities in the U.S., Queer Nation and ACT UP disappeared.

In 1993, “queer” began to appear as an adjective in more and more diverse contexts. There was, for example, not only queer theory, but queer movies, queer life styles, queer shopping centres, queer travel agencies, and so on. In a way, “queer” slowly lost its direct political radicalism as it was no longer so often used by activists, but it acquired the possibility of functioning temporarily in different contexts, even in commercial contexts.

For many academics who adopted “queer”, the term was a means of blurring the distinction between activism and academia. A good example of this is the work of Douglas Crimp, particularly his essays dating from the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s subsequently published as *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (2002). Crimp in these essays continuously oscillates between political activism and academic discourse. He challenges not only the distinction between these fields but also the discourses through which politics and academia operate.

2.4.1 Queer politics as a form of academic critique

In her essay “Making It Perfectly Queer” (1991), Lisa Duggan advocates that theory be kept as close to activism as possible. For Duggan, it is crucial that “queer” incorporates, in both theory and activism, a utopian dimension. The oppositional and confrontational character of “queer” on a theoretical level can be transformed into a radical critique of gay politics. Duggan writes: “I want to take up the position of “queer” largely in order to criticize (but not completely displace) the liberal and nationalist strategies in gay politics and to advocate the constructionist turn in lesbian and gay theories and practices” (Duggan 2006 [1991], 149). In Duggan’s opinion “queer” can be used in politically engaged theories in order to criticize presumptions about the self, political agency and the public/private division.

Duggan regards Queer Nation as a good example of the practice of that type of critique. She characterizes the political agenda of activists in the following way:

Many of these new gay militants reject the liberal value of privacy and the appeal to tolerance which dominate the agendas of more mainstream gay organizations. Instead, they emphasize publicity and self-assertion; confrontation and direct action top their list of tactical options; the rhetoric of difference replaces the more assimilationist liberal emphasis on similarity to other groups. (Duggan 2006 [1991], 153)

Duggan emphasizes that the rhetoric of difference may be used to problematize the very notion of unitary identity. “Queer” was used to demonstrate that identities are constructed

socially and that people are marked with multiple identities that define them. Interestingly, in the 1990s academia also developed a new way of analysing identities called intersectionality (see e.g. Crenshaw 1991).

Duggan claims that not only the notion of gay and lesbian identity but also the very notion of a gay and lesbian community is problematic, and the term “queer” can help in rethinking this notion.

The notion of a “queer community” can work somewhat differently. It is often used to construct a collectivity no longer defined solely by the gender of its members’ sexual partners. This new community is unified only by a shared dissent from the dominant organization of sex and gender. (Duggan 2006, 157)

She also mentions that for many activists, “queer” simply meant “gay”. Nevertheless for many others, this term was a new cultural and political opening.

For Duggan, on many levels “queer” is a contradictory term but it does not mean that it should be dismissed in academia; on the contrary, in these contradictions Duggan recognizes a political potential that might also be transformational for academic theories. Duggan in fact attempts to set an agenda for future queer theory:

The continuing work of queer politics and theory is to open up possibilities of coalition across barriers of class, race, and gender, and to somehow satisfy the paradoxical necessity of recognizing differences, while producing (provisional) unity. (Duggan 2006 [1991], 162)

This might be regarded as a rather ambitious aim.

Duggan’s 1991 essay is important because it is one of the first texts to theorize “queer” and search for a proper academic language and discourse to express it and to make it political. Duggan aims to be very close to the original uses of “queer” by Queer Nation, but at the same time she aims at establishing a theoretical field that would be able to maintain the political potency which “queer” has in activism and to express a more general social and political criticism in academic terms.

2.4.2 Queer academic utopia

Lauren Berlant also based her use of “queer” on Queer Nation’s notion of the term. In her essay “Sex in Public” (1999, written with Michael Warner), she uses “queer” to discuss the concept of the public sphere. The point of using “queer” in this essay is to sexualize and deconstruct the traditional concept of the public sphere. In this context, “queer” contains a notion of an

alternative to the established meaning of the public sphere and the values that are connected to it.

For Berlant, “queer” can function as the basis for a utopian project. She writes:

By queer culture we mean a world-making project, where “world” like “public,” differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people that can be identified, more spaces that can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright. The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate registers, by definition unrealizable as community or identity. (Berlant and Warner, 2000, 322)

Here “queer” is connected with certain forms of utopian revolutionary politics that are prompted by particular acts and lifestyles. In this context, “queer” refers to a way of living that is alternative and non-normative. Through “queer”, Berlant attempts to challenge the notion of intimacy. The concept of “queer” would accommodate forms of intimacy without a necessary connection to concepts of “privacy”, “kinship”, “property” or “nation”. In this idea, one can detect some echoes of Queer Nation, but Berlant seems to go even further with the concept of “queer”. It is clearly a positively valorized term that in some way is able to inspire us to make the world a better place. It would seem that for Berlant, “queer” is a type of messianic promise for the future; it can inspire or encourage us to be politically active and also to live alternative lifestyles. However, contrary to Queer Nation, Berlant’s text does not clearly explain how to act politically in the name of “queer” or what would it mean to be “queer”. “Queer” here is instead an idealized concept of difference.

Berlant also discusses “queer” in “Queer Nationality”, one of her early essays co-authored with Elizabeth Freeman. Here she is much closer to the explicit uses of “queer” by Queer Nation. Berlant states that “queer” as it is deployed by Queer Nation has multiple political references. According to Berlant, many of Queer Nation’s actions and ideologies aim to point out: “how thoroughly the local experience of the body is framed by laws, policies, and social customs regulating sexuality” (Berlant and Freeman 1997, 148). Berlant seems to be placing Queer Nation into a Foucaultian framework, especially since later on in the same text she sees Queer Nation as representing resistance to these regulatory regimes.

Berlant emphasizes two aspects in the uses of “queer” by Queer Nation: counterpolitics and an alternative vision of public space. Berlant claims that public space is unitary, hegemonic and normative. From this perspective, Queer Nation opens up public space to new meanings. “Queer Nation understands the property of queerness to be a function of the diverse spaces in

which it aims to become explicit. It names multiple local and national publics” (Berlant and Freeman 1997, 151).

In “Queer Nationality”, “queer” is powerful, political, transformative and radical. Enthusiasm about “queer” and Queer Nation is very strong in this essay, the author seeming to believe that this term can produce theoretical miracles through its powerful radical critique. It can, for example, challenge our presumptions about identity, community, nation, norms and popular culture.

Berlant states that the use of “queer” among activists established the concept as an ideal limit. It is a “utopian promise” of a new identity and a new community. It also marks the beginning of a new symbolic order. By this “Queer Symbolic” Berlant refers to a possibility of imagining new forms of cultural participation and nationalism; in other words, new forms of being together in different shared spaces.

2.4.3 Queer against norms

For Michael Warner “queer” stands for the contestation of the institutions of state, family, nation, and of politics itself. He states:

The preference of “queer” represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favour of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal. (Warner 1993, XXVI)

Warner considers the political value of “queer” to lie in its oppositional role in reference to established social norms. This idea is very close to the politics of contestation proposed by Queer Nation, but Warner goes on to attribute more theoretical qualities to the concept of “queer”. To Warner, “queer” is able to express the permanent insufficiency of traditional identity categories.

A similar way of theorizing “queer” is represented by Simon Watney. Watney was one of the first scholars in the Anglo-Saxon academic circles to conduct a cultural analysis of AIDS. Watney observes: “‘queer’ identity recognizes that no single term, including ‘queer’, can ever resolve all the epistemological and political problems that are inscribed within the current dominant rationality of sexuality and sexual identity” (Watney 2000, 61). Watney argues that “queer” signifies counter-identity, and it is politically very potent in the form in which it was deployed by activists. However, Watney considers this potency to be temporal. “Queer” as the name of a radically oppositional concept and movement began to appear historically during the time of AIDS and it can be seen as a cultural answer to this disease. Watney distinguishes two main aspects in “queer”: its oppositional side towards mainstream

society and its deconstructive side towards LGBT communities. For Watney, the second aspect of “queer” seems to be more important. He writes: “ ‘Queer’ thus articulates contradictions and tensions within the older lesbian and gay politics, and permits us to think of ‘gay’ politics in a wider historical perspective” (Watney 2000, 59).

Like Gould, I find the role of emotions to be crucial in establishing “queer” as a political term. The relationship between emotions and politics in the case of the term “queer” is very contingent and can be discerned on several levels. For me it is crucial that “queer” has introduced a new approach to political debates and theories. Queer Nation showed that agents do not have to take part in political debates on pre-established terms, which might often be oppressive, limiting and normative. Indeed, agents can contest and challenge the very terms in which political debates take place.

The term “queer” as a political concept in the field of AIDS and LGBT activism appeared around 1990 and disappeared around 1993. There were still some smaller organizations that used the term, such as Queers United in Support of Political Prisoners or Qthink, but after 1993 none of them were able to capture political imagination of sexual minorities on such scale as Queer Nation did. Even though after 1993, “queer” was no longer as radical politically in the field of activism, a new chapter of “queer” as a political concept began with its use by scholars in U.S. academia.

When activists of Queer Nation used the term “queer”, they were able to galvanise public opinion with it, including many gays and lesbians. Many public actions were very provocative and outrageous. This was a political practice, understood as a public transformative action. But when academics try to place “queer” into theoretical discourses, it often sounds too idealistic, utopian or at points, exaggerated. Nevertheless, I find it fascinating that this concept is so flexible and that it is able to work on so many levels and can provoke such an immense number of interpretations and uses.

2.5 Conclusions

Around 1990, in ACT UP and Queer Nation “queer” began to be regarded politically as a sign of a coalition. It was the coalition of various agents united by their disapprobation of the U.S. health politics and growing conservatism. “Queer” was used to unite various marginalized groups in common political goals. “Queer” was not a basis for identity, but it was a ground for a specific political agency. This agency was formed not so much by common interest but rather by protest and contestation of the current politics and its language.

“Queer” began to be used as a political concept by activists at the end of the 1980s and particularly between 1990 and 1993. For activists “queer” never had a single connotation and

the term was used in various ways. However, it would be an exaggeration to claim that “queer” was an empty signifier that could mean anything. On the contrary, although its meaning was limited, it was nonetheless a flexible and inclusive term, so that, for example, it could also be used by heterosexuals who were campaigning against U.S. AIDS politics. I would suggest that in the political context, the most important function of the concept of “queer” was to oppose social, cultural and political norms, particularly those related to sexuality. The meaning of “queer” was positional in relation to the norms defining human sexual behaviour. We can therefore think of “queer” not as a fixed concept, but as an emotional attitude or a political strategy that can serve as a tool for social criticism and as a call for political transformation.

Beginning in the 1990s, “queer” was used by many simply as a synonym for “gay” and “lesbian”, but for most activists, “queer” was not an identity concept comparable to the term “gay”. Furthermore, “queer” was not a mark of a particular social position. On the contrary, we can see that in activists’ use of the term “queer”, it functions as an identification based on a contestation of social and political regimes that set up norms of agency and cultural citizenship. Therefore “queer” does not fit into established oppositions between different identity concepts such as heterosexual versus homosexual, or White US citizen versus Latino immigrant. I would argue that if used like this, in certain contexts “queer” runs the risk of idealizing contestation as a position that might transcend power relations. Nevertheless, looking at the history of “queer” as a political concept during the period 1990 – 1993, we can clearly notice that “queer” was politically effective. It strongly transformed the attitude of American society towards the HIV/AIDS crisis. Moreover, ACT UP and Queer Nation reshaped the whole scene of gay and lesbian activism. Internal criticism, particularly concerning race and gender consciousness, became key elements of LGBT activism from the 1990s to the present.

The aggressively oppositional political attitude of people using the term “queer” brought heightened visibility to LGBT communities. “Queer” was used by activists of the time to criticize the language and discourse of politics. These activists called into question the basic terms that were uncritically used in politics, such as public space, nation, community, rights and citizenship.

“Queer” as a political term was contingent upon the people who used it. “Queer” was a label that marked a specific oppositional stance towards U.S. politics, particularly targeting sex and the health care system. Moreover, “queer” was a label used to describe activists who protested against homophobia and the stigmatization of people with HIV at the beginning of the 1990s. Also, “queer” was often used as an umbrella term for various socially marginalized positions. It was likewise used as an internal critique of gay and lesbian communities, and it

was formative for new communities. And finally, from the 1990s onwards, many gay and lesbian people often referred to themselves as “queer”. The flexibility of this word was its main asset in its development as a political concept in the 1990s. But its flexibility was also the cause of the decline of the radicalism of “queer” from 1993 onwards. If I have to single out one feature of “queer” as a political concept, it would be an ability to function as a sharp critical tool in discussions, not only on non-normative sexuality, but also on race, class, gender and ethnicity.

I argue that from the early uses of “queer” as a political term there was a tension between on the one hand uses that emphasized community building, joint political action and on the other hand uses that connect this term to individual contestation of norms and a form of self-understanding as an alternative person. As I have shown in my analyses, for most activists “queer” has been a sign of political engagement and the tension within the concept has been productive in opening up new ways of using this concept and further proliferating it.

When it was used as an oppositional and critical term, “queer” was occasionally even anti-utopian, and there are good examples of such uses of “queer” provided by ACT UP and Queer Nation. But it had its utopian dimension particularly when it referred to gay and lesbian communities, in a sense that it was a call to re-imagine and transform these communities, and it was also a call to search for a more inclusive and diverse community.

The AIDS crisis brought to the fore questions of representation of sexual minorities, of identity and of their place in U.S. society. “Queer” appears in this political context. My finding is that “queer” was used on three different levels. Activists engaged with extensive political debates, such as that concerning the shape of public space and access to it. Secondly, “queer” was used in internal debates among sexual minorities that focused on problems of internal exclusion of some agents but also on profiles of LGBT organizations and their politics. Finally, some used “queer” to express their personal desire to live differently and to contest norms exercised by the mainstream.

Chapter 3: Early uses of “queer” in academia

As discussed in the previous chapter, “queer” as a political concept was initially used in specific circles of North American activists, particularly those engaged in AIDS activism. Shortly afterwards “queer” started to be used in academic texts and publications and from about 1991, “queer” can be described as an academic concept that was related to specific problems and methodologies. It is difficult to clearly segregate political uses of “queer” as applied by activists and academics. Particularly at the early stages of its political use, “queer” often carried personal and emotional attachments and the division between activism and academia seems to be partly artificial. Many academics, who from about 1990 used the term “queer” in their articles and from 1993 in books, were also engaged in different forms of activism. It seems that especially in the field of gender and sexuality this division between theory and practice, between academia and activism, is problematic. Theories are also political and can be translated into ways of engaging and transforming reality. Already in the previous chapter I discussed several authors that use “queer” in a political manner, particularly in relation to activism.

In this chapter, I focus primarily on early academic texts that use “queer” as a political term, but I do not intend to clearly distinguish between academic and activist uses. In both cases, I undertake a textual analysis of “queer” as a concept. The authors that I discuss here use “queer” often without a reference to direct political action. The examples of the early political use of “queer” in academia that I will analyse here are essays by Teresa de Lauretis, Sue-Ellen Case and Michael Warner. There are also other texts from around 1989 – 1993 that use the term “queer” but I have chosen these three authors because they were among the first to use “queer” in academic works but, more importantly, they advocated the use of “queer” in academia and they aimed at setting up a specific mode of political usage of “queer”. In addition, these authors were influential for future researchers who applied “queer” to their analyses.

I suggest that “queer” was deployed in academic contexts in opposition to gay and lesbian studies and certain strains of feminism that during the time were dominant forms of conceptualizing sexuality. The uses of “queer” that I analyse in this chapter promote a specific conceptual politics that targets the ethnic model of gay identity and research informed by traditional disciplines such as history, sociology and anthropology.

3.1. Academia and activism

As presented in the previous chapter, “queer” was a powerful term that was used among activists to mobilize people in their opposition towards the silencing and ignorance of the AIDS

crisis. It was also a term that was applied to many debates concerning strategies, political aims, divisions and internal exclusions of some groups within lesbian and gay communities. For activists, “queer” was also a form of identity critique even though it did not function in any defined theoretical framework, but around “queer” debates about internal divisions and exclusions within lesbian and gay communities were initiated. Queer Nation through “queer” addressed issues such as homophobia and they also related the term to debates on internal exclusions within lesbian and gay communities based on factors such as race and class. In the previous chapter I suggested that among activists the term functioned as a critique of gay identity that was based on the ethnic model. The term “queer” was often used in campy posters or in demonstrations, but activists did not need to develop a single coherent discourse in which “queer” would have a consistent usage. The use of “queer” amongst academics is different in this regard. Academia requires conceptual coherence and a specific discourse combined with a corresponding methodology.

Activists that were part of the queer movement belonged to different social classes and positions. When shouting on the streets: “We are queer! We are here! Get used to it!” they probably did not analyse the theoretical background of this slogan or its conceptual coherence. This slogan was an immediate manifestation of their anger and a call for its recognition in public places. Academic use of concepts requires a certain distance and a critical approach. Moreover, many academics are not directly engaged in political activism but pursue their political engagement through their writing instead. Another important issue is the very status of academics. Academics represent one specific class, in the U.S. they are considered to be middle class, but more specifically, they form a specific social position and even if they had a personal interest or were engaged in the queer movement, at universities they work with theories and this requires some distance towards the terms used. One could argue that an academic article or book can be driven by anger to express a feeling of unfairness, but writing an academic text also needs meta-reflection about the language that is used to express these feelings and ideas. There are many cases when the dividing line between activist and academic is blurry but in my study it is clear that “queer” was mobilized for different purposes and it functioned differently when it was used during street demonstrations and activist debates or when it was found in academic texts.

Benjamin Shepard in *Queer Political Performance and Protest* describes the tension between academics and activists. Many academics who at the beginning of the 1990s started using the term “queer” developed around it a critique of identity politics, but activists were divided about this issue. Shepard writes that among activists “some argued there was also a

place for identity in queer politics, a strategic essentialism that recognises until the playing field is more equal, social categories are still necessary” (Shepard 2011, 226). Shepard claims that during the 1990s the division between activists and academics slowly became more marked. Shepard writes from the perspective of activism, concluding: “At its worst, queer theory had become another technocracy of complicated, esoteric language and jargon accessible to mainly those with university education” (Shepard 2011, 226). Shepard sharply brings out the division between those who used “queer” as a part of political activism and those who applied the term in political debates in academia. In many cases this division was not so radical, but Shepard presented a standpoint that many activists adopted during the 1990s and later on.

A division between political theory and practice is clear, and it would, moreover, be naïve to expect that academics should always write in a way that was accessible to everyone. Here at stake was not only language but also deeper political concerns, such as identity or representation. From the academic perspective it is possible to propose a radical critique of these problems, but from the perspective of political practice the language that operates with concepts such as “gay”, “lesbian” and “queer” and develops certain political representations and claims requires constant negotiation more than radical critique.

Many theorists see the emergence of “queer” in academic discourse as part of the spreading of new forms of cultural critique often classified as “postmodernism” or “poststructuralism”. Rosemary Hennessy, for instance, writes: “The emergence of queer counterdiscourses has been enabled by postmodern reconfiguration of subjectivity as more flexible and ambivalent and by shifting political pressures within the gay community” (Hennessy 1995, 145-146). Importantly, Hennessy points out two sources of adaptation of “queer” to academia: the first were the new emerging forms of theoretical analysis of identity and the second were the growing political discussions within the gay and lesbian community that needed to be conceptualized in academia. Hennessy’s position towards the term “queer” is ambiguous. She perceives this term to bear an almost exclusive focus on visibility and representation which means a shift away from the neo-Marxist analysis of the material construction of sexuality. But Hennessy and several other authors who discuss the term often move from discussing the concepts to discussing agents. Obviously, postmodernism did not reconfigure or deconstruct subjectivity or identity. It offered a new way of conceptualizing the subject that can be considered to be the deconstruction of some concept of identity. For many authors the term “postmodern” is taken for granted to mean a critique of stable concepts of identity or even more generally of subjectivity. Hennessy as well as Seidman (1997) and Huffer (2010) recognize the influence of French theories on the appropriation of “queer” into

academic discourses. In this context perhaps the most frequently mentioned author is Jacques Derrida, but Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan are also crucial. However, contrary to authors who take “postmodernism” or “queer” as active quasi-agents that are capable of doing things in reality, I focus on the conceptual aspect of “queer” and analyse its use as a political term.

In the introduction to the anthology *Sexual Identities – Queer Politics* the editor, Mark Blasius, claims that “queer” emerges in academic discourses from the AIDS movement but subsequently “it was influenced intellectually primarily by the postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault and was motivated to move beyond the immediate goal of ACT UP” (Blasius 2001, 12). I will not argue here, however, whether it was Foucault, Derrida or Lacan who became the key influence for the application of “queer” to academic discourse. All of them created a theoretical background in which from about 1991 “queer” was used. As Blasius suggests, “queer” was used in a more comprehensive way amongst academics than it was amongst activists. ACT UP focused initially on issues related to AIDS but subsequently they built a complex political platform that tackled various political issues related to sexual minorities. In comparison, in academia the topic of AIDS was of course important, but authors such as Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick searched for terms and methodologies that would allow them to develop new frameworks to theorize sexuality. These authors opened general debates on representation and identity that differed from those taking place in Gay and Lesbian Studies until the end of the 1980s. They did not negate the previous lesbian and gay studies or feminist thought. Butler and de Lauretis are deeply indebted to these traditions but at the same time they borrowed from other theoretical traditions. It seems that for these researchers and for many others who were intellectually formed by New Cultural Criticism, Continental Philosophy and new literary analyses, “queer” was a term that fitted well into the new way of theorizing marginal sexualities. Of course, the AIDS crisis urgently needed to be theorized, but academics such as Butler or Sedgwick went further; they opened new ways of conceptualizing sexuality and they searched for methodologies and terms that would enable them to explicate a new and powerful cultural critique.

Butler (1990), de Lauretis (1991) and Sedgwick (1990) start their inquiry into the field of sexuality with the claim that the existing research is not sufficient to express the problems of sexuality and its experience at that time. The scholars saw the need to theorize not only sexual orientation but also sexual practices, forms of representation of sexuality and the related question of identity. Butler (1990) points out that existing feminist theories are too focused on gender and are unable to provide non-exclusive categories to theorize the construction of sexuality. De Lauretis (1991) claims that there is a theoretical gap in approaching lesbian

experience and its representation, particularly in the relationship of this experience towards the issues of class and race. Sedgwick (1990) states that homosexuality needs to be newly theorized in order to bring out the uniqueness of homosexual desire and its various constructions.

3.2. “Queer” as a hypothesis

The first academic publication that bore “queer” in the title and that many consider to be the beginning of “queer theory” was the special issue of *differences* 1991 vol. 3, edited by Teresa de Lauretis. Earlier uses of “queer” were also sporadically registered in some academic texts but the special issue of *differences* aimed at applying “queer” as an analytical and political category to a specific way of thinking and theorizing sexuality.

In 1990 Teresa de Lauretis organized what can now be viewed as a historically significant academic conference entitled “Queer Theory”. Among the participants were many scholars who subsequently became prominent representatives of this new field of knowledge designated “queer studies” or “queer theory”, such as Lee Edelman, Sue-Ellen Case, Douglas Crimp, Jeff Nunokawa and D. A. Miller. Most topics were formulated in the language of contemporary literary theory and criticism as applied to the study of sexuality of minority groups, the problems of representation of sexual minorities, AIDS and the cultural crisis surrounding it.

De Lauretis postulates the use of “queer” as an alternative to “gay and lesbian”. Her reason for this is that “gay and lesbian” became too exclusive and it made invisible many important differences within sexual minority communities. I see this as a radical proposition for that time because most activists or researchers who used “queer” as a political concept thought that the concept could function beside other concepts such as “lesbian” or “gay”. De Lauretis therefore proposes a radical change in LGBT language.

Moreover, de Lauretis proposed shifting the focus from rights that are always general and simultaneously exclusive to issues of representation. According to de Lauretis, “queer” in academic literature “conveys a double emphasis – on the conceptual and speculative work involved in discourse production, and on the necessary critical work of deconstructing our own discourses and their constructed silences” (de Lauretis, 1991, iv). Crucially, de Lauretis understood “representation” differently than the major gay and lesbian organizations of the time. For them the question of representation was predominantly limited to building a public image of gay people that would be acceptable for the majority of U.S. society. For de Lauretis “representation” was about making differences visible, it was about searching for ways to express specific voices and experiences without unifying them.

Interestingly, although de Lauretis postulates “queer” as a new theoretical approach to tackle the issue of lesbian representation, she rarely uses the term. I have not, for example, found the concept of “queer” in her essays published during the 1980s and 1990s, with the exception of the introduction to the special issue of *differences* in 1991, and a 1996 essay entitled “Habit Changes, Response.” also published in *differences*, which was her own critique of the earlier essay. In her work, however, one can understand that she sees the need to critically analyse current gay and lesbian knowledge and to examine the language that lesbians and gays use to describe their sexuality. She considers the deconstruction of this knowledge to be one of the important contexts of “queer”. Yet, the main task she sets for “queer” is not merely deconstruction, but the production of new knowledges and new discourses that would offer an alternative to the dominant ones. For her “queer” is an important part of multiple and diverse discourses of sexuality. I suggest that de Lauretis’ proposition to use “queer” has political consequences. It targets the language of gay and lesbian studies of the time. De Lauretis advocates a shift towards discussing sexual experiences and factors that influence sexuality such as class or race and using “queer” as part of this new approach and in opposition to the prevailing discourse of gay and lesbian studies.

It is crucial politically that “queer” is placed in opposition to “gay and lesbian”. As de Lauretis puts it: “The term “queer,” juxtaposed to ... “lesbian and gay” ..., is intended to mark a certain critical distance from the latter, by now established and often conventional, formula” (1991, iv). The author explains that the reason for this conceptual change is that terms such as “lesbian and gay” have become too generic and vague. De Lauretis states that in fact the formula “lesbian and gay” is a political fiction because gay men have their own theories based mostly on historians such as Weeks (1977) and D’Emilio (1983), while theory for lesbians focused more on the issue of gender as represented by authors such as Foster (1956), Abbott and Love (1972), Johnston (1973), Ponse (1978) and Rich (1980). De Lauretis noted that the gap between these theories grew bigger and bigger and was visible at many levels. One example is vocabulary, e.g. while gay theorists used the term “homosexual”, lesbians avoided this term. Lesbians focused more on literary studies while gays concentrated on history and sociology. De Lauretis writes that “gay” and “lesbian” “designate distinct kinds of life-styles, sexualities, sexual practices, communities, issues, publications and discourses” (de Lauretis 1991, v).

The problem that de Lauretis diagnoses is that sexual minority communities are divided and have little in common. These communities do not know much about each other and some communities are undertheorized and underrepresented. “Queer” is an attempt to respond to this

problem. De Lauretis continues: “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 problematize them” (1991, v). Therefore “queer” here is a part of “Queer Theory”, which should create a common ground for new types of research that would not undermine differences but would also allow a common ground for discussing various sexual identifications and experiences. It is a political task to build a specific alliance on the theoretical level that would create a space for what was up to then silenced and it should also be a space of exchange in which different agents can try to express their experiences but also acknowledge the experiences of others.

De Lauretis does not mention what precisely would be the ground for a platform called “Queer Theory”. She nevertheless mentions that the current AIDS crisis and backlash of conservatives against sexual minorities force these minorities to form alliances and reflect on alternative ways of representing themselves and their claims. De Lauretis claims that most of the differences are not represented under the umbrella of “lesbian and gay” and there is a need, indeed even a necessity, to search for other ways to express differences among sexual minorities. Another important task is that different communities should be informed about each other and “Queer Theory” could be a platform for this.

Surprisingly, in this context, de Lauretis ignores activism and would appear to be only interested in written texts. She looks at such texts as political and therefore postulates “Queer Theory” as a form of activism, but she does not mention any forms of direct activism such as street protests. Moreover, in one of her footnotes she distances her position from that represented by Queer Nation. She writes: “The term “queer” was suggested to me by a conference in which I participated (...) My “queer,” however, had no relation to the Queer Nation group, of whose existence I was ignorant at that time. As the essays will show, there is in fact very little in common between Queer Nation and this queer theory” (de Lauretis 1991, xvii). It is difficult to reflect further on this statement because we cannot say what de Lauretis knows about Queer Nation. As discussed in the previous chapter, Queer Nation organized different types of actions and offered an interesting internal critique of sexual minorities communities as well as of the politics of liberal U.S. society. But the fact is that none of the essays in the special issue of *differences* mention queer activism. Not all of them, however, are focused on literary analyses or psychoanalysis. Two essays, one by Samuel R. Delany and another by Tomas Almaguer represent more empirical and anthropological approaches to sexuality. My contention is that de Lauretis in her use of “queer” does not feel indebted to

earlier uses of the term, for instance by AIDS activists. She freely picks up the term and designs it to work as a critical term within gay and lesbian studies. She does not seem to be concerned about direct political activism, instead she develops a critique of academic discourse that gay and lesbian studies of the time use. In this, “queer” plays an important role in de Lauretis’ conceptual politics.

According to de Lauretis, “queer” should take the position of “an activist” concept that would have the capacity of political critique of the current gay and lesbian studies with their homogeneous representation based on the ethnic model of sexual minorities. De Lauretis accuses gay and lesbian studies of constructing “silences around the relations of race to identity and subjectivity in the practice of homosexualities and the representation of same-sex desire” (1991, viii). Queer theory is situated in opposition towards gay and lesbian studies and its task is to pick upon silenced problems and develop different forms of representation. De Lauretis stresses that the newly born theory needs to be localized geographically and culturally, and it needs to be specific in addressing race and class. But in fact de Lauretis does not discuss class in detail.

De Lauretis proposed “queer” as a name for a new approach to problems of representation with sexual minorities, but quite soon she abandoned this term. In recent years she has started using the term again but in a different manner, which I will discuss in chapter 6. In 1991, for de Lauretis “queer” carried a utopian promise. She asks “Can our queerness act as an agency of social change, and our theory construct another discursive horizon, another way of living the racial and the sexual?” (1991, xi). De Lauretis does not provide an answer to the question she poses but one can see it as a suggestion of a utopian horizon that queerness as a type of agency and theoretical approach can occupy. I assume from Lauretis’ words above that politics for her is more related to individual life choices that can in some way influence or change society, for she never engages in questions which concern social institutions,

De Lauretis states that her book *Practice of Love* (1994) “is not about feminism theory or queer theory” (1997, 316). It is a clear sign of her distance from the feminism and the academic uses of “queer” of the time. She aims to theorize sexuality and use critical reading as a method. She adds: “As for “queer theory,” my insistent specification *lesbian* may well be taken as a taking of distance from what, since I proposed it as a working hypothesis for lesbian and gay studies in this very journal (*differences* 2.3), has quickly become a conceptually vacuous creature for the publishing industry” (1997, 316). Around that time “queer” was already a popular term used in countless academic publications. It would seem that de Lauretis considered that this term had lost its critical edge and had become part of mainstream academic

debates. Moreover, in the quotation above we can see that “queer” was just “a working hypothesis” that was soon abandoned in favour of the more specific term “lesbian”. De Lauretis explains that she continues the practice of critical reading of lesbian experience and lesbian agency through a psychoanalytical framework. She believes that she should focus on this not by developing any general theories because different groups among sexual minorities are unable to understand each other. Therefore, the most viable alternative is to look for specific languages and try to describe experiences that are the closest ones to ourselves. Moreover, it seems that after 1991 de Lauretis stopped believing that there could be such a theory or concept that would help to inform different groups among sexual minorities about each other’s differences and would allow them to understand each other better.

Several years after the special issue of *differences* editors of the journal decided to tackle the issue of “queer” again and in 1996 a new volume of *differences* dedicated to the relationship between feminism and queer theory was published and subsequently gained the form of a book *Feminism meets Queer Theory* (1997). Several of the articles included in this book explicitly comment on de Lauretis’ proposal to develop “queer theory”. Evelynn Hammonds offered an interesting polemic with de Lauretis’ 1991 position. In “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality” she claims that de Lauretis only mentions race but fails to really theorize it. First she states that, in queer theory as described by de Lauretis, “*maybe* I had found a place to explore the ways in which queer, black, and female subjectivities are produced” (Hammonds 1997, 139). Nevertheless, Hammonds declares that contrary to its promises queer theory fails to acknowledge the “multiplicity of identities or subject position of black women”. She continues:

Thus, queer theory as reflected in this volume has so far failed to theorize the very questions de Lauretis announces that the term “queer” will address. I disagree with her assertion that we do not know enough about one another’s differences to theorize differences between and within gays and lesbian in relation to race. (Hammonds 1997, 140)

It seems that for Hammonds it would be too easy to dismiss the problem of race by relegating it to black lesbians to write about it. She asks that more attention be paid towards race and she finds this issue crucial for future queer theory or feminism. Black feminists should develop counter narratives to the “white” theories of sexuality. De Lauretis inadequately proposes “queer” as a term that can develop new narratives of sexuality and race for the reason that it is not enough to talk about lack and silences. Positive work should be done that would develop the relation between race and sexuality into a new conceptual frame. Hammonds concludes:

I need not simply add the label queer to my list as another naturalized identity. As I have argued, there is no need to reproduce black women's sexualities as a silent void. Nor are black queer female sexualities simply identities. Rather, they represent discursive and material terrains where there exists the possibility for the active production of speech, desire, and agency. (Hammonds 1997, 152)

This is an important critique of de Lauretis' use of the term "queer" particularly because it comes from a black feminist point of view. It could be argued that Hammonds' interpretation of de Lauretis' thoughts is somewhat exaggerated, but the fact remains that except for stating that "queer" should be able to tackle the silenced issue of race in gay and lesbian studies, de Lauretis does not provide any examples and does not develop this idea further. For black lesbian theorists like Hammonds "queer" cannot be just about voicing silences but should be a productive category that would be a tool to explore different ways of thinking and experiencing desire as it is influenced by race, ethnicity, class and other factors. I also find it significant that Hammonds claims that one should not begin theorizing without a connection to activism. An important part of Hammond's work is dedicated to discussing activism and the AIDS crisis in Afro-American communities.

Even though de Lauretis did not use the concept of "queer" frequently during the 1990s, her introduction to *differences* 3 in 1991 was highly influential and sparked off further polemics. From a sociological point of view, Steven Seidman (1997) sees de Lauretis' "queer theory" as part of a broader turn in sexuality studies that was inspired by psychoanalysis and French poststructuralism. The main point was the attack on the crucial issue of gay and lesbian studies and "the assumption of a unified homosexual identity". Seidman responds: "I interpret queer theory as contesting this foundation and therefore the very telos of Western homosexual politics" (1997, 92). Seidman acknowledges that, among others, de Lauretis helped to problematize the issue of homosexual subjectivity, but he also doubts the efficacy of this "textual" approach which so clearly ignores practical issues of social and institutional analyses. His proposal for queer theories is to be politically more "pragmatic". Although I find Seidman an interesting polemicist, I would maintain that he discusses de Lauretis and other theorists such as Butler or Sedgwick on quite a superficial level, without exact references and instead only referring to books or articles by name. He also does not focus on concrete terms these authors use but instead generalizes their theories under a common summary.

An author that develops in more detail a critique of de Lauretis' stand on "queer" is Rosemary Hennessy. In her article "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture" Hennessy finds "queer" a politically important concept because it aims at the proliferation of sexual identities and it often functions as a tool to include other elements like race, ethnicity, class, and

nationality in the analysis of sexuality. She writes: ““Queer” often professes to define a critical standpoint that makes visible how heteronormative attempts to fix sexual identities tend to fail often because they are overdetermined by other issues and conflicts – over race or national identity, for example” (Hennessy 1995, 144). Nevertheless, Hennessy finds “queer” a politically dangerous concept. To her, “queer” is often used in contexts where sexuality is the prime factor and therefore there is a threat that we might look in the same way at gay men and lesbians although they are differently situated within social power structures. Therefore “queer” as an umbrella category for different sexual minorities might threaten their specificity and make some issues invisible. Hennessy calls it “postmodern fetishizing of sexual identity”. What she means by this is that in the light of the concept of sexuality all other social factors seem to be less important or not important at all. To me, this claim is an exaggeration which is not based on a close reading of de Lauretis or other authors of the time who used the term “queer”.

Hennessy claims that de Lauretis is wrong when she states that her analyses are political and not purely textual. For Hennessy “queer” as proposed by de Lauretis is just an elegant tool for different kinds of cultural criticism but it does not offer access to deeply political analyses and critiques. In her view, De Lauretis focuses on visibility issues and this was at the core of her proposal to use “queer”. But when Hennessy looks at how these “queer” analyses work in practice, she states that they often operate with “highly individualized notions of fantasy” (Hennessy 1995, 157). She further states that de Lauretis “fetishizes meaning by cutting it off from the social and historical forces that make text intelligible” (Hennessy 1995, 157). The main problem for Hennessy, whose criticism of “queer” comes from a neo-Marxist perspective, is that this concept is applied almost exclusively to debates on visibility and representation and in this way it loses crucial political potential to tackle the issues of class and social change. For her, politics is about social change and it cannot be reduced to the problems of cultural representation. Hennessy is not entirely against the concept of “queer” but she concludes that “queer” as proposed by de Lauretis might easily become part of those mainstream academic theories that have no political influence, because for theory to be critical it cannot only offer a change in a style or language. She writes: “We need a way of understanding visibility that acknowledges both the local situation in which sexuality is made intelligible as well as the ties that bind knowledge and power to commodity production, consumption, and exchange” (Hennessy 1995, 177).

De Lauretis’ proposal to use “queer” as a specific critical category is a useful critique of the feminism and gay and lesbian studies of the time but she does not provide details about the new academic politics that she proposes. The level of debate is rather general, and except for

very general statements that “queer” should be the mark of a new research field that would give voice to silenced positions, the author does not develop her ideas. De Lauretis’ point from 1991 is that there is a need for non-essentialist categories that would provide a basis for new political engagements, but she does not develop this point, and because of this it might sound for some somewhat empty. Rather, what is important for de Lauretis is to develop new discourses that would allow different experiences to be expressed. On this point I share Hennessy’s opinion that to talk about expressing different voices one needs to be already rooted in the language of individualism. De Lauretis in 1991 would seem to aim at establishing “queer” as a deeply critical and political concept, but for this purpose it is not sufficient to design diversifying and multiplying discourses describing sexuality one’s prime target. De Lauretis in her 1991 essay does not relate to the social reality of the time in a comprehensive way, such reality being understood as not only cultural texts but also as social institutions. To tackle the problems of race and class in connection to sexuality de Lauretis proposes “queer” as a new analytical tool, but in order to develop an efficient political term, “queer” should be applied not only to literary analyses but also to concrete political and institutional analyses. In order to be a political concept “queer” needs to be not only a call for the broader visibility of specific minorities but also a call to build pragmatic coalitions and a call for a political commitment to change social reality.

3.3 Queer vampires

Another significant scholar that needs to be mentioned here is Sue-Ellen Case. With the exception of de Lauretis, Case is the only author in *differences* 3.1991 that discusses the term “queer”. In her 1988 article “Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetics” Case had already used the concept of “queer”. The term is partly related to politics (the context of her discussion is “queer” postmodern politics), but it seems that “queer” in that essay is not a properly developed concept but rather an accidental word. In the whole essay “queer” appears only twice, but it is noteworthy. Case writes: “Contemporary theory seems to open the closet door to invite the queer to come out, transformed as a new, postmodern subject, or even to invite straights to come into the closet, out of the roar of dominant discourse” (Case 1993 [1988], 299). It might seem that in this text Case is somewhat hesitant to use “queer”. Nevertheless, it is significant that the concept is related to postmodern methodologies and to crossing dominant discourse. The thematic that “queer” relates to is subjectivity and its transformation. Case uses “queer” while discussing the politics of camp. She finds strategies of postmodern politics that use irony and distance in relation to homophobia very promising, but she also emphasizes the danger that these strategies might lock one into a self-indulgent circle. Even though Case in this article

does not develop her standpoint on “queer”, I suggest that exactly her formulation of “queer” was influential for many authors such as de Lauretis 1991 and Warner 1993, who used “queer” as a more explicitly political category.

Case uses “queer” to talk about new forms of subjectivity and she sets it against a background of postmodern theories. Interestingly, “queer” is a mark of a new style in politics and theory. It is a term that can be a call to or encouragement for transformation into this new “postmodern subject”. Therefore, an ethical level is also involved, but it would seem that it is a rather negative ethics that is situated in opposition to the dominant discourse. “Queer” is a mark of possible alternatives, and Case explicitly relates it to styles and politics of camp.

In “Tracking the Vampire” in *differences*, Case reflects more systematically on the word “queer”. Case’s article can be classified as literary criticism in which psychoanalysis and semiotics are used as a methodological framework. Although her article can be seen as a piece of literary criticism, it is not a typical textual analysis of a literary text. Firstly, it is a very personal text. Case starts it by going back to her teen experiences when she was discovering that she was lesbian. The opening of her article is also a reflection on the term “queer”. Case writes about her teenage years: “the only term I knew to describe my desire and my feelings was “queer” – a painful term hurled as an insult against developing adolescents who were, somehow, found to be unable to ante up in the heterosexist economy of sexual and emotional trade” (Case 1991, 1). Case does not try to generalize but situates “queer” in the context of people like herself who were growing up in the United States in a specific time. In this way, she also situates her own article and claims as rooted in subjective experiences, rather than constructing a universal theory of sexuality. Case makes her voice strongly visible as a middle-aged lesbian living in the U.S. She continues: ““Queer” was the site in the discourse at which I felt both immediate identification and shame – a contradiction that both established my social identity and required me to render it somehow invisible” (Case 1991, 1). Case writes this in the past tense but past identification and shame were productive for both the current social identity and alternative ways of thinking about social agency and this is what Case develops in her article.

For Case, “queer” also serves as a term to describe alternative ways of forming identity and alternative ways of perceiving and describing this identity. She mentions that her own self-image was formed by reading authors such as Rimbaud. Therefore, rather than identity, “queer” can be seen as a form of imaginary (or real) cross-gender identification. She states: “For I became queer through my readerly identifications with male homosexual authors” (Case 1991, 1). Case also adds that her “queer thinking” was influenced by camp as a form of personal

exaggerated style. She describes camp as a “subcultural discourse” that she learned in San Francisco bars from older lesbians and gay male friends. On the theoretical side, feminist critique was one of the key influences.

Case does not seem to strongly attach “queer” to “theory”. She uses “queer” in different constellations and one of them is “queer theory”, but she also talks also about “queer desire,” “queer discourse” and “queer representation”, and “queer” even becomes at points a quasi agent capable of acting on its own, in a sense that “queer” functions as a subject capable of producing certain change on its own, rather than just a term that can be used in various ways. When it comes to “queer theory” she writes:

My construction of the following queer theory, then is historically and materially specific to my personal, social, and educational experience, and hopefully to others who have likewise suffered the scourge of dominant discourse and enjoyed these same strategies of resistance. It is in no way offered as a general truth or a generative model. (Case 1991, 1-2).”

Case seems to offer a new politics for academia. She starts from acknowledging her point of view that is situated and limited, refusing to build any coherent theory but instead offering fragments, a work in progress. In “Tracking the Vampire” she poses a hypothesis to think about sexual minorities through the figure of the vampire as an excluded agent situated against the idea of life. In this way Case opened up new types of analysis that became popular during the 1990s and afterwards. Case’s idea of the vampire, as being situated on the side of death, is clearly mirrored later in the work of Lee Edelman (2004) and Teresa de Lauretis (2007).

“Tracking the Vampire” has several ideas that were key features of the concept of “queer” in academia. Case proposes a way of thinking via literary figures and she claims that this method might be transformative for our fantasies but also for discourses and language. She also calls for a rethinking of the very process of identification. One approach to this is the proposition to identify with negativity and to think a new oppression. She writes:

The discovery of Rimbaud and camp enables a theory that reaches across lines of gender oppression to gay men and, along with feminist theory, prompts the writing itself – ironically distanced and flaunting through metaphor. By imploding this particular confluence of strategies, this queer theory strikes the blissful wound into ontology itself, to bleed the fast line between living and dead. (Case 1991, 2)

The style that Case uses in this passage is interesting in itself. It is so highly individualistic and almost lyrical that is hard to paraphrase. She rejects typical academic jargon and offers an analysis that crosses the lines between genres and disciplines. For Case this is also part of what she understands by “queer”. Social stigmatization and oppression of homosexual people was earlier described by the language of political sciences or sociology. Case refuses to engage in

these discourses and offers at times a poetic form of literary criticism. “Queer” for Case is not only a new term that can be applied to this peculiar form of literary criticism; more importantly, it is a term that marks a change in the academic way of thinking about sexuality. It is also a term that is in itself a form of activism. She states: “Unlike petitions for civil rights, queer reveals constitute a kind of activism that attacks the dominant notion of the natural. The queer is the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny” (Case 1991, 3).

Immediately, a feminist-trained reader might find a concept like “queer” dangerous because it would appear to be blind to sexual difference. Clearly, Case is aware of this issue, but she thinks that even the very categories of sexual difference and gender need to be thought of in a new way. Case claims that, of course, we need to be aware of forms of male domination, but she aims at shifting the perspective from being gender centred to what she calls “ontology”, and by this she means forms of conceptualizing desire and sexuality. The very aim of “Tracking the Vampire” is to provide an example of an alternative ontology of desire. Case writes: “The articulation of queer desire also breaks with the discourse that claims mimetically to represent that “natural” world, by subverting its tropes” (Case 1991, 3). The point is to develop new discourses that would be capable of expressing alternative forms of desires, fantasies and sexual practices. Therefore, for Case, it is also about a different ontology that would describe objects and their relations in different ways. Through her theorizing of the vampire metaphor she presents the possibility of thinking beyond the binary dichotomies of subject/object, life/death. The challenge is concerned with the concept of sign and representation, where already at this basic level there is an assumed heterosexual system of domination. “Queer”, therefore, is a term that works to challenge the very concepts of sign and representation.

Interestingly, in her anthology of lesbian performances *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance* (1996) Case writes “queer” in quotation marks. In that anthology “queer” marks a new subculture of the 1990s and it stands in opposition to earlier feminist theory and activism. “Queer” seems to signify new radical approaches developed during the 1990s. However, it is hard to explain why Case uses “queer” with quotation marks, especially because she does not comment on the term. The use of quotation marks situates this term differently from other terms she uses and it suggests some critical distance towards it, but at the same time Case positively incorporates the term into her analyses of lesbian performances.

I find texts by Sue-Ellen Case, and in particular “Tracking the Vampire”, interesting examples of the early use of “queer” in academia. Her essay was influential because she uses

“queer” as a radical form of cultural critique but also as an opening to new engagements with language. “Queer” is used to challenge the politics of academia. The term becomes a call for new academic production that would be deeply subjective and provocative in its break with neutrality. Case proposes some inter- or perhaps post-disciplinary perspectives. The move to situate the narrator textually in academic texts is also politically meaningful. In this way perhaps the academic voice loses part of its authority but it reveals its own social position and its specific social engagement. More broadly, we can interpret this move as a critique of the idea of neutrality in academia and a call to reread academic texts to discover their subjective biases. Case started using “queer” in the context of politicizing academic and cultural discourses. This politics was developed by many feminist scholars in the 1980s and Case is clearly influenced by them, but while they focused their analyses on gender oppressions, Case proposed a critical reading of cultural and academic discourses with the focus on sexuality and sexual practices.

Since 1988 the work of Sue-Ellen Case has continued to provide challenges for traditional gay and lesbian studies. Her application of “queer” to academic discourse launched new analyses of sexuality. She applied “queer” as a concept that questions other concepts such as “gender” and “oppression”, which were previously dominant in feminism and gay and lesbian studies. Case’s way of thinking was not to completely abandon these concepts but to start developing new ones that would not be limited to theorizing sexual difference and gender oppression. She aimed at developing new concepts, new metaphors and even a new “ontology” that would express experiences and social position of sexual minorities in society. From an academic point, this application of “queer” is deeply political because it is a mark of the struggle to challenge existing concepts and to keep working on developing new ones that would be closer to people’s experiences. On the other hand, that time in the U.S. there were many gays and lesbians who felt uneasy about the term “queer” and felt much more comfortable with e.g. the term “gay”. The fact is that most of LGBT organizations in the 1990s used rather terms “gay” and “lesbian” as people felt more attached to them. Therefore what de Lauretis and Case consider being closer to people’s experiences was for many an academic abstraction.

3.4 Queer Politics

Another crucial early application of “queer” to academic debates was the anthology of texts *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* edited by Michael Warner (1993). In this context the most important contribution seems to be Warner’s introduction where he explains why “queer” had recently become such an important term for sexuality studies. Warner also explicitly writes what he considers the politics of “queer” to be about.

Warner starts his text with the question “what do queers want?” It seems, he assumes that readers already have in mind who queers are and that queers want something. Warner does not disclose the term “queer” in one simple description but his essay gives an idea what he means by this concept. Initially, Warner gives the impression that he applies the term “queer” to refer to sexual minorities, but the reader soon notices that it is more than just another identity term.

Warner states: ““queer” gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual, and normal includes normal business in the academy” (Warner 1993, xxvi). This is a very important statement because it aims to design the direction of the political impulse that follows from “queer”. Warner sees “queer” as a critical concept but not in opposition to heterosexuality. It is not a name for sexual minority groups but for those who reject dominant forms of sexuality. In this context, “queer” refers to other rules of social interactions and other norms that define proper agency in contemporary Western societies. It is an inclusive definition because possibly even certain heterosexuals who have at some level non-normative lives, can find use for the concept “queer” as a tool to describe their difference in opposition to the norms that limit them. Moreover, Warner is probably the first to openly raise the issue of resisting the politics of academia and to develop new forms of academic thinking, writing and teaching in the name of “queer”. “Queer” is not only about sexual politics but also about norms in daily life and norms that govern academia. Warner proposes the use of the term “queer” in an academic context in order to destabilize theoretical presumptions about theorizing sexuality and develop new models of thinking about it.

The negative or anti-social aspect of “queer” is highlighted by Warner. He writes: “Organizing a movement around queerness also allows it to draw on dissatisfaction with the regime of the normal in general. Following Hannah Arendt, we might even say that queer politics opposes society itself” (Warner 1993, xxvii). I would suggest that society in this context is identified with conformism and norms, while “queer” represents a rebellious impulse.

Warner was trained in literary theory and he aims to bring his literary training into political theory. For him, “queer” is a concept that can be applied to literary methodologies and analyses but one that can have political consequences. Warner does not want to limit the usage of “queer” to one field but instead considers that “queer” can be used in different kinds of analyses and can function as a powerful critique. His relationship to previous gay and lesbian studies is interesting. There are points where he criticizes gay and lesbian studies and especially their idea of “sexual identity”, but he never dismisses them and at the end of his essay he states

that “queer” should not aim at substituting them: “Queer politics has not just replaced older models of lesbian and gay identity, it has come to exist alongside those older models, opening up new possibilities and problems whose relation to more familiar problems is not always clear” (Warner 1993, xxviii).

Warner’s theorization is a way to highlight that “queer” should be as much of an inclusive term as possible and the aim to use it is not to start new sex wars but to add new discourse to existing ones. This sounds attractive, but on the other hand one could claim this declaration does not mean much. It is quite clear from Warner’s essay that “queer” also functions as a critique of feminism and gay and lesbian studies. It is a critique of feminism because it turns away from gender issues in order to focus on sexual identities and practices and it is also against gay and lesbian studies because it offers alternatives to the ethnic model of thinking about identities of sexual minorities. For instance, Warner states: “The preference for “queer” represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favour of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” (Warner 1993, xxvi). The essay is clearly written against gay and lesbian studies that were inspired by the New Left and ethnic models of identity developed by other minority groups. Dominant gay and lesbian thought of the 1980s theorized sexual minorities as a group with a specific interest and representation. On the same page Warner continues: ““Queer” is also a way of cutting against mandatory gender divisions (...)” (Warner 1993, xxvi). Of course, Warner is not so naïve to try to erase completely the issues of gender, but he wants to somehow find a way of theorizing that would focus less on gender division and more on sexuality. My contention is that Warner wishes “queer” to perform a radical conceptual politics of opposing the previous theoretical framework that was used to discuss lesbian and gay issues. I argue that Warner uses “queer” in order to introduce a new academic language and methodology to describe the politics of sexual minorities. Moreover, with this term he even aims to redefine this politics.

Warner claims that the use of “queer” in academia is strongly inspired by the work of Michel Foucault, French feminism and American psychoanalytic feminism. Surprisingly, he does not mention his own methods of literary criticism and he is, moreover, critical towards deconstruction. He explains this in a footnote quoting Sedgwick: “Deconstruction, founded as a very science of differ(e/a)nce, has both so fetishized the idea of difference and so vaporized its possible embodiments that its most thoroughgoing practitioners are the last people to whom one would now look for help in thinking about particular differences” (Sedgwick, 1990, 23). It is particularly striking that to dismiss deconstruction Warner quotes Sedgwick who, in many of

her essays, applies deconstruction as a method of reading marginalized sexuality. I discuss this further in chapter 5.

Warner, contrary to de Lauretis and Case, does not propose one specific theoretical framework in which “queer” is supposed to be used. For instance, for de Lauretis and Case a specific strain of literary theory was the main theoretical framework; they adhere to cultural analysis and do not attempt to engage directly in political debates. Warner’s references, on the other hand, seem rather accidental, stepping outside of a single academic genre. Although his background is in literary studies, he engages in political theory and social analyses, and directly applies cultural critique to politics. He discusses the construction of the state in the U.S. context and also the forms of social institutionalization of specific modes of agency and suppression of others. Nevertheless, in my opinion, particularly in his 1993 essay, he sounds naïve at points when constructing “queer” as a sign of opposition to “the norms”. “Queer” in his essay becomes almost a grand metaphysical concept that signifies an alternative to norms. I find it also problematic that “queer” in Warner’s work loses any specific connection to a particular group. It is no longer a term that an individual or a group can identify with but a token of a theoretical critique.

Warner aims to construct “queer” as an extensive political category that would be able to critically address a variety of problems. He is against the overly philosophical use of “queer” and he proposes that “queer” should function as a critical term towards the state and its institutions. He writes: “queer struggles aim not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those institutions and accounts” (Warner 1993, xiii). I see in this the inspiration of the early post-Stonewall liberation agenda that aimed at wide social changes and not only at achieving specific rights. Politically, he makes an important point when he claims that the term “queer” should not be limited only to theorizing sexual oppression.

As an approach to politics, I find it problematic that Warner situates “queer” in opposition to norms and society. This could be interpreted as his belief that it is possible to organize life outside of social norms. I argue that politically this is a weak claim, reminiscent of some youthful idealistic leftist position. In the practice of politics and in life one cannot avoid norms and we can only confront some norms with other norms and argue which create a more liveable life and who is oppressed by which norms and who benefits from them. Warner seems to privilege “queer” for the reason that it is a mark of a marginalised position. Warner’s ideas are somewhat romantic, as the opposition to norms becomes for Warner an aim in itself. To me, political practice is about making interventions, and in order to transform norms one needs to engage with society. I would argue that a powerful political intervention is not one which is

merely limited to criticism and contestation but goes further to propose alternatives, creating utopias or engaging directly with specific social problems and their solutions. The point of politics as action is not only critique, it is about doing things, about changing and constructing. Besides, to say that we should oppose norms is also to construct another norm. This type of idea that can be paraphrased as: to be original and different is prioritized and to be like everyone else is marked as negative. This idea, to me, sounds very problematic, particularly as a starting point of politics that comes from oppressed communities and aims at changing or transforming society.

In his next essays published in the 1990s, Warner further developed his idea of queer politics. For instance, the 1995 essay “Something Queer about the Nation State” offers more details and I would say a less naïve vision of the concept of “queer”. Warner claims that “queer” has a politically comprehensive function. He writes: “From the beginning of queer politics, queer issues were linked to political struggles not centrally identified with sexuality” (Warner 2002, 222). In this publication, Warner attaches “queer” to discussions about the state and citizenship. This is an interesting way of using “queer” in order to challenge the common presumptions about the state and citizenship and to point out that the current forms are completely accidental and can be reworked or reimagined. Warner is against designing any specific visions of the future based on the concept of “queer”. He claims that “queer” is not a utopian concept: “There is no utopian project on the horizon, but queer politics names this environment as a problem” (Warner 2002, 222). Warner sets up the term “queer” to function as a critique of public institutions, the construction of public space and the very construction of the state. In this way he avoids utopian thinking, but one could ask why should utopia be avoided? Positive elements of the concept of “queer” that would introduce some idea of the future do not necessarily have to be something that political thought has to avoid. Historically, we know that some utopian ideas were politically very fruitful. Clearly, Warner attaches the term “queer” to issues that are not necessarily related to sexuality or they are indirectly related towards the problems of sexuality. He thinks that the concept of “queer” can function at a more general level. Interestingly, Warner claims that by using “queer” in the context of issues which are not related to sexuality, these issues are sexualised and seen differently.

Warner keeps the academic use of “queer” close to the activists’ use. He does not idealize activism, but he sees it as a primal political strength of “queer”. Moreover, Warner thinks that even the use of “queer” in academia should be a form of activism. The aim of this activism is to reveal the particularity of state institutions. Warner writes: “Queer activism, considered as politics, presupposes and exploits the impossibility of the welfare state’s own

project” (Warner 2002, 217). I consider this essay to be an interesting critique of the idea of the state. In order to demonstrate the limits of the state and its accidental character, Warner uses the concept of “queer” as a tool that points to alternative values and alternative ways of thinking about public spaces.

There is one more point that I find very valuable in Warner’s way of theorizing “queer”. In a more recent publication (2002) he analyses the rhetoric that has been employed around “queer” in academia. He notices that generally “queer” opposes “neo-liberal” or “individual” while recognizing that this rhetoric is founded on the idea of individualism common in the U.S. He therefore states:

Queer theory is commonly understood as a fundamental critique of liberal individualism, where the latter is understood as a belief in voluntarism and the ego-integrated self. But I distrust this metanarrative of queer theory. Queer politics continues regularly to invoke norms of liberal modernity such as self-determination and self-representation; it continues to invoke a civil society politics against the state; and, most significant to my mind, it continues to value sexuality by linking it to the expressive capacities of individuals. (Warner 2002, 219)

I consider Warner’s words here a powerful and important critique of certain currents of sexual politics that focus excessively on developing alternatives towards what they call “neo-liberalism” but forget that they reproduce the notion of neo-liberal agency. For Warner, the point is not to label neo-liberalism an enemy but to think about the rhetoric and terms that are used in political debates. Warner thinks that the concept of “queer” might in this context represent a promise of transformation. It is significant how within a period of about 10 years Warner’s political thinking changed. In his essays published as *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), Warner presents a much more nuanced political standpoint, specifically from the viewpoint of rhetoric. In the essay opening *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993) Warner seems to be using “queer” as a magical term that would solve the problems of lesbian and gay studies. In his subsequent essays he develops the term “queer” into a political signifier that can be applied to discussions on the state and its institutions and the limits of citizenship.

The major problem in Warner’s use of “queer”, particularly in his 1993 essay, is that it seems to assume the social field is divided into the normative and the alternative. He sees the normative realm as homogeneous and coherent. In practice, however, the heterosexual mainstream is governed by many, frequently competing, norms that might grant privilege but might also oppress. The same can be observed in the case of sexual minorities. They are also governed by norms. Warner’s approach might help to see more clearly oppressive norms but it

simplifies problems related to oppression. I suggest that a politically more fruitful strategy would be to analyse the social field as a realm of competing norms.

3.5 Conclusions

In the early days of its academic use, “queer” was picked up by several scholars who ascribed to it various political connotations. The term “queer” did not have a clear political reference and it was uncertain in which methodological and theoretical framework it would function. A good example of this uncertainty is Sue-Ellen Case’s essay “Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic” from 1988, where the author does not use “queer” consistently, and instead the term is used as an interesting but accidental concept.

Most scholars that incorporated the term into their texts had a grounding in literary or culture studies. In all of the texts that I have analysed in this section “queer” appears to be a promise of a new radical cultural critique. Teresa de Lauretis, Sue-Ellen Case and Michael Warner find “queer” a term that has a political potential that did not exist in lesbian and gay studies or even in feminism. The main strength of this concept according to them lies in its critical potential that can be applied to the issues of representation, community and norms. All these authors rather than just taking the term “queer” in its existing form, propose to use it in a various ways there were mostly absent in the activists’ usage of this term.

Thus, it is not surprising that these types of analysis raised critical responses from gay and lesbian theorists who were informed by neo-Marxist theories. Rosemary Hennessy (1995) Steven Seidman (1995) and Shane Phelan (1995) criticized the strong focus given to representation by authors who used “queer” in the early 1990s as idealizing. Critics did not intend to dismiss the concept “queer” but they proposed to engage in a more detailed discussion of specific political issues, such as the construction of public institutions, citizenship, and problems related to the class and social position of agents. Specifically, Phelan warned that the excluded position should not be romanticized. “Queer” can interestingly function as a critical term but it should also carry positive and transformative political elements, otherwise politics is not possible. She states that “this queerness is not itself a virtue” (Phelan 1995, 344) and is against separatism because it is not a politically fruitful position. This specific idealization of separatism among some authors that use “queer” is an effect of the tradition of American individualism and it should be further examined in this light. I would agree with Phelan when she calls for transformative politics. In her opinion, the point is not eternal elaboration of differences but pragmatic coalitional politics and “forcing the political and legal systems to stretch and re-form to do justice to our lives” (Phelan 1995, 344).

Many of the early uses of “queer” were informed by psychoanalytical theories. The language of psychoanalysis was applied to cultural analyses of sexuality, in particular to the issues related to representation and recognition. For many scholars this language offered a vocabulary that was suitable to describe in a new and radical way the exclusion and oppression of sexual minorities. Particularly the concept of the “Other” for authors such as de Lauretis or Case seems to resemble the notion of “queer”.

More generally, the function of “queer” in its early academic use was to oppose exclusive identity terms such as lesbian, gay or woman. This critical approach towards identity was already present within AIDS activism, but the authors I discuss developed systematic theoretical tools to analyse identity and representation, issues that informed many discussions on sexuality during the 1990s. None of the authors that I have analysed claim that “queer” should replace other identity terms, and it should instead function as a reminder that these terms are never complete and need to be continually re-examined. My contention is that around 1991-1993, the conceptual politics of “queer” was about replacing the previous discourse of gay and lesbian studies based on the language of disciplines such as history, anthropology, psychology and sociology with a new discourse. “Queer” was used to mobilise the language of psychoanalysis and cultural criticism. From around that time this new discourse became dominant in the discussions on sexual minorities in the U.S. academia.

Chapter 4: “Queer” as a strategic and temporary signifier

Since the publication of *Gender Trouble* in 1990, Butler has become one of the most prominent and possibly the most famous theorists of gender and sexuality. Many credit her as being one of the founders and key theorists of queer theory.²⁴ Nevertheless, no significant analysis has been conducted of Butler’s uses of the concept of “queer”. Although Butler came to be labelled as a “queer theorist”, few researchers reflect on what in fact is the proper place of “queer” within Butler’s work. In this chapter I focus on how the concept of “queer” functions in Butler’s work. My key argument is that for Butler “queer” is a signifier that can be attached to various issues and it can serve several political purposes. Rather than offering one specific use of “queer” Butler attaches this term to various political issues and presents it as an open signifier.

Soon after its publication *Gender Trouble* was considered to be a key text in new queer theory, though in fact Butler does not use the word “queer” in this book. In many analyses (Jagose 1996, Lloyd 1999, Colebrook 2009) Butler’s idea of performativity is connected with “queer”. In this chapter, on the basis of examining her texts and the use of the concept “queer” in them, I argue that she rarely uses the term queer in connection with performativity, but instead relates it to other issues. Quite surprisingly, my analysis shows that she uses the term in particular to underline the intersections of race, ethnicity and class with gender and sexuality (Butler 1993). Throughout her work, Butler proposes no theory of “queer”, nor is “queer” a central term in her writing.

Moya Lloyd writes: “There is no doubt that her (Butler’s) work has been seen as central to the advent of queer politics” (Lloyd 2008, 10). Lloyd, like many other authors, analyses Butler’s work in relation to queer politics and queer theory. My analysis differs from Lloyd’s in that I analyse what kind of politics the term represents. This chapter thus investigates the politics of “queer” in Butler’s work.

Many researchers²⁵ who write about “queer theory” associate one particular theme of *Gender Trouble* with “queer”, and that is Butler’s concept of “performativity” or the critique of the subject. I claim, however, that neither of these themes is directly related to the concept of “queer” in Butler’s work. Sara Salih, for instance, in her book on Butler, claims that Butler’s conceptualization of subjectivity is at the core of her use of the term “queer” (Salih 2002, 7-9).

²⁴ Among many authors who credit Judith Butler as one of the founders of queer theory are Annamarie Jagose 1996, William B. Turner 2000, and Donald E. Hall 2003

²⁵ For example: Escoffier, Jeffrey; *American Homo*, Berkeley 1998; Sullivan, Nikki; *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, New York 2003; Huffer, Lynne; *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory*, New York 2010

She also identifies “queer” with a certain theoretical approach: “... the blend of Foucauldianism, psychoanalysis and feminism that characterizes her work from the start is part of what constitutes the “queerness” of her theories” (Salih 2002, 8). I agree that it is important to look at Butler’s methodology while analysing her use of the term “queer”, but my study is distant from the approach represented by Salih as she takes “queer” as a specific predefined idea and I concentrate on particular usages of the term.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the conceptual function of “queer” in Butler’s texts, paying special emphasis to the political aspect of the concept. I claim that this aspect is particularly visible when Butler applies “queer” to discussions of identity and its intersection with class and race (Butler 1993, 223-242). Butler’s writing is political in that it is a form of social critique and an intervention in the social, even if both the critique and the intervention are in the form of academic texts and not a direct political action.

I am not primarily as interested in Butler’s relation to queer theory as I am in the function of “queer” in her texts. I focus on how “queer” carries a certain legacy of activism from the end of the 1980s and the beginning of 1990s and how it is combined with a poststructuralist framework in Butler’s work. I highlight how “queer” is situated within Butler’s work in relation to feminist and philosophical tradition.

It is crucial to analyse Butler’s use of “queer” because she sets up a theoretical and thematic context for this concept that became very influential. Butler uses “queer” in relation to identity but she problematizes the understanding of identity, adding to it the dimension of race and class. Sexual identity according to Butler needs to be localized, and sexuality is always at the crossroads of various factors, such as the state, class, and race. Butler’s focus on identity was highly influential for many academics who subsequently applied “queer” to discussions on the intersections of sexual identity and race, and class and nationality.

4.1 Queer: between politics and academia

As discussed in chapter 2, among gay and lesbian communities, the term “queer” appeared at the end of the 1980s and was often used by activists who were fighting the stigmatization of those with HIV/AIDS. The term was used in an affirmative way and became better known through the public actions of Queer Nation. Queer Nation used “queer” to promote separatist and non-assimilationist politics. At almost the same time, “queer” entered American academia. In chapter 3 I analysed the first major publication in this field, which today is considered canonical, a special issue of *differences* (3/2) from 1991, entitled: *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*. From the very beginning, the relationship between queer activism and theoretical discourse was anything but straightforward. As mentioned in the previous chapter,

de Lauretis ignores direct political activism and rather focuses on developing certain conceptual politics around the concept of “queer”.

Butler partly shares de Lauretis’ interest in developing a new language to talk about sexual minorities, but contrary to de Lauretis, Butler is clearly aware of and even in some ways enthusiastic about Queer Nation, even though she rarely specifically mentions it or other similar activist organisations²⁶ that began using “queer” as a quasi-identity and politically potent confrontational term. Although Butler does acknowledge direct political activism around the concept “queer”, her uses of this concept do not owe much to activists. Her stand towards direct political activism is complex and several times faced criticism.

Douglas Crimp (2002), a former ACT UP activist, is critical in his essays towards such trends in queer theory that are alienated from activism and the lives and needs of sexual minorities. Lisa Duggan presents a similar criticism in her essay: “Making it Perfectly Queer” (1991) and “Queering the State” (1994) (Duggan 2006). She claims that certain thematics, such as the critique of essential identity, were already present in feminist activism from the 1970s onwards. According to Duggan, Butler’s work is alienated from activism and she sees this alienation as a problem for Butler’s theory. Duggan would appear to claim that any strong theory works against progressive activism, and affirms that “queer” in academia can be political only if it remains connected to activism. One could question here why activism should always be more progressive and politically more important than theories. Perhaps, some theory can be more radical than activism and on the other hand, activism can be more conservative than theory. Duggan does not dwell on this issue, but would seem to assume the political supremacy of activism.

Contrary to Duggan, I believe that Butler’s use of “queer” carries a significant amount of the primary political meaning of the concept that was originally developed by activists. Compared with de Lauretis or Duggan, I find Judith Butler’s position regarding the concept of “queer” and her debates about it very balanced. De Lauretis ignores activism whereas Duggan idealizes it. Butler does not establish a strong theory of “queer”, but her work does relate to activism and to certain theoretical traditions, albeit taking a critical distance towards them. The meaning of “queer” is not fixed in her texts, and she does not offer any total philosophical vision of the concept. Rather, it seems that she opposes any grand visions of “queer”, in this way avoiding a utopian vision of the concept. At the same time, she is careful not to idealize HIV/AIDS activism and its use “queer”. In her essay “Against Proper Objects” (2007), Butler

²⁶ Judith Butler mentions Queer Nation only once in *Bodies that Matter* 1993 and also once in *The Psychic Life of Power* 1997

argues that “queer” in academia should combine the valuable elements of the gay and lesbian liberation movement with feminist thought.

4.2 “Queer” between different feminisms

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler does not use the term “queer”, instead she often refers to feminism. Although she situates her own work within the field of feminism, she is critical towards its main currents. Later, however, Butler’s perspective shifts so that she no longer identifies directly with feminism, nor does she adopt a different stance under the sign of “queer” as an alternative to feminist thought. While the two terms, “feminism” and “queer”, are critical categories for Butler and constitute particular fields of research and political action, the relationship between these two terms is contingent.

It is in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) that Judith Butler first reflects on the concept, meaning and theoretical place of “queer”. The word itself appears a few times in the book and the entire last chapter is dedicated to its consideration. In no other book by Butler does the term “queer” appear so often nor carry so many theoretical implications.

Up to the last chapter of the book Butler uses the word “queer” without proposing any specific meaning for the term. It is rather that the context in which the term is used prescribes its connotation. To me, it seems that around 1993, the concept of “queer” was already used in academic literature as a sign of a new kind of approach to sexuality studies. In the preface to *Bodies That Matter*, Butler writes:

This text is offered, then, in part as a rethinking of some parts of *Gender Trouble* that have caused confusion, but also as an effort to think further about the working of heterosexual hegemony in the crafting of matters sexual and political. As a critical rearticulation of various theoretical practices, including feminist and queer studies, this text is not intended to be programmatic. (Butler 1993, xii)

Butler does not ascribe any specific meaning or limit the references of the word “queer”. It can be a conscious choice but perhaps she assumes that the meaning, or at least the usage of this word in U.S. academia, is already somehow established and there is no need to discuss it in detail. Having said that, I nevertheless find Butler’s usage of “queer” original and politically important.

Approximately from the end of the 1980s, the term “queer” had achieved political potential and it had been used in opposition to the term “normal”. It appears that Butler takes “queer” as it was used during that time in the United States, as a politically confrontational identity term for homosexuals and as a new critical academic term, but she expands it into an analytical and philosophical category. From these two sentences in the preface, which include the word “queer”, one can see that the term was associated with a critique of heterosexual

hegemony as well as with some new theoretical practices of analysing sexuality. It is also interesting that in the preface to *Bodies That Matter* Butler only partially identifies with what she calls “queer studies”. For example, nowhere has she stated that her book is a work within queer studies or is about the concept of “queer”, though she does say that it “includes queer studies”. In fact, the expression “queer studies” is never explained throughout the whole book.

In another passage from *Bodies that Matter* Butler writes:

Although the political discourses that mobilize identity categories tend to cultivate identifications in the service of a political goal, it may be that the persistence of *disidentification* is equally crucial to the rearticulation of democratic contestation. Indeed, it may be precisely through practices which underscore disidentification with those regulatory norms by which sexual difference is materialized that both feminist and queer politics are mobilized. (Butler 1993, 4)

This is the second time that “queer” appears in *Bodies That Matter*. This case is interesting because here “queer” appears in relation to politics. Butler does not develop the idea of “queer politics” at this point, but she suggests that “queer” is a category which might be mobilized in the context of political struggles to rearticulate the concepts of sex and the body in democratic discourses. Therefore, politically, the concept of queer would be a type of critical category used in the field of collective identities and linked to sexuality. Regarding queer politics, for Butler, the problem of identity appears to be a crucial concern. I would not claim that Butler radically rejects identity politics. Although “queer” is for her a tool of criticism towards identity politics, she is aware that identity is a necessary element for political mobilization. I suggest that in Butler’s work, “queer” stands for a limited and temporal identification. Butler does not negate the fact that recognition is crucial particularly in cases of minorities and identity is a confirmation of recognition, and that politically it would be utopian to completely negate identity.

A radically different reading of Butler’s work in relation to queer politics is proposed by Claire Colebrook (Colebrook 2009). She provides a reading in line with Deleuzian philosophy and draws political consequences from this philosophy:

Thus queer politics would involve neither recognition of the self, nor a refusal of normativity, but the affirmation of the prepersonal. Rather than assessing political problems according to their meaning and convention – or the relations that organise certain affects and desires – we need to think desires according to virtual series, all the encounters that are potential or not yet actualised. (Colebrook 2009, 21)

For me, this comment on Butler’s queer politics is very controversial. Colebrook does not analyse in detail how “queer” functions in Butler’s texts but she assumes that there is something like “queer theory” and “queer politics” that is represented by certain ideas in the

work of Judith Butler. I argue that Colebrook's interpretation is based on several suppositions that are not literally present in Butler's texts. For instance, Colebrook interprets the concept of "body" in Butler's texts as related to Deleuze's philosophy. Her interpretation also seems close to theories of "Affective Turn". Butler herself never used Deleuze's philosophy extensively and "queer" in her work has a broader meaning than the body, desire and affect.

In the first two sentences in which the word "queer" appears in *Bodies that Matter* (Butler 1993, 4), "feminism" appears in the same line. These two words, however, constitute two different fields of research and Butler situates her own work in both of them, or somewhere in between. The difference between them is further discussed by Butler in 1994/1997 article, "Against Proper Objects." In this article, Butler argues against the strict division between feminist theory and politics and queer theory and politics, but the point of departure for her text is the existence of this division. As a primary interpretative key to social relations, Butler picks the term "queer" as being more related to sexuality, contrary to the term "feminism" that is more related to gender. At the point when the article was written, Butler notices that in the American academia, many researchers work either under the label of "queer" or under the label of "feminism". This division is rather strong, for Butler notices that, "It seemed that the exploration of the "encounter" between feminism and queer theory was timely and potentially productive, but I forgot at that moment how quickly a critical encounter becomes misconstrued as a war" (Butler 1997, 1). Furthermore, in "Against Proper Objects" the relationship between these two terms: "queer" and "feminism" is conceptually very complex. Butler first polarizes the scene in order to subsequently present herself as a theoretician who combines these two approaches in her analysis, or at least she postulates that. Readers are not informed of any of the names of these queer thinkers who reject gender and feminist conservatism in order to construct progressive social theories, but Butler points out that they are rooted in the work of Gayle Rubin. At this point it seems that Butler is drawn to Rubin's essays that focus less on gender discrimination, but more on ways of theorizing sex and sexual practices. Nevertheless, Butler continues to avoid taking a clear stance on the queer side. She only mentions that many people take her *Gender Trouble* as the beginning of queer research. "That the work (*Gender Trouble*) was taken as a queer departure from feminism signalled to me how deeply identified feminism is with those very heterosexist assumptions" (Butler 1997, 2). This statement is again rather ambiguous. It does not reveal us much about the content of this "queer departure", nor does it disclose anything about Butler's own position in relationship to it. What is clear is that "queer" emerged in connection to the publication of *Gender Trouble*

and as a reaction to a feminism that was predominantly focused on theorizing heterosexual issues.

Subsequently in the same essay, Butler points to the conservative currents within feminism during the 1980s. As an example, she mentions the anti-pornography stance of many feminists.

Butler clarifies her position further on the next page of the same article:

To mark sexuality off as a domain separable from gender seemed to many of us, especially of queer persuasion, to emphasize sexual practices rather than either gender or sexual identity and to allow for forms of “dissonance” to emerge between gendered self-understandings and forms of sexual engagement. (Butler 1997, 3)

Here it seems that Butler is part of the “us” that turns to studying sexual practices rather than dwelling on the traditional in the feminism problem of gender. Furthermore, she suggests that the aim of queer researchers is the emergence of “dissonance”. This term is reminiscent of the field of deconstruction, but at the same time it remains political as a call to rethink the relationship between gender and sexual identity, particularly since these categories were used almost uncritically at least since the 1960s by feminist theorists and by the gay movement.

Butler aims throughout this essay to balance her theoretical standpoint between feminism and gay and lesbian studies. She is critical towards both, while at the same time she wants to fill the gap that exists between theories of gender and theories of sexuality. In this text, “queer” refers primarily to the gay and lesbian movement and to gay and lesbian studies, and one can even wonder whether in certain passages they are not synonyms for Butler, at least at the point when the theoretical focus is on sex and sexual practices and at the same time there is an absence of gender perspective. Clearly more positive examples relate to the gay and lesbian movement and gay and lesbian studies, although Butler also points out that “investment in misogyny and other forms of oppression” (Butler 1997, 2) should be acknowledged by lesbian and gay studies. Butler calls for an immanent critique and is a particularly harsh critic of feminism. She discusses conservative strains of feminism engaged in anti-pornography campaigns, but she is also sceptical towards the strong emphasis on gender that seems to be so important for certain currents of feminism. Moreover, Butler points to the deep “heterosexist assumptions” that exist in feminism.

Importantly, “queer” in this essay stands for a coalition of minorities or excluded individuals and groups. Butler recalls this meaning of “queer”, although she states that she is doubtful whether “queer” can really stand for “sexual minorities” in general. I find it important, particularly when I focus on the political aspect of “queer”, that Butler does not draw a clear

line of division between academia and activism as is the case with de Lauretis (1991) or Edelman (2004). It seems that for her texts might be a form of political activism and activism can have academic importance.

According to Annamarie Jagose, Butler uses “queer” politically to oppose identity politics represented by many currents of the LGBT movement and feminism. According to her, by strongly focusing on community, recognition and identity these organizations lost radical political potential. Jagose writes: “For queer is, in part, a response to perceived limitations in the liberationist and identity-conscious politics of the gay and lesbian feminist movement” (Jagose 1996, 130). Clearly, Jagose has a point that Butler develops “queer” as a critical term that targets the politics of the major gay and lesbian and feminist organizations, but I think that Butler’s point is not to reject identity concepts and replace them with “queer”. I suggest that instead Butler uses “queer” to destabilize identity terms and to reformulate them so that they will always be open to new meanings and new positionings. “Queer” is different from traditional identity terms because it is a reiteration of an abuse and it is therefore self-critical, it reveals its own conditions and limitations (Butler 1993, 221). As a citation, “queer” is always theatrical and therefore it has a possibility to remain open and can be used even as a critique of those who use it, meaning both activists and theorists. Butler writes:

In this sense, the genealogical critique of the queer subject will be central to queer politics to the extent that it constitutes a self-critical dimension within activism, a persistent reminder to take the time to consider the exclusionary force of one of activism’s most treasured contemporary premises. (Butler 1993, 227)

A statement like this would not be easily accepted by many political activists. Most of them have a strong faith in what they fight for, but Butler is warning that even when fighting for a good cause one needs to remain self-critical. Many LGBT activists²⁷ consider such statements coming from academics either too theoretical or counter-political. The quote above illustrates Butler’s ambiguous relationship towards “identity”. I argue that, in this context “queer” is designed to represent an immanent criticism toward strong identity concepts but at the same time Butler does not reject identity concepts. She acknowledges the need for them, particularly in activism, but these identity terms need to be constantly re-examined.

Butler opposes queer theory as a discrete discipline and is against any theoretical institutionalization of “queer”. At the end of her article “Against Proper Objects”, Butler reveals what the function of “queer thinking” should be. She postulates that the role and

²⁷A good example is Jeffrey Escoffier who in *American Homo* calls this type of criticism “ivory tower”, out of touch with the real politics of LGBT.

function of “queer” is to be a critical category, a form of social reflection on sexuality that would help to “map power” (Butler 2007, 25). In other words, the concept of “queer” in itself does not constitute a particular methodology or a field of study but should, according to Butler, help to provide “a more expansive conception of criticism” (Butler 2007, 24).

It is interesting that in “Against Proper Objects” Butler acknowledges that the concept of “queer” has to a certain degree a fixed meaning but she nevertheless seems to use “queer” as an open and mobile concept that one can take and use in different ways. Hence, the essay offers some ways to use “queer” that Butler finds to be most fruitful. She proposes a usage of “queer” that would create a counterbalance to binary systems and divisions that are common in the field of feminism and lesbian and gay studies. Thus, Butler is against a clear gender / sexuality division as distinct analytical fields. Butler’s main concern in “Against Proper Objects” is to avoid binary terms that are so common in theorizing sexuality, as well as in different political struggles concerning sexual issues. “Queer” in this context stands for a broad platform of studies that would focus on exclusion and on an the analysis of power, but at the same time this platform should remain methodologically and conceptually open to new approaches and new topics. It seems that Butler believes that “queer” can be part of a new approach to sexuality that is beyond traditional feminist discussions on gender oppression and also beyond the strong gay and lesbian emphasis on sexual identity.

4.3 Queer grammar

Traditionally in the English language “queer” falls into the grammatical category of an adjective. The meaning of “queer” began to change when the word started to function as a term of abuse. Then it began to appear as a noun, as for example in the following statement: “These queers will soon destroy our American culture.” Activists further proliferated the grammatical possibilities of this word but it was only within academia that “queer” acquired almost unlimited grammatical possibilities. Butler’s work is a good example of the different grammatical uses of this concept.

The word “queer” in Butler’s work appears in many different grammatical forms. In some cases it is a noun, but it can frequently be an adjective that describes nouns such as theory, lives, politics, practices and movement. Butler also uses a different form of this noun: “queerness”. For instance, in the introduction to *Bodies That Matter*, she writes:

... the contentious practices of “queerness” might be understood not only as an example of citational politics, but as a specific reworking of abjection into political agency that might explain why “citationality” has contemporary political promise. The public assertion of “queerness” enacts performativity as citationality for the purpose of

resignifying the abjection of homosexuality into defiance and legitimacy. (Butler 1993, 21)

Butler clarifies that for her, this “queerness” cannot be understood in Hegelian terms as a dialectical concept which turns into its opposite. My argument is that the process of “resignification” or “subversion” in Butler’s work is a political act which opens up new possibilities for future sexual agency but does not mean erasing or even diminishing a painful past. I suggest that “resignification” should not be seen as a part of the notion of progress. I suggest that for Butler although “queer” turns into the future it is also a constant reminder about the degrading history of this concept’s use.

It seems that Butler frequently uses the word “queer” and “queerness” as synonyms. Both these terms are crucial for her in order to politicize abjection. For Butler, this politicization might be an incitement to rework the violence contained in the word “queer”. Butler first acknowledges the violence in the term and only subsequently aims at transforming it. “Queer” is often related to action, and it is often about a critical approach to an issue or the deconstruction of other concepts or finally a reworking of other terms. It is not about a static theory that describes sexuality.

Butler also uses the form “queering” as a term of critique or as a new approach to some issues. It also relates to the process of rereading and challenging previous concepts and theories or even direct political action. The following passage from *Bodies That Matter* is a good illustration: “In the last instance, queering is what upsets and exposes passing; it is the act by which the radically and sexually repressive surface of conversation is exploded, by rage, by sexuality, by the insistence on color” (Butler 1993, 177). Butler uses “queering” in the context of her reading of *Passing*, a novel by Nella Larsen. To me, this passage and the use of the verb-form of “queer” is insightful as it suggests that for Butler “queer” is not part of any theory, but rather part of critical thinking, or, one might say, of political thinking about theories and concepts.

The verb-form of “queer” is related to deconstruction. In her reading of *Passing*, Butler is inspired by Jacques Derrida. Her reading does not aim at revealing any meaning but she points out discontinuities that might bring readers to the crossroads of sexuality, race, class and fantasy. Jordana Rosenberg interprets an earlier chapter (2) of *Bodies That Matter* in a similar spirit. She relates Butler’s critical inquiry to the work of deconstruction and opposes the idea that Butler’s work constitute “queer theory”. To her, Butler does not offer a theory as a form of statement or even as a comment about reality, but instead problematizes the very notion of theory. As Rosenberg puts it, Butler represents “the Lesbian Phallus’s recurrent shuffling off of

the question of the identity of queer theory in favour of a treatment of questions of excess and remainder—queer theory’s address to the unaccountable and contradictory status of desire” (Rosenberg 2003, 395). Rosenberg goes as far as to claim that Butler offers a new type of deconstruction: “queer deconstruction”. However, I find in *Bodies That Matter* elements that are not deconstructive, such as stories of people’s desire and pain that are analysed in the final chapter, but it seems clear to me that one of the main methodological connections of “queer” is deconstruction, particularly when it is used in a verb-form that suggests a process and an action.

4.4 Queer critique

When Judith Butler reflects on “queer” as a theoretical or philosophical concept in *Bodies That Matter*, in most cases she does not connect it directly to political action and to the term’s current use by HIV/AIDS activists or by other radical sexual minority groups. It seems instead that she interprets “queer” as a term that might function in the field of literary theory and in this field it might have a political potential. Moreover, Butler does not directly address any current political problems concerning the sexual minority movement.

One of the first uses of the term in *Bodies That Matter* is in the expression “queer lives”. Butler describes it in relation to people with AIDS but she explains that the use of “queer” might be broader. For Butler, “queer lives” are agents who have a social identity that is marked by abjection. The abjection that Butler analyses generally has a sexual basis, but she clearly states that she does not want to limit her theory only to homosexuality, because homosexuality does not accommodate all the variability of the agents who are devalued by the symbolic order. In short, the concept “queer” is very important for Butler because it carries more theoretical implications than the feminist discussions on sexual difference. These discussions were blind to the aspects of race, ethnicity and class. As a result, according to Butler, theorists of sexual difference always discussed only “white sexuality”.²⁸ In this context, as a theoretical category “queer” has an advantage for the reason that under the umbrella term “queer” one is also able to theorize the intersections of sexuality, race, class and also perhaps other components which constitute the social position of an agent.

For Butler, sexuality cannot be theorized separately from other social factors, particularly race and class. These factors situate the subject. Race, class and sexuality overlap and, while analysing abjection, it would be a mistake to focus solely on sexual practices as if they were not connected and co-dependent on other forms of social identification. This is the

²⁸ In *Bodies That Matter* Butler makes this point a few times, one example being the beginning of chapter 6, p. 167.

point where “queer” functions in Butler’s work as a critique of traditional gay and lesbian identity as based merely on sexual orientation. I suggest that the use of “queer” with a special focus on class and race is targeting lesbian and gay studies that often tend to overlook these issues. On a broader level it is an attempt to rethink notions of sexual orientation as limited. Through “queer” Butler aims at further politicizing and destabilizing the notions of sexual identity.

In this context it is useful to mention Nancy Fraser’s article “The Uses and Abuses of French Discourse Theories for Feminist Politics” 1992. Here and elsewhere Fraser accuses psychoanalytical and poststructuralist theorists of sexuality and in between lines Butler of being blind to the issues of class and redistribution. Also in “False Antithesis” 1995 Fraser theorizes feminist politics as an impasse between deconstructive language and a neo-Marxist approach that sees language as intertwined in historically specific social institutions and various practices. Fraser specifically attacks Butler’s approach towards feminist politics in 1997 article “Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism”. She claims that Butler’s position lacks a materialist dimension. According to Butler (“Merely Cultural?” 1997), however, the opposition between a historically specific approach to oppression and deconstruction is unnecessary. The political power of “queer” arises from the specific history of this term and the possibility to politically apply this term as deconstructive in various cases related to identity, community and representation issues.

In this respect it is interesting that in *Bodies That Matter*, Butler uses “queer” as an interpretative key to read two particular texts, Larsen’s *Passing* and Jennie Livingstone’s film *Paris Is Burning*. Butler’s reading of these works focuses on the construction of sex and desire exactly on the grounds of race, ethnicity and class. In this context, “queer” seems to be precisely a critical theoretical tool to analyse the hegemony of white, heterosexual forms of agency and the abjection of other forms of agency. Therefore, for Butler, “queer” might serve as a sign of abjection, but it is one that does not stand for a general or universal form of abjection. Rather, “queer” would be a peculiar term that allows the recognition of the multiplicity of overlapping forms that degrade an agent. For me, “queer” in Butler’s work seems to be a concept that reveals particular discursive silences; moreover, because of its contingent character the term can be applied as a deconstructive term for debates on identity and agency.

Chapters four and six in *Bodies That Matter* best illustrate Butler’s usage of “queer”. *Paris Is Burning* and *Passing* historically have no special role in the development of “queer” into a political concept, as this term was used in academia in the 1990s and even up to the

present time. However, Butler chooses these examples because they represent for her what is crucial in understanding or in using “queer” as a theoretical and political concept. In *Paris Is Burning*, all the characters are poor, Blacks or Latinos living in New York. In various ways, they enact on the stage, in their behaviour and in their stories the terms of their life and exclusion in the world that surrounds them and delegates them to the margins. Those terms are, for instance, family, middle class, whiteness, masculinity and femininity. The people in *Paris Is Burning* theatrically enact the violence that they experience in their lives. Through drag shows they ironically mime abjection. This strategy allows them to turn abjection into something positive and formative for their subjectivity. In this context, Butler writes about “queer”: “... reworking of “queer” from abjection to politicized affiliation will interrogate similar sites of ambivalence produced at the limits of discursive legitimacy” (Butler 1993, 124). This means that *Paris Is Burning* presents a community that is based on the reversal of the traditional concept of the family. The people presented in the film find something productive in their marginalization. They turn the stigma into agency, which is able to be a basis for positive action. Perhaps the crucial element in this movie is that there is no idealization of exclusion or a melancholic vision of the “freedom inside agents”. This can be exemplified by one of the main characters of the movie, Venus, a Latino transsexual prostitute who is killed. In other words, “queer” does not annihilate violence and exclusion but it might be formative for alternative forms of agency. What is particularly important for Butler in *Paris Is Burning* is the resignification of kinship. Butler admits that pure subversion is a utopian idea. “Queer” here would be a sign of a process of opening up to some other logic of placing so that “I” and “we” that are different from the designations of traditional forms of kinship.

Another text that Butler explores is Nella Larsen’s *Passing*. Here Butler traces the use of “queer”, examining it from the perspective of the social construction of race. This book dates back to 1929. It might be surprising that Butler goes that far back in time to trace the meaning of “queer”, but it is not, of course, a conceptual genealogy of the term that Butler creates. It is rather Butler’s political proposal to use “queer” in a specific way. The novel she analyses goes back to a time when “queer” was not even used frequently as a derogative term for homosexuals. Her point is rather to trace a critical potential of the term.

The novel itself focuses on the problem of the link between desire and race. Oppression underlines everything: the construction of the identity of the characters, desire, race, language and sexuality. “Queer” is not used as a subversive category in the novel, at least not in a sense that it could stand for any particular subversive political acts, but it has been assigned a special *place* in language where things which were usually under control and invisible might be

exposed. The following passages are good examples of Butler's uses of "queer" in this chapter of *Bodies That Matter*: "... the narrator refers to the sudden gap in the surface of language as "queer" or as 'queering'" and later: "... Larsen links queerness with a potentially problematic eruption of sexuality" and on the same page a crucial definition, "As a term for betraying what ought to remain concealed, "queering" works as the exposure within language – an exposure that disrupts the repressive surface of language – of both sexuality and race" (Butler 1993, 176). Butler's analysis of *Passing* is clearly not a historical investigation of the concept of "queer". Rather, what she is searching for is a concept that is able to make a linguistic intervention, "queer" as something which links the different levels of exclusions and oppression. For Butler, "queer" is a politically disturbing category which might reveal what the symbolic and political system aims to hide.

In *Bodies That Matter* the use of "queer" in relation to race and class is an example of how "queer" might function politically. Self-evidently, it is not an exclusive way of using "queer" and Butler proves it in other texts by connecting "queer" to other issues and problems, such as kinship and transsexuality. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler gives an important explanation about her use of "queer":

If the term "queer" is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes. (Butler 1993, 228)

For a political concept, it seems strange to be always open because it is difficult to formulate any proper claims in the name of a concept that is flexible and unstable. But stability comes at a price of exclusion and normativity. Therefore Butler aims to use "queer" as a term that perhaps might not be considered very useful in the current practice of politics, but it can reveal limitations of the current political practice and it can also politicize new issues and problems. Nevertheless, when Butler calls "queer" a "never fully owned" concept she does not say that it is totally open and can be abstracted from its abusive history. I suggest that for Butler the term offers a transformation of this history but simultaneously it is also a constant reminder of this history. Heather Love comments:

While Butler's attention to the implications of *queer* for personal and collective injury is crucial in recalling the mixed history of queer subjectivity, her anxious emphasis on the need of constant turning, constant reclamation, is striking. Queers are thus subject to a double imperative: they must face backward, toward a difficult past, and forward, in the direction of "urgent and expanding political purposes." According to this vision, the work of queering is never done. (Love 2001, 493)

Love offers an interesting analysis of Butler's use of "queer". The concept for Butler is open for new political tasks that might come. "Queering" for Butler is an ethical and political task that aims at transforming social reality. The very power of this term lies in its openness. But Love offers more than analyses of Butler's thought, she provides us with an important critical voice. She writes: "Too precipitous a turn from past degradation to present or future affirmation ignores not only an important historical reality but the persistence of the past in the present. Resignification or refunctioning stigma has become synonymous with "the political" in queer criticism" (Love 2001, 496). Love calls for a more nuanced relationship to history. She criticizes Butler for not taking traumatic histories of abjection and exclusion seriously enough. To Love, Butler's queer politics seems to be abstract and overly progressivist for the reason that Butler too quickly turns to resignification and transformation, except acknowledging various traumatic experiences. I understand Love's point as a call for a more refined relationship with history, but it is also a call for theories to politicize experiences of sexual minorities.

4.5 "Queer" and "homosexuality"

In this context, it is important to reflect on the relationship between the terms "queer" and "homosexuality". Butler writes: "...the legitimization of homosexuality will have to resist the force of normalization for a queer resignification of the symbolic to expand and alter the normativity of its own terms" (Butler 1993, 111). Here, "queer" is linked to homosexuality but "homosexuality" as a concept does not contain a transgressive or transformative potential. On the contrary, homosexuality can be absorbed by the symbolic order. Butler points out that some forms of homosexuality are already on the side of the privileged. Chambers and Carver in their book *Judith Butler & Political Theory* comment on this issue: "Queer identity therefore must not be confused or conflated with gay identity; it rests not on the ground of a fixed desire for the same sex, but on the position of one's marginal sexuality in relation to the norm of heterosexuality" (Chambers and Carver 2008, 4).

I find it striking when Butler mentions in the context of "queer" "the normativity of its own terms". To me it seems that Butler argues against a particular trend in gay and lesbian thought that was initiated by Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and also represented by Monique Wittig and Guy Hocquenghem. These authors saw non-heterosexual identities and non-normative sexual practices as being sites of resistance or even as having revolutionary potential. Nevertheless, Butler is not clear about whether "resistance to normalization" and "resignification of the symbolic" can be understood as some conscious, public acts or as individual choices or sexual practices. There is no one recipe for how to be

queer, but clearly Butler has some ethical project and one can see a call to be queer in *Bodies That Matter*. I think that there are two alternative readings of Butler's conceptualization of "queer". The first would place "queer" as a rather theoretical, critical concept that resignifies the symbolic when used as an analytical term to interpret culture or politics. The second would represent the opposite interpretation, which might be partly in line with Wittig and Hocquenghem. Undoubtedly both Wittig and Hocquenghem were a source of inspiration to Butler (Wittig is mentioned several times in *Gender Trouble*), particularly the notion that individual acts, for example, non-normative sexual practices, might be subversive. The term "subversion" also seems to be closely associated with the term "queer". Clearly, to Butler "homosexuality" and "homosexual sex" are not synonyms for "queer" but they have a subversive potential and they might therefore be related to "queer". Butler does not offer any exact conditions under which sexual acts are "queer" and when they are normative. As an overall idea of *Bodies That Matter*, we might have the impression that "queer" is not so much about sex itself but about oppression and about the reaction towards this oppression. What is clear to me is that "queer" in Butler's work functions against the idea of transgression or any type of idealization of sexual acts. This situates Butler in opposition to other authors who use "queer" politically as a sign of transgression of norms e.g. Michael Warner 1999, Tim Dean 2009, Jose E. Munoz 2009, and Leo Bersani 2010. The range of authors who use "queer" in order to idealize certain sexual acts as transgressive became very influential within recent years. I see Butler's work as a persistent opposition to this usage of "queer".

In this context, it is also important to consider whether in Butler's texts the term "queer", in opposition to traditional sexual identity terms such as "homosexual", means fluidity of gender and sexuality. I think that such interpretation is possible but I suggest that it would be an idealization of Butler's concept of openness. This reading of Butler is represented for instance by Moya Lloyd, who writes: "There is, thus, no single modality of embodiment that stands for straight-ness or queer-ness. Rather there is openness, fluidity, flux; an endless possibility of de-determination and re-citation" (Lloyd 1999, 197). I do not, however, agree with Lloyd. Certainly, Butler aims at opening up identity concepts, but it is possible only to some extent and possibilities are not endless. Body, language and society impose limits on gender and sexuality and also provide us with possibilities to subvert these limits, but not everything is fluid and possible. In my understanding, Butler in her political usage of "queer" rather clearly forecloses this happy utopia when she demonstrates that in *Passing* and in *Paris Is Burning* the possibilities of embodiment are open but limited, and at the end there is death.

4.6 Queer resistance

In *Bodies That Matter* the term “queer” stands as a term of resistance to the process of assimilation to the symbolic order. Through “queer” Butler poses the question of whether there is any possibility of finding alternative symbolic forms that will accommodate those who have been excluded from full social recognition as agents. “Queer” is therefore the category which stands for otherness that can be expressed only in its own terms, not through submission to the universal symbolic order. In Butler’s work “queer” is not a utopian category that offers recourse to something outside of the symbolic order. I suggest that Butler seems to be too closely theoretically connected to poststructuralism to assume any idea of an outside to normativity or liberation from it. Nonetheless, according to Butler, “queer” can be a tool to challenge the symbolic system from within. In several of her texts she argues for an immanent critique. “Queer” might be a helpful term in developing a new normativity, a normativity that might be written for different forms of sexuality in their own terms.

Of course, Butler’s conceptualization of “queer” can be perceived as utopian, and in a sense it represents a particular utopian vision of a possible future. This future would be more open to differences and would be more diverse even at a cultural-symbolic level. Even if we decide to call Butler’s conceptualization of “queer” utopian, it is a very real utopia that is based on language acts that might subvert the symbolic order; it is also based on literature that reflects on the alternative possibilities of agency. Most importantly, however this utopia is based on the lives of people who do not fit into society and who try to live their lives and find ways to express themselves. In this case, the division between utopia and reality no longer stands.

Butler does not assume that “queer” has a liberating power. The main problem for Butler is how to protect bodies from violation. Certainly, the way to accomplish this is not through the erasure of offensive terms. Butler argues, “On the contrary, precisely because such terms have been produced and constrained within such regimes, they ought to be repeated in directions that reverse and displace their originating aims” (Butler 1993, 123). This is not to say that one can adopt a full theoretical distance to terms that are offensive. Butler states that an injury might also be an occasion to resignify the power of injury into something affirmative. In other words, the repetition of an offensive term such as “queer” might rework the trauma of the injury into something creative for agency.

4.7 The framework of “queer”

Butler only undertakes a more systematic conceptual analysis of the concept of “queer” in the last chapter of *Bodies That Matter* titled “Critically Queer”. Given its late appearance, it could be said that the concept of “queer” is the culmination of the book. Butler herself mentions that she writes about “queer” in the final chapter because it is the most recent problem for her. She

is aware that by 1993 “queer” was increasingly more commonly used in the context of sexuality studies but also in various contexts that address sexual minorities. “Queer” also became a political concept and a sign of different radical activists.

It is interesting that in “Critically Queer” Butler does not recall any authors who were writing about “queer” during that time, although Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is mentioned once in the context of queer performativity. Regarding the political use of “queer” Butler mentions ACT UP and Queer Nation. Butler’s chapter is in no way an analysis of the use of “queer” at the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s. It is rather her own project or fantasy about “queer”. Furthermore, when Butler warns readers against dangerous exclusionary uses of “queer”, she does not specify who has used “queer” in this particular way. In this chapter, Butler clearly links the term “queer” to deconstruction and to her own concept of “performativity”. The theorists whom she recalls in this context are, among others, Derrida, Nietzsche, Foucault, Spivak, Freud, Rubin, Austin and de Man (de Man is recalled only in a footnote (4), but I regard this footnote to be important), and Butler also mentions her own work, *Gender Trouble*. With this theoretical background she invites readers to think about “queer”.

Except focusing exclusively on these authors, Annamarie Jagose stresses that we should analyse Butler’s use of “queer” using the background of her earlier work, in particular Butler’s concept of “performativity”. Jagose writes:

Her (Butler’s) anti-essentialist understanding of queer is informed by her earlier influential deliberations on performativity, a term she uses to bring to attention the way in which normative reiterations bring into being the identity categories they seem only to express. (Jagose 2009, 163)

For Jagose, Butler’s use of “queer” has a broad political implication because it problematizes the very identity categories through which politics operates. This problematization of identity categories is an important element of Butler’s conceptual politics.

In my reading, for Butler, the political use of “queer” is a particular intervention in language and it therefore requires reflection on language. Here Butler recalls performative speech acts as well as de Man, who states that all speech acts are fictional. Discourse is formative for the subject, but because discourse is historical and thus unstable, it might contain discontinuities. These discontinuities could be an incitement to rework the construction of the abjected “I”, as in the case of “queer”. “The term “queer” emerges as an interpellation that raises the question of the status of force and opposition, of stability and variability, *within* performativity” (Butler 1993, 226). It appears that Butler in a sense aspires to create her own

usage of ‘queer in relation to her concept of “gender performativity”. This would also serve her political purposes.

Some of Butler’s sentences clearly indicate that she considers there to be nothing objective about “queer”. Furthermore, Butler does not feel limited by most of the recent theoretical and conceptual developments of this term, and neither does she feel obliged to mention them. Perhaps it is a part of her conceptual politics. To Butler “queer” is a concept that is in the process of formation and she wants to make her own intervention in this concept. A suitable example of this point is the following sentence:

“If the term “queer” is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (Butler 1993, 228).

For Butler political radicalism is a primal function of “queer”, therefore she is concerned about other associations of “queer” which might be dangerous for the political radicalism of the term. For instance, “queer” is often used by white, young, gays and lesbians who believe that gender categories are a matter of the past and that they can now be overcome. To Butler, “queer” should not annihilate differences but at the same time it should be as accommodating as possible. For the reason that the term “queer” is mobilized by exclusion, it resists any one, particular positive association. But essentialization is a constant threat to “queer”. Butler states that “queer” should not replace identity categories but be a critique of them, as well as its own critique.

The political deconstruction of “queer” ought not to paralyze the use of such terms [she is talking about identity categories] but, ideally, to extend its range, to make us consider at what expense and for what purpose the terms are used, and through what relations of power such categories have been wrought. (Butler 1993, 229)

All in all, I would claim that through her discussion of identity categories in relation to “queer”, Butler introduces the idea of radical contestation into contemporary democratic theory and practice. By bringing the unstable concept “queer” into political thought she aims at destabilizing and rethinking other concepts that are used in politics. It seems that at this point Butler’s ideas resemble those of Chantal Mouffe, in particular Mouffe’s concept of antagonism. Butler recalls at this point Spivak’s (Butler 1993, 229) formulation of identity as *a necessary error* in democracy, where democracy is understood as a pluralism of voices. Democracy is a contestation and therefore different identities are required but “queer” is not merely one more identity, it has *a democratizing force*. Following, “queer” serves here as a deconstruction of

identity categories, a means for them to remain open and flexible. As an identity category, 'homosexuality' tends to be exclusive and it is often associated with whiteness. By contrast, "queer" should ideally be able to accommodate other factors that intersect with the construction of desire and sexuality. For Butler, however, "queer" seems to be primarily a negative concept, which serves as a critique of any essentialism and has a deconstructive function. She writes:

"Queering" might signal an inquiry into (a) the *formation* of homosexualities (a historical inquiry which cannot take the stability of the term for granted, despite the political pressure to do so) and (b) the *deformative* and *misappropriative* power that the term currently enjoys. (Butler 1993, 229)

Rosemary Hennessy agrees with Butler about these two dimensions of "queering", she writes: "But I would add that these dimensions of queer praxis need to be marshalled as forces for collective and transformative social intervention" (Hennessy 1995, 145). It seems that for Hennessy there is a threat in Butler's work that "queer" might become too abstract a concept. Hennessy advocates that theories should be always a form of political intervention. I understand her concern but I would suggest that she understands political intervention too narrowly.

"Queer" as a term that might serve as an identity category is interesting for Butler because it presents a possibility to rework abjection into a site of resistance. Moreover, "queer" can be formative because the term, as Butler observes, does "not fully describe those it purports to represent" (Butler 1993, 230). At this point, "queer" as an identity concept is highly contingent. It is not possible to grasp a meaning of this concept or even describe its principal connotation. It is very Derridian to envision "queer" as being radically divided between the signified and signifier. Certainly, "queer" is not a purely negative, empty signifier. Nor am I claiming that Butler suggests this, but I claim that in Butler's work "queer" has the ability to remain open and resist the constitution of any unitary meaning. Furthermore, Derrida is cited by Butler in the context of politicizing abjection, as Salih writes: "Specifically, Butler asserts that Derrida's citationality will be useful as a queer strategy of converting the abjection and exclusion of non-sanctioned sexed and gendered identities into political agency" (Salih 2002, 91). In other words, for Butler Derridian deconstruction becomes the political potential of "queer".

Butler demonstrates here that "queer" often works hyperbolically and as a consequence, it exposes and reverses homophobic interpellation. This might be seen as a new quality in politics, but not a politics that constitutes a struggle for rights, but a politics that searches for a different language to express what was culturally sentenced to invisibility, a politics that 'acts

out' and thereby brings to light the injury of abjection. As Butler puts it: "The hyperbolic gesture is crucial to the exposure of the homophobic "law" that can no longer control the terms of its own abjecting strategies" (Butler 1993, 232).

It is clear that Butler does not use the concept of "queer" as a ready political concept that only lacks theoretical description. Indeed, Butler does not offer such theoretical descriptions in *Bodies That Matter*. Instead, Butler suggests a new political project of using "queer" as a "democratizing force". Butler imagines the possible uses of "queer" that would be politically potent. She finds the post-structural framework of deconstruction to be the most fruitful in order to apply "queer" as a political category. Austin, Derrida, and Foucault do not provide any historical and conceptual background for current uses of "queer" for the simple reason that they never used the concept. But it seems that according to Butler, these thinkers are able to offer a theoretical background that can shape a political force of "queer". Her project in *Bodies That Matter* is a project of imagining "queer". Here, according to Butler, deconstruction is the best tool to theorize the important political aims that excluded groups share.

It seems that apart from the deconstructive framework in which Butler uses "queer", particularly in *Bodies That Matter*, there is another element that is crucial to this concept in Butler's work. Interestingly, it is contrary to deconstruction. "Queer" is rather a peculiar ethical concept. Readers can notice in *Bodies That Matter* that "queer" is not merely a term of injury or a quasi-identity of sexual minorities, but it is a call to act in its name. For Butler, "queer" is the name of a project which questions the social status quo.

For some commentators this is a contradiction in Butler's project. David Ruffolo, for instance, writes: "Queer as it stands against heteronormativity, is only capable of resignifying the possible when the desire is to destabilize normative discourses" (Ruffolo 2009, 154). In his book *Post-Queer Politics*, Ruffolo concludes that Butler's theorization of "queer" needs to be fulfilled by Deleuze's concept of desire and becoming because the post-structuralist framework does not provide the possibility of formulating ethical claims. Even though the ethical dimension of "queer" seems to be evident, Butler does not create any particular ethical system around "queer". I do not agree with Ruffolo. Certainly, Butler's project has an ethical dimension that overcomes poststructuralist framework but I think Deleuzian philosophy is not necessarily here. Moreover, as I have shown, "queer" has much more extensive political function that merely destabilization of norms.

4.8 Modalities of queer

In *Antigone's Claim* (2000), Antigone represents queerness as a critique of the fixed concept of kinship, but Butler refers to her as "not quite a queer heroine" (Butler 2000, 72). Perhaps this is

because Antigone is still based within traditional kinship but this kinship is no longer liveable for her. In this book, Butler makes more points concerning “queer” than the question of whether or not Antigone is queer. Butler theorizes “queer” in relation to a radical politics that questions all normativity and foundationalism. The example which she offers is the writings of Michael Warner. Butler refers to this as a utopian enterprise, but this utopia is politically very meaningful. Butler then posits her theory amidst this utopian quest to transgress kinship and offers a more psychoanalytic approach that aims at opening up the concept of kinship.

Butler does not often use “queer” in *Excitable Speech* (1997). It appears only a few times and is connected either to performativity in the language, or otherwise to racial issues. There is, nevertheless, one example that is noteworthy. It seems that in the United States in 1997, when Butler’s book was published, “queer” was a very broad term, which in some circles was becoming fashionable. Butler warns against “queer” losing its radicalism. “... “queer” becomes so utterly disjoined from sexual practice that every well-meaning heterosexual takes on the term” (Butler 1997, 124). For Butler, “queer” has to remain closely connected to non-dominant sexual practices and to problems of exclusion. However, when the term begins to be a sign of something positive, this diminishes its critical potential.

Salih detects a sign of Butler’s doubt in the power of radical resignification in *Excitable Speech*. This is the reason that Butler rarely mentions “queer”. Butler is not certain if the same resignification is possible in the case of a term such as “nigger”. Salih writes: “Butler accepts that words cannot be metaphorically purified of their historicity, even though she celebrates what she calls ‘the vulnerability of sullied terms to unexpected innocence’” (Salih 2002, 116). Another possible reason why Butler in her more recent work rarely uses “queer” is that she never claimed that this term is universally political. Even in 1993 she theorized it as a temporary and localized term that during that time was politically powerful. Perhaps for Butler “queer” had its time in the first part of the 1990s and therefore later Butler moved to other terms and issues to continue her political critique. Nevertheless “queer” still occasionally appears in Butler’s work.

For Butler, the crucial aspect of the term “queer” is its undecidability and openness. The meaning of this term is connected to a different aspect of Butler’s theory in various texts. In her 2002 article “Capacity”, dedicated to the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Butler associates “queer” with trans issues. She observes:

It becomes difficult to say whether the sexuality of the transgendered person is homosexual or heterosexual. The term “queer” gained currency a decade ago precisely to address such moments of productive undecidability, but we have not yet seen a

psychoanalytic attempt to take account of these cultural formations in which certain vacillating notions of sexual orientation are constitutive. (Butler 2004, 114)

Here “queer” has a critical potential related to the question of the construction of sexual identity. Moreover, according to Butler, “queer” has an ability to represent something which is not yet recognized by psychoanalysis. This means that “queer” is a theoretical concept but has a special capacity to precede theory.

In Butler’s collection of essays entitled *Undoing Gender* (2004), “queer” is used many times but there is no systematic reflection on this term. Butler mentions queer theory or queer activists several times, but it is never clear what she exactly means by it, or whom it represents. This might be deliberate in order not to limit these terms but to open them for many users. What is interesting here is that in a few passages “queer” stands in opposition to the feminism of sexual difference. The reason for this is that Butler’s use of “queer” does not privilege one difference over others. This is evident in the essay “The End of Sexual difference?” This essay is particularly interesting as it sheds the light on Butler’s understanding of conceptual politics. The very title resembles a utopian claim from *Oppression and Liberation* (1971) about the end of homosexual. Butler is against opposing “gender” to “sexuality” as a sign of distinct theoretical and political standpoints. She sees a political need for both of them but is aware about the limited status of both of them.

To me, Butler’s use of “queer” is deeply rooted in post-structuralism; “queer” can be seen as an unstable or perhaps an empty signifier that gains its meaning through different semantic or even syntactic positions and through different reiterations. Its own meaning is merely a trace of negativity (of an abuse). In my opinion, Butler uses “queer” as the theatrical repetition of abuse and in this way she strongly politicizes exclusion that cannot be limited to one dimension but has to be always seen as a complex issue involving sex, gender, class, race and ethnicity.

The concept of “queer” is also able to accommodate a greater multiplicity of sexual and bodily practices. Butler provides the examples of the broad use of “queer” in her essays, for instance, by situating “queer” in variable contexts. There are, for instance, queer lives, queer activism, queer communities, queer crossing, queer critique, queer theory, queer studies, “the queer appropriation of “queer”” (Butler 2004, 223), queer comedy, queer redescription, and even “the queer post-structuralism of the psyche” (Butler 2004, 44). Butler also identifies her first book as an important intervention in feminism that opens up a space for queer theory. Nevertheless, she mentions modestly that *Gender Trouble* is not the whole of queer theory but a moment in it.

When Butler mentions the concept of “queer” in her work, she often oscillates between psychoanalysis and post-structuralism. In many cases “queer” might be seen as a term which has a very broad meaning connected to sexual identification based on abjection, in many other cases it seems that the term does not have a positive meaning and it works as a negative deconstructive category. However, in my opinion, this is not a contradiction. Butler mobilizes the post-structuralist framework, particularly Derrida’s philosophy, in order to work politically in the field of sexuality. Here “queer” is an example of a term with a meaning that can be described only by a negation that was formative for this term and it still functions in the form of temporary alliances, which themselves can be an object of deconstruction. “Queer” does not have an exclusive definition. It is more a tool that can be mobilized to look critically at any notions of sexuality and particularly at the limits and peripheries of these notions.

4.9 The politics of queer

While considering Butler’s use of the concept of “queer” and its political aspects, it is important to also ask what the concept of politics might refer to in this context. It seems that Butler does not make a distinction between the political and the non-political, and she makes no clear distinction between the public and the private. Through the concept of “queer”, Butler is able to show more clearly that these distinctions are normative. To Butler, “queer” stands for a radical political criticism, directed particularly at the issues of gender and sexuality.

In the work of Judith Butler “queer” is used to pursue a specific conceptual politics. The term targets many feminist debates that were almost exclusively focused on issues related to gender. Instead, through “queer” Butler incorporates into feminist debates sex, race and class. “Queer” functions in Butler’s work within a post-structural methodology and the term is used to oppose any essentialist conceptualization of identity. The term “queer” is not used to negate the previous feminist studies but rather to open them up and to add new topics and new perspectives.

In the work of Judith Butler, “queer” does not function as a basis for any theory. On the contrary, this concept should be applied in order to destabilize theoretical presumptions and foundationalist tendencies. Butler never specifies a positive effect that “queer” might have. Annamarie Jagose comments:

Judith Butler does not try to anticipate exactly how queer will continue to challenge normative structures and discourses. On the contrary, she argues that what makes queer so efficacious is the way in which it understands the effects of its interventions are not singular and therefore cannot be anticipated in advance. (Jagose 1996, 129)

Its political potential lies in resisting any institutionalization, both academic and practical, such as activism, or even on an individual level, identity practices. For Butler “queer” is ever-changing and it never carries a strong positive content. It can be described as a negative concept, not only in the sense that it opposes norms, but it is even in opposition to itself as far as it can work as a self-critique. Perhaps that is also the reason why Butler never strongly identifies with this concept although she sporadically uses it in different contexts.

Butler uses the term “queer” as a utopian project only in the sense that it is an imagined concept and its possibilities are also not factual. Butler does not analyse what was really achieved by the use of “queer” by activists. She projects into her texts what she considers that the use of “queer” should be and what these uses politically should achieve.

Some Butler scholars prefer to read her work as a rather general philosophical theory than a politically applicable reflection. Claire Colebrook, for instance, argues that Butler constructs a philosophical reflection on autonomy and recognition in relation to the body and it should not be seen as a ground for political action. She writes: “Butler’s work is not so much a mobilisation of twentieth-century theory for queer politics, but a theory in which the queer body becomes exemplary” (Colebrook 2009, 14). I can understand Colebrook’s caution toward immediate translation of theories into political practice, but I think that she unnecessarily opposes theory and politics. Butler’s use of “queer” is political already within academia as she introduces this unstable term to challenge traditional concepts of “identity”, “recognition”, “community”, “self” and other notions. Colebrook seems to assume that theories used by politics are simplified. Many activists during the 1990s showed that Butler provided them with theoretical tools for activism. There were also others who criticized her for being overly theoretical (Duggan 2006). Contrary to Colebrook, I do not think that Butler’s work can be described as a “theory of the queer body” because Butler’s methodology and her topics of interest constantly change. I would, therefore, rather describe her work as politics within academia, as she persistently challenges academic discourses and concepts. In this context, “queer” stands as just one example of this politics of academia. Unlike Colebrook, I think that “queer” in Butler’s work is not merely about self but also about community, recognition and among other things political issues such as race and class.

I suggest that readings of Butler that tend to theorize “queer” merely as a critique of identity (Colebrook 2009, Sideman 1995) simplify the issue. Butler herself is careful not to overvalue the denaturalization of identity. It is an important political strategy but, as she says, “there is a risk in the affirmation of denaturalization as a strategy” (Butler 1993, 93). “Queer”

in Butler's work poses a challenge to traditional identity concepts but it also has a broader political function.

It is difficult to determine why Butler rarely used the concept of "queer" after the publication of *Bodies That Matter*. Perhaps to her, "queer" had the greatest political potential at the beginning of the 1990s. As we can see from her theorization of "queer", it is a temporal and open concept that might acquire a political and theoretical potential in some contexts and might easily lose them in other contexts and at other times.

Several authors that focus on the gay and lesbian political movement as well as on the queer movement accused some queer theorists, including Butler, of depoliticizing "queer". In his essays, Douglas Crimp (2002) argues strongly against a queer theory that distances itself from activism. Jeffrey Escoffier also tackles the same problem in *American Homo*. Whereas Escoffier does not analyse Butler's work in detail, he places her in the same category as those theorists who prefer literary and cultural studies over politics. According to Escoffier, theory cannot be properly political without focusing on social institutions and structures (Escoffier 1998, 178). He interprets Butler's concept of "queer" as being part of her theory of performativity. Escoffier claims that for Butler, the possibility of political mobilization follows from the performative character of discourses. Therefore, Escoffier concludes that Butler's work is part of cultural analyses that are linguistic games rather than a real political intervention. It is easy to think about Butler in this way because she rarely engages in discussion about rights or social institutions. Nevertheless, it is wrong to situate Butler entirely within cultural studies and accuse her of using "queer" as a concept within the field of literary criticism. The concept of "queer", even if used at points in Butler's work as a literary deconstructive category, obtains its political status from its primal function as an abuse and from its application by activists as a sign of protest. In this context, the term becomes a call for alternative recognition. Clearly, Butler makes no distinction between the political and cultural. She argues about this with Nancy Fraser in their exchange in *Social Text*.²⁹ According to Butler, this distinction is both superficial and normative. As a concept "queer" is a good example that politics is more than merely institutionalized politics. It is also a call for new ways of participation in society, new forms of recognition, and new forms of kinship. "Queer" in Butler's work is "a site of collective contestation" (Butler 1993, 228), but also a tool to analyse the construction of normativity. For Butler, the political dimension of "queer" lies in its

²⁹ *Social Text*, 52/53, Vol. 15, nos. 3 and 4, Fall/Winter 1997.

possibility to articulate the very terms of political agency and to reveal that they are not neutral, but normative.

Moreover, on political grounds Fraser perceives “queer demands for the recognition of difference as misplaced demands for redistribution” (Fraser 1997, 284). Butler does not oppose recognition to redistribution, but rather critically analyses both of them as necessary elements of the political struggle of sexual minorities.

Contrary to theorists such as Munoz, Dean, or Bersani, Butler does not relate the term “queer” to the analyses of transgressive sexual practices. This is how she avoids idealizing and superficially politicizing the sexual practices that could bring theories into a radically utopian dimension that has little to do with the social reality and political struggle. It seems to be crucial in Butler’s use of “queer” that this concept is not outside norms and values, but it is theoretically as well as politically a tool of critique from the inside.

It is not easy to provide a clear conclusion and say what Butler means by “queer” and what is the political potential of the term in her work. I have not found any extensive critical analysis of this particular term in Butler’s works, but I think that both its strong and its weak side is that it is an open-ended term, and is not defined in a positive way. In Butler’s work, I find that “queer” occupies a peculiar position in that Butler sets “queer” as a horizon of critical political practices. At this point the influence of Foucault’s thought is apparent; Butler does not aim at liberation of homosexuals from oppression, rather “queer” is for her a sign of political resistance to the dominant norms. In my reading, Butler uses “queer” as a negative concept in the sense that it does not have a meaning of its own but it gains meaning when attached to a particular context, but the politics that “queer” denotes is not negative. It is a politics of active resistance towards the dominant forms of power. As Steven Seidman puts it: “Judith Butler proposes a variant of deconstructive analysis but one which gestures toward a constructive politics” (Seidman 1997, 159). Based on Butler’s work, “queer” can be used to denaturalize and politicize norms and practices that are considered neutral in our culture. For Seidman, it also presents a problem on the ethical level; he asks which differences would be permissible and which norms could guide judgments and finally, what would organize new subjectivities in the absence of identity concepts. In my opinion, Seidman’s interpretation of Butler’s critique of identity concepts is too radical. The concept of “queer” would not replace identity concepts. Butler does not aim at rejecting these concepts but rather at exposing them as political constructs. In this context, “queer” disturbs the construction of identity concepts but it does not erase or replace them.

Although in her work Butler uses “queer” rather rarely, she became an icon of queer theory. Particularly *Bodies That Matter* set up specific theoretical and thematic contexts in which “queer” was politicized. This was inspiring for many other theorists and activists. Interestingly, Butler does not explicitly relate “queer” to “performativity” but she deploys this concept in order to examine the intersections of sexuality, race and class. Her relationship towards the issue of identity is crucial here; “queer” can function as a critique of identity concepts but not as a substitute for them. Butler, moreover, does not reject identity concepts but rather aims at reworking them. “Identity”, “race”, “class” became topics around which “queer” oscillates.

In her work, Butler uses “queer” within a conscious methodology and rhetoric, but her use of this term cannot be summed up through one distinctive feature. For Butler “queer” is a political signifier that has various connotations and can be attached to several issues. Perhaps this openness is the key characteristic of the term in Butler’s work.

For Butler the concept of “queer” serves not only as a tool for a radical political critique. “Queer” is also used to criticize the liberal presumptions and series of exclusions that are present in the politics of rights. “Queer” is used to open up politics to new possibilities, new discourses and new ways of thinking about political agency. Butler does not offer any concrete details about this “queer politics” but like Derrida (1997) opens up politics into the radically unknown. Butler does not try to predefine what this politics would look like, or what should be a new understanding of political agency. Instead, the term “queer” is a mark of longing for this new political opening.

Chapter 5: Queer (de)construction

The work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is crucial for the development of contemporary studies on gender and sexuality. Her work, moreover, also occupies a special role in regard to the proliferation of the concept of “queer”. In chapter 3 I presented how “queer” was used as a part of literary criticism but I argued that the political thought that accompanied these uses was not very nuanced. In chapter 4 I argued that Butler uses “queer” as an activist term in academia and she addresses various topics through it. Sedgwick started using the term as part of her specific literary criticism but she has also shown that literary criticism can be a powerful political tool that can tackle issues related to sexual identity and political activism. Her redescription of “queer” that I analyse in this chapter is also an important act of conceptual politics in academia. Clearly, Sedgwick’s uses of “queer” provide an original insight into sexuality studies.

Sedgwick started using the term “queer” in her essays from the early 1990s, subsequently collected and published as *Tendencies* (1993). Her publications are crucial for the understanding of the development of “queer” as a political concept in U.S. academia. Sedgwick deploys “queer” as a critical concept that can be applied to literary criticism but also to a broad field of cultural critique. Sedgwick initiated new forms of theorizing sexuality by applying to this field the language of literary criticism, in particular inspired by poststructuralism and by resigning from the feminist discourse that was predominantly focused on gender oppression. In this context “queer” is part of a radical conceptual politics of developing a new discourse that would be able to address the issues of sexual identity and sexual practices without recourse to the feminist discourse of oppression or of lesbian and gay discourse on rights and representation.

The focus of my analysis is on two books of essays, *Tendencies* and *Touching Feeling*, as there Sedgwick most frequently uses the term “queer”. I also look at *The Weather in Proust*, a collection of essays published after Sedgwick’s death. In particular, I am interested in the deconstructive aspect of the concept of “queer” in Sedgwick’s work and suggest that it is a key element in Sedgwick’s conceptual politics. My argument is that for Sedgwick “queer” plays a special role in that it can function as a disruptive trope in the reading of cultural texts. I pose the question: How can “queer” function as a political or ethical category when placed within the framework of literary criticism?

Sedgwick’s work is not explicitly political, as it does not directly relate to, for instance, issues of law or public institutions. Nevertheless, the way she uses the term “queer” is political as it poses a challenge to the established academic discourse, moreover it is also a term that

further problematizes the construction of sexual agency and the very understanding of sexuality. Sedgwick is a writer who passionately engages with the reality around her, therefore her work, which is a commentary on and an intervention in this reality, is deeply political.

Sedgwick's work on gender and sexuality at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s was ground-breaking for many who were seeking a new way to conduct a critical analysis in this field. Sedgwick's first book, *The Coherence of Gothic Convention* (1980), dealt with the cultural construction of homosexuality and heterosexuality. *Between Men* (1985) focuses on forms of male desire and the conditions of its intelligibility. The most significant aspect in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) was the theorization of the relationship between desire and its object, and the claim that gender and sexuality are two distinct discourses. Her work has been generally considered a milestone in queer theory. The focus of this chapter is on Sedgwick's formulation of "queer", therefore I shall analyse her later texts starting with *Tendencies* (1993), as in none of her earlier works does she use the concept of "queer".

Throughout her work, Sedgwick identifies her own theoretical position neither with deconstruction nor with queer theory. Nevertheless, the concept of "queer" occupies a crucial position in her work, particularly in *Tendencies* (1993) and *Touching Feeling* (2003), but also in her late essays published after her death as *The Weather in Proust* (2011). I suggest that in Sedgwick's work the concept carries particular deconstructive traces. In this chapter I analyse in detail how "queer" functions in her work and what the significance of this concept is for Sedgwick's literary criticism and for her political project.

For Sedgwick "political" has a very complex meaning that goes far beyond influencing and making law. In several of her texts she stresses that her writing is political and that this writing is part of her activism. In one of her late essays she is against the narrow designation of politics exclusively in terms of election and legislation, or the terms of institutional assimilation (Sedgwick 2011, 202). Sedgwick claims that such a narrow understanding of politics is characteristic for the mainstream gay and lesbian movement. She believes that the queer project is also about rethinking our very understanding of politics itself.

5.1 Queer and deconstruction

To present "queer" as a political concept in Sedgwick's work poses a challenge because her work is complex, relating to various topics and oscillating between various methodologies. In this chapter I do not attempt to characterize the whole of Sedgwick's oeuvre; instead, I focus entirely on her uses of the concept of "queer". I suggest that there is a productive link between the term "queer" and deconstruction as a strategy that Sedgwick employs for her conceptual and cultural politics. Perhaps Sedgwick's whole work should not be characterized as

deconstructive, but if “queer” is considered to be a deconstructive category, it is because Sedgwick uses it as a sign of something temporal, unstable or non-normative.³⁰ In fact, she has several ways in which she deploys “queer” politically. Often the term is part of her critical reading that she describes as “paranoid”. Sedgwick’s work as a whole is not deconstructive in the sense that it constantly alternates between what she calls “paranoid” and “reparative” reading³¹. In reparative reading a positive, constructive element is strongly present. Moreover, her writing is political in the sense that she often seems to speak in the name of degraded people. Therefore, Sedgwick does not offer a typical deconstructive reading in the de Manian sense – as an internal analysis of the self-negating elements in a text. Nevertheless, she traces the logic of the heterosexual supplement, and “queer” functions as a figural refusal of this logic.³² Her project begins with deconstruction but exceeds it due to its political and ethical consequences. Negativity is neither the final aim of Sedgwick’s writing, nor is it the main analytical approach. Nevertheless, I find that negativity is important in her writing in order to understand the term “queer”, in that “queer” starts with shame, violence and exclusion. But the question still remains: Can Sedgwick’s work on “queer” be considered deconstructive, and if so, what would be the meaning of this deconstruction?

Unlike Judith Butler (1990), Sedgwick does not postulate subversion as an effect of the deconstructive reading of sexuality. Instead, Sedgwick’s work reveals contradictions in the concept of sexuality and its cultural deployment in law, literature, history, and broadly understood, the public arena. This type of reading reveals that the crisis within texts (for Sedgwick texts are not only written literary texts, but also e.g. cultural institutions) can be described as deconstructive. Yet the contradictions and discontinuities that can be revealed in the contemporary construction of sexuality are not in themselves subversive, indeed they are the opposite, in that these contradictions and discontinuities constitute the forms of sexuality that are currently present. For Sedgwick to reveal the construction of sexuality does not mean to subvert it. Penelope Deutscher puts it as follows:

Thus Sedgwick labels her own strategy ‘deconstructive’ but avoids two claims that are

³⁰ Look, for instance, at Sedgwick’s formulation of “queer” in her essay: “Queer and Now” in *Tendencies*.

³¹ Sedgwick (2003) understands paranoid and reparative readings as modes of hermeneutic. Paranoid reading focuses on suspicion and aims at revealing negative affects, while reparative reading offers reconciliation with negative affects.

³² In the essay “Around Performative” in *Touching Feeling* Sedgwick uses “queer” in the context of the Derridean concept of the logic of supplement. She writes: “Persons who self-identify as queer will be those whose subjectivity is lodged in refusal or deflection of (or by) the logic of heterosexual supplement.” (Sedgwick 2003, 71). Derrida developed the concept of supplement in *Of Grammatology* (1967, English translation 1976). The supplement stands for accretion and substitution (*Of Grammatology* 200). It functions to cover emptiness and it is a condition of representation (*Of Grammatology* 144). For Sedgwick the logic of heterosexual supplement aims at hiding always accidental and singular character of sexuality.

typically associated with deconstruction: first, that the internal instability of binarisms has a self-corrosive efficacy or internally subversive effect, and second, that the deconstructive critic's exposure of that internal instability has a corrosive efficacy. (Deutscher 1997, 18)

However, *Tendencies* seems to suggest that the concept of "queer" in some specific contexts acquires a disruptive power in relation to the construction of sexuality.

In some texts, such as in her main work, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick uses Derridian deconstruction as a general construction for her own arguments. The paradigmatic opposition in this book is based on the relation of difference, which is negative. Heterosexuality/homosexuality is a relational pair of concepts that codetermine each other and function as oppositions only in the determined structure. Here, in between the lines we can see the work of such Derridian terms as "trace" or "the law of genre".³³ I do not offer any systematic analyses of Derrida's influence on Sedgwick's work, but I wish to point out that these deconstructive elements are an important part of the deployment of the concept of "queer".

It is noteworthy that Sedgwick was trained in literary theory at Cornell and Yale at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. During that time, particularly Yale, but also to some extent Cornell, were among the first universities in the States to introduce French post-structuralism and to apply it to literary and cultural criticism. Sedgwick is not a paradigmatic representative of the Yale School but her work clearly suggests the strong influence of this school.

At the beginning of *Tendencies* Sedgwick, as a literary scholar, offers us this working description of the term "queer": "'queer' can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick 1993, 7). When we look at the rhetorical aspect of this description, it might remind us of some texts from the Yale School that refer to deconstructive concepts (e.g. Paul de Man's "The Concept of Irony"). "Queer" appears to be an internal element of text or discourse that exceeds the semantic limitations of that text or discourse. Sedgwick does not advocate any semantic transgression, but advocates the act of rereading that extends semantic limits.

In the quoted description of "queer", which is only one of several alternative

³³ The Derridian inspirations of Sedgwick's main work are traced by Ross Chambers in: "Strategic Constructivism? Sedgwick's Ethics of Inversion".

descriptions of the term in *Tendencies*, this concept does not refer to any particular object. The context of its application is gender and sexuality, but it is not a trope or a figure that can have limited signification. Instead, it “seems to be the trope of tropes, the one that names the term as the “turning away,” but that notion is so all-encompassing that it would include all tropes” (de Man 1996, 165). This is a part of the description of Paul de Man’s concept of irony and I believe it fits very well the context in which “queer” appears in Sedgwick’s work. De Man claims that irony has a performative function and it is not really a trope or a proper concept that could be defined. This can also be applied to the concept of “queer” as deployed by Sedgwick. Sedgwick does not explicitly acknowledge de Man’s influence on her theorization of “queer”, but I think the Yale School provided Sedgwick with a very useful framework to challenge the existing theories of gender and sexuality and to politicize them in a different way.

In Sedgwick’s work “queer” is a very ambiguous concept. It seems to be a type of “third term” which is without clear reference and oscillates between fiction and reality. In this sense it is a deeply deconstructive concept because it always appears as an act, or as Sedgwick calls it, a performative act. We have no power to interpret it because there is no interpretation ready at hand and no rules exist to guide our understanding of “queer” or to make a distinction between the imagined part of the concept and its reality connected to negativity. The positive element of “queer” is fictional, unstable, flexible and often utopian. The negative element is stable and is connected with shame and degradation.

The relationship between concepts of the “body” and the “text” is crucial in many of Sedgwick’s essays. Sometimes it is hard to understand what she means by these terms because they seem to have a broad connotation for her. For Sedgwick the body seems to resemble a text. It is close to the Foucaultian understanding of the body³⁴ that can be written by different discourses but also overwritten by others and again rewritten by multiple, often contradictory, power regimes. Sedgwick argues that the text and the body are limited and not totally open; they are predetermined but at the same time they remain flexible. Sedgwick describes bodies in terms of literary criticism that are usually applied to texts. This is an interesting strategy and is theoretically challenging. I will focus on the consequences of this approach at the conceptual level.

5.2 Queer as an act of writing

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to separate what Sedgwick says from the way she writes. If one could define theory in opposition to literature as something that can be paraphrased,

³⁴ Halperin, David 1995, and Huffer, Lynne 2010 are among several authors who have commented on Foucaultian traces in Sedgwick’s work.

something that can be said in other ways and summarized, then Sedgwick's writing would be situated somewhere in between the realm of theory and literature. She is a truly contemporary, passionate writer, who, like Derrida, is in search of her own style of expression. And as in Derrida's work, it is not possible to disconnect what is said from the way it is said. In his book on Sedgwick, Jason Edwards warns that readers of Sedgwick should be ready for "sentences that are openly *queer* and explicit in other ways and about a variety of things" (Edwards 2009, 6, italics original).

Sedgwick introduces "I" to critical texts and she strongly identifies with what she says. She is the narrator of her story about queer sexuality, and her literary criticism is itself literary. It is also important to notice that Sedgwick very rarely speaks of sexuality in abstract terms or in purely political terms, and instead she addresses sexuality through her reading of literature. We can view Sedgwick's texts in the context of what Culler (2000) calls "the literary in theory" in contemporary thought (he explicitly mentions Sedgwick in his text). Culler's conclusion concerning literature and theories is that everything is literary. He states: "... the effect of theory has been to inform disciplines of both the fictionality and the performative efficacy of their constructions" (Culler 2000, 290).

To understand Sedgwick better I will also reflect on the rhetorical aspects of her writing. Sedgwick does not consider "queer" to be a term like others that would have a limited field of connotation. It functions instead as a figure of otherness; it is an invitation to think differently. Finally, I suggest that Sedgwick uses "queer" as a peculiar literary figure, a trope that can have a disruptive effect on discourse. Although methodologically Sedgwick is inspired by post-structuralism, she does not follow it as a school of thought.

Sedgwick's writing continually fluctuates between objective academic discourse and a radically individualistic style. Sedgwick does not search for stylistic or for methodological coherence in her writing; instead, she offers us a mixture of fragments of literary criticism with her own memories written in the first person. Furthermore, she includes parts of her poetry and personal reflections in academic essays. As a result, Sedgwick creates a kind of effusive and intimate discourse that can be used to discuss problems of shame, exclusion, desire and bodies. Judith Butler calls this way of writing "a form of political lyricism" (Butler 2002, 109).

I wish now to focus on the meaning of the term "political" for a moment. Sedgwick's writing is not a neutral form of literary criticism. Although she does not address political issues directly, her texts remain deeply political because they comment on social reality and aim at challenging this reality. Sedgwick does not merely interpret homophobia and shame, rather through her texts she intervenes at the very core of shame and homophobia. With the concept

“queer” as a tool she explores the political potential that lies within experiences of shame.

It is difficult to find the basis for any discussion concerning rights in Sedgwick’s work, nor does she reflect directly on the state and its institutions. For example, in *Epistemology of the Closet* and in *Tendencies*, she primarily focuses on ways of reading desire in Western culture. This reading is deconstructive because it reveals the closures, discontinuities and contradictions that underlie the construction of dominant heterosexual desire. Sedgwick draws her “queer tutelage” from this network of contradictory relations. “Queer tutelage” can be understood as an examination of a possible space for alterity in Western culture. It focuses on difference and dissonance rather than on continuity and sameness. In other words, Sedgwick’s work is not a literary game, as some texts from the Yale School would seem to be, but, as Butler puts it: “a certain ethics of thinking, one that postpones the question of logical incoherence in the name of historical possibilities that emerge when no single schema turns out to exhaust the epistemological field” (Butler 2002, 117). It seems that what is crucial here for Butler is the impossibility of posing a question regarding real or original desire on the basis of Sedgwick’s work. What is real is the sequence itself that produces a particular desire. Sedgwick’s work suggests that no desires can be privileged nor can they be more authentic than others. Instead, they all reflect each other and there is neither a source for them, nor any ahistorical ground for them.

According to Sedgwick, the unity of heterosexuality is fictitious and is achieved by discourses that aim at hiding their own inner contradictions. In the context of her work, “political” would imply a way of approaching Western culture that does not give precedence to certain signs but instead takes all signs as a site of productive struggle. I also find her approach political because it is an intervention in the Western binary way of thinking. Sedgwick’s method is deconstruction but deconstruction is also an effect of her analyses. Deconstruction leaves the reader without an answer regarding what a desire is or what sexuality is. Another point is that politically deconstruction does not postulate emancipation or liberation. However, it produces moments of undecidability and it challenges any unitary notion of a sexual subject. To me the message of Sedgwick’s work is that there might be an infinite number of ways of thinking about sexuality and none of them would be able to exhaust the meaning of desire.

It is also important to mention here what Berlant refers to as Sedgwick’s “poetics of misrecognition”. The starting point for Sedgwick’s writing is the closet. This is the point of misrecognition for the subject, because the subject identifies with the degrading perspective of the other. Yet this misrecognition might also be reparative. It does not destroy the possibilities for identification but opens them up into the unknown. Moreover, the poetics of misrecognition

is a negation of literary and political necessity, and can be a form of analysing fantasies. Berlant argues that “Misrecognition (meconnaissance) describes the psychic process by which fantasy recalibrates what we encounter so that something can fulfill our desire” (Berlant 2002, 71).

If we could discuss Sedgwick’s work in terms of ontology, it would be rather simple, desiring bodies exist and there is no need to question that. Sedgwick does not feel that she needs to reflect on this. Instead, to Sedgwick the important questions would be: How does desire function and what are its consequences, what surplus does it produce on the psychic, cultural and political level, how limited and how open is desire for reimagination? And as for the concept of “queer”, Sedgwick seems to ask: Can we reimagine agency?

5.3 Queer “I”

“(I)t was a queer but long-married young woman whose erotic and intellectual life were fiercely transitive, shaped by a thirst for knowledges and identifications that might cross the barriers of what seemed my identity” (Sedgwick 1993, 256). Sedgwick describes herself in this way in the ’80s. This sentence is a good example of her style in general and I would like to reflect on this for a moment. It is very characteristic of Sedgwick to write in the first person, to talk about herself. Her texts often have a specific, intimate atmosphere. As she admits, she does not engage in building a “strong theory” but instead cultivates “weak theory”.³⁵ Most of her writing might be considered a personal balancing between academic and literary genres in which “queer” appears. “Queer” describes an “I” but, as one can see from the sentence quoted, this “I” is a peculiar one. It is the “I” of the author, Eve, but not the “I” of the narrator. In short, there is a split. By Sedgwick describing herself as “queer”, she avoids the first person form and chooses to say it in the third person form. As a consequence, “queer” is used to tell the story of an “I” which is split or cannot be identified as itself. Perhaps this “I” is in an ambiguous relation to itself and it is clearly not self-identical, because it appears in the gap between the narrator, the author and the subject of writing: Eve from the past, who was a temporal Eve, in contrast to the person who writes the text, Sedgwick, who is differentiated from the Eve of the past. This sentence contains three instances of “I”: the fictional Eve from the past, the narrator, who is a function of the text, and the author, who allows us to read it as Sedgwick’s essay. All these functions are interconnected but split, which is especially evident in the “queer” identification. Only the fictional Eve from the ’80s is described as “queer”. It is also interesting that in this case, while describing the Eve from the past, Kosofsky uses the indefinite article

³⁵Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, Barber, Stephen M., Clark, David L. “This Piercing Bouquet: An Interview with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick”, in *Regarding Sedgwick* 243-262.

“a”, which might seem to be a mistake, especially in that the Eve from the past had already appeared earlier in the text. It seems that in this context, Sedgwick in general questions the traditional oppositions of literary studies: the fiction - reality, inside - outside of the text. It is therefore not possible to ask what it would mean that “a queer but long-married young woman” is fictional. The narration situates her as an object, but at the same time, this object is a precondition of the narration because it is the past of the author. Perhaps queer Eve is the narrator’s fantasy that has a transformative potential for the author.

In the context of “queer” the young Eve is a figure of herself. This figuration questions the relation between identity and time. Here the traditional metonymic relationship is displaced. The most interesting aspect is that this figuration of the author reveals the split in the identity itself. This opens identity up to multiple positionalities. Here “queer” strips away the fiction of unity and coherence from the “I” and reveals it as being vulnerable and capable of suffering and pain, but also open to new meanings. The relation of the author to the figure of a young author is marked by melancholia and a particular kind of idealization. This idealization is a sign of openness and indeterminacy. There is no longing for “queer” by the actual author, but the young Eve is a transformative figure in itself. Interestingly, Sedgwick does not draw from the term “queer” any ideas to come and she does not pre-define “queer” in order to represent her political or theoretical aims.

In *Tendencies* “queer” is found in an interesting temporal relation. For Sedgwick temporality is crucial to her use of “queer”. For instance, she talks about “queer time” or “queer moments” (this temporal dimension of “queer” is clear in the first chapter of *Tendencies*). This temporality cannot be mistaken for passive linear history. Barber and Clark write: “If “queer” is temporality, a “moment,” it is also then a force; or rather, it is a crossing temporality with force” (Barber and Clark 2002, 8). What is even more striking is that “queer” is often related to the past. In the sentence that I am analysing this is also the case. Sedgwick does not describe herself at the current moment as “queer”, but she talks about the young woman from the past, as if “queer” would mark some impossible limit for the presence. It is important to note that “queer” does not appear in any relation to the future in Sedgwick’s writing. It marks the past: a time of crisis and hope, as radically open for interpretation. It is not the future or the current time which is open, but the past. And the past is open to what she refers to as a paranoid and reparative reading.

Finally what is also significant in that sentence is the very literal meaning that it carries. For Sedgwick, “queer” is placed in a non-exclusionary opposition to marriage. Young queer Eve is transitive in her erotic and intellectual life. She seems to be on the border or between

different identities and knowledges (Sedgwick uses the grammatically incorrect plural form “knowledges”). This means that “queer” is not in opposition to an identity; on the contrary, it is connected to a multiplicity of identities and their unfixed character. “Queer” neither represents alternative identity, nor the idea that identities do not matter. Instead, “queer” stands for some multiplicity of forms and shapes that life can assume. “Queer” as an adjective shows young Eve as being open to change, not fully formed, possibly in the midst of a crisis, but on the other hand it is a time of hope. Certainly, “queer” is associated with a unique time, a time that has passed and which could exist only fleetingly, only related to the fictional Eve, which is the precondition of the real author, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. As a trope, therefore, “queer” fictionalizes stories of the past and offers them as ready for reinterpretation.

A particularity of “queer” is that Sedgwick situates it somewhere between fiction, fantasy and reality. In her writing the term functions as a challenge to this opposition between fiction and reality, between literature and politics. In short, fiction is a transformative site of reality. Sedgwick shows us that “I” is made in fiction and as a fiction, therefore it can also be rewritten, transgressed through fiction. She does not link “queer” directly to politics but fiction nevertheless has an immense political potential as it often expresses individual experiences better than theories.

In the sentence quoted Sedgwick does not use “queer” in relation subjectivity in a utopian way. The aim is not to completely deconstruct identity and present it as totally open for any new meaning. “Queer” is attached to the subject that is limited by its painful history but is in the process of redefining its meaning and deconstructing its position and relations. I see the influence of Sedgwick’s conceptualization of “queer” in the work of Elizabeth Freeman, in particular her book *Time Binds* (2010). Specifically, it is the political aspect of Sedgwick’s usage of “queer” that inspired scholars such as Freeman to theorize the traumas and histories of marginalized people. In relation to “queer”, Freeman turns to the past rather than to utopia. In this context, “queer” helps to rewrite the past. Freeman in the preface to her book mentions Sedgwick a number of times. In the spirit of Sedgwick she claims that queer time is about twisting chronology but, more importantly, it is also about discovering new possibilities in the painful past. Freeman calls it: “the temporal politics of deconstruction” and understands by this “putting the past into meaningful and transformative relation with the present” (Freeman 2010, xvi). “Queer” functions politically by transforming the way narrations are formed. I suggest that Sedgwick’s connection between “queer” and temporality offers not merely an insight into the formation of narrations, it also reveals the particular character of any narration and its open structure.

Sedgwick does not use “queer” as a term that can describe a social group or movement: “(T)here are important senses in which “queer” can signify only *when attached to the first person*” (Sedgwick 1993, 8, italics original). In this way “queer” can destabilize the meaning of established identity concepts, as in their place it offers a fantasmatic self-affiliation. Therefore, according to Sedgwick, “queer” might signify something different each time. The meaning of the term thus changes each time it is attached to a different object. This is the crucial aspect of Sedgwick’s “queer performativity”; when “queer” is used in every speech act, it proves the possibility of not being itself. As Linda Anderson states:

“It [Sedgwick’s strategy to use “queer” in the first person] is first of all a way of dislodging queer from its possible definitional role and putting it to work as a word – an adjective – which actively changes meanings. As *performed* meaning, Sedgwick argues, queer is always different from itself. (Anderson 2000, 69)

5.4 Narrating “queer”

“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* (transversive), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*” (Sedgwick 1993, xii). Sedgwick’s *Tendencies* opens with a sort of preface to “queer” and even though the concept of “queer”, with the exception of the introduction and the first chapter, does not appear very often, the beginning of the book situates all the chapters in the orbit of “queer”. Thus, the main reference of the book is “queer” and Sedgwick considers it to be a crucial category. In her use of “queer” Sedgwick does not refer exclusively to any particular present use of the concept, nor does she describe any genealogy of the term, either historical or personal. It is worth noting how she narrates “queer”, particularly in *Tendencies*, where Sedgwick uses it for the first time as a political signifier.

Sedgwick begins *Tendencies* with a description of the New York City Gay Pride Parade in 1992. At the time, there was an atmosphere of contestation and hope. One of the T-shirts that Sedgwick saw at that gathering read, “KEEP YOUR LAWS OFF MY UTERUS”. She recapitulates: “It was a QUEER time” (Sedgwick 1993, xi). The book begins like a manifesto. “Queer” appears in the context of the gay pride street demonstration. It is a sign which was crucial to the atmosphere of that moment. It did not express a specific positive meaning but it unified people around it. The first section of the book describes the social movement and then bases the theory upon it. The writing begins with passionate and personal engagement, clearly indicating that *Tendencies* is a radically subjective book. As it is also an academic book, this is a dangerous strategy to adopt, but the aim is to make the reader passionate about the topic

presented. The Foreword shows that in the case of “queer” there is no division between theory and social movement, between literature and politics. For Sedgwick the meaning of “queer” begins with the action and the practice of social transformation and this same action might equally well transform the philosophical and political theories which focus on sexuality.

“The *queer* of these essays is transitive – multiply transitive. The immemorial current that *queer* represents is antiseparatist as it is antiassimilationist. Keenly, it is relational, and strange” (Sedgwick 1993, xii). Sedgwick uses a number of adjectives to describe “queer” but it still it seems to be an ambiguous term. Clearly there is a relation to lesbian and gay politics behind describing “queer” as antiassimilationist and antiseparatist. I suggest that in the sentence quoted above Sedgwick signals her distance from lesbian and gay politics of the time. Interestingly, there is no direct or necessary recourse to homosexuality. Instead, the focus is on the transitive character of “queer”. The term seems to be both contradictory and radically particular. Sedgwick relates it to the borders and crossing lines of sexuality and discourse. For Sedgwick, “queer” never evokes a unitary concept of homosexuality; it refers instead to perversion understood as the uniqueness of sexual acts and identities. Sedgwick’s essay on Henry James, for example, clearly demonstrates that she does not search for something that might be exemplary and general, but by contrast investigates the exceptionality of desires.

The way Sedgwick writes about “queer” is interesting because it is on the edge of theoretical discourse, personal diary and political manifesto. In Sedgwick’s writing the borders are blurred, especially in the context of “queer”. This is passionate writing that is intended to be a theoretical and political intervention in the current debates on sexuality and gender. Sedgwick seems to suggest to readers that in the case of sexuality there is no distinction between the personal and the political or between the universal and the particular.

It is important to reflect on Sedgwick’s concept of “performativity” because it is tightly linked to “queer”. “Performativity” appears several times in the context of “queer” and its meaning is related to the semantic effect that “queer” is capable of producing, but primarily it refers to the acts of coming out of the closet or to acts of alternative self identification: ““Queer” seems to hinge more radically and explicitly on a person’s undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiations” (Sedgwick 1993, 8). “Performative” refers here to acts of recycling discourse that one was described by. Edwards explains the effect of this queer performativity: “And yet, through queer performativity, Sedgwick suggests, the ground of subjectivity, representation, communication, relation and community can be sublimely reconfigured” (Edwards 2009, 91).

It is also worth pointing out that “queer” sometimes functions in Sedgwick’s texts as a

quasi-intentional agent.³⁶ This is not a concept that would have a clear, limited semantic structure consisting of a denotation and connotation. She writes:

A word so fraught as “queer” is – fraught with so many social and personal histories of exclusion, violence, defiance, excitement – never can only denote; nor even can it connote; a part of its experimental force as a speech act is the way in which it dramatizes locutionary position itself. (Sedgwick 1993, 8)

Sedgwick does not offer us a set of rules regarding the use of the concept of “queer”, and in her own work this concept functions in several different ways. For example, it can be a quasi-identity, theoretical term from the field of literary criticism, or a political or ethical concept. And even within these fields, “queer”, depending on context, might function in different ways. It seems that for Sedgwick it is not the meaning of “queer” itself that is important but what possible impact or function “queer” can have. “Queer” is about being disruptive and opening up alternative opportunities. It is also about opposing any unitary constructions of concepts related to sexuality, desire and the body. Therefore, in *Touching Feeling* Sedgwick emphasizes the connection of “queer” to contingency. This seems to be a key point of “paranoid reading.” Sedgwick points out: “For if, as I have shown, a paranoid reading practice is closely tied to a notion of inevitable there are other features of queer reading that can attune it exquisitely to a heartbeat of contingency” (Sedgwick 2003, 147).

5.5 Queer ethics

In Sedgwick’s work a particular critical force is represented by the concept of “queer”. In a sense, this is an ethical term, and Sedgwick often relates it to a way of life that people might live. It is also often connected to “performativity”, which is sometimes understood philosophically, in the way Judith Butler writes about it, but also theatrically (Sedgwick 1993, 11 and Sedgwick 2003, 3-8).³⁷ Sedgwick explains that on the basic level “queer” as a word is performative as at its core the flexibility of language is revealed, in particular the flexibility of oppressive language. She states: “The “queer” potential of performativity is evidently related to the tenuousness of its ontological ground” (Sedgwick 2003, 3). Sedgwick recalls here Austin, Derrida and Butler. They are important intellectual sources for her, but her understanding of “performativity” goes further. It is not merely a deconstructive term, it becomes an ethical term, relating to action, choices and affects.

In *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame*, Sally Munt notices that there is an important connection in Sedgwick’s work between “queer”, “performativity” and “shame”

³⁶ See the Introduction and first chapter of *Tendencies*.

³⁷ Sedgwick explains what she means by “performativity” in the first chapter of *Tendencies* and in the Introduction to *Touching Feeling*.

(Munt 2007, 23). This conceptual connection is at the core of *Tendencies*. Furthermore, the abjection caused by shame might be an incitement to an alternative ethics of self. One could argue that Sedgwick assumes a certain transhistorical meaning of shame but I would argue that for her the meaning of shame is always open for various experiences and emotions.

Sedgwick focuses particularly on the identity effects that a particular performative act might have. One of the main examples is coming out as a performative act and also the closet as a particular cultural performance in itself. Both of these are dramatized in a special way and they are based on the play within identity. This play is both constructive and deconstructive for identity. It shapes, deforms and makes identity unstable. Here the link between linguistic performativity and the history of same-sex desire seems to be crucial in *Epistemology of the Closet*.

Sedgwick argues that the semantic force of “queer” is at its strongest when used in the first person. If we also add that according to Sedgwick “queer” is a relational force, this resembles the Foucaultian project of ethics that is relational and focuses on the creation and transformation of self. This connection is also suggested by Barber and Clark in their introduction to *Regarding Sedgwick*: “‘Queer’ seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person’s undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation” (Barber and Clark 2002, 8). Sedgwick’s ethics is a way of living that leaves the “I” always open for new temporary identifications.

As for same-sex desire, the meaning of “I” is always relational. First, it is a relation to the closet and to the external world that is based on the hiding-revealing dialectic. However, what might be even more essential is the relation of the “I” to itself and to the problem of defining the borders of the meaning of “I”. In the case of the “queer I” these borders are never fully fixed. The “queer I” is primarily defined in relation to the closet, which is always relational and temporal. This means that “queerness” reflects the unpredictability of the moment, and this overcomes the paradigmatic structure of heterosexual/homosexual, which is defining for contemporary culture. Sedgwick’s deconstructive move to reverse that structure might also be interpreted as ethical because it makes agents re-evaluate the paradigms which define their identity. Sedgwick states: “Persons who self-identify as queer will be those whose subjectivity is lodged in refusal or deflection of (or by) the logic of heterosexual supplement” (Sedgwick 2003, 71).

It is significant that in this context Derrida is not recalled directly, but clearly in her analysis of queer subjectivity, Sedgwick relies on the logic of supplement, which is a main deconstructive method in *Of Grammatology*. A queer person will be a figure of discontinuity

both on the level of language, but also on the level of the construction of political agency that requires the submission to particular performative acts. What marks the queer subject is the denial to participate in binary semantics, but also in the political system. Nevertheless, Sedgwick does not seem to suggest any political project of contestation. On the contrary, that denial is an ethical act which might prove productive.

5.6. Negativity and queer

In Sedgwick's work "queer" does not seem to have a positive meaning, or at least not a stable, positive meaning. The term temporarily engages in some alliances but remains internally empty as a sign. Although Sedgwick uses "queer" in many different contexts and attaches different connotations to it, she primarily connects "queer" to negativity. This is contrary to the concept of "gay". "Queer" is not a positive identity and it is related to "shame", or perhaps one could even say it is based on the shame. The main way in which "queer" is elaborated by Sedgwick is in connection to shame and AIDS. She states, "If queer is a politically potent term, which it is, that's because, far from being capable of being detached from the childhood scene of shame, it cleaves to that scene as a near-inexhaustible source of transformation" (Sedgwick 1993, 4). The first point to note here is that when Sedgwick was re-editing her essay on Henry James for inclusion in *Touching Feeling*, she cut out this sentence. However, I believe that the general meaning of this passage is still present in the book in a slightly different form. In 2003 Sedgwick was subtler in her discussion of politics. The sentence is very dense in meaning, but what is most crucial for me is that the condition for "queer" being a political term is its relation to shame. Shame stands for negativity, but for Sedgwick this negativity is never absolute. On the contrary, it can be productive. It might also be a basis for an alternative identity politics. It is important to note, that in Sedgwick's work the motif of the child appears at points in relation to queerness. In particular she focuses on the relationship between "the queer adult that one *is* and queer child that one *was*" (Barber and Clark 2002, 5). Freeman comments:

The later relation, figured in Sedgwick's work as a promise, necessarily entails a dialectic between a protean sense of "queer" as polymorphous, as alienated, as somatically and psychologically estranged from adulthood in unpredictable ways, and a more pointed sense of the term as interventionist, as transformational, as anti-normative. (Freeman 2010, 82)

Sedgwick refers to negativity as a tool that enables certain transformations. Interestingly in this context she does not use terms such as "emancipation" or even "subversion" but instead uses "transformation". "Transformation" seems to suggest that there is no outside, no realm of future happiness that can be achieved by right political choices. Transformation always comes from within and is internal; it recycles existing cultural forms, ways of living and desiring into

different positions. Sedgwick suggests that pain and misrecognition always exist in different forms but can always be reworked and transformed.

Lynne Huffer proposes to examine Sedgwick's work in line with certain Foucaultian tropes. In the context of shame Huffer writes: "This story about queer shame transfigured as critical moralism retells a De Manian lesson Sedgwick herself recalls: that the positive resignifications of "transformational shame" have a life of their own, in their "necessarily 'aberrant'" relation to their own reference" (Huffer 2009, 182). Huffer mentions that this transformational shame happens through bodies seeking pleasure and this point is the beginning of an ethical perspective. To me, the transformation of shame in Sedgwick's work happens on a few levels, involving re-narrating stories of the past, re-identifying with them, and discovering other positions for "I".

At this point Sedgwick rejects psychoanalysis at the level of rhetoric and methodology, nor does she engage in discussing psychoanalytical issues. Her famous anti-psychoanalysis call from *Tendencies*: "Forget the Name of the Father!" (Sedgwick 1993, 57) is at the core of "queer tutelage". This is particularly important when thinking about queer shame.

Shame is a negation of identity but it is also productive for minority identities. Shame is, in addition, an affect which destroys the unproblematic relation to the identity as an essence of "I". The moment of shame brings into crisis the very coherence of "I" that is questioned through the experience of being ashamed. Shame forecloses the essential "I" but opens up multiple possibilities of experiencing "I" in relation to the closet. Shame is then the structuring fact of minoritarian agency.

Sedgwick clearly states that for her, "queer" is not a tool to be used to construct a theory of homosexuality. Indeed, she says that she does not have any. "Queer", however, can be a name for non-normative ways of experiencing desire and identity. In Sedgwick's use of "queer", this term reveals a discontinuity between identity and desire.

Again in relation to the closet, Sedgwick discusses "queer performativity": "In this usage, "queer performativity" is the name of a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame and to the later and related fact of stigma" (Sedgwick 2003, 61). "Queer" seems to be a product of the relation to the closet but it goes beyond the paradigm of heterosexuality/homosexuality. This term has the potential of producing unexpected meaning and it can challenge the binary structure common to Western culture. It is also interesting that for Sedgwick, a meaning, and therefore also more broadly, semantics, is not in opposition to ontology. In relation to shame "queer" intensifies the meanings of the "I", of the body, of desire, of pleasure and finally of agency itself. Negation represented by shame

does not leave us with nothing; on the contrary, it opens up identity and desire and multiplies them. Shame is not a trope for Sedgwick, it is a potential mode of meaning transformation.

Shame has a connection to same-sex desire for Sedgwick, but this connection is not exclusive. In a number of her essays she also writes about queer and shame in the context of activism and political movement: “Shame interests me politically, then, because it generates and legitimates the place of identity – the question of identity – at the origin of the impulse to the performative, but does so without giving that identity space the standing of an essence” (Sedgwick 2003, 64). To me, this fragment is reminiscent of Spivak’s strategic essentialism (Spivak 1988). Moreover “queer” as persistently present resembles Spivak’s deconstruction.

Shame is a crucial concept in Sedgwick’s work and one that has been very influential for other scholars and writers. Several authors contributing to the anthology *Gay Shame* feel indebted to Sedgwick. Hanson writes:

Shame is not, in her view simply good or bad, not something that one could banish for the sake of a politics of pride and self-affirmation, gay or otherwise. It is an organizing principle of identity, perhaps the key principle for queer identity in particular, and therefore a nexus for the communal connection, for the transformational political and artistic effort, that have characterized that identity. (Hanson 2009, 138)

I find it important that though shame plays such a crucial role in Sedgwick’s work, at no point does she idealize it and attach to it any affirmative, emancipatory possibilities. Sedgwick discovers the modalities of shame that are productive and political. The question in relation to shame is not how to transgress it or forget it, but rather how to accommodate it to one’s life so that it will be liveable, and to political actions so that the space of the social will extend. Shame produces a queer agency that is exposed and vulnerable, but at the same time Sedgwick proposes to take shame as a basis for an alternative experience of desire, body and community.

Although Sedgwick’s focus on shame seems to oppose the mainstream gay and lesbian politics of pride, Heather Love claims that the opposition is not as radical as it seems:

While Sedgwick contrasts queer politics with blandly affirmative gay politics, her own discussion of the term *queer* rests on an “affirmative reclamation” that is itself brazenly performative. Such a move is deeply indebted to traditional gay and lesbian politics, which also seeks to manage shame, to transform it into a usable resource. (Love 2001, 106)

Love is an important critical voice. Love argues that Sedgwick does not treat shame seriously enough and only aims at overcoming it. I agree that shame for Sedgwick is not an absolute negation, but I do not think that Sedgwick aims at overcoming shame by transforming it, rather on the contrary, shame should be constantly present as a transformative potential but also a reminder of the past.

Sedgwick began writing about AIDS in the 1990s and continued until her death in 2009. Over the years, her interest in the AIDS related issues did not change. As Barber and Clark observe: “For Sedgwick, “queer” is this forceful representation, and its potency and revelations prove inextricable from both the phenomenology of the emergence of AIDS and from temporal disorientation in which queer lives immemorially” (Barber and Clark 2002, 5). The question of death is closely related to “queer”. Here death as a trope reverses traditional temporality. Death is semantically and ontologically productive and transformative.

The tropes related to “queer” are “shame”, “AIDS”, “death”, and “stigma”. All of them are by nature negative terms, but paradoxically, and most of Sedgwick’s work is based on paradoxes, these tropes can be affirmative. This negative affirmation is Sedgwick’s political project. This project aims at challenging the paradigm of the closet, which Western culture is based on. This is not a utopian project, as Sedgwick does not offer any positive alternative to “shame”, “AIDS”, or “death”. In her work “queer” cannot serve as an alternative to these negative concepts, for “queer” is not meant to be a sign of a bright and happy future.

I suggest that Sedgwick repeatedly uses tropes of negativity neither to expose “queer” as an internally impossible concept, nor to build some kind of dead-end political project. Rather she dramatizes these tropes, makes them performative in such a way that they deconstruct the negativity itself. To Sedgwick, negativity is not a Hegelian dialectical project. Instead, it is a deessentializing move to break with a dualistic way of thinking. Through this specifically understood negativity Sedgwick attempts to open up other possibilities of thinking, conceptualizing but also experiencing the body and desire. Her work is definitely not a song of praise to negativity. Instead, by dramatizing and eroticizing the semantic associations of negativity, Sedgwick makes a Derridian move of dismissal of originality. She defetishizes negativity. “Queer” as based on this deconstructed negativity is free from limiting semiotic rules. As a consequence, negation then becomes a mode of transformation, an alternative temporality and a different form of identity.

Sedgwick performs a deconstruction on negativity. She does this in the spirit of de Man, offering us an allegory of epistemology. In her work “queer” is an extraverted signifier, acting toward the audience, giving the possibility for establishing a connection with different meanings and for different relations. In this way this signifier is intensified. Negativity, which is the primary meaning of “queer”, seems to perform against itself, producing a positive effect. The link between the meaning and the performance of “queer” is aberrant. In fact, the reference of the signifier “queer” can be described as a perversion. This perversion occurs not only on the level of the meaning of “queer” but on the level of the sign and its relation to syntax and

linguistic structure.

A useful critique of queer negative politics is offered by Sara Ahmed. She writes:

I admire Eve Sedgwick's (2003) refusal of the discourse of queer pride. She suggests instead that shame is the primary queer affect because it embraces the "not"; it embraces its own negation from the sphere of ordinary culture. But I am not sure how it is possible to embrace the negative without turning it into a positive. (Ahmed 2006, 175)

This is an important point to make in order not to fall into an idealized over-theoretical dimension. Ahmed is worried about the political dimension of the concept "queer" and about its openness for non-white and non-middle class people. However, I think that Sedgwick avoids this problem by accompanying her paranoid reading (negative moment), with a reparative reading. Contrary to Ahmed's claim, Sedgwick does not call us to embrace our rejection, and contrary to e.g. Lee Edelman (2004), who sets negativity as an ultimate aim of queer politics (discussed in chapter 6), Sedgwick proposes to rework rejection, shame and trauma and to make them liveable. Sedgwick claims that to create a liveable life there are other methods than just submitting to the discourse of the normal. Sedgwick uses "queer" in a radically anti-formalist way, therefore there is not a single way to summarize her work. It is instead an open-ended critical project that starts with paranoid criticism and moves into reparative criticism.

This is well described by Freeman:

...that because we can't know in advance, but only retrospectively if even then, what is queer and what is not, we gather and combine eclectically, dragging a bunch of cultural debris around us and stacking it in idiosyncratic piles "*not necessarily like any preexisting whole,*" though composed of what preexists. (Freeman 2010, xiii).

5.7 Queer Politics

Just as there is no one meaning of "queer" in Sedgwick's work, so too with "politics". These two concepts are, nevertheless, bound together in some intimate ways. For Sedgwick, "queer" cannot remain a purely theoretical term applicable merely to literary analysis or culture studies. For her, using "queer" is a form of intellectual activism that aims at challenging presumptions and schematic binaries, particularly in relation to sexuality but not merely there. According to Sedgwick, "queer" cannot be attached to just one set of political connotations; rather it needs to be open in order to address different kinds of exclusions. As Freeman writes: "Eve Sedgwick's suggests that queer politics must refuse to abject even the most stigmatized child-figure from formulation of adult political subjectivity" (Freeman 2010, 82). "Queer" can be used to theorize a child's subjectivity and a child's sexuality, but more importantly it can be used to politicize these problems. "Queer" can be attached to different figures or social phenomena in order to trouble or to twist them. Moreover, for Sedgwick "queer" is not about theoretical troubling but

about political challenge. I suggest that she means by this a radical conceptual politics that undermines traditional narrations and offers often uncanny responses and alternatives. In “Thinking through Queer Theory” (first presented as a lecture in 2000) Sedgwick criticizes contemporary mainstream gay and lesbian movements for forgetting and diminishing the problem of AIDS. According to her, in the context of AIDS, “queer” remains a precious analytical and political tool to approach the disease:

It seems to me that the failure to remain engaged with AIDS issues is closely tied to the repudiation of queer thought by the conservative gay/lesbian movement in America. After all, it is only a queer analysis, not a strictly gay one, that can give us any help with this disease that respects no simple boundaries of identity. (Sedgwick 2011, 202)

Here Sedgwick is explicitly political. To her, “queer” is a political site of identification that is distinctly in opposition to identity terms such as “gay” or “lesbian”. She claims that after more than two decades of AIDS activism, the mainstream gay and lesbian movement and the public at large in the U.S. is in denial over AIDS. Sedgwick postulates continuing AIDS activism, but, according to her, it is not possible to think about AIDS in terms of the politics of assimilation. The movement and activism built around the concept of “queer” seems to promise that political sensitivity can tackle the variety of issues that are absent or intentionally silenced in mainstream gay and lesbian activism. She continues:

At this point in the American epidemic, the crucial issues go far beyond homophobia; they require an understanding of how homophobia and gay identities intersect historically with issues of race and poverty, with complex and phobic ideologies concerning drugs, with epidemiological models, with profound cultural meanings associated with sexuality, risk, and death, with the burgeoning prison system, with the global economies of medical development and marketing, and with the rapidly changing force fields of America’s profit-driven medical delivery system. (Sedgwick 2011, 202)

“Queer” is the concept that might be applied to the forms of writing that engage with these issues and to the forms of writing that are on the edge of academia and activism. This type of writing is characteristic for Sedgwick. Therefore the meaning of “politics” would be related to a critical engagement with the cultural and social reality, the production of meaning in this realm and its transformation. The transformation of this meaning is Sedgwick’s crucial concern.

In the same essay Sedgwick mentions that in her intellectual formation the second wave of feminism was important with its radical critique of neutrality in science, arts and politics. This and her distance to dualisms and separatism are the basis of her queer politics. She also adds “methodological tools of deconstruction have always been congenial to me” (Sedgwick 2011, 190). Deconstruction for Sedgwick is a way of reading texts and, in general, the

American culture. But I suggest that deconstruction is not a system of knowledge or a coherent methodology in her work, for Sedgwick it is more a form of academic activism. In this context “queer” stands for a perfect example of this activism. In Sedgwick’s texts “queer” functions in a terrain where binary constructions are questioned. Sedgwick relates “queer” to sexuality, which is seen and experienced as a contingent experience organized around various and often crossing definitional lines.

According to Sedgwick the mainstream of American gay and lesbian politics is built around separatist and assimilationist strategies. Big LGBT organizations aim at building a strong identity that differs culturally and politically from the heterosexual majority, and therefore can have cultural and political representation. At the same time, these organizations talk about equality and the assimilation of gay and lesbian people into society at large. The language of assimilation is used in many political claims. One good example is the call for the right to marry. Sedgwick finds “queer” a concept that can offer an alternative political language. She writes:

It seems true to say that queer politics are both antiseperatist and anti-assimilationist: antiseperatist in the sense that we don’t take it for granted that the world is neatly and naturally divided between homosexuals and heterosexuals, and anti-assimilationist in the sense that we are not eager to share in the privileges and presumptions of normality. (Sedgwick 2011, 201).

Sedgwick does not claim that there is one form of queer politics; she even uses the plural form “are” when discussing queer politics . “Queer politics” are forms of writing and acting that oppose the regimes of normal. “Queer politics” are intended to influence and even more deconstruct cultural and political institutions that assume one view of agency. For Sedgwick “queer politics” is about displacing the meaning of sexuality and desire. “Queer” as a term is a good example how meaning production can be turned around and differently distributed.

In 2007 article “Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes”, Sedgwick rejects psychoanalysis as a simplistic perspective with its: “defining centrality of dualistic gender difference; the primacy of genital morphology and desire; the determinative nature of childhood experience and the linear teleology toward a sharply distinct state of maturity; and especially the logic of zero-sum games and the excluded middle term, where passive is the opposite of active and desire is the opposite of identification, and where one person’s getting more love means a priori that another is getting less” (Sedgwick 2007, 631). Sedgwick proposes a queer perspective as an alternative to these binarisms. In this and many other of her essays she proposes uncanny crossroads of identity, desire, sex, gender, class and adds the dimension of illness namely AIDS, and her own fight with cancer. Sedgwick very strongly

advocates AIDS activism. It is one of the sources of the concept of “queer” and its political potency. In the same essay she claims that the term “queer” came out of a certain feeling of paranoia, dread and the need for resistance that grew during the end of 1980s. “Queer” became a paranoid position that humiliation turned into a powerful resource of thought and action.

In her 2000 essay “Thinking through Queer Theory” Sedgwick is glad that “queer” has been recently used to discuss problems in addition to just gender and sexuality, e.g. ethnicity, race, post-colonial nationality and other discourses on identity, state and culture. She also adds: ““Queer,” to me, refers to a politics that values the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other, crossing all kinds of boundaries rather than reinforcing them” (Sedgwick 2011, 200). For Sedgwick, “queer” is, on the one hand, a sign of resistance to the social and cultural institutions that describe and limit sexuality, and on the other hand it is a call to reimagine these institutions and their functions, to discover new ways of intersecting institutions such as the family, nation, private, public, political, class, etc. “Queer” in Sedgwick’s work does not provide any new meaning of sexuality that would be free from oppression, but it is instead a proposal to recycle the meaning present in different institutions, to experiment with this meaning, and to disengage and disarticulate meaning from its common affiliation. One of the examples that Sedgwick provides is “the family”. She is critical of conventional LGBT politics and their use of the concept “gay families”, which is focused on legal protection and legal rights. Instead, Sedgwick sees the task of “queer analysis” to focus on the instability of the very structure of the family as an institution. “Queer” is used to undermine the stability of the meaning of “family” and to allow a redescription of this concept.

As I understand my own political history, it has often happened that the propulsive energy of activist justification, of being or feeling joined with others in an urgent cause, tends to be structured very much in a paranoid/schizoid fashion: driven by attributed motives, fearful contempt of opponents, collective fantasies of powerlessness and/or omnipotence, scapegoating, purism, and schism. (Sedgwick 2007, 638)

Here Sedgwick directly speaks about her political engagement and on the same page she connects it to queer theory and activism. This is not politics as we usually understand it. It is rather a passionate and intimate attachment to the social reality in which Sedgwick lived combined with hope and belief in transformation.

5.8 Queer intimate deconstruction

Sedgwick’s proposal to think about sexuality as a signifier helps not only to situate sexuality in relation to power, to see its deployment and limitations, it also allows one to maintain a distance from the rhetoric of rights and emancipation, but most importantly it invites us to search for other semantic configurations for sexuality. “Queer” is the concept that due to its

semantic instability, might be transformative for the very processes of the signification of sexuality.

Sedgwick's project regarding the expansion of the limits of thinking about bodies and desires is more significantly about expanding the limits of experiencing of bodies and desires. This is not a project that can be considered theoretical. Sedgwick discusses her own experiences and experiences of people whom she knows. These discussions are about bodies, the connections between them and their possibilities. This is an open-ended project that is destined to create spaces for marginalized people, and it has the potential to challenge the cultural forms and institutions that are based on binary oppositions and exclusions.

For Sedgwick, "queer" does not politically have one fixed meaning but it becomes a tool of criticism when applied to various issues, particularly other concepts that describe sexuality, agency and identity. Sedgwick acknowledges that she took the term from activism, therefore at its root "queer" is political. In her work Sedgwick carefully uses "queer" as if she never really possessed the term but only temporarily borrowed it. For her "queer" is a term that among other things signifies transition but at the same time the very term is in transition, always in motion.

It is important to add that this way of theorizing "queer" might be problematic for political theorists or sociologists because of the lack of interest in the practice of politics, law and public institutions. For Seidman, Sedgwick's focus on cultural analyses is insufficient in tackling problems of repression of sexual minorities but it is also insufficient in creating a language for the individual and collective expression of sexual minorities (Seidman 1997, 146-161). I think that Seidman's claim that Sedgwick approaches homosexuality merely as a discursive and textual phenomenon is based on a very selective reading of her texts. Perhaps based only on *Epistemology of the Closet* one could have the impression that Sedgwick's work is about discursive analyses of cultural figures, but her later essays that focus on affects, prove that for Sedgwick deconstruction is a starting point for a more comprehensive project. Sedgwick uses "queer" to replace the language of equality with a new political approach that would allow more space for rethinking diversity. I suggest that in Sedgwick's work "queer" functions politically as a sign of protest against the reductionist approach of lesbian and gay studies towards sexual identity. The term "queer" operates within a conceptual framework that questions the very concept of "sexual identity" and offers an approach that concentrates on the multiplicity of sexual practices and the forms of experiencing body and sexuality. For Sedgwick, the language that focuses on negative aspects of sexuality such as oppression is insufficient, and hence she complements it with the theorization of affect.

I would describe Sedgwick's work as an intimate deconstruction. She always offers fragments that are in themselves part of "queer performativity". She also refers to individual experiences that cannot be generalized. Sedgwick does not offer a queer theory or queer methodology. Indeed, "queer" seems instead to represent resistance to theory. It is a movement, a particular temporality of *working through*. "Queer" can be used in order to make a literature out of our personal, often painful past but the next move is to make it political for the present. I see similarities between Derrida's *Politics of Friendship* (1997 [1994]) and Sedgwick's queer politics, especially when it comes to the aim to open up love, love being understood as a discourse but also as practices. For Sedgwick, "queer" functions politically as a term that questions the stability of other concepts related to sexuality. Another political dimension of "queer" is that it opens up new dimensions of rethinking sexuality in relation to age, violence, illness and others. Sedgwick does not theorize directly political issues, rather she proposes that they can be opened up to new problems and be theorized differently.

Chapter 6: Queer and negativity

In its political use “queer” has never been a purely affirmative concept. “Queer” has a strong connection to negativity through its own semantic history, as it was a humiliating and degrading term for people belonging to sexual minorities. Certain ideas of negativity became crucial for some academics who use “queer” in their work. In this chapter I examine the political implications of uses of “queer” in relation to negativity. I focus on the authors that were most highly debated within recent decade. They theorize “queer” as a negative concept or an empty signifier and based on this they develop a particular political stance. “Queer” as a political concept has commonly been linked to negativity. As discussed in the previous chapters, this concept has a variety of connotations but many of them might be described as negative because they do not evoke any positive ideas. It was a political move to embrace the term of debasement, to identify with it and to create a community around it. Moreover, from the beginning of its political use, “queer” has often been used as a mode of critique towards the internal issues and politics of the LGBT movement and communities. However, during the 1990s the negative aspect of the concept, despite its importance, was not highlighted, and obviously “queer” functioned in order to affirm many political ideas. For more than a decade now, the negative aspect of “queer” started to be considered as radical and this aspect started to gain relevance in many publications.

The books that marked a turn in queer politics into negativity are *No Future* (2004) by Lee Edelman, *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005) by Judith Halberstam, *Freud's Drive* (2008) by Teresa de Lauretis, together with several anthologies, among which the most noteworthy were *After Sex?* (2007) edited by Janet Halley and Andrew Parker and *Gay Shame* (2009) edited by David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub. The connection between “queer” and negativity led to many discussions on LGBT politics and influenced more authors to relate to this topic, but importantly it reflected a wider conceptual politics in the U.S. academia that turned to theorizing sexual minorities through language that can be described as separatist, especially in relation to the previous more assimilationist language of the major lesbian and gay organizations. This conceptual politics starts by developing the language that is in radical opposition to the mainstream lesbian and gay politics of the time. In this chapter I explore the main texts of this new turn and analyse their implications for understanding “queer” as a political concept. I focus in detail on *No Future* by Edelman because this book introduces the most provocative and radical conceptualization of “queer”. My key question is how does queer function politically in the context of negative references? Two other issues that I study are:

what are the political consequences of a theoretical attachment of “queer” to the thematic of negativity and what kind of politics might “queer” perform when attached to negativity?

In addition to the above, I discuss Teresa de Lauretis’ conceptualization of the death drive (de Lauretis 2008) and its ethical and political aspects. As discussed in chapter 3, in the beginning of the 1990s, De Lauretis was one of the key persons who began to use the concept of “queer” in academic discourses. Later she abandoned this concept and turned back to the more specific concept of “lesbian”, but in recent years she has come to apply “queer” to Freudian-inspired cultural analysis of literature and cinema. De Lauretis attaches “queer” to the Freudian (not Lacanian as is the case with Edelman) notion of the death drive in order to develop a concept that stands for transition.

Judith Halberstam (2005) applies “queer” to cultural analysis of the margins of sexual minority groups. Importantly, “queer” in her work usually functions as a tool for a critique from within LGBT communities. “Queer” is a particular form of political engagement that disturbs dominant LGBT identity formation processes.

The concept of negativity is only sporadically mentioned explicitly in the texts that I analyse. By “negativity” I understand a set of thematics, motives, figures and specific rhetorics that became popular within LGBT groups mainly in the U.S. from the beginning of the millennium. From the early days of its political use at the end of the 1980s, “queer” was a powerful critical concept and it was often used as a form of contestation of public policies but also of mainstream LGBT politics. Nevertheless, it seems that during the 1980s and the 1990s, “queer” also had positive connections. It was partly an affirmative term that was used to gain recognition for people with HIV or AIDS and for many others (Gould 2009). It was also used to claim rights to fair medical treatment and to law protection against physical and verbal homophobic violence. For some lesbians and gays of the time “queer” was a new identity concept that replaced previous ones, for others it was the mark of a political standpoint, often oppositional politics targeting the assimilationist ideas of major lesbian and gay organizations of the time and the neo-liberal politics of the U.S. government. These are just a few examples of the political uses that “queer” acquired in the beginning of the 1990s. They were discussed in detail in chapter 2. These uses were rooted in the degrading history of “queer” and this term stood against the positive politics of recognition that were pursued by major lesbian and gay organizations. Nevertheless, politically the concept of “queer” for many activists also had associations with e.g. inclusion, hope and change. Furthermore, following ideas developed in the previous chapters, the early uses of “queer” in academia did not carry specifically positive values. Instead, “queer” functions as a mobile and temporal concept that can acquire different

connotations in relation to different issues related to sexual minorities (Butler 1993, Sedgwick 1993, Halperin 1995). I believe that the approach to “queer” presented by Edelman (2004), Halberstam (2005) and de Lauretis (2008) differ from earlier ones as they radicalize the use of this term by almost exclusively attaching it to “negativity” as it is variously understood. Since it has been adopted as a political concept, “queer” has most frequently functioned in opposition to “normal”, but within at least the last decade this very opposition became for some scholars the defining aspect of “queer” and its political use.

6.1. Edelman’s negative politics of queer

Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2004) attracted a great deal of attention and received many critical responses. Edelman’s discussion of “queer” in relation to politics, his account of “queer” and of “politics”, is indeed very original. In relation to “queer”, though, he does not recall the recent history of the concept; he does not, for example, mention AIDS activists at all. His main references are to the work of literary theorists, such as Paul de Man, Barbara Johnson and D.A. Miller, and to psychoanalytical analysis by Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek. In *No Future* there are some references to established authors that use the concept “queer”, such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. But Edelman does not attempt to build up his use of the concept around these works; instead, he aims to create his own version of the concept of “queer” that would serve his political vision. The scope of analysis where Edelman uses “queer” is broad, from current issues in U.S. politics to movies and classical English language novels. The language of the book is not typical academic discourse, rather it is a provocative cultural analysis that at points resembles a manifesto. Edelman’s analyses are largely based on semantic ground. He focuses on language, figures, and narratives describing non-normative sexualities, but he also discusses in general the construction of social agency. These analyses are not part of political theories but they do carry an important political message at the core of which is the concept of “queer”.

6.1.1 Queer and Death

“In a political field whose limit and horizon is reproductive futurism, queerness embodies this death drive, this intransigent jouissance, by figuring sexuality’s implication in the senseless pulsion of that drive” (Edelman 2004, 27). The full title of Edelman’s is *No Future – Queer Theory and the Death Drive* and the thematic of the death drive and death is one of the crucial connotations of “queer”. It might, however, be somewhat puzzling at first that this connotation is not linked to the AIDS crisis. In fact, in the entire book AIDS is mentioned only twice and is never really analysed. In his first book *Homographesis* (1994), Edelman presented a very interesting analysis of “AIDS” as a category that produces a surplus of meaning and he also

refers there to the emergence of “queer” as a political concept although he did not develop this idea any further. Only a decade later in *No Future* Edelman formulated the concept of “queer” as a comprehensive term rooted in psychoanalytical jargon.

Edelman’s conceptualization of “queer” and of “politics” carries traces of his earlier work where he uses literary theory in order to analyse “politics”, “AIDS” and “race” among other issues, as tropes that are part of their own specific field of reference, discourse and fantasy. However, what is striking in *No Future* is the lack of almost any reference to activism and the practice of politics. Instead, Edelman constructs “queer” as a negative trope that is situated in opposition to “politics”.

In *Homographesis* Edelman explores the construction of the discourse that grew around AIDS. He discusses the narratives and symbolic forms of this discourse and its politics but when it comes to the term “queer”, Edelman merely acknowledges this term as an interesting concept. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning what Edelman wrote in 1994 about “queer” as it carries a political message. It is a concept that he sees as part of a movement that aims at reinventing politics and agency by attention to the fluidity and shiftiness of sexuality. Edelman notices a potential in the concept of “queer” but also a risk. He writes:

Though “queer” as the endlessly mutating token of non-assimilation (and hence as the utopian badge of a would-be “authentic” position of resistance) may reflect a certain bourgeois aspiration to be always *au courant*, its vigorous and unmethodical dislocation of “identity” create, at the risk, to be sure, of producing a version of identity politics as postmodern commodity fetishism, a zone of possibilities in which the embodiment of the subject might be experienced otherwise. (Edelman 1994, 114)

Whenever “queer” appeared in Edelman’s first book it was always in the context of AIDS and activism. Clearly in that book Edelman is searching for other ways of thinking about politics but also for other forms of politics. He aims to tackle “the instability of the ground on which it (politics) rests” (Edelman 1994, 112). Interestingly, all this is done in the name of the “efficacy of intervention” (Edelman 1994,112) of politics.

The quote from *No Future* that opens this section has no intention of making a political intervention. In 2004 “queer” in Edelman’s work has no connection to activism and “politics” seems to be a much more abstract term. Edelman does not mention anywhere the political intervention that his project should be able to make. It seems that in 2004 he found this alternative politics or an alternative to politics that he was searching for in *Homographesis*. This alternative is radical negativity and its main figure is “death”. There is no attempt to offer any social transformation.

What is interesting in Edelman's thinking is the criticism towards the very basic notion of "politics". In the quote that opens this subchapter, "queer" functions in opposition to "politics" and the figure that represents "politics" is the future. Consequently, the figure that stands for "queer" is the negation of the future – death. Edelman approaches "politics" as a limited field of tropes with references set in advance. Following this, the construction of "queer" is based on being in radical opposition to politics and this negation of the political is the first reference to "queer".

"Death", in this context, does not mean biological death, for instance there is no connection to people dying of AIDS in the 1980s and afterwards. Death is a figure of structural negation that resists any positive connotation and can only be seen in relation to politics as its opposition. Therefore all the main terms that Edelman uses such as "queer", "politics", "death" or "child" should be seen in their figurality as tropes that among themselves create a specific field of reference.

The identification "queer" – "death", on one level, is anti-utopian. There is no "zone of possibilities" that was mentioned in the passage from 1994. As far as every possibility can only arrive within the existing field of politics and therefore it is a part of reproductive futurism, "queer" does not represent any possibility or promise. Together with the utopian dimension, the risk that Edelman saw in the concept of "queer" in 1994 also disappeared. *No Future* is a confident statement of queer negativity. Edelman resigns here from any ambiguity and constructs a very one-dimensional concept of "queer". It looks radical and flashy. "Queer" is identified with "death" as a final limit of reference, as an end of meaning, the end of the fields of politics and semantics, but perhaps precisely here "queer" reflects this "bourgeois aspiration to be always *au courant*".

De Lauretis writes about the death drive in a similar manner. She writes that it "conveys the sense of and the force of something in human reality that resists discursive articulation as well as political diplomacy, an otherness that haunts the dream of a common world" (de Lauretis 2008, 9). Both these authors, but in particular Edelman, relate the death drive to the concept of "queer". Therefore "queer" does not function politically as a sign of a new community or a new name for old sexual minority communities. It is rather anti-communitarian. Politically, it works as a critique of communities as collective formations that are based on positive principles of identity formation.

The literary figures through which Edelman illustrates his connection between "queer" and "death" come from film and literature, such as Hannibal Lecter from *The Silence of Lambs*, Leonard from *North by Northwest* or Scrooge from *A Christmas Carol*. There is only one

movie analysed in *No Future* that relates to the AIDS crisis in the US, namely *Philadelphia* directed by Jonathan Demme. Most of the materials analysed by Edelman are not explicitly political and Edelman's interpretation does not aim at revealing some hidden political potential in them. Nevertheless, in *No Future* Edelman is very interested in politics, therefore, the issue arises: what does he mean by politics and what is the relationship between "queer" and "politics"?

6.1.2 Negativity and Politics

For Edelman in *No Future* "queer" is neither a name for a movement of sexual minorities nor for a definite identity; he writes: "queerness can never define an identity; it can only disturb one" (Edelman 2004, 17). His construction of "queer" is based on a purely oppositional function towards society, mainstream politics and dominant values. "Queer" does not refer to any concrete social or historical phenomena. It is a kind of negative signifier – a sign that is only an article of negation or what is excluded from the signifier.³⁸ Therefore it is difficult to say whether "queer" in *No Future* is a political concept, at least it is not a political concept in the traditional sense. It is noteworthy that the language of semiotics and psychoanalysis that Edelman uses is not usually used to discuss political issues.

The word "politics" appears quite often in *No Future*, particularly in the first chapter. Political is understood in a peculiarly Lacanian manner, as something similar to the symbolic. At the beginning of his book, Edelman comments on pro-family rhetoric, and then gives the reader a hint how he understands "politics": "the fantasy of subtending the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought" (Edelman 2004, 2). Later, Edelman develops this idea, stating that politics is a structure with its own language and logic that is governed by the figure of the Child.

Politics in *No Future* is a field of signs, tropes and fantasies. They are static and there is no possibility of opposing them from within, and hence Edelman proposes the concept of "queer" as a structural negation of the Child. His project is about creating "the very space that "politics" makes unthinkable: the space outside the framework within which politics as we know it appears and so outside the conflict of visions that share as their presupposition that the body of politics must survive" (Edelman 2004, 3). Therefore politics in *No Future* is a normative system that allows specific thoughts to be expressed and excludes others. It is similar to the concept of language, particularly that inspired by psychoanalysis and, indeed, Edelman

³⁸ "Negative signifier" understood as what is excluded from the signifier is a Lacanian concept. It appears explicitly in his 1960-1961 seminars. This text was never translated into English but the Lacanian "concept of negative" is analysed by David Pavón Cuéllar in *From the Conscious Interior to an Exterior Unconscious* (2010).

often recalls Lacan. One can therefore ask how is it possible that Edelman can create a whole theory about “queer” if it is unthinkable and beyond language and politics? A possible answer could be that it is not an absolute negativity that Edelman inscribes to “queer” but an imagined position that allows him to criticize politics from this imagined outside. To me this answer, nevertheless, does not seem to be fully satisfying. This structure of politics and its outside are purely abstract terms that have very little to do with practical politics. The binary scheme that Edelman develops is an idealization of exclusion and in general of the political field. The basic structuralist scheme of the inside/out does not allow us to understand the complexity of social dynamics, it does not, for example, allow us to understand the various degrees of social marginalization or the various forms this marginalization can take. Moreover, even as a hypothetical construct it resembles more closely metaphysical ideas than poststructural strategies.

In *No Future* politics is not a field of contest between different opinions; it is more an attempt to organize chaotic reality by imposing on it a specific fantasy, and “queer” is an element that reminds one of this primal chaos. It is the element that opposes organizing fantasy and, therefore, it is at the other extreme to politics. Edelman writes:

Politics names the social enactment of the subject’s attempt to establish the conditions for this impossible consolidation by identifying with something outside itself in order to enter the presence, deferred perpetually, of itself. Politics, that is, names the struggle to effect a fantasmatic order of reality in which the subject’s alienation would vanish into seamlessness of identity at the endpoint of the endless chain of signifiers lived as history. (Edelman 2004, 8)

Therefore if “politics” for Edelman is a word for the process of structuring reality and the subject, it has very little to do with the practical struggles of oppressed minorities and their claims for recognition. Furthermore, “queer” as the negation of politics and its structural opposition that aims to undo the subject and forecloses the fantasy of order, becomes a very abstract term that has little connection to the lives and experiences of sexual minorities. I suggest that Edelman’s account of politics ignores the development of sexual minority politics from the beginning of the queer movement at the end of the 1980s. The queer movement started a broad critique of the lesbian and gay community by paying attention to internal differences and importantly to internal exclusions that are based on class and race. The theoretical scheme that Edelman uses does not allow for analysis of internal exclusions within sexual minority communities. It assumes the dominant and the excluded therefore it leaves differences untouched.

Politics in this context becomes a semantic system, and “queer” is a sign that does not fit this system. Politics govern the field of references to its own semiotic system and “queer” as an excluded element has no reference. It is difficult to relate to this way of thinking about any practical problems of sexual minorities but it is a very intriguing proposition to rethink the very terms under which politics operate. Edelman encourages us to be critical towards the very language that we use to claim rights, recognition or even to describe our own identity. *No Future* is a manifesto which emphasizes that we need to reflect on the basic terms that appear in almost every claim to rights or recognition. Terms such as “future”, “child”, “hope”, “compassion”, “community” are not innocent as they come with a particular, exclusive axiology. According to Edelman, politics provide intelligibility and identity but there is a price to pay – coherence can be achieved by exclusion of heterogenic elements, and the excluded is described by Edelman as “queer”. I do not think that in this understanding of “queer” there has to be a necessary connection to sexuality, but Edelman does not want to leave the concept of “queer” completely open so he makes this connection between marginal sexualities and “queer”. Nevertheless, I do not think he is able to show the necessity of this connection (Edelman 2004, especially chapter 2). I argue that “queer” as an identity term or “queer” as a purely negative concept are not the only available options of politicizing the term. These are two radically opposing uses but there are other more nuanced possible uses of “queer” such as those proposed by Sedgwick (1993, 2004) or Butler (1993).

In *An Archive of Feelings* (2003) Ann Cvetkovich also uses “queer” in a political manner and often in relation to negativity, but she offers a very different understanding of politics. According to her, negativity is at the core of “queer” because of all the experiences of shame that sexual minorities have to live through. However, this negativity is just a starting point for action that should be transformative. As a response to Lee Edelman’s essay “Ever After” in *After Sex?* (2007), she writes: “The goal is to depathologize negative affects so that they can be seen as a possible resource for political action rather than as its antithesis” (Cvetkovich 2007, 460). For Cvetkovich, when using “queer” we cannot forget about activism, most importantly AIDS activism.

The “queer” politics of *No Future* drastically differs from Judith Butler’s account of politics. Although, as discussed in chapter 4, Butler uses “queer” in the context of the resignification, interruption and transformation of norms, “queer” politics primarily grew from the devastating experience of AIDS. In both Butler’s and Edelman’s work tropes of death are very significant, but while for Butler this trope is a starting point for her politics of precarity, for Edelman it is a motive for rejecting politics. An interesting point of comparison between

these two different visions of queer politics is offered by the figure of Antigone. Both Edelman and Butler describe Antigone as a queer figure. While for Butler (2000) Antigone offers an alternative to traditional kinship and a possibility of reiteration of symbolic law, the same figure for Edelman stands for the ultimate refusal of any transformation and future. To him, this figure just stands for death. I must acknowledge here that Edelman's reading of Antigone is more compelling to me as I find it more coherent, but I must also admit that it is based on a structuralist binary division between inside and outside. Butler's queer politics is a much more contingent construct. An interesting analysis of Antigone's figure in the work of Judith Butler and Lee Edelman is offered by Bonnie Honig in *Antigone Interrupted* (2013, 45-54). Honig writes:

Edelman's critique of Butler epitomizes a central debate within queer theory about the (im)possibility of remaking or rejecting the terms of intelligibility. Where Butler hopes for future kinship forms that repeat the law of kinship with a difference, Edelman calls for the renunciation of futurism, the embrace of the death drive with which he says gay people are in any case insistently identified, and the dethronement of the Child as the *arche* figure of hopeful politics. (Honig 2013, 53)

Following Honig, I suggest that Edelman represents a radically antiassimilationist vision of queer politics that is based on a simplistic binary division between the inside and outside of politics. To me, Butler offers a more comprehensive idea of politics that is not based on binary divisions but on constant struggles for transforming politics, law and norms in order to make life more liveable. I would even suggest that there is something very optimistic in Edelman's idea that we can reject future and politics. It sounds compelling and radical, but I do not believe it is possible. There is no way to escape the norms among which we live, but through various social, cultural and directly political actions we can at least negotiate the terms of our coexistence with our local communities and our society.

6.1.3 Queer as a term in literary criticism

In his conceptualization of "queer" Edelman uses the terms and methods of literary criticism. First of all, "queer" is applied to the analysis of works of literature and movies. In *No Future* current political issues are rarely mentioned. I find interesting the language that Edelman uses to describe "queer". At points it seems that Edelman makes an intervention into semiotics rather than into sexuality studies or politics. For instance, the terms that are frequently used ("signifier", "meaning", "sign", "figure", "trope" etc.) are from the field of semiotics or literary criticism. In *No Future* Edelman does not offer a classical reading of art with the concept "queer", instead he offers a type of structural analysis that aims not at revealing the meaning of

works of art but at building two opposing interpretative fields. Edelman's reading of literature is merely a way to illustrate his vision of "queer".

Barbara Johnson's work is one of the important influences on Edelman's analysis. Johnson is a feminist scholar who offers an interesting mode of critical reading of literature. Her analyses of narration in literature, which focus on elements that are disruptive for the narration, influenced Edelman's conceptualization of "queer". In this connection, Edelman relates "queer" to the concept of "irony" that he takes from the work of Paul de Man. Edelman quotes a description of the theory of irony from de Man: "Any theory of irony is the undoing, the necessary undoing, of any theory of narrative" (de Man 1996, 179). For de Man, irony is always disruptive and it overcomes any positive definitions. It reveals the rhetoric of authenticity as always secondary and inauthentic. Edelman calls irony the "queerest of rhetorical devices" (Edelman 2004, 23) and he compares the disruptive work of irony to the way in which "queer" can function. To me, Edelman reads de Man selectively because de Man writes about irony as always related to a specific temporality that de-mystifies the past and strips authenticity from the future (de Man 1982, 222), while Edelman, through his concept of "queer", aims to totally reject the concept of future.

The concept of "irony" seems to be crucial for Edelman's conceptualization of "queer". Throughout the book, it appears many times and Edelman explicitly states: "irony always characterizes queer theory" (Edelman 2004, 28). It seems that the concept of irony, as described by de Man, offered Edelman an example of a negative, disruptive concept that he can relate to his analysis of "queer". "Irony" for Edelman has "explosive force" (Edelman 2004, 31 and 65), but Edelman may have forgotten that the force of "queer" arose from people using it and identifying with it. Edelman compels "queer" to function as a literary term, but few can identify with a term such as "irony". Consequently, "queer" loses its disruptive potential and becomes a purely abstract concept with few links to the lives or experiences of marginalized people.

6.1.4 Queer and psychoanalysis

For Edelman, sexuality is a way of undoing politics. It can never be fully controlled by politics, especially marginal sexualities that are on the edge or outside of politics. For this reason, according to Edelman, they carry a threat to politics. In this context Edelman uses the Lacanian term "jouissance". Access to reality is mediated by fantasies provided by politics, and according to Edelman "jouissance" is a form of unmediated reality. In French, "jouissance" means enjoyment, and in Lacanian theory this cannot be experienced directly and entirely, instead this can only be partly experienced in sex or in death. "However" according to Edelman

“queer, can afford an access to the *jouissance* that at once defines and negates us” (Edelman 2004, 5). This is an interesting point because it reveals that in *No Future* “queer” is an idealized concept that would refer to some privileged position or perhaps a position that allows access to a special point of view of reality or a privileged position of critique. Be this as it may, by defining “queer” as something that provides access to reality in an unmediated form, Edelman makes his theory either highly metaphysical or self-contradictory. “Jouissance” is a concept that signifies limit and the idea of something beyond limit is purely metaphysical. I claim that identifying “queer” with “jouissance” is theoretically and politically incorrect for the reason that marginalization or stigmatization does not work as an absolute negation and does not fully define an agent. It is always partial and interconnected with other social factors.

I would argue that there is a more important problem with defining “queer” as an access to *jouissance* than the issue whether “queer” becomes a metaphysical concept or not. This problem arises when we look at this definition from an ethical point of view. The concept of “queer” appeared in a political context at the time of the AIDS crisis and it was used by activists as a sign of protest. If one claims that “queer” opens up access to *jouissance* then one erases the history of a painful struggle of people with AIDS and other excluded people who wanted to address their situation using this term, and instead of this, one has a term that might serve self-indulgence. In Edelman’s call to embrace “queer” along with “jouissance” pleasure is involved. If a degrading term can be embraced and enjoyed it stops being degrading and violent towards an agent. The question here is: from which position is it possible to think that “queer” can offer a special position of critique, or from which position can this supposedly negative term be embraced and enjoyed? I think such a usage of “queer” is possible only when the term loses its real political potential for intervention and becomes a purely abstract construct. There are strategies of dealing with trauma and pain that are based on the acceptance of a traumatizing event but I think Edelman’s point is different. By embracing “queer” he argues for a kind of politics of contestation or withdrawal. Activists that fought under the banner of “queer” demanded, among other things, equal access to health care or a stop to homophobic violence. I would suggest that the position of withdrawal is often based on a privileged and secure status.

6.1.5 The ethics of queer

Edelman’s project in *No Future* has an important ethical aspect. “Queer” is not merely a psychoanalytical term, nor is it a term that is only useful in literary criticism. In *No Future* Edelman creates a particular manifesto that, like most manifestos, has a crucial ethical dimension. The ethical level of the book is very clear when we look at the language it contains.

The ethical aspect is very striking on the rhetorical level of the book. Edelman writes it in the name of “us”, especially in the first chapter of *No Future*. Here, in the narrative, there is frequent mention of an imagined community of readers – queers, who should follow the imperatives of the book, among which the most important one seems to be the call to embrace queer negativity (Edelman 2004, 6). To me, the negativity of “queer” is somewhat problematic. If one takes negativity seriously, how can one embrace it and how one can be called to embrace it? In negativity, there is nothing to be embraced. But it is, of course, too easy to dismiss Edelman’s “queer” in this way, and it is important to consider what exactly the point of the ethical dimension of “queer” is.

Edelman writes: “Queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place, accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure” (Edelman 2004, 3). In two other passages of the book, Edelman also mentions that embracing the queer position requires an impossible ethical act. It seems that Edelman constructs social and political reality as a system that always needs to be resisted and opposed. “Queer” is a sign of opposition towards politics, understood as the structures in which we live. Therefore, there is no possibility to change these structures or to open them up to new meanings. According to Edelman, politics is not something that can be simply adjusted. On the practical level, we might find the concept of “queer” proposed by Edelman non-political because, in the name of this concept, it is hard to imagine that any action or community can be built. If “queer” is a purely oppositional concept, then what can be the basis for any political engagement?

Sara Ahmed sees Edelman’s queer negativity as a figure that in fact encourages thinking differently about queer hope. “And yet Edelman is still affirming something in the act of refusing affirmation. I find rather something optimistic and hopeful about Edelman’s polemic, where hope rests on the possibility opened up by inhabiting the negative” (Ahmed 2010, 161). It is not dialectical play to say that to affirm a negative position requires something positive. Ahmed points out that this negation is relative but also that to refuse the typical rhetoric of future and progress might be productive. In her reading, Edelman’s “queer” becomes a specific utopian term for an alternative to hope and affirmation. Generally, Ahmed offers to some extent a sympathetic reading of *No Future* but, in her reading, I find important one question that she poses for Edelman’s queer negativity: are all forms of political hope, optimism or utopia necessarily part of the logic of futurism that, according to Edelman, governs politics? (Ahmed, 2010, 161).

A similar question is raised by José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*. Muñoz acknowledges the importance of Edelman's argument and its ethical value. He writes: "Edelman clearly announces his mode of argumentation as being in the realm of the ethical, and this introduction is an anticipation of a reanimated political critique and should be read as an idiosyncratic allegiance to the polemical force of his argument and nothing like an easy dismissal" (Muñoz 2009, 11). Muñoz finds *No Future* an important political critique but his *Cruising Utopia* proposes a diametrically different understanding of "queer", seeing the term always in relation to some collectivity. According to Muñoz, *No Future* does not allow one to think in detail about specific differences such as race, class and others. For Muñoz, such approaches, as proposed by Edelman, are "romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference" (Muñoz 2009, 11). His book is a good example of a radically different use of "queer". Muñoz applies it to analysis marginal groups, and their forms of knowledge production and community creation. These are all forms of political engagement, not in a narrow sense of politics, as something that instantly influences the legislation processes or voting results, but rather as something that is a form of intervention into the social. Muñoz states: "But as strongly as I reject reproductive futurity, I nonetheless refuse to give up on concepts such as politics, hope, and a future that is not kid stuff" (Muñoz 2009, 92).

Furthermore, for Muñoz, "queer" acquires its meaning in relation to particular cultural practices that are attempts to redefine the reality or norms or forms of belonging. For him, theories such as Edelman's that "fail to factor in the relational relevance of race or class merely reproduce a crypto-universal white gay subject that is weirdly atemporal" (Muñoz 2009, 94). In *Cruising Utopia* "queer" is understood as a horizon, it is about imagining alternative futures to the present, it is about creating utopias.

A similar point about the use of "queer" is presented by Freeman, who is sympathetic towards the thematic of negativity but nevertheless stresses that "queer" also needs to be related to utopia. She states that "queer is always ahead of actually existing social possibilities" (Freeman 2007, 498). For Freeman, "queer" is about engaging in political issues without answers set in advance or solutions. It is definitely not about rejecting politics.

Through the figure of "queer", Edelman questions the limits that are imposed on political thinking and political engagement, but if "queer" does not have any content, is any alternative political engagement possible?

6.2 A different death drive

Teresa de Lauretis is another prominent thinker who relates the concept of “queer” to the death drive. It is important here to juxtapose these two authors, who at first sight seem to offer similar approaches to “queer”. Since at least the 1980s, De Lauretis has been an influential feminist thinker who works within the field of cultural studies. She applies psychoanalysis and semiotics to analysis of lesbian experience and representation. De Lauretis’ most recent work: *Freud’s Drive: Psychoanalysis, Literature and Film* (2008) explores several films from the Freudian perspective. Like Edelman, de Lauretis also focuses on negativity as a ground for the analysis of non-normative sexualities.

Contrary to Edelman, de Lauretis does not explicitly theorize “queer”. The chapter “The Queer Space of the Drive: Rereading Freud with Laplanche” relates psychoanalysis in a more direct manner to the concept of “queer”, but the focus of the whole book is not on “queer” but rather on “negativity” and, therefore, at this point it might be fruitful to juxtapose *Freud’s Drive* with *No Future*.

“Queer” is approached by de Lauretis through the methods of psychoanalysis and poststructural literary criticism. De Lauretis takes her terms and a general analytical approach from these methodologies, but there are also strong psychoanalytical influences on the level of the content of book. De Lauretis does not directly discuss current politics or the politics of gay and lesbian communities. Instead, she writes about several works of fiction and she analyses them in relation to the death motif in Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. The concepts, such as trope, metaphor, signifier and figure, which she uses in *Freud’s Drive* are from literary criticism and this is similar to Edelman in *No Future*.

De Lauretis approaches negativity via figures of death. The Freudian death drive cannot be approached directly because it is purely negative, hence the author writes about it only via figures. Following Freud and Laplanche, de Lauretis claims that the death drive has a crucial connection to sexuality (de Lauretis 2008, 8). She analyses the death drive through works of fiction using psychoanalytic discourse. Works of fiction are seen through psychoanalytical lenses but psychoanalysis is also seen as a particular narration, a fiction. In a Lacanian manner, she treats texts as a psyche and psyche as a text.

De Lauretis does not aim at creating a strong theory. She says that a theory is also “a figure of the history of the present” (de Lauretis 2008, 2), it is a struggle to articulate the present. Such a theory is an engagement in reading and rewriting the present and to de Lauretis this means that her work can be considered “also political”. De Lauretis sees her work on negativity as political for the reason that it is a form of commitment to the present and, moreover, to theorize is always a political stance.

De Lauretis explains her interest in the death drive as follows: “If I return to Freud’s notion of an unconscious death drive, it is because it conveys the sense of and the force of something in human reality that resists discursive articulation as well as political diplomacy, an otherness that haunts the dream of a common world” (de Lauretis 2008, 9). This explanation also clearly sets out the field of her inquiry, namely its language, its possibilities and its limitations. It would seem that de Lauretis, like Edelman, situates herself as an anti-communitarian, but this I think would be a simplification. When she criticizes what she calls “the dream of a common world” she is against the discourse of individuality and, particularly in her passionate reading of Cronenberg movies, she highlights the fact that problems of identification always have to be seen in relation to race and class. Politically de Lauretis’ position can be considered as anti-communitarian but this does not characterise fully the way she uses “queer”, particularly that she does not offer a unitary version of “queer”; the term is rather used to signify an abstract, excluded position. Paradoxically, in comparison with de Lauretis, Edelman with his call to embrace queer negativity seems to affirm romantic individualism. Lauretis avoids this trap by analysing how the individual is formed by various narrations and, at the same time, she intentionally leaves the “queer” position undefined. “Queer” seems to be a position that can be inhabited by some form of agency, but it would be perhaps a destabilized or alternative form of agency. De Lauretis leaves this question open and, unlike Edelman, does not make an ethical call to embrace the queer position.

De Lauretis investigates heterogeneity, alterity and the possibility for its expressions (see especially her collection of essays *Figures of Resistance*, 2007). For de Lauretis the reinterpretation of fantasies that underlie the social realm is a political task. She believes that, following Paul de Man, by approaching fictions and theories on the figural level, language can be opened up from universalizing structures into “possibilities of referential aberrations” (the term comes from Paul de Man’s *Allegories of Reading*, 1979) (de Lauretis 2007, 255). These linguistic, referential aberrations might offer an interesting insight into marginalized and non-normative sexualities.

As mentioned earlier, De Lauretis connects the concept of “queer” with the Freudian concept of the death drive; in fact, at points the reader might be confused whether de Lauretis is talking about “queer” or the “death drive” as these terms seem, at points, to be interchangeable and work as an internal form of critique towards language. She writes:

As I let the figure guide me and displace me through the reading of Freud and of Laplanche’s reading of Freud, it takes me to a queer, non-binary place – dis-place – in which the categorical opposition between the psychic and the biological, between the order of the signifier and the materiality of the body, or between the organic and the

inorganic no longer hold. This is the figural space inhabited by Freud's drive, a non-homogenous, heterotropic space of passage, of transit and transformation 'between the mental and the somatic', where *between* does not stand for the binary logic of exclusion but figures the movement of a passing. (de Lauretis 2008, 13)

Her way of theorizing "queer" is different from that presented by Edelman. In *Freud's Drive* there are no imperatives calling readers to embrace a queer position. Moreover, "queer" here is more consistently a negative term as it is only a position of transition and of passage. It is not a structural negation of norms but a sign of a possible destabilization of subjectivity or meaning. It is not clear what the "place" that de Lauretis describes refers to, but to me, the use of "queer" in the passage above more closely resembles Sedgwick's theorization of "queer" (Sedgwick 1993) than Edelman's *No Future*.

De Lauretis rarely uses the concept of "queer", but I would say that it is an important term for her and it has a peculiar function. It is not a concept that opposes another term or category, but rather a concept standing in-between other terms or concepts, in a place of difference. Moreover, as a figure, "queer" is not typical one, but is instead a figure for figuration itself, as it does not mark anything concrete but just the passing or transformation, or even the very possibility of transformation which exists within sexuality. This understanding of "queer" is close to de Man's concept of irony (de Man 1989 and 1996).

Edelman also declares that his concept of "queer" owes much to de Manian irony. Nevertheless, it seems that both of them were influenced by de Man in very different ways. In Edelman's work, "queer" stands for the outside of the system of tropes, and hence the outside of meaning, while de Lauretis does not assume any outside or any absolute negation. I would say that de Lauretis is a more consistent reader, perhaps a more radical one, of Paul de Man. For her there is no possibility of any conclusion or of any ethics in the name of "queer". Negative ethics seems to be internally contradicted and perhaps that is the reason why de Lauretis does not make any call to embrace negativity, nor does she use any "we" as a subject of her writing or the imagined community to which she directs her text. De Lauretis states that similarities between Edelman's project and hers are coincidental and even with all these similarities she finds these projects unrelated. She explains her point as follows:

Edelman urges queers to embrace a figural identification with the death drive as *jouissance*, a figure for the undoing identity and the heteronormative order of meaning. My reading of Freud's drive offers no programme, no ethical position, no polemic, only queer figures of passing in the uninhabited space between mind and matter. (de Lauretis 2008, 87).

The processes how we construct our sexualities, how these constructions are limited but also enabled by different normative instances are continuous and, even in the case of marginalized groups, are never purely negative. I believe that if “queer” is to remain a meaningful concept with political potential, it should not be used without connection to the reality of how sexuality is experienced, described and fantasized. Therefore, I find inspiring de Lauretis’ proposition to think about figures of transformation. It is an encouragement to always think differently about sexuality. Perhaps these figures of transformation are not explicitly political or perhaps they are anti-political as they can be deconstructive towards the concepts that we use to think about our presence in the world, about ourselves. Thinking through the figures of transformation is a way of resisting any stable meaning of sexuality. De Lauretis analyses sexuality as a field of fantasies, therefore sexuality is a product of semiotic systems, “sexuality is an effect of signs” (de Lauretis 2008, 29). The figure of death displaces this system and allows its reinterpretation, or alternatively it does not allow for these signs to create a coherent system.

De Lauretis conceptualization of negativity is theoretically very compelling, and from the very beginning of *Freud’s Drive* she declares that it is also a political project (de Lauretis 2008, 3). Perhaps every hermeneutic project is political, particularly when it concerns sexuality, class and race, but perhaps hermeneutics is not enough. I agree with José Esteban Muñoz who argues: “Queerness, like feminism, is an essentially performative endeavor, a mode of doing as opposed to being. This is not to say that being and performativity are easily unyoked, but I do want to suggest that shifting from a hermeneutic that is primarily attuned to the epistemological is a good thing” (Muñoz 2007, 550).

6.3 Queer Subculture

Another influential thinker who theorizes “queer” in relation to negativity is Judith Halberstam. Her/his³⁹ standpoint is somewhat different from that presented by Edelman or by de Lauretis. Halberstam also operates within the field of cultural critique but much of her/his analysis is related to counter-cultural production and very often her texts are directly related to LGBT communities, their problems, politics and discussions among these communities. She/he states that the aim of her/his work is “to explore a queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity” (Halberstam 1998, 9). The point of “queer” as a concept is critique and, interestingly, this critique often targets members of sexual minority communities. In *Female Masculinity* Halberstam applies “queer” to the analysis of non-

³⁹ In my thesis I refer to Halberstam’s work that was published until 2011. In more recent publications Halberstam uses name Jack. As I analyze publications published under name Judith Halberstam I use this name in my analyses but I acknowledge Halberstam transition and therefore in most of cases I use the form “her/his”.

normative ways of living, and of constructing and experiencing gender and sexuality. She/he mentions “queer methodology” (Halberstam 1998, 10) as an interdisciplinary way of approaching her subject. I would say that in *Female Masculinity*, generally, “queer” means the refusal of mainstream norms and it refers to communities or people who even within sexual minority groups are a minority.

In her/his next book, *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam also frequently uses the term “queer”. This book offers a more political view of “queer”, particularly at the point where “queer” is used to criticize gay and lesbian communities. Thus, “queer” is often used in opposition to “gay”, as in the following :

At a time when “gay and lesbian community” is used as a rallying cry for fairly conservative social projects aimed at assimilating gays and lesbians into the mainstream of the life of the nation and the family, queer subcultures preserve the critique of heteronormativity that was always implicit in queer life. (Halberstam 2005, 153-154)

Therefore, for Halberstam “queer” is not merely a mark of being member of the LGBT community and it is not just about being marginalized; it is a political stance against normativity. Through “queer”, Halberstam often describes subcultures that can be defined not only via their relationship towards the mainstream culture but also towards sexuality and how they express their sexual identity. Halberstam writes:

Queer subcultures cannot only be placed in relation to a parent culture, and they tend to form in relation to place as much as in relation to a genre of cultural expression, and ultimately, they oppose not only the hegemony of dominant culture but also the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian culture. (Halberstam 2005, 161)

I wonder why Halberstam claims that the critique of heteronormativity was “always implicit in queer life”. It seems that she/he has a normative and exclusionary vision of who can be classified as “queer” and who is a traitor and should be left out of this concept. Interestingly, “queer” is related to acts, communities, lives and theories that are critical and always marginal. *In a Queer Time and Place* relates “queer” to a variety of phenomena from music, literature, photography, paintings to different types of performances, and it is also often related to people who are part of some subcultures. The important question is who is there to judge whether a non-heterosexual person or community is really critical towards the mainstream? Of course, in her/his books Halberstam is the judge, but we are left with no really clear tools. We know we should differentiate the mainstream of gays and lesbians from critical and oppositional queers, but how should one do this?

I find inspiring the inherent critique of the gay and lesbian movement and their politics that is strongly present in recent books by Halberstam. “Queer”, says Halberstam, is against

rights, capitalism, conformism, and so on, and it has a meaning only when attached to concrete people and communities or acts. It does not become an abstract category. At the beginning of *In a Queer Time and Place* we find a quasi-definition of “queer”: ““queer” refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in time and space” (Halberstam 2005, 6). Also at the beginning of the book, Halberstam relates the start of what she calls “queer time” to the time of AIDS and, although she/he does not discuss the AIDS movement in detail, it is meaningful that she/he starts her work with the acknowledgment of AIDS and its relation to the concept of “queer”.

In one of her/his articles and in *The Queer Art of Failure* Halberstam offers a powerful critique of Edelman’s *No Future*. Basically, her/his point is that Edelman presents a too abstract and limited conceptualization of “queer”. In the article “The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies” (2008) she criticizes *No Future* for masculinist points of view and limited archives. She writes: “we need to think carefully about the problems with a progressive and positive liberal agenda and about the potentially sinister associations that can be drawn between apolitical negativity of the kind Edelman outlines and the masculinist anti-domesticity and anti-reproductive politics of homophile movements in the 1930’s with Nazi sympathies (Halberstam 2008, 147). One thing is clear, Halberstam is a very passionate critic. Although I generally find her/his points thought-provoking, I would nevertheless say that to relate *No Future* to Nazi imaginaries, as Halberstam does, is an exaggeration. She/he claims that Edelman’s approach to “queer” carries a threat of apolitical passivity and situates her/his own theory also on the side of negativity. She/he explains, however: “Negativity might well constitute an anti-politics but it should not register as apolitical” (Halberstam 2008, 148). Halberstam rejects apolitical approach and instead she/he proposes a notion of anti-politics. This notion she/he relates to “queer”. The term, for her/him, is always related to negativity and is always a critical category, particularly towards gay and lesbian communities; it is never neutral or apolitical.

This association of “queer” with “negativity” is further developed by Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). The book presents a powerful critical engagement with important dominant currents in the gay and lesbian movement and with its narration. Halberstam posits herself/himself against the idea of “rainbow families”, against gay and lesbian marriages and the rights movement and against the narration of oppression and emancipation. She/he clearly opposes heroic narration of the mainstream of the gay and lesbian movement. Her/his analyses do not focus so much on earlier canonical works of literature but rather on such authors as Elfride Jelinek, Jamaica Kincaid or Zadie Smith as well as cartoons, photos and paintings. In the context of her/his analysis, Halberstam reveals her/his vision of “queer” as different forms of resistance to norms. The

relationship between “queer” and negativity is always crucial because “queer” does not represent resistance in the name of other values or any particular vision of the future. Halberstam sees “queerness as a mode of critique rather than as a new investment in normativity or life or respectability or wholeness or legitimacy” (Halberstam 2011, 111).

I suggest that “queer” in Halberstam’s work functions as an anarchic term that disturbs coherency of any narration of sexual minority as a political community. Halberstam claims that the point of “queer” is not to build another heroic narration for LGBT people. She/he writes: “failure must be located within that range of political affects that we call *queer*” (Halberstam 2011, 89). It is somewhat unusual to call “queer” “political affects”. One of these affects on which Halberstam reflects in detail is passivity. This, to me, should be seen from the perspective of the North American cult of individualism and the idea that through hard work one can achieve anything. Clearly, Halberstam is against these ideas and her/his idea of passivity is an attempt to search for other forms of social and political engagement. Passivity is an idea that stands in radical contrast with traditional U.S. cultural values.

Contrary to Edelman, “queer”, according to Halberstam, is not an anti-communitarian concept. In fact, even though “queer” repeatedly serves as a tool for critiquing gay and lesbian communities and their politics, “queer” often gains meaning when attached to community actions. In *The Queer Art of Failure* Halberstam provides a more elaborate debate with Edelman. First, she/he acknowledges a connection between Edelman’s projects and her/his own, particularly the use of “queer” as a tool of resistance towards what Halberstam calls “the U.S. imperialist project of hope”. She/he also states that both projects focus on developing a “counterhegemonic imaginary”, and both aim at developing alternatives to traditional political engagement through negativity. Nonetheless, Halberstam sees a contradiction between Edelman’s claims and the language that expresses them. She/he points out that the project of queer negativity is not particularly negative as “Edelman’s syntax itself closes down the anarchy of signification” (Halberstam 2011, 107). His project betrays the negativity that Halberstam theorizes because it does not relate to any concrete examples of debased or excluded groups. “No future for Edelman means routing our desires around the eternal sunshine of the spotless child and finding the shady side of political imaginaries in the proudly sterile and antireproductive logics of queer relation” (Halberstam 2011, 108).

For Halberstam, Edelman’s “queer” is an apolitical, white and elitist term that has no relation to what she/he considers to be authentic negative queer aesthetics. Her/his argument at some points seems quite understandable, if “queer” is negative why is Edelman so keen to embrace it? A similar point was raised by Ahmed: “By “embracing” the negation of queer from normative culture, Edelman turns the “no” into a “yes”: in other words, converting bad feeling into good” (Ahmed 2010, 270). This is not the negativity that Halberstam wants to embrace in “queer”.

According to Halberstam, this concept might function as a creative way to say “no” to normative culture and also be a way of cultivating alternative ways of being and community bonding. While not being a sign of the liberal hope for a better tomorrow, “queer” can trouble the idea of progress and emancipation. Halberstam writes:

If we want to make the antisocial turn in queer theory we must be willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly political negativity. One that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak out and loud, to disrupt, assassinate, shock, and annihilate. (Halberstam 2011, 110)

We can read this as Halberstam’s manifesto on queer negativity. I would argue that the real difference between her/his and Edelman lies not in archives. Although Halberstam claims her/his archives are more egalitarian and his are elitist (Halberstam 2008, 151-153), I suggest that the difference lies in a sensitivity towards real social differences such as class and race.

As much as in the case of *No Future*, in Halberstam’s appropriation of negativity I find something puzzling. The question is, which position enables embracement of the idea of negativity? When does one have the power to say “no”? This statement requires the particular comfort of positivity. When one is in a truly negative position, it feels as if one’s physical or mental integrity is threatened, and this position is not happily embraced. Nevertheless, what Halberstam calls the anti-social turn in queer theory (Halberstam 2008, 154) carries a powerful political message, particularly towards gay and lesbian communities. It is a message that there are others who were not included in your agendas and do not enjoy your privileges.

It is important to ask the question, from which position can such statements of negativity be formulated? I would suggest that books such as *No Future*, *Freud’s Drive* or *The Queer Art of Failure* could appear in the U.S. at a time when sexual minorities enjoyed certain rights, were protected by the law and could further develop their communities. Similar to *No Future*, *The Queer Art of Failure* speaks from a position of some authenticity and truth. It seems that both authors command authority and speak from a position of privileged criticism. Halberstam’s moralism, however, sounds more authentic because her/his use of “queer” is grounded in and related to particular problems and discussions within LGBT communities. Of course, *No Future* also relates to specific discussions and problems within LGBT politics, but it does so on a more abstract level and therefore for many it might feel less authentic.

In *The Queer Art of Failure* a particular ethical project is also included. It can be compared to the late Foucaultian idea of cultivating the self, but Halberstam does not write about any possibility of transgression. I would suggest that her/his ethical project is primarily about resistance. The future is a site of possible resistance and it can be imagined as an alternative to the present. She/he writes: “The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the

unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being” (Halberstam 2011, 88).

I suggest that Halberstam’s rhetoric of resistance to norms and her radical political stance resembles in certain respects Paul Goodman’s “The Politics of Being Queer” (1969). As discussed in Chapter 1, this position is also characterized by the heroic act of opposing society with its norms. Certainly, such stances can temporarily offer a radical and disruptive politics.

In the case of Edelman, I would claim that to imagine “queer” as a negative concept, as a radical resistance to normativity, and as a term of radical ethics, there has to be something comforting in such a position, therefore any such radical project risks being seen as a self-indulgent position. Especially in the case of Halberstam’s writing, which claims to be close to “queer life”, it seems difficult to relate to such a radical project, for to live in or be part of any community even a radical one, there should be positive elements. Communities cannot be based purely on resistance because the elements that keep people together are in themselves positive. Also, in this project, there is some demonization of norms but at the same time the idea that we need to always resist norms is in itself normative. At this ethical level Halberstam’s own discourse betrays herself/himself. She/he claims to be against late capitalistic individualism but it seems that she/he proposes a narration of heroic resistance based on the discourse of individualism. It is hard to understand why we need to always resist norms, indeed it is not possible to always resist norms. Some norms are important to live by, some are enabling and creating, and some are limiting and excluding. Even if we resist some norms we do it in the name of other norms. Even resistance in the form of passivity as proposed by Halberstam is an ethical stand. Norms are unavoidable and not all of them are bad. It is Halberstam’s demonization of norms that makes her/his project appear to reproduce most faithfully the discourse of the North American individualism.

The association of “queer” with shame, rejection, margins, and opposition towards the positive and rights-oriented major LGBT organizations appears to be an interesting political move that calls for more debate among sexual minorities. But there is also something worrying in Halberstam’s tone. Reading Halberstam at points gives one the impression of being at a radical evangelical church on Sunday morning and listening to the pastor’s speech. This is well described by Gould, who notices that Halberstam easily slips from sham to shaming: “But in noting shame as a powerful *tactic*, she (Halberstam) seems to shift its meaning from the feeling of shame to the process of *shaming* as a means for eliciting shame in those who then might become aware of their privilege.” (Gould 2009, 384). Gould also adds that she can do well without this type of shaming, “understood as a means of eliciting shame through moral righteousness and judgementalism” (2009, 384). In her analysis of the AIDS movement and its politics, shame is for Gould a crucial affect, but she proposes to use “queer” not only in relation to negative affects but also as a category

that opens up new forms of political activism. Jennifer Moon also points out a similar issue, namely “Halberstam’s denial of butch lesbian shame” (Moon 2009, 363) and her shaming of white gay men seems to be a strange position. Halberstam claims in one of her articles (Halberstam 2005, 226) that shame is an affect that white male gays experience and that butch lesbians do not experience it, or perhaps should not experience it, but one might ask who gave her/him the right to speak on behalf of all butch lesbians and judge that they do not feel shame, as gay men do. However, what I find inspiring in Halberstam’s appropriation of negativity is a refusal to glorify any historical moment in gay and lesbian history. It seems that, for her/him, history should be constantly reread critically not as a source of good examples but as a map of failures that always repeats itself.

6.4 Problems with the politics of negativity

Jasbir K. Puar, in *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), criticizes queer theory for being a particular product of a secular U.S. culture that is exclusive and does not relate to sexual minorities from other ethnic or religious backgrounds. She claims that queer theory and the concept of “queer” often have no connection to the problems of immigrants and LGBT people from other ethnicities. Moreover, she claims that “queer” is often a utopian concept with few links with the reality of radical politics. Here the meaning of utopia is not related to Munoz’s *Cruising Utopia* but is instead a specific understanding of political utopia. As Pulkkinen comments: “a utopian perspective is always a perspective of the final truth, the endpoint of and the state of affairs in which problems are solved” (Pulkkinen 2000, 21). This perspective is clear in the moralism of Edelman and Halberstam, whose standpoint offers little space for discussion or virtually no political action. The embracement of queer negativity is seen by them as a final political act.

Puar criticizes mainstream gay and lesbian organizations and their politics as well as particular currents in queer theory. Her critique is very explicit in relation to *No Future* but I think it can also be read as a general critique of a type of fetishization of negativity in relation to the concept of “queer”. She writes:

For queer politics, the challenge is not so much to refuse a future through the repudiation of reproductive futurity, (...) but to understand how the biopolitics of regenerative capacity already demarcate racialized and sexualized statistical population aggregates as those in decay, destined for no future, based not upon whether they can or cannot reproduce children but on what capacities they can and cannot regenerate and what kind of assemblages they compel, repel, spur, deflate. (Puar 2007, 211)

Puar does not refuse to use the concept of “queer” but she sees a place for it in sexual genealogies that would investigate identities with regard to the crossroads of sexuality, desire, religion, ethnicity and Western imperialism.

Another important author who discusses “queer” from the perspective of negativity is Elizabeth Freeman. In *Time Binds* (2010) she discusses “queer” as a political concept in relation to

different sexual practices and different kinds of sexual minority communities. Freeman does not embrace a narration of progress or emancipation; on the contrary, she is interested in alternative meaning production, and therefore does not embrace negativity. For her, temporality and therefore also the future, is at the core of her interest, but what she clearly shows is that there can be alternatives to dominant temporalities and alternative visions of future. She writes:

To me, “queer” cannot signal a purely deconstructive move or position of pure negativity. In enjoying queers to operate as agents of dis- or de-figuration, critics like Lee Edelman (...) risk evacuating the messiest thing about being queer: the actual meeting of bodies with other bodies and with objects. (Freeman 2010, xxi)

The AIDS crisis and the activism that grew around it are for Freeman sources of the political potential of “queer” and subsequently she applies “queer” to the analysis of, for instance, different sexual practices such as S/M or the relationship between sexuality and class. For Freeman, “queer” can function against late capitalism as a form of resistance or disruption when related to alternative forms of experiencing sexuality, but also alternative ways of experiencing bodies, time and alternative ways of relating to others. This is the political potential of “queer”, but this concept becomes purely theoretical when the future is foreclosed.

I find the theorization of “queer” as a negative concept theoretically and politically problematic. Particularly the authors that became most associated with this turn towards negativity, Lee Edelman and Judith Halberstam, propose specific ethical projects as a result of queer negativity, which seems to be somewhat contradictory. From another point of view, both of these authors give examples of “queer” as a negative concept and relate the concept to particular styles by analysing specific works of art. When reading their books, one can clearly see that they give positive value to Hitchcock movies or books by Jelinek, for instance. Therefore their negativity is self-contradictory as it is always represented by something that authors find valuable and they valorize this. This identification of “queer” with negativity can work well politically as a critique of current political discourse. What troubles me is that these projects seem to stop here.

Arguably, in the projects of Edelman, Halberstam and de Lauretis the negativity of “queer” has the power to undo subjectivity. But is it really so simple to undo our subjectivity? Do we only need to identify with a negative fantasy about ourselves? Of course, it might not be so easy to identify with some degrading fantasies but, apart from that, is it enough to undo or get away from the subject. For Edelman, “queer” has access to *jouissance*; for Halberstam it offers some alternative forms of being, and for de Lauretis it is a form of undoing the psyche. The argument against these ideas is developed in Lynne Huffer’s *Mad for Foucault* (2010). She claims that such projects wish to negate the subject but they reproduce it on another level:

Precisely because queer performativity cannot let go of the “psyche” or “soul” which constitutes the rationalist modern subject, the moral violence of the swamp remains-even,

and especially, in morality's dialectical negation as a resistance to sociality or a queer death drive. Indeed, from a Nietzschean perspective, the death drive of the queer antisocial thesis epitomizes the self-hating violence of the moral "I" (...). In dialectical terms, negation alone does not undo the "I" (Huffer 2010, 115-116).

Huffer finds particularly problematic the moralistic tone of the queer antisocial thesis. She postulates that "queer" should be used within the framework of Foucaultian ethics and be without morality. Of the authors I have analysed, the closest to this idea would be de Lauretis, for whom negativity cannot be a tool to valorize or create an axiology.

I claim that, historically, "queer" from the time of AIDS activism was not only a form of critique but also a concept that would enable different fantasies about the future, namely future forms of being, future forms of relating, and, finally, future politics. For me, the political potential of "queer" comes from its critical perspective because this concept refers to resistance to norms. "Queer" also gets its political impetus from being used as a utopian concept that projects alternatives, opens up old meanings and designs new meanings. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote: "It is extraordinarily difficult to imagine an analytically usable language of habit, in a landscape so rubbed and defeated by the twin hurricanes named Just Do It and Just Say No" (Sedgwick 1993, 140). I believe that the concept "queer" offers a possibility of a third way. It can serve as a tool of political critique and contestation but without foreclosing the future and, more importantly, it can enable different forms of political engagement with the present.

I suggest that narrations of "queer" as a negative concept understood as something anti-systemic have a certain degree of melancholia. Perhaps this idea of the radical "no" expressed powerfully by Edelman (2004), Halberstam (2005) and de Lauretis (2008) came from nostalgia for political engagement. In the beginning of the 1990s new queer theories were close to queer activism but more than a decade later queer activism almost did not exist and definitely did not have such a cultural and political impact as ACT UP or Queer Nation. I suggest that the nostalgic narration of radicalism expresses nostalgia for lost political engagement and looking for new ways of making politics after the era of queer activism.

Chapter 7: Queer citizenship

There have been countless uses of “queer” in academic texts that could be broadly classified as cultural critique. Most authors that used “queer” in their books and articles have had a literary studies background, among them Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lee Edelman and Judith Halberstam. Up to the late 1990s “queer” was rarely used by political theorists to debate explicitly political issues. Although “queer” was used to discuss political problems, such as agency, community and representation, it was only from about the second half of the 1990s that “queer” was applied by political theorists to analyses that used language and methodologies which were explicitly linked to the field of political theory. This chapter presents applications of “queer” to discussion on the idea of “citizenship”. I analyse how authors such as Shane Phelan, Laurent Berlant, Jasbir K Puar, David Bell and Jon Binnie approach the topic of “citizenship” and how they relate it to sexuality. I follow this by exploring the implications that “queer” can have for political reflection on citizenship.

One of the first political theorists that considered “queer” as a potentially political category was Shane Phelan. In her earlier work e.g. in an article from 1995 “The space of justice: lesbians and democratic politics”, she was rather critical towards this term but over time she appropriated “queer” into her analysis of citizenship (Phelan, 2001). After 1995, several political theorists applied “queer” to discuss different political issues, amongst which citizenship seemed to occupy a prominent position because it is a topic in which questions concerning rights, representation, participation, political agency and public space cross. Another important theorist that directly uses the term “queer” in the context of citizenship is Lauren Berlant (1997). Berlant uses “queer” as a tool to critique the contemporary U.S. concept of citizenship. For me, her texts are one of the main points of reference when thinking about the involvement of “queer” in political debates on citizenship.

Discussions on queer citizenship have been very fruitful, particularly within recent decades. This is evidenced by the increasing number of publications that use the concept of “queer citizenship” to refer to, for instance, the limitations of Western gay and lesbian discourse (Puar 2007), or participation in the public sphere (Bell and Binnie 2000). Such discussions around queer citizenship will certainly continue and therefore I find it particularly interesting to examine the political promise of “queer” in this context.

7.1 The changing meaning of “citizenship”

Up to the end of the 1980s, the question of citizenship was predominantly treated as a legal problem. When it appeared in political theory, it had no relation to sexuality. Furthermore, on a

more philosophical level, it seems that the concept of “citizenship” was rarely used and only in the early 1990s did it become one of the key concepts, serving as a substitute for political agency in many contexts.⁴⁰ Good examples of such uses of “citizenship” are provided by authors such as Evans (1993), Mouffe (1993), Honig (1995), Pulkkinen (1996/2000), Yuval-Davis (1997), Berlant (1997) and Pulkkinen (2000). From the 1990s onwards, “citizenship” became one of the crucial concepts in cultural theory, and subsequently in feminist and queer theory.

Feminist thinkers such as Nira Yuval-Davis⁴¹ addressed at the end of 1980s the question of gender through the concept of “citizenship”. But as “queer” predominantly pertains to sexuality, I shall here focus exclusively on issues related to sexuality and how they were related to “citizenship”. I believe this can provide an insight into understanding how “queer” functioned within explicitly political language.

In legal literature, which was a dominant place for debates on “citizenship”, this topic has been related to an issue of the legal status of a person in a country. To be a citizen of a particular country means being protected by the law of that country and also having a set of duties towards that country. I think that from the late 1980s, problems connected to immigration and globalization reached such a degree of importance that politics and political theories had to search for new conceptual frameworks to approach them. This alone does not explain why “citizenship” became such a broadly used term. The fact is that political theorists, such as Mouffe (1993) or Honig (1995), searched for new terms to describe how contemporary Western societies are divided and how different groups participate in the public sphere and in politics. They and several others started using “citizenship” in a comprehensive way in order to address social norms as well as gender-related problems.

For some politicians from the 1980s on, such as Margaret Thatcher, “citizenship” started to function as a normative and regulatory term. This concept of “citizenship” was a way to limit participation in the public sphere to a certain group of people, to so called decent citizens in opposition to, for example, illegal immigrants or working class people. The concept of political agency seems to be more difficult to mobilize for certain political purposes such as restricting the access of one social group to the labour market or to other rights. In this regard the concept of “citizenship” is more flexible and can be used to privilege one group and to

⁴⁰I find such the theorization of citizenship problematic because it risks blending the issues of immigrants with discussions on participation and rights. An interesting voice in this debate on the concept of “citizenship” is presented by Seyla Benhabin (1992). She calls for a limited understanding of “citizenship” within legal theory.

⁴¹One of the first important and highly influential publications that theorize gender in the context of citizenship is *Woman-Nation-State* by Nira Yuval-Davis (1989).

exclude others. It can therefore be surprising that the concept of “citizenship” is currently very widely used by feminists and queer theorists including Berlant (1997), Bell and Binnie (2000), and Phelan (2001).

It is interesting that Arendt’s formulation of “active citizenship” which Honig (1995) refers to was often used by conservative politicians such as Thatcher, who claimed that paying taxes is just the beginning of citizenship and that what was required were active citizens. As the British Conservative government of the time stated: “citizenship is about our responsibilities” (quote after Evans 1993, 5). One can clearly see that this “active citizenship” creates a space for normative evaluation and subsequently opportunities to grade citizenship. Here the concept of “citizenship” acquires an ethical and moral value, which was always there between the lines, but at that time was explicitly presented as the demarcation lines between the good and bad citizens. The notion was that one could be a better or a worse citizen, and that citizenship was not a static fact but a process, something that had to be maintained. Republicans in the United States in the 1980s used a similar rhetoric regarding citizens, who should justify their status.

In the 1980s the concept of “citizenship” gradually acquired a very broad meaning related not only to the link between an individual and the state, but also to morality, cultural production, identity and agency, and finally to gender and sexuality. I examine how the concept of “citizenship” functions in relation to another concept, “queer”. The very expression “queer citizenship” is used most remarkably in the work of Laurent Berlant and Shane Phelan. Many other authors also refer to citizenship by using the concept of “queer”, although there is no direct connection between these concepts and it might seem strange why anyone would theorize these two concepts together. Perhaps part of the problem lies in the fact that the concept of “citizenship” is traditionally part of legal and political theory and is rarely related to sexuality, while most theorists use “queer” to discuss sexuality as a part of cultural critique and they rarely refer to legal theory. In addition, it is easier to imagine a discussion within political theory concerning the concept of “citizenship” in relation to the problems of redistribution or to the limits of social recognition, but it is harder to relate it to the concept of “queer”, which functions within the field of cultural studies. Yet, as Judith Butler argues in her debate with Nancy Fraser⁴² with respect to queer studies, no distinction is made between the cultural and social. I consider this to be a starting point for those theorists who use the concept of citizenship in relation to sexual minorities.

7.2 Sex and citizenship

⁴² Butler, Judith; “Merely Cultural?”; in *Social Text*, 52/53 1997 pp. 265- 278

The link between sex and citizenship can be intriguing, but it has proved to be productive in terms of many academic articles and books published within the last two decades. To theorize sexuality in the political context, particularly in the context of citizenship, is to pose a question about the flexibility of political language, which was traditionally universal and rather gender and sex-free, at least until feminists began to offer political critiques. This raised the question: What legitimates the language of politics and are there other possible discourses that would differently express e.g. agency? Can the concept of “queer” be productive with regard to theorizing citizenship? What kind of conceptual consequences will it have for citizenship? This connection between “queer” and “citizenship” clearly brings marginalized sexualities into political debates and it also calls for rethinking about the division between public and private and other political concepts such as “public space”, “participation” and “representation”.

One of the first books that focuses on the relation between the concept of “citizenship” and sexuality, and one that frequently refers to sexual minorities, is *Sexual Citizenship* by David T. Evans (1993). This was an important publication, particularly in the UK and Europe, but remains less known in the United States. I find this publication of value because it offers a comprehensive understanding of “citizenship” and analyses in detail its relation to sexuality. Evans adopts Foucaultian terms and a sociological methodology. He makes the significant claim that citizenship is directly linked to sexuality and the meaning of “citizenship” is very close to political agency. In his reflections on sexual citizenship, Evans discusses political rhetoric and forms of participating in the culture, while simultaneously focusing on sexuality, forms of exclusion of homosexuals and their alternative culture. It seems, moreover, to be crucial for Evans to situate citizenship and sexuality within the dominant economic and political discourses of British society between the 1960s and 1990s. He writes: “The history of citizenship is a history of fundamental formal heterosexist patriarchal principles and practices ostensibly progressively ‘liberalized’ towards and through the rhetoric of ‘equality’ but in practice to effect unequal differentiation” (Evans 1993, 9). As a result, he offers us answers to the question of how the public space is constructed in relation to sexuality and how political and economic rights are organized in regard to sexuality.

Although in his book Evans hardly mentions “queer”, with the exception of “queer bashing”, his book is a good example of how the concept of “citizenship” has been analysed in relationship to sexuality. The book became very influential and caused many critical debates. David Bell and Jon Binnie, for instance, mention D. T. Evans, although rather critically, in their book *The Sexual Citizen*, while discussing explicitly queer politics and applying the term “queer” to their debate on citizenship. They claim that Evans’ view on citizenship focuses too

much on the market and the economy and that this is a simplistic approach (Bell and Binnie 2000, 11).

In contrast to explicit queer theorists who came later, it seems that Evans does not take a normative stance on sexual citizenship. In other words, he does not develop the utopian dimension of sexual citizenship because, according to him, values are conceptual constructs that can be analysed discursively. In this context, Evans is able to raise the question of the community being created by the exclusion of certain sexual practices from the public sphere. For him, this is more a socio-historical question than a strictly political claim. It is important that during this time, the concept of “queer” had just been introduced into academic discussions that took place predominantly in the USA. Therefore for Evans, “queer” did not have the political-utopian dimension that this concept acquired in the USA around 1993 (the time when Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* and Sedgwick’s *Tendencies* were published). The main contribution of *Sexual Citizenship* is to point out that the relation between politics, intimacy and affect is not accidental. It is instead a crucial relationship for understanding contemporary politics and it can be traced to different levels of social and political organization.

7.3 Citizenship and sexual minorities

I argue that there are several reasons why the concepts of sexuality and citizenship were linked in U.S. political theory beginning in the 1990s. Firstly, in the United States minority discourses were ready to hand. These have been very strong in that political culture since at least the 1960s. Another reason is that in the United States “citizenship” has been a strongly normative concept. In the introduction to *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997) Berlant suggests that it was particularly from Reagan’s time onwards that American politics began to pay more attention to intimacy and also adopted an explicit normative stance on these issues.

Another contributing factor was the popularization of the LGBT movement and its involvement in current American politics. This influenced the connection between sex and citizenship. The LGBT movement demanded anti-discrimination laws and strongly advocated the inclusion of LGBT communities into the core of the American society. The question of rights is directly linked to citizenship. For mainstream LGBT organizations the concept of “citizenship” opened up a language through which they claimed rights. At the same time other crucial questions appeared, namely what defines belonging to the US as a nation, and what it mean to be a citizen of the United States.

During Reagan’s administration, conservative politicians started using the concept of the ideal American citizen (Berlant 1997). For Republicans, citizenship was not only the legal status of US citizen, it became an idealized symbol of the future, of a social paradise of middle

class society with no crime rate. Therefore this citizenship had to be maintained and protected whenever it was threatened and it should be developed when there were opportunities to do so.

In its origin, the concept of citizenship is supposed to be universal and is assumed to include all members of a particular political community. The modern concept of citizenship is formulated on the grounds of individualism and a liberal understanding of rights (Rawls 1998, 56). Moreover, citizenship has, particularly in Europe, often been connected to the idea of nation. Citizenship has been a mark of belonging to the community and supposedly it should not limit the membership in the social community based on the particular qualities of agents. I believe that implicitly this concept always had a normative aspect. Explicitly, citizenship is about being protected by the state and being able to participate in a society on an equal ground with other agents of the same society, for instance everyone with full civil rights has the right to vote in elections and every vote is equally important. Nevertheless, there are norms and values that govern citizenship. Some agents are considered better representatives of the idea of citizenship, whereas some others are not considered to be good examples of citizens.

The issue of gender appears at a very early stage in the concept of citizenship. Many national constitutions provide special protection for families or they mention that the family is a basic unit of society. At the same time, most national constitutions across Europe have paragraphs on non-discrimination. In practice, the representation of an ideal citizen would be a middle class, working, married man with children. The law and cultural codes focus on this representation of citizen. Other agents of society often have to struggle to be included in the picture of the citizen or they have to try to demonstrate that even if they seem to be different, in reality they are very close to the ideal and the differences are meaningless.

The problem of citizenship in relation to sexual minorities appeared in practical politics in the 1960s when gay and lesbians gained some visibility in the United States and they started to be part of the political discourse (mostly conservative but not exclusively). During that time, the issue mainly concerned the protection of LGBT people from violence and from other forms of attack. The HIV/AIDS crisis brought to the fore the fight for equal access to medical care. Finally, in the 1980s, gay and lesbian activists also began to strongly advocate for the removal of the anti-sodomy law, which until then existed in many states of the US. During the 1990s the issue of gays in the military service was raised. Currently, the struggle for gay and lesbian marriages is what seems to be a key concern of the main LGBT activists in the US.

Evans (1993) has argued that citizenship could not remain to be treated as neutral in a contemporary culture where identities are likened to commodities. The notion of citizenship is crucial to the self-understanding of agents and even to their existence in public space.

Citizenship reflects the majority's normative view dictating how agents are supposed to be in order to be proper, active, full citizens. The response to this concept of citizenship comes from various theoretical positions. The main LGBT organizations in the United States advocated a broader inclusion of gays and lesbians in the concept of citizenship by giving them, for instance, the right to marry. However, during the 1990s, many academics began to argue that the concept of "citizenship" should be challenged and changed in order to become more diverse and be able to express minority issues. This position was also presented by the activists of Queer Nation (Warner 1993, xx). In Queer Nation's actions the term "queer" came into a productive relationship with "citizenship" for the first time. From 1993, and coinciding with the publication of *Fear of a Queer Planet*, the concept of "queer" in academia started appearing in the context of the contestation of the Republican idea of citizenship, and a few years later it was thoroughly theorized. *Fear of a Queer Planet* brought to the fore the anti-assimilation politics of LGBT communities.

Two authors, who wrote on citizenship from the perspective of queer studies are Lauren Berlant and Shane Phelan. They both use the concept of "queer" as a critical category for their investigation on citizenship. They speak about citizenship from within a sexual minority group. Their approaches have been highly commented on in recent years and I want to focus on them because they represent two different approaches while sharing similar goals.

In the work of Lauren Berlant, particularly in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997), the concept of "queer" is a means to critically examine and deconstruct the dominant idea of citizenship. In this publication, "queer" functions as a mode of critique that is capable of revealing values, particularities, assumptions and contradictions that are hidden in citizenship. Berlant does not set an agenda for future queer politics, rather her primary analyses revolve around American popular culture and politics.

Berlant focuses on the cultural and symbolic construction of citizenship. She describes citizenship "as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere" (Berlant 1997, 5). Here citizenship means even more than political agency. Citizenship is a set of rights and duties citizens have but, more than that, it is also a set of representations that culturally legitimize a person in the public sphere. It is also a set of symbolic codes that create community and are the basis for the nation. Berlant claims that citizenship is essentially a regulative and oppressive political category: "The populations who were and are managed by the discipline of the promise – women, African Americans, Native Americans, immigrants, homosexuals – have long experienced simultaneously the wish to be full citizens and the violence of their partial

citizenship” (Berlant 1997, 19). For Berlant, citizenship has levels of belonging and can be partial. According to her, full citizenship is rather a phantasmatic border, an ideal, a normative concept that reflects the current political system.

Berlant offers Queer Nation as an example of alternative citizenship. These activists wanted “to change the ways straight and gay people experienced the public spaces of everyday life and the ordinary trajectories of everyday identity” (Berlant 1997, 23). Clearly, for Berlant there is something wrong with the concept of “citizenship”, and through the concept of “queer” she aims to redefine it. Through its exaggerated and parodic actions in public spaces, Queer Nation aimed to broaden the concept of citizenship to embrace new meanings in order to make it more democratic. Berlant quotes a number of QN posters made in the form of advertisements, such as “I’d start my own cigarette company and call it Fags” or “All you need is a three-dollar bill and a dream” (Berlant 1997, 162). It is based on the U.S. connection between citizenship and being a customer, and, due to their ironic content, QN’s advertisements create resistance to the liberal ideology of the customer-citizen.

According to Berlant, Queer Nation does not have theoretical coherence. “All politics in the Queer Nation are imagined on the *street*”, and “Queer Nation understands the property of queerness to be a function of the diverse spaces in which it aims to become explicit” (Berlant 1997, 151). In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* and other essays by Berlant, public space is crucial for her theorization of intimacy. The problem with public space is that it is homogeneous and heterosexualized, and for this reason Berlant (in the essay written with Elizabeth Freeman, first published in 1992) claims that it needs to be reshaped. In the case of Queer Nation, her focus is also on public space. “Queer Nation’s infusion of consumer space with a queer sensibility and its recognition of the potential for exploiting spaces of psychic and physical permeability are fundamental to its radical reconstruction of citizenship” (Berlant 1997, 163). It is interesting that in the context of “queer” in Berlant’s theory, the distinction between public and private disappears. Intimacy and sex are also public, and Berlant continues: “queer citizenship confers the right to one’s own specific pleasures” (Berlant 1997, 163).

To Berlant, queer citizenship would be a political project of reimagining the concepts of public spaces and political agency among others. The point is not to create an alternative to the neo-liberal or a new political system, but rather to resist universalizing and oppressive elements of politics: “We must produce a political transformation of the key concepts, that is, of the concepts that are strategic for us” (Berlant 1997, 167).

I find Berlant’s theorization of queer citizenship important because she opposes utopian ideas of total disidentification with U.S. citizenship. For her, it is not an answer to sexual

minorities in the U.S. Instead, the only reasonable solution is to work to redefine the existing concept of citizenship. This proposition, however, might face criticism from representatives of communities of people of colour. In her article “Funny Boys and Girls” (1995) Gopinath argues that the identification with American citizenship is not possible for many queers of colour, particularly those from diasporas. Her point is valuable, but in the case of citizenship the issue is not so much about identification but rather about being protected by certain rights and having the possibility to exercise them. For this reason marginalized groups in particular need to struggle for recognition and inclusion in the vision of American citizenship because they might potentially need protection from the state and its institutions. I would argue that the contestation of citizenship is a comfortable position that not every person can afford. One can contest citizenship when one is in a situation that is comfortable and one would not need state institutions and law protection, but this is a rare and unique position. I would rather suggest, contrary to Gopinath, that ethnic minorities should be the first who need to fight to redefine the terms of citizenship as they often do not have the luxury of passively contesting the politics.

7.4 Queer political theory

In 1997 Shane Phelan edited a collection of essays entitled *Playing with Fire*. These texts apply “queer” to the field of political theory. In the introduction, Phelan states: “Queer political theory brings together the recognition of the structures and patterns of electoral and legal politics with the imagination of new cultural forms and new political subjects” (Phelan 1997, 6). According to Phelan queer political theory should be a form of inquiry that has to be sensitive to the practice of U.S. politics. It is not merely about cultural critique; instead the focus should be on the concrete situation of sexual minorities in the USA and their struggle for recognition and inclusion. Although critical of the discourse of rights, Phelan does not advocate rejecting this discourse but proposes reworking it.

In *Sexual Strangers*, Shane Phelan (2001) constructs “queer” as a utopian category that has the potential for not only radical social critique, but it can also be thought of as the horizon of gay and lesbian politics. In relation to citizenship, “queer” is a promise of a more open society that would be more inclusive and accommodate more differences.

Phelan presents a focused consideration of the concept of citizenship and its relation to “queer”. She begins by clarifying that citizenship “is about recognition and participation” (Phelan 2001, 3). It seems that although Phelan is a political theorist in her conceptualisation of citizenship, the division between strict political sciences and cultural studies is blurred. She writes: “Citizenship is about participation in the social and political life of a political community, and as such it is not confined to a list of legal protections and inclusions. It is just

as much about political and cultural visibility” (Phelan 2001, 6). Phelan follows this by reflecting on the rights that gay couples do not have in the U.S., such as the ban on serving in the army or on marrying. If citizenship is about rights and duties, then if one group has full access to a set of right and others are not granted equal access to exercise these right or they do not have full protection, then we can say that citizenship is a normative concept granted to some more fully than to others.

Phelan defines citizenship in terms of recognition and participation and this opens up a space to interpreting citizenship in cultural theory. However, Phelan only occasionally discusses these issues and her focus is primarily on political theory. Phelan’s book is not a description of contemporary issues regarding citizenship and sexuality, but she clearly takes a political stance towards these problems. She claims that it is not enough to give sexual minorities the rights they lack. She states: “I argue that before political/legal citizenship can be achieved a thorough queering of public culture is needed” (Phelan 2001, 8). The task is, thus, to critically examine and challenge the existing concept of citizenship. As Phelan explains, the issue at stake is the relationship between the state, the family, masculinity, religion and sexuality.

Phelan claims that in contemporary politics, there is a gap between citizenship and homosexuality. In the public sphere, heterosexuality is symbolically dominant and other forms of sexuality are restricted to the private zone. According to Phelan, citizenship represents only a specific group of people and marginalizes the rest. The solution is not only to give rights to those who do not enjoy them, but to challenge the very construct of citizenship. Therefore, Phelan proposes a new term, “queer citizenship”: “Thus the road to queer citizenship, if such is possible, must take us from strangeness through the construction of polity that creates it” (Phelan 2001, 32).

An important part of *Sexual Strangers* is the idea of the other – the stranger who is not included in citizenship. My contention is that this idea of “queer citizenship” refers here to a utopian concept of an alternative politics of belonging. It requires “full-scale refiguring of the body politics” (Phelan 2002, 40). In this context “queer” is not so much about assimilation or inclusion or even about gay visibility, as in the case of Berlant; it is about cultural and political counter-production. It involves opposing the dominant norms in politics, norms which are exclusive and oppressive. For Phelan, the meaning of “queer citizenship” is related to subversive practices that can result in undermining dominant forms of representation and participation in society.

The problem that I find in Phelan's idea of "the stranger" is that it seems to be rather homogeneous. There are immigrants that do not have any legal status in a country and one might say they are without citizenship, even though they are protected by basic human rights. But Phelan seems to relate this idea of the stranger merely to sexual minorities because they do not enjoy full rights or adequate representation, and do not participate in the public sphere on equal grounds. I find this construct problematic. Probably every person could find some aspect in which he or she is marginalized and ways in which his or her representation is not adequate. "Queer" provides Phelan with the opportunity to construct a somewhat schematic vision of society divided between the privileged and the oppressed. To me, the very idea of "the stranger" should raise suspicions. Our identities are contingent and we often experience oppression and enjoy privileges. "The queer stranger" construct creates a binary opposition that is simply not adequate to the political complexity of our situation.

What I find crucial in Phelan's work on queer citizenship is a call to reconfigure body politics. The task is not merely to achieve rights for marginalized groups, it is about changing the frameworks through which politics operates. This framework includes institutions, the law, education, political discourse and even the U.S. culture. Phelan questions the language that is used to discuss political matters because it assumes the liberal vision of the subject as an autonomous subject. Queer citizenship for Phelan is a proposal to oppose the dominant neo-liberal ideology and to build new models of agency sensitive towards issues of gender and sexuality. She writes: "Citizenship for those whose bodies and passions do not confirm to phallic modes will require not simply citizenship for queers, but a thorough queering of citizenship itself. Such a queering must include a challenge to the ideology of independence and masculinity" (Phelan 2001, 62).

Phelan does not offer a carefully formulated political theory in regard to citizenship but instead projects a normative stance on this issue. In fact, her ethics of contesting the state and one's minority rights can only be exercised by a certain group of people, mainly white middle class sexual minorities from large cities. Those that need healthcare, public funding and finally those who do not have fully legal residence status in the USA or have some legal status but live in diasporas do not have the luxury of contesting rights. Such groups and individuals need legal recognition and protection, and only state institutions can provide them with this protection. To contest rights and institutions does not mean to reject them, nor do I think that this is Phelan's intention. My contention is that she does not discuss in enough detail the actual practice of USA politics but instead builds a theoretical construction of future queer citizenship.

Politically, for Phelan “queer” is a sign of a radical democracy. It is a utopian concept that brings a vision of recognition and inclusion, and an equal community to come. Phelan writes: “Queer community is a process of democratic values, in which lesbians and gays and trans people and bisexuals and, yes, heterosexuals participate to loosen the bonds of gender” (Phelan 2001, 137). Utopias are politically important and represent an interesting project that Phelan offers. According to Phelan, queer citizens are those that recognize an incompleteness in their identities. It is a vital task but when we look at the practice of American politics and the politics of other countries it does not seem to be a sufficient aim. It is important to contest rights but at the same time we need to fight for these rights and for those who need them.

7.5 Queer citizen

British scholars David Bell and Jon Binnie in *The Sexual Citizen* (2000) offer a different way of theorising queer citizenship that can be seen as an alternative to the approach presented by several scholars from the U.S. For Bell and Binnie the sources of thinking about queer citizenship are in the street politics of ACT UP and Queer Nation (Bell and Binnie 2000, 20-25). They state: “The politics of rage and the politics of the body enacted by queer and AIDS activists, in fact, might take us some way toward thinking queer citizenship” (Bell and Binnie 2000, 22). Activists provide important materials for their analysis because activism is concerned with such problems as access to healthcare, access to public sphere, sex work, sexual education, etc. that are all crucial for the formulation of “citizenship”. Bell and Binnie do not offer their own original formulation of the concept of “queer” but instead analyse in detail the political situation in the UK and the U.S. during the 1990s and, in addition they examine several academic texts published at that time. They do not present any literary analyses but provide a political theorization of queer citizenship.

For Bell and Binnie “queer” functions as a kind of conceptual transgression of the notion of citizenship (Bell and Binnie 2000, 143). According to them, “queer” resists any stability, and thus this term always stands in opposition to citizenship because the concept of citizenship affirms the current political order. For Bell and Binnie, “queer” functions conceptually as a transitory and particular term. It is always a temporal concept that is the opposite of the citizen. It is a mark of someone who does not fall into the category of citizenship, or is marked as a bad citizen. In relation to the “citizen”, “queer” signifies the fantasy of alternative politics and the counter-public.

For Bell and Binnie, the task of queering citizenship means that they focus on hidden and often invisible differences within marginalized groups. They relate, for example, to the market and to class exclusion, to immigration and globalization. This is a very British post-

Marxist theorization of the problems of exclusion. Interestingly, for Bell and Binnie the issue of citizenship becomes an incitement to offer more general thoughts about queer politics. According to them, queer politics starts with the AIDS crisis and inability of gay and lesbian organizations to respond to this crisis and to growing homophobia during the 1980s. Queer politics was an answer to conservatives in the U.S. and the UK who wanted to remove sex from the public debates and postulated a new Puritanism. As the answer to AIDS, politicians proposed the closure of sex clubs and the ideal of monogamous long-term relations. Queer politics replied with a positive attitude towards sex and an aggressive call to “bash back”. In this context, Bell and Binnie see “queer politics as an important site of embodied political resistance” (Bell and Binnie 2000, 37). This resistance should not be limited to the aspects of politics related directly to sexuality, and instead they proposed a broad political project of dissidence that aimed at a deeper social transformation (Bell and Binnie 2000, 141-146).

Another aspect of queer politics that Bell and Binnie highlight is the tension among sexual minority communities that was strongly manifested during the 1980s when many heated debates took place. They write: “Queer politics also threw critical light on the lesbian and gay community and its mode of political activism, arguing that it had settled into an assimilationist agenda, with entryism into mainstream (mainly local) politics and an acceptance of the ‘good gay citizen’ model” (Bell and Binnie 2000, 37). They describe here the model of the “good gay citizen” that was developed during the 1980s, particularly in the UK. This prototype would be a gay middle class citizen, who was almost the same as heterosexual citizens, and would not manifest his sexuality in any way or even mention it in public. He would not rely on public funds and he would contribute to the state and its economy with his knowledge, work and money. This type of gay was acceptable by the Conservative party in the UK during the 1980s.

An important feature of queer politics that Bell and Binnie diagnose is the tension between queer activism and theory. They claim that the impulse to rethink the concept of citizenship came from activists and subsequently it was described in academic language. Nevertheless, the relationship between these two is not so straightforward. While LGBT communities were very divided and focused on internal divisions, from the early 1990s academics attempted to create theories that would be sensitive towards differences while enabling confrontation with threats external to communities, such as homophobia and growing conservatism. Bell and Binnie write: “While there were (and still are) tensions between academic and activist articulations of queer, the theoretical insights of queer theory nevertheless transformed aspects of sexual politics, creating the opportunity to forge new alliances and set new agendas” (Bell and Binnie 2000, 37). They seem to see the term “queer”

as capable of creating political connections beyond differences of race, class and gender. This is a surprising claim. First, it is like believing that magic is inherent to this word. In their book Bell and Binnie are in most cases very specific and provide detailed references for each claim they make, but here it seems that “queer theory” is a construct which bears a presumptive meaning. I find this point strange and incorrect. I suggest that there is no such thing as a unified queer theory. There are different stances concerning political actions among academics who use “queer”, but many prominent queer theorists do not even discuss politics openly and some do not care about alliances but instead they use “queer” in a highly individualistic manner. Moreover, some are content with radical differences (Halberstam 2005) and some are against any political action (Edelman 2004).

I find Bell and Binnie’s use of “queer” in the context of citizenship well argued and politically pragmatic. They do not create utopian visions of queer citizenship and they avoid bold claims. Instead they describe how the concept of “queer” was used to discuss political issues, particularly within lesbian and gay communities. They claim that the attention to citizenship is not a theoretical issue that needs to be developed within cultural studies. It is a problem that was brought about by AIDS activism and has direct political implications (Bell and Binnie 2000, 17-20 and 35-37). Although it seems that the authors are in favour of using “queer” as a part of political theory, they also provide a critical voice towards this term. Here, for example, is an important passage where the authors present critical remarks on “queer”:

Weir’s polemic introduces a widely voiced critique of queer politics as the politics of a metropolitan elite, unintelligible to the majority of ‘people with homosexual urges’. The alignment of queer politics (...) with so-called lifestyle politics has been used to suggest that it cannot have the same widespread appeal as the assimilationist agenda – an argument made particularly forcefully by gay conservatives, but also by what Rosaria Champagne (1998) calls ‘(anti-) queer Marxists’ who wish to retain an old school revolutionary struggle in the sphere of sexual politics. Outside the USA, there has been an added dimension to this tension, raising questions about the usefulness of queer politics, read as an American model of activism, in different political cultures. (Bell and Binnie 2000, 48)

In this excerpt, the authors present three different points of departure for their critique of queer politics. The first is an assimilationist one in which lesbian and gay activism aims at achieving rights, building a positive image of homosexual people in society and organizing homosexual people into big lobbying groups that would effectively influence current politics. For them “queer” represents a threat to the coherence of the image of homosexual people that they aim to build. In addition, for these authors “queer” seems to be an overly theoretical and politically unappealing or useless concept. From the perspective of neo-leftist lesbians and gays, “queer”

is not radical enough because the notion is too related to the problems of representation and it is difficult to apply it to any analysis of redistribution or public institutions. And finally, the third critical stance towards “queer” comes from a post-colonial perspective. For many LGBT activists in other countries, the U.S. model of political activism is not adequate to the social and political situation.

Another publication that discusses queer citizenship from the perspective of political theory is Jon Binnie’s *The Globalization of Sexuality* (2004). Here, in most cases, Binnie uses “queer” simply as a synonym for sexual minorities. In his book Binnie understands citizenship more narrowly and discusses it in relation to tourism and the migration of people but also to the migration of ideas and political strategies. He presents how the AIDS crisis and AIDS prevention policies help to create global queer political strategies. The internet has an important role in constructing a global queer citizenship (in this case I think Binnie understands citizenship to mean identity). In his book “queer” lacks a specific political meaning and is used as a descriptive term for sexual minorities. Overall, *The Globalization of Sexuality* remains an important publication because it discusses issues related to the mobility of ideas with a special emphasis on to class, ethnicity and race.

7.6 Queer politics and its geographical limits

Phelan and Berlant write from the perspective of being part of the sexual minority movement in the USA. Most of their examples and analyses relate to U.S. culture and politics, and with the exception of occasional references to the European context, they do not relate to other perspectives on LGBT politics and activism than Western ones. Only Bell and Binnie raise this issue openly as a problem that queer politics should challenge. Jasbir K. Puar examines the issue of the geography of “queer” in *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007). Puar claims that queer politics, if it focuses solely on the issue of identity and representation, becomes very limited. The very focus of queer theories needs to be reoriented. She proposes “queerness as not an identity or anti-identity but as an assemblage that is spatially and temporally contingent” (Puar 2007, 204).

In my view, Puar offers a different approach to “queer” than the notions of “queer” proposed, for example, by Butler (1993) or Sedgwick (1993) and others influenced by these early uses of this term. In the 1990s “queer” was frequently used to theorize identity and representation, often in a critical way, but it seems that these themes were dominant. For Puar, the point is not to continuously think about identity and its critique but to open up to new problems and challenges. For her, the task for queer politics is to problematize the notions of nationality, patriotism, terrorism and religion. The focus on a critique of identity limits queer

politics to the Western context and, even more narrowly, to elites who can afford to be critical about their own identity. Instead, Puar proposes a specific coalitional politics that would be able to accommodate different experiences. The point is not to idealize the queer position in relation to other subject positions. She writes:

Queerness as an assemblage moves away from excavation work, deprivileges a binary opposition between queer and not-queer subjects, and, instead of retaining queerness exclusively as dissenting, resistant, and alternative (all of which queerness importantly is and does), it underscores contingency and complicity with dominant formations. (Puar 2007, 205)

For Puar, “queer” can be an effective political term but it needs to be used to critically examine the current political situation. I support Puar’s view and consider that many discussions on queer identity can be seen as the self-indulgence of academics who are not able to go beyond the borders of U.S. individualism. Puar offers an open concept of “queer” without the limitations of belonging or not-belonging. Her aim is rather to take seriously the various experiences and exclusions that exist on different levels. It is not about setting a limit to queerness but rather about opening it up to new engagements. The concept of “other” changes. Currently in the USA, in relation to the mainstream U.S. culture, Arabs more than homosexual people represent the *other*. The examples of issues that appear here are how to develop tools to analyse Arab sexuality and how to form a coalition with them to fight the state and cultural oppression. There are no ready answers to these questions, but it is an important task for queer politics in order to remain in touch with reality and critical.

Puar does not reject the concept of “queer” she instead aims to direct it more towards concrete political issues. She finds it problematic that the concept is predominantly used for cultural and literary analyses. She describes her project as: “Reflective of an ongoing push to articulate queer theories beyond their origins in literary studies, as well as a challenge to unproved assumptions of whiteness and citizenship privilege (...)” (Puar 2007, xiv). Puar often understands citizenship to be a document that grants specific rights. The problem is that Western citizenship seems to assume a superior position towards others. The point for her is to recognize otherness, not like Phelan who postulates it in ourselves, but outside and in this way create a space for it. Moreover, the aim is to create a connection with these very concrete others: immigrants, Arabs, Asians, and so on. “Queer” is about creating assemblages.

7.7 Perspectives on queer citizenship

Within recent decades many books and articles have been published concerning the relationship between “queer” and “citizenship”. I have focused my analyses on authors such as Shane Phelan, Lauren Berlant, David Bell and Jon Binnie, and Jasbir K. Puar because I find their

accounts of queer citizenship most relevant to present discussions about “queer” and the politics of this concept. Each of them offers an original conceptualization of “queer” within the context of political theory.

The discussions concerning citizenship interestingly return “queer” from the field of literary theories to the core of politics. “Queer” functions as a political concept as it sheds a critical light on the understanding of citizenship. All of the authors that I analyse agree that the current idea of citizenship in the Western world needs to be rethought. For Berlant the key concern is public space, which needs to be sexualized and opened up to new forms of participation. Phelan creates a utopian vision of a community of equals, queer citizens to come. This needs to be preceded by a thorough critique of the current political discourse. Bell and Binnie advocate a search for new forms of participation and representation in politics. Puar advocates the creation of strategic assemblages in order to challenge oppressive and homogenized culture. To me, the most politically realistic view is presented by Puar. It is good to aim at more thorough changes in society but at the same time there are very concrete steps that can be made when we create assemblages and recognize our differences.

Conclusions

This study analyses various uses of “queer” as a political concept. I examine how “queer” was politicized among sexual minority communities, activists and academics. I believe that this thesis sheds new light on debates that have proven crucial for sexual minorities over the last few decades. My study does not merely present the history of “queer” as a political concept, it also highlights the political importance of some uses of “queer” and engages in discussion about the political consequences with selected theorists.

From my own perspective “queer” is a foreign word. Although for me the term does not carry any emotional history, it is fascinating to study such a term that is profoundly marked by violence, pain, struggle and often also pride. Currently this term evokes a nostalgia for radicalism, a fantasy about activism and theories that are disruptive and transformative. An attempt to study this term while being geographically so far from its context might seem to be a hard task, but even if it is merely my personal nostalgic story of “queer”, it brought me the belief that theories and activism can be truly and deeply political on a small and larger scale and this outlook on “queer” can also point out real political problems that exist to this day.

Queer activism from the end of the 1980s had an immense impact on the various groups and political movements that followed. Theatrical, militant and often exaggerated forms of political activism in public spaces that used the term “queer” inspired such groups as Pussy Riot or Femen and even had an influence on the Occupy Movement. Also in academia the uses of “queer” introduced deep changes. Up until the 1980s, many important feminist academic discussions were preoccupied with the issue of gender. Human rights discourse was dominant in debates concerning sexual minorities. “Queer” marks the departure from the language dominated by theories focused on gender and human rights. From the 1990s on there was an increasing number of publications that used “queer” and postulated a stronger focus on sexuality and various forms of sexual practices. “Queer” was used to reshape academic discussions by bringing in new topics and new methodologies. In the 1990s the concept of “queer” became a mark of a new sexual politics. My study presents a multiplicity of topics and debates in which “queer” played a crucial part as a political signifier.

Political language is dynamic, it constantly evolves, and so does the very understanding of politics and even of society over time. Depending on the historical context, some terms become a powerful media for political messages or they might be words devoid of political content. During the 20th century, political language frequently changed and many new terms gained popularity and became political signs. Examples of such new political terms are

“green”, “neoliberalism”, “New Left”, “postmodernism” or “postcolonialism”. Another example of such terms is “queer”, a common abusive term for non-heterosexual people, that also gained political usage. “Queer” has proven to be flexible enough to serve various political purposes. This oppressive term was turned into a tool for fighting the very oppression that underlies the semantic history of this term during the 20th century. The term was picked up and redescribed by various users who expressed their political ideas through it. I have analysed the most influential and politically potent uses of this word.

“Queer” has been a key term in many debates among sexual minorities for more than a quarter of a century. I would suggest that in the majority of contexts queer has functioned in opposition to “gay”. Nevertheless, “queer” was not an alternative concept to “gay”, rather it functioned alongside of “gay”, creating a conceptual tension that resulted in countless debates among sexual minorities within and outside of academia.

In my thesis I do not assume that there is something like a “sexual minority” which forms a self-conscious community or a social group that has specific qualities. I use the term “sexual minorities” largely as a sign of marginalized sexual agencies. By the plural form of this term I wish to highlight that people who belong to sexual minorities do not form one group, comparable to e.g. a class. Those who do not belong to the majority are very divided; they perceive and describe their body and sexuality in various ways. One of the side results of my analyses is a reminder of how divided and polarized sexual minorities are, how heated their discussions are, and how many different political standpoints and opinions they represent.

The term “queer” as a political concept does not have a clear history. As early as the 1960s and possibly before then, there were people who used the term as a part of their radical political engagement. In my thesis I focus on the time when “queer” became a basis for political community, action and theories. My study clearly shows that “queer” was mobilized in various ways to function as a powerful political signifier.

“Queer” started to be more widespread as a political term at the end of the 1980s amidst the AIDS crisis. Initially, “queer” was used by some activists to combat the stigmatization of people with HIV/AIDS and various forms of homophobia. For many of them the term also carried a utopian promise of an alternative social reality. These two currents of uses of “queer”, engaged in transformative politics and representing utopian politics, can be found throughout many texts from recent decades that applied “queer” as a political concept.

I suggest that feminist debates of the 1980s and new trends in U.S. academia, such as poststructuralism, deconstruction and the Foucaultian thought reshaped the political language that sexual minorities used during the time. In my study I presented how, at the end of the

1980s, “queer” was brought into politics by new organizations such as ACT UP and Queer Nation, which searched for new forms of political engagement. The term “queer” was used to mobilize people to act together politically in the face of the AIDS crisis. Activists used “queer” not only to address issues related to the AIDS crisis or to new forms of homophobia but also to initiate debates on ongoing problems within sexual minority communities, such as internal exclusions based on race or gender.

My analyses show that the political usage of “queer” starts with the connection to death as it was used by AIDS activists, but the term was not primarily used as a form of political mourning. I have presented how the term became a potent form of protest for some circles of sexual minorities against mainstream politics in the U.S. during the 1990s, but this term also politically challenged academic vocabularies, particularly ones used for discussing sexuality. The connection to the trope of death and negativity became an important context in which “queer” has been used, opening a new political path of contestation that continues to the present day (Edelman 2004, de Lauretis 2008, Halberstam 2011).

I have analysed in detail the first academic uses of “queer” in political contexts. In the beginning of the 1990s, “queer” appeared as part of academic discussions concerning the idea of sexual identity, community, political strategies but also the very language that was used to describe the issues of sexual minorities. My observation is that academics applied “queer” to new forms of cultural and philosophical analyses that have challenged the field of feminism and gender studies. I suggest that there has been tension between political usages of “queer” among activists and in academia. It is particularly visible, for example, in Douglas Crimp’s essays from that time and in debates around Judith Butler’s work. My finding indicates that in early academic usage, “queer” was used by authors such as Teresa de Lauretis (1991) and Sue-Ellen Case (1991) without reference to activism or AIDS. Arguably, this opened up a path for versatile political uses of this term.

In the texts that I have studied, perhaps the most common pattern that “queer” as a political term carried was a sense of opposition towards the dominant norms and order. It was strongly present in the manifesto “Queers Read This” from 1990, carried into academia by Michael Warner (1993) and David M. Halperin (1995) and continues to circulate, for example, in the work of Lee Edelman (2004) and Judith Halberstam (2005 and 2011). My contention is that “queer” in relation to the idea of contestation of norms resembles a certain melancholy for impossible romantic agency beyond social norms. In particular the work of Lee Edelman and Jack Halberstam I perceive as a nostalgic longing for radicalism.

When discussing the uses of “queer” in the work of Judith Butler, I highlight the fact that, contrary to common interpretations, her use of “queer” has little connection with the idea of performativity. I demonstrate that Butler (1993) rather relates “queer” to problems of intersections of sexuality, race and class. Butler used the term “queer” as part of her poststructuralist framework. It represents an important switch in academic language describing the struggle of sexual minorities which was previously often dominated by various forms of Neo-Marxist discourse. I suggest that “queer” is part of Judith Butler’s conceptual politics in academia that calls for constant re-evaluation of terms and methodologies that sexual minorities use.

In the case of the work of Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick my finding is that she uses “queer” to problematize the idea of identity. “Queer” functions in her work as a specific deconstructive term that can be related to various topics as a form of critical inquiry. My contention is that “queer” for Sedgwick is a very flexible signifier that can also relate to a certain type of affect. Politically, the term opposes established narrations of homosexuality. Sedgwick aims at developing a new language that would allow for a broader expression of non-normative sexualities. In Sedgwick’s essays “queer” helps to reveal assumptions underlying literary constructions, and “queer” also functions as an incitement to rereading literary texts and to perceive them as radically open to various interpretations. The literary politics of “queer” is about new forms of reading and meaning construction. I point out that Sedgwick’s use of “queer” inspired many writers to apply this term to the field of literary studies and art criticism.

I offer examples of how “queer” functions politically in order to present this concept as always in transition, never fully defined and never owned by any one person. My study reveals that politically “queer” seems to be quite an open and flexible term that can carry various connotations. The political message that “queer” carried depended on the issue to which the term was related but also on the methodology of the author who used the term. “Queer” was deployed in the works of Butler or Sedgwick to contest certain methodological approaches towards sexuality and to promote new ones. I therefore suggest that the politics of “queer” should be seen as not merely related to social reality but also to the conceptual politics of academia. My analyses of Butler’s or Sedgwick’s uses of “queer”, for instance, present how the concept performs a very specific conceptual politics in academia.

I also examine the recently fruitful connection between “queer” and negativity. In particular, I have analysed how Lee Edelman (2004) and Judith Halberstam (2005) use “queer” to build their projects of political contestation. Their projects are different, but they share a mistrust towards the way politics functions in the U.S. and perhaps also in Europe. For them,

“queer” reflects this mistrust. I argue that for these scholars the term functions as a type of anarchic signifier. I believe that this type of approach on a certain level risks depoliticizing various struggles of sexual minorities. In my opinion a productive political approach would be based on an engagement with democratic institutions and an attempt to challenge and redefine them from within.

In the case of several authors discussed in this study, I point out that “queer” is related to a certain idea of negativity and the term seems to function in a binary framework that divides the social into the normative and the non-normative or the dominant and the excluded. Scholars such as Michael Warner and Lee Edelman, and to some extent Judith Halberstam, construct the social and political field as a fairly homogeneous field that is normative and oppressive. “Queer” in this structure functions as a negation. These authors see “queer” as an opposition to normative liberal or neoliberal social and political reality. I suggest that this approach simplifies the question of identity to a one-dimensional concept while leaving on the side all the complexity of the multiple forms of identification that we experience. My argument is that such binary oppositions always stem from an idealization of social reality. Politically, these theories to some might sound radical, but to others they might sound somewhat self-indulgent when they pay little attention to the reality around them. In my opinion it is a politically naïve stand to propose “queer” as a word which represents the outside of the system in which we live. Works such as *No Future*, for example, do not contribute to understanding or to answering any of the existing challenges that minorities face.

My final chapter offered analyses of the uses of “queer” in relation to the traditional political issues such as citizenship. My finding was that for some scholars “queer” functions within political language as a term that extends the debate on citizenship. For Lauren Berlant (1997) and Shane Phelan (2001) “queer” functions as a call to develop alternative ways of thinking about citizenship. In other words, “queer” is used to design a utopian vision of citizenship that is open and accommodating to differences. This debate also points out the limited character of the concept of political agency that is broadly used in politics and political theories. For other political theorists such as Bell and Binnie (2000), “queer” is an occasion to engage in debate about the limitations of the British, but also more broadly, the Western concept of citizenship. For them, “queer” is not a call for an alternative concept of citizenship but for challenging and reworking the existing one. Bell and Binnie use “queer” not as part of the politics of withdrawal or the politics of lamentation, and instead the term is used to engage in transformative politics.

Every signifier, and this is the case particularly with political signifiers, is partly imagined. I do not believe that the analyses of the uses of “queer” that I present reveal some internal truth about this concept, but perhaps they present some fragments of a certain political imagination that captured many authors and activists who started using “queer” as a political signifier. This political imaginary was subsequently shaped by various theoretical approaches and methodologies.

My work brings together various uses of “queer” as originally found in academic discussions and in activists’ debates. The aim is not to construct a synthesis of political uses of “queer”; on the contrary, the goal is to present variety of different applications of this concept. I claim that “queer” is a contingent term and its uses are diverse. The uses of this term during the last quarter of century were heterogeneous and they related to many ideas. In my study I focused on the most important ones such as the critique of sexual identity, new forms of political activism, discussions about representation of sexual minorities, the critique of the political system in the U.S., and the contestation of norms.

“Queer” clearly had an immense impact on the language and politics of sexual minorities. Many academic texts that used “queer”, such as *Bodies That Matter* by Butler or *Tendencies* by Sedgwick 1993, created a conceptual tension that resulted in countless debates that still take place today both within and outside of academia.

Since the end of the 1980s “queer” has proliferated and has been used in multiple contexts. Perhaps today the term does not sound politically as radical as it did, and while analysing Edelman’s *No Future*, for instance, my impression is that what is left from the initial radicalism is a sense of indefinite nostalgia. I do not predict that in the future “queer” will remain an open term or that it will remain political at all. I maintain that there is a political potential in “queer” that is best demonstrated by its ability to be a critical term for activists and academics. This term can be used in demonstrations but also applied to analyses sexuality, community, politics and the state and its institutions. In various academic uses, “queer” maintains the characteristic activist-derived sense of opposition towards dominant social, cultural and political order.

If “queer” as a political term has one persistent connotation, it is clearly related to minority groups. “Queer” does not always relate to homosexuality e.g. (Sedgwick 1993) but I did not find a single usage of this term that would refer to the majority of society. “Queer” works within specific minority logic, sometimes offering a challenge to this logic, like in the work of Judith Butler, who points to the constructed character of the minority subject (Butler 1993). “Queer” was also set to function in opposition to “homonormativity” (Halberstam 2005

and 2011). The term was used in debates about models of the lesbian and gay community and politics. “Queer” was often used a part of the critique of LGBT politics that was predominantly focused on achieving rights. Several scholars that used the term opposed assimilationist politics and a way of theorising sexual minorities based on the model of ethnic minority.

The political potential of “queer” is always local and temporal. This is another reason why I focused on the usage of “queer” in the United States. When it was imported to other countries, mostly to Europe, it worked differently and predominantly failed to carry such a powerful political potential, but was instead considered a trendy academic term. “Queer” in Europe did not carry the history of the struggle with the AIDS crisis. It came directly into academic discussions and never became as popular among different groups of activists (with the exception of some groups in the UK during the early 1990s).

It is clear that the countless texts that used “queer” produced a significant shift in the way sexuality is perceived and theorised. There is no clear answer to which uses of “queer” are political and which are not. In my view, the political uses of “queer” make an intervention in academia, communities, society, politics and the lives of individual people. The authors that I have analysed in this thesis have clearly made an intervention on several of these levels. Only time will tell whether “queer” will retain its political character or whether it will lose its power of critical intervention.

Currently “queer” is widely used in various, often commercial contexts but even in commercial context this term can be in a certain way political and it can be a form of intervention in public sphere. I think that currently “queer” does not seem to sound politically so radical as during the early 1990s. Often the term appears as a synonym of “original” in relation to sexuality and it even became trendy in certain artistic circles. Nevertheless, for many people the term continues to carry an important political message.

“Queer” is a concept that carries the painful history of exclusion, marginalization and the struggle of sexual minorities in the United States. “Queer” has never been a neutral academic concept but it should be seen instead as an affective engagement with social and political reality. Moreover, it also marks a specific, I would argue, passionate engagement within the academic field. This political passion can be seen in the many uses of the term that I have analysed in my study. This passion drives people to search for new ways of thinking about and experiencing sexuality.

Perhaps “queer” will remain the flexible term it was originally intended to be at the end of the 1980s, never fully owned by anyone who uses it, capable of alliances and always critical

and radical. Another possible fate for queer is that it will disappear and other terms will speak more strongly to people's political imagination and capture their energies and passions.

There are many more ways in which "queer" can be analysed. It can be seen from the perspective of affect theory or from the viewpoint of literary criticism. In my analyses I partly included these perspectives so that my focus would be entirely on the political aspect of "queer". This aspect remains important to this day due to the many essays and books that, for instance, currently use "queer" as a sign of protest towards academic politics. For more than two decades this term has been very successful in mobilizing political action and reflection on sexuality and more broadly on society. For many, "queer" remains a political term that signifies a dream of a deep social change and the encouragement to fight to make this dream come true.

"Queer" is a concept that during the last decades has been constantly forged, invented, claimed, imagined and re-imagined. This project came from the fascination with the queer movement and queer theories but also from a certain melancholia about political radicalism that is foreclosed to me. I see my own project on "queer" as a celebration of passion and as an engagement with people who as activists and academics use the term "queer" as their weapon to challenge and transform politics.

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