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Theory, politics and community:
Ethical dilemmas in Sydney and Melbourne queer activist collectives

***

Kate O’Halloran

2015
Declaration of Originality

I declare that the substance of this thesis has not been submitted already for any degree, nor is it currently being submitted for another degree. I certify to the best of my knowledge that all sources of reference have been acknowledged in this body of work.

Signed:

Kate O’Halloran

22 October 2015
Abstract

U.S.-based queer theory began with an explicit ethical agenda tied inseparably to real-world politics and activism. Key scholars Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault and Gayle Rubin proposed that the political potentiality of queer lay in the ‘way of life’ and affective and relational virtualities it could bring about, and not as a progressivist movement defined by its radicalism in opposition to movements ‘past’ (especially feminism and gay and lesbian politics).

In this thesis I argue that the translation of this ethical agenda has been problematic within theoretically-informed queer activist collectives in Sydney and Melbourne. These collectives are often plagued by intra-group conflict and feelings of ostracisation and exclusion. For example, this is exemplified in the activist practice of ‘calling out’ which shuts down rather than opens up the possibility of ethical movement towards other bodies, and productive encounters with difference. This then produces alienation amongst some members on account of not sharing the ‘dominant’ queer position on a number of issues covered in this thesis: from gay marriage debates to contemporary manifestations of the ‘feminist sex wars’. The thesis traces the historical contexts and precedents for these debates, notably U.S.-based queer theory, and the particularly conservative political context out of which it arose and that gave rise to its often polemical mode of address.

I argue for a more ‘ethical’ ways of being in collectivity with other bodies that encourage productive connection rather than diminution of those bodies involved. In this I draw on case studies such as the RuPaul’s Drag Race (2009-) and Wicked Women communities as examples of difficult but productive encounters with antagonism that suggest new, productive paths for an ethics of localised queer activism.
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INTRODUCTION - QUEER ACTIVIST ETHICS

It’s September 2014. I’ve been thinking a long time about what anecdote¹ I could draw on to function as broadly representative of the scenes and conflicts I describe herein. I hope that my example might also shed some light on why I chose to spend five years of my life writing about a topic I find as dispiriting and frustrating as this one. The problem is that I no longer voluntarily participate in much queer activism, at least not the kind that drove me to this topic in the first place. For almost a decade I was involved in queer collectives connected with The University of Melbourne and The University of Sydney (the two Higher Education institutions I’ve studied at). This included being part of groups that met on campus, organised social and political events and participated in rallies. I was also involved in (and to an extent am still involved in) queer social life and the activist-affiliated ‘queer scene’. By the ‘queer scene’ I refer to the people, events and places² that constitute a queer-specific (as distinct from ‘gay and lesbian’) nightlife and social networks in these two cities. Participants in the scene I describe are not only current or ex-student activists, yet they do tend to be relatively young (in their 20s, 30s, and less often 40s and above), affluent and educated. Often they have come across ‘queer’ via theirs and/or others’ exposure to queer theory or participation in queer activist collectives (which, importantly, may mobilise ‘queer’ in a way that differs from dominant theoretical or academic usages). Still others are drawn to the queer scene because of its embrace of gendered and/or sexual fluidity. This includes people who identify as trans³, genderqueer or intersex, or in any other way refuse more normative categorisations of queer sexuality like gay or lesbian. For many, these scenes and collectives promise hope,

¹ I describe my use of anecdote with reference to Meaghan Morris’ description of the mise en abyme (1988; 1989) as this section continues.
² In Melbourne these suburbs are usually located in the inner-north like Carlton, Fitzroy, Collingwood, and Brunswick. On Sydney I mean predominantly the queer-friendly ‘inner-west’ bubble of Newtown, Enmore and Marrickville.
³ I have chosen to use ‘trans’ in this thesis to refer to a range of possible trans identities, for instance, transgender, transsexual and trans (which some use in the sense of ‘genderqueer’). In this I follow the work of Kath Browne and Jason Lim (2010), but also an overwhelming number of local queer activists who prefer the term because it ‘avoids recourse to the opposition between sex and gender’ that the traditional distinction between ‘transgender’ as associated with ‘social gender roles’ and ‘transsexualism’ as ‘associated with embodied “sex”’ (p. 617). As Browne and Lim write, the term ‘trans’ thus draws on ‘poststructural feminist analyses of gender/sex in that we are seeking to move beyond dichotomies of man/woman as well as questioning the location of gender within pre-existing (or surgically formed) sexed bodies’ (p. 617).
safety, collective change and growth. Still more, however, have begun to withdraw. I, like so many others, have lost patience with the scene, been worn down by endless Facebook (and less often, in-person) arguments that degenerate into personalising attacks and circular arguments that make you feel as if you’re banging your head against a brick wall. Queer activism in Sydney and Melbourne as I and so many others know it has become what Rob Cover (2013) describes as a space of ‘relative’ (I’m tempted to say ‘total’) ‘misery’.

Having chosen to write on this topic I have been surprised and invigorated by the number of people who feel the same way as I do. When I first started to write this thesis I was terrified about what my friends or those I knew in the scene would think of me being so critical of our ‘community’⁴. Contrary to my fears I have time and again encountered people opening up about their own feelings of ostracisation and frustration; they may not be willing to go on the ‘record’ for fear of further isolation, but on the whole many feel deflated and defeated about the current state of affairs. And so it was in this capacity that my anecdote came to me. My ex-girlfriend is currently an editor of the University of Sydney’s Honi Soit – the campus newspaper – and was involved in an editorial discussion around the artwork that was to go on the cover of the Queer Edition⁵. She sent a screenshot of the thread to me for moral support.

The debate presented here may not perfectly encapsulate all the issues I have drawn out in this thesis as the chapters progress, but it is yet another, banal example of the kinds of repetitious infighting that currently characterises these scenes. My use of anecdote here is inspired by Meaghan Morris’ (1988) understanding of how it can work to produce a mise en abyme; as a ‘referential’ tool that can function as an ‘allegorical exposition of a model of the way the world can be said to be working’ (p. 7)⁶. Like Morris I imagine the necessarily limited allegory that anecdotes can provide as being useful for the ‘construction of a precise, local, and social discursive context’ (p. 7, emphasis in the

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⁴ Community as a term and necessarily contested and fraught concept is something I will explore in much more detail in Chapter Five in particular.

⁵ This was the Week Eight, Semester Two 2014 edition of Honi Soit.

⁶ Morris elsewhere describes the mise en abyme as ‘a sign of appropriation… that generates some kind of explicit commentary on the modifying power, or desired effects, of its own action on other textual elements, other texts’ (1989, p. 107). I take Morris to mean this discursively in the sense that a mise en abyme can capture a particular historico-political moment or event that speaks of the broader power relations that are at work in local queer activism, as only one example.
original) that works to illuminate ‘what counts as politics, to whom’ in these local, everyday, even ‘mundane’ encounters (Gregg 2004, p. 364). The use of anecdote, ethnographic and auto-ethnographic observation in this thesis is a deliberate methodological choice. In this I am sensitive to the often affectively fraught nature of participating in queer activist collectives and scenes, particularly for those who are exposed to marginalisation and oppression on account of their gender, sex or sexuality in their everyday lives more generally. Talking about conflict within these scenes raises the emotional stakes once again; confessing to one’s experiences of ostracisation can set one up for further isolation within an already ‘niche’ scene. As a result I have often had to rely on informal accounts of people’s experiences of exclusion or conflict. Although most people I spoke to had very similar experiences they were frightened to put their name to what they identified as an ‘unpopular’ – even if majority – viewpoint (I expand on this in Chapter Two in my discussion of ‘hot politics’). Presenting these encounters as anecdotes or personal observations became a way to insulate them from the frightening possibility of being exposed to further political scrutiny and social exclusion.

Leading with everyday examples has also allowed me to illustrate the way people in these scenes navigate academic or theoretical ideals in their collective and social lives. For Melissa Gregg (2004), Meaghan Morris’ practice of using the ‘mundane’ is a way of staying connected to the localised impacts of universalising theory: ‘a mundane voice is shown to situate and contextualise our understanding of major concepts circulating in international theory, and broaden the audience for academic debate’ (p. 363). In this thesis I am interested in the impact that U.S.-based canonical queer theory has had on these local, grass-roots collectives and the ethical implications of this complex and difficult relationship between theory and the everyday. Beginning with the mundane and banal allows me to invert traditional academic practice of ‘applying political theory to everyday life’ (Gregg 2004, p. 364) to consider how ‘people’s actions and involvement in events’ are ‘significant historical exercises in themselves’ and to ‘recognize how people act in dissonance with theoretical models’ (p. 378). Measuring this dissonance is

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7 I am likewise inspired by Elspeth Probyn’s use of the anecdotal in the sense that she is invested in ‘a mode of theorizing that is careful of where it is leaving from’ (1995, p. 2). For Probyn this is a deliberate methodological choice designed to avert the universalising impulses of academic ‘booms’. As Probyn argues, ‘much theory seems to be hell-bent on arriving somewhere, belonging to one clique or another,
particularly significant to this project given that I am concerned with the relationship between what I see as queer theory’s original ethical agenda (as exemplified by key figures like Michel Foucault and Eve Sedgwick among others) and the ethical dilemmas that play out in conflicts in these scenes. In the chapters that follow, I will suggest that queer activism in Sydney and Melbourne has become increasingly distanced from the ethical agenda that inspired queer theory and associated activism in the first place. The fact that this example involves an online thread that was eventually shut down on account of having become an ‘unsafe’ space, after one by one its participants retreated from the discussion, only furthers this contention.

‘Lisa’, a self-identified ‘pansexual female’ has been asked to put forward a design for the front page and posts one option to the editorial team:

Fig. 1. Queer Edition Honi Soit 2014

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fitting in, being in, travelling under the sign of the latest buzz-words’ (p. 2). In this thesis, the impact of canonical queer theory on local activist scenes is evidence of the at once universalising nature of particularly U.S.-based theory, and the very specific local effects of this relationship.

I have anonymised the names of all the activists I draw on in this thesis so as not to identify those involved.
Almost immediately, there is a problem. ‘Sam’, a participant on the thread, and the first to comment, writes: ‘[n]o offence, great art but really really not pro sex focused cis white bodies’ (personal communication, 28 August 2014). Lisa offers to change the image, but specifies that she deliberately kept the figures ‘andrognous’. Others agree that the figures are both ambiguous in terms of whether or not they are ‘cisgendered’ or ‘white’. ‘Jo’ (personal communication, 28 August 2014) adds that they don’t read them as cisgendered either:

...but thinking about it I suppose it’s an issue if they CAN be read as cis/white (since cis white folks are absolutely going to read them as cis and white) - and we don’t want it to be ambiguous.

I’d like to pause here for a moment because this last point is important to the arguments I’ll make in this introduction and beyond. Ambiguity here is construed as a problem: it is the problem of this representation. Because ambiguous, the logic goes, the image can only be problematic, since non-specificity is assumed to automatically equate to normativity, while normativity is assumed inherently problematic. Perhaps this first logical leap (non-specificity equating to normativity) makes sense if considered from the perspective that heteronormativity and white privilege are shored up by way of being ‘invisible’, by way of being construed as ‘natural’ and default. But what does such a binaristic interpretation of queer versus normative bodies and representation leave out? Sam later complains that the bodies are on the ‘whiter side of things,’ (personal communication, 28 August 2014) so are coloured bodies more or less problematic by their proximity to whiteness? What about the Asian body? In this image, the bodies are slight in build, their skin at least partially a tanned or yellowed white, both of which could easily signify Asianness. Despite this, they are interpreted in a fairly inflexible binary between white and non-white; because the bodies are not unambiguously ‘black’, they are taken to be ‘white’ and immediately rendered ‘problematic’ or ‘normative’ in a way

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9 I have cited all of these quotes as personal communication since they took place in a private editorial discussion on Facebook that I received screenshots of.
10 I have used ‘they’ in the thesis as a pronoun for those I am aware of who prefer gender-neutral pronouns.
11 See for example Antonio Gramsci’s (1995) prison notebooks on the concept of hegemony where he describes the way dominant ideology is maintained by way of its ‘common sense’ nature, despite it benefiting the few. Thus, for example, whiteness, as Richard Dyer (1997) argues, is never in and of itself seen as a race, but rather the ‘default’ against which other races/ethnicities are defined. He tries to redress this by studying whiteness.
that fails to qualify as sufficiently queer. It is this limiting interpretation of bodies that contributes to what Gilbert Caluya (2006; 2008) calls the racial stratification of bodies and space in the Sydney queer scene. As an Asian man who conducted his autoethnography of gay clubbing in Newtown and Darlinghurst, Caluya finds himself repeatedly confronted by his taxonimisation as Asian, a process of what he calls ‘racial fixing’ (2008, p. 283) that overrides all other aspects of his sexuality, gender identity and/or body such as ‘sense of style or modes of behaviour’ (p. 285). He is both restricted in terms of literal movement in space, in the sense that clubs are often divided along racial lines (he describes one club as having ‘reserved’ a space for Asian men and rice queens ‘around the bottom of the stairs next to the stage’ (Caluya 2008, p. 287)) and by way of not being seen in all his complexity beyond the colour of his skin (his ‘identity’ as Asian precludes him from consideration as anything else - and indeed as an object of desire to anyone but ‘rice queens’12). In a similar sense, the bodies in this artwork become a point of fixation and stringent classification, a site not only for reading whiteness and normativity into ambiguity, but perhaps more importantly for this project, as a site where fixed ideas about what queerness ought to entail and look like permeate. The only bodies that would be queer enough for this image, the logic goes, would be ones marked as visibly trans, as visibly non-white (with a lack of clarity about what that would mean for the Asian body, as one example) and visibly polyamorous. Thus, not only is the raced body constrained by a relatively inflexible taxonomy, so too are cis/trans bodies and monogamous/polyamorous bodies. Bodies that pass, presumably, are not trans/queer enough, bodies that have sex in pairs are unambiguously monogamous. This not only fixes what queer bodies and/or politics can and should look like, but taxonomies of race, sex, gender and sexuality simultaneously.

Such a taxonimisation of queerness, particularly in binary distinction from the ‘normative’, is contrary to Eve Sedgwick’s (1994) originating conception of queer as a ‘continuing movement’, akin to the English adjective ‘recurrent’ combined with the French ‘troublant’ (p. xii); a kind of perpetual but variable political disturbance. Speaking from the perspective of a 1992 gay pride parade in New York City where African

12 Caluya (2008) explains that the term rice queen is ‘gay parlance-initially used derogatively, but increasingly as a term of self-identification-to describe white men who are attracted primarily to Asian men’ (p. 284).
American, Latino and white leather men, dykes and drag queens united in anticipation of the president’s latest address on the status of AIDS drugs, Sedgwick heralded what felt like a ‘queer’ time (p. xii). She warned, however, that ‘[i]n the short-shelf-life American marketplace of images, maybe the queer moment, if it’s here today, will for that very reason be gone tomorrow’ (p. xii). Sedgwick in other words imagined that queer named not a static, recognisable form of resistance to the norm but one that would be inextinguishable by nature of its capacity to be, as Judith Butler – herself building on Sedgwick – claimed, ‘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, p. 228). I argue that to follow through on this promise would mean firstly interrogating the nature of ‘queer’ as a U.S.-centric term and movement (borne of literary studies departments and insular citation circles revolving around the ‘Big Ten’ U.S. campuses, and inspired by the specific history of AIDS activism in the U.S.). Likewise, within this framework, there could be no simple assurance of queer’s particular historical moment as distinct from more ‘normative’ or ‘mainstream’ gay and lesbian movements. Indeed, in 1995, at the height of queer theory’s institutionalisation in the academy13, Elspeth Probyn (1993) warned against queer as a point ‘of departure that would either assimilate or reify queer desire,’ instead calling for a ‘method of differentiation that refuses a logic of categorization’ (p. 13). In the context of the debate above, and other conflicts covered in this thesis, however, fixed and fixated readings of queerness and normativity reify queerness as the most radical departure from the norm imaginable. These are not ‘readers who make strange, who render queer the relations between images and bodies’ (Probyn 1995, p. 9) but a constituency assured of precisely what makes a body ‘queer’ or not.

It is apt, I would argue, that Caluya (2008) reflects on being racially codified in the queer scene as mirroring the kind of ‘taxonomic classifications of early sexology’ (p. 285) that Michel Foucault critiqued in The History of Sexuality Vol. 1. Queer activism in the scenes I

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13 It was in 1995, for example, that Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner reflected that ‘queer theory has already incited a vast labor of metacommentary, a virtual industry: special issues, sections of journals, omnibus reviews, anthologies, and dictionary entries’ causing them to decry the practice of ‘introduc[ing], anatomiz[ing], and theoriz[ing] something that can barely be said yet to exist’ (p. 343). It was in 1996, meanwhile, that Annamarie Jagose wrote the oft-cited, re-printed and influential Queer Theory: An Introduction, paving the way for similarly popular consolidations of the field as distinct from gay and lesbian studies and feminism in particular.
describe has deviated significantly from the original ethical agenda that the work of key figures in the field like Sedgwick and Foucault instantiated. Foucault of course is not just any key figure: one need only look as far as David Halperin’s (1995) claim that ‘you can’t even begin to practice queer politics without reading’ (p. 26) the History of Sexuality Vol. 1 for some evidence of the status of Foucault’s work within the field of queer theory and its associated activist networks. Intellectually Foucault is influential for his historico-political analysis of the effects of disciplinary power manifest in the pseudo or medical sciences as regimes of truth-making that turned homosexual acts into a conception of the homosexual as ‘species’14. Foucault was clear that disciplinary power in relation to sexuality operated not by means of repression, but as productive in its proliferation of sexualities, its proliferation of potential pathologies15. He warned that a gay politics that sought civil rights and assimilation into the mainstream was a necessarily limited political operation enacted on the very (pathological) terms set out by sexologists. Foucault’s work thus became emblematic of a radical shift in the politics of particularly U.S.-based AIDS activists who no longer believed in ‘freedom’ as tied up with the ‘liberation’ and confession of their repressed (homo)sexuality. For prominent AIDS activists like Douglas Crimp and others, such a politics could not account for the fact that homosexuals were increasingly seen as ‘sexually voracious’ and ‘murderously irresponsible’ in their promiscuity (Crimp 1987, p. 244) - often by homosexuals themselves16. Crimp (1987) succinctly summarises conventional (moral) wisdom at the time embodied by Larry Kramer’s play The Normal Heart: ‘that gay men should stop having so much sex, that promiscuity kills’ (p. 247). To an increasingly fearful public, the reason for and problem with AIDS – as summarised by Berkeley biochemist Peter Duesberg – was thus ‘the gay lifestyle’ (Duesberg cited in Crimp 1987, p. 238). In retaliation, Crimp (p. 253) builds on Cindy Patton17 to remind that grassroots gay and lesbian communities:

14 For other influential work in this tradition see Halperin’s (1990) One Hundred Years of Homosexuality which seeks to establish the absence of homosexual definition in male-male erotics in Ancient Greece, or Jonathan Katz (1997) on the discursive construction of ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’ as categories of sexual orientation.
15 See for instance Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s Psychopathia Sexualis (1998), originally published in German in 1886, which catalogues a range of possible sexual perversions and was influential for sexologists.
16 Crimp covers at length Randy Schilts from the San Francisco Chronicle’s invention of ‘Patient Zero’ which Crimp calls ‘Schilts’s homophobic nightmare of himself’ (Crimp 1987, p. 244).
17 Patton insisted that grassroots communities were influential in navigating the dangers of AIDS and sexual experimentation more generally, but that homophobia prevented people from turning to urban gay
...were able to invent safe sex because we have always known that sex is not, in an epidemic or not, limited to penetrative sex. Our promiscuity taught us many things, not only about the pleasures of sex, but about the great multiplicity of those pleasures.

Against conventional (failed) moral wisdom that abstinence and monogamy were the only two ‘safe’ approaches to AIDS, then, Crimp, Patton and other ACT UP and AIDS activists signified a radical shift in gay politics on sex that could no longer simply seek assimilation into a homophobic mainstream that turned a blind eye to gay men dying whilst simultaneously codifying AIDS as a ‘gay disease’ and withdrawing funding for AIDS that ‘promote[s], encourage[s], or condone[s] homosexual sexual activities’ (Crimp 1987, p. 259)\(^\text{18}\). For Halperin and others, then, power and politics as approached from a Foucauldian perspective and manifest in grassroots activism on AIDS represented a fundamental shift from a politics of gay ‘liberation’ to what is now retrospectively known as queer politics. This shift, and its inextricable connection with Foucault’s ethico-political agenda is exemplified in Halperin’s famous observation that, from the perspective of 1995, *The History of Sexuality vol. 1* was the ‘single most important intellectual source of political inspiration for contemporary AIDS activists’ and *the* book that ACT UP members ‘carry about with them in their leather jackets’ (Halperin 1995, p. 15).

As I will argue in this thesis (see *Chapter One* in particular), however, this oft-told story of a neat historical shift from more conservative, assimilationist (gay) politics to radical (queer) politics works to once again ‘fix’ queer politics by way of oppositionality. Foucault by contrast was very much opposed to the idea that this new (for him ‘gay’) politics would entail a dogmatic, straightforwardly oppositional agenda that distanced itself from gay and lesbian politics by way of its particularly progressive approach to issues of sexuality. This is evidenced in his refusal to condemn the work of gay liberationists whom he argued had laid the groundwork for a systemic critique of what can now be termed

\(^{18}\) This is the famous ‘Helms Amendment’ put forward by senator Jesse Helms from North Carolina in an amendment to the ‘Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education bill’ which would have seen ‘nearly a billion dollars for AIDS research and education in fiscal 1988’ (Crimp 1987, p. 259). As set out by Crimp, the amendment sought ‘[t]o prohibit the use of any funds provided under this Act to the Centres for Disease Control from being used to provide AIDS education, information, or prevention materials and activities that promote, encourage, or condone homosexual sexual activities or the intravenous use of illegal drugs’ (p. 259).
‘heteronormativity’\(^{19}\), despite the fact that this form of critique is now retrospectively attributed to *queer* theory and politics. While Foucault argued, for instance, that a radical gay politics would entail the construction of alternate ‘cultural forms’ rather than mere assimilation of same-sex relations into the mainstream, he also added, in 1982, that it (Foucault 2000c, p. 164):

...is important, first, to have the possibility – and the right – to choose your own sexuality. Human rights regarding sexuality are important and are still not respected in many places. We shouldn’t consider that such problems are solved now.

Foucault thus conceived of the political potentiality of this version of gay politics not in a *progressivist* sense, such that it would supersede a more ‘outmoded’ version of gay liberationist or identity politics, but as a site for the development of new affective and relational virtualities that took place in conversation with the fight to obtain more practical or legal rights in the name of particular identity categorisations. Indeed, Foucault (2000a, p. 138) suggested that the political potentiality of gay politics lay in its ‘slantwise’ orientation to the norm, in a ‘way of life’ that could ‘yield a culture and an ethics’. To be ‘“gay,”’ argued Foucault, ‘is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible markers of the homosexual but to try and define and develop a way of life’ (p. 138). This ethics and way of life would not be defined by its simple opposition to the norm, but by a *slantwise* relation to heterosexism: a politics of potentiality that was open to being ‘problematised’ in Foucault’s sense of the word\(^{20}\). This was likewise Sedgwick’s motivation in reminding that queer means *across*, ‘from the Indo-European root -twerkw, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*’ (1994, p. xii). As she (Moon et al. 1994, p. 30) put it, ‘[q]ueer lives and impulses do not occupy a separate social or physical space from straight ones’, nor indeed, I would add, gay and lesbian liberationist ones:

...instead, they are relational and conditional, moving across and transforming the conventional spaces that were designed to offer endless narcissistic self-confirmation to the unstable normative systems of sex, gender and family.

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\(^{19}\) I will much more substantially discuss the origins and contemporary applications of this term in *Chapter One* via the work of Michael Warner (1993; 2000) in particular.

\(^{20}\) For Foucault, problematisation is key to an historico-political analysis of the social. He (2000d) defines it as ‘the way to analyze questions of general import in their historically unique form’ (p. 318). For this project this means, importantly, multifaceted and variable challenges to the ‘norm’ as necessarily particular to that contextual standpoint.
This, to me, is the core of both Foucault and Sedgwick’s athwart, non-progressivist ethical agenda, aptly put in temporal terms by Butler when she claims that if “queer” is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings it must be open to perpetual disidentification21 (1993, p. 228). These key figures were interested not in queer politics and theory as a superior moralistic enterprise to the norm or activisms past and/or present, but queer as an ethical project: defined not by strict parameters around what queer bodies and politics should look like and/or do, but what they can, and what those iterations can do22. This includes, crucially, queer politics as defined by an openness to and capacity to be suspended by the question of which bodies and which approaches to queer politics qualify as ‘queer enough’ in a particular context or scenario23 - queer as a movement open to critique of its own tendency to be monolithically anti-assimilationist and anti-normative.

**An ethics of the cosubstantial**

This thesis argues that the kind of ethical project Foucault and Sedgwick imagined queer could entail is sorely lacking in the kinds of debates that predominate in queer activist collectives in Sydney and Melbourne. To return to the anecdote with which this Introduction began, the complaint that the bodies on the cover are on the ‘whiter side of things’ speaks of a broader tendency for these collectives to pursue a particular, pre-determined conception of queer politics at the expense of a more broadly intersectional, ethical and athwart challenge to oppressive norms. I have already pointed out that the demand for the bodies on the *Honi Soit* cover to be ‘black’ ignores the possibility that the image signifies the Asian body, but here I’d like to draw attention to how such an ultimatum ignores the Indigenous body and contemporary Indigenous relations, too. In

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21 As Butler (1993) argues, ‘[a]lthough the political discourses that mobilize identity categories tend to cultivate identifications in the serve of a political goal, it may be that the persistence of disidentification is equally crucial to the rearticulation of democratic contestation’ (p. 4).

22 In this I have been influenced by Daniel Smith’s (2003) Deleuzean-inspired definition of ethics as opposed to morality: ‘[t]he fundamental question of ethics is not “What must I do?” (the question of morality) but rather “What can I do?” Given my degree of power, what are my capabilities and capacities? How can I come into active possession of my power? How can I go to the limit of what I “can do”? ’ (p. 62)

23 This is inspired by Butler’s (1993) assertion that “queer” will be necessary as a term of affiliation, but it will not fully describe those it purports to represent. As a result, it will be necessary to affirm the contingency of the term: to let it be vanquished by those who are excluded by the term but who justifiably expect representation by it’ (p. 230).
contemporary Australian discourse where Indigenous bodies are too often judged by their level of ‘authentic’ blackness in a chorus of complaints about the ‘unfair’ nature of Indigenous scholarships or welfare benefits\(^{24}\), this demand for the queer body to be ‘black enough’ seems problematic indeed. It’s an oversight at a time, moreover, where the First Australians are still not recognised in official Australian constitution as the owners of a land once declared ‘terra nullius’ by its colonialist occupiers\(^{25}\), when the state of Indigenous health remains so poor and communities in the Northern Territory struggle with the lasting impact of a national ‘emergency’ Intervention that suspended the Racial Discrimination Act to enact its discriminatory policies.

From a queer perspective, it was in just November 2013 that controversy erupted over local television series *Redfern Now* (2012\(^{-}\))\(^{26}\), which in Episode One of Series Two (Where The Heart Is 2013) features a story about an Indigenous man fighting for custody of his daughter after his (male) partner dies. At the time influential and controversial Indigenous boxer Anthony Mundine (cited in ABC News 2013a) updated his Facebook status with:

> Watching redfern now [sic] & they promoting homosexuality! (Like it’s ok in our culture) that ain’t in our culture & our ancestors would have there [sic] head for it! Like my dad told me GOD made ADAM & EVE not Adam & Steve.

\(^{24}\) That this kind of discourse is prevalent and lasting is made painfully clear in the expository *First Contact* (2014) screened on SBS, which took 6 non-Indigenous Australians, who, as they put it, represent the 6/10 Australians who have had little or no contact with Indigenous Australians on a journey into what ‘life is like for Indigenous Australians’. This is in an effort to redress increasingly poor relations amongst Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The show’s sensationalist premise, which in its trailer quotes contestant Sandy arguing that ‘If they are spending dole cheques on booze, don’t give them their dole cheques’ also takes place on the back of the NT intervention of The Howard government which suspended the Racial Discrimination Act to target Indigenous Australians discriminately with paternalistic policies such as the banning of alcohol and pornography and quarantining of welfare onto ‘Basics cards’ on the back of a moral panic over child sex offending (which, despite being the justification for the ‘emergency intervention’ has not yet seen one persecution). See Macoun (2011) for a comprehensive account of how the national focus on sexual abuse of Aboriginal children quickly became a site of contestation about the nature, value and future of Aboriginality (and the nature of Aboriginal sexuality) more generally. As Macoun (2011) argues, the policy targets Aboriginal people themselves, and their culture and their sexuality, as a ‘problem to be resolved’. The focus is ‘defective Aboriginality’, so that children who need rescuing need rescuing from Aboriginal culture more broadly.

\(^{25}\) For a recent exploration of this in public Australian discourse see Noel Pearson’s (2014) ‘A Rightful Place: Race, Recognition and a More Complete Commonwealth’ in *The Quarterly Essay*, or on a more official level, Mick Dodson’s (2011) address to the Parliament of Australia entitled ‘Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australians’.

\(^{26}\) *Redfern Now* (2012\(^{-}\)) is produced by Blackfella films, the same production company behind *First Contact*. It is the first drama series written directed and produced by Indigenous Australians, and won Most Outstanding Drama Series at the TV Week Logie Awards in 2013. For this information and more, see the *Redfern Now* website (ABC TV 2015).
It was left to Indigenous actor Luke Carroll, who played the character of ‘Lenny’ in Series One of Redfern Now to remind Mundine that ‘God or Christianity isn’t apart [sic] of our Culture either... our Ancestors had dreamtime beliefs!’ Carroll (cited in ABC News 2013a) then went on to blame Mundine’s homophobia on his ‘white’, moralistic Christian views:

I’m talking about all these blackfullas that have been brainwashed with Christianity & a belief in this ‘White Jesus’ who is their saviour!! These beliefs where (sic) brought over by the white man on the first fleet!!

The episode, and subsequent commentary, thus catapulted queer and indigenous issues (and their intersections) into Australian public discourse, with Carroll challenging Mundine’s presumption of a fundamental incompatibility between traditional Indigenous culture and queer sexuality by provocatively suggesting that homophobia is a white, Christian norm. In turn, Carroll implies that Mundine betrays his own culture in his adoption of his colonisers’ (homophobic) religion. As Rachel Perkins from Blackfella Films commented to the ABC, ‘I’ve known Aboriginal activists throughout the ‘60s and ‘70s and ‘80s and ‘90s who fought for the cause of Aboriginal people and they are gay’ (Perkins cited in ABC News 2013a). Both Perkins and Carroll thus read Mundine’s attitude as out of step with a history of coalition between Aboriginal and queer people (with many Aboriginal people being queer and vice versa, but also, as I will detail further on, with a history of intersectional politics on behalf of both movements). Post this controversy, however, there was a resounding silence in queer communities on the issue, which indicates that Indigenous issues are often overlooked in a narrow focus on particular categories or instances of oppression.

In the case of the Honi Soit cover, for instance, the purportedly transphobic nature of the cover image becomes the ruse through which all other claims to disenfranchisement are rendered invalid. After some of the thread participants mentioned that the bodies depicted in the image appeared to be ‘ambiguous’ in gender Sam (personal communication, 28 August 2014) responded with:

...cis people stop telling [sic] these bodies aren’t cis... You started with an image of some skinny white girls fucking yes? Well it’s obvious. I hate it. I’m not editing a publication where we think it’s ok to put something that looks like a lesbian porn DVD directed by some cis straight dude on the cover.
After Lisa objected to the categorisation of her artwork as akin to ‘straight male porn’ (given her self-identification as a queer female), another thread participant and editor, ‘Roberta’, responded to say that she was ‘uncomfortable with the amount of aggression in this thread’ (personal communication, 28 August 2014). To this, Sam (personal communication, 28 August 2014) responded one final time with:

On that note I’m uncomfortable about yours and others [sic] blatant and frankly transphobic, fatphobic, and otherwise awful dismissal of my concerns. Calling out 101: when a trans person says you’re being transphobic... You are. No explanation needed. Can’t see why? That’s called privilege.

Sam’s claim here is tautological: to disagree with their suggestion that the image is obviously cisgendered and thus transphobic is the result of (cis)privilege and thus transphobic (in other words, transphobia is a guaranteed outcome).

This is typical of what is here referred to as ‘calling out’ as it happens in queer collectives. ‘Calling out’ refers to a person of a marginalised (usually self)identity ‘calling out’ someone’s behaviour as, for example, ‘transphobic’, ‘racist’, ‘whorephobic’ and so on.

Calling out derives from a history of identitarian movements being insufficiently intersectional – the women’s movement providing one prominent example – and is a means of calling attention to those gaps or failures. It is both an activist and academic practice in the sense that it is a politics of ‘denunciation’. Elspeth Probyn (2004), for instance, writes of how women’s (and later, gender) studies classrooms are often characterised by calls of ‘that’s essentialist’ or ‘that’s naturalized’ as examples of how students repeat the lessons in denunciation that they are taught when studying politicised content and practising academic critique (p. 29). Probyn aptly pays attention to this as a personalising and bodily process for many students, arguing that ‘careful consideration needs to be paid to providing safety structures for students for whom a triggered affective response may be deeply disturbing’ (p. 30). Likewise, in activist circles, a number of strategies have been devised to be attentive to this process (including the recent popularity of ‘trigger warnings’ which tee up their audience to the possibly ‘triggering’ and traumatic effects of any given content or conversation). In the case of calling out, this means having an explicit forum for people to speak out about processes that feel alienating and exclusive. This is significant in that provides a platform for people who have experienced any number of violences or traumas to ask that they not be
repeated in the very circles that promise them freedom from those experiences of shame and abjection.

In queer activist circles, however, calling out has become an individualised process that belies its intended nature as a process of systemic critique. Inverting Audre Lorde’s (2001) assertion that ‘it is not the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes’ (p. 315) calling out often falls to those who must declare their marginalised self-status in the process of ‘calling out’. As calling out happens in queer activism this process does not invite further debate, since the one who ‘calls out’ is protected by their marginalised status and cannot be wrong. This is what Sam means by arguing that no explanation is needed for their assertion that the cover art is transphobic; failing to accept this fact is merely evidence of further privilege, and so discussion and conversation is silenced. Thus ‘call out’ culture, despite its promise to intersectional and ethical politics, may be more akin to what Foucault (2000b, p. 112) describes as ‘polemical’ politics:

In the serious play of questions and answers, in the work of reciprocal education, the rights of each person are in some sense immanent in the discussion... The person asking the questions is merely exercising the right that has been given him: to remain unconvinced, to perceive a contradiction, to require more information, to emphasize different postulates, to point out faulty reasoning, and so on... Questions and answers depend on a game – a game that is at once pleasant and difficult – in which each of the two partners takes pains to use only the rights given him by the other and by the accepted form of the dialogue. The polemicist, on the other hand, proceeds encased in privileges that he possesses in advance and will never agree to question... On principle he possesses rights authorizing him to wage war and making that struggle a just undertaking; the person he confronts is not a partner in the search for the truth but an adversary, an enemy who is wrong, who is harmful, and whose very existence constitutes a threat. For him, then, the game consists not of recognizing this person as a subject having the right to speak but of abolishing him, as interlocutor, from any possible dialogue.

Provocatively, Foucault suggests that it is the polemicist who necessarily wields privilege in these situations, since their claims cannot be ‘questioned’; their opponent is obliterated in the process of denying them the right to participate in a dialogue about that which they have been accused (since they are already guilty as charged27). Of course

27 See Foucault (2000b) again on this point: ‘polemics sets itself the task of determining the intangible point of dogma, the fundamental and necessary principle that the adversary has neglected, ignored, or transgressed; and it denounces this negligence as a moral failing... As in judiciary practice, polemics allows for no possibility of an equal discussion: it examines a case; it isn’t dealing with an interlocutor, it is
this is an unequal burden, as Lorde has pointed out, since it is a privilege to remain unaware of the various forms of marginalisation that occur, even in leftist, progressivist movements. It is a problem, however, when calling out results in the denial of the possibility of other forms of privilege and/or marginalisation, and when conversation is disabled by the a priori accusation of privilege. No doubt there is a difference between privilege as it is experienced as a result of broader social structures (say, the privilege of being cis versus trans, but also, and to be considered in combination with that, the privilege of being read as a man versus a woman) and possessing situational privilege in the context of a localised queer space and specific dialogue. As such, I am not arguing that queer activists should not call each other out when they believe particular behaviours solidify structural privilege, only that the common rhetorical mode for doing so creates a specific, situational privilege that truncates productive dialogue. An ethical politics cannot end at accusation or denunciation. As Foucault (2000c) argues, ‘[t]o say no is the minimum form of resistance. But, of course, at times that is very important. You have to say no as a decisive form of resistance’ (p. 168). What is crucial is what happens once this minimum form of resistance has been enacted: the political potentialities this opens up rather than shuts down.

When practised in a polemical mode, queer politics is far removed from the ethical imperative to be open to its own contestation and reformation, particularly by those who may be alienated from the conversation on different terms. If Sedgwick defines the ethical imperative for queer politics as the capacity to recognise that the ‘person who is disabled through one set of oppressions may by the same positioning be enabled through others’ (2008, p. 32, emphasis in the original) then in simplified terms, I see two key issues with the nature of this conversation. The first is that calling out structural privileges

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28 In the case of this Honi Soit argument for example I believe that very productive conversations about the politics of representation could have proceeded from an editorial on the debate that took place over the cover image. However, in the eventual, printed edition, the cover was simply replaced with another called ‘Vulva crocheted’ (which depicts a number of crocheted vaginas, differently decorated). The argument over the cover image was never mentioned, except in the fine print below the editorial where credit was given to those involved in the cover image: ‘special thanks to: the creators of the original ‘Vagina Soit’ aka JAM, and to all participants in the 100+ comment thread it took to make this cover’ (‘Honi Soit Queer Edition: Credits’ 2014). Lisa’s proposed cover image was included in the publication, but it simply accompanied a piece of fiction with no contextualisation given.
relies unequally on the situational privilege of ‘calling out’ in a queer activist context, where to ‘call out’ means to shut down dialogue and have your accusation of transphobia or cisprivilege stand in for your own victory in the conversation and refusal of the right to reply or further dialogue. Secondly, the accusation that this image is transphobic precludes an analysis of any other intersectional factor like race beyond the limiting complaint that the bodies in the image are on the ‘whiter side of things’. It also trumps any consideration of Lisa’s social positionings (which, as outsider, I cannot presume to know, beyond that of being a queer female artist with a significant investment in queer politics, now lumped with the accusation of having produced a transphobic, fatphobic piece of art). Queer politics as such pertains not to Sedgwick’s conception of ethics but what she describes as the paranoid/schizoid imperative that often underpins activist politics, ‘driven by attributed motives, fearful contempt of opponents, collective fantasies of powerlessness and/or omnipotence, scapegoating, purism, and schism’ (2007, p. 638).

That queer activism should play out this way is perhaps no surprise given Sedgwick’s (1997) claim that ‘queer studies in particular has had a distinctive history of intimacy with the paranoid imperative’ (p. 6). In the context of the AIDS crisis, Sedgwick (2007) writes that the paranoia of early queer theory/politics had a ‘palpable purchase on daily reality’²⁹ (p. 640). This meant, for Sedgwick, a politics that was at once poignantly hopeful, driven by a ‘propulsive energy of activist justification, of being or feeling joined with others in an urgent cause’ and justifiably paranoid (p. 638). What interests me in this thesis is her claim that contemporary queer politics continues to be characterised by a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’³⁰ that has ‘retained the paranoid structure of the earlier AIDS years, but done so increasingly outside of [its original] context’ (Sedgwick 2007, p. 640).

²⁹ Sedgwick’s key examples include the fact that the U.S. president at the time never mentioned AIDS, and the fact that ‘sodomy was illegal in half the United States’ (2008, p. xiii).

³⁰ I would refer here to Sedgwick’s use of Silvan Tomkins’ work to explain what she means by a hermeneutic of suspicion: ‘[l]ike any highly organized effort at detection, as little as possible is left to chance. The radar antennae are placed wherever it seems possible the enemy may attack. Intelligence officers may monitor even unlikely conversations if there is an outside chance something relevant may be detected or if there is a chance that two independent bits of information taken together may give indication of the enemy’s intentions... But above all there is a highly organized way of interpreting information so that what is possibly relevant can be quickly abstracted and magnified, and the rest discarded’ (Tomkins cited in Sedgwick 1997, p. 14). This seems particularly apt as a framework for understanding what is happening in the paranoid/schizoid tenor of the Honi Soit discussion above, as well as a number of the case studies used in this thesis.
argue, in line with her claim, that queer activism in the scenes described herein continues to be structured by a paranoid/schizoid hermeneutic of suspicion that is progressivist in nature. In Chapter Four I pay attention to the historical issues at play in this tradition of *ressentiment* and schism, particularly at the intersections of queer and feminist activism. For Wendy Brown (1997) such tension is inevitable at the transition from identitarian politics to the contestation and undoing of the very categories that must nonetheless be retained from a disciplinary and political perspective. As Brown (1997, n.p.) outlines:

> Women’s studies as a contemporary institution... may be politically and theoretically incoherent, as well as tacitly conservative - incoherent because by definition it circumscribes uncircusable "women" as an object of study, and conservative because it must resist all objections to such circumscription if it is to sustain that object of study as its raison d’etre. Hence the persistent theory wars, race wars, and sex wars notoriously ravaging women's studies in the 1980s, not to mention the ways in which women's studies has sometimes greeted uncomfortably (and even with hostility) the rise of feminist literary studies and theory outside of its purview, Critical Race Theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory, and cultural studies.

In Chapter One I explore this same problematic in queer theory: at once an academic discipline that positions itself as *anti-disciplinary* and refusing the ‘coherent’ subjectivity of gay and lesbian studies while at the same time staking a specific claim to representing the interests of the most marginalised of queer bodies. In Chapter Four I delve into the history of the sex wars as playing out what Brown describes as the tensions that arise at the border of feminist and queer politics, particularly as they manifest in a politics of *ressentiment* – the who rather than what is at play when it comes to core issues. Here I am attentive to what I see as a tendency for queer activism in the present to be defined by a self-assured belief in its radicalism in comparison to movements past, despite the fact that it repeats the very issues that have plagued gay and lesbian and feminist activism for decades (in Chapter Six for example I explore the politics of door policies at queer and feminist social events as playing out the long-standing tension between destabilising ‘essentialising’ gender categories while at the same time recognising the continuing forms of marginalisation that play out when one is socialised and lives as a woman).

At times, then, these contemporary schisms partake in an active forgetting of activism’s historical capacity to enact the kind of intersectional, athwart ethics that Sedgwick and
Foucault proposed. In 1997, for example, representatives from Sydney’s lesbian and gay community organisations met to discuss the Aboriginal Reconciliation process on the back of the persistent refusal by the Howard government to apologise for non-Indigenous crimes against the First Australians. At the time the Liberal National Party (LNP) government refused to acknowledge the lasting damage caused by the Stolen Generations, with the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Senator the Hon John Herron pettily arguing before the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee in 2000 that ‘stolen’ misrepresented the intention of the colonialists at the time, and failed to distinguish those who were ‘forcibly separated for good reason’ (however defined) (Herron 2000). Likewise the Federal Government’s submission to the Bringing them home report (Commonwealth of Australia 1997) argued that ‘[t]here was never a ‘generation’ of stolen children’ since ‘the proportion of separated Aboriginal children was no more than 10 percent’ (Herron 2000). The invariably offensive nature of such rhetoric and the refusal to acknowledge that ‘generations’ adequately represents the lasting legacy and damage of these cruel colonialist and racist practices were presumably too much for Sydney gay and lesbian community organisations to ignore. They subsequently launched both a statement of support of the Reconciliation process, as well as the ‘Black + White + Pink’ indigenous anti-homophobia campaign in conjunction with Mick Dodson, current Professor of Law at ANU and native title barrister known partly for being the first Indigenous law graduate in Australia. The statement reinforced that ‘bigotry and injustice’ comes in ‘all forms’ and that ‘racism exists within the lesbian and gay community and that indigenous gays and lesbians often feel alienated and unsupported by our community’ (Grant et al. 1997). What those involved in this campaign recognised, therefore, was the ways that various axes of oppression intersect with one another, that power is never simply ‘located’ or ‘evacuated’ from a body simply by nature of the colour of its skin, or its gendered or sexual presentation31. The ‘Black + White + Pink’ campaign stood for activist politics forging an athwart culture and ethics in its broad-based, systemic critique that recognises

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31 This intersectional understanding of oppression resonates with similar critiques of a more simplistic ‘additive’ model of oppression. While an additive model of oppression might presume to know how marginalised someone is on the basis of how many ‘categories’ of marginalisation they occupy, a more complex analysis would consider the intersections of these categories as they operate in particular contexts. See for instance Nikki Sullivan’s (2003b) discussion of the competing tropes of the ‘black gay’ versus the ‘gay black’ in her chapter ‘Queer Race’.
that racist Australian ideology cannot be divorced from heterosexist Australian ideology and vice versa.

That these inspiring moments of activist history are lost in contemporary local activist discourse demonstrates that what defines the temporal ethics of queer politics is in part what gets remembered and what doesn’t. Yet the forgetting of these moments is not just a convenient means of reifying the radicalism of queer activists and activism in the present, it is an ethical blindness to ongoing and alarming injustices. For Elizabeth Povinelli (2008), the kind of injustices experienced by Indigenous Australians every day fail to ‘rise to the level of an event’; they are ‘ordinary, chronic, acute and cruddy’ (p. 511) and do not seem to demand that we take ethical notice in the same way more catastrophic suffering does32 - except of course in periodic ‘public hand-wringing, outrage and scandal’ (p. 512) that has a track record of resulting in paternalistic governmental intervention. In the example of queer politics in the present, it is even more alarming that these chronic crises are overlooked in favour of the circular and exasperating banalities of the kind characterised above and in this thesis. In Povinelli’s work, where she draws heavily on the legacy of Ursula Le Guin and in particular on Le Guin’s fable The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas33, ethics can be defined by the realisation that one’s good life is always ‘cosubstantial’ with the suffering of others. In The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas a small child is tortured in a manner akin to a philosophical utilitarian wager in order that the others in Omelas live their ‘good life’. Povinelli thus extrapolates from the child in the broom closet a limited metaphor for contemporary Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations as they stand in Australia. To recognise the suffering of the child in

32 Povinelli’s (2008) example is the Bali bombings and purported ‘omnipresent invisible domestic and international terrorist threat’ cited by the Howard government ‘when it sought to modify the Crimes Act 1914’ (p. 522). The government proceeded to pass a range of inhumane anti-terror laws that gave ASIO ‘power to detain any person for up to seven days without charge if he or she is suspected on “reasonable grounds” of being involved in any terrorist activity. During this time, detainees are prohibited from exercising their rights to have a lawyer present; to silence; and to protect themselves against self-incrimination’ (p. 522). Contemporary examples include acts of violence that are increasingly attributed to terrorists and the Islamic State (IS) rather than being seen as stand-alone incidents. The end of 2014 siege of the Lindt Cafe in Sydney appeared to provide a notable exception with NSW Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione calling the murders an ‘isolated incident’ and an ‘act of an individual’ (ABC News 2014b). Nonetheless conservative LNP Prime Minister Tony Abbott drew attention to the spectre of terrorism by saying: '[t]ens, if not hundreds, of millions of people right around the world have been focused on the city of Sydney which has been touched by terrorism for the first time in more than 35 years’ (ABC News 2014b). More subtly, perhaps, his earlier televised address to the nation was conducted in front of a Christmas tree, a symbol of the ‘Christian’ Australian nation under threat from the Muslim other.

33 For a copy of the Le Guin’s fable, written in 1975, see Le Guin (2000).
the broom closet, she says, would be to understand that ‘[m]y happiness is substantially in her unhappiness; my corporeal well-being is part of a larger mode of embodiment in which her corporeal misery is a vital organ’ (Povinelli 2008, p. 511). Although it is tempting to say that the everyday Australian good life is enabled by turning a blind eye to the suffering of Indigenous Australians, Povinelli concludes that ‘[t]hings are not that good’ (p. 521) here, even for non-Indigenous Australians. Making things more complicated, I would argue, is that in contemporary neoliberal Australia the tendency remains for non-Indigenous Australians to believe that the increase in powers and capacities of Indigenous Australians takes from their good life, or redraws attention away from their suffering (the price of groceries, rising unemployment and so on). In her discussion of the possibilities for this outlook to change, I argue that Povinelli (2008) outlines an ethical vision that involves understanding ourselves as bodies that are cosubstantial with others; as Povinelli says, the ‘ethical imperative’ is to recognise that ‘your own good life is already in her broom closet’ (p. 511). I would argue that it is also about recognising that an increase in the powers and capacities of others does not equate to a diminishing of one’s own capacities, or a diminished recognition of one’s own suffering.

To put this in Deleuzean terms then, to practice what I call a ‘cosubstantial ethics’ is to imagine bodies as existing on a plane of immanence and to think of ‘how a being [can] take another being into its world, while preserving or respecting the other’s own relations and world’ (Deleuze 1992, p. 628). This is both about re-conceptualising our own good lives as only as good as the lives of those others with whom we gather in collective life, and understanding that an increase in the powers and capacities of others is not in conflict with our (cosubstantial) bodies. To apply this to the state of local queer activist politics this would avert the tendency to see the legitimate suffering of some (couched in the language of ‘cisprivilege’ or ‘transphobia’ in the above example) as trumping the suffering of others (in raced, classed or other terms). To think queerness cosubstantially then is to encourage a focus on multiple axes of oppression simultaneously, without competing with/redrawing attention away from more ‘worthy’ forms of suffering. This crucially shifts the conversation from individual privilege and suffering towards a conception of queerness as necessarily about ethical sociability. For
Deleuze (1992, p. 628), this is what it means to practice an ethology, such that the question becomes:

...knowing whether relations (and which ones?) can compound directly to form a new, more ‘extensive’ relation, or whether capacities can compound directly to constitute a more ‘intensive’ capacity or power. It is no longer a matter of utilizations or captures, but of sociabilities and communities. How do individuals enter into a composition with one another to form a higher individual, ad infinitum?

At present, however, queer collectives and ‘communities’ are to those bodies that are implicated in them what Deleuze (1992, p. 628) would call a ‘poison’ rather than a ‘food’. In affective connection with one another they reduce rather than increase each other’s powers and capacities such that most are silenced, withdraw, are fed up, disillusioned and leave.

**The call to community**

It would be tempting to assume that the paranoid/schizoid in-fighting, schism and misery experienced in these scenes has destroyed all hope for and sense of queer sociability and community. What I have found on the contrary is that these scenes can be defined by what Miranda Joseph (2002) calls a peculiar re-attachment to and persistent adherence to the ‘romance of community’ in face of all (academic) critique and activist disenfranchisement. Not long after the *Honi Soit* incident a friend invited me to a special queer collective meeting at the University of Sydney called ‘Calling Out and Apologising Workshop 101’. The workshop included an explanation of calling out as ‘saying something problematic’ that is tied to ‘privilege’ and perpetuates ‘oppression’, and likewise explained how to ‘effectively apologise after being called out’ (personal communication, 18 September 2014). A separate handout I was given included 5 bullet points for effective apologising, one of which I noted was not to ‘ask the person who called you out for

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34 As Deleuze says, affects can ‘threaten the thing (diminish its power, slow it down, reduce it to the minimum), or strengthen, accelerate and increase it: poison or food? – with all the complications, since a poison can be a food for part of the thing considered’ (1997, p. 628).

35 This was entitled ‘Anatomy of an Apology/Accountability’ and included: ‘say you’re sorry; give your understanding of how you hurt the other person; undertake not to do the thing again; offer suggestions for how to repair the harm and how you can account for your impact, and; ask how those suggestions sit with the other person’ (personal communication, 18 September 2014). I have chosen not to include the document in this thesis as it is not publicly available and I did not have permission to use it for my research.
more information’ (personal communication, 18 September 2014). In other words, this prohibition defines and endorses calling out – and its aftermath – as the end of all possible dialogue, and, as specified on the handout, requests of the receiver not just an apology, but silence, acceptance, a ‘commitment to changing your behaviour’ and finally, a ‘thank you’ to your accuser, in recognition of the bravery required to call someone out (personal communication, 18 September 2014). I had in my hands precisely what I had suspected: that calling out was not about mutual respect, debate and the possibility of coalitional politics, but polemic domination and punishment of those with the ‘wrong’ priorities or insufficiently ‘queer’ politics. Perhaps, at least, in its honesty, the workshop and its accompanying handout spelt the end of any claim to queer community and politics on ethical terms. What came next, however, surprised me. ‘Peter’, one of the leaders of the workshop, acknowledged that ‘call out culture’ had become toxic in a queer context, and that we might in its place pursue something called ‘calling in’. Calling in, Peter explained, was much the same as calling out, only it should be prefaced by a call to community; a call to one’s shared positioning as queer in a heteronormative world, for instance, or by first establishing a common axis of oppression (racialised oppression would be one example)36. Peter argued that this would go some way towards recognising shared oppression/social positioning before the speaker redressed the addressee.

In a sense calling in has a seductive logic. It appears to have the capacity to simultaneously highlight the similarities one might share with those with whom one finds oneself in ‘queer community’ but also go some way towards highlighting the many ways in which those displaced by heteronormativity can also differ from each other37 (see Chapter Five for my analysis of competing claims to queer community as they exist in queer spaces and how community may thus be reconceptualised away from simplistic claims to shared oppression and commonality). As such its potential is to approach

36 Peter quite likely drew inspiration for the practice of ‘calling in’ from an article written by Ngọc Loan Trần (2013) in the wake of a conference on racial justice. Trần (2013) describes the conference as characterised by ‘all types of fucked up behavior and the culture that we have created to respond to said fucked up behavior’. Trần (2013) maintains that anger is important in these scenarios, but that it must be accompanied by ‘compassion and patience’. As such, Trần (2013) likewise advocates for first establishing ‘common ground’ amongst participants. Trần’s blog was posted on Black Girl Dangerous, a ‘reader-funded, not-profit project’ that ‘seeks to, in as many ways possible, amplify the voices, experiences and expressions of queer and trans* people of color’ (Black Girl Dangerous n.d.)

37 In this I reference Sedgwick’s (2008) first and most famous axiom, “[p]eople are different from each other” (p. 22).
something like an ethics of the cosubstantial: to recognise that there are multiple, intersecting forms of privilege and oppression that are at play in any particular instance of confrontation or conversation. Its promise is likewise to respect and preserve other bodies’ particular social positionings even while these assemblages might impinge on one’s own capacities and freedoms.

This indeed was one of Sedgwick’s (2008) hopes for queer politics; that an intersectional approach might enable a focus on ‘how a variety of forms of oppression intertwine systemically with each other’ (p. 32), facilitating an understanding of privilege (as in Foucault’s conception of power) as never possessed but contextually and intersectionally determined. Despite the promise of calling in, however, the workshop betrayed the same narrow focus on particular oppressions that trumped all others as in the Honi Soit example. After Peter spoke at length about calling in for instance, we were invited to participate in some calling out ‘roleplay scenarios’. Most of these scenarios entailed instances of racism\(^{38}\) or transphobia, but only one of the 24 mentioned anything to do with class\(^{39}\). In an exclusive University setting dominated by students of middle to upper-class socioeconomic status, this stood out as a clear downplaying of class inequality, especially given that it sat alongside another roleplay scenario where we were asked to discuss what to do when ‘[s]omeone deflects being called out by saying that they’re oppressed too’ (personal communication, 18 September 2014). This roleplay scenario worked to frame this as an unacceptable instance in which someone ‘excuses’ their problematic behaviour on the basis of some other axis of oppression. Where, then, I wondered, was the space for someone to claim lack of education in queer/leftist jargon, say, to know that words like ‘crazy’ or ‘lame’ are ‘ableist’ slurs (as a couple of other roleplay scenarios referred to) (personal communication, 18 September 2014)? In seeking to first establish shared axes of identity from which participants are free to ‘call each other out’, calling in presumes at least some social positionings, including that one feel comfortable in and is able to participate in the very particular unspoken laws and

\(^{38}\) This is not to suggest that racism is thus ‘adequately’ dealt with, particularly not if you consider the Honi Soit example and the failure to consider Asian or Indigenous bodies in the binary between white/non-white bodies.

\(^{39}\) This scenario likewise only obscurely touched on class by (presumably) encouraging us to think about the privilege of being able to afford overseas holidays; the roleplay scenario read: ‘[e]veryone in a meeting is encouraged to talk about the overseas holiday destinations they have recently been to’ (personal communication, 18 September 2014).
etiquette that govern queer activist spaces attached to privileged institutions. To draw attention to this, however, is seen here as a form of ‘excusing’ one’s own problematic behaviour. As such, calling in may require or produce what Pierre Bourdieu (2004) calls ‘cultural capital’. For Bourdieu (2004) one’s comfort in a particular context ‘cannot be transmitted instantaneously... by gift or bequest, purchase or exchange’ but must be part of their ‘habitus’ (p. 18). Despite this, cultural capital is often not an obvious form of privilege but ‘is predisposed to function as symbolic capital... and recognized as legitimate competence’ (p. 18). Bourdieu thus reminds that cultural capital is ‘symbolically and materially active... it is appropriated by agents and implemented and invested as a weapon and a stake in the struggles which go on in the fields of cultural production’ (pp. 18-20). As a reflection of the unequal distribution of privilege in the ‘social classes’ one’s possession of cultural capital enables one to ‘obtain profits proportionate to their mastery of objectified capital, and therefore to the extent of their embodied capital’ (Bourdieu 2004, p. 20). In the context of queer collectives, then, calling in presumes that one feels comfortable enough in that space to call someone out in the first place, to wield the cultural capital and subsequent benefits of taking up the place of the polemicist, in Foucault’s terms. In this case, then, while ‘calling in’ purports to be attentive to multiple, simultaneous forms of systemic oppression and ostracisation, it still relies on, and produces, individual cultural capital. This fact is in turn the hardest to ‘call out’. For calling in to realise the ethical potential of the cosubstantial would be to consider this as one form of social privilege that operates at the level of the individual rather than the collective. To recognise that our good lives are only as good as those of the bodies with whom we gather would thus be to recognise that both calling in and out are political mechanisms available only to some. This is not to obliterate the political potentiality of calling in, but to draw attention to the contradictions and double binds that haunt queer activist collectives.

For Foucault this is a problem of a politics of community that builds on the presumption of shared community and/or oppression. As such, Foucault (2000b, p. 114-115) argues that the problem of establishing commonality:

...is, precisely, to decide if it is actually suitable to place oneself with a ‘we’ in order to assert the principles one recognizes and the values one accepts; or if it is not, rather, necessary to make the future formation of a ‘we’ possible by elaborating the question.
Because it seems to me that the ‘we’ must not be pervious to the question; it can only be the result – and the necessarily temporary result – of the question as it is posed in the new terms in which one formulates it.\(^{40}\)

Foucault poses in other words that we don’t begin with the question of how ‘we’ are in alignment or political community, but rather that alliances can be forged – often unpredictably – from the dialogues that take place in response to a question or problem. As it stands, however, these opportunities for discussion and debate are shut down when calling out and in is primarily about establishing offense and subsequently ending dialogue. As such, in Chapter Five, I have worked to think through the ethical possibilities of community defined not by the presumption of commonality, but a recognition that antagonism and difference are crucial aspects of not just queer community, but the possibility of an ethical queer politics. I do this through an analysis of Seasons Three and Six of RuPaul’s Drag Race (2009-) and a reality TV show which, thanks to reality television conventions, exaggerates and emphasises difference and conflict between its contestants rather than commonality and harmony.

**Difference and repetition**

Given the continued applicability of Foucault, Sedgwick and others’ original provocations to the field, it would seem reasonable to conclude that queer politics is in some ways stuck on endless repeat; its efforts to distance itself from the ‘problems’ of gay and lesbian and feminist identity political movements past only appear to implicate it further in them. This may in turn prompt the question of why these phenomena are interesting in 2014 at all, but the problems that haunt queer activism in the scenes I describe herein are both painfully repetitious and specific to this period in time. As I have pointed out, there still exists the lure of community in the queer scenes I know today; it is not as if

\[^{40}\] Reading this quote of Foucault’s, I would argue that one can see the influence of his work on Butler, particularly when she (1993, p. 227) calls for a ‘genealogical’ critique of queer politics: ‘[w]ho is represented by which use of the term, and who is excluded? For whom does the term present an impossible conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual politics? What kinds of policies are enabled by what kinds of usages, and which are backgrounded or erased from view? 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’. Of course here she is also drawing on Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1989) *On The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*.  

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activists no longer act in the interest of preserving or establishing community with their fellow ‘queers’. There are, however, some significant shifts that have taken place, especially when it comes to issues of gender identity. One example is the emergence of so many more varieties of gender identification in the queer scene, particularly people identifying not just as transsexual (FTM/MTF) but as transgender or genderqueer, and preferring gender-neutral pronouns such as ‘they’. In fact, in a Gender and Cultural Studies tutorial41 that I was running in Semester Two 2014, a student asked me if we could do a ‘pronoun round’ (in which we all state our preferred pronouns, aka ‘she/her’, ‘they/them’ and so on) and over half the class preferred ‘they’. This might not be a very scientific sample, but in the queer activist circles I know this is increasingly common (and, at least in my experience, a number of the students who major in Gender and Cultural Studies at The University of Sydney are involved in one variety or another of queer activism/participate in the local queer scene). As such I hope to make clear that these are time-specific issues for the queer scene I describe as much as they define the pitfalls of any identity political movement more generally and a tendency for such problems to repeat, even in queer politics as defined by its critique of or distance from identity politics42. In this sense I adhere to Foucault’s (2000d, p. 315) pursuit of an ‘archaeological’ method of inquiry that:

...will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge... but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events43.

The discourses of queer politics I have chosen to analyse in this thesis operate in a field of competing claims to queer community and identity, but likewise reveal patterns that I see as context and time-specific and as significant to analyse in terms of how queer theory and its relationship to feminism has infiltrated and inflected the queer collectives/scenes I describe. In the case of gender identity and in Chapter Six of this thesis, for instance, I am interested in how queer activists increasingly embrace the process of self-naming

41 The class was GCST2609: Masculinity, mateship and men’s lives.
42 I recognise that queer theory specifically advocated for queer politics as a non identity political movement, however in the body of this thesis I suggest that this is not how queer politics operates in actuality (see Chapter One and Chapter Two in particular).
43 This is likewise the attitude that Sedgwick (2008) takes to her work: ‘[a] point of the book is not to know how far its insights and projects are generalizable, not to be able to say in advance where the semantic specificity of these issues gives over to’ (p. 12).
when it comes to gender identity that in some ways contradicts Butler’s (1993) famous claim that the capacity for labels like queer to be reclaimed will be a discursively limited attempt at normative subversion crafted from resources ‘inevitably impure’ (p. 241). On the contrary, present-day activists very much invest in the process of self-naming as a means with which to claim and assert queer radical (often gendered) identity, despite Butler’s (p. 228) provocative argument that:

...the conceit of autonomy implied in self-naming is the paradigmatically presentist conceit... that language expresses a ‘will’ or a ‘choice’ rather than a complex and constitutive history of discourse and power which compose the invariably ambivalent resources through which a queer and queering agency is forged and reworked.

Likewise in Chapter Four I have been concerned with the repetition of the feminist sex wars in an Australian context, albeit with a shift in the political landscape towards support for sex workers and decriminalisation. In both these examples I am interested in how queer politics is inevitably implicated in the issues that haunted the very movements it claims to move ‘beyond’, at least in its various attempts to consolidate the field in the academy.

This brings me to another key concern for this thesis, particularly as explored in Chapter Four: the relationship of queer activism to feminism in particular (as one of its most logical predecessors) and its own theoretical positioning in a sometimes progressivist narrative from activist movements ‘past’. It was the influential work of Gayle Rubin that first argued, in 1984, that there was ‘an urgent need to develop radical perspectives on sexuality’ given the stalemate that had ensued within feminism around the issue of sex, particularly in relation to the ‘sex wars’ (2007, p. 148). For Rubin, sex constitutes a ‘special case’ in Western discourse, a site for excessive vitriol and ‘moral panic’. Debates

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44 Butler (1993) for example believed that it would be impossible to oppose normative discourse from the perspective of ‘reverse-discourse’: ‘[p]erformativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a ‘pure’ opposition, a ‘transcendence’ of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure’ (p. 241).

45 For more on the history of the feminist sex wars, particularly in the U.S. context see Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter’s (2006) edited collection of mostly their own work in Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture.

46 Rubin (2007) calls this the ‘fallacy of misplaced scale’ (p. 151) and goes on to quote Jeffrey Weeks on the centrality of sexuality to incidences of moral panic: ‘[t]he moral panic crystallizes widespread fears and anxieties, and often deals with them not by seeking the real cause of the problems and conditions which they demonstrate but by displacing them on to ‘Folk Devils’ in an identified social group (often the
which had increasingly polarised feminists into either ‘pro-sex’ or ‘antiporn’ camps, Rubin contended, ‘simply added to the mystification that shrouds the subject’ and contributed to increasing hostility among activists (p. 148). As such, she argued against feminism as the ‘privileged site of a theory of sexuality’ (p. 169) and for the pursuit of a new field of study which would more appropriately and ethically tackle the subject of sexuality. Rubin’s work was of significant influence to Sedgwick, who likewise argued, in 1990, that ‘the question of gender and the question of sexuality, inextricable from one another though they are... are nonetheless not the same question’ (2008, p. 30). In so initiating this distance from feminism, however, neither scholar endorsed a queer politics that was anti or superior to, feminism. In her updated preface to Epistemology of the Closet, written in 2008, Sedgwick credited feminism for the intersectional analysis that she had urged antihomophobic readers/practitioners to pursue (p. xv). She likewise credited what she in retrospect termed the ‘insistent perspectivism’ of her classic text to 1970s feminist writing which paid consistent attention to the ‘the questions of who’s speaking, to whom? Who wants to know, and what for? What do these answers do?’ (p. xv). Both Sedgwick and Rubin’s ethical agenda was thus to take the insistent feminist critique of power relations to the question of sexuality with an eye towards ethical possibility: if we can circumvent the repetitious and disempowering arguments that characterise the feminist sex wars, what might our radical theorising do to oppressive norms of sexuality?

It has been my ethical agenda, indeed, to pursue the same question, but in the specific context of queer activism now as it relates to feminism and feminist movements past. In looking at contemporary activist conflicts like the gay marriage debate and recent, localised iterations of the sex wars, I have been careful in the spirit of Rubin and Sedgwick not to endorse one ‘camp’ over the other, but rather to ask after a practical queer and feminist politics ‘whose minority-model and universalist-strategies, and for that matter whose gender-separatist and gender-integrative analyses would likewise proceed in parallel without any high premium placed on ideological rationalization between them’ (Sedgwick 2008, p. 13). In this sense I have taken great inspiration from Sedgwick, who, even if she remained committed to ‘constructivist over essentialist, universalizing over

‘immoral’ or ‘degenerate’). Sexuality has had a peculiar centrality in such panics, and sexual ‘deviants’ have been omnipresent scapegoats’ (Weeks cited in Rubin 2007, p. 161).
minoritizing, and gender-transitive over gender-separatist understandings of sexual choice,’ acknowledged that her own work and positionings ‘owe[d] everything to the wealth of essentialist, minoritizing, and separatist gay thought and struggle also in progress’ (p. 13). I argue that queer activism on the contrary can be defined by a difficult and less respectful relationship to the past. I lament in particular the tendency for queer activist politics to see itself in a position of temporal ascendancy from radical feminism or earlier, more separatist feminist activist collectives, a legacy which Rubin and Sedgwick (and thus queer theory) nonetheless remain significantly influenced by and in the debt of. My approach in these chapters builds upon the ethico-political agenda of feminist and queer theorist Lauren Berlant (1994) who pushes against the tendency for past revolutionary feminist movements to be framed as ‘no longer historical, as finished, and therefore failed’ (p. 155, emphasis in the original). From the perspective of 1994, Berlant documented what she saw as an increasing ‘intellectual/activist’ split between feminist (particularly older) academics and the ‘rapid expansion of queer and multiculturally identified bodies into publics of their own, publics that have become important grounds for emergent cultures of radical expertise’ (p. 154). Although she does not name it as such, the increasing institutionalisation of queer theory in the academy and the emergence of aligned activist collectives was contributing to what Berlant saw as a tendency to align a feminist politics of revolution with a ‘utopian’ ‘narrative of failure’ that bore no relevance to the fast-changing present (p. 125). Berlant (p. 126) however pushes back against this by placing feminist pasts:

...in a scene of collaborations and aspirations for thinking, describing and theorizing social change in a present tense, but a present tense different from what we can now imagine for pragmatic, possible, or useful politics.

This she and others did, moreover, from ‘within’ the academy without playing into a presumed intellectual/activist political divide.

47 Like Foucault, for instance, Sedgwick (2008) believed firmly in first establishing civil rights: ‘[p]olitical progress on... life-and-death issues has depended precisely on the strength of a minority-model gay activism; it is the normalizing, persuasive analogy between the needs of gay/lesbian students and those of Black or Jewish students, for instance, and the development of the corresponding political techniques that enable process in such arenas. And that side of the needed progress cannot be mobilised from within any closet; it requires very many people’s risky and affirming acts of the most explicit self-identification as members of the minority affected’ (p. 58).
As such I have tried in this thesis to propose a queer and feminist activist politics that would imagine the work of even the most unfashionable of feminists as filled with ethico-political possibilities: in Elizabeth Grosz’s (2004) terms I argue that they constitute untapped ‘virtualities’ that not only can be useful to the present but remain just as relevant to the problems of queer activism today. In this sense I aim to put into practice what I advocate in Chapter Three: that the ethical potentiality of the field of queer temporality lies not in its ability to define more progressive timelines (or lifestyles) over others, but in its capacity to treat that which is otherwise seen as ‘backward’ as useful in its potential to alter the present and/or future in service of athwart, unpredictable challenges to oppressive norms. Throughout this project then I seek to combat the ‘knowingness’ that can sometimes accompany academic ‘booms’ and their relationship to movements past, a tendency to ‘refamiliarize, renaturalize, damagingly reify an entity that it could be doing so much more to subject to analysis’ (Sedgwick 2008, p. 45, emphasis in the original). Like Sedgwick I aim to ‘denaturalize the present, rather than the past - in effect, to render less destructively presumable’ (p. 48) queer politics as it exists now and feminist/gay liberationist politics as it existed then. I thus focus on both contemporary examples of queer activist antagonism and how these repeat or differ from (but always owe something to) activist-aligned collectives and events past.

Throughout this project I remain committed to the question of how queer scenes and politics can be and become more ethical in the sense of opening up rather than shutting down possibilities for queer activism to achieve the very important changes it strives for. This project started from the concern that local queer activism has become diminishing

48 Probyn (1995) suggests, in her own collaboration with Grosz, that ‘queer belongings’ constitute a ‘milieux made up of actualized and virtual relations’ (p. 15). In this she wards off progressivist or ‘nostalgic’ queer narratives that would think in terms of a ‘golden past’ or ‘pristine future’ (p.15). For Probyn, time works not by ‘teleological’ or transcendent design, but ‘only the temporary structuring of our various belongings’ (p. 15).

49 In this I allude to Sedgwick’s (1988) use of the term, in her article ‘Privilege of Unknowing’. I apply her conception of knowingness in Chapter One to discuss what I see as a lack of self-reflexivity on account of some queer theorists about the uptake of their work in activist scenes.

50 See Morris (1988) for a detailed discussion of how particular academic movements fall in and out of favour, such that a boom ‘overtly defines and directs what can be done at a given moment. Once it is conceded that booms positively shape the possible, by stabilizing a temporary horizon in relation to which one cannot claim a position of definite exteriority, then it also becomes possible to think more carefully the politics of one’s own participation and complicity’ (p. 5).
rather than strengthening to most of its participants\textsuperscript{51}; that it is defined, not by an experimental process of being open to ‘where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take’ (Foucault 2000d, p. 316) but by a dogmatic adherence to a moralistic vision of what a queer enough politics would look like, resulting in reductions in the capacities of the bodies that find themselves caught up in it as well as the collectives they make up, affect and are affected by. This reduction in capacity is not only exemplified in the ‘freezing’ of those bodies who feel incapable of movement or speech within these spaces but in the vast numbers of bodies who simply drop out, refuse the call to ‘sociability’ and ‘community’ in this destructive queer context. I am thus dedicated in this project not just to outlining all the ways in which queer activism as it stands has become diminishing, but in striving for a more ethical version of queer politics that hopefully contributes to a ‘historico-practical test of the limits we may go beyond’ (Foucault 2000d, p. 316).

\textsuperscript{51} In this I recognise the complexity of queer community/activism as both enabling and disabling to some extent (say in the simultaneous sense of ‘community’ with and ‘ostracisation’ from one’s peers that many can experience).
CHAPTER ONE - THE QUEER POLEMIC IN TRANSLATION: THEORY, HUMILITY AND SELF-REFLEXIVITY

In one of the opening scenes of queer poster boy Bruce LaBruce’s pornographic comedy *The Raspberry Reich* (2004), lead character Gudrun relaxes on a park bench for some ‘light’ reading. To what can only be described as elevator music, the raspberry-chewing Gudrun tosses Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* into the bin, instead beginning to read Wilhelm Reich’s *The Sexual Revolution*, followed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engles’ *The Communist Manifesto*. Here she pauses to sniff a dandelion, thematically, and suitably, colour-coded red. The dandelion is her second purchase of the day, occurring just after the anti-capitalist heroine has been window-shopping for guns. This cheesy, purchase-happy Gudrun is presented as the antithesis of her namesake, Red Army Faction (RAF) founder Gudrun Ensslin, and this paradox sets the scene for what is a deliberately enigmatic film; a mediation on the way contemporary, left-leaning activists fetishise – and in the process often pervert – the traditions of their political idols.

No doubt, the film’s most comedic moments come from its ironic depiction of a modern-day, sexualised RAF (called The Raspberry Reich) negotiating the lessons of their forbearers. Taking a trip in a stolen BMW (the ‘Baader Meinhof Wagen’), Clyde is admonished for wearing his balaclava well in advance of their planned abduction of a wealthy businessman’s son. ‘Why don’t you just put a terrorist on board sign in the back window’\(^{52}\), snaps Andreas. ‘I’m not a terrorist!’ insists the sulking Clyde. Helmut agrees: ‘we’re activists!’ he asserts, before checking in with Andreas: ‘isn’t that what you told me?’ ‘Oh please, spare me the lesson in semantics...’ is Andreas’ deadpan reply.

But the film is careful to pay attention precisely to semantics. These are terrorist activists whose livelihood is a caricature of the ideological lessons that have been passed down to them via Gudrun - the only member of the group who seems to do any reading. Thus Helmut asks ‘isn’t that what you told me,’ since nearly all the ‘activists’ in this film seem

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\(^{52}\) Here LaBruce references the fact that the Baader Meinhof Group were well known for stealing BMWs, to the extent that BMW owners became fed up with being stopped by police in roadblocks. Many BMW drivers took to displaying ‘Ich gehöre nicht zur Baader-Meinhof Gruppe’ (‘I do not belong to the Baader-Meinhof Group’) bumper stickers on their car (Huffman n.d.).
more persuaded by Gudrun’s totalitarian bossiness (‘It’s as Gudrun always says...’ continues Andreas) – or offers of sex\(^53\) – than their own ideological beliefs. Hence their rather dubious interpretations of ideology become a source of continuing comic relief: perhaps most amusingly when Gudrun takes a trip with Che and Holger to a grocery store to ‘liberate’\(^54\) some groceries. Che, who spends most of his time masturbating to a mural of Che Guevara, jumps up and down, grinning and clapping while he shouts: ‘Shoplifting! Shoplifting!’ Holger, meanwhile, is slightly more critical: ‘But this is a family owned grocery store!’ he protests; ‘I thought you told us only to steal from corporate franchises and megastores, not from the lumping proletariat!’ ‘I’ll give you a lumping if you don’t get to work,’ retorts Gudrun, gripping him by his ear, ‘we don’t have time to argue over petty ideological distinctions. Sometimes the exigencies of the revolution necessitate the advancement of praxis over theory’.

Yet it’s my sense that La Bruce wrote this scene – and indeed the film – precisely as a deliberation on the interchange between theory and praxis. In the film, Gudrun is emblematic of a typical activist ‘mode,’ she becomes the threatening spectre of (an interpretation of) theory that must be taken at its word. Thus the movie is well-known, amongst its cult-following, for her ‘quotable’ quotes, slogans that she bandies around with no apparent irony. ‘Heterosexuality is the opiate of the masses,’ is her deviation on Marx, hence she instructs her boyfriend to have sex with Che. ‘Are you crazy, I’m your boyfriend,’ retorts Holger, before Gudrun cuts him off: ‘Don’t be ridiculous, the revolution is my boyfriend!’ she responds, fist pumped skyward, whilst the ready-made slogan flashes on and off-screen in a blinding combination of black and red. Gudrun here embodies the ‘the Black Cross’ of anarchist fame, while LaBruce’s propaganda art/porn aesthetic makes a mockery of the anarcho-syndicalist tribal colours.

Gudrun comes to represent, then, a mode of politics in translation: the way that certain leftist political theory can become ‘sloganised’ – even fetishised – to the point of comedy. Not only does Gudrun insist that the ‘revolution is her boyfriend,’ she even wears it on a t-shirt when she goes to bed. Theory is literally her uniform: both part of her uniform

\(^53\) As in Gudrun’s highly comedic threat to her boyfriend Holger: ‘free yourself from your heterosexual oppression or you aren’t getting any tonight!’

\(^54\) Just after Horst asks ‘what are we stealing this time?’ comes a typically ‘quotable’ Gudrun quote: ‘don’t think of it as stealing, private property cannot be stolen, just liberated’.
adherence to (and/or dogmatic interpretation of) Reich’s sexual and Marx’s economic principles, and her inability to switch out of theoretical mode; hence she talks to Holger as if he is a child (while pinching his ear), yet talks of ‘exigencies’ and ‘praxis’ rather than needs and practice. It’s partly her inability to live in the ‘real world’ that leaves her companions utterly confused as to just what kind of activists/terrorists they are. Unwilling or unable to engage with the original sources themselves, they take Gudrun’s perverse interpretations of Reich and Marx at face value (although Holger at least is suspect about the robbery of the family-run grocery store).

The Raspberry Reich is self-consciously parodic, and it is in this mode that it is an insightful mediation on the often-difficult relationship that leftist academic theory has with activism, a relationship that is a central concern of this thesis. In this chapter I am particularly interested in the question of translation; in modes of address (particularly the polemic) and how these influence the way theory is taken up in associated activist scenes. While I do not deal directly with the localised activist context in this chapter, I engage with some of the most sloganised of all queer theory to question its degree of self-reflexivity about its translation and application in activist circles (especially those outside of the U.S., from where the majority of queer theoretical work originates). I do not mean to set up an arbitrary distinction between queer theory and queer activism (as if ‘queer theorists’ were not ‘queer activists’ and vice versa), and I acknowledge that the key texts covered herein arose precisely out of their authors’ frustrations with local queer activism in the midst of an especially conservative political moment in the U.S. It is often because of the passionate investments of their authors that these texts read retrospectively as polemically as they do. There is no denying, however, that terms like heteronormativity (Warner 1993; 2000) and homonormativity (Duggan, 2003) are heavily influential in the different historical context of contemporary Sydney and Melbourne-based queer activism, and as such I have found it important to analyse the way these texts lend themselves to translation. Finally I analyse the work of Jack Halberstam, via her text Gaga Feminism (2012), as an example of a U.S.-based queer academic and activist who self-consciously positions herself as straddling the line between both academia and activism.
I have deliberately focused on the U.S.-based canon here, given my contention that it is U.S.-based queer theory that is most well-known and has become most influential in an Australian activist setting. The question I want to keep open throughout this chapter is how queer theory translates to an activist context in a way that might be counter to its specified aims. As well as the social discursive context, I consider the academic and disciplinary issues at play that influence queer theory’s modes of address. As such I firstly analyse texts that were published at the height of the field’s consolidation in the academy (Warner 1993; 2000 and Duggan 2003) before, in the case of Gaga Feminism (Halberstam 2012), analysing a text that was produced after queer theory had become the kind of field which makes academic tenure possible. I return to The Raspberry Reich at the conclusion of the chapter to argue that in contrast to LaBruce, these theorists are less self-reflexively or sardonically aware of the potential impact of their work and/or theorising on aligned activist circles, and likewise less open to a critique of their own privileged position in this relationship. In this sense I am interested in how some canonical queer theory lends itself to being taken up in a way that is counter to its aim not to consolidate into a ‘identity’ or ‘community-based’ politics in the same way that it claims that prior (gay and lesbian) movements did.

**The queer polemic in translation**

‘[H]eteronormativity can be overcome only by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world’
- Warner 1993, p. xvi

‘The time has come to think about queering the state’
- Duggan 1994, p. 1

In the same way that Sedgwick characterised the AIDS-era as a time of understandable paranoia for queer activism, queer theory written in the early 1990s in the U.S. tended towards what its practitioners saw as a justified use of the polemic. For Michael Warner, whose edited collection Fear of a Queer Planet (1993) brought together some examples of a ‘new wave of lesbian and gay studies’ inspired by Foucault, Sedgwick and others (p. x), the political impetus for this mode of address was none other than the naturalisation
of ‘heterosexual society’ that had been either ignored or endorsed by leftist ‘social and political theory’ (p. vii). Despite returning ‘continually to the question of sexuality,’ argues Warner, most influential leftist theorists and texts had until that point in time displayed ‘an endless capacity to marginalize queer sexuality in its descriptions of the social world’ (p. ix). Warner saw this as justification for even more ardently pursuing a queer social constructivist agenda, which in his mind had the capacity to enact a move away from the call ‘for tolerance of lesbians and gays’ that defined both leftist academic work as well as existing forms of gay and lesbian activism (p. xii). Warner believed that it was this new wave of queer theorising that had the potential to change this ‘universalizing discourse of identity and rights’ by aiming ‘not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those institutions and accounts’ (1993, pp. xii-xiii). For Warner, then, *Fear of a Queer Planet* was a text about translation, a polemic designed to up the theoretical ante of queer studies as a distinct field of politics and enquiry with an eye to changing the way gay and lesbian politics was practised in actuality. Thus Warner famously pitched his text, and *queerness*, as contrary to ‘gay and lesbian community’ as he characterised it at the

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55 Warner (1993) acknowledges that ‘[s]ome major branches of social theory... have made the connection between sexuality and politics an important or even paradigmatic concern’, naming French social theorists like Bataille and Deleuze as well as, of course, psychoanalysis. Despite this Warner laments the phallocentric nature of ‘Lacanian-Althusserian cultural studies’ (pp. viii-ix). He likewise acknowledges the work of influential feminists like Rubin, Rich, Sedgwick, Butler and Marion Young to connect the potential for a ‘nonoppressive gender order’ to ‘radical change in sexuality’, but points out that they have begun to argue that sexuality ought to be a ‘partially separate field of inquiry and activism’ to feminism (pp. viii-ix).

56 Warner (1993) argues, therefore, that the essays contained in *Fear of a Queer Planet* ‘go beyond calling for tolerance of lesbians and gays. They assert they necessarily and desirably queer nature of the world. This extra step has become necessary, if only because so much privilege lies in heterosexual culture’s exclusive ability to interpret itself as society’ (p. xxi).

57 Warner (1993) uses the term ‘universalizing’ to describe the way that ‘rights discourse’ in ‘gay politics’ may have assumed a coherent ‘subject’ or gay identity (p. xii). This is not to be confused with Sedgwick’s (2008) universalizing/minoritizing tension outlined in *Epistemology of the Closet*, not just because Warner argues that his definition is distinct, but because Sedgwick advocated for the utility of both universalizing and minoritizing subject positions. Warner, on the other hand, finds no utility in the ‘middle ground,’ which he argues is emblematic of a ‘localizing’ Western perspective that tends to become universalized (p. xii). This is ironic in some ways given the number of critiques that have since appeared of queer theory’s tendency to universalise U.S.-specific experiences. See for example David Eng, Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz (2005) who point out that the fact that most queer theory is written and circulated in English has exclusionary effects: ‘[s]cholars writing in other languages and from other political and cultural perspectives read but are not, in turn, read. These uneven exchanges replicate in uncomfortable ways the rise and consolidation of the U.S. empire, as well as the insistent positing of a U.S. nationalist identity and political agenda globally’ (p. 15). For a very early version of this argument see Berlant and Freeman (1993) on the globalising tendencies of U.S.-based activism, embodied especially in activist group Queer Nation (which has itself become the site of so many queer theoretical texts on ‘queer activism’, rarely prefaced by ‘U.S.-based’).
time in the U.S.: ‘dominated by those with capital: typically middle-class white men’ (p. xvii).

Warner wasn’t the only one arguing that increasingly neoliberal discourses of rights and tolerance masked a more sinister conservatism. For Probyn (1990), the beginning of the 90s in the U.S. and Canada marked an era of ‘new traditionalism’. By new traditionalism, Probyn referred to the paradoxical way in which women were increasingly being sold new ‘choices’ in their lives where ‘choice’ amounted to a reconsolidation of a differently-packaged status quo: ‘new traditionalism both symbolizes and reproduces the solid nature of the status quo as it urges women to get on the bandwagon, to buy into the old as new’ (p. 152). Probyn coins this an ‘ideology of the choicoise’ where such an ideology ultimately offers women not choice but a renewed investment in the same, for some; the ‘reaffirmation of what has always been there, always already there for the right women’ (p. 152). For Probyn, then, this public discourse culminates in a ‘liberal feminism shorn of its political programme – it is choice freed of the necessity for thinking about the political and social ramifications of the act of choosing’ (p. 156). This parallels Warner’s (1993) concern with a discourse of tolerance that is available solely to the ‘right’ kinds of gay and lesbian citizens: those of ‘relatively dominant positions: whites, males, and middle-class activists’ (p. xvi)58. Both Probyn and Warner thus refuse to embrace a dominant political agenda of choice and tolerance for the marginalised on the terms of a conservative, moralising mainstream.

For Warner, then, it was crucial that this new queer politics would mean ‘a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal,’ whilst simultaneously ‘suggest[ing] the difficulty in defining the population whose interests are at stake in queer politics’ (p. xxvi). In this Warner builds on Foucault’s utopian wish for the new gay politics to ‘yield a culture and an ethics’ (Foucault 2000a, p. 138), by claiming provocatively that ‘heteronormativity can be overcome only by actively imagining a necessarily and

58 Warner’s discussion of an increasingly neoliberal U.S. political climate aptly foreshadows what Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz (2005) define as an era of ‘queer liberalism’ instantiated by the then re-elected George W. Bush-led government. The Bush administration, they argue, increasingly sold gays and lesbians ‘rights, recognitions, and privileges’ that they “cannot not want”’ (p. 11) such as the right to marry and welfare benefits. See the latter section of this chapter entitled ‘Homonormative publics or politics?’ for a more detailed discussion of this context.
desirably queer world’ (Warner 1993, p. xvi). Likewise he builds on Butler (1993, p. 227) who argues that:

...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.

Unlike Warner, however, neither Foucault nor Butler claimed that the way of life or politics that queer could entail would be the antithesis of ‘heteronormativity’ or the ‘normal’, but rather, as referred to in the Introduction, as an athwart and unpredictable challenge to oppressive norms. Of course, as I have pointed out, Warner’s response to this particular political moment is justified in its suspicion of normalising regimes that depoliticise progressivist movements. From a contemporary, Australian vantage point however, Warner’s claim to queerness as ‘against normal’ leads to a confusing and sometimes contradictory tendency for him to laud queer as representing a constituency distinct from the more ‘mainstream’, ‘assimilationist’ gay and lesbian community as well as the kind of anti-identity political constituency that will be unidentifiable by way of its perpetual contestation. Indeed, Warner explicitly states that there remains the question of whether it is useful to think of ‘queer politics’ as referring to a distinct constituency which ‘brings very differently sexualized and differently politicized people into a movement that, despite its heterogeneity, must address broad questions and common identifications’ (p. xvi). As such, Warner argues that, ‘[q]ueer people are a special kind of social group fundamentally unlike others, a status group only insofar as they are not a class’ (p. xxv). Warner thus seems to embrace the queer movement as opening up a space for a constituency neglected by the white, middle-class, U.S. activists at the centre of the mainstream LGBT movement, but at the same time, argues that queer could never signify a tangible social group. By defining queer people as a ‘special kind of social group... insofar as they are not a class’ he is thus able to conclude that ‘queer politics does not obey the member/non-member logics’ of comparable identity categories like ‘race and gender’ (p. xvii). Queer politics is therefore by analytic definition⁵⁹ pit as the kind of

⁵⁹ Indeed, this is how Warner and Berlant (1998) describe queer world-making in ‘Sex in Public’ — as by ‘definition unrealizable as community or identity’ (p. 198).
movement where questions of inclusion/exclusion are ‘unintelligible’. For Warner, however, this is not because sexuality does not obey the member/non-member logics of race and gender, since he argues that lesbian and gay politics is ‘defined’ precisely ‘by multiple boundaries that makes the question [of] who is and is not “one of them” not merely ambiguous but rather a perpetually and necessarily contested issue’ (p. xxv). This distinction further shores up queer politics and the queer movement as fundamentally distinct from gay and lesbian politics; a movement that will ‘stand for’ those neglected by its mainstreaming tactics and investments, while at the same time being absolved of the problems of sexual political community by way of its (theoretical, analytical) definition as a movement open to continual disruption and contestation (in part due to the difficulty of defining the constituency whose interests are at stake in it).

In Warner’s (1993) work, however, it is precisely those he sees as neglected by ‘gay and lesbian’ identity politics who define a queer constituency. Likewise, from a theoretical or critical perspective, Warner sees those who recognise this injustice, who self-consciously distance themselves from narrow-minded, assimilationist activism as qualifying as ‘queer’. He writes, for instance, that he and ‘so many people in the last two or three years – including many of the authors of this volume – have [thus] shifted their self-identification from “gay” to “queer”’ (p. xxvi). As such, the shift from gay to queer becomes the most deliberate kind of identity statement possible, where queer is most palpably defined by what being gay is not, as rejecting ‘toleration’ or ‘assimilation’ in favour of more radical strategies of queer world making (or breaking). It is partly from this confusion or paradox that Warner admits that ‘there remains a question whether or in what context queers have political interests, as queers, that connect them to broader

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60 In speaking of the inability to ‘describe the kind of group or nongroup that queer people constitute’ Warner (1993) concludes (I believe erroneously) that “class” is conspicuously useless: feminism could at least have a debate whether women constituted a specific economic class; in queer theory the question is unintelligible (p. xxiv).

61 Warner (1993) very clearly foreshadows the later ‘anti-social’ movement in queer theory as exemplified by Lee Edelman, Halberstam and others when he writes that ‘we might even say that queer politics opposes society itself’ (p. xxvii). In this he likewise builds on Guy Hocquenghem’s psychoanalytically-inflected Homosexual Desire (1978). In a move that anticipates Leo Bersani’s (2010) ‘Is The Rectum A Grave?’, originally written in 1987, Hocquenghem (1978) argues that ‘desires directed towards the anus’ are indicative of the capacity for homosexuality to cause the ‘collapse’ of the ‘the phallic hierarchy’ (p. 111), in that homosexual sociality ‘produces itself without reproducing’ (p. 107). Indeed in his article on the anti-social thesis and Henry James, Robert Caserio (2010) describes Hocquenghem’s text as a ‘useful first step’ in describing its trajectory (p. 7). See Chapter Three for more on the anti-social thesis.
demands for justice and freedom’ (1993, p. xi). In other words, Warner himself is unable to decide whether queerness is about rejecting the idea of an identifiable political constituency altogether, or whether it remains politically necessary to lay claim to the political interests of queers as under or un-represented by contemporary gay and lesbian political activism. Warner thus grapples with the same problematic as Foucault when Foucault (2000c) insisted that the process of constructing alternate cultural forms would first entail the need to secure a number of important human rights and mainstream benefits or privileges without which justice or freedom would not be possible (p. 164). Writing from the U.S. context of 1993, however, Warner to an extent takes these benefits or privileges for granted by calling for an abandonment of assimilationist strategies in favour of a more thorough, systemic critique of heteronormativity and practice of queer world-making. Those who make this call, or take it up, then, qualify as ‘queer’.

Thus I would argue that queer in this mode can encourage precisely the kind of identity-based schisms that Warner attributes to lesbian and gay (identity) politics. While Warner argues, in other words, that gay and lesbian politics is about who is or isn’t ‘one of them’, this line of argumentation can just as easily encourage schisms within queer politics over who is or isn’t ‘queer’. I would also suggest that this has a lot more to do with class than Warner would allow. Even in the theoretical mode, that is, one’s self-identification with queer marks one’s critical distance from the pitfalls of a more old-fashioned and outmoded form of (uncritical) identity. Thus to be or identify as queer is precisely about ‘status’ in that it defines one’s ‘radicalism’. This radicalism is prefaced, moreover, on an ‘educated’ mode, on one’s familiarity with or belonging to the kind of social circles (e.g. academic or at least academically-inflected) that are able to strategically do away with essentialism. In the context of queer theory, for example, this includes those who benefit from the insular citation circles of tenured literary studies professors in the U.S. and associated publication houses. At the time of Fear of the Queer Planet, that is,

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62 Unlike strategic essentialism (Spivak 1990a), this is the idea that the queer movement is defined by a self-conscious, ‘strategic’ opposition to assimilationist tactics that it attributes to gay and lesbian politics. The irony is that in rejecting the ‘essentialism’ of gay and lesbian activism, queer politics attributes status and legitimacy to one’s self-conscious identification as ‘queer’. Likewise this is a strategic move that is available mostly to those who are able to first take for granted their ‘freedom’ and ‘justice’ in the form of basic civil rights that enable one to think about more systemic change in the first place.

63 The most common being Duke University and its associated Press. It was at Duke University that Sedgwick was Professor of English and under whose tutelage Jose Muñoz made a name for himself. Duke
Warner claimed queer theory as an anti-institutional discipline, arguing that “‘queer’ gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual, and normal includes normal business in the academy’ (1993, p. xxvi). Again he saw this as a distinguishing feature of queer versus gay and lesbian politics, in that it set queer theory apart from a ‘well-sanctioned and compartmentalized academic version of “lesbian and gay studies”’ (p. xxvi). Warner hoped therefore that queer’s anti-social, anti-assimilationist bent would mean an inevitably uncomfortable relationship with the privileged confines of the ‘normative’, ‘traditionalist’ academy. On the contrary, however queer theory’s almost immediate consolidation into an academic ‘buzz’ field saw it far more wedded to the academy, and its associated privileges, than he imagined. Only two years after the publication of Fear of Queer Planet, for example, Berlant and Warner himself (1995, p. 343) observed that:

> Queer theory has already incited a vast labor of metacommentary, a virtual industry: special issues, sections of journals, omnibus reviews, anthologies, and dictionary entries. Yet the term itself is less than five years old. Why do people feel the need to introduce, anatomize, and theorize something that can barely be said yet to exist?

There is an irony, then, in a field that self-consciously declares its distance from the assimilationist quest for civil rights by way of its more radical tactics of systemic critique and quest for broader social change from the very privileged confines of the academy. Quickly overtaking gay and lesbian studies in terms of academic popularity and sustainability, queer theory became the kind of discipline both willing to move beyond ‘mere’ rights and recognition whilst being most able to take certain privileges (tenure and its associated impact on standards of living and so on) for granted. What interests me in both this chapter and the next, then, is how queer in practicality might indeed be a

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University Press published Halberstam’s (1999) Female Masculinity, and has continually supported the work of Berlant (1997; 2008; 2011). It likewise launched ‘Series Q’, overseen by editors Michèle Aina Barale, Jonathan Goldberg, Michael Moon, and Sedgwick. It starts and ends with texts by Sedgwick (the series concluded upon her death in 2009), and includes 48 works considered to belong to the queer theoretical canon. Authors include Lee Edelman, Carolyn Dinshaw and Elizabeth Freeman. Finally, Duke also carries journals such as Differences, GLQ and Social Text.

64 For a similar argument, see Roderick Ferguson (2005) who argues that queer studies’ status as the field of inquiry for the question of sexuality proves ‘interdisciplinarity’s complicity with disciplinarity rather than interdisciplinarity’s rebellion against the disciplines’ (p. 88). Ferguson writes from the perspective of interrogating how queer theory, following Foucault, has ‘monopolized the conversations about sexual formations and steered them away from considerations of race’ (p. 86).
‘special’ kind of identity status, not because it has nothing to do with class, but because it is precisely an educated mode that marks its critical and superior distance from gay and lesbian politics and activism. Consolidating queer’s theoretical distance from gay and lesbian politics in this way, moreover, runs the risk of solidifying queer as an oppositional form of identity based precisely on the in-group vs. out-group schisms it attributes to these more ‘traditional’ identity-political movements.

Lisa Duggan (1994) seemed to touch on this contradiction when she acknowledged, only one year after Fear of a Queer Planet’s groundbreaking publication, that there was a contradiction in queer politics as an ‘oppositional stance’, and queer theory as a ‘deconstructionist’ strategy (p. 4). Duggan noted, that is, a gap between queer in theory and queer in practice. Building on this, I argue that queer theory’s self-conscious distance from gay and lesbian studies and activism defines a movement less critical of all claims to identity politics and community, than one invested in a distinct constituency and politics that is both educated and privileged in terms of its ties to the academy. In other words this is not just a problem of the contradiction between queer in theory and queer in practice. Instead, I am interested in how queer theory’s deconstructionist critique of gay and lesbian identity politics can inadvertently encourage a politics of oppositionality. I will continue to suggest that this is enabled by the polemical nature of early queer theory, as a response to the neoliberal conservative climate of the 1990s and onwards in the U.S.

For the purposes of making the role of this historical context in influential queer theoretical texts of the time clear, I focus in the coming sections on two of the most read and talked-about queer texts of the last 15 years, both of which were written at the height of the field’s institutionalisation as well as an increasingly conservative political climate. These are Warner’s The Trouble with Normal (2000) (which consolidated queerness as an ‘anti-normative’ stance) and Duggan’s The Twilight of Equality? (2003) (which consolidated the shift from a focus on heteronormative society more generally to the ‘homonormativity’ of gay and lesbian politics in particular). Both ‘heteronormativity’ and ‘homonormativity’ as terms and concepts are mainstays in local queer activist scenes in Australia, and it is therefore significant to understand the specific context from which they originated, and their translation into the very different spaces this thesis engages with.
Good Gays and Bad Queers

Both *The Trouble with Normal* (2000) and *The Twilight of Equality?* (2003), in fact, respond not only to the same locational and historical context, but more precisely to the same figure – Andrew Sullivan – as the harbinger of a new era of gay normativity. Warner begins by arguing that Sullivan’s ‘manifesto’ in *The New Republic* of 1993 was ‘the most influential gay essay of the ’90s’ (2000, p. 52). Sullivan’s writing for *The New Republic* (which he edited from 1991-1996), largely reproduced in his book *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality* (1995) was controversial amongst queer theorists and activists for his conservative views on ‘homosexual’ subculture, particularly in terms of its promiscuity. Sullivan mused, for instance, that it might be because such a small percentage of the population are same-sex attracted that ‘male homosexual culture has developed an ethic more of anonymous and promiscuous sex than of committed relationships’ (p. 13). Sullivan, despite elsewhere spelling out the various ethical virtues of gay subculture as he saw it declared that anonymous sex and promiscuity amongst gay men represented the pathological effects of the difficulties of growing up gay: ‘[i]t’s as if the hard lessons of adolescence lower permanently – by the sheer dint of the odds – the aspiration for anything more’ (p. 13). Sullivan thus slips into very dangerous territory, echoing what Crimp, Patton and other AIDS activists outlined as the popular public

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65 Undoubtedly Warner meant the most influential gay essay of the ‘90s in the U.S. (or at least North America), since neither Sullivan himself nor the text Warner speaks of have had anywhere near the same exposure or effect in an Australian setting.

66 Sullivan persisted with using ‘homosexual’ despite its origins in pathologising sexual history. However I note that Sedgwick at the time resisted ‘the convention, used by some scholars, of differentiating between “gay” and “homosexual” on the basis of whether a given text or person was perceived as embodying) respectively gay affirmation or internalized homophobia’ (2008, p. 17). In line with her ethical agenda to resist a politics of ‘knowingness’ (1988), Sedgwick (2008) argues that ‘an unproblematical ease in distinguishing between these two things is not an assumption’ of her work (p. 17).

67 This is ascertained rather dubiously from Sullivan’s (1995) personal history: ‘[m]y own experience suggests that somewhere between two and five percent of the population have involuntarily strong emotional and sexual attractions to the same sex. Which means that the pool of possible partners starts at one in twenty to one in fifty’ (p. 13).

68 In some ways, in fact, Sullivan (1995) approaches something like Foucault’s (2000a) suggestion that the ethical promise of gay politics lies in its capacity to create a culture and way of life that would provide a challenge to heterosexist norms of love, intimacy and friendship as they stand. As examples, Sullivan (1995) writes that ‘[s]ame sex unions often incorporate the virtues of friendship more effectively than traditional marriages’; that ‘gay friendship was often as good an emotional nourishment as a single relationship’ and ‘that the kind of supportive community that bolsters many gay relationships is something many isolated straight marriages could benefit from’ (pp. 202-203). Finally, he adds: ‘I also learned how the subcultural fact of gay life rendered it remarkably democratic: in gay bars, there was far less socio-economic stratification than in heterosexual bars’ (p. 203).
discursive attribution of the AIDS epidemic to a reckless and soulless ‘gay lifestyle’. As covered in the Introduction, Crimp’s (1987) work in particular made clear the devastating effects that such public discourse had in the form of governmental policy like the Helms amendment. Thus Sullivan came under attack for seemingly endorsing such homophobic policy, pinpointing queer subculture as the problem that prevented him and others from assimilation into a happier, healthier mainstream life. Post coming out, Sullivan (1995, p. 192) writes:

I was convinced I was entering finally into normal life. I was the equal of heterosexuals, deserving of exactly the same respect, attempting to construct in the necessarily contrived world of the gay subculture the mirror image of the happy heterosexuality I imagined around me.

Thus not only did Sullivan blame a ‘merciless and shallow [gay] subculture’ for his distance from happy heterosexuality, he likewise seemed to side with and excuse the majority in their homophobia, all the while acknowledging that the key difference between heterosexuals and homosexuals post the AIDS crisis was their proximity to death. Relaying the story of going to a gay friend with AIDS’ thirtieth birthday party, Sullivan (p. 195) asks:

How could we explain what it was like to live in one’s twenties and thirties with such a short horizon, to face mortality and sickness and death, to attend funerals when others were attending weddings?

Although on the surface a poignant point, Sullivan once again pits the virtue of ‘weddings’ and a heteronormative lifestyle against a gay subculture that he saw as bringing death and unhappiness to ‘virtually normal’ (p. 9) homosexuals like himself.

It is in response to rhetoric such as this that The Trouble with Normal (2000) proceeds. Warner (p. 3) starts by aptly pointing out that sex post the AIDS era remains broadly enshrouded in shame and indignity:

The difficult question is not: how do we get rid of sexual shame? The answer to that one will inevitably be: get rid of sex. The question, rather, is this: what will we do with our shame? And the usual response is: pin it on someone else.

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69 See for example his sympathy for ‘violence fear and hostility to homosexuals’ from the perspective of repressed homosexuality (he concludes that life is never easy, for either the homosexual or the heterosexual’ (Sullivan 1995, p. 11)) or his argument that ‘[g]iven a choice, many homosexuals along the way would have preferred this were not so’, which he uses as evidence for homosexuality being ‘involuntary’ (p. 17).
For Warner then figures like Sullivan are adept at exercising a ‘pseudo-morality’ when it comes to sex that has only ‘suspicion for sexual variance’ and is ‘the opposite of an ethical respect for the autonomy of others’ (p. 4). Cleverly inverting the politics of Sullivan’s claim that queer subcultures display an (undesirable) ethics of promiscuity and anonymity at the expense of committed relationships, Warner goes on to reclaim the value of what he calls a queer ethics of sexual shame in response; ‘an ethical vision much more at home with sex and with the indignities associated with sex’ (p. 33). He calls this a ‘special kind of sociability that holds queer culture together’ that is premised on the very depravity Sullivan invokes and disowns (p. 35):

In those circles where queerness has been most cultivated, the ground rule is that one doesn’t pretend to be above the indignity of sex. And although this usually isn’t announced as an ethical vision, that’s what it perversely is.

In his justifiably emotive response to Sullivan, however, I would argue that Warner makes some generalisations about the state of the ‘gay movement’ that has the potential to perpetuate not a queer ethics but a didactic divide between progressive and regressive queer politics. Warner extrapolates from Sullivan’s conservatism, for example, a broader tendency in gay and lesbian activism to seek integration into the mainstream on the basis of ‘narrow[ing] its scope to those issues of sexual orientation that have least to do with sex’ (p. 25). For Warner, Sullivan thus becomes representative of ‘the official gay movement... its major national organizations, its national media, its most visible spokespersons,’ who are ‘enthralled by respectability’ and haunted by ‘sexual shame’ (Warner 2000, p. 25). As he puts it: ‘[r]epudiating its best histories of insight and activism, it has turned into an instrument for normalizing gay men and lesbians’ (p. 25). Going further again, he concludes that ‘we therefore have an inevitable tension, with sex radicals at one end and assimilationists at the other’ (pp. 43-44). Here, Warner slips into the mode of the polemic, in the sense that his prose is ‘warlike’ (with polemical deriving from the Greek polemos for ‘war’ (‘Polemic’ 2015)). He generalises from Sullivan’s conservatism two imaginary constituencies (‘sex radicals’ and ‘assimilationists’) and pits them against one another, as if they compromised two identifiable communities of people – sex radical ‘queers’ and assimilationist ‘gays’ – rather than two contrasting but
not necessarily mutually exclusive political approaches. Thus he implies that Sullivan’s support for gay marriage and other civil rights is driven by internalised homophobia and terms his politics ‘anti-queer’; indicative of a more general divide between ‘Good Gays’ and ‘Bad Queers’ (Warner 2000, p. 114):

...the image of the Good Gay is never invoked without its shadow in mind—the Bad Queer, the kind who has sex, who talks about it, and who builds with other queers a way of life that ordinary folk do not understand or control.

Despite seeming to want to draw attention to Sullivan’s own caricature of these two constituencies, then, Warner plays into and feeds such a divide. Warner’s desire to show that being a Bad Queer might in fact be more ethical than being a Good Gay like Sullivan thus drives the polemical rendering of two opposing identities that characterise queer (subcultural) vs. gay (mainstream) life. Hence, the cover and spine of Warner’s book (see Fig. 2) depicts two contrasting figures: the sex radical ‘leatherman’ with legs spread wide, torso exposed, standing next to the white suited, bowtied groom, whose legs stay prudishly together. Together the pair embody what Warner sets up as two identifiable constituencies: the Queers and Gays.

Fig. 2 The Trouble With Normal 2000

While Warner later wrote The Trouble With Normal was about ‘rally[ing] a public’ (2002, p. 19) he perhaps misses the crucial point, that he himself makes later in Publics and Counterpublics, that polemics ‘help to make a world insofar as the object of the address is brought into being partly by postulating and characterizing it’ (2002, p. 91).
To draw on Eve Sedgwick, then, I would argue contrary to Warner that queer ethics is not about defining Bad Queer sex radicals against Good Gay assimilationists, but rather the effort to think about how various (even ‘mainstream’) forms of sexual or political practice can, at one or other point, disrupt oppressive norms. Sedgwick, for example, refused to condemn ‘minority-model gay activism’ as antithetical to the queer cause. As she put it (2008, p. 58) in 1990:

Our culture still sees to its being dangerous enough that women and men who find or fear they are homosexual... are psychically and mentally terrorized... [p]olitical progress on these and similar life-and-death issues has depended precisely on the strength of a minority-model gay activism; it is the normalizing, persuasive analogy between the needs of gay/lesbian students and those of Black or Jewish students, for instance, that enable progress in such arenas.

In some ways Sullivan’s (1995) depiction of being a gay teenager learning that ‘the condition of his [male] friendships is the subjugation of himself’ (p. 12) suggests the persistent need for this kind of minoritising politics, as well as the endurance of what Sedgwick (1985) describes as the constitutive homophobia of male homosocial bonds.

For Warner, however, there is no consideration of the potential utility of minoritising politics, since he is focused more on placing blame on Sullivan and his contemporaries for what he sees as a betrayal of the ‘best’ kinds of queer activism (Warner 2000, p. 44):

...the conflict here is far from being an equal tension. It is a hierarchy. Political groups that mediate between queers and normal find that power lies almost exclusively on the normal side.

Here Warner both reinforces the idea of there being two warring constituencies – ‘queers’ vs. ‘normals’ (conflated with ‘sex radicals’ and ‘assimilationists’) – and lays blame clearly on the ‘normal’ side. Thus Warner refers to queer politics and ‘queers’ not in the broad sense of a special kind of heterogeneous, undefinable status group he gestured towards in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, he means queers in a very specific way (Warner 2000, p. 36):

I’m speaking now of the sluts and drag queens and trannies and trolls and women who have seen a lot in life-not of the media spokesmen and respectable leaders of the gay community.

In this sense the conflation is telling: Warner means ‘queers’ in the same sense as ‘sex radicals’ to the extent that one’s sex radicalism, one’s ‘radical politics’ becomes the very condition of one’s queerness.
But to what extent does the polemic, as mode, create that very queer ‘side’, resulting in precisely what he accuses gay and lesbian politics of in Fear of a Queer Planet: ‘us vs. them’ identity-based schisms? In The Trouble with Normal, those whose politics or sex lives aren’t ‘queer enough’ lose the right to the ‘queer’ label at all. They revert back to being gays, lesbians, assimilationists and even ‘normals’. This constituency in Warner’s mind, moreover, is a ‘privileged’ one dominated by middle-class, conservative gays and lesbians. But I would argue – following Foucault (2002) – that power and privilege is neither ‘possessed’ by one group or another, but everywhere dispersed. Thus to practise a Foucauldian queer ethics would entail an acknowledgement that queer politics as much as gay and lesbian activism is both privileged (especially if we think from the perspective of queer theory being ensconced in the academy) and somewhat prescriptive. Warner (2000) does, in fact, acknowledge the latter as a feature of queer culture, pointing out that it ‘has its own norms, its own way of keeping people in line’ (p. 35). In queer circles, where sex-positivity is the norm, argues Warner, ‘you are likely to be teased and abused until you grasp the idea’ (p. 35). Thus while Warner complains that there are behavioural or political imperatives to which one must adhere in order to be included in the gay and lesbian community, Warner lets queer’s same prescriptivism off the hook. Warner writes, for instance, that being part of the gay and lesbian community requires that one pursue a politics of sexual identity whilst distancing oneself from the shame and stigma of sex, such that ‘[a] hierarchy emerges... Those with the biggest fig leaves stand, always, at the top of the hierarchy’ (p. 40). Thus he is able to claim that gay and lesbian politics has a ‘tendency to sort people by greater or lesser degrees of privilege’ depending on the imperative that one distance oneself from sexual shame (p. 40). What he does not take into account, however, is his own admission that in the queer circles he knows, there is a prescriptiveness in indignity to the extent that ‘[q]ueers can be abusive, insulting, and vile toward one another’ (p. 35) if they fail to conform to queer sexual norms of embracing shame and stigma.

What, then, are the virtues of an ethic and special kind of sociability defined as such? When Rubin first called for a special field of study focused on sexuality it was with the intention of averting precisely the kind of ‘insider’ conflict that Warner depicts and performatively invokes here. Rubin self-consciously identifies as sex-positive and wrote
her treatise *Thinking Sex* in 1984 as a response to the moralism of anti-porn feminists and their unethical political tactics in the form of silencing those who did not share their political outlook (see *Chapter Four* for my analysis of contemporary, localised sex wars). As such Rubin’s intention, in outlining the ‘sexual morality’ that she saw as characteristic of Western society at the time, was to show that these feminists were replicating and endorsing the ‘hierarchical system of sexual value’ that saw ‘[m]arital, reproductive, heterosexuals... alone at the top of the erotic pyramid’ while ‘transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex workers such as porn models’ languish at the bottom (2007, p. 279). Rubin’s point was that such a hierarchy rewarded and punished by degree of sexual stigma in the form of ‘certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support, and material benefits’ (p. 279). She thus pointed out that such a ‘sexual morality has more in common with ideologies of racism than with true ethics’ (p. 283).

Significantly, however, Rubin did not advocate for a queer ethics as the moral inversion of this hierarchy, as reverse discourse. As she wrote: ‘[i]t is just as objectionable to insist that everyone should be lesbian, non-monogamous, or kinky, as to believe that everyone should be heterosexual, married or vanilla,’ despite the fact that ‘the latter set of options are backed by considerably more coercive power than the former’ (p. 283). Like Sedgwick, then, Rubin’s politics clearly ‘privilege constructivist over essentialist, universalizing over minoritizing, and gender-transitive over gender-separatist understandings of sexual choice’ (Sedgwick 2008, p. 13). But just as Sedgwick avoids ‘any high premium placed on ideological rationalization between them,’ (p. 18) Rubin (2007, p. 283) advocates for a sexual ethics that instead shifts the terms of debate to pleasure and consent:

> A democratic morality should judge sexual acts by the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and the quantity and quality of the pleasures they provide. Whether sex acts are gay or straight, coupled or in groups, naked or in underwear, commercial or free, with or without video, should not be ethical concerns.

To extrapolate from Rubin’s pluralistic sexual ethics then, it seems to me that a queer ethics would be best pursued not by the demand to value shame and indignity as the ethical alternative to a moralistic (gay and lesbian) dignity. For Rubin, ethics is defined not
by the moralism of this call to reverse discourse but by an ethics more interested in how bodies are affected and their capacities increased by the pleasure they experience in consensual sexual relations of whatever kind. In this I find parallels with Sedgwick’s call for queer to be the kind of ethical pursuit that presents not an imperative-based agenda but enables an unpredictable and potentially contradictory politics to proceed. In a characteristically self-reflexive consideration of her own contribution to queer politics, for example, Sedgwick (2008, p. 14) wrote that:

Any critical book makes endless choices of focus and methodology, and it is very difficult for these choices to be interpreted in any other light than that of the categorical imperative: the fact that they are made in a certain way here seems a priori to assert that they would be best made in the same way everywhere. I would ask that, however sweeping the claims made by this book may seem to be, it not be read as making that particular claim. Quite the opposite: a real measure of the success of such an analysis would lie in its ability, in the hands of an inquirer with different needs, talents, or positionings, to clarify the distinctive kinds of resistance offered to it from different spaces on the social map, even though such a project might require revisions or rupturings of the analysis as first proffered.

In other words, queer ethics proffered as such derives its critical and political capacity from its capability to appeal to and be malleable to readers of all social positionings. Polemics like Warner’s arguably leave less room for such critical reflection, and as such run the risk of endorsing reverse discourse as an ethical queer politics.

**Queer Shame and Gay Pride**

A particularly interesting case study in this process is the Gay Shame conference that took place in 2003 at The University of Michigan, and was subsequently turned into a mixed-media publication (with DVD) in 2009 (but was also discussed in several contributions to the 2005 special edition of *Social Text*, ‘What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?’). The conference built on the legacy of Warner’s *The Trouble with Normal* by pitting itself in what many would later cite as the inauguration of the discipline of queer studies - that queer would stand for the ‘intersections’ of race, gender and sexuality without consolidating into the ‘lifestyles, sexual practices’ and ‘communities’ that had become part and parcel of ‘gay and lesbian’ identity (p. v).

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71 In this Sedgwick echoes Foucault’s assertion that he would like his theories to act as ‘toolboxes’ that can be adapted for the particular political purposes of his readers: '[a]ll my books...are, if you like, little tool boxes. If people want to open them, or to use this sentence or that idea as a screwdriver or spanner to short-circuit, discredit or smash systems of power, including eventually those from which my books have emerged...so much the better’ (Foucault cited in Morris & Patton 1979, p. 115). She also of course builds on the claim of Teresa de Lauretis (1991) – in what many would later cite as the inauguration of the discipline of queer studies - that queer would stand for the ‘intersections’ of race, gender and sexuality without consolidating into the 'lifestyles, sexual practices' and 'communities' that had become part and parcel of 'gay and lesbian' identity (p. v).
actively against the ‘normalising’ politics of the mainstream GLBT movement. Jennifer Moon (2009, pp. 358-359), in the edited collection that was assembled from the conference aptly characterises its interest in ‘shame’ on this basis:

...as long as sexuality is policed and viewed in moralizing terms by the mainstream, those of us with deviant desires and gendered self-presentations will be excluded and marginalized. In such a context, shame and alienation cannot be eliminated and might instead form the basis of a new, collective identity and a radical queer politics.

It was in this spirit that the conference built on existing activist efforts to turn a politics of shame into a queer sociability. David Halperin and Valerie Traub, the conference organisers and editors of the volume, pointed out that activist events such as Gay Shame awards ceremonies thus represented ‘an effort to construct a new grassroots queer collectivity founded on principles of resistance to normalization’ (p. 9). Halperin and Traub’s example of Gay Shame activism, however, shows that such collectivity is prefaced on a politics of reverse discourse. They cite, for instance, Gay Shame Awards ceremonies which ‘call attention to, and... shame, members of the local gay and lesbian communities who had sold out their queer comrades to profit, property values, or electoral popularity’ (p. 9). In other words Gay Shame Awards ceremonies are set up explicitly as a politics of reverse discourse, whereby the shame that is felt at being ostracised or alienated from the mainstream LGBT community is then reversed onto those whom it sees as ‘selling out’ to the mainstream: ‘[t]hese are the queers that mainstream gay pride is not always proud of... Gay Shame festivals strive to capitalize on that dynamic - and to reverse it’ (Halperin & Traub 2009, p. 9).

Halperin and Traub’s decision to celebrate Gay Shame Awards ceremonies as examples of how shame can become a basis for queer collectivity, then, is an unfortunate choice given they claim to be ‘the last people in the world’ who would want ‘gay shame... to displace or replace gay pride’ (p. 5). This celebration of the shaming of gay and lesbian politics seems even more troubling given they themselves admit that the conference arose out of a recent past where (p. 7):

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72 In this they reference Eve Sedgwick’s call to consider how shame might be a useful affect through which to ground a queer politics, given it ‘delineates identity- but delineates it without defining it or giving it content’ (1993, p. 12). I discuss Sedgwick’s original conceptualisation of the potential of shame for queer politics in more detail as this chapter proceeds.
...queer theorists and queer activists alike were mounting an assault on gay and lesbian identity as old-fashioned, assimilationist, reactionary, delusional, and phantasmatic, as if the habit of making an identity out of queer sexuality was what lesbians and gay men ought to feel most ashamed of themselves for doing.

As such, although the purpose of the conference was ‘not exactly to demolish gay pride’ (Halperin & Traub 2009, p. 44) part of their contribution to the topic is to laud – in activist form – the reverse discursive political shaming of precisely those gays and lesbians who engage in gay pride celebrations.

Despite the conference being set up explicitly to combine activist and academic contributions (although of course never mutually exclusive) to the topic of gay shame⁷³, there soon emerged a rift between these two constituencies. Moon (2009, p. 361) notes that in their invited contribution to the conference, the Gay Shame activists:

...began their presentation by accusing academics of appropriating queer culture to further their own careers and by suggesting that “Gay Sham” would be a more fitting title for the conference.

As such, although Halperin and Traub had set the conference up on the basis that more could be done to bridge an academic/activist divide, they argue that this moment indicates that ‘a gulf separates at least some of the aims and strategies of Gay Shame activism from the interrogation of shame in the academy’ (p. 32). This gulf, moreover, is attributed to what they see as the problematic tactics of the Gay Shame activists, who: ‘do not hesitate to mobilize shame as a political tactic to be used against other queers’ (p. 32).

There is at least a two-part irony, however, to critiquing these queer activists for using shame as a political tactic against other queers (in this case mostly those pigeon holed as ‘queer academics’). Despite prefacing the conference on an appreciation of the important political work being done to rework shame in activist terms, the accusation of a gulf between interrogation of shame in the academy and its attribution in practice suggests

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⁷³ Halperin and Traub (2009) wrote that one key motivation for the conference was ‘to bring the intellectual current in queer studies that had given new prominence to the category of gay shame into direct dialogue with a newer impulse in queer activism that went by that very name: Gay Shame’ (p. 8). Likewise, see: ‘[w]e wanted to unite those engaged in both the academic and activist reclamation of gay shame (sometimes they are the same people)’ (p. 9).
that these activists misunderstand the more nuanced political agenda of gay shame theorising. Likewise, while Halperin and Traub begin by celebrating the Gay Shame activists’ shaming of mainstream members of the GLBT community, these activists’ attempts to expose the privilege of some forms of queer academia are instead interpreted as ‘discourses of shame’ that (p. 25):

...took on increasingly didactic and moralizing dimensions, the analytical and critical reflection on shame that the conference intended to enable risked being brought to a halt by the tactical redeployment of shame itself.

In other words only certain members of the broader LGBT/queer community are open to shaming, and the privilege of queer academia is off limits to the same kinds of exposure and critique. Moreover, Halperin and Traub (pp. 24-25) go on to regret that:

...the proceedings took on a ritualistic character as several [activist] speakers castigated the conference, the conference organizers, and the University of Michigan for its multiple failures of inclusion: of bisexuals, of sex workers, of local activists, of undergraduates, of people of colour.

For a conference purportedly prefaced on an awareness of the multiple forms of ostracisation and exclusion felt from LGBT activism this would seem to be not only a fair critique, but one made in the very spirit of the conference. Indeed, it gets to the core of how shame, theorised by Sedgwick (1993, p. 12), is precisely about casting doubt on the capacity of queer to delineate its identity constituency:

The usefulness of thinking about shame in relation to queer performativity, in any event, does not come from its adding any extra certainty to the question of what utterances or acts may be classed as “performative,” or what people may be classed as “queer”... part of the interest of shame is that it is an affect that delineates identity-but delineates it without defining it or giving it content.

Key here is that such a delineated identity is without content, such that (Sedgwick 1993, p. 13):

...race, gender, class, sexuality, appearance and abledness are only a few of the defining social constructions that will crystallize there, developing from this originary affect their particular structures of expression, creativity, pleasure, and struggle.

Thus, for Sedgwick (p. 14), shame is valuable politically:

...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.
The open question of identity that shame poses, then, is precisely about the incapacity to maintain a pride/shame binary when exploring the various struggles for recognition and representation that take place under the banner of ‘queer’.

The one invited person of colour who spoke at the conference, Hiram Perez, however, points out that such critiques were not taken in the spirit of the queer potential of shame, but were seen as evidence that the conference had been ‘hijacked by identitarian politics’ (2005, p. 174). In other words, the accusation that queer theorising around collectivities of shame enacts its own racialised exclusions was once again attributed to the pitfalls of identity rather than queer politics. As such Perez suggests quite provocatively that the conference proved that ‘[a]n established group of queer theorists remain quite riled, understandably, about the normalization of queer. However, queer theory resists the critique of its own even more alarming normalizations’ (p. 188).74

Such aversion to contestation is particularly alarming in the context of a rich history of queer theorising on the topic of shame that pays attention to the way that shame is experienced very differently by those of different social positionings. In a letter sent to Douglas Crimp on the absence of raced awareness in his own contribution to the Gay Shame conference, Frances Negrón-Muntaner (cited in Halperin & Traub 2009, p. 31) wrote that:

...when shame is constitutive of an ethnic group, of the group’s poetics of identification, we are faced with a different object than that of queer theory. For instance, it is individual queers, rather than the gay community, that are most frequently the subject of shame75.

Because shame attaches itself very differently to different bodies, shame cannot be reclaimed in the same manner or on the same terms by those different bodies. In her pioneering work on the cultural politics of shame in the context of queer attachments, for instance, Sally Munt (2008) observes that ‘dynamics of shame were consistent across

74 In this Perez (2005) means mostly an aversion to acknowledging that ‘[q]ueer theorizing, as it has been institutionalized, is proper to-and property to-white bodies’ (p. 174)
75 Perez (2005) later argues very similarly that ‘both Crimp’s essay and the conference proceedings demonstrate a resistance within queer theory to appreciating how racial differences contribute to queer singularities. Such resistance, hardly ethical or productive, secures both white privilege and its transparency’ (p. 180).
historical periods, genres, forms, social structures and subcultures,’ such that ‘patterns of shame were disturbingly long-lived, and that cultures retain far-reaching memories for continued and renewed use upon stigmatised groups’ (p. 28). Amongst those groups most likely to carry around the social stigma of shame she lists ‘the underclass, the urban poor, rural labourers and peasants, ‘gypsies’ or Travellers, homosexuals, sex workers, and racial enmities enacted by ancient colonial dictat’ (p. 3). Munt (2008, p. 23) is also careful to pay attention to the fact that some forms of shame are less visible than others, such that she writes that she is keen to:

...witness shame’s sedimentation into the social, to observe the kinds of attachments forged by its effects, especially those that pass as undetectable, as opposed to those that are visibly marked.

In the context of queer conferences and theorising then it remains apt to question to what extent queer theory indulges the shame of white gay masculinity as its most invisible form of privilege. The call to sociability on the premise of gay shame then might be one unequally available to those who do not already have to contend with the misrecognition that shame can generate. In this I am inspired by the work of theorists like Caluya (2006), who argues that that being read as Asian by other men is a form of shaming that prevents his ethical recognition as other: ‘in the moment that one is recognised as Asian one is also not recognised as one’s self’ (n.p.). Thus building on Sedgwick and Probyn (2000), he points out that shame does not just ‘attach’ to bodies but is productive in a Foucauldian sense. Speaking of desire for Asian men in the Sydney gay scene, Caluya (2006) muses that many men respond by ‘re-phallicising’ their bodies such that ‘the shame of being emasculated in gay culture is recovered through the gym that sublimates it into self esteem’ (n.p.). To draw on Perez (2005), it is precisely this kind of nuanced analysis that is lost in the context of a movement anxious to set itself apart from ‘normative’ GLBT activism: ‘[q]ueer theory, when it privileges difference over sameness absolutely, colludes with institutionalized racism in vanishing, hence retrenching, white privilege’ (p. 187).

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76 See for instance Halberstam’s (2005b) critique of the conference where she argues that ‘I became convinced that gay shame, if used in an uncritical way, was for, by, and about the white gay men who had rejected feminism and a queer of color critique and for whom, therefore, shame was still an active rubric of identification’ (p. 219).
To return to Sedgwick, then, the queer potential of shame might alternatively lie in the recognition that shame is a structuring fact of all queer identity that nonetheless plays out very differently along raced and other lines (1993, p. 14):

...at least for certain (“queer”) people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity: one that has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities.

The point is not to ignore the various contestations to queer collectivities as they play out on these terms, but rather (Sedgwick 1993, p. 14):

...asking good questions about shame and shame/performativity could get us somewhere with a lot of the recalcitrant knots that tie themselves into the guts of identity politics - yet without delegitimating the felt urgency and power of the notion “identity” itself.

Thus while Crimp (2009) may claim, in the spirit of Warner, that the mainstream LGBT movement ‘sees shame as conventional indignity rather than the affective substrate necessary to the transformation of one’s distinctiveness into a queer kind of dignity’ (p. 72), I would like to keep open the question of the extent to which this theoretical desire for queer sociability in the shame of indignity retains an ethical openness to contestation, and to the fact of its own role in its often problematic translation.

**Homonormative publics or politics?**

The controversy of the Gay Shame conference, and the splintering of its participants, in part contributed to Social Text’s decision in 2005 to release a special double issue dedicated to asking the question: ‘What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?’ Part of the premise for this special issue was that fourteen years had passed since the publication of Warner’s (1993) edited collection Fear of a Queer Planet, whilst the edition also allowed for Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz (2005) to lament the waning ‘political promise’ for queer to pertain to ‘broad critique of multiple social antagonisms, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, in addition to sexuality’ (p. 1). Importantly, their introduction contextualises the political climate of the early to mid-2000s in the U.S. to renew the call for queer studies to counterpose ‘[t]he contemporary mainstreaming of gay and lesbian identity - as a mass-mediated consumer lifestyle and embattled legal category,’ with a ‘queer studies ever vigilant to the fact that sexuality is intersectional’ (Eng, Halberstam &
Muñoz 2005, p. 1). They name this specific context as the era of ‘queer liberalism,’ where, on the back of a re-elected George W. Bush-led government, gays and lesbians had been put in the position of valuing ‘rights, recognitions, and privileges’ that they “cannot not want” (with the authors drawing on Spivak’s use of this phrase77) (Eng, Halberstam & Muñoz 2005, 11). This includes, for instance, the legalisation of gay marriage at a time when it was legalised only in Massachusetts, and ‘traditional marriage is increasingly the only way to access federal welfare benefits in the United States’ (p. 11). In pointing this out, however, they advocate for abandoning ‘a mainstreamed nationalist politics of identity, entitlement, inclusion, and personal responsibility’ embodied by, for example, equal marriage movements, without pausing to ask for whom this might be viable (p. 11).

In this they build on Lisa Duggan’s (2003) critique of homonormativity to call for ‘a more global critique of capitalist exploitation and domination, state violence and experience, and religious fundamentalisms and hate’ (Eng, Halberstam & Muñoz 2005, p. 11). But in so calling for an abandonment of the pursuit of these civil rights, there is an absence of their own call for attention to the kind of intersectional social positionings that enable one to pass up the federal welfare benefits that marriage in the U.S. entails.

Duggan (2003, p. 50, emphasis in the original) indeed pointed out that one response to this particular political climate in the U.S. was the emergence of ‘the new homonormativity,’ a GLBT-led ‘new neoliberal sexual politics’ that:

...does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.

In this Duggan repeats the polemical tone and politics of Warner’s The Trouble with Normal, arguing that the Independent Gay Forum (IGF)78 in particular ‘has been remarkably effective in creating what Michael Warner has called “a virtual gay

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77 Spivak (1990b) most famously uses the phrase to discuss how having access to the (American) Constitution is a civil right that '[o]ne cannot dismiss... as mere “essentialism” and take a position against’ (p. 3). As such she concludes that ‘[w]e in the United States cannot want to inhabit this rational abstraction’ (p. 3).

78 Duggan (2003) traces the beginnings of the IGF back to the 1999 ““Liberty for All” Log Cabin National Leadership Conference in New York’ which ‘assembled gay Republicans from across the U.S.’ (p. 47). At the time Jonathan Rauch of the National Journal lauded the IGF as the ““cutting edge” of a new gay movement’ that would pursue “real dialogue, mutual respect, and even affinity between gay groups and gay leaders at serious political odds, against a backdrop of community unity” (Rauch cited in Duggan 2003, pp. 47-48).

Duggan lists Andrew Sullivan as the most publically influential member of the IGF (p. 49).
movement” in the mainstream and gay press since the mid-1990s’ (Duggan 2003, p. 50). The irony in Duggan’s salute of Warner’s conclusion, however, is that she notes that the IGF is a ‘relatively small, emergent minority’ (p. 44) of mostly gay Republicans. Duggan thus points out that in ‘invoking a phantom mainstream public of “conventional” gays who represent the responsible center,’ the IGF affects a false ‘triangulation’ by ‘positioning itself against antigay conservatism and queer progressive politics’ (p. 48). In so positioning themselves as the ‘moderate’ or ‘reasonable’ centre Duggan (2003, p. 50) argues that IGF writers engage in a:

...double-voiced address to an imagined gay public, on the one hand, and to the national mainstream constructed by neoliberalism on the other. This address works to bring the desired public into political salience as a perceived mainstream.

Duggan (p. 48) quite rightly points out, then, that the ‘moral conservatism’ of Sullivan and others is the effort of a small minority (30 men and three women) to position themselves as the voice of a much larger, politically diverse GLBT community. Duggan likewise usefully critiques their acceptance of a national mainstream constructed by neoliberalism as dictating the conservative political stance they take in order to effect the important changes in civil rights that they advocate for. But in so critiquing the IGF Duggan perhaps overestimates their capacity to ‘bring the desired public into political salience’ (p. 50). If anything it is Duggan here who brings a ‘virtual gay movement’ (p. 50) into salience by imagining with Warner that the IGF represents an assimilationist community of homonormative gays and lesbians. On the contrary I would argue that there exists no recognisable public of neoliberal or assimilationist gays and lesbians against which queer people and politics could possibly be positioned, instead there are only various differing – perhaps simultaneously valid – approaches to late-capitalist, neoliberal society and its politics of sexuality. One may adopt, for instance, a ‘neoliberal’, conservative stance towards an issue like gay marriage – particularly, say, if one wants to argue that some gays and lesbians may need to strategically buy into the institution of marriage for the sake of welfare benefits – or one may adopt a more systemic approach and critique by arguing that this nonetheless upholds a traditionalist and patriarchal institution in the service of temporary gain. To situate the two as opposing constituencies, however, would be to engage in an imaginary – or ‘phantom’ – opposition
that does not do justice to the complexity of competing social positionings and needs that enable and influence both approaches.

To return to the central concern of this chapter then, the problem about these canonical queer texts is the extent to which the queer polemic becomes a problematic mode in translation. This can mean both translation across time (from the early to mid-90s in the U.S., to the mid-2000s, to now) and across space (from the U.S. to Australia, as only one example⁷⁹), not to mention from theory to activism. Without the problem of translation taken sufficiently into account, however, some queer theorists are unable to acknowledge how queerness – despite what it says in theory – might become problematic in an activist context. This is particularly telling in Duggan’s text when she dismisses what is perhaps Sullivan’s most pertinent critique: that queer has, in an activist context, become a ‘uniform and compulsory identity’ (Sullivan cited in Duggan 2003, p. 58). In response, Duggan (p. 58) writes that:

...in fact, “queer” has been used most often precisely to question the uniformity of sexual identities and to replace a list of relatively fixed identity categories (like Sullivan’s “gay” identity) with a notion of flexible, antinormative, politicized sexualities.

Duggan’s definition, whilst analytically sound, however, alludes to a theoretical definition of queerness⁸⁰ that has been shown to be disputably anti-identitarian in practice. In his critique of queer as a ‘uniform and compulsory identity’, Sullivan (cited in Duggan 2003, p. 58) talks purely from his experience of an activist context. Queer theory, and the ethical, political utility of its politics, then, needs to be read not only from a definitional perspective, but from the perspective of what happens to those texts in translation. Both Warner and Duggan’s texts, indeed, arise out of concerns with the state of grass roots, queer activism, and queer theory is at its best when it retains focus on the everyday manifestations of its political ideals.

⁷⁹ See for instance Judith Butler’s (2011) reminder that ‘when we are looking for a “queer theory,” it may be that we can find it precisely as a presupposition of activism, and that we cannot know that theory apart from its [localised] enactments’ (p. 383).
⁸⁰ Indeed, Duggan footnotes her own academic text, ‘Making it Perfectly Queer’ (Duggan 1992), for evidence of this.
Negotiating the polemic: ‘a little humility’

‘...how in the world did we end up with a gay agenda that seeks marriage equality when the world is going to hell in a handbag and what we really need is complete and utter social transformation?’
- Halberstam 2012, p. 114

‘The fact that the world is going to hell in a Kate Spade handbag is no excuse for rudeness’
- LaBruce 2011

‘Without getting too academic about this...’ is the start to Jack Halberstam’s (2012) treatise, in *Gaga Feminism*, on why gay marriage is a bad idea (p. 98). The tone is a strategic choice since the book is directed at an imagined queer activist public; one that she imagines shares her politics. Thus her chapter ‘The End of Marriage’ starts with the sympathetic lament (Halberstam 2012, p. 95):

Why is it that whenever you have a big heated argument with someone who wants you to relent on your critique of gay marriage, they turn around and invite you to their big fat gay wedding?

Halberstam then proceeds with an anecdote about her encounter with the ‘poor guy who stopped me on the street the other day’ (p. 97). The ‘poor guy’ happened to be a marriage equality advocate, who had asked Halberstam to sign his petition for the legalisation of marriage in California. As Halberstam recounts, her response was to ‘snap’ at him, asking ‘“[d]on’t you have anything better to do with your political energies?”’ (p. 97). She argues that his ‘absolute confidence that I would be a supporter of gay marriage... implies that, generally speaking, the critique of gay marriage has not been well articulated in the public sphere’ (p. 97). Halberstam (p. 97) assumes that a poor guy like this one, therefore, hasn’t been exposed to queer critiques of gay marriage:

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81 This subheading is a reference to Gayle Rubin’s (2009) piece, in the *Gay Shame* reader, entitled ‘A Little Humility’. In this piece, Rubin speaks of the need for queer studies to have some humility, particularly towards ‘past’ movements. She points out, for example, that ‘[g]ay pride may be exhausted; gay shame will have its day. But this too shall pass. Some day gay shame will seem just as tired’ (p. 370).
82 This is from LaBruce’s (2011) ‘manifesto’ on advanced capitalism. As he describes it, it ‘pretty much sums up all the modern contradictions I can think of concerning advanced capitalism, celebrity, and revolution’ (LaBruce 2011). LaBruce originally wrote the piece in 2006 for Canadian arts magazine *Art Metropole*. Its tone is typical LaBruce, part searing satire, part earnestly political.
...think tanks like the Williams Institute have dominated the airwaves with their rights-advocacy arguments, and all the opposition to gay marriage has been depicted as external to queer communities and as coming from Christian fundamentalist groups. However, there is a fierce and powerful argument against gay marriage from within queer activist groups.

Halberstam appears to presume that had gays and lesbians on the street been exposed to such critiques, they would be directing their political energies to better, queerer causes.

What Halberstam doesn’t consider then, is that marriage equality advocates may indeed have read or been exposed to queer critiques of marriage, and decided nonetheless to persist with campaigning for it. One possible explanation for this may be the fact, as pointed out by Halberstam herself (in collaboration with Eng and Muñoz (2005)), that marriage in the U.S. may guarantee one associated welfare and tax benefits, and may well be the kind of civil right some people cannot not want. Indeed, Halberstam (2012) points out that the ‘big fat gay wedding’ she was invited to was partly motivated by tax breaks: ‘[n]umber one on this list of reasons to get married, it turned out, was the super-romantic rationale of the hallowed tax benefit’ (p. 96). Nonetheless, she goes on to argue that ‘gay marriage will do little for queer people currently living in poverty, while it has definite tax benefits for the middle class and the very rich’ (p. 102). Marriage is thus set up as a middle-to-upper class benefit, while she implies that tax breaks would be of little benefit to working class people (who in fact go unmentioned, in Halberstam’s sliding scale of ‘living in poverty’ to ‘middle class’ to ‘very rich’). In implying that marriage equality is a middle or upper class concern, Halberstam neglects to point out that it may be precisely those middle to upper class queers who can afford a queer critique of marriage (for example by possessing the relative financial comfort that enables them to pass up tax benefits in favour of the hope of more systemic change). Likewise I would argue that there may be a valuable cultural capital (Bourdieu 2004) in outlining an educated critique of marriage, since such a critique marks one out as progressively queer (as the kind of person this book laments with, not at the expense of). Contrastingly – and again neglected by Halberstam – is the fact that marriage might present a kind of priceless social currency amongst queer people less familiar with academic or queer critiques of marriage. There are contexts in which cultural capital cannot be generated by queer critiques of marriage. In these scenarios it may be that the promise of having one’s
relationship elevated to ‘equal’ status (albeit still upholding marriage as the pinnacle of so-called romantic love) amongst one’s peers and family is just the tonic to get one by.\textsuperscript{83} Halberstam does seem to acknowledge the social currency of marriage when she talks of Lady Gaga’s (what she sees as cynical) endorsement of marriage as ‘important, especially to young people’ and ‘sexual minorities’ (p. 103). She acknowledges, in other words, that celebrities talking out on behalf of marriage equality or the repeal of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell can be incredibly powerful statements to people of particular social positionings. Yet Halberstam reads Gaga’s support of marriage as (pejoratively) ‘ordinary,’ part of her capitalist and contrived guise as performer (p. 103). Thus she describes Gaga’s support of ‘popular’ causes as nothing more than ‘clichéd political positions’ that are the antithesis of ‘what makes her interesting, what makes her gaga,’ (p. 103) with ‘gaga’ here being analogous to queer. Halberstam, in other words, pits the ‘ordinary’ aspirations of the poor folk who don’t know better and want to get married (and Gaga cashing in on that) against theoretical gagaism of the superior kind, the subject of her academic but ‘accessible’ book. The theoretical superiority of a ‘queer’ position on marriage, therefore, is presented in the somewhat patronising tone of a text that tries to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Halberstam (p. 96), for instance, describes her shock at the desire of her recently transitioned FTM friend wanting to marry his female partner:

I questioned my friend and his new fiancé about their need to marry when he had just transitioned into manhood and she had, after all, just transitioned out of heterosexuality.

Halberstam implies, therefore, that this is a much queerer couple than that. She then goes into length about how ‘awkward’ it is to see their ‘freshly inked tattoos with the dates of their engagement inscribed on their arms,’ (pp. 96-97) before she concludes ‘be warned: before you change it [the institution], it changes you. OK, so I am grumpy about gay marriage’ (p. 97, emphasis in the original).

\textsuperscript{83} In this I am inspired by Berlant’s (2007a) provocation that ‘we need better ways to talk about activity oriented toward the reproduction of ordinary life: the burdens of compelled will that exhaust people taken up by managing contemporary labor and household pressures, for example; or spreading-out activities like sex or eating, oriented toward pleasure or self-abeyance’ (p. 757). For Berlant our participation in normative desires ought to be recontextualised not as a “crisis” of judgement in the affective present but an ethicopolitical condition’ of contemporary, advanced capitalist, Western life (p. 769).
The tone of this book works to consolidate Halberstam’s vision of queer politics as one shared by her more knowledgeable readers. I mean this firstly in the sense that Halberstam both defines very clearly what queer politics would not look like in practice (in the figure of the gay marriage advocate), but also in the sense that the text works to endear its own projected audience by way of their implication in her frustration at the ignorance of those who advocate for, and want to get married. This is clear in the rhetorical nature of her questions, such as ‘[w]hy is it that whenever...?’ (p.95). Halberstam assumes, that is, that she’s speaking to a public who have had precisely these (frustrating) encounters with ignorance. This mode of address hails her readership as ‘mates’ or ‘friends’ who know exactly the kinds of people she’s talking about, so that the anticipated or expected mode of response is a collective eye-roll. But there is something ethically troubling about queer collectivity founded on a haughty admonishment of the ignorance of gays and lesbians on the street.

Indeed, Sedgwick (1988, p. 103) has termed this the pitfalls of a polemical ‘knowingness’:

...there is a satisfaction in dwelling on the degree to which the power of our enemies over us is implicated, not in their command of knowledge, but precisely in their ignorance. The effect is a real one, but it carries dangers with it as well. The chief of these dangers is the scornful, fearful, or patheticizing reification of “ignorance”; it goes with the unexamined Enlightenment assumptions by which the labelling of a particular force as “ignorance” seems to place it unappealably in a demonized space on a never-quit-quite-explicit ethical schema.

In this, Sedgwick builds on Foucault’s (1980) work which has problematised the ethical and political dimensions of any simple claim to knowledge (as if it could simply be ‘had’ or not, and that with the right knowledge, one could have the right kind of politics).

Moreover, Sedgwick (1988, p. 104) reminds us that:

...there are psychological operations of shame, denial, projection around “ignorance” that makes it an especially propulsive category in the individual reader, even as they give it a rhetorical potency that it would be hard for writers to forswear and foolhardy for them to embrace.

In other words, the temptation to lambast others with the shame of ignorance is an ethically troubling position to take that implicates its imagined readership and community in a knowing rhetoric; a rhetoric that refuses the call to self-reflexivity in its transference of shame onto the other. This rhetorical mode then is the equivalent of what Sedgwick elsewhere refers to as the ‘performative elaboration’ of the phrase

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'Shame on You,' which ‘records the place in which an I, in conferring shame, has effaced itself and its own agency’ (1993, p. 4). Part of what is effaced here is the possibility of critiquing the wisdom of the friendly academic and the knowing/ignorant binary Halberstam substantiates. You know exactly what I’m talking about here, Halberstam seems to say, you know exactly the kinds of gays who could never be queer.

I have chosen Halberstam’s text purposefully here because of her positioning in the nexus of academia/activism. Halberstam is not just any queer academic after all; she is perhaps the most visible queer theorist in American ‘mainstream’ popular culture, having garnered the attention of none other than Oprah Winfrey. In Winfrey’s O, The Oprah Magazine, Halberstam was the subject of a 7-page spread (and photoshoot) with then partner Macarena Gomez-Barris (with the reprinted, online article receiving over 1,100 Facebook likes) (Fischer 2009). The article, dubiously entitled ‘Why Women Are Leaving Men For Other Women’ (Fischer 2009) was part and parcel of increasing Halberstam’s ‘star’ appeal that has made her a media darling: and not just in the U.S. Indeed, as a freelance journalist for Sydney-based queer street publications Cherrie and SX, I was asked to interview Halberstam when she was invited to ‘Queer Thinking’, an annual Mardi-Gras related-event where academics are invited to present their work to a more popular or activist-based audience. At the time, I spoke of Halberstam being a household name amongst members of the local ‘queer community’, with Female Masculinity (Halberstam 1999) in particular becoming something of a ‘bible’ – and obligatory purchase – amongst especially lesbians and trans people (O’Halloran 2011a). Halberstam, then, is anything but the kind of queer theorist whose work remains at a purely theoretical level. She herself spoke to me of her desire to break out of the kind of ‘disciplinary training in universities [that] teaches academics to write and think in ways that are not always easily translated into popular idioms’ (O’Halloran 2011a). Certainly a text like Gaga Feminism attempts to bridge the gap between queer in theory and queer in practice. What I would suggest, however, is that the sometimes-patronising tone of Halberstam’s text, as well as her eagerness to admonish certain ‘lesser’ strands of queer activism, is an anti-self-reflexive move that can see only ‘ignorance’ as the reason for queer theory’s difficult translation into an activist setting. What it does not confront, then, is the great purchase that queer texts do have in respective activist settings:
particularly when they come from such ‘public’, respected and ‘crushable’ figures as herself. The work of these academics should thus to some extent be held accountable for not only observing but actively constituting activist ‘schisms’ (e.g. between ‘gay’ and ‘queer’, ‘assimilationist’ and ‘radical’, ‘knowing’ and ‘ignorant’ constituencies). That her mode of argumentation may not resonate for some may say more about her mode of address, and her shaming of ordinary gays and lesbians, than the fact of these arguments not having been ‘properly’ translated or understood.

To return to the text with which I began this chapter, then, I want to draw attention to LaBruce as another queer ‘celebrity’ who purposefully straddles the line between academia and activism, albeit with a different relationship to his texts and their translation. La Bruce is a fascinating figure in that he is both a self-confessed ‘queer poster child’ (Waugh 2006, p. xv) famous for his explicit brand of New Queer Cinema, while also a queer academic. I say queer academic with some reservation here because La Bruce is awkwardly called upon at various intervals to contribute to queer edited collections, write forwards to queer books and more, whilst actively identifying as a ‘recovering academic’ (Waugh 2006, p. xvi). He has likewise written that he ‘hate[s] the word “queer”’ (La Bruce 1995, p. 186) and has actively resisted the characterisation of his work under any of the names queer academics or film critics have attributed to it, such as ‘queercore’ and ‘New Queer Cinema’ (La Bruce 1995, p. 194):

Apparently I have become some kind of spokesmodel for a movement called ‘queercore’, a word that I cannot even write without putting quotation marks around it.

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84 There’s no doubt that Halberstam is the kind of queer academic who is talked about like a rockstar in queer activist communities. Not only do activists gush over her, she also seems to actively cultivate a ‘rockstar’ status – see for example her famous portrait on the back of Female Masculinity (1999), as well as Kate Bornstein’s review on the back cover which describes her as ‘dashing’. Finally her books are reviewed by actual (queer) rockstars; see for example J.D. Samson’s (Le Tigre, MEN) review of In a Queer Time and Place (2005a), also featured on the back cover.

85 In this I am classifying his film-making as a form of queer activism. Ruby Rich (2013) has written about New Queer Cinema as a form of political activism since first coining the term in 1992.

86 LaBruce, when approached by Tom Waugh to write the foreword to his book, The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas, wrote: ‘I am an outsider in a band of outsiders, a character on the margins of the marginalized, an ancillary fairy. What insight could I possibly contribute from the drama of my exile? But once I dove into this remarkably deep and thorough work, I began to realize that in some ways I could be its poster child’ (Waugh 2006, p. xv).

I have also been lumped in with something called ‘The New Queer Cinema’, which to me is equally meaningless. You see, I don’t feel I have a lot in common with a bunch of rich kids with degrees in semiotic theory who make dry, academic films with overdetermined AIDS metaphors and Advocate Men in them. I’ve never felt comfortable with the new ‘queer’ movement, never attended a Queer Nation meeting or participated in any marches or protests or actions. Some people may think that’s irresponsible, but what can I say? I’ve never been able to surrender my mind to prefabricated dogma, or to reduce my politics to a slogan, or even situate myself in a fixed position on the political spectrum. No, I’m not ‘queer’, and I don’t know why they had to go and ruin a perfectly good word, either. They are so gay.

The quote is LaBruce at his witty, rhetorical best. He demonstrates an intricate knowledge of the queer movement and its key signifiers, particularly in relation to activism (in Queer Nation) and film (in ‘movements’ like ‘queercore’ and ‘New Queer Cinema’, which he is lauded as a key practitioner of) and rejects queer politics on those very terms. LaBruce enacts a circular critique of queer theory that both accuses it of reifying queer activist or artistic work under and in service of its capital-q name in the academy, and rejects its alignment of him with other ‘queer’ artists who engage in similarly privileged exercises (such as making ‘overdetermined’, ‘academic’ films). This is not just rhetoric either: LaBruce’s work, as Tom Waugh points out, has ‘never been financed by public agencies’ (Waugh 2006, p. 221) and has been particularly shunned in his home country of Canada, with ‘not a single one of his four or five video features… available from Canadian distributors’ (p. 221). For Waugh, this is yet another aspect of LaBruce’s ‘multiple and contradictory persona’ such that he can claim to be ‘one of the few commercially viable queer feature filmmakers in Canada’ (with a now cult-following) and (p. 221):

...at the same time the one most obsessed with the sex-money nexus in his work and the most contemptuous of the new world order of commodified relationships, desires, and identities.

Ironically, LaBruce thus embodies a very queer critique of his art as academic commodity, whilst cleverly inverting what Halberstam invokes as the portrait of an ‘ignorant’ activist whose problematic politics is the result of their lack of education in queer theory.

LaBruce, in claiming not to be interested in ‘dogmatic’ or ‘sloganised’ politics, rejects queer’s claim to an anti-identitarian politics open to contestation by gesturing at its

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88 In this Waugh (2006) also points to his ‘Dr Jekyll-esque career as irreverent but academic film critic under the name of Bryan Bruce in the Toronto magazine Cineaction!’ as well as his role as a “homocore” zine activist and Super 8 rabble-rouser” (p. 222).
problematic translation into activist scenes. Finally, he wards off any critique of his own position as haughty or self-righteous by dubiously ending on the popular homophobic refrain: ‘they are so gay’ (LaBruce 1995, p. 194). This is not just the bratty camp his on-screen persona is famous for⁸⁹: ‘gay’ here references his preference for calling his work as a zine maker part of a ‘homocore’ movement despite academic efforts to recuperate it as ‘queercore’. As LaBruce (1995) wrote at the time, ‘Punk isn’t supposed to be written about, just like ‘queercore’ fanzines aren’t supposed to be catalogued and historicised and analysed to death, for Christ’s sake’ (p. 193). Having started ‘homocore’ from a place of disillusionment with ‘two once exciting, volatile underground movements, gay and punk,’ (p. 194) LaBruce refuses queer’s claim to be any different. Thus, despite Warner’s claim to a queer ethic that makes the most outsider of sexual outsiders feel at home, LaBruce offers a critique of this conclusion from the position of having travelled to the ‘big city as a naïve, virgin farmboy, desperate to lose my cherry’ who found that the ‘community’ ‘offered no solace’ (pp. 192-193):

I never quite understood why everyone tried to look like everybody else, and why if you didn’t conform to the precise uniform, and the Pavlovian behavioural patterns, and the doctrinaire politics, you were treated with a contempt that you might reserve for some kind of enemy. To me, it was as cold and uninviting a country as the straight world that loathed me.

LaBruce’s work has thus always been motivated by his position as ‘outsider’, even to a movement and community that would claim him as one of its most queer practitioners and members. Ironically known to, praised and loved by so many queer academics and activists, LaBruce thus crafts much of his work with this audience in mind.

To return to Gaga Feminism, these two texts and authors share similar audiences: self-identified ‘queers’. Both Halberstam and LaBruce are aware of this audience: thus Halberstam writes in the rhetorical, knowing tone of a queer academic lamenting to her converted, while LaBruce self-reflexively pre-empts and disrupts the reception of his

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⁸⁹ LaBruce often features as a character in his films, particularly his earlier works. Perhaps his most loved and lauded form of bratty camp can be found in his role as Jürgen Anger in Hustler White (LaBruce & Castro 2002) where he plays an ‘anthropologist’ who is on a ‘field trip’ of the hustling strip, Santa Monica Boulevard. The character is no doubt another thinly-veiled swipe at academia since Jürgen is depicted as pretentious and incapable of communicating with would-be lover Monty, who is by contrast characterised as a money-hungry and uneducated hustler. This leads to several comedic encounters between the two, such as when Jürgen tries to chase down Monty to give him back his bloodied singlet, but is so used to being chauffeured that he turns on his window wipers instead of his indicator, and loses Monty in the process; or when Jürgen exploits Monty by paying him to interview him for his academic book on hustling.
work in these circles. *Raspberry Reich*, in other words, works as a mediation on his own status as ‘cult’ queer director and the potential for his work to dictate the kind of ‘sloganised’ and ‘dogmatic’ politics he is so critical of. Consider, for example, what happens after Gudrun instructs Che and Horst to rob the family-owned grocery store. ‘Remember, no meat!’ she yells, to which Horst rolls his eyes, sighing, ‘Oh Gudrun…’ ‘Meat is Murder,’ she continues, raising an eyebrow and flaring her eyes, ‘What did I tell you!’ On cue, companion Che turns and stares directly into the camera, reeling off a pre-prepared speech on the wastefulness of meat consumption. Che and Horst are depicted as mere puppets of the ideology-spouting Gudrun; although they briefly offer resistance – ‘but this is a family-run grocery store!’ – they trudge knowingly into the migrant-run store, still reciting Gudrun’s polemical attack on meat-eaters. LaBruce thus reflects on the ironic way that leftist prescriptiveness can end up retreating on its aims: by convincing Gudrun’s followers that they are ‘revolutionising’ if they do as they are told (even if what they are told seems illogical - is *explicitly* illogical). But the scene does not stop at Gudrun’s top-down influence on her followers; it also works as a reflection of the film’s influence on its audience. When Che quickly turns around, stares into the camera and mimics Gudrun’s force-fed speech about meat, for example, it acts as an equally imperative instruction to the audience of the film (and later, as the two are shown stealing from the store, text rolls over the screen, producing facts and figures that ‘prove’ why the consumption of meat is wasteful). But in the context of Gudrun’s own paradoxical advice, LaBruce cleverly asks the audience to consider the value of prescriptive address. We are asked, as Gudrun seems to demand of her ‘sidekicks’, to consider our own critical faculties, whether we, like they do, should buy into LaBruce’s own orthodoxy.

The end of the film seems to provide LaBruce’s clearest answer to this question, when these activists’ blind adherence to Gudrun’s purportedly ‘anti-capitalist’ ideology imbricates them further in capitalism. The scene starts at the local gay bar, which is holding a costumed ‘terrorist party’. The ex-Raspberry Reich members all attend, doing their best to look the part. This involves, in Horst’s instance, wearing Gudrun’s ‘The Revolution is my Boyfriend’ t-shirt. Thus while Andreas enthusiastically claims that he looks ‘more authentic’ than the others in the crowd, the audience is left to laugh at the
authenticity of an anti-capitalist movement that can wear its politics, literally, on its sleeves. I don’t think there’s any doubt, then, that when LaBruce started selling ‘The Revolution is my Boyfriend’ t-shirts in his online store\(^9\), that it was the ultimate form of ironic gesture. Just as he depicts the ease with which anti-capitalist becomes capitalist for The Raspberry Reich, he offers a mediation on the power his own film has to be equally prescriptive to its queer audience. He is all too aware, that is, that viewers might themselves want to own/buy a piece of the action: that his film – and his own ‘star power’ – has the ability to inspire/constitute a t-shirt buying, ‘alternative’ cult following. In so pre-empting and questioning this process of reception and translation, LaBruce demands of his queer audience a critical response to polemical address.

I am not sure, however, that Halberstam is as self-reflexive about her own constitutive role in the politics of queer activism, on a community that likewise draws on her ‘star power’ to model itself upon. Perhaps this is a partly paradoxical thing to say, because in some ways, Halberstam does assume that queer theory has a top-down influence on activist communities (by assuming, for instance, that if queer theory had made its way to gay and lesbian activists, they wouldn’t be wasting their time campaigning for gay marriage). What Halberstam seems less aware of, or perhaps less concerned about, then, is that some of the key tenets of her own work don’t resonate with certain demographics - maybe or especially with the ‘ordinary’ people who appreciate Lady Gaga standing up for gay marriage. So while The Raspberry Reich seems to be about critiquing the kinds of politics and communities that form around theoretical idols, Gaga Feminism both encourages, and places itself squarely within, an oppositionally-defined queer community. I wonder to what extent this endorses, in an activist setting, the kind of bruising schisms one encounters over issues like gay marriage (which I cover in Chapter Two), and to what extent such power and reach could come with a little humility, or respect for those who disagree.

\(^9\) They were previously available for purchase from the now-defunct www.raspberryreich.com.
Queer as a privileged mode

It’s not easy to disagree. I would attest to that having undertaken this project. It has put me at odds with close friends, with my own ‘community’ and with queer academics whom I highly respect, academics whom I might one day like to work alongside. Contesting queer orthodoxies, then, is in some ways a precarious position to take: not least because academic life, and work opportunities themselves are so precarious. In this way I wonder how much queerness, in its academic mode, is itself a performance of one’s compliance: perhaps for justified reasons. As Robyn Wiegman (2012) has noted of queer’s institutionalisation within the academy, ‘the gesture of citing one’s queer disidentification with normativity was itself a disciplinary norm, the very position from which practitioners could assume that their critical practice was unquestionably queer’ (p. 33). As such, adopted stances, like being ‘grumpy’ about gay marriage, become productive of one’s identity as a Queer Theorist. This, likewise, becomes the performative gesture that ensconces one within an academically-cushioned discipline.

This is one of queer theory’s most perplexing paradoxes: between its purported status as an ‘anti-normal’ ‘anti-discipline’ and its rapid institutionalisation within the academy. It was only one year after her own championing of the movement, for instance, that Teresa de Lauretis (1994) claimed that queer theory had become ‘a vacuous creature of the publishing industry’ (p. 297). Undoubtedly this has always been a sore point for a movement intent on proving its distance from normativity in both the academy (as privileged institution) and gay and lesbian activism (as a purportedly privileged form of nonpolitics). What would it mean, then, for queer theory to be honest about the self-structuring privileges that enable its critique of normativity? Not only does the privilege of the academic institution enable queer scholars careers in the critique of normativity, it also ensconces them in a relatively stable work environment which is an anomaly under today’s ordinary work conditions.

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91 By this I’m not suggesting that academia itself is necessarily a privileged work environment, given the many (disturbing) changes to work conditions that have recently occurred at my own University as only one example, and given the extent to which academics and academics-in-training are expected to work lengthy hours for comparatively little financial compensation.
To draw, then, for one last time on Halberstam, I’d like to end on a scene from *Gaga Feminism*. In it, Halberstam gets into a limo that picks her up from the airport in Indianapolis on her way to an academic conference. She gets into a conversation with her limo driver who has ‘recently moved from one small town to another’ (2012, p. 72). The man ran a small business with his now divorced wife, where they ‘hand-bred’ horses. Halberstam is unsure what this means. ‘What kind of business? I inquired… maybe I shouldn’t have… Well, I am a city person, urban through and through, and this rang no bells for me’ (p. 72). Halberstam continues to push the driver on what hand-breeding means until he explains that their role was to help the stud find the mare’s vagina, since ‘[m]ore often than not, the stud finds the anus and does his business there’ (p. 72). Halberstam follows with her own commentary: ‘[a]nus. There it was, a word I had not expected or wanted to hear on a dark night’s ride in Indiana. It got weirder’ (p. 72). She several times refers to this process, and story as ‘[w]eird’, and, despite continuing to prod her driver, as something she ‘did not want to imagine’ (p. 73). In her reflection on this encounter, Halberstam reads the story as an important insight into how (I would argue she means normative) ‘[h]eterosexuality’ is taken for granted, even when it requires significant external intervention (p. 73). She reads this encounter, in other words, as yet another example of the insidious nature of heteronormativity, that, as a ‘city person’ she had not been aware of (p. 72). What is particularly odd about this passage is that Halberstam then offers that when recounting this story to her colleague, she was accused ‘of being patronizing toward people who live in small-town America’ (p. 73). This, however, she dismisses (p. 73):

> But was it that, really? Was this merely a case of an urban queer person puzzling over the odd ways of country folk? Or was this story a reminder… that the concept of “normal” has reached a kind of conceptual conclusion?

On this note, the tale, the odd ways of country folk, and her colleague’s critique, are left permanently behind.

Anti-heteronormativity is the conceptual conclusion of *Gaga Feminism*: it is the predictable message that she reads into this ‘odd’ story. What this foregone conclusion does, then, is foreclose any self-reflexive analysis not only of her own urban-bias, but of what else this story tells us about normal. Halberstam mentions, that is, but never
analyses, the fact that this man had just moved from one small-town to another after going through a divorce with his wife. The reason he was driving a limo was because farm work had become untenable as a single man. This is a pretty ‘normal’ story for many Americans, not just small-town folk. As Berlant (2011) has argued, adaptation and flexibility is precisely what is expected of a ‘normal’ person these days, to the extent that it is actually ‘precariousness’ rather than ‘stability’ that is the new norm. To take this new norm as a point of analysis for queer theory, then, might be to reflect on the fact that queer – both as a career, and as a ‘disruptive’ position – is in many ways a position of privilege. Performing queerness in an academic setting, that is, is part and parcel of what it takes to secure the elusive: a comfortable, well-paid job (the kind where you get picked up in limos). To reflect on this might be to acknowledge that queerness as an anti-normative, academic imperative is not necessarily a desirable position for at-risk (including small-town) queers to take.

This has real implications for queer theory’s critique of identity politics as well as community. What might it mean to question how capitalism relies on and is productive of what it means to be ‘anti-community’, to be ‘anti-normative’ and ‘anti-identity’? It should give one pause, for instance, to assume that anti-normativity is always and everywhere desirable, to consider the ways that one’s own performative enactment of anti-normativity might become the condition by which one’s own privilege is enabled or ensured. In the next chapter I take these theoretical observations to a local, Australian activist context. There, I will again pursue the question of translation, as well as privilege. My questions will be: to what extent has queer theory mediated, or transformed the way queer ‘community’ is practised in an Australian activist sense? To what extent, moreover, has this translation been productive of the practice of ‘calling out’ others on their privilege, to the extent that what defines the queer community is its schisms, its ‘wars’? I argue that the often war-like tenor of queer activism is a problematic, unethical mode for activists to engage in that may be attributable, in part, to the translation of canonical queer theory within these scenes.
CHAPTER TWO - HOMONORMATIVITY, HOT POLITICS AND GAY MARRIAGE

In 2012, an extraordinary post appeared on my Facebook news feed entitled ‘WANTED: SPACE FOR UNFUCK(ME)ABILITY’ (Alfanfo 2012). The post had been liked by 179 people and shared by another 66. I knew before I opened it that it was related to the queer scene, because the majority of my Facebook friends who had liked it were acquaintances from my undergraduate days. Most were fellow inhabitants of the Melbourne queer scene that dominated the social landscape of my late teens and early-mid 20s. These were the people who had likewise been involved in queer student activism, as part of the ‘Queer Lounge’ at The University of Melbourne92, or participants in the broader social scene that took over our lives off campus. People I’d danced with ‘til all hours at Q+A at The Builder’s Arms before it became IQ at A Bar Called Barry. People who I’d stood in line with at The Peel before I was unwelcome on account of being a woman93. One of whom was the author of this post. We didn’t have a special bond in any sense, in fact, I’m not sure we would recognise each other on the street. What I did know is that we’d moved in the same spaces, sat on the same milk crates in the backyard of a queer sharehouse in Carlton, and been involved in the same, tiresome political debates.

The Facebook post started as follows (Alfanfo 2012):

This is something I have been wanting to write for a really long time. There has been anger, sadness, disappointment and frustration in spades and so I waited until now… I waited to see if, once I stopped being so pissed off, I still felt the same way… This is not a rant. This is the result of months of percolating emotions and ideas, of conversation with family, friends, acquaintances, strangers and myself. I write from my own perspective and experience, largely within and relating to the Melbourne queer social networks I have lived and worked within for the last three and a half years...

As I read, I felt a tingle of goosebumps, knowing this was going to be significant. I’ll quote a lengthy chunk from the post (Alfanfo 2012) for the sake of analysis:

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92 The Queer Lounge is part of the University of Melbourne Student Union’s Queer Department. The Department was established in 1995 and took over the Melbourne University Gay Society which had been in existence since 1973 (Willett 2011, p. 136-138).

93 The Peel is a venue explicitly marketed to gay men: it won a landmark case in 2007 to legally discriminate against patrons at the door (Akersten 2012), for example if the ‘Gay Male to guest ratio’ is undesirable (The Peel Hotel 2012).
I need to say - it feels to me that there is barely any space for vulnerability in our community. I feel this way because in my experience, the way that we relate to each other – especially en masse at public events – is dominated by creating, identifying, validating, documenting and discussing our value both as individuals and groups based on how successful we are at being...

HOT. FIERCE. BEAST. MINCER. BABE

etc.

...the constant and relentless call and response of what and who is HOT FIERCE BEAST MINCING BABE makes me feel completely suffocated and alienated. And in some ways it is as simple as fashion. In some ways it is as complex as the interplay of power, privilege, oppression and social capital within our scene and community. Being (and being considered) a HOT FIERCE BEAST MINCING BABE is not based purely on an individuals [sic] aesthetic, although sadly I believe the right look is a crucial element - but instinctively I know that succeeding is intrinsically linked to fuckability. Because we accord value in terms of HOTness. To everything. Your hair. Your relationships. Your jacket. Your politics. Your job. Your art. Your car. The way you walk, talk, mow the lawn, cook, walk your dog.

I’ll stop there for now, because I’d like to draw attention to a few things. First, a word about terminology. The term ‘mincer’, despite having a long history\(^{94}\), has only relatively recently become popular in the Melbourne queer scene. It has been taken up since I moved to Sydney in early 2010 and has been reclaimed as a way of referring to one’s ‘queerness’ or ‘hotness’ (often the same thing). The uptake of ‘mincing’ is manifest in underground parties and events like ‘Mince Pie’\(^{95}\) where those involved in the Melbourne queer scene socialise, dance and pose for photos that are uploaded onto Facebook and are publicly available (Mince Pie 2012).

As Alfanfo makes clear in the Facebook post quoted above, despite the fact that these events intend to celebrate the ‘hotness’ of queer culture, they are often experienced as being intimidating and alienating. This is not just because of aesthetics, but because of the \textit{interplay} of aesthetics and politics. Gestures such as raising one’s shirt to demonstrate that one has had ‘top surgery’\(^{96}\), displaying one’s hairy armpits, or the adoption of ‘Normcore’\(^{97}\) fashion as represented by one’s baseball cap or ‘bling’, become...

\(^{94}\) The term mostly derives from a San Franciscan or American context where mincing is used, sometimes derogatorily, to refer to a particular style of gay male effeminacy. As recently as 2010 the term drew mainstream press attention after a controversial ‘No mincing’ sign was placed outside an Elton John concert in the UK (The Mirror 2010).

\(^{95}\) Otherwise known as ‘House of Mince’.

\(^{96}\) The common term to describe a double mastectomy, a surgery often undertaken by FTM trans people.

\(^{97}\) Normcore is the name of a fashion trend that arose after K-Hole (A New York-based youth trend forecasting agency) predicted a movement that ‘moves away from a coolness that relies on difference to a
constitutive of something much broader. They become constitutive of one’s refusal of gender conformity or binaries (as in the hairy armpits, or top surgery) or an ironic relationship to commodity capitalism (as in the ‘snapback’, singlets, or ‘kicks’). This is not to say having hairy armpits is the same as undergoing top surgery; clearly there is more at stake in the permanent and sometimes painful or traumatic alteration of one’s body (not to mention the far greater risk of social ostracisation and harassment that comes with being so much more visibly gender non-conforming). While these examples are significant and explicit signs of refusing normative gender roles, other performative gestures, such as the adoption of Normcore fashion, rely on the successful navigation of codes that have become incorporated into local queer culture. Normcore only ‘works’, that is, when one is conscious of the ‘ordinariness’ of their outfit; that’s why writer Fiona Duncan (2014) calls Normcore a ‘self-aware, stylized blandness,’ while Tori Telfer (2014) from Bustle magazine described the style as ‘boring fashion for interesting people’. So while on one level Normcore recognises that one can’t be ‘interesting’ and ‘original’ when following a fashion trend, its meta-commentary on this fact ironically requires that one stand out in their conscious deployment of the common. This sets one’s ordinariness out as precisely out of the ordinary, as ‘queering’ commodity consumption.

For people who inhabit these scenes, navigating such codes can be intimidating, even if they are aware of them, or have in some ways deployed them themselves, as Alfanfo (2012) points out:

> I’m certainly not abdicating my own responsibility. I have revelled in mine and others (sic) HOT. FIERCE. BEAST. MINCING. BABENESS. I have celebrated, I have danced and talked endless shit in gutters and bedrooms and courtyards, I laughed my ass off, I pranced and played and fucked my brains out and loved every second. I FELT SO QUEER.

BUT.

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post-authenticity coolness that opts in to sameness’ (Tschorn 2014). It was subsequently taken up by brands such as The Gap, and colloquially associated with ‘hipster’ fashion. In the queer scene its meaning most closely aligns with the ‘top definition’ in the Urban Dictionary: ‘A subculture based on conscious, artificial adoption of things that are in widespread use, proven to be acceptable, or otherwise inoffensive. Ultra-conformists’ (Skaught 2009).

98 This is a slang term for baseball hats that have an adjustable, flat brim. They are big in both the queer and lesbian scenes in Sydney. The Newtown Hotel in Sydney runs an event called ‘Snapback’ every Wednesday (known affectionately in Newtown as ‘Wednesgay’ after the range of mostly lesbian events that are on, like Birdcage at Zanzibar or Queer Central at The Sly Fox).

99 Most often these are Nike High Tops.
Queer codes are available for co-optation; they can be utilised and performed to recognise, or instantiate one’s queerness. Performing recognisable versions of queerness brings into being one’s identity as queer, as in the phrase ‘I FEEL SO QUEER’. But feeling queer, and being recognised as a queer, relies on one’s performative adherence to, and knowledge of, such codes. These codes, moreover, can be inaccessible, to the extent that one can only grasp what it means to be queer, or how to be recognisable as queer, through one’s own immersion in the scene. To come to the scene as a relative outsider, then, carries with it the enormous weight of trying to find one’s place in the community, to consciously navigate the various codes and requirements on one’s behaviour that enable one to ‘fit in’. Sometimes this culture remains inaccessible, despite one’s immersion in it, given that some codes are not equally available for co-optation to all. This includes having the right body to pull off certain ‘looks’, the money – or ethical indifference – to buy new kicks, or being part of the right social networks to be ‘in the know’ about these events at all.

Thus, navigating the codes that are characteristic of the queer scene is also in some ways about performing a version of queer identity politics. As the Facebook post makes clear, ‘fitting in’ is not just about the way one dresses, it’s also about the aspects of one’s behaviour that indicate one’s ‘insider’ queer credentials. Factors as seemingly unrelated as ‘your job’, ‘your politics’, ‘the way you walk, talk, mow the lawn, cook, walk your dog’ are all performative aspects of one’s behaviour that can be read as ‘queer’ (or not queer enough). It’s in taking the right kind of job, walking in the right kind of way that proves just how queer you are, which likewise enables you to accumulate some of the cultural capital that is key to earning social capital (Bourdieu 2004) and its associated comforts

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100 In this I refer to Nike’s string of human and workers’ rights violations, such as running sweatshops in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and more, and history of child labour. See for example Oxfam International’s report Offside! Labour Rights and Sportswear Production in Asia (Connor & Dent 2006) or other comprehensive overviews of Nike’s ethics, such as (Shop Ethical! 2015) or (Ethical Consumer 2015).

101 I follow Bourdieu’s (2004) use of the term here, in the sense that he argues that ‘[t]he volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent... depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected’ (p. 21).
and privileges in this scene. Alfanfo’s post doesn’t discuss what kind of politics it takes to acquire cultural or social capital in the queer community, nor does it spell out the precise relationship between capital, power and privilege in the scene. However, I undertake that task in this chapter, exploring how these scenes have been informed by queer scholarship and theoretical terms like ‘homonormativity’. I will pay particular attention to the concept of a ‘queer identity politics’ as having followed from, or indeed, in spite of, queer theoretical critiques of identity politics. Finally, I engage with the gay marriage debate as it has played out in localised, queer collectives, and its relationship to questions of privilege and ‘hot’ or dominant queer politics.

Homonormativity, oppositional politics and queer identity

In 2009 came another extraordinary moment in the queer scene or community this thesis describes. It was winter, and a large number of queer-identifying students from all around Australia had gathered in freezing, grey Canberra. There’s probably only one event that would draw so many queer students\(^\text{102}\) to Canberra at that time of year and that’s Queer Collaborations (QC)\(^\text{103}\). This particular year, two of my best friend’s housemates from Melbourne were giving a plenary, and we all drove to Canberra together in my mate’s car. Their talk was on homonormativity and the pink dollar. Situated in a large lecture hall at Australian National University (ANU), the plenary drew numbers that I’d rarely seen at other QC events. The atmosphere was incredibly tense. The presenters, two white, young, middle-class, cis male university students, proceeded...
to deliver a lecture on the evils of ‘homonormative’ gays and lesbians, those who were willing to exploit their ‘pink dollar incomes’ to buy into the ideological framework of ‘normal’ life. As they spoke, they displayed images on large screens that identified who they were talking about. One image, a cartoon with a retro 1950s aesthetic, depicted a cis male couple in their suburban home. One man was outside barbecuing, while the other returned from work with a speech bubble that said ‘honey, I’m home!’ Amidst a chorus of condescending laughs and head-shaking, the presenters used this and similar caricatures in their discussion of ‘cookie cutter’ gays and lesbians. It was ‘gross’, they contended, that these people aspired to nothing more than a ‘picket-fence’ lifestyle and the ability to ‘belong’ to normative society; and as such, they represented everything that queer life was not.

I was furious after that plenary. I spent hours sitting in my best friend’s car, trying to explain to her why it had made me so uncomfortable. I explained that I had felt personally affronted, and imagined many others had too. Who were they to judge who was or wasn’t queer enough? What did they know about the lives of those who lived in the suburbs, who raised kids, got married, worked in banks? Who said they couldn’t be queer? Until I wrote this chapter in 2013, I couldn’t say for certain what effect that talk had had on other people who were there. In addition, I had avoided QC since. However, I found out that a colleague in the Gender and Cultural Studies Department at The University of Sydney had also been in attendance that day. At the time, she was Queer Officer\textsuperscript{104} at The University of Sydney, but was also part of the Grievance Collective\textsuperscript{105} for that year’s conference. Like me, she remembered less about the content of the plenary itself than its ‘tone’. ‘Was it a lecture? I know they lectured us’ she said. What she remembered most was not the plenary, but the aftermath. Being part of the Grievance Collective, she was approached after the talk by two young conference participants. They were partners, one 18, the other slightly older, both attending their first QC. They spoke about their identification as ‘femme lesbians’ who looked ‘normal’ enough to go

\textsuperscript{104} As explained on the NSW & ACT Queer Students Network, Queer Officers are elected at each University which is affiliated with the National Union of Students (NUS) and has a queer department (NSW & ACT Queer Students Network 2015).

\textsuperscript{105} The Grievance collective includes a representative from each of the conference’s autonomous caucuses. Grievance Officers are trained, and identifiable to attendees by a coloured arm band. Their role is to ‘accept grievances and facilitate the constructive resolution thereof’ (Q.C. Organising Collective 2010b, p. 33).
relatively unremarked upon in everyday society. Having grown up in a working-class, rural town, ‘passing’, indeed, was a necessary strategy to avoid homophobic violence. My colleague described how one woman cried and both spoke about feeling like they were ‘imposters’ in the scene and at the conference, like they weren’t ‘really queer’ (personal communication, 17 March 2013).

I’d like to pick up on the concept of ‘really queer’ as I think it says a lot about queer politics in these scenes. In the case of these two women, it was the sense of not being ‘really’ queer that informed their experience of alienation and exclusion. I’m not the only one to have talked about exclusion in Australian queer scenes. In his work on queer youth suicide in an Australian context, for instance, Rob Cover (2012; 2013) has worked to link feelings of isolation and exclusion within LGBTIQ communities to the propensity for queer youth to turn to self-harm. Insightfully, Cover (2012, p. 119) has argued that these scenes can be dominated by ‘stereotypes’ of behaviour which:

...present the idea that in order to perform a coherent queer selfhood, there is some considerable pressure to adapt one’s sense of identity in order to participate in – or belong to – a minority community.

Cover concludes, however, that exclusion is derived from the fact that ‘contemporary western GLBT communities are homonormative’ and that one must adhere to homonormative standards of ‘taste, aesthetics, affluence and career choices’ in order to belong (p. 119, emphasis in the original). Yet in my experience, and in the example above, this is very much the opposite of what occurs in Australian queer scenes. That is, one’s ability to find one’s place within the queer scenes I am familiar with relies on one’s performance of anti-homonormativity. In the case above, for example, the girls spoke about their understanding that being ‘femme’ was sometimes ‘OK’ in queer circles, but only if it was a performative version of femininity\(^\text{106}\), only if they were ‘high femme’ in the queer sense. Indeed, the queer scene in Sydney has its own version of this style of

\(^{106}\)Historically Sue-Ellen Case (1988-89) – following psychoanalyst Joan Riviere - has spoken about the capacity for butch-femme roles to provide women with an ‘agency and self-determination to the historically passive subject, providing her with at least two options for gender identification and, with the aid of camp, an irony that allows her perception to be constructed from outside ideology, with a gender role that makes her appear as if she is inside it’ (p. 65). In other words it is the camp performance of ideological norms that produces ‘the distance from them required to enter the psychoanalytic viewing space’ (p. 65) in which the ‘queering’ of normative gender roles can take place.
femininity, exemplified in the ‘The Femme Guild’\textsuperscript{107}. While not wishing to place judgement on the collective itself, I have often heard from femme-identified friends that they understand the performative ‘femmeness’ of the Guild to be a ‘camp’ comment on femininity itself, such that one’s belonging in the group is dependent on one’s ironic acknowledgement of the constructedness of that category. In this sense, the two girls at QC event in Canberra may have felt that their own femininity was not ‘ironic’ or ‘performative’ enough to be considered queer. Ordinary femininity, being a ‘mere’ femme, might thus be seen as complicit with a ‘homo’ or ‘hetero’-normative system that is the antithesis of what is read as sexy and queer\textsuperscript{108}. Disturbingly, this repeats the attitude of mostly middle-class, anti-porn feminists in the 1980s, who saw working class butches and femmes (often women of colour lesbians) as products of a bar culture that uncritically replicated normative gender roles (Case 1988). At the time it was left to sex-positive feminist Joan Nestle (quoted in Case 1988-89, p. 59) to point out the classist overtones of such a position:

I wonder why there is such a consuming interest in the butch-fem lives of upper-class women, usually more literary figures, while real-life, working butch-fem women are seen as imitative and culturally backward... the reality of passing women, usually a working-class lesbian’s method of survival, has provoked very little academic lesbian-feminist interest.

Nestle thus makes two points relevant to contemporary queer activist ethics: first, that passing and ‘normative’ gender roles can be a survival strategy that is particularly important for working-class queers\textsuperscript{109}, and secondly, that condescension about someone else’s ‘normative’ appearance and behaviour is likely an elitist judgement borne out of

\textsuperscript{107} The Femme Guild refer to themselves as ‘a queer feminist organisation working to create an awareness, understanding, and ultimately a celebration of femme identity within the GLBTQI community’ (Sydney Femme Guild Inc. 2015).

\textsuperscript{108} And in queer scenes this is reflected in the capital afforded to one’s capacity to participate in ‘genderfuck’. As the proceedings to QC Wollongong 2010 describes it, ‘[g]enderfuck refers to the self-conscious effort to “fuck with” or play with traditional notions of gender identity, gender roles, and gender presentation. Genderfuck uses parody and exaggeration to call attention to its transgression of gender roles, seeking to expose them as artificial, often by manipulating one’s appearance to create gender dissonance or ambiguity in stark opposition of [sic] the gender binary’ (QC Organising Collective 2010a, p. 41).

\textsuperscript{109} See also Gail Mason (2002) on how queer people construct ‘safety maps’ that enable them to navigate danger as they are likely to encounter it in their everyday lives. As Mason concludes, ‘in constantly mapping their bodies for signs of homosexuality, lesbians and gay men are also able to exercise a form of control... Gay men and lesbians may rarely be in a position to ‘take charge’ of the hostility that is committed directly against them, but as the ‘managers’ of their own visibility, many are able to take charge of the contexts that feed into and flow from their knowledge of such hostility’ (pp. 93-94).
one’s own class privilege and cultural capital. In the late 1980s this site of privilege – what Case (1988-89, p. 63) calls ‘critical capital’ – was an anti-porn feminist movement dominated by ‘white upper-middle-class heterosexual women’ in cahoots with ‘right-wing homophobic, born-again men and women who also support censorship’ (Case 1988-89, p. 58). Dorothy Allison (1994), indeed, makes a very similar point in her own reflections on being pro-sex, femme and working class in the lesbian-feminist movement. Allison (n.p.) argues that the alienation she experiences in the movement on account of her sexual preferences is inextricably tied to her class identity:

I know that I have been hated as a lesbian both by “society” and by the intimate world of my extended family, but I have also been hated or held in contempt (which is in some ways more debilitating and slippery than hatred) by lesbians for behaviour and sexual practices shaped in large part by class... The kind of woman I am attracted to is invariably the kind of woman who embarrasses respectably middle-class, politically aware lesbian feminists. My sexual ideal is butch, exhibitionistic, physically aggressive, smarter than she wants you to know, and proud of being called a pervert. Most often she is working class, with an aura of danger and an ironic sense of humour. There is a lot of contemporary lip service paid to sexual tolerance, but the fact that my sexuality is constructed within, and by, a butch/femme and leather fetishism is widely viewed with distaste and outright hatred.

For Allison (n.p.), experiencing this kind of class-based sexual condemnation alienates her from her ‘alternative lesbian family’ within which she anticipates less moralism and judgement:

It was hard enough for me to shake off demands when they were made by straight society. It was appalling when I found the same demands made by other lesbians.

To take these historical experiences and texts into account in the contemporary moment is to argue that the queer activist scene can be equally inattentive to the experiences of being a classed outsider. This in turn leads to the perception by some scene participants that there are specific norms or standards by which one must live in order to be accepted or included. This may not manifest in precisely the same way as the lesbian feminist context, and no doubt the queer activists I know would abhor such an association with the 1980s anti-porn feminist movement and its associated conservatism and ostracising political tactics. Nonetheless it is important that those whose gendered presentation and/or sexual desire is not self-consciously ironic or academically-informed are equally
welcome and feel comfortable in the queer scene. Otherwise class identity once again leaves one on the outside of leftist, feminist sexual politics.

To an outsider, it may seem that the women – and I – were overreacting, taking personally a critique that was never meant to be personal. But at QC, where sex is as much a part of proceedings as politics, and where one’s politics determines one’s hotness, this is an ethically problematic scene. My colleague touched on this in her version of events. What made the plenary a particular site of anxiety, she mused, was the fact that the two presenters were ‘hot shit’ that year. She recalled how they were ‘topics of conversation’ and the plenary was packed because their ‘fan clubs’ were in attendance (personal communication, 17 March 2013):

They were sexy and what they were saying was sexy, and it’s the sexier version of... the politics it’s understood to be linked to... a well-placed haircut or a couple of piercings signifies a kind of politics. So what becomes hot in those spaces becomes what they’re reading as designating hot politics.

This is typical of QC and the queer scene. In a ‘meat market’ atmosphere, certain people become the flavour of the year (or month, or day). Most often this is not just about how they look, rather, it’s about what that look says, what it says about their politics, and their performative distance from (homo)normativity. In this sense, I don’t think it’s any surprise that the post I began this chapter with ended on the importance of the way you ‘mow the lawn, cook’ and ‘walk your dog’ in queer scenes. This line shifts the post’s emphasis from the abstract to the everyday, as well as from the public to the private: to the personalising and domestic aspects of one’s life. I don’t believe this is a mistake, since in queer politics one’s everyday life is precisely a point of critique and/or analysis. Life choices, like shacking up with one’s monogamous partner, owning a house in the suburbs, ‘passing’ in terms of one’s gendered appearance, become indicative of one’s capacity to be queer as much as one’s adherence to particular fashion codes. It is only through demonstrating one’s lack of interest in owning a dog, living in a house with a lawn in the suburbs – in ‘homo-ordinary’ life – that one can be considered ‘really’ queer.

For people seeking ‘community’ in the queer scene, this means a great deal and has significant implications. Events like QC have great purchase and power over their participants because they work to designate who belongs in the queer community and
who does not. I would suggest that this is what Probyn (1996) means when she argues that ‘belonging is situated as threshold’ (p. 12). As Probyn (1996, pp. 12-13) writes: 

Both public and private, personal and common, this [belonging] entails a very powerful mode of subjectification. It designates a profoundly affective manner of being, always performed with the experience of being within and inbetween sets of social relations.

Judgements of queerness reside both at a personal and private level in the sense that they are often about the intersection of the abstract and the everyday (what one wears, and what that signifies in political terms). One’s ‘personalising’ qualities, such as how one lives, how one walks (or indeed whether one owns) a dog, are precisely sites of analysis, judgement and critique in terms of what they represent or say about one’s capacity to be queer. One might thus feel ‘subjected’ to norms of queer behaviour in the sense that one’s affective sense of belonging hinges on being able to ‘perform’ and ‘look’ the part. In this sense, I argue that there is much to learn from those who feel oppressed by the norms of queer culture, since it is those who don’t fit in who have the greatest sense of the constitutive boundaries of ‘queerness’ in an activist sense. As Probyn writes, ‘if you have to think about belonging, perhaps you are already outside’ (p. 8). Therefore, in the following section of this chapter I reflect further on the ways that people have found themselves on the outside of what counts as ‘really queer’ within queer student activism and local queer scenes. This is with the intention of painting a picture of queerness in these scenes as an identity-based politic that is determined by one’s adherence to dominant norms of anti-(homo)normativity.

‘The Queer Queers’

Feelings of exclusion are not uncommon in the Australian queer scene\textsuperscript{110}, as elsewhere. In this section I examine these feelings through an analysis of Querelle, the annual queer activist publication that is printed in conjunction with – and launched at – the conclusion of QC each year\textsuperscript{111}. Given that Querelle offers comparative distance from the ‘full-fucking on environment’ (Di Blasio & Piper 2011, p. 32) of QC, it is a particularly useful space for

\textsuperscript{110} See Noack-Lundberg (2012) for a qualitative, interview-based study of feelings of ostracisation in the Melbourne queer scene in particular.

\textsuperscript{111} The publication welcomes input from any of the delegates, who are able to put into words their thoughts and feelings about queer life, or the conference specifically.
analysing some of the dynamics that play out at and around the conference. Querelle provides a platform where those who feel uncomfortable raising any qualms during the conference are able to reflect on and process the events that took place, before penning their feelings in the comforting and relative distance of the written word.

One year after the homonormativity incident at QC 2009, a piece appeared in Querelle 2010 entitled ‘The “Queer” Queer’ (Smith 2010). In it, author Kiri Smith\textsuperscript{112} wrote that she was ‘rather surprised at the invitation’\textsuperscript{113} to contribute a piece to the publication: ‘[w]hich leads me to the point of this piece. I seem to be the ‘queer’ queer on some level. The odd one out’ (Smith 2010). Smith went on to describe being ‘by all definitions “bisexual”’ yet also in many ways uncomfortable with that label. As she wrote:

\begin{quote}
I’ve noticed of late that even my gay, lesbian and bisexual friends seem to consider me straight… Maybe my sexuality is no longer recognized as legitimately bisexual by others because I am now engaged to a man. A monogamous engagement might I add!… Strange, I know - after all those years of not caring if I’m labelled or not, I’m starting to wonder that if I don’t have that label I will be in some kind of queer/straight limbo (although, maybe that’s where I’ve been all along). I know I probably sound like a neurotic idiot who perhaps never had any sense of self-identity in the first place, but being the ‘queer’ queer is not a nice feeling. It’s one thing to set the boundaries of how you define yourself, but it’s another story when you feel like those boundaries are almost being set for you. So where do I fit now?
\end{quote}

Smith’s post is insightful in a number of ways. What is striking is the pressure she feels to identify with a label, despite the fact that, theoretically, queer was never intended to designate an identity position. Indeed, Smith talks about the pressure to identify as ‘bisexual’ despite never having felt comfortable with the label herself: this, presumably, at least gives her some claim to queerness. She likewise discusses a very clear sense of queer being an identity that qualifies as the antithesis of straight, given her sense of currently being in ‘queer/straight limbo’. She seems to feel pressured to identify as bisexual to be closer to queer on the continuum, given that her friends presently imagine her to be straight. Yet, she also seems hesitant, as though she isn’t sure that such a label would be enough to grant her recognition as legitimately queer. This is particularly

\textsuperscript{112} I have chosen not to anonymise names from Querelle since they are already published and available to the public.
\textsuperscript{113} Querelle does not usually specifically ‘invite’ people to contribute, although 2010’s publication was overseen by Charles Sturt University (Bathurst campus), with the Bathurst contingent invested in giving greater representation to rural queer experiences. Given that Querelle, as well as other Australian queer spaces more generally, are dominated by urban-based students (in both representation and participation), this year’s edition appears to have included more ‘invited’ responses or submissions.
apparent in her mention of being ‘engaged to a man,’ and in a monogamous engagement no less. Smith here draws attention to several key ways in which one can ‘fall outside’ what it means to be queer: not only is she getting married (believes in the institution of marriage), she is getting married to a man (is thus presumably ‘really’ or ‘just’ straight) and is monogamous (where a clear trend in the queer scene is towards polyamory as a more liberating mode of sexual relation). Unwilling to ‘box herself in’ by setting boundaries on her behaviour, she nonetheless feels pressured to do so by her own community; these ‘criterion’ become the various ways in which she fails or falls short of being ‘really’ queer. Feeling ‘outside’ or ‘in limbo’ is an unpleasant and uncomfortable feeling for Smith: so where does she fit now? One might be tempted to argue that Smith no longer has any ‘legitimate’ claim to a queer identity, but it is evident that she identifies with her bisexuality despite being currently in a monogamous relationship with a man. But instead of seeing ‘queerness’ as inherent in the questioning of sexual norms and the need for ‘labels’, Smith understands ‘queer’ as simply ‘the opposite of straight’. This is hardly a queer way of thinking about sexuality at all. The important point here is that Smith reads ‘queer’ in this way because of the ‘judgement’ she feels by a community dubious of her claim to queerness on account of various aspects of her current relationship.

Exclusion from the queer scene was one of the main themes in the 2010 issue of Querelle. Other issues have also dealt with feelings of exclusion, but it seems especially pertinent that the 2010 given that it was produced by a student contingent from Charles Sturt University in Bathurst. Fittingly, 2010’s edition of Querelle was dedicated to ‘representing rural queers and their experiences’ (Stewart, Ebelt & palila 2010). While submissions are welcome from all over Australia, this edition sought to prioritise rural voices. Querelle 2010 thus gives significant insight into the experiences of those who are already in some ways ‘outside’ queer culture - those who do not live in the urban centres that are the traditional hubs of queer activist collectives. This sense of being ‘outside’ was reflected in the first few pages of this edition, which included a question and answer section with some members of the editing collective. In response to the question “What

114 Bathurst is a regional town in NSW, and so offers a significantly different context and environment for queers than East coast urban capitals like Sydney and Melbourne.
are your “queer-bits” that you think are worth fighting for?” Laura (‘A few honest words from some members of our collective’ 2010, p. 9) wrote:

...stereotypes must be broken down, both in and out of the Queer community... It was so daunting for me to try and get involved in the queer community. I felt like I wasn’t accepted in regular society but the “queers” questioned my sexuality, because I was a girl, with shoulder length hair, who wore dresses and make-up. I didn’t believe that these stereotypes existed until I experienced them for myself. That is the last thing anyone should have to go through when coming to terms with their sexuality.

Laura here evokes the scenes witnessed in the aftermath of the plenary on homonormativity at QC 2009. She feels in some ways ‘singled out’ by ‘the queers’ because of her effeminate appearance. Her hair, her clothing, her choice to wear make-up, all become constitutive of an identity that places her outside what it means to be a ‘one of them’ (the queers). She also evokes the affective dimensions involved in community when she laments that this is ‘the last thing anyone should have to go through’. Laura implies that the pain of ‘coming to terms’ with one’s sexuality, for example in terms of ‘coming out,’ is not something that queer activists have moved ‘beyond’. This may be especially pertinent for rural queers, where homophobic violence is an ever-present threat. The desire to ‘belong’, and have a place of refuge, might be even stronger for queers who do not belong to urban centres. Yet by defining queerness as the antithesis of passing, of needing to ‘fit in’, these scenes work off the assumption that this is not something ‘we’ need to worry about anymore. This reveals, therefore, a constitutive bias in the way queer has come to be defined in local queer activism, where the ‘we’ in the queer community pre-emptively shuts out or ostracises certain normative ‘others’ in favour of a middle-class, urban-based, gender-deviant default queer subject.

In addition, it is telling that Laura lists being a ‘girl’ (separate to being an effeminate girl) as one of the ways she finds herself ‘outside’ the queer community as she knows it. Within Australian queer scenes, that is, there has been an increasing distrust of binary gender categories as upholding a ‘heteronormative status quo’. This also goes for so-called binary or ‘normative’ categories of sexuality like ‘lesbian’. For example, the 2009 edition of Querelle featured a piece entitled ‘Why lesbian has become a dirty word’ (Piper 2009). In it, Kat Piper discusses the radical history of the term ‘lesbian’, lamenting the increasing uptake of ‘queer’ as a more fashionable alternative to ‘lesbian’ that in some ways erases embodied female experience. As she wrote (p. 39):
Queer politics stemmed from post-modern theory and argues that gender and sexuality can be performed and played with like a game. Adopting a queer identity became a way that lesbians could reject gender and remain palatable to gay men at the same time... It is easier, more palatable and less confrontational to be known as queer, gay or any other identity that decentres the needs of women.

Undoubtedly this is not necessarily the argument of key queer theorists\textsuperscript{115}. Queer theory has not proposed that gender or sexuality can be ‘dragged’ away, performed and subverted in any straightforward sense. What is interesting about an article like Piper’s, however, is that queer politics – in the form of queer activism and the queer social scene – has led her to believe that this is the case. Speaking from her own experience, and her sense that lesbianism, or even being a woman, has become unfashionable, outmoded or inconsequential in comparison to queer. She begins to pinpoint some of the most difficult points of interaction or translation between theory and practice that play out in these scenes. While it is true that most of the key texts analysed in the previous chapter have not advocated for the simple ‘play’ of gender and sexuality, queer theory has been especially strong, even polemical, on the topic of ‘homonormativity’. As can be seen in some of the examples above, it is precisely the sense of being ‘(homo)normative’ in terms of one’s gendered appearance, one’s lifestyle choices\textsuperscript{116} and one’s sexual identity that leads one to be, or at least to feel, ostracised and ‘outside’ what it means to be truly queer, where queer is akin to an identity-based category. Thus it might be true in some ways to say that queer theory, when practised, has played a role in the instantiation of a queer identity that takes a form of judgemental leave from more ‘normative’ ways to live and be.

In summary, participants in this scene perceive the ideal of anti-homonormativity as constitutive of queerness to the extent that their own failure to measure up means they either withdraw altogether or are too afraid to speak out. The alienating norms that

\textsuperscript{115} Butler’s \textit{Bodies That Matter} (1993), for example, was dedicated to addressing the popular uptake of \textit{Gender Trouble} (Butler 1990), which she argues mistook her use of drag as an example of the capacity for gender norms to be subverted as the pinnacle of gender subversion. For Butler this misreading may have something to do with the fact that there is a ‘desire for a fully phantasmatic transfiguration of the body’ in ‘the public sphere’ (Butler, Segal & Osborne 1994, p. 33). As Butler goes on to argue ‘I don’t think that drag is a paradigm for the subversion of gender. I don’t think that if we were [sic] all more dragged out gender life would become more expansive and less restrictive’ (Butler, Segal & Osborne 1994, p. 33).

\textsuperscript{116} This also includes other areas of ‘lifestyle choice’ that I have not had the room to cover here. For instance, one article begins with the author ‘coming out’ as Catholic, implying that religious affiliation is something that must stay closeted in queer scenes, is marginal and/or unwelcome (suomynona 2010).
define queer culture thus lead to the silencing and ostracisation of many and demonstrate what Stuart Hall (1988) describes as the way ‘ideas may dominate other conceptions of the social world by setting the limit to what will appear as rational, reasonable, credible, even sayable or thinkable’ (p. 44). To return to the Facebook post that opened this chapter, it is clear from its popularity that its sentiment is one shared by many. This is reflected not just in the feelings of ostracisation captured above, but likewise in the Facebook comments below the post where a number of people commented that they had had similar conversations and experiences. Two weeks after the post, however, an update to the original note appeared (Alfanfo 2012):

Hi Facespace… I am reposting/redistributing this because - two things. 1. After I posted it I was completely overwhelmed with responses from friends, acquaintances and complete strangers, outpourings of relief… Since then I put out a cautious callout to see if anyone wanted to help me turn this into a radio-doco-art piece-social commentary. Not one response, in a week.

Why?

It doesn’t fit that so many people felt strongly enough to respond, but not one person wants to put their human voice to their feelings. Is this culture that entrenched, that immovable, that no one feels they can speak up?

It could certainly be argued that those who engaged with this post stayed silent in this scenario in order to avoid (further) placing themselves outside of the community. Speaking up against queer norms, in a form more tangible, more personal, than a ‘like’ on Facebook, is to many an unbearable proposition. It places them too much at risk of being socially ostracised to be worth it. That may explain why it took me until 2013, while writing a thesis about this very issue, to hear the story of the two girls talking to the Grievance Officer after the ‘homonormativity’ plenary at QC Canberra in 2009. Perhaps this also explains why an official grievance was never made, despite the intensity of feeling it provoked amongst a number of people. This might also be why, when I told my colleague (the former Grievance Officer) that I might include parts of our conversation about it in my thesis, the first thing she said was ‘oh no… I’m just thinking of the social consequences’¹¹⁷ (personal communication, 17 March 2013). The norms of these scenes are thus sustained on several levels: on the one hand, by the people who are afraid to speak out, who effectively silence themselves on account of their fear of being left

¹¹⁷ I should add that she did give me permission to include our conversation, so long as she remained anonymous.
‘outside’. They are also sustained by those who, for perhaps no other reason than the desire to belong, conform to the norms of queer politics in a way that can further ostracise and exclude others (for example by attending events like the plenary, shaking their heads and laughing at those condescending jokes). Finally, they are upheld by theorists who are willing to acknowledge the ‘exclusive’ nature of queer scenes, but who recuperate that exclusion back into dominant theoretical definitions of queerness: as opposed, for instance, to heteronormativity. When only ‘hetero’ or ‘homonormativity’ is understood as the basis for exclusion or ‘relative misery’ (Cover 2012) within queer scenes, then, there is an associated unwillingness to acknowledge that the critique of hetero- or homonormativity may itself have become normative within queer scenes; that, ironically, queer may have become precisely the kind of exclusionary or moralistic form of identity politics that gay and lesbian politics was accused of as part of queer’s formative critique. In the following section, I suggest that this places queer politics in a complex relationship with ‘privilege’, such that it may indeed take cultural capital or privilege to be able to pinpoint those who will or won’t count as ‘queer enough’ in this scene.

Privilege and the Gay Marriage Debate

In 2013 I returned to QC (in Sydney) for the first time since 2009. However, this time I attended for research purposes and I chose to attend the workshop I thought most likely to raise some of the tensions within queer activism that I have so far explored. This was the Community Action Against Homophobia (CAAH)118 workshop on marriage equality. This forum relates directly to the discussion I flagged in Chapter One on marriage equality as debated in queer theory. Nothing dominates discussion amongst queer activists like marriage, a topic that had just made its way back into the Australian public consciousness given the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s backflip on the issue in the wake of the 2013

118 CAAH are a ‘community activist organisation based in Sydney, Australia. Since establishment in 1999, we have aimed to eliminate homophobia and achieve full equality for queer people -- defined as “lesbian, gay, bisexual, same-sex attracted and msm, transgender, intersex or non-heterosexually identifying” in our constitution’ (Community Action Against Homophobia 2009). As they write on their website, they are probably ‘most well-known for our organisation of the street marches for marriage equality in Sydney’ (Community Action Against Homophobia 2009).
The dominance of this topic in activist circles mirrors its relative popularity in queer theory, particularly the popularity of anti-marriage stances. In much the same way as the issue has been framed in queer theory, conversations about marriage equality often revolve around themes of assimilation, normativity and what political causes qualify as queer. This makes marriage equality debates an insightful point of analysis for further reflecting on dominant queer ideals: not just in terms of who they are freezing out, but whom they most benefit, and how cultural and social capital in this scene may be intertwined with privilege and power.

For the first half hour of the forum, the workshop convener talked at length about the political climate in France after its recent adoption of marriage equality laws. When questions followed they were largely polite, with audience members asking broad or generally factual questions which were careful not to rock the boat. That was until the convener of the workshop asked, ‘just as a point of interest, who here would say they were opposed to marriage?’ (personal communication, 14 July 2013). The majority of the room, the convener included, were quick to raise their hands. I counted two who had left their hands down, both of whom looked uncomfortable. After some awkward silence ensued, the convener laughed nervously before adding ‘I am opposed to marriage but for marriage equality. I think that while straight people can [get married] we should all be able to’ (personal communication, 14 July 2013). After being asked by a workshop participant to elaborate, she spoke about not liking the idea that not having equality of access to the institution effectively hierarchised relationships into ‘classes’. At this point,

119 Rudd initially posted about his change of heart on his website. He said he had hesitated to support same-sex marriage thanks to his identification as Christian, but called his newfound support a response to the ‘ethical fundamentals of the issue’ and an ‘ethical conclusion’ (Rudd cited in ABC News 2013b). This happened before Rudd was returned to the Prime Ministership as Labor leader, prompting some cynicism that the public announcement was made by a man intent on regaining the title. As PM for the second time, he then famously defended his support of gay marriage on Q&A when a Brisbane pastor in the audience told Rudd that he was putting himself at odds with the teachings of the Bible (Ross 2013). Rudd won praise and applause for his quick-witted response: ‘Well, mate, if I was going to have that view, the Bible also says that slavery is a natural condition’ (Rudd cited in Ross 2013).


121 I took extensive notes at this workshop, and have included these conversations from my notes, whilst making sure participants remain anonymous.
one audience member began vigorously shaking their\textsuperscript{122} head. Once the convener was finished speaking, another audience member asked the one who had been shaking their head to elaborate on why they were opposed to marriage equality.

‘Lots of things...’ they began (personal communication, 14 July 2013):

It’s a very cis male dominated space and homonormative space... if we pass this really homonormative form of equal marriage that looks after a middle-class white group of people... it’s a huge problem. It’s just generally a really heteronormative framework in the first place... and it misses out on some of the best parts of queer subversive culture to begin with.

This comment neatly encapsulates the way in which discussions amongst activists are dominated by references to queer theoretical ‘buzz words’ like homo- or heteronormativity. Here we have the use of either homo- or heteronormativity repeated three times in the space of three sentences. The speaker relies on the audience’s knowledge of these terms, as evidenced by their lack of elaboration as to what exactly makes the fight for marriage equality homonormative. The little evidence that is provided is the dominance of ‘cis males’ in the marriage equality campaign, as well as the fact that such campaigns do a disservice to ‘some of the best parts of queer subversive culture’ (personal communication, 14 July 2013). Significantly, this is a nod to queer scholarship: particularly to the work of Michael Warner (2000), who, as discussed in Chapter One, argues that GLBT activism in the U.S. has disavowed ‘its best histories of insight and activism’ and ‘has turned into an instrument for normalizing gay men and lesbians’ (p. 25). What is clear here, then, is the way that canonical (U.S.) queer theory is drawn upon, and drawn into these debates as a way of defining what causes or politics do and do not count as ‘subversive’ or ‘queer’ enough in a local context. Terms like ‘homonormativity’ are wielded as shorthand for what is presumed a ‘default’ queer position on marriage - an institution ‘proved’ to be of interest only for those who are privileged. Knowledge of queer theoretical jargon thus becomes a minimum point of entry into these conversations, conversations which run off the assumption that those present are likewise knowledgeable about the meaning of such concepts and the nature of queer critiques of marriage. This very likely constitutes another way in which people find

\textsuperscript{122} In reference to the workshop, I have continued to use gender-neutral pronouns for anyone I am aware of who prefers them, and no one is named.
themselves intimidated by the ‘codes’ of queer culture, since access to and comfort in these spaces depends on one’s cultural capital, itself a form of significant privilege.

Nonetheless, this workshop participant remained stuck on the notion that it was those who supported marriage equality who were privileged (personal communication, 14 July 2013):

If you look at the time and the resources that are going into the movement... it’s people who don’t have other things that are more pressing issues... they’re people who aren’t already dealing with socio-economic issues, or say domestic violence... let’s look at trans women of colour in indigenous communities or something like that... the last thing that they’re probably worried about is marriage... It’s a right that people who don’t have other rights that they’re already concerned about, are more important. People who already have a bunch of privilege and aren’t worried about other rights. If you have the time and energy to put into it you’re probably not being oppressed enough.

To what extent, however, can we take for granted the assumption here that queer politics and the critique of marriage benefits the under-privileged, that privilege is something possessed by those it critiques? For this audience member, marriage is taken to be a bastion of homonormativity that is attractive only to those who have ‘nothing more pressing’ to deal with. The position they occupy in this critique, therefore, is one that is anti-privilege: the position of ‘calling out’ those with too much privilege, and ‘defending’ those with not enough (the more oppressed). This is done, however, in the first case by adopting the privileged position of speaking on behalf of others, by assuming to know what it is that, say, ‘trans women of colour in indigenous communities’ want (despite, importantly, being white). It is also achieved by ‘pinning’ privilege on others: on the ‘white, gay cis males’ of the marriage equality movement they equally assume to know. What can be seen here, then, is the way that queer theoretical stances become so quickly personalising: how the conceptual desire to critique dominant, heteronormative ideology, suddenly becomes a form of oppositional politics that requires pinning privilege onto and shaming someone else for their presumed complicity in the system123. As I argued in Chapter One, however, it remains questionable whether it is indeed only

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123 This resonates with my argument in Chapter One that theoretical stances, such as being ‘anti-pride’, or embracing ‘gay shame’, are vulnerable to transformation into oppositional politics that require the ‘pinning’ of shame onto others. I also return to the ethics of political shaming in Chapter Four with the case study of the Feminist Futures conference.
middle-class gays and lesbians for whom marriage is important\textsuperscript{124}. It may be that marriage, and the popular support it rouses amongst celebrities and politicians, provides a priceless form of social currency for, as only one example, working-class or rural queers.

The convenor raised the following counterpoint after struggling to find a gap in the increasingly heated conversation (personal communication, 14 July 2013):

\begin{quote}
  Just in my experience... it’s my friends who haven’t gone to uni, who do work all the time, who do work in jobs that don’t pay very much, who work in retail, who do tend to be the most supportive of marriage equality, and who don’t see as many things about it that they find problematic. It’s my friends who are more educated, who have better paying jobs who are the ones who are more opposed to marriage equality, and that’s the general trend I’ve noticed.
\end{quote}

At this point several audience members nodded to themselves or made faint murmurings of agreement, and for me this raises a crucial point. To what extent, then, is it actually the privilege of being educated in queer theory, being able to have these conversations, to throw around words like ‘homonormativity’ (without defining them) that enables one to critique the institution of marriage in the first place? What are the conditions which enable these critiques to take place, critiques which rely moreover, on the judgements they make about who is more or less ‘privileged’? Could it be that those who wield privilege in this situation are not the imaginary publics of wealthy, white, gay cis men scrambling for their right to assimilation, but the ones who presume to know what others want, to know who is privileged and who isn’t, who is more or less oppressed? Those who are educated and knowledgeable about queer theoretical terms, and those who wield popular queer theoretical arguments in a context where ‘hot’ politics are primary; where you are in the overwhelming majority if you oppose marriage equality (Rodgers 2010)\textsuperscript{125}? What I’d argue then is that privilege is often the enabler of the critique of marriage and of normativity, and that this critique is what affords one cultural and social capital in this scene. In a queer context where your social capital and relative ‘hotness’ is afforded or judged on the basis of your queer politics, adopting an anti-marriage stance is thus a safe and beneficial choice indeed.

\textsuperscript{124} Often these arguments rely on a connection between marriage and the ‘pink dollar’, although as Mark Pendleton (2001) asserts, there are now many studies which have shown that the pink dollar is a myth.

\textsuperscript{125} Rodgers’ paper documents Australian queer student activists’ perspectives on same-sex marriage. Following an analysis of the 2003 and 2004 editions of Querelle, Rodgers (2010) concludes that ‘this youth voice constructs an articulate anti-marriage position based on arguments about inequality related to the perceived capitalist structure, assimilation and exclusion’ (p. 613).
It is from this place of relative safety and comfort, moreover, that the voices of several imagined publics (gay cis male marriage equality advocates, but also trans women of colour in indigenous communities, for example) are silenced or frozen out. This is what Foucault calls the often ‘sterilizing effects’ of polemical politics, (2000b, p. 113) where dialogue is limited on account of one position on an issue reaching the status of norm or ideal. This is particularly important in the context of Querelle, which, as the only annual publication of its kind, aims to ‘represent’ the opinions of a variety of queer, mostly student, activists. One of the only people to have previously written on Australian queer student activism, Jessica Rodgers (2012), has noted, however, that publications like Querelle (but certainly not limited to Querelle) are often edited to reflect editors’ and/or organising committees’ pre-determined ideals of ‘queerness’. For instance, Rodgers interviewed ‘Tallace’, who was involved in the editing of Querelle 2004 in their capacity as Queer Officer at The University of Melbourne. Asked about how they went about collating material for the collection, Tallace commented (Rodgers 2012, n.p.):

I don’t think it was inclusivity that I was aiming for. I think if anything, I wanted to alienate a certain kind of person... I guess it wasn’t a friendly space ever for someone who wanted to write, like anything particularly, anything that I didn’t agree with... anything I thought wasn’t queer.

According to another student interviewed by Rodgers (2012), (whom she does not name), this means that ‘if editors deem an author to be ‘straight’, regardless of the author’s self-identification, that person’s article would be excluded’ (n.p.). Here ‘straight’ means something akin to normative, ‘vanilla’ or even ‘beige’ (the latest buzzword used in queer circles to describe someone who is ‘conservative’, usually in their gender presentation or sex life). Likewise, Rodgers writes that ‘[t]he gay white middle-class male was one identity that was consistently excluded’ (2012, n.p.). Thus, these ‘editorial choices’ work to define ‘what is and is not queer... and this thus defines who is and is not part of the queer student media audience and community’ (Rodgers 2012). This is significant to consider, moreover, since as Rodgers points out (2012, n.p.):

Rodgers (2012) points out that there are ‘dozens of queer student publications’ that circulate amongst and originate within queer departments across Australia (n.p.). Her interviewees were all people who had been ‘queer officers for their student union’ and involved in the publication of Querelle, but had ‘also regularly contributed to queer and other student media’ (n.p.).
Queer student media is a clear example of minority media that can contribute to the constitution of community and identity. For through such media a community works to define itself.

When queer activists in position of power, or with sizeable social capital, operate on a pre-determined idea of what constitutes queerness, they work to actively freeze out certain voices/identities that are considered not ‘queer’ or ‘queer enough’. This then reinforces narrow definitions of queerness that freeze out people with different perspectives or backgrounds. The resultant subject of ostracisation is thus not only ‘straight’ queers, or ‘gay white middle-class males’ but anyone for whom dominant understandings of queer politics do not resonate. Those whom, for instance, cannot reconcile their own personal experience (i.e. of non-university educated or working-class queers supporting marriage) with commonly encountered theoretical and activist rhetoric about marriage being the concern of ‘privileged’ gays and lesbians only. Or those for whom these conversations are far too personal, hurtful or ostracising to keep attending: those who consequently withdraw from the scene for good.

The ostracisation and withdrawal of these competing voices means the scene risks further stratification. This process is compounded by the move of those with power and capital within these scenes to present the appearance of widespread agreement on key issues like marriage equality. 2013’s Querelle, for instance, opens with an article that neatly summarises the currently dominant ‘anti-marriage’ stance within these communities. The article starts: ‘[y]ou don’t really want to read another article about marriage equality’ (Thomason 2013, p. 7). As the opening statement of the article, as well as the entire publication, it acts as an assurance that what follows will settle debate about the issue, as well as ‘represent’ what publications like Querelle – as a representative publication of the ‘queer community’ – think. The article quickly covers how LGBTIQ people were once subjected to ‘conversion therapy’, including electrical shock treatment, castration and hormone replacement therapy, which the author (Thomason 2013, p. 8) uses as a metaphor for the current-day drive for marriage equality:

Straight people abused the queers, so now the queers are going to abuse themselves... The television-watching, tax-paying population get served an exquisite dish and its price tag is equality, only for some... And all at once it dawns on you why for the past forty years the queer community has been cannibalising whole sections of itself, to make it more palatable to the public.
I’d like to pick up on the metaphor of cannibalism here as an apt one for the ethical dilemmas of present day queer activism. In this article, Thomason (2013) uses the notion of cannibalism to accuse gays and lesbians who want to marry of ‘cannibalising’ less normative sections of the community for their own personal gain. Cannibalisation is used in this sense as a means of recuperating conflict and exclusion within the queer scene into a framework of homonormativity: cannibalism is assumed to exist in the queer scene only to the extent that those ‘privileged’ and ‘homonormative’ gays and lesbians are willing to eat their own more shameful counterparts to get ahead. Likewise, this amnestic account characterises GLBT activism of the past forty years as having cannibalised itself for conservative or mainstream gain (with no mention of AIDS activism as only one example, in reference to which the metaphor of cannibalism seems perhaps most offensive). In contrast to this account, then, I would argue that cannibalism characterises contemporary, queer politics in its anti-homonormative, dominant sense. The Facebook note which opened this chapter gestures towards this by concluding with a short piece of prose about the queer community entitled ‘HUNGRY’ (Alfanfo 2012):

We are here. We are queer.
We eat our own.

We tear the meat right off

...Eat it. Fuck it. Stick it.
You’re on the menu
Or you have a meal ticket.

And sometimes its [sic] carnage
Bewildering mess.
I refuse to accept that this level of damage is just part of the process
When did we get so carnivorous?

In this context, then, cannibalism comes to mean something quite different. Cannibalism is used to describe the extent to which queer politics in practice can turn bodies into fodder for consumption\(^\text{127}\), such that one’s politics, one’s demeanour, become ‘digestible’, ‘analysable,’ against a dominant queer ideal. In the case of the article just

\(^{127}\) Indeed, Probyn, in Carnal Appetites (2000), has spoken of the link between cannibalism and consumerism in the sense that ‘the cannibal brings together competing aspects underlying Western identity: its analogy with capital and consumer society is congruent with fears that our appetites have no ends’ (p. 81). This desire for consumption is also linked to sex: ‘[e]ating, wanting and having sex with the other are deeply enmeshed… in the desire to completely consume the other it is easy to slide from loving to eating’ (p. 94).
described, one’s performative utterance of one’s anti-marriage stance, then, affords one the right to be consumed, on the opening page of *Querelle*, or in the ANU lecture hall at QC. In turn, having one’s name put to one’s hot politics, affords one the right to consume, or be consumed on one’s own terms. But to what extent can cannibalism count as an ethical mode of relating within queer culture? In her text on queer temporality *Queer/Early/Modern*, queer theorist Carla Freccero (2006) advocates for an ethico-historical practice of ‘hauntology’ as a mode of relating that disrupts a ‘presumed logic of cause and effect, anticipation and result… of the “done-ness” of the past’ (p. 5). Thus she (p. 70) writes that the practice of hauntology will name:

...the practice of attending to the spectral... a way of thinking and responding ethically within history, as it is a way of thinking ethics in relation to the project of historiography by acknowledging the force of haunting.

This has practical, ethical and social implications since a hauntology is ‘motivated by a concern not only for the past but also for the future, for those who live on in the borderlands without a home’ (Freccero 2006, p. 75). To take Freccero’s metaphor of these borderland figures and apply it to queer collectivity, a hauntology demands an ethical attention to those bodies ostracised by a queer community within which they seek refuge. Indeed, Freccero writes that ‘haunting’ is a ‘social force... [that] engages alterity’ (p. 85). In contrast to a ‘hauntology’, Freccero calls ‘cannibalism... in some sense haunting’s double, its evil twin,’ in its ‘desire to incorporate the other within the self’ which ‘fundamentally destroys its alterity or otherness’ (p. 87). Cannibalism thus names the process whereby dominant queer norms dictate what is consumed (in the form of ‘editing’ or ‘tailoring’ queer publications to pre-existing norms of queerness), and which bodies or politics count as ‘hot enough’ to be considered attractive, queer commodities. The end result is that alterity, in the form of queer discord, queer disharmony, is destroyed; destroyed both in terms of active silencing, but also in terms of the silence an oppressive culture creates. Those with something other to contribute, those whose voices are not heard but are being spoken for, take up the place of the ‘queer’ queer:
those who don’t fit into a category that was never meant to be a category, a space meant to be ‘reformed’ and ‘deformed’ on precisely these outsiders’ terms.\(^{128}\)

In the final section of this chapter I would like to further consider what relationship the norms of queer culture, and its associated cannibalism, as an unethical mode of relation, has with queer theory or queer theoretical terms. The influence and popularity of queer theory in these scenes means that U.S. historical narratives have become incorporated into an Australian activist context. Present-day queer activists tend to use their knowledge of these histories to justify the radicalism of their actions in the present, further instantiating a queer identity that is based on its ‘progression’ from less radical identities or movements. I reflect on the implications this has for privilege and capital within the scene as a lead-in to the following two chapters on queer temporality and ethics.

**Strategic nostalgia: the ‘right’ kinds of queer histories and ‘being outside’**

Midsumma\(^{129}\) is Melbourne’s annual equivalent of Sydney’s Mardi Gras, regularly holding events on issues important to the broader LGBTIQ community. In 2013, iconic Melbourne queer bookstore Hares and Hyenas hosted its 19th instalment of ‘Rapid Fire’\(^{130}\) as part of the festival. Speakers are given six minutes each to talk on their topic of choice. In 2013 the event included a speech by Jess Ison, a founding member of To The Exclusion of All Others (TTEOAO), a local activist collective made up of a ‘bunch of queers who don’t believe that marriage equality means marriage for all’ (To The Exclusion of All Others 2014). The collective ‘allows questioning, critiquing and discussing of gay marriage and homonormativity, predominantly in Australia’\(^{131}\) (To The Exclusion of All Others 2014).

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\(^{128}\) I am influenced again by Butler (1993) here, and her argument that queer ‘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’ (p. 228).

\(^{129}\) Its website describes Midsumma as ‘Victoria’s premier gay and lesbian arts and cultural festival’. It has been running since 1988 when ‘some of our local community leaders decided they were sick of Sydney taking all our money and talent’ to Mardi Gras (Midsumma Festival Inc. 2015).

\(^{130}\) Rapid Fire is Hares and Hyenas’ ‘signature’ event, where 12 writers talk for six minutes each (Valentish 2011). The event has been running yearly since 1994.

\(^{131}\) Despite its localised focus, the group is influenced in several ways by North American-based queer theory and activism. Apart from its use of queer theoretical terms like ‘homonormativity’, TTEOAO is
Ison’s 6-minute speech (uploaded onto YouTube) started sardonically (alittlespoooky 2013, sec 00:21):

We’re told that the major fight right now in the LGBTQI community right is ‘gay marriage’, or sorry, sorry… marriage equality… we wouldn’t want the word ‘gay’ in the title that’s too gay… it needs to be much more homonormative.

At this point some loud, appreciative laughter ensued amongst the crowd. Later, she continued (alittlespooky 2013, sec 01:12):

The marriage campaign has stepped in and created what is meant to be the ideal gay and lesbian life. It does so through pinning up white, able-bodied, cis-gendered gays and lesbians: they’re rich, respectable and always so fucking smiley.

Here again, she paused, while various members of the audience chuckled on cue. Sardonic, dry wit and mocking humour is a mainstay of the queer community. Not only is it present in Ison’s speech, it is also typical of the broader ‘anti-marriage’ campaign of TTEOAO. The Facebook page, for instance, trades in polemic barbs which work to both distance the group members from marriage equality advocates, as well as instantiate feelings of united (anti-)collectivity (see Figure 3).

Fig. 3 Stand up for what you believe in, even if you’re standing alone 2013

inspired by activist collective and website ‘Against Equality’, which began in November 2009, and cites ‘a strong a growing distrust of and disagreement and disillusionment with the mainstream gay movement’ (Nair 2010, p. 7). The group is a ‘loose aggregate of people currently located throughout the United States and Canada’ (Nair 2010, p. 7) and has also published a collection of critiques of gay marriage (Conrad 2010), a feat TTEOAO aims to replicate.
The irony in an image like this one is that it suggests that ‘anti-marriage’ advocates are alone, when anecdotal evidence as well as research clearly shows (Rodgers 2010) that anti-marriage is the dominant stance in local queer activist collectives, and queer ideals work to exclude those who do not display similarly queer critiques of or cynicism towards marriage. Thus ‘sharing’ this image is also in some ways a shoring up of queer community as built on a shared embarrassment of ‘normative’ GLBT culture. Indeed, other posts on TTEOAO’s Facebook news feed refer to marriage equality advocates as the ‘desperate to gay-marry’, while members of the group shared articles by so-called ‘homocons’ like Andrew Sullivan which invited comments such as ‘I think I just puked a little in my mouth’ and ‘I need a very large bucket’ (To The Exclusion of All Others 2015). To return to Chapter One, this is precisely the condescending admonishment performed in Halberstam’s Gaga Feminism, a book which likewise invites ridicule from its equally ‘grumpy about gay marriage’ audience132. In both cases, sardonic wit becomes the device through which the queer community draws the line between the queers and the gays, the radicals and the ‘desperate to gay marry’.

In this way queer activist collectives mimic the polemical style of their academic idols. Ison (alittlespooky 2013, sec 00:54) noted in her speech, for example, that:

...when I came out I was amped on... queer sex and a lot of reading. And I came to realise that I didn’t have to do any of that heteronormative crap. No white picket fence, no flatscreen, no marriage. Rather I saw a queer future that I could shape by myself, not one that was dictated to me.

The paradox in Ison’s claim to not being dictated to, then, is that she admits to being ‘amped up on a lot of reading’ which shifted her own understanding and interpretation of ‘heteronormative crap’. It is through her very engagement with queer theoretical critiques of homonormativity and marriage, Halberstam’s likely included, that Ison comes to the realisation that she ‘doesn’t have to do any of that’. In some ways this may be a refusal to be dictated to by the mainstream popularity of marriage equality campaigns, but it is also a willingness to be dictated to by the logic of queer theoretical scholarship. As I will explore in the following two chapters, this includes scholarship which encourages

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132 And indeed, Gaga Feminism (Halberstam 2012) was ‘reviewed’ and written enthusiastically about on the TTOAO Facebook page (To The Exclusion of All Others 2015), suggesting it was successful in reaching its target audience.
its audience to craft their own utopian radical queer futures prefaced on anti-
(hetero)normativity (see for example Muñoz 2009).

Indeed, the extent to which the conflict and disillusionment that permeates these scenes has to do with the uptake, or at least the caricature of queer scholarship, is a question that ought to be kept open and interrogated. In particular, I would suggest that attention be paid to the difficult translation of U.S.-based activism and theory into an Australian context. As mentioned, TTEOAO is influenced heavily by North-American queer activism and politics, a fact highlighted by Ison’s reflection on the beginnings of TTEOAO: ‘the name for this collection, To The Exclusion of All Others, came to me as I was standing outside the Stonewall Inn, the icon of so much gay liberation’ (alittlespooky 2013, sec 02:29). After giving a short history of Stonewall, Ison continued: ‘there’s a bar in Oxford St called Stonewall and I wonder how many people dancing to badly mashed up pop music know who Sylvia Rivera is’ (alittlespooky 2013, sec 03:21). Ison then described Oxford St as having a ‘similar narrative to Stonewall’, citing ‘the fight, [and] the changes to laws’ (alittlespooky 2013, sec 03:39) before shifting focus to how the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras recently changed its name to the Sydney Mardi Gras as the most ‘obvious’ example of the ‘mainstreaming’ of the movement (alittlespooky 2013, sec 03:49). Here, then, is a familiar story, or the adaptation of a familiar story to an Australian context. Ison laments, that is, the story of how ‘gay liberation and lesbian feminism lost their radical edge in a conservative slide from oppositional to assimilationist politics’ (Jagose 1996, p. 59). But as Annamarie Jagose (1996) has reminded us, this is an American-centric narrative133. The conflation of U.S. and Australian history in Ison’s narrative sees Rivera’s legacy turned into the vacuous party scene of Oxford St; a scene that betrays the more ‘liberating’ and ‘enlightening’ days of radical queer activism circa Stonewall.

But in many ways this depiction of the downward spiral of Australian queer activism is an unfair caricature that relies on the conflation of two vastly differing histories. The history of Mardi Gras, for example, is much more complicated than the simple collapse into

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133 See for example Jagose’s (1996) observation that ‘Australian accounts of the rise of gay liberation frequently explain it in the context of American conditions’ (p. 35). She thus points out that ‘[c]omparisons between American and Australian gay liberation have to take into account that in Australia there was nothing equivalent to the homophile movement’ (p. 35).
consumerism and a ‘party lifestyle’ than is captured here. Kane Race (2003, n.p.), for example, has written extensively about the history of Mardi Gras in Sydney, suggesting that the critique of the modern-day commercialisation of the event does not take into account its formative context. Speaking about the influence of the HIV-AIDS epidemic on the Sydney queer community in particular, Race (2003, n.p.) argues that Mardi Gras parties were a community inducing, collective response to the spectre of the disease, which were always *in some ways* mediated by capitalism. Tickets were, and always have been expensive, writes Race (2003, n.p.), but many were willing to fork out for one under the assumption that this party could well be their last. Thus I would argue, to build on Race’s work, that only a nostalgic view of an ‘authentic’ radical queer community would presume that the past had no relationship to capitalism, and that the rising ticket prices of Mardi Gras parties, or the increasing commercialisation of floats, represents a ‘collapse’ into assimilation on the part of the present day Mardi Gras. Indeed, in his work on Australian queer activism, Mark Pendleton (2007) has called this kind of longing for queerer origins a ‘radical nostalgia’ for a past disconnected from the present day assimilationist politics of the conservative gay and lesbian movement. It is precisely this process of being nostalgic for more (in some ways imagined) radical or liberationist pasts that becomes constitutive of queer activism in the present claiming an ‘authentic’ queer identity; one connected to ‘proper’ queer histories like Rivera’s.

Engaging in this form of strategic radical nostalgia means that current, self-identifying queer activists tend to place themselves free of the problems of privilege and capital they associate with an imagined public of conservative ‘Oxford St’ gays and lesbians. The irony of such a narrative is, as I have suggested, that this means pinning privilege onto a caricature that likely does not exist, as well as failing to acknowledge the role *queer norms* play in sustaining an exclusionary community which trades in ‘hot politics’ and the capital afforded from the performance of those politics. Ison’s speech at Rapid Fire concluded as such: ‘if the fight is to own flatscreen televisions and exclude anyone that doesn’t fit the mould, I’ll keep fighting outside’ (alittlespooky 2013). Yet, as Foucault (2002) would argue, no-one is completely *outside* of power; queer activism is not exempt from questions of power, privilege and capital by adopting an ‘anti-normative’ stance. Claiming to ‘represent’ the underprivileged whilst simultaneously freezing out those who
have something different to contribute to queer politics is indeed only possible from a position of privilege within queer political discourse. Perhaps then Probyn (1996) is correct in arguing that ‘the desire to belong’ places one ‘on the outside’ (p. 9)\textsuperscript{134}. In queer politics this is an explicit process, since it is often the desire to belong to the queer community that contributes to the designation of what counts as the constitutive outside of queer; to the oppression of those too ordinary, normative and so on to ever qualify as queer or hot enough. As such, queer norms contribute to the loss of complexity, vulnerability and alterity within these scenes.

In the next chapter I further explore the temporal dimensions of the way queer is defined in theory and also in its translation into an activist context. Given the recent explosion of academic material on the concept of ‘queer temporality’ within U.S. queer scholarship, I am particularly interested in the translation of the concept of ‘queer time’ into an activist context. To what extent is queer time, within queer scholarship, based on a similar ‘distancing’ from more normative and/or gay and lesbian lifestyles, to the extent that this provides the justification for the exclusion and alienation of certain bodies which do not count as ‘queer enough’? That is my project in the following two chapters.

\textsuperscript{134} The essays collated in Probyn’s (1996) book, moreover, were, as she herself states, ‘written... across the moment of queer theory’s full emergence’ (p. 13). She thus writes of feeling caught between ‘the euphoria of queer’s possibilities’, while at the same time ‘I move away from ideas I consider to be restricting’ (p. 13). As such, she seeks to maintain the ethical promise of queer to – following Judith Butler – remain open to its own contestation: ‘I write in order to remind myself of the ways in which belonging hinges on not belonging, to raise the ways in which the manners of being at threshold may provide another perspective from which to view the complexities of identity, difference, subjectivity, and desire’ (Probyn 1996, p. 14).
CHAPTER THREE - ANTI-SOCIALITY AND QUEER ENOUGH FUTURES

This scene takes place in Alfred Hitchcock’s cult classic, *The Birds* (1963). It’s a sunny day in the provincial town of Bodega Bay, California. The sky is a clear, almost pastel blue as San Franciscan Melanie gets to know local Mitch over a glass of wine. The two have met previously in San Francisco, attempting to outsmart each other in a game of prank upon prank while Mitch looks to purchase some lovebirds for his niece Cathy’s birthday. Melanie’s industrious stalking has brought her here to his home town, just in time for Cathy’s birthday and with a pair of lovebirds in tow. Having managed to both charm and gain the upper hand with Mitch, he appears to have succeeded in securing her affection in return. Standing on the top of a hillside, he pours a stumbling and tipsy Melanie another drink and euphemistically tells her that he intends for her to ‘stay for dinner’. We can only assume that his typically Hitchcockian mother has heard him when we later cut to her sour face, as she carries Cathy’s pink-iced cake to the children’s party. On her way she passes Mitch’s ex-lover Annie, who distractedly facilitates the children’s game while looking on.

On the surface, then, everything appears to be heteronormatively in order. The stock characters take their place: irresistible Mitch and wooed wild child Melanie, possessive mother Lydia and jealous ex Annie. The children, especially Cathy, seem oblivious to the sexually charged tension around them, screaming with laughter at their game of what looks like pin the tail on the donkey. But it’s in the midst of this apparently predictable scene that things start to go haywire. Annie looks anxiously skyward before a gull swoops on Cathy’s head. Suddenly, what were once merely children’s balloons become props ripe for the pecking. Within seconds the gulls are everywhere, taking aim primarily at the children.

In his work on queer temporality, Lee Edelman (2004, p. 121) analyses this scene as one of deep significance:

…the choice of the children’s party for this first fully choreographed attack suggests the extent to which the birds take aim at the social structures of meaning that observances like the birthday party serve and enact: take aim, that is, not only at children and the sacralization of childhood, but also at the very organization of meaning around
structures of subjectivity that celebrate, along with the day of one’s birth, the ideology of reproductive necessity.

In his heavily psychoanalytic and polemical text No Future, Edelman (2004) insists that (Western, American) society is fundamentally based on the myth of ‘reproductive futurism’: on the unwavering investment in the ‘fight for the children’ that ‘invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought’ (pp. 2-3). The Child, as figurative, represents the ideological necessity (within late-capitalism) of the nuclear family: father, mother and children. The Child similarly embodies the drive to reproduction, perhaps summed up perfectly in Peter Costello’s infamous insistence that we – as Australians – ‘should have one for the father, one for the mother and one for the country’ (Farouque 2004)\(^{135}\). At the height of the Howard era, the reproductive capacity of women was an oft-wielded tool of (conservative) power. Framed as necessary – for the family as much as for the Nation – the fanaticism surrounding reproduction and the Child effectively sanctions only those most ‘productive’ relationships in the neoliberal Nation’s eyes. (Heterosexual) Mum, Dad and Babies: doing their best to secure our Nation’s future. In a U.S. context specifically, Edelman argues that such a discourse permeates all sides of politics, to the extent that debate on key issues is rarely about a ‘partisan discourse of political argumentation’ so much as a “‘self-evident” one-sidedness – the affirmation of a value so unquestioned, because so obviously unquestionable, as that of the Child whose innocence solicits our defense’ (p. 2). Indeed, he (p. 3) goes so far as to argue that:

> Even proponents of abortion rights, while promoting the freedom of women to control their own bodies through reproductive choice, recurrently frame their political struggle, mirroring their anti-abortion foes as “fight for our children— for our daughters and our sons,” and thus as a fight for the future”.

For Edelman, then, the discourse of the Child is hegemonic to the extent that resistance is impossible, securing the regime of heteronormativity ‘by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle’ (p. 2). In other words, Edelman concludes that resistance internal to the social

\(^{135}\) Costello made this comment in regards to an ‘ageing demographic’ in Australia at the time, with fertility rates at ‘1.75 per woman’ a then ‘record low’ (Farouque 2004). The Howard government implemented a $3000 maternity bonus amongst other family payment changes to encourage Australians to further reproduce (Farouque 2004).
is an impossible ideal. Thus he laments that ‘lesbians and gay men by the thousands work for the right to marry, to serve in the military and raise children of their own,’ terming them ‘comrades in reproductive futurism’ with the ‘political right’ (p. 19). For Edelman, then, queerness must instead represent ‘the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form’ (p. 4). Despite his use of the phrase ‘internal to the social’ what Edelman really means is that queerness must represent always and only the complete destruction of the social as we know it: the social without any foreseeable future. Thus he ends his first chapter with the assertion that ‘what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist... that the future stop here’ (p. 31). To return to The Birds, Edelman asserts that the only possible source of queerness in the film – and this scene – are the murderous birds themselves. This is despite noting as ‘compelling’ (p. 120) and ‘persuasive’ (p. 119) Robin Wood’s review of the film, in which Wood (cited in Edelman, pp. 119-120) concludes that the birds:

...are a concrete embodiment of the arbitrary and unpredictable, of whatever makes human life and human relations precarious, a reminder of the fragility and instability that cannot be ignored or evaded and, beyond that, of the possibility that life is meaningless and absurd.

Wood, in other words, sees the birds themselves as an arbitrary embodiment of a potentially broader nihilism on Hitchcock’s behalf; as a reminder of the constitutive fragility that accompanies life as those, particularly in urban centres, know it. Edelman (p. 120, emphasis in the original), however, wants to invest the birds with a particular meaning, arguing that:

By deploying... a given figure, such as, in this instance, the birds... the text necessarily gestures toward a specific threat to meaning and suggests particular strategies by which one might manage to ward it off.

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136 In this I reference Hitchcock’s assertion that ‘[b]asically, in The Birds, what you have is a kind of an overall sketchy theme of everyone taking nature for granted’ (cited in Edelman 2004, p. 119). Although perhaps an oversimplified analysis of the film from the notoriously evasive director, The Birds does seem contemptuous of the middle to upper-class urban types who will ‘visit’ Bodega Bay, but won’t settle (as I explore later in this chapter). The film does at various points reference human disregard for animals (e.g. in the maltreatment of Melanie’s caged lovebirds, and the caging of animals more generally, as well as Mrs. Bundy’s panicked observation that the birds may be starting a ‘war against humanity’).
In contrast to Wood’s argument that the birds are merely a concrete embodiment of the constitutive precariously that is woven into everyday life, then, Edelman (over) invests the birds with meaning such that they become symbolic of his queer sinthomosexual. Edelman concludes that Wood misses two very important facts about the birds: that ‘they come from San Francisco’ and that they ‘display a strong predilection for children’ (p. 120). Resistance to the social, the capacity to disrupt the social or the ‘normative’ as we know it, then, is found in the heroic queer figure of the birds - where queerness, moreover, is able to be defined and located: queers come from San Francisco, and they eat children.

This is queerness at its most foreclosed; when only the San Franciscan, child-eating birds qualify as queer, Edelman refuses to see anything else queer about this text. Yet Hitchcock’s films are no strangers to queer subtext, a subtext moreover that requires some form of expertise in cinematic critique. One need only look as far as D.A. Miller’s (1990) famous reading of Hitchcock’s Rope and its connotative queerness for evidence of this. Miller (p. 117) points out that homosexuality is a taken-for-granted or ‘unremarkable’ element of the film in comparison to its technical prowess:

...so that technique acquires all the transgressive fascination of homosexuality, while homosexuality is consigned to the status of a dry technical detail. To the extent that an interest in technique phobically bespeaks a desire for homosexuality, homosexuality is shown hardly to exist-or if it does exist, not to matter.

Miller points out that any representation of homosexuality in the film must be subtext, since Rope was released at the time of the ‘famously hard-ass Production Code’ (popularly known as the Hays Code) which ‘strictly forbade the display and even denomination of homosexuality’ (p. 118). As such, ‘Rope’s representation of homosexuality has been consigned to connotation’, and it is the very fact of its connotative nature that makes it easy to dismiss: ‘appearing doubtful, debatable, possibly a mere effluvium of rumination (stereotypically, the English professor’s) fond of discovering in what must be read what need not be read into it’ (Miller 1990, p. 118).

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137 Edelman describes ‘sinthomosexuality’ as a concept that ‘would assert itself against futurity, against its propagation, insofar as it would designate an impasse in the passage to the future, and, by doing so, would pass beyond, pass through the saving fantasy futurity denotes’ (2004, p. 33, emphasis in the original).

138 For more on the Hays Code and its relationship to a conservative political agenda see Hollywood censored: morality Codes, Catholics, and the movies (Black 1994).
Miller’s comprehensive reading of the film’s queer subtext thus restores it as a central element of Hitchcock’s text, and Hitchcock to the status of queer director: ‘Rope exploits the particular aptitude of connotation for allowing homosexual meaning to be elided even as it is also being elaborated’ (p. 118). The Birds, despite being released much later than Rope, was likewise produced under the Hays Code. Although the Code had in many ways become more flexible, homosexuality was perhaps the one element of the code that was non-negotiable. As such, The Birds is ripe for a Milleresque analysis, and some scholars have indeed read queerness into it, albeit through a psychoanalytic frame. Slavoj Žižek for example reads the ‘intersubjective relations between the main characters, (Melanie, Mitch, and his mother)’ as ‘far from being merely an insignificant sideline to the “true” plot’ such that the ‘attacking birds only “embody” a fundamental discord, a disturbance, a derailment in those relations’ (1991, p. 98). Subsequently, he reads the film in a way completely antithetical to Edelman: ‘we must imagine The Birds as a film without birds’ (p. 105). Robert Samuels (1998), meanwhile, himself responding to Žižek, argues that Melanie is punished for her active or ‘masculinised’ sexuality (pp. 129-130). In positing that the bird attacks follow Melanie’s sexual pursuit of Mitch, Samuels writes that ‘love turns into hatred the moment that the passive object of desire attempts to take on an active subjective position’ (p. 130). Yet it is despite these queer readings of The Birds, and despite Miller’s queer reading of Rope (which Edelman does not cite) and Hitchcock as director more generally, that Edelman fails to note the very many queer things about The Birds.

As I have pointed out, one could read the children’s birthday party scene as relatively heteronormative (as Edelman does). In it, Annie distractedly twirls Cathy in preparation for pin the tail on the donkey, all eyes on Melanie and Mitch and their blossoming romance. Although one could read Annie’s focus on the couple as typical of a jilted ex-lover, the scene before it suggests an alternate reading. Melanie has just been over at Annie’s place. When Mitch catches Melanie outside Annie’s house and asks how they

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139 As Bob Mondello (2008) writes, it was around 1959, when ‘a Code-approved film could deal with pretty much any topic but homosexuality’. He lists Some Like It Hot as a case in point, which, in flaunting this requirement, had to be released ‘without a certificate of approval from the Production Code Administration’ (Mondello 2008).

140 Strangely, Edelman (2004) mentions a ‘deep gratitude for my ongoing conversations with D.A. Miller’ (p. 181) but nowhere engages with his critical work.
know each other, the quick-thinking Melanie replies that the two ‘went to college together’. Mitch’s coy smile suggests that he knows – as we do – what happens when women go to college together. It’s something very akin to the spirit of women’s college, then, when Melanie returns to Annie’s house to find her waiting for her on the couch in her dressing gown. The camera sits behind Annie’s shoulder, her head tilted just enough so that we see her eyes never really reading the paper she uses as an excuse to be sitting right there, facing the door, when Melanie walks in. Tossing the paper aside, Annie offers ‘Miss Daniels’ a drink, to which ‘Miss Daniels’ insists ‘won’t you call me Melanie?’

Won’t you call me Melanie, indeed. Annie’s smirk suggests she’s pretty pleased about that, as she saunters to the kitchen and back, alcohol in hand and dressing gown ever so slightly apart, noting that it ‘gets a bit chilly here at night time’. The two women then get into what would otherwise seem a fairly predictable conversation about the man they both followed to Bodega Bay. Annie assures Melanie that she ‘needn’t worry’ about anything going on between her and Mitch, before Melanie seems to miss the point: ‘Annie I can assure you nothing is going on between Mr. Brenner and me’. ‘Isn’t there? … Maybe there’s never been anything between Mitch and any girl,’ replies Annie, before reaching for the bottle: ‘I think I’ll have one of those.’

It seems an odd dynamic for a queer scholar to miss. Perhaps there is nothing between Mitch and any girl in this film, perhaps the love triangle between Annie, Melanie and Mitch is nothing more than a decoy for what can at least be called a highly flirtatious friendship between these two women. What I’m gesturing at here is that perhaps queerness is something other than total destruction, that figuring queer temporalities as always and only pure destruction of the social misses the very queer things that happen within the social itself. Edelman enters into The Birds with a very specific idea of what

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141 Actress Tippi Hedren (who plays Melanie) went on to name her daughter ‘Melanie’ (Melanie Griffith).
142 Edelman (2004) does in fact quote this line, but uses it to make a joke about Mitch’s emasculation: ‘[b]ut the birds don’t alight in Hitchcock’s film because Mitch is light in the loafers’ (p. 149). He then goes on to argue, as he does throughout this chapter, that the birds represent ‘queerness [as] the negativizing burden of sexuality – sexuality that is, as synthome, as always sinthomosexual: sexuality as the force that threatens to leave futurity foutu’ (p. 149, emphasis in the original).
143 In this I differ from Žižek’s (1991) reading of the film, wherein he focuses solely on the triangle between Mitch, Melanie and Lydia (Mitch’s mother). Žižek’s choice of Lydia rather than Annie as the key ‘third figure’ in Mitch and Melanie’s relationship is perhaps no surprise given his psychoanalytically-inflected reading, a reading he is not alone in making. As John McCombe (2005) writes, ‘much has been made (and naturally so) of the tangled Oedipal complex at the heart of the Lydia/Mitch/Melanie triangle’ (p. 76).
queerness means: and this causes him to read it into only the most appropriate queer objects for his all-encompassing ‘strong’ theory. This means San Franciscan birds who display a ‘strong predilection for children’ (Edelman 2004, p. 120), but not the very apparent queer vibes coming out of this Bodega Bay lounge-room. In the section that follows I would like to interrogate the temporal consequences of prioritising certain queerer objects over others, suggesting that this results in the so-called normative behind left behind.

### Appropriate queer objects: leaving the rest behind

Edelman’s assertion that the birds are the only queer object in Hitchcock’s film is a two-part foreclosure. On the one hand it locates queerness in a specific object with a specific aim (the birds, as child-eaters) while it is also locationally specific; by pointing out that the birds come from the queer, urban hub of San Francisco, Edelman enacts a locational bias that pits San Francisco in opposition to the fictional town of Bodega Bay. Edelman writes, for instance, that Bodega Bay is ‘[d]efined, as if allegorically, in opposition to San Francisco, the sophisticated urban center’ (p. 133) of the film. Sardonically, Edelman (2004, p. 133) notes that The Birds might thus be about “coming”:

...insofar as we come, we thereby come to naught - or come, which may come to the same in the end to a place like Bodega Bay. What a perfect spot for a pair of lovebirds to build their little nest.

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144 Drawing on the work of Silvan Tomkins, Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995) outline the difference between ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ theories in terms of how much ground the theory claims to cover. Sedgwick and Frank (1995) advocate for the utility of weak theory, particularly in the context of affect, because a weak theory only claims a very limited domain of expertise, and we are able to feel safe in the context of that small domain: ‘a weak theory’s domain can be thought of as pockets of terrains each in analytic relation to the others and expandable only by textured analogy. A strong theory’s domain is more digital-more highly organized and expandable by analogies evacuated of certain qualities. If a weak theory encounters some terrain unlike any it has ever tripped over if it can’t understand this terrain as significantly similar or resemblant enough to one or more in its domain-it will throw up its hands, shrug its shoulders, remain dumb’ (p. 519). As I have argued, ‘queerness’ and its relationship to futurity is so foreclosed in Edelman’s text that his analyses (e.g. of The Birds as one example) a priori amount to the same thing: the necessity for sinthomosexuality and the death of all claims to futurity.

145 In the early 60s, it should be noted, San Francisco was still an industrial town, albeit in the process of great upheaval. It also wasn’t until the 70s that San Francisco became a known centre for gay and lesbian rights.

146 This has a precedent in Hitchcock’s grammatically confounding choice of promotional tagline for the film: ‘The Birds is coming’.
Edelman makes no secret of the fact that he reads Bodega Bay both as straightforwardly heterosexual (sounding here like a retirement village), and as unremarkable as any other place ‘like’ it. Edelman’s interest in it, paired against the queer, urban hub of San Francisco, is the equivalent of ‘naught’.

Yet, despite his assertion that The Birds makes Bodega Bay San Francisco’s heterosexual allegorical opposite, the film very much mocks this supposed opposition. In the midst of the queer scene just analysed, Melanie by now well into her brandy, Annie decides to broach the topic of location. ‘Well how do you like our little Hamlet?’ she asks, standing over Melanie as she drinks. The camera likewise towers over her San Franciscan guest, who from this angle is made to look like a spoilt child with her churlish answer of ‘I despise it’. Annie, who has originally come from San Francisco herself, smiles knowingly, before adding insightfully: ‘well I suppose it doesn’t offer much to the casual visitor, unless you’re thrilled by a collection of shacks on the hillside’. Annie here gestures at the fact that while there mightn’t be anything very interesting about Bodega Bay on the surface, that doesn’t mean that there’s nothing queer about it. It’s just that queerness here might be less obvious than it is in San Francisco: it requires one to hang around long enough to give it a chance to emerge. It’s not as simple as seeing a pink birthday cake, a mother, and a blooming romance and calling it a heterosexual, provincial romp.

In many ways the exchange between Annie and Melanie could work as a metaphor for queer theory’s well-documented tendency to ignore the small-town, the suburban and the rural\(^{147}\). With the urban seen as the most ‘likely’ home of queerness, places like Bodega Bay are readily skipped over. In other words, the move to make queerness mean certain locations is not only a locational bias, but a temporal bias. Bodega Bay and its occupants become symbolic of what some queer scholarship doesn’t want to linger on, the kinds of places and lives it doesn’t want to stay long enough to get to know better.

\(^{147}\) See for example Scott Herring (2010) who argues that queer theory can be characterised by its ‘metronormativity’.
In *The Birds*, Melanie takes on the role of just this ‘casual visitor’\(^{148}\), highlighted by her frequent insistence, throughout the film, that she must ‘get going’ - ‘get going’, that is, back to San Francisco. When Annie and Melanie first meet, Annie offers Melanie a cigarette, observing that there’s ‘a lot of spare time in Bodega Bay’. At this point Annie turns, staring wistfully into the distance before asking Melanie if she’s planning on staying long. The two women stand on Annie’s balcony, the camera frame just tight enough to emphasise the cigarette they relish sharing. Hitchcock here references the cigarette-smoking trope of the ‘new woman’, a woman whose gender non-conformity also spoke of her potential sexual non-conformity (since the two are often, of course, intertwined). The scene thus adds to the viewer’s sense that ‘a lot of spare time in Bodega Bay’ is a euphemism for Annie’s desire to spend that time with Melanie: that there might be something more to Annie’s forlorn look when Melanie insists she’s only staying ‘for a few hours’.

But the potential for this queer relationship to blossom is made more difficult by the fact that Melanie – as she tells Mitch on the hill preceding the birthday party – apparently has ‘things to get back to’ in San Francisco. When Mitch presses her on what exactly they are, Melanie seems not to notice how her own rather sparse schedule reads as a poor excuse. Her unconvincing explanation highlights the fact that it is Melanie’s attitude – and not something inherent about Bodega Bay – that means things ‘happen’ for her in San Francisco in a way that they don’t in Bodega Bay. It is hardly a coincidence that in the end Melanie finds herself unable to leave, coming to realise – albeit violently – that all the ‘action’ happens right here in this little town. It’s Bodega Bay that proves most queer: a fact exemplified in the fascination – 50 years on – to figure out just what it all means.

To take Melanie’s own experience of Bodega Bay as metaphor, then, what I would like to suggest is that premeditated ideas about queerness – about what it is and where it can come from – amounts to a temporal bias. Edelman – like Melanie – tries to skip over the queer happenings of Bodega Bay; in temporal terms these moments are ‘left behind’.

\(^{148}\) Consider for example the scene when she first arrives at the general store. She pulls up directly out front in her expensive car, while the shopkeeper looks bewilderingly on. Melanie seems not to notice her difference: that she is the one who is out of place. She seems annoyed, for instance, with the shopkeeper’s vague telephone conversation with the man who leases the boats, and his level of familiarity with the townspeople. He is left to stare blankly at her as she leaves: at the one so obviously not from ‘around here’.
Unwilling to linger longer, queer scholarship like Edelman’s works only to reaffirm the queerness inherent in certain locations, in certain bodies and actions that take their leave by way of an implicit comparison with that which could apparently never be queer. In Edelman’s work, what qualifies as queer is the urban over the provincial, but also the destruction of the social over the capacity, internal to the social, for queer happenings to unravel. The result is that some objects qualify for analysis, while others remain abandoned shacks on a hillside. In the section that follows I argue that this amounts to a ‘queer fear of the ordinary’, which can be traced back to the ‘anti-social’ turn in queer theory.

**The anti-social thesis: queer fears of the ordinary**

Edelman’s text has become canonical in many discussions of queer scholarship on temporality, and can be contextualised as part of the shift – around the mid-2000s – towards ‘anti-sociality’ within the field of queer temporality, which itself reflected the more general shift towards anti-sociality within queer theory. Certainly, the momentum gained by the anti-social thesis can be traced back to the conservative politics of the George W. Bush era (2001-2009). This was a time of renewed discussion in the U.S. around marriage and gays in the military. As I discussed in Chapter One, queer theorists increasingly came to associate efforts to secure rights to marriage or to service in the military (as in campaigns to repeal Don’t Ask Don’t Tell) with what Duggan (2003) terms ‘homonormativity’, since this represented an attempt to ‘assimilate’ into, rather than fundamentally challenge, the mainstream. The body of texts that emerged on the

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149 Halberstam (2008), who had at the time also published a text on queer temporalities, calls No Future ‘perhaps the most powerful and controversial recent contribution to anti-social queer theory’ (p. 141).

150 The ‘anti-social thesis’ has been referred to at length in PMLA, where a group of queer theorists – Robert Caserio, Edelman, Halberstam, Muñoz and Tim Dean – gathered for the MLA’s Division Executive Committee for Gay Studies in Language and Literature to ‘stocktake’ what they referred to as the ‘anti-social thesis’ in queer theory (Caserio et al. 2006, p. 819). For Caserio, who called the panel, the anti-social thesis can be traced back to Leo Bersani and his influential text, Homos (Bersani 1995). Caserio explains that Homos is notable for its resistance to the trope of ‘gay respectability’ and to the idea that a homosexual should be a ‘good citizen’ (p. 819). Caserio picks up on this rejection of the notion of respectability as characteristic of the work of certain contemporary queer scholars including Lee Edelman.

151 It seems important to note that while the anti-social thesis claims this as an innovation of queer theoretical scholarship, it also has roots in gay and lesbian theorising. Jeffrey Weeks (1998), for example, is one who has thoroughly considered the politics of assimilation as oscillations between ‘transgression’ and ‘citizenship’ (p. 36). Weeks (1998) suggests that on the one hand, assimilationist LGBT movements alter or
back of this political context have thus been retrospectively identified as part of the ‘anti-social’ turn in queer theory, since they work to challenge the idea that LGBT politics have become concerned with ‘respectability’ and mainstream assimilation rather than outright resistance to these institutions.

It was on the back of this turn to anti-sociality that the academic study of queer temporality rode a secondary wave of enthusiasm, with a flurry of individual texts, roundtables and special issues appearing at around the same time. In the introduction to the 2007 GLQ special issue on queer temporalities, Elizabeth Freeman explains the link between the anti-social thesis and temporality. Firstly, she acknowledges the efforts of past activists to pave the way for the securing of important civil rights and protection: ‘[f]or at least the past two decades, queer activists have certainly worked to secure a better future’ (Freeman 2007, p. 165). In reference to paving the way for a better future, she lists efforts to combat homophobic violence, the right to hospital visitation, adoption and reproductive rights, as well as archival work to secure records of queer social and intellectual culture (p. 165). Nonetheless, Freeman (p. 165) concludes that such efforts have:

...fit sexual dissidents into a normative set of temporal constructs, including biological or social reproduction, and monetary or cultural inheritance. Pragmatically valuable as they are, they can partake in a mainstream American tendency to privilege family, property, and heritage.

Freeman’s point, then, is that the ‘fight for the future’ practised by normative LGBT activism and institutions buys into the (heteronormative) American dream: to own property and raise a family. She calls this – borrowing Nguyen Tan Hoang from the roundtable’s term – a ‘homonormative time line’, concluding that this is a ‘linear’ way of conceptualising time (p. 165). For the scholars participating in the GLQ roundtable on queer temporality in the same issue, the ‘linearity’ of such timelines lies in their ‘unquestioning’ march towards the landmarks of heteronormative life. Texts on queer temporality post the anti-social turn in queer theory are thus pitched as a challenge to

\[\text{reinvent existing institutions, making the ‘normative’ appear ‘queer’ (transgression). On the other, these movements are fundamentally about making a claim for inclusion into existing normative social structures like the law, marriage and so on (citizenship).}\]

\[\text{152 These were: Carolyn Dinshaw, Edelman, Roderick A. Ferguson, Freccero, Freeman, Halberstam, Jagose, Christopher S. Nealon and Nguyen Tan Hoang.}\]
these so-called linear time lines, to the necessity of equality within a neoliberal, conservative regime. Typically, this means one of two approaches: the rejection outright of the concept of the future (as in Edelman)\(^{153}\) or the encouragement of alternative, queer timelines which are seen as disrupting the hetero/homonormative or linear status quo.

Jack Halberstam’s work in *In A Queer Time and Place* (2005a) is emblematic of the second approach. Although Edelman and Halberstam share an investment in the anti-social thesis, Halberstam is less enamoured by Edelman’s outright rejection of any future. She instead reifies what she calls the ‘queer “way of life”’ (2005a, p. 1) as a powerful remedy to ‘hetero temporalities’ (p. 182). To clarify, Halberstam defines ‘hetero temporalities’ as ‘the narrative coherence of adolescence – early adulthood – marriage – reproduction – child rearing – retirement – death’ (p. 182). In opposition to these linear, ‘hetero’ temporalities, Halberstam proposes that the alternative practices of queers constitute what she calls ‘queer’ (or non-straight) time lines. Halberstam justifies this by pointing out that because queers are often unencumbered by children, or the necessity to ‘go to weddings’ on the weekend, they are able to ‘prolong the periods of their life devoted to subcultural participation’ (p. 161). They thus engage in what she terms a ‘different mode of temporality that might arise out of an immersion in club cultures or queer sex cultures’ (p. 174).

How does this constitute a disruption of linear time *per se*? Firstly, Halberstam needs to conflate ‘heteronormative’ and ‘linear’ to the extent that they are assumed to mean the same thing. Being heteronormatively heterosexual, or a homonormative gay or lesbian who marries or reproduces locks one into not only ‘normative’ time, but also ‘linear’ time. Presumably Halberstam’s logic is that these people follow the ‘expected’ trajectory of one’s life, and so act life out in a ‘linear’ fashion. But what concerns Halberstam is presumably less linearity and more the ‘normative’ nature of these life choices. In that case, it is highly questionable whether one can assume linearity *necessarily* equates to normativity. *In A Queer Time and Place* (2005a) privileges the nightclub over the family

\(^{153}\) Although I have been gesturing at the fact that Edelman’s work, despite its claims to the rejection of futurity altogether, works implicitly to suggest the ascendancy of certain forms of being and living over others.
home, yet there is no reason why the ‘family home’ might not disrupt normativity in some way. Speaking from the perspective of the intersections of race and sexuality, for example, Gayatri Gopinath (2005) has argued that queer scholarship can ‘imagine “home” as a place to be left behind, to be escaped in order to emerge into another, more liberatory space’ (p. 14). This includes, for example, well-worn tales of escape from the rural to the urban, but also, significantly, in a diasporic context where ‘home’ has very different meanings for differently racialised subjects. Gopinath notes, for example, that the home is a ‘site of contestation’ that is particularly important to ‘queer racialized migrant subjects’, since “staying put” becomes a way of remaining within the oppressive structures of the home-as domestic space, racialized community space, and national space—while imaginatively working to dislodge its heteronormative logic’ (pp. 14-15). She thus sees the home as a necessarily ‘vexed location where queer subjects whose very desires and subjectivities are formed by its logic simultaneously labor to transform it’ (p. 15).

Halberstam’s argument, however, does not exhibit this same nuance. Home is automatically equated with normativity, with linearity, and is codified as not queer. So in the same way as Halberstam does not allow for the potential to ‘queer’ ‘questions of home, dwelling, and the domestic space’ (Gopinath 2005, p. 14) there is likewise no consideration of how some apparently linear activities such as queer child rearing might in some ways subvert normative notions of family, responsibility, and appropriate caregiving. Finally, Halberstam also makes the assumption that non-linear timelines, such as her examples of a prolonged adolescence or the refusal to marry, constitute a necessary disruption of the status quo. But there is no reason why going to nightclubs or skipping weddings per se disrupts the normative status quo. Halberstam, for instance, critiques ‘middle-class’ gays and lesbians who raise families, but makes nothing of the middle-class who can afford long nights of drinking, drugs and cab rides home. It is questionable the extent to which their participation in the night-time economy disrupts the normative, late-capitalist logic which governs 21st century American society.

154 Jagose makes a similar argument to mine in her role on the Theorizing Queer Temporalities roundtable, pointing out that ‘it’s important to question the reification of queer temporality, the credentialing of asynchrony, multi-temporality, and nonlinearity as if they were automatically in service of queer political projects and aspirations’ (Caserio et al. 2007, p. 191).
The sum of Halberstam’s text is therefore that all ‘hetero’ aspirations are ‘normative’, and that all ‘queer’ activities work automatically in service of disrupting the status quo. In her logic, this also means that all ‘normative’ behaviour is necessarily linear and all ‘non-normative’ behaviour constitutes a necessarily queer temporality. What this effectively does is sanction queer experiences as better ways to live and be in comparison to those trapped in ‘hetero’ time (which Halberstam characterises as marriage-retirement-death). Yet by conflating all ‘heteronormative’ activities with ‘linearity’ and undesirability, I would suggest that work like Halberstam’s instantiates its own version of what I’ll call a linear ‘progressivist’ narrative. I mean linear progressivist in the sense that it assumes that there exists such a thing as more or less desirable or radical ways of living and being, such that queer time usurps less desirable timelines. Halberstam, that is, pitches her work as a challenge to the so-called ‘linear’ aspirations of LGBT activist communities or families, but in many ways her own work is prefaced on a linearity that presumes that those timelines and aspirations are inferior – that is less politically progressive – in comparison to queer timelines and aspirations.

In this there are clear parallels with the work of Edelman. Insistent as both are on challenging ‘normativity’, both preface ‘better’ or anti-social futures on a binary opposition to the ordinary. Their binary logic thus invests queerness in pre-determined objects, locations, and timelines. In Edelman it is Bodega Bay which is the allegorical opposite of all things queer, while in Halberstam it is the family home: for both it is people with ordinary, future-oriented aspirations that don’t qualify as queer or radical enough. Gopinath’s (2005) work on queer diaspora and the family home gestures at the particularly problematic nature of such judgements for queers of different social positionings, especially, say, queer migrants who might qualify in temporal terms as merely ‘staying put’ (rather than participating in alternative, queer disruptions of ‘normative’ timelines). That queer theorising thus implicitly critiques ordinariness, however, is not a new critique. In 1994, at the height of queer theory’s institutionalisation, Biddy Martin famously wrote that queer theory’s ‘[r]adical anti-normativity throws out a lot babies with a lot of bathwater,’ resulting in ‘[a]n enormous fear of ordinariness or normalcy’ (1997, p. 133). Martin’s criticism of the field was fast dismissed when Berlant and Warner responded directly by arguing that ‘[t]o be against
heteronormativity is not to be against norms. To be against the processes of normalization is not to be afraid of ordinariness’ (1998, p. 557). Yet I believe that the intense and renewed push against ‘normativity’ characteristic of the anti-social turn in queer scholarship on temporality justifies the re-opening of this conversation. I would ask, for example, what the ethical implications are of pitting a challenge to linear time against queer futures that are defined and celebrated by means of their deviation from the ‘ordinary’.

**Anti-social queer time as progressivist time**

What I would like to suggest, then, is that the ‘linear’ timeline of LGBT activism roundly critiqued by queer theorists might just be one linear timeline amongst many: a many that includes the *progressivist* linear time line practiced by scholars of queer temporality after the anti-social turn in queer theory. What is of particular concern to me is the way that these more ‘advanced’ or ‘better’ queer timelines take their leave from those with ‘ordinary’ aspirations in life. This may include people for whom there is no other choice: people whose financial and socio-economic conditions mean that they are unable to pursue the more ‘subversive’ lifestyles Halberstam advocates. Or they may indeed be people with complicated notions of ‘home’ and ‘nation’; those with what Gopinath (2005) calls ‘queer diasporic’ relationships to time and space. This means that queer time – as conceptualised by both Halberstam and Edelman – is at risk of singling out those who are most vulnerable as those most ‘backward’.

Prior to the anti-social thesis, however, it was precisely this casual attribution of ‘backwardness’ to some bodies, lives and times that queer scholars set out to challenge. Let me explain this via a deviation from Tom Boellstorff’s (2007) analysis of Halberstam’s *In A Queer Time and Place* (2005a). Boellstorff has also challenged Halberstam’s claim to

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155 As Gopinath (2005) writes, ‘[a] queer diasporic framework productively exploits the analogous relation between nation and diaspora on the one hand, and between heterosexuality and queerness on the other: in other words, queerness is to heterosexuality as the diaspora is to the nation’ (p. 11). I am particularly inspired by her work in that this allows a ‘critique of heterosexuality and the nation form while exploding the binary oppositions between nation and diaspora, heterosexuality and homosexuality, original and copy’ (p. 11). I would, however, argue that its potentially greater political potentiality lies in its capacity to explode the binary of *queerness* and heteronormativity, *queerness* and ordinariness.
a rejection of ‘linear’ timelines, arguing that Halberstam’s embrace of immaturity and a ‘stretched-out adolescence’ reconfigures queer time as ‘delay, not abandonment’ of a linear narrative (Boellstorff 2007, p. 229). Boellstorff (2007) then goes on to compare Halberstam’s failure to challenge ‘linear time’ with what he sees as Elizabeth Freeman’s equal failure to do so with her concept of ‘temporal drag’ (Freeman 2000). In Freeman’s (2000) article ‘Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations’ – written prior to the anti-social turn in queer theory – temporal drag refers to the process of identifying with something which is seen as ‘out of time’, as in the example of her own graduate student identifying with lesbian feminism from the standpoint of the ‘queer’ generation (pp. 727-728). Freeman notes her own surprise at the student’s identification with that which is seen as ‘past’ or bygone, calling it a process of identification across time: what she calls ‘temporal drag’ (p. 728, emphasis in the original). Picking up on the concept of temporal drag, Boellstorff argues that Freeman does not adequately challenge the concept of linear time in the sense that ‘drag’ involves ‘retrogression’ and ‘delay’ rather than outright refusal of ‘straight’ time (Boellstorff 2007, p. 230).

I would argue, however, that Freeman’s concept of ‘temporal drag’ does something quite different to Halberstam’s conceptualisation of queer vs. hetero timelines. ‘Temporal drag’ refuses the move to associate some identities with undesirability and ‘pastness’ (e.g. the lesbian) and others with desirability and progression (e.g. queers). Freeman’s (2000) concept of ‘temporal drag’, that is, describes the ‘pull of the past upon the present’ while avoiding the negative connotations of ‘retrogression’ and ‘delay’ that can stick to past movements (p. 728). As an example, she writes (p. 728) that the case of her student’s identification with lesbian feminism indicates:

...the gravitational pull that “lesbian” sometimes seems to exert upon “queer.” In many discussions between the two, it often seems as if the lesbian feminist is cast as the big drag, drawing politics inexorably back to essentialized bodies, normative visions of women’s sexuality, and single-issue identity politics.

156 In some ways Boellstorff’s reading takes childhood’s position in a linear narrative to the present self for granted. Probyn (1996), for example, employing a Deleuzean and Foucauldian understanding of the ‘event’, argues that if ‘we turn our attention to childhood as event, as a heterogeneous ensemble of discourses and relations, tracing a straight line between a present self as lesbian or gay and any childhood experience becomes somewhat tricky’ (p. 116). Probyn’s understanding of childhood as event thus retains an anti-essentialist, queer impulse.
Freeman’s own identification with both lesbian feminism and queer politics, however, disrupts the inevitably negative connotations that attach to lesbian feminism (and feminists) in such a progressivist political narrative (p. 728):

...for those of us for whom queer politics and theory involve not disavowing our relationship to particular (feminist) histories even as we move away from identity politics, thinking of “drag” as a temporal phenomenon also raises a crucial question: what is the time of queer performativity?

This more complicated question thus disrupts any capacity for queer time to straightforwardly refer to those bodies or lives that are too ‘normative’ or ‘regressive’ to be considered queer. Halberstam (2005a) by comparison does not shy away from pointing out who is stuck in (hetero)normative time. These are most obviously the ‘middle-class gays and lesbians [who] are choosing to raise children in conventional family settings’ (pp. 152-153). It is thus these gays and lesbians who are conferred the status of undesirability in Halberstam’s work: figures stuck in a retrograde attachment to the ‘life of the nation and the family’ (p. 153).

The difference between these two pieces of work, then, is not only contextual. It might also be ethical. Explaining this requires going back to Foucault – who, not incidentally – inspired most of the original work (including Freeman’s) on queer temporality. In many ways, Foucault might be considered the inspiration for the field of queer temporality itself, since one of his formative gifts to the field was his insistence that there is nothing simple about assuming that we, in the present, are liberated from the problems of the past (Foucault 1998). He was the first to remind us that sex had a history: one that we, in the present, didn’t know well enough to critique157. Foucault’s work thus offered a critique of progressivist linearity: of the sense that time is the simple progression from ‘worse’ to ‘better’. In the Introduction I termed this part of his ethical agenda, since challenging linear narratives of time in this way allows one to shift focus from the problems of the past or present, to what the past can offer to the present, or future.

157 As in the oft-observed assumption that the Victorian era was ‘repressive’. Foucault (1998) cleverly disrupts these pre-conceived notions of what the past was/meant to current more ‘progressive’ understandings of sexuality.
Thus, it was on the back of Foucault’s work that many of the early texts on queer temporality\textsuperscript{158}, prior to the anti-social thesis, did their best to ensure that we did not forget that sex, and theorising sex, has a history - a history that the advances made in the present owe much to. Much of this work has resonances with foundational critiques of the field of queer theory itself: such as both Judith Butler (1994)\textsuperscript{159} and Biddy Martin’s (1997)\textsuperscript{160} pieces, which were concerned with the way the popularity and development of the field of queer theory in some ways made feminism seem the monolithic ground upon which its more sophisticated analysis of sex took place. Later work on queer temporality – such as Freeman’s (2000) on ‘temporal drag’, but also Carla Freccero’s (2006) text \textit{Queer/Early/Modern} – were thus pitched against the sense that progressivist narratives, particularly those of queer theory’s progression from feminism to queer theory, can result in the reification of ‘whatever looks newer or more-radical-than-thou,’ while ‘whatever seems to generate continuity seems better left behind’ (Freeman 2000, p.

\textsuperscript{158} See for example Fradenburg and Freccero’s edited collection ‘Premodern Sexualities’ (1996) which they acknowledge takes its dues from figures like Judith Butler and Gayle Rubin, who have in their own way tried to ensure ‘we do not forget that sex has a history’ (Fradenburg & Freccero 1996, p. vii). In this, Fradenburg and Freccero are undoubtedly concerned with the parallel insistence that queer theory has a history. Thus, the collection acts as an antidote to the sense that queer theory participates in what they name, following Sara Suleri (1992), as ‘alteritism’ – ‘a belief in the absoluteness of cultural and/or historical difference’ (Fradenburg & Freccero 1996, p. xv). For Fradenburg and Freccero, alteritism names the sense in which disparate fields claim that we are ‘modern insofar as we know that we are incommensurably different from our past and from other cultures’ (1996, p. xv).

\textsuperscript{159} In this I refer to Judith Butler’s (1994) article ‘Against Proper Objects’. Butler considers the implications of the ‘methodological distinction’ that emerged around the time of queer’s institutionalisation, between feminism, as a field proper to the ‘analysis of gender’ and queer studies as a field proper to ‘the theoretical investigation of sexuality’ (p. 1). She argues that this distinction can work as a ‘repudiation’ which ‘begins with the reduction of gender to sex-a caricature of feminist theoretical work of the last twenty years-which then stages the possibility of an assimilation of that caricatured version of feminism to the putatively more expansive terrain of gay and lesbian studies... lesbian and gay studies [thus] does precisely what feminism is said to do, but does it in a more expansive and complex way’ (p. 4). I should emphasise that there is a slippage here between Butler’s use of ‘lesbian and gay studies’ and what would emerge later as the field of ‘queer studies’. Indeed she has said (Butler, Segal & Osborne 1994, p. 32) that when she wrote \textit{Gender Trouble} she did not know that there was such a thing as either gay and lesbian studies or queer theory, aside from the fact that differences had run a special edition of the journal by that name.

\textsuperscript{160} With her piece originally published in the same year (1994) and journal (\textit{différences}) as Butler’s ‘Against Proper Objects’, Martin (1997) argued that we must ‘stop defining queerness as mobile and fluid in relation to what then gets construed as stagnant and ensnaring, and as associated with a maternal, anchronicous, and putatively puritanical feminism’ (p. 110). Elsewhere, she likewise argued that the methodological distinction between queer theory and feminism has worked ‘by way of polemical and ultimately reductionist accounts of the verities of feminist approaches to just one feminism, guilty of the humanist trap of making a self-name, universal category of “women”-defined as other than men-the subject of feminism. At its worst, feminism has been seen as more punitively policing than mainstream culture’ (1994, p. 105).
728). What inspired much of this work was thus the desire to challenge the way that time – in the form of the ‘present’ or ‘future’ – seemed to rely on its own projection of ‘backwardness’ onto certain movements (as in feminism) or identities (as in the lesbian feminist). Yet in Halberstam’s work, like Edelman’s, there is no such hesitation. In theorising progressivist queer narratives, that is, they do not hesitate in their assessment of what is ‘backwards’ or ‘past’. Ironically, given Halberstam’s own discussions of butchness as interpreted through a flexibility/rigidity binary this often works to confer the status of ‘backwardness’ onto those very figures early work in the field did its best not to confer judgement on: ordinary figures like working-class lesbians or domestic, diasporic queers. Work on queer temporality post the anti-social thesis thus appears to leave behind this ethical agenda. Its insistent focus on critiquing heteronormativity cares not what it ‘leaves behind’ in its wake, no matter how vulnerable the figures it reads as backward. In the next section I would like to propose that one way of getting back to the

161 Carolyn Dinshaw’s (1999) Getting Medieval is exemplary in this respect. Getting Medieval works against the idea that the oft-observed ‘slipperiness’ of postmodernism is unique to contemporary society. As a medieval scholar, Dinshaw’s text is interested especially in how the ‘indeterminacies, contradictions’ and ‘slippages’ attributed to the present day (and I would add to ‘queer’ identity and politics in particular) are able to be found in ‘major cultural phenomena in late-medieval England’ (p. 11). By returning to cultural sites as diverse as Geoffrey Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales through to Quentin Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction, Dinshaw seeks to prove that the ‘Middle Ages’ are not the ‘dense, unvarying, and eminently obvious monolith against which modernity and postmodernity groovily emerge’ (p. 16).

162 I particularly like Halberstam’s (1999) chapter in Female Masculinity, ‘Butch/FTM Border Wars’. There she discusses how, in the context of queer communities, the emergence of FTM trans people ‘by comparison makes “butch” look like a stable signifier’ (p. 146). She follows this up further in the Queer Temporalities roundtable in GLQ, discussing her own identification as ‘stone butch’ and how ‘[p]eople often tell me that stone butch was an identity bound to the 1950s and apparently dependent on a preliberation understanding of lesbianism or queerness. Or, now I hear from younger trans folks that stone butchness can be “resolved” by transitioning’ (Dinshaw et al. 2007, p. 190). As such, she concludes that ‘the emphasis within contemporary sexual subcultures on “flexibility,” flexible desires/practices/identifications, marks people with strong identifications as pathological in relation to their rigidity and that the binary of flexible and rigid is definitely a temporal one-it ascribes mobility over time to some notion of liberation and casts stubborn identification as a way of being stuck in time, unevolved, not versatile’ (p. 190)

163 See for instance Ann Cvetkovich and Selena Wahng’s (2001) piece on the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. Cvetkovich and Wahng avoid a straightforward analysis of the festival as transphobic, instead letting women who participate in the festival speak of their attachment to the festival in a roundtable form. One thing that clearly emerges from this discussion is the importance of the physical elements of festival preparation in an emergent sense of community amongst volunteers (p. 135). Cvetkovich (2007) elsewhere reflected on her own participation in the festival as a ‘queer’ process: ‘[w]riting about the music festival, the haven of lesbian separatism and women-only space, might seem like an anachronism... yet it is a significantly queer project for me since the festival, particularly the workers’ community, has survived as a locus for alternative cultures and visionary thinking. I focus on how forms of manual labor associated with the working class, especially working-class masculinities, can be the site of community building and creativity, remaking Marxist notions of alienated labor’ (p. 466).
original ethical agenda of queer temporality is to change the way the ‘future’ is conceptualised in this work.

The future as invested object in anti-social queer theory

As I have pointed out, scholarship on queer temporality post the anti-social thesis tends to either reject the idea of a queer future altogether (e.g. Edelman), or reify the radical political potentiality of queer timelines and lives (e.g. Halberstam). Aligned with the second approach is the work of Jose Esteban Muñoz (2009), who opposes the ‘polemic of the “antirelation”’ (p. 10) characteristic of recent work in the field, especially as embodied by No Future. Although Muñoz (2009, p. 11) calls No Future a ‘brilliant and nothing short of inspiring polemic’ he argues that it and other antirelational queer scholarship like it partake ‘in what can only be seen as a binary logic of opposition’ (p. 13). I have argued that such an opposition is prefaced on a distinction from all that is seen as normative, linear and ordinary, with all the complicated conflations that happen between those categorisations. The spirit of my critique has been that this kind of oppositional understanding of queer time forecloses the capacity for queerness to be found in locations and lives outside of pre-determined and foreclosed parameters. Muñoz (p. 14) also points to strict parameters around what queer time entails by arguing that:

The prime examples of queer antirelationality in Bersani’s Homos, Edelman’s No Future, and all the other proponents of this turn in queer criticism are scenes of jouissance, which are always described as shattering orgasmic ruptures often associated with gay male sexual abandon or self-styled risky behaviour.

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164 Although, again, I have complicated any simplistic division between these two approaches in my critique of Edelman’s reification of properly queer objects/locations/lives in The Birds.

165 Muñoz (2009) uses the term ‘antirelational’ as a ‘provisional’ (p. 11) term to delineate a shift in the field which is much more commonly termed the ‘antisocial thesis’ in queer theory (see Caserio et al. 2006). Indeed, as Caserio et al. (2006) do, Muñoz (2009) contends that ‘[a]ntisocial queer theories are inspired by Leo Bersani’s book Homos, in which he first theorized the so-called theses of antirelationality’ (p. 11). Although antirelationality is not equivalent to antiutopianism, Muñoz insists that the two are related: ‘[a]ntiutopianism in queer studies... is more often that not intertwined with antirelationality’ (p. 12). I would say that both fit neatly under the banner of ‘antisociality’.
This is true of these two more psychoanalytically-inflected texts, as well as of course Bersani’s (2010) groundbreaking ‘Is The Rectum A Grave?’ (originally written in 1987). What Muñoz overlooks in this characterisation, however, is the other ways that queerness has become consolidated in antisocial queer work: in not only gay male sexual subcultures, but in urban locations and in default white bodies. This latter critique is implicitly reflected in his assertion (Muñoz 2009, p. 17) that this work:

...moves to imagine an escape or denouncement of relationality as first and foremost a distancing of queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference. In other words, antirelational approaches to queer theory are romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference.

Muñoz’s point that such scholarship ‘defers various dreams of difference’ is also a temporal one: romances of foreclosed queer negativity divert attention away from different future investments, from the fact that the shape of various lives and the timelines they follow is inflected differently by their various social positionings. I have suggested that this leads to certain bodies and lives being coded as ‘backward’ or ‘retrograde’; often ones already vulnerable and with atypical relationships to the urban, the home and so on. This has potentially devastating implications for women and queers of colour. As Muñoz writes, ‘[q]ueer feminist and queer of colour critiques are the powerful counterweight to the antirelational. I situate my work squarely in those quarters’ (p. 17).

One example of this kind of critique might be found in Sara Ahmed’s Queer Phenomenology (2006). Although Ahmed’s work is primarily about how different social positionings orient one in space, it also covers the implications of these orientations in temporal terms. Ahmed, for instance, draws on the work of Franz Fanon (1967) to point

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166 Bersani (2010) notes that “‘passive’ anal sex’ has historically been a ‘moral taboo’ that for men has been associated with the ‘abdication’ of ‘power’ (p. 19). He posits that the ‘radical disintegration and humiliation of the self’ that the act represents makes it ‘possible to think of the sexual as, precisely, moving between a hyperbolic sense of self and a loss of all consciousness of self’ (p. 25). As such, he concludes that ‘if the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal... of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death’ (p. 29).

167 Which is not to say that this is not something Muñoz is attentive to, especially given his work in Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Muñoz 1999). But Cruising Utopia is less specifically about race: ‘although this writing project is not always explicitly about race, it does share much political urgency with a vibrant list of scholars working on the particularities of queers of color and their politics’ (Muñoz 2009, p. 17).
out that different bodies will have different relationships to space, not least of which black bodies trying to find their way in spaces that are implicitly and explicitly coded white. In a context where whiteness is taken for granted, Ahmed points out that white bodies are able to ‘extend’ into space, and find their way. As Ahmed (2006, p. 110) puts it, by asking us to think from the perspective of the ‘historic-racial’, Fanon directs us to pay attention to the way that:

...the lived experience of being the object of the hostile white gaze... involves a shift from an active body, which extends itself through objects, to one that is negated or “stopped” in its tracks.

Ahmed (p. 111) thus eloquently argues that:

...racism “stops” black bodies inhabiting space by extending through objects and others; the familiarity of “the white world,” as a world we know implicitly, “disorients” black bodies such that they cease to know where to find things-reduced as they are to things amongst things. Racism ensures that the black gaze returns to the body, which is not a loving return but rather follows the line of the hostile white gaze. The disorientation affected by racism diminishes the capacity for action.

Ahmed shifts here into the language of ethics: to be restricted in one’s movements, in one’s capacity to be at home in the world, is to experience a diminishment in what one ‘can do’: ‘seeing oneself or being seen as white or black or mixed does affect what one “can do,” or even where one can go’ (p. 112). In her exploration of the tools of phenomenology and queer theory for rethinking orientation in ethico-political terms, Ahmed turns to the idea of a ‘queer genealogy’ (p. 154). Akin to ‘queer diaspora’, Ahmed (p. 154) argues that a queer genealogy has the capacity to disrupt implicitly white understandings of home, nation and community. Ahmed (pp. 154-155), however, hesitates in foreclosing the meaning of queer genealogy in oppositional terms:

Queer genealogy would not be about making another family tree, which would turn queer connections into new lines, nor would it be about creating a line that connects two sides. A queer genealogy would take the very ‘affects’ of mixing, or coming into contact with things that reside on different lines, as opening up new kinds of connection.

Key to Ahmed’s definition of queer genealogy then, is that it is one invested in the “‘crossing” of existing lines’ (p. 155) rather than its binary opposition to them. This is a queer genealogy in the spirit of Sedgwick’s call for an ‘athwart’ queer politics that will not foreclose the possibilities for queerness by opposing it absolutely to the normative, linear
or ordinary; instead a ‘queer genealogy would be full of such ordinary proximities’ (Ahmed 2006, p. 155). This has significant implications for thinking through the various differing dreams of and relationships to the idea of the future that different social positionings will entail. Thus while Ahmed embraces the possibilities of ‘black’ (as analogous to queer) as a word that ‘points toward the future and toward a world that we have yet to inhabit: a world that is not orientated around whiteness,’ (p. 156) she likewise refuses to foreclose what such a future might look like; which bodies, lives and affective connections by which it might be defined: ‘[w]e don’t know, as yet, what shape such a world might take, or what mixtures might be possible, when we no longer reproduce the lines we follow’ (p. 156). Refusing to straightforwardly reproduce temporal lines then includes both neoliberal, hetero or homonormative timelines, but also the linear progressivist narrative pursued by some queer theorists: queer theorists moreover who seem assured of precisely which live trajectories and bodies qualify as queer.

Here, then, is where I differ from Muñoz, despite sharing his critique of Edelman, and his investment in feminist and queer of colour critiques of the antisocial thesis. In proposing that ‘we must vacate from the here and now for a then and there’ (Muñoz 2009, p. 185), Muñoz does not leave the possibilities for such a future open so much as further forecloses them. His theoretical debt to Ernst Bloch, for instance, is couched in Muñoz’s insistence that ‘concrete’ rather than ‘abstract’ utopias should be pursued on the basis that ‘abstract utopias are akin to banal optimism’ (p. 3). Although for Muñoz this comes from a place of suggesting that ‘[c]oncrete utopias are relational to historically situated struggles’ (p. 3), and so do not take leave from the past in a progressivist sense, this causes Muñoz to cling to a concretised vision of what a queer future would entail. This vision, moreover, is once again based on the anti-normativity that characterises both Edelman and Halberstam’s work. Muñoz’s call for utopia and futurity in the face of the present, that is, is premised on what he calls an ‘anemic political agenda that dominates contemporary LGBT politics today’ (p. 19). In this he is certainly concrete: ‘I most

Muñoz indeed is invested in not enacting the same kind of progressivist relationship to the past that I have accused some queer scholars of. As he (2009) writes, ‘[u]ltimately this book offers a theory of queer futurity that is attentive to the past for the purposes of critiquing a present’ (p. 18). This includes his drawing on Heidegger – who Muñoz calls an ‘abject political failure’ (p. 17) who he is nonetheless willing to build on ‘in the service of a different politics and understanding of the world’ (p. 16). I have been inspired by this move in my next chapter in which I resist the move to consider controversial feminists figures like Sheila Jeffreys as incapable of contributing anything useful to a feminist conversation.
pointedly mean U.S. queers clamoring for their right to participate in the suspect institution of marriage and, maybe worse, to serve in the military’ (p. 22). Muñoz’s problem with LGBT politics is thus that their vision of a better future does not align with his: hence he calls U.S. LGBT politics a ‘short sighted, and retrograde politics of the present’ (p. 20). Not only is this a worse vision of the future that fails to be queer, this vision is denied the temporal quality of the future at all (it is both present and retrograde, even in the present). The anti-normativity of Muñoz’s text, then, precedes his heavy investment in a (better) future, such that the future becomes the most idealised of all invested objects. Thus, I would extent Foucault’s critique of progressivist linearity to a critique of the way the ‘future’ is configured in queer scholarship inflected by the anti-social thesis. Critiquing progressivist narratives, I would suggest, should give us pause to examine the common presumption – within queer theory as much as LGBT politics – that there is a clearly defined better future out there. The idea of the better future relies, after all, on a conviction that we know what this future looks like and how it compares to the less desirable present or past. The concept of the future thus becomes what sociologists Brown and Michael (2003) call an ‘analytical object’. As they explain, the future is ‘not simply a neutral temporal space into which objective expectations can be projected’ (p. 4). In other words, for many people – queer scholars notwithstanding – the future is anything but a mere temporal concept; the future becomes an object of great investment and significance: the promise of something better or more than what the present/past has/had to offer.

In scholarship on queer temporality post the anti-social thesis, this investment in the future is also an investment in it as a knowable object: it becomes the kind of object we can peer into and decide, quite easily, whether it constitutes the future we’re after or not. Yet here I would draw on Butler’s (1993) work to suggest that this goes against the critical capacity of queer scholarship. As I have previously explored, Butler (1993) suggests that queer loses its critical or radical edge once it consolidates into a knowable entity. In the context of queer temporalities, then, the point of such futures remaining open to contestation is that they are open to challenge by those for whom these particular versions of an idealised queer future don’t resonate; those who Butler says nonetheless ‘justifiably expect representation by it’ (p. 230). To pursue this ethical
agenda would mean that that the futures these antisocial queer scholars conjure remains just as open to contestation by those with which it does not resonate, by those from which it takes its leave.

In contrast, the anti-social thesis invests queer futures far beyond the point of contestation. In Muñoz (2009), not only is he assured of what the queer horizon constitutes, he also argues that his text provides a ‘flight plan for a collective political becoming’ (p. 189). Yet far from being ‘open’, flight plans are notoriously rigid: they set in advance their destination as well as the route to it. They allow us to go into auto-pilot, assured that our destination will be reached. Flight plans foreclose possibilities for the future, effectively shutting off all possibility of detours, route changes or productive encounters with that which is seen as ‘backward’.

**Birds without flight plans**

I don’t believe that the solution is to disinvest in the future, as Edelman has called for. There are certain people for whom this simply isn’t an option: a point both Tim Dean (2008) and Juana Maria Rodriguez (2011) have made in their excellent critiques of Edelman’s work. As Rodriguez (2011) reminds, ‘[f]uturity has never been given to queers of color, children of color, or other marginalized communities that live under the violence of state and social erasure’ (p. 333). I would suggest, then, that the opportunity to abandon futurity relies unequally on the privilege of the speaker, such that I am in sympathy with Freeman’s (2007, p. 167) critique that:

...radical antifuturity, and its corollary, the antisocial thesis, are the new postmodernity, that is, the conceptual privilege of white middle-class male subjects who are always already guaranteed a future and so can afford to jettison one.

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169 As Dean (2008) writes: ‘[s]ome of us are sufficiently privileged to embrace and then deploy the death drive, instead of being simply subjected to it. In this way, No Future offers certain readers a comfortably radical point of imaginary identification’ (pp. 127-128). Implicitly, Dean suggests that Edelman’s is a ‘feel-good’ text for certain left-wing queer radicals who can take comfort (from the relative privilege of academia) in what Dean calls an ‘imaginary’ – I would suggest he means elitist - critique. Edelman ignores, in other words, that the violence of ‘death’ is an ever-present threat that some are unable to take theoretical pleasure in.

170 Although Freeman attributes this critique to Muñoz (2006), it also goes back to Martin (1997), who argues crucially that for some ‘homosexual women’ especially, ‘normativity’ may not be the ‘biggest problem’ (p. 132). As Martin, suggests, what is often more important is ‘rights to education, jobs, housing,
One alternative, then, would be to accept that the future is rightfully an object of great investment, for many grass-roots queer of colour and feminist activists in particular. Indeed, as Elizabeth Grosz (2002) has argued, the future is especially important to feminists given the ‘failure of the past to provide a space and time for women as women’ (p. 13). Until such a time has come, feminism’s investment in the future will remain. What can change, then, is the extent to which investing in the future entails the tendency to foreclose that future. To borrow Muñoz’s analogy, queer scholarship needs to abandon its pre-determined flight plans: to get off auto-pilot and see where else queer might take us. This would mean an investment in a better future for those who are presently oppressed without a pre-determined idea of what that future looks like, and how to get there. It is only by doing so that it can proceed ethically: by focusing on what could be queer rather than what could not, by focusing on so-called better queer futures that don’t rely on a scorn or disdain for the ordinary or the backward.

Practically, this might mean looking for queerness in the most ordinary or unlikely of places. Indeed, if queerness has itself consolidated into a set of idealised ‘norms’ (which I argued in Chapter Two) this might mean looking precisely to those things, those bodies or places that it currently excludes, that it currently writes off as anything but queer. As I will argue, via Rosalyn Diprose’s (2003) work on alterity and ethics, it is only through encounters with these ‘Others’ that queerness as both foreclosed identity and destination can change. Encountering something that surprises us: something queer in a place we might never look, is what forces us to change our pre-determined ideas of what queerness is and means. Temporally, it challenges us to re-write our scripts for the future, what a better future would look like, and our flight plans for how to get there.

This has a real synergy with early scholarship on queer temporality. Opening up the future to contestation, that is, might be achieved primarily by investing energy into that which is seen as past or backward. As I argued with Foucault, understanding time as

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171 This also has resonances with Heather Love’s work, in Feeling Backward (2007), in which she seeks to listen to the voices of ‘unlikely’ queer figures from the past. These include those whom she muses might want to resist this call, such that she questions even the ethics of her own recuperative project. In so doing Love’s work enacts a self-reflexive and ethical version of what I suggest is the productive potentiality or virtuality that characterises an otherwise unfashionable, unlikely or retrograde queer past.
'progressivist’ means the future and past are heavily linked. Invested futures, seem, by nature, to invest the past with a sense of backwardness that the future rescues us from. Scholarship like Muñoz’s (2009) thus chart the movement, as he puts it, from ‘the past (having-been)’ to the ‘future (the not-yet)’ (p. 186). But to this I would ask: what if the past was considered as something other than what the future has ‘progressed’ from, something other than the ‘has-been’? As I will explore in the following chapter, Grosz’s (2002) work on temporality has similarly attempted to re-configure the past in this way, terming it – following Henri Bergson – a ‘virtuality’. For Grosz, time works by the activation of ‘virtual’ possibilities. In this sense, the present can be understood as merely one ‘activated’ virtuality (a virtuality that has become an actuality). Seen in this light, the past and present ‘paradoxically co-exist’, such that the past exists in the present ‘in a state of latency or virtuality’ (Grosz 2002, p. 18). All that is past, in other words, acts as a virtuality that might be activated in the service of alternative futures. The value of Grosz’s reconceptualisation of time is thus that the past can be productively refigured away from linear and progressivist narratives of time. The past here acts not as that which we must be liberated from, but as imbued with its own potential to activate present and future (as yet unthought of) possibilities that may be desirable for queer/feminist politics.

This is particularly helpful if we understand the ‘past’ not only as the (literal) past, but those things which appear ‘retrograde’ to us, those things apparently most backward or ordinary. These encounters productively open queer futures up to that which might not appear to fit into currently dominant understandings of queer identity, politics or time. To do so is not inconsistent with queer theory’s desire to move beyond mere rights and recognition. It is part of what Grosz (2005) elsewhere calls the process of opening up ‘political struggles to what is beyond current comprehension and control, to becoming unrecognizable, becoming other, becoming artistic’ (p. 5). It is part of what it means for a movement to become ethical, to be expansive and humble enough to engage with the unlikely others that may yet take it creatively forward.

I would thus propose a queer/feminist temporality built on this reconceptualisation of linear or progressivist time, which in turn hinges crucially on letting go of the idea that we already know what the queer/feminist future is and should look like. As Grosz (2005, p. 182) writes:
The project of radical politics...remains directed at how to envisage and engender a future unlike the present, without being able to specify in advance what such a future entails. It is thus an investment in the power of the leap, by which the actual emerges and produces itself from its virtual resources.

The value of reconceptualising all that is backward as potentially productive, in other words, is that it also allows us to let go of our ‘flight plans’ for the future, by conceding that we may never know in advance what counts as ‘queer’, or ‘productive’ politics. To engage in a queer politics that takes seriously the ethical promise not to specify in advance what its future looks like thus requires a certain humility. It means acknowledging that we – as queer/feminist scholars and activists – may not know which future is the best one possible, that what some can afford to abandon, others cannot, and that things we conceive of as past, outmoded or ordinary might yet count as useful to some queer/feminist futures.

In the following chapter I am interested in taking this ethics to the space of queer/feminist activist politics. To what extent have these political circles themselves internalised some form of a queer progressivist narrative? To what extent do they understand queer and feminist futures as better ways to live and be, especially in comparison with more outmoded or outdated movements or identities, like lesbian feminism and older generations of feminists? I would like to explore the consequences of a queer progressivist understanding of time at an activist level, and the implications this has for the way certain objects become coded as backwards, and are treated accordingly.

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172 This next chapter enacts a shift from predominantly queer activist spaces and collectives to where they overlap with feminist activist spaces and collectives. Of course there are overlaps between these two movements/communities, even in solely ‘queer’ identifying spaces, but in the next chapter I look to where the two overlap explicitly.
CHAPTER FOUR - FEMINIST FUTURES: SEX WARS, TEMPORALITY AND RESSENTIMENT

As an undergraduate student at The University of Melbourne (UOM) from 2004-2006, I spent a lot of time in what was called the ‘Queer Lounge’. I had found my first year of Uni incredibly difficult. I am working class and grew up in the industrial West of Melbourne. I went to a local, Catholic primary school of 180 people before Mum had me sit a scholarship exam for prestigious girls’ school Methodist Ladies’ College (MLC), located in the leafy, wealthy East. After my success on the exam, the years that followed convinced me that I had done enough cultural adjustment for one lifetime. I had also been lulled into the apparently false belief that the shift from MLC to UOM would be a relatively minor one, given the prestige of both institutions. On the contrary, my small band of like-minded high school friends and I drifted apart and I spent a lot of my first year resenting what struck me as the cold elitism of the place. I made no friends in tutes, and was yet to meet anyone else queer - not that I knew of, anyway. So upon hearing about the Queer Lounge I thought I might have better luck feeling welcome there.

Nonetheless it took me a long time to go. I finally plucked up the courage in my second year. The Queer Lounge was at the end of a really long corridor, on the fourth floor of the Union building. The lounge itself had windows that faced out onto the corridor. From the corridor you couldn’t really see inside, but people from inside could likely see you. Walking down that corridor and into that space remains one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. Like most difficult things in life, I found I could do it with the help of a friend. So my friend Owen and I, who both identified as bisexual at the time, made the long walk. When we did arrive, people were surprisingly friendly, although when they asked if we would like to stay and if we were ‘queer’ I panicked a bit. I said I wasn’t sure because I was ‘half-queer’. After some laughter ensued, the crew were quick to correct me and explain that ‘queer’ encompassed all sorts of non-straight sexualities and identities. They welcomed me into the fold, and it was from them that I learned most of what I know now about queerness, its associated communities and activism.
One of the first things I learned in this space was that I should hate a woman called Sheila Jeffreys. Some people in the Queer Lounge had encountered her in her role as co-ordinator and lecturer of ‘Sexual Politics’, the largest undergraduate Gender Studies subject on offer. I distinctly remember Dianne, an older dyke who made me feel quite intimidated, coming in and ranting about her one day:

‘OH MY GOD... you guys have got to go see a lecture of hers some time... she is outrageous!’ ‘Yeah,’ joined Marie, ‘you know she says that all heterosexual sex is rape,’ to which we all laughed, in equal parts shock and bemusement.

This was typical of my encounters with Jeffreys as myth in the years that followed. Most of us – myself included – had never been to one of her lectures, but were privy to this kind of routine gossip about her. Like a chain of whispers, the stories seemed to become more and more confronting and absurd: Jeffreys says trans people are victims of false consciousness; Jeffreys thinks sex workers are dupes of patriarchy, and so on. I’d never read a word of her work and wouldn’t have recognised her by face, but I was convinced that she was crazy. And so it was that she reached the status of (pejorative) legend in the Melbourne queer activist imagination.

In the years that followed I became much more involved in queer student politics, including becoming a member of the queer committee of UOM’s Student Union

173 Jeffreys is a well-known radical feminist. She is ‘one of the most outspoken local voices against pornography and all forms of commercial sex work’ (Albury 2002, p. 35). She is also often spoken about in terms of her identification as a political lesbian, after she and others drafted the 1979 ‘Political Lesbian’ manifesto. Many feminists have aptly critiqued political lesbianism in terms of its deterministic links between penetrative or heterosexual sex and patriarchal power structures. Kath Albury (2002) for instance has argued that ‘in the context of political lesbianism, heterosexual women became identified as “traitors” to the cause of feminism or, at best, “dupes” of patriarchy’ (pp. 30-31). Jeffreys has also since become famously controversial for her views on ‘transgenderism’ (which is a term Jeffreys uses wilfully despite trans people and activists considering the term offensive). See Jeffreys (2014) for a book-length outline of her position. Likewise, for some of her earlier work on the topic see Anticlimax (1991), reprinted in a second edition in 2001. In Anticlimax Jeffreys builds on and endorses Janice Raymond’s (1991) famously controversial The Transsexual Empire. Raymond’s book and its legacy was later exceptionally critiqued by Sandy Stone (2006) in ‘The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto’.

174 This isn’t entirely inaccurate. As Albury (2002) writes, ‘[w]ithin the “cultural feminist” argument, any act of sexual penetration between any combination of partners can be seen as “male”, and therefore degrading to women’ (p. 34). This can also have homophobic overtones, since as Albury writes of Jeffreys’ work: ‘gay men, lesbians and transsexual people become “heterosexual” when they practise penetration and gender roleplay’ (p. 36).

175 As a queer committee member I sat in on meetings with the elected Queer Officers and other committee members. I had a say in which political campaigns we would support or pursue, and voted on how to allocate any funding that we received.
As part of my role I regularly attended QC, the annual queer student activist conference (see Chapter Two). In 2008, we hosted QC. I was sitting in Conference Floor when someone proposed a motion to call on UOM to fire Jeffreys. The reasoning that was given was that she was a ‘whorephobe’. I remember being startled by this motion. From my exposure to queer politics over the years I knew what it meant, broadly, to be a ‘whorephobe’, and by all accounts her and my own positions on sex work were very far apart. But what exactly were her politics on sex? On trafficking? On porn? I identified with a definition of sex-positive feminism that approaches (McKee, Albury & Lumby 2008, p. 22):

...pornography on a case by case basis and believes that debating the ethics of different porn practices and genres will do much more to change products than simply forcing them underground.

Thus while I felt strongly that ‘not all sexualised representations of women are automatically degrading or that pornography is at the root of women’s oppression’ (p. 22) I still had complicated feelings on the subject. As a queer committee member I was also there to represent a number of my peers who had expressed similarly conflicted points of view. The person moving the motion hadn’t elaborated on these aspects of Jeffreys’ work, and I still hadn’t attended a lecture of hers let alone read her work. With all of this circling in my mind, the time had come to vote. Almost everyone in the room voted ‘yes’. Nobody voted ‘no’. I was one of two people to abstain.

Needless to say my choice to abstain wasn’t without controversy. I explained it as such: I felt uncomfortable voting on the future of someone’s career on the basis of my own ignorance. At one level, of course, I knew that my vote, and the vote itself, meant nothing for Jeffreys’ career. She, after all, was the one with academic tenure. By comparison, UOM administration would see us as a bunch of ‘unwashed’ leftie queers. I held no illusions about the power I or we held to actually fire someone, but I retained my right to further information before I felt comfortable deciding on something so significant. Having since read Jeffreys’ work, and sat in on her presentation at the Australian Women’s and

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176 Conference Floor is where motions are passed when bureaucratic decisions need to be made. As explained in the 2010 reader, ‘[m]otions are how Conference Floor makes a decision. Motions can do a whole bunch of things, from adopting the Participants’ Agreement to just stating that Conference has a particular view. All motions need to be written down, must have a mover (generally the person who wrote the motion), a seconder, and be delivered to the facilitator’ (Wallace 2011, p. 28).
Gender Studies Association (AWGSA)\textsuperscript{177} conference at The University of New South Wales (UNSW) in 2012\textsuperscript{178}, I feel somewhat ashamed at what now appears like a history of defending her. Her talk at AWGSA concerned how male clients of sex workers participate in the ‘creation of global systems of trafficking and prostitution that are constructed out of racism, deprivation and the subordination of women’ (Jeffreys 2012, p. 55)\textsuperscript{179}. While Jeffreys is an impressive speaker\textsuperscript{180}, whose attention to systemic factors that contribute to women’s subordination is commendable, question time was soon derailed by her blatant disregard for the rights of trans people, whom she continued to refer to in highly inflammatory and offensive terms. In hindsight I see now that I used her as a synecdoche, to stand in for a more general distrust on my part of feminist codes of silencing, and an investment in nuanced and robust debate on sex.

In 2011, however, she once again constituted the means through which I wanted to tackle these issues. A conference called Feminist Futures was being held in Melbourne from May 28-29, and Jeffreys was an invited speaker. By then I had moved to Sydney to start my PhD, but news of the conference filtered through via friends, and, predominantly, my Facebook feed. The conference was organised by a (now defunct) grass-roots group of queer/feminist activists called The Melbourne Feminist Collective. The collective had consciously set up the conference to address a ‘lack of unity within the feminist movement’, working to reframe disunity as not a ‘sign of its failure or weakness’ but as part of the ‘movement’s strength and vitality’ (Melbourne Feminist Collective 2011b). The organisers thus insisted that ‘diversity and inclusiveness’ would be the event’s ‘guiding principles’ and asked for participants to focus on ‘what unites rather than divides us’ in their debates about and discussions of the future (Melbourne Feminist

\textsuperscript{177}AWGSA ‘is the peak body representing researchers, academics and students of Women’s Studies and Gender Studies in Australia’ (AWGSA 2011).

\textsuperscript{178}The AWGSA conference happens biennially. In 2012 it was held at UNSW with the title and theme ‘Interventions: Reflections, Critiques, Practices’.

\textsuperscript{179}Her presentation formed the basis for what she has now turned into a book chapter of the same title: ‘The “Agency” of Men: Male Buyers in the Global Sex Industry’ (Jeffreys 2013).

\textsuperscript{180}In fact she is widely regarded as such. As Albury (2002) notes of Jeffreys’ and other radical feminists’ work, she draws her audience in with the ‘force and conviction of her arguments’ (p. 37). She is also known amongst her students for her humour (which again, Albury acknowledges by pointing out that her ‘survey of sexual self-help books’ are ‘often amusing’ (p. 36)). I can attest to having friends who participated in the women’s collective on the basis that Jeffreys had ‘converted’ them to feminism. She also has a reputation as an ‘inspirational’ speaker who is passionate in her defence not only of women’s rights, but also animal rights and vegetarianism.
Collective 2011a). In other words, the collective endeavoured to keep open the question of what utopic feminist futures (as multiple) might look like, under the (equally or greater utopic) premise that there might be some middle-ground between, say, radical feminists and members of Scarlet Alliance. On that note, the collective invited Jeffreys to speak alongside feminists like Elena Jeffreys. Sheila Jeffreys was to give a talk entitled ‘Why Prostitution is Violence against Women’.

Predictably, Jeffreys’ invitation sparked outrage from the local community, not least of which my old friends from the Queer Lounge. The Feminist Futures Facebook page was inundated by community feedback. These wall posts and comments were largely complaints about Jeffreys’ invitation, but there were also some expressions of outrage from her supporters and/or discontent from those who defended her right to speak. After some fiery debate ensued, the moderators decided to ban commenting altogether. As such, some took to the blogosphere to continue the conversation. One of these people was an old acquaintance of mine – from both UOM and MLC – whose blog post was entitled ‘NOT MY FEMINIST FUTURE’. In it, ‘Nixwilliams’ (2011) wrote:

So, Melbourne Feminist Collective is holding a ‘Feminist Futures’ conference in late May. Sounds good, and there are some interesting speakers on the list, and a good range of links to their site.

But Sheila Jeffreys? Really?

This is a woman who says trans people are delusional and calls trans-related surgeries mutilation. A woman who is famously anti-sex-worker. Why on earth would such a relic be invited to a conference on futures?

The post reminded me of the way Jeffreys was spoken about in the Queer Lounge and at QC: on the basis of the assertion that Jeffreys is both transphobic and anti sex-worker the

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181 This was reiterated by one of the organisers, ‘Cath’, in an interview with community radio station, 3CR, for ‘The Squatters and Unwaged Airwaves’ (an anarchist feminist radio program). Cath claimed that they had called the event Feminist Futures because of a realisation that there are ‘many visions and versions of that future’ (3CR community radio 2011, min. 7:20). In keeping with community sentiment, one of the presenters responded to Cath by arguing that ‘some of these panellists particularly could be considered where we’ve come from and that people don’t want to go back there’ (3CR community radio 2011, min. 23:15). I will explore the idea that this represents a progressivist narrative of feminist history as the chapter progresses.

182 Elena Jeffreys was at the time the president of Scarlet Alliance, the ‘national peak sex worker organisation in Australia’ (Scarlet Alliance 2014a). Scarlet Alliance ‘aims to achieve equality, social, legal, political, cultural and economic justice for past and present workers in the sex industry, in order for sex workers to be self-determining agents, building their own alliances and choosing where and how they work’ (Scarlet Alliance 2014b).
post implies that her invite defies common sense. In asking for Jeffreys’ voice to be
censored, the right for others to form their own opinion of Jeffreys’ politics – and more
accurately the content of her presentation – is denied. Of course Jeffreys’ publication
record in many ways speaks for itself in terms of her refusal to recognise trans people as
legitimate subjects at all. The difficulty here is that her transphobia becomes the ruse
through which potentially robust debate about the politics of sex is repudiated.

In many ways the hostile grass-roots response to her invitation speaks of the complexity
of a feminist movement ‘predicated on the blurring of the distinction between the
political and the intellectual’ (Probyn 1998, p. 132). The ‘academic’ desire of the
conference organisers to showcase and encourage a diversity of visions of feminist
futurity fails spectacularly: not at the level of the political per se (in part since there is no
easy way to separate out ‘intellectual’ and ‘political’) but the personal. For Probyn (p. 132):

> ...the problem lies not so much in the relation between the two, but rather in the
> individualising that has come to characterise both terms. Thus, the debate turns less on
> considerations of ‘the political’, or ‘the intellectual’ per se, and more on what are ‘my’
> politics, or that question oft-addressed to theoretical texts, what are the politics here?,
> as if ‘politics’ is a transparent issue rather than a relational and contextual reworking of
text in temporally and spatially situated milieux.

The censorship of Jeffreys’ voice from the Feminist Futures conference is in part about
this individualising impulse. Of course the first and most obvious example of this is the
personal nature of her notorious politics; the fact that it is impossible to ‘theorise’ about
trans people or sex work without it getting personal (perhaps made more personal by the
fact that Jeffreys is neither trans nor a sex worker). Added to that is the personally
affronting issue of how one’s politics appear in queer/feminist circles if they defend or
support her invitation: does claiming that Jeffreys has the right to speak make one a
transphobe, a whorephobe, or at the very least an apologist for transphobia and

\[183\] It is telling in this sense that academic conference AWGSA seemed at first to mirror the original
intentions behind Feminist Futures, in that radical feminists Jeffreys, Renata Klein, Susan Hawthorne and
Caroline Norma were all invited to present amongst others of very different political persuasions. The four
presented together on a panel called ‘Interventions into Contemporary Sexual Cultures’. In effect, however,
giving them their own panel meant they could be ‘cordoned’ off from the rest of the conference so that
other participants could ‘opt out’ from attending, minimising the possibility of debate amongst each other.
whorephobia? In the context of queer/feminist online discourse\(^{184}\) taking this position most certainly speaks of one’s temporal location in a history of feminist and queer theorising on sex in particular. The use of ‘relic’ in Nixwilliams’ (2011) post ties Jeffreys undeniably to her own shameful past (which I will elaborate on in the following section) but it likewise speaks of a feminist progressivist narrative on the topic of sex. That Jeffreys has no place in the feminist future is about more than just the way her politics are taken so personally; it is also about what she signifies in the political spectrum of feminist thinking on sex. With little more concrete than a title to go by, Jeffreys is given away as ‘out of step’ with the tide of queer/feminist activist sentiment. In the queer circles I know, calling sex work ‘prostitution’ is swiftly shut down; it gives the speaker away as misinformed, or hostile to the rights of sex workers. Jeffreys thus comes into queer/feminist activist conversation as stubbornly attached to the negative aspects of the sex industry, a product of the ‘second-generation’ of anti-porn campaigners. To speak of her as relic enacts, in other words, a progressivist narrative on sex, from a monolithically sex-negative past, to a queerer, sex-positive present and feminist future. The risk with such a narrative, I will argue, is that it tends to encourage the repetition of some of the troubling political tactics that have long haunted feminist debate on sex. Famously termed the ‘sex wars’, this history of acrimonious debate amongst feminists has proceeded not ethically but by way of moralistic reproach\(^{185}\), or what Probyn (1998) calls a feminist tendency to ‘ressentiment’\(^{186}\). In this chapter I argue that in order to avoid a politics of ressentiment, these debates must proceed by way of a more nuanced understanding of feminist history and temporality.

\(^{184}\) Indeed, I use Nixwilliams’ (2011) blog post here as merely one example of a number of similar posts that I encountered online, both on tumblr and Facebook (and see footnote 8 above for how a similar sentiment was expressed on community radio). I was invited, for example, to a Facebook event entitled ‘What is your feminist future?’ The event description read: ‘[a]fter the inclusion of Sheila Jeffreys** in the upcoming Feminist Futures conference we thought, isn’t this the ghost of feminism’s past? Haven’t we moved on from anti-sex work, anti-trans, anti-penetration, etc etc etc [sic] ideas?’ (Gonzalez et al. 2011). No doubt ‘haven’t we moved on’ here implies that, for example, debate about sex work and porn has ‘moved on’ to the extent that it no longer bears discussion, at least not from what is perceived of as an ‘outdated’ and uniformly negative perspective.

\(^{185}\) As Albury (2002) writes, ‘[t]here has been a tendency for each side to engage in namecalling, in the classic playground tradition of the good girls versus the sluts’ (p. xvi).

\(^{186}\) In this Probyn draws heavily on Wendy Brown’s (1993) own influential adaptation of Friedrich Nietzsche’s conception of ‘ressentiment’ as characteristic of a feminist tendency to ‘wounded attachment’.
The literature on women—both feminist and anti-feminist—is a long rumination on the question of the nature and genesis of women’s oppression and social subordination. The question is not a trivial one, since the answers given it determine our visions of the future, and our evaluation of whether or not it is realistic to hope for a sexually egalitarian society’
- Rubin 1975, p. 157

The events of the Feminist Futures conference are reminiscent of feminist history for a number of concerning reasons. Most scholars attribute the beginning of the (U.S.) ‘feminist sex wars’ to the 1984 Barnard Sex Conference, an event Gayle Rubin (2010) cites as ‘one of the most volcanic battles’ in its history (p. 16). In her reflection on the event, Rubin explains that the conference was set up to cover a number of topics, amongst which were ‘pornography’, ‘butch/femme roles in both gay and straight relationships’ and ‘prostitution’ (p. 21). To accompany the conference, a 72-page booklet, *Diary of a Conference*, had been printed, which provided descriptions of workshops, suggestions for further reading on key topics, and a schedule of events (pp. 20-21). Rubin was to give a workshop entitled ‘Concepts for a Radical Politics of Sex’ (p. 21). When word of the conference spread, anti-porn feminists organised a protest, picketing on campus and wearing T-shirts that said “For a Feminist Sexuality” on the front and “Against S/M” on the back’ (p. 24). They distributed leaflets to conference organisers which claimed that they had “thrown their support to the very sexual institutions and values that oppress all women” and called the politics of some of the invited speakers ‘unfeminist [sic]’ (p. 24). Amongst others, anti-porn activists singled out

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187 I take this subheading from Gayle Rubin (2010) who herself borrows the phrase from Jonathan Ned Katz, ‘one of the founders of the modern field of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender history’ (Rubin 2010, p. 17). Rubin specifies that Katz uses the phrase in his e-mail signature. In recounting her version of the now infamous Barnard Sex Conference, as well as similar ‘showdowns’ between anti-porn and pro-sex feminists, Rubin (2010) writes: ‘while these memories can be painful, I am happy to be a foot soldier in the fight against forgetting’ (p. 17).

188 As Rubin (2010) points out this has become the popular shorthand for “The Scholar and the Feminist IX: Towards a Politics of Sexuality”, the ninth iteration of “The Scholar and the Feminist” conference held annually at Barnard College since 1974’ (p. 20).

189 According to Rubin (2010), other topics included: ‘Jacques Lacan, abortion rights, gay and lesbian rights… teen romance, popular sex advice literature, creativity and theatre, artistic vision… class, race, psychotherapy, politically correct and incorrect sex, body image, disability, the sexuality of infancy and childhood… and psychoanalysis’ (p. 21).
Gayle Rubin for attack thanks to her membership in Samois, as well as her research on the ‘gay male leather and S/M population’ (p. 20). The protest was largely successful, with the Barnard administration being sufficiently spooked as to ‘confiscate all copies of the conference booklet’ (some ‘fifteen hundred copies’), while college President Ellen V. Futter distanced herself from the conference, its organisers and participants, calling the Diary ‘a piece of pornography’ (pp. 25-26). Although the conference, as well as Rubin’s workshop, went ahead, Rubin recalls (p. 16) that her name was henceforth tarnished:

Once I had been identified as a public enemy by early feminist antipornography activists... my appearances became occasions for protests against my speaking, not just on pornography but on any topic at all.

One such occasion came in 1979, when Rubin was due to give a paper on Michel Foucault at a ‘Marxist-feminist discussion group in Berkeley’ (p. 17). As Rubin (p. 17) recounts:

Several antiporn members of the group felt I should not be allowed to speak. After a campaign to have me removed from the panel failed, those opposing my participation boycotted the discussion.

Rubin (p. 16) laments such attempts at censorship, arguing that they constitute a moralistic crusade that diverts attention away from critical debate:

Some antipornography advocates preferred to resort to ad feminem attacks and character assassination rather than to debate substantive issues. They attempted to excommunicate from the feminist movement anyone who disagreed with them, and they aggressively sabotaged events that did not adhere to the antiporn party line. Their conduct left a bitter legacy for feminism.

Rubin’s key concern, then, is the tendency for feminist debate on sex to collapse into a personalising politics that ruptures the possibility for productive and nuanced debate on crucial issues of feminist concern. In a similar vein, Probyn (1998) has pointed out that it is ‘a problem [for feminism] when the debate is animated by an emphasis on “who” rather than “what”,’ since the ‘logics of resentment... fosters a vocabulary of “who” is in the right, not what is of concern’ (p. 133).

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190 Samois was a ‘lesbian S/M group from San Francisco’ (Rubin 2010, p. 24). Rubin was a member, as was Pat Califia, who was also singled out in protests, despite merely attending (and not presenting at) the conference. Califia has since transitioned and has written books on radical queer sex (1994; 2002), transgender politics (1997) and BDSM (2001). He also writes erotic fiction and poetry.

191 Indeed, as Rubin (2010) reflects in the case of the Barnard Sex Conference, ‘[i]ronically, the conference’s major theme, reflected in workshops, the concept paper, and the resulting anthology, was that sexuality is for women both a means of pleasure and a source of danger’ (pp. 21-22). In other words, the conference was anything but an uncritical celebration of S/M or porn, but as Rubin asserts, ‘[s]uch nuance was anathema to the leadership of the antiporn movement’ (p. 22).
The two situations are not perfectly analogous, but there are reasons to suggest that the Jeffrey incident at Feminist Futures highlights a similar tendency to ressentiment in the context of contemporary, localised\textsuperscript{192} sex wars. The grass-roots opposition to Jeffrey’s appearance hinges on likewise personal terms. In the same way as Rubin (2010) describes herself as ‘radioactive’ post-Barnard (p. 20), attempts to censor Jeffrey from speaking are based not on the content of her presentation itself, but on her history of transphobia and her abolitionist position on sex work. One key difference between Jeffrey and Rubin, of course, is Jeffrey’s own participation in an acrimonious history of feminist moral reproach. When Rubin was invited to the Humanities Research Centre (HRC) at Australian National University (ANU) in 1993, Jeffrey was one of several radical feminists who wrote a letter to the ANU Vice-Chancellor protesting her inclusion. The letter (multiple authors\textsuperscript{193} cited in Rubin 2010, p. 35) stated:

Some of the women invited... hold what can only be described as anti-feminist positions... In particular we want to protest in the strongest possible terms against the HRC’s bias in inviting Gayle Rubin, Cindy Patton and Carol [sic] Vance to be conference participants... The work of these women from the US displays a zeal in defence of male supremacist meanings and values that amounts to an outright anti-feminism.

Jeffrey, in other words, is no stranger to the politics of ‘silencing and intimidation’ (Rubin 2010, p. 16) that Rubin describes as characteristic of the feminist sex wars. In that sense, there is a hypocrisy to Jeffrey’s (2011) claim that she had to withdraw from Feminist Futures thanks to the ‘bullying’ tactics of those who opposed her appearance at the conference:

...the campaign against me on the conference Facebook page, on a number of blogs and in letters to the committee was vitriolic and led to the committee inviting 4 representatives of the bullies to speak, and the placement of one of them on the panel I was to be on. I decided to withdraw and... the talk that I gave at an alternative event, named the ‘Real’ Feminist Futures Conference, which was organised at the last minute as a side event... was very successful.

Jeffrey’s claim to bullying, that is, proceeds despite her own history of attempting to censor Rubin and other sex-positive feminists. Her prior opposition to Rubin’s speaking,

\textsuperscript{192} I do want to acknowledge the difference in locational contexts here. For example, while Rubin (2010) concludes that in a U.S. context that ‘these conflicts within feminism have cooled’ (p. 16), in my experience they have most certainly continued to dominate the Australian feminist activist landscape.

\textsuperscript{193} In Rubin’s (2010) footnotes the letter is attributed to ‘multiple authors’ while in-text she specifies that the letter was written by ‘[s]everal Australian radical feminists, including Sheila Jeffrey, Denise Thompson, and Renate Klein’, (p. 34).
moreover, hinges on her claim that the politics of Rubin, Patton and Vance are ‘anti-feminist’. In this tradition, her assurance that her own politics on sex are ‘right’ results in her participating in a conference named the ‘Real’ Feminist Futures Conference, as if she and those of similar political persuasions are arbiters of what ‘true’ feminism entails. What I would like to suggest is that both those involved in the ‘Real’ Feminist Futures Conference and those who opposed Jeffreys’ invitation participate in some version of assuredness about not only what (‘proper’ and ‘properly good’) feminism is, but what the future of feminism thus entails. In the popular discursive outcry at Jeffreys’ invitation, there is a similar assurance that what the future of feminism looks like can be measured by its censure of voices like Jeffreys’; Jeffreys’ politics, made personal, are not ‘our’ feminist future.

What I find particularly inspiring about the work of Rubin is that it was despite her very clear political positioning on sex that she pursued an ethical approach to feminist debate. Rubin, that is, is famous for her description of the moralistic ‘sexual value system’ that she saw as characteristic of Western society at the time of writing (in 1984). As she wrote (2007, p. 152):

> According to this system, sexuality that is ‘good’, ‘normal’, and ‘natural’ should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home. It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female. Any sex that violates these rules is ‘bad’, ‘abnormal’, or ‘unnatural’.

Rubin’s taxonomy also exhibited nuance, in that she argued that ‘[m]ost homosexuality is still on the bad side of the line. But if it is coupled and monogamous, the society is beginning to recognize that it includes the full range of interaction’ (p. 152). On the other hand, she argued that (pp. 152-153):

> Promiscuous homosexuality, sadomasochism, fetishism, transsexuality, and cross-generational encounters are still viewed as unmodulated horrors incapable of involving affection, love, free choice, kindness, or transcendence. This kind of sexual morality has more in common with ideologies of racism than with true ethics.

\[194\] Indeed Foucault (2000c) paid credit to Rubin in her dedication to the study of S&M as ‘the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea about previously’ (p. 165). Foucault was particularly interested in how S&M can constitute the ‘eroticization of the body’ in ways that have been unexplored previously. As he wrote, ‘[t]he idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure as the root of all our possible pleasure - I think that’s something quite wrong. These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very
In this Rubin was building a pointed critique of what she saw as the ‘temporary hegemony’ of ‘the anti-pornography movement’ in ‘feminist analysis’ on sex (p. 165). Her argument was that this tradition of feminist thought, which considers ‘sexual liberalization to be inherently a mere extension of male privilege... resonates with conservative, anti-sexual discourse’ (p. 165). As such, her point was that the ‘scapegoating’ tactics of ‘anti-porn’ rhetoric colluded with moralising discourse on sex that codified ‘all sex acts on the bad side of the line’ as ‘utterly repellent and devoid of all emotional nuance’ (p. 152). In so critiquing the anti-porn movement, however, Rubin did not call for its censorship, or a politics of reverse discourse (p. 154):

It is just as objectionable to insist that everyone should be lesbian, non-monogamous, or kinky, as to believe that everyone should be heterosexual, married or vanilla- though the latter set of opinions are backed by considerably more coercive power than the former.

The final point is a significant one, since in the context of Feminist Futures there is once again an imbalance in the power and reach of the voice of Jeffreys, as tenured academic, and that of number of young, queer, student activists195. Jeffreys, for example, has much more of a platform to share her views on sex, both in terms of her access to undergraduate university students, to book contracts, and in terms of how her credentials enable her access to, for example, mainstream media. But in the context of queer/feminist activist circles, perspectives on sex like Jeffreys’ are outnumbered, given the ascendancy of sex-positive politics and sentiment. In these contexts it may be vital to hold open the question of what gets said on the topic of sex such that the legitimacy of one’s workshop or presentation cannot be written off in the first instance simply by nature of coming from the ‘wrong’ voices on the ‘wrong’ side of feminist politics. In this I acknowledge that Jeffreys is once again an awkward example, given that her transphobia and politics on sex work are in many ways inextricable; the content of her presentation as putatively ‘about’ sex work and not trans issues does not abdicate her from the claim that

unusual situations, and so on’ (p. 165). Foucault could have been clearer here in acknowledging that part of S&M’s expansion of the conception of pleasure is also its expansion of what constitutes the ‘sexual’.

195 Indeed, in her book Sexing the self: Gender Positions in Cultural Studies, Probyn (1993) has discussed how ‘liberal dialogue’ is practically impossible in a feminist context structured by a history of prejudice and unequal power relations: ‘[t]he idea that we could solve structural problems in free and equal conversing goes against the requisite that we proceed from an acknowledgement of the ensemble of determinants that limit the ways in which we can encounter others’ (p. 146).
she should not be allowed to speak on the grounds of her transphobia. Yet it seems to me that at least some of the opposition to her speaking derives from the outmodedness of her position on sex work, which must be considered in a history of similar feminist censorship and reproach on the topic of sex. The challenge for contemporary queer/feminist activist politics may thus be what Wendy Brown describes as the need for feminists to ‘learn to contest domination with the strength of an alternative vision of collective life, rather than moral reproach’ (cited in Probyn 1998, p. 131).

In the following sections I suggest that this may be achieved, in part, by addressing the way temporality is invoked in feminist activism and debate. In the case of another contemporary feminist activist event, SlutWalk, I suggest that the past can be invoked as a static entity from which ‘we’ in the present have progressed in terms of sexual politics. This poses a problem for an ethical feminist politics open to that which is ‘backward’ as a source of potentiality for present and future changes to women’s oppression and subordination.

**SlutWalk and the ‘generational divide’**

*SlutWalk* originated in Toronto, Canada, after a police officer famously lamented that girls should stop dressing like ‘sluts’ in order to avoid being sexually assaulted (Kwan 2011). The comments sparked outrage from locals, who agreed to organise a protest march in response. The march later became a global phenomenon, attracting the kind of publicity and participation numbers other feminist movements could only dream of. *SlutWalk* is an undeniably feminist event, which, like *Feminist Futures*, is invested in a future more amenable to the interests of women. This future would be one where victims are not blamed for their sexual assault, where what a woman wears is not an excuse for the violence done to her body, and where women’s sexuality and pleasure is not treated with suspicion and distaste. Not that primary organiser, Sonya Barnett, saw it as a necessarily feminist event. At the time, she famously claimed that she identified as a ‘slut’ over and above ‘feminist’ because of feminism’s ‘man-hating, hairy-legged, Birkenstock-wearing’

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196 I further this argument later in this chapter by exploring the similar hostility to Kathleen Maltzahn, an anti-trafficking campaigner who spoke at *Feminist Futures.*
reputation (sjfbarnett 2011). But does this mean Barnett is not a feminist? In many ways Barnett’s statement works less to distinguish herself from feminism per se (as if sluts could not be feminists and vice versa), than from a particular variety of feminism that she sees as belonging to a bygone era. The caricatured depiction she offers here is unmistakably that of the second-generation lesbian or radical feminist. As Australian feminists Monica Dux and Zora Simic (2008) contend, it is an image commonly deployed to turn girls ‘off’ feminism, and evoking it as such mirrors the tactics of those who have sought to ‘straw-bash’ the movement\(^\text{197}\). In distancing herself from this caricature of feminisms past, Barnett positions SlutWalk as creating its own legacy, a legacy that owes nothing to its dark, separatist, hairy-legged past.

This progressivist sentiment was differently evident in each of the SlutWalks I participated in (SlutWalk Melbourne and SlutWalk Berlin). Attending a ‘Soli Party’\(^\text{198}\) for SlutWalk Berlin, I was confronted by this poster as I walked in:

![Feminism back by popular demand 2011](image)

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\(^{197}\) As Dux and Simic (2008) explain ‘straw-bashing... involves setting up a caricature of feminism, built on half-truths, oversimplifications, generalisations and stereotypes, and then proceeding to beat the crap out of it’ (p. 6). Although Dux and Simic acknowledge that this usually is the domain of right-wing, conservatives, they likewise write that ‘contemporary feminist-bashing struck us as much more complicated... the attacks are also coming from people who claim to be speaking for feminism’ (p. 7). In the context of the sex wars, this is an entrenched historical tendency.

\(^{198}\) Soli Party is shorthand for ‘Solidarity Party’. They often function as fundraisers for left-wing activist causes.
What stands out about this poster is the simultaneous presence and absence of feminist pasts. For feminism to be ‘back’ means there is an acknowledgement of the existence of histories of feminist thinking and political action on sex, and that *SlutWalk* exists on a trajectory that is made possible by those pasts. To be back by ‘popular’ demand, however, suggests that it is *this* version of feminism that is amenable to everyday women, women whom, it implies, prior generations of (academic) feminism perhaps disregarded or could not engage.

*SlutWalk* positions itself as providing to these women what other generations of feminism could not. Carmen Rios (cited in McCartney 2011), the American media officer for *SlutWalk Washington*, had this to say after the march:

> Feminists of today are functioning in a much different culture and it’s one that is a lot more sexual...I think sex positivity in the feminist movement is something that we’re working on now. It’s what’s relevant to women’s lives.

Similarly, in her own coverage of the event, Australian cultural commentator Emma Jane (2011) wrote ‘the reclaiming of sex and sexualisation is a hallmark of modern manifestations of the women’s movement’. Jane assumes that sex positivity is a unique product of the present generation of feminism. For Rios, sex positivity is almost a consequence of the cultural divide that spans the generations: only ‘feminists of today’ have experienced the sexualised culture of the 21st Century, her logic goes, and so it is they who are able to resist and confront it. For Jane, it is sex positivity that makes the current generation *modern*. ‘We’ in the present are seen as modern insofar as we are presumed more liberated or enlightened than those who came before us when it comes to sex. Both characterisations of *SlutWalk* thus hinge on a contemporary endorsement of what Foucault (1998) terms the ‘repressive hypothesis’. The past is given little or no credit for its own sex-positive legacy; instead it is read as monolithically sex-negative, symbolised in Barnett’s figure of the hairy-legged, man-hating lesbian. It is on the backs of these ‘repressed’ and sexless figures that *SlutWalk* is upheld as proceeding in its *modern*, sex-positive legacy.

*SlutWalk* and its sex-positive politics, however, owes much to its less popular histories. This includes ‘Reclaim The Night’ (RTN) marches in particular, which began in 1977 and were conceived of as a strategy to combat ‘violence against women’ (Rein 1978, p.8).
SlutWalk borrows liberally from RTN’s infamous mantra, ‘Yes means yes, no means no, however we dress, wherever we go’. As merely one example, SlutWalk Melbourne organiser and journalist Clem Bastow drew on the chant in her article about the march. As Bastow (2011) wrote, ‘It’s alarming that, in the 21st century, the old Reclaim The Night war cry… still doesn’t seem to have sunk in’. SlutWalk clearly operates in a tradition tied to its activist predecessor in RTN, but this was not always so overtly – or respectfully – acknowledged.

Of the five opening speeches for SlutWalk Melbourne, for example, only one mentioned RTN. This speech was given by Leslie Cannold, local academic, author and columnist. She argued that ‘slut’ was about disciplining women to be ‘good, moral and virtuous’ subjects, before she (Cannold 2011) added:

Well I say BUGGER THAT! I say that words matter and that the women and men of Melbourne have decided to grasp the activist baton some older feminists wrongly say they aren’t interested in and to do something new and clever so they can be heard.

Today, we aren’t marching to TAKE BACK THE NIGHT199 any more. Today what we are doing is TAKING BACK the word slut.

The symbolism of the baton here is significant. As in a relay race, Cannold sees RTN as having ‘run its race’. Exhausted, and with nothing more to give, RTN gives over to SlutWalk. Cannold clearly places SlutWalk in a lineage with earlier predecessor RTN, but in a way that sees SlutWalk as succeeding it. There is no possibility of the two continuing simultaneously in the present, as RTN in fact does in Australia. Cannold’s speech works, therefore, to drive a temporal wedge between histories of feminist activism: between the sex-positivity of SlutWalk and its unsexy predecessor.

In some ways, however, Cannold’s speech is notable for what it doesn’t say or explain about feminism’s past. Cannold’s reference to ‘older feminists’ treating contemporary feminists with disrespect, that is, has a history. As one example, Anne Summers (1996) became famously controversial when she lamented in her article ‘The DIY Generation’, that ‘young women want to dress sexily but they are outraged at any suggestion that such attire could make them vulnerable to sexual assault’. Kath Albury (2002, p. xi) has been one of a number of feminists to rightly critique Summers on this account:

199 Take Back The Night is another common name for RTN.
Despite Summers’ harking back to old struggles, she seems to have forgotten the old marching songs. Did that ‘however we dress, wherever we go’ slogan have some kind of sub-clause attached to it?

While Summers considers that refraining from dressing provocatively is not prudishness but prudence, it’s hard to imagine what the ‘assault-proof’ outfit might be... If I have to wait until every man in Australia has adopted an open, non-coercive attitude towards female sexuality before I can walk down the street in a sexy frock, I fear I’ll be wearing a tent to my grave.

Albury reads Summers’ attitude as indicative of what she calls – following Emily Apter (1998) – the ‘gynophobia’ of some varieties of feminism. As Albury puts it, ‘within the gynophobic framework, female sexual display is considered both a foolish weakness and a perverse collaboration with the enemy’ (p. xi). It is left to Albury and other sex-positive feminists, then, to emphasise that the expression of female sexuality is never an invitation to abuse, nor automatically in service of patriarchal norms.

Both Summers’ article, and Cannold’s speech as detailed above, tend to attribute these differences within feminism to a ‘generational divide’, which is insufficient for characterising tension and disagreement within the movement. As Albury (2002) puts it, ‘[t]he issue of “sex and feminism” is much too complicated to explain away as a generational conflict’ (p. xvi). This is not least because numerous and complex schisms have characterised a feminist history of debate on the sex wars, as outlined with reference to the work of Gayle Rubin above. To frame it as such seems only to foster further resentment amongst feminists, such that Probyn (1998) argues that the generational debate is characteristic of feminism’s tendency to moral reproach: ‘[t]he pitting of categories against each other (which logically follows from a term like generation) fits easily as a scapegoating manoeuvre that is one of the thrusts of ressentiment’ (p. 131). Indeed, in the context of SlutWalk, it was precisely the pitting of a newer generation of feminist politics against its less radical past that inflamed debate amongst feminists. As one Australian blogger angrily posted (Megpie71 2011):

SlutWalk comes along and is presented as a “radical” “new” idea (when actually, it’s another iteration of an older one)... the same damn problems which afflicted feminism in the 1970s and 1980s... are presented as “new” and “radical” issues to be confronted in the modern version of feminism.

This blogger’s bitterness arises from her perception that sex positivity in the feminist movement extends far beyond SlutWalk. Situating SlutWalk in a progressivist narrative
from those histories however fails to acknowledge that legacy. This has significant political effects, since it sets what Foucault (2002) calls the ‘conditions of possibility’ for movements like SlutWalk – and contemporary feminism more broadly – to make inroads into a history of shared political causes. For Foucault (p. 341), that is, power operates not as an oppressive, top-down mechanism, but one that:

...operates on the field of possibilities in which the behaviour of active subjects is able to inscribe itself. It is a set of actions on possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; it releases and contrives, makes more probable or less; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely, but it is always a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions.

How one engages in the present with feminist pasts, in other words, sets the conditions of possibility for how much work needs to be done to tackle these issues in the present, with the view towards a more desirable future. For Foucault this speaks of the difference between a politics of ‘agonism’ as opposed to ‘antagonism’. As opposed to an ‘essential antagonism’, that is, ‘agonism’ describes ‘a relationship that is at the same time mutual incitement and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation that paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation’ (Foucault 2002, p. 342). On the contrary, however, both the discursive construction of a generational divide and the deep schism that characterises the feminist sex wars constitute an essential antagonism within the feminist movement. In the following section I return to the Feminist Futures conference to interrogate some of the affective conditions behind this tendency to antagonism, particularly through the lens of shame.

Shame on you: the ethics of feminist shaming

In addition to Jeffreys, the invitation of the lesser-known Kathleen Maltzahn to present at Feminist Futures caused deep controversy. Professionally, Maltzahn works as an anti-trafficking campaigner and is Founding Director of the organisation Project Respect200. Maltzahn would already have been known to many of the activists in attendance as The

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200 According to its website, Project Respect is a ‘non-profit, feminist, community-based organisation, that aims to empower and support women in the sex industry, including women trafficked to Australia’ (Project Respect 2008).
Greens candidate for Richmond in the 2010 Victorian state election\textsuperscript{201}. During this election, the Australian Sex Party directed preferences to The Australian Labor Party (ALP) above The Greens, dealing The Greens a significant blow in their hopes for an upset victory in this marginal, left-leaning seat\textsuperscript{202}. Fiona Patten, leader of the Australian Sex Party, was quoted as saying that she ‘didn’t attempt a preference deal with the Greens because of concerns about an “anti-sex feminist element” in the party’ (Tyler 2012). An article posted on the Sex Party’s website disputed this account of events, however, arguing that The Greens ignored efforts by the Sex Party to discuss a preference deal (Vega 2012). Nonetheless, a number of queer/feminist activists waged a grass-roots campaign against Maltzahn in an attempt to prevent her from being elected. This included a social media campaign (with events on Facebook and status updates imploring friends not to vote for The Greens in Richmond, for example), as well as the creation of flyers designed to ward off Greens door-knockers\textsuperscript{203}. The protestors insisted that Maltzahn was a ‘whorephobe’ thanks to her support for Nordic-style\textsuperscript{204} sex work legislation which criminalises the clients of sex workers\textsuperscript{205}. Protestors also focused on what they argued was Project Respect’s over-emphasis on trafficking at a time when many were pushing for full decriminalisation of sex work.

Unlike Jeffreys, Maltzahn nonetheless participated in Feminist Futures, giving a presentation on the final panel of the conference. The presentation, however, was subject to a number of disruptions and protests. This included the leafleting of flyers to attendees which stated ‘Kathleen Maltzahn supports legislation which \textit{HARMS SEX}

\textsuperscript{201} Maltzahn was also the Greens candidate for Richmond in the 2014 Victorian state election. Maltzahn (31.46% of first preference votes) very narrowly lost to ALP candidate Richard Wynne (33.29% of first preference votes). On two party-preferred terms the final count was Richard Wynne (51.86%) to Kathleen Maltzahn (48.14%) (Victorian Electoral Commission 2014).

\textsuperscript{202} At the 2014 election, for example, the Sex Party received 3.33% of first preference votes, which, if directed to The Greens, would have been enough to elect Maltzahn over Wynne. Richmond was the only inner-northern seat, moreover, where the Sex Party ‘nominated a candidate in opposition to the Greens’ (ABC News 2014a).

\textsuperscript{203} One such flyer read: ‘Don’t even think about door-knocking for the Greens here. Do yourself a favour, turn those ugly ass Crocs around and walk away. At this home we eat abolitionists/Swedish Model supporters for breakfast’ (fuckyeahmyaccount 2011b).

\textsuperscript{204} The so-called Nordic model was first adopted in Sweden in 1999, while similar laws were passed in Norway in 2008 and Iceland in 2009 (The Nordic Page 2012).

\textsuperscript{205} Several articles written around the time of the 2010 state election referenced Maltzahn’s support for the Nordic model of sex work legislation. See Noonan (2010) and Vega (2012).
WORKERS. As Maltzahn spoke, members of the audience stood and turned their backs, interrupting her speech with shouts. One attendee (Casey 2011) recalled the protest as such on her blog after the event:

...during her presentation several audience members stood & turned their backs. So far so good, all strong, non-aggressive voicing of opposition. One protester, however, used an umbrella to block the view of the other members of the audience & during question time a couple of protesters interrupted with heckles from the crowd.

It is important to note that the umbrella Casey refers to here was a red umbrella that has become symbolic of sex workers’ rights. The sex workers and members of Scarlet Alliance in attendance were protesting the right of someone like Maltzahn to speak politically and publically on their behalf, especially because of the possibility that she might become a State MP. In other words, her views on sex work could affect sex workers’ livelihoods. This noisy protest became a vehicle for countering Maltzahn’s voice with the much more marginalised ones of sex workers. In the context of this quite legitimate action, however, the protest was interpreted by some in the audience as shameful, even as others had shamed Maltzahn by turning their backs on her while she was speaking. Who is the shamer and who is the shamed here is hard to clearly demarcate.

Probyn (2005) has written about how shame can be used as a political tactic by those of marginal or oppressed status as a means towards productive political change. Probyn (pp. 94-100) outlines, for instance, how many Indigenous and non-Indigenous audience members turned their backs on then Prime Minister John Howard as he presented at the Australian Reconciliation Convention in Melbourne in 1997. This was in part a response to Howard’s continuing refusal to apologise for the crimes committed against Indigenous people during the ‘Stolen Generations’ (with an acknowledgement of the long-lasting effects of those practices). A National Inquiry into these historic events had just been released, with the report concluding that ‘the 1970s were dedicated to the removal and the genocidal eradication of the Indigenous people of Australia’ (cited in Probyn 2005, p. 95). Subsequent media coverage focused on the shame that prominent and ordinary

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206 A copy of the flier can be seen at fuckyeahmyaccount (2011a).
207 For further explanation of how the red umbrella came to be a global icon for sex workers’ rights see Scarlet Road (n.d.).
Australians felt, or should feel, as a result. In her recounting of these events, Probyn (p. 99) suggests that while:

...nothing new was really said... the public acceptance of shame allowed people to own up to their own ignorance. As such, shame allowed for knowledge to circulate, softened by the affective cloaking of shared emotions.

Probyn thus specifies that political shaming has the potential for progressive, productive, effects, while simultaneously making the important point that shaming can be a powerful tactic available for co-optation by those most familiar with its affective force. In this I do not mean to conflate affect and emotion, or feeling. Throughout the thesis I have utilised a Deleuzean-Spinozist understanding of affect as a ‘prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another’ (Massumi cited in Shouse 2005, n.p.). As I outlined in the Introduction with reference to Smith (2003), I prefer this definition because it retains a focus on ethics and potentialities. As Massumi (cited in Shouse 2005, n.p.) puts it, this definition is attentive to what processes imply an ‘augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act’.

The political potentiality of shame lies in its capacity to augment those bodies affected to act, rather than be flattened by the ensuing emotions attached to this process. Indeed, it is on these grounds that Probyn (2005, p. 87) has warned that shame may be particularly debilitating to some in queer/feminist activist circles:

...if historically women and queers have been made to feel ashamed and as a consequence have become more attuned to detecting the shame of others, it makes a certain sense that the subordinated may have more nuanced skills at shaming than the privileged.

In the context of Feminist Futures, then, it is no surprise that protestors turned to the shaming of Maltzahn in response to what they perceived as her history of damaging campaigning and public noise-making on the topic of trafficking, as well as her support for the Nordic model of sex work legislation. These are protestors whose very livelihood is at stake in these discussions, whose choice of occupation has resulted in their fair share of shaming by some feminists.

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208 See Shouse (2005) for a comprehensive distinction of the three.

Shaming tiptoes a fine line between what Probyn (2005) calls ‘a politics resulting from feeling shame and a politics that actively seeks to cause shame in those seen as their enemy’ (p. 76). In this sense, shaming in a feminist context might be understood as having the potential to be what Probyn calls – following John Braithwaite\textsuperscript{210} – ‘reintegrative or stigmatizing’ (p. 88). As Probyn (p. 88) elaborates:

> Shaming’s success depends on whether it produces reintegration as opposed to disintegration... The capacity for interdependency is crucial to a good outcome of shaming, as is a context of respect.

It seems to me that the feminist sex wars has been, and continues to be, characterised by a disintegrative process of shaming, as well as a pointed lack of respect. Most commonly, attempts to shame other feminists are carried out at the level of one’s right to the label ‘feminist’ at all. As Rubin (2010) has noted of the anti-porn crusaders of the 70s in the U.S., their attacks were ‘deployed to impugn our right to speak on the issues and to excommunicate us from the ranks of legitimate feminists’ (p. 33). This form of excommunication is likewise implicit in the assertion that certain feminists (and by extension certain politics) have no place whatsoever in a discussion of futures. By claiming as ‘anti-feminist’ an alternative perspective on sex, then, the scope for creativity and imagination in the context of such futures is narrowed. The key point here is thus about generosity: to respect another’s right to an alternative opinion, and to acknowledge their proximity to us on a broader political spectrum, is a process of opening up conversation and future feminist possibilities.

In this perhaps it is important to acknowledge that both shaming and being shamed in a feminist context implies a shared investment in the politics of sex. As Probyn (2005, p. 76) writes:

> It’s nothing new that feminism makes people impassioned. The potential for shame is all the greater because feminism has put forward ideals that often inspire the best in people and of which it is also easy to fall short.

Probyn works here to emphasise that the tendency to shame can be a characteristic of feminist politics, but that it nonetheless derives from a potentially politically productive

\textsuperscript{210} Braithwaite writes extensively on the concept of reintegrative shaming as a form of recognition-oriented punishment. He is especially well known for his groundbreaking text \textit{Crime, shame and reintegration} (1989).
place. Central to Probyn’s (2005) argument is Silvan Tomkins’ contention that shame coincides with ‘interest’ (p. ix), and that ‘interest involves a desire for connection. At a basic level, it has to do with our longing for communication, touch, lines of entanglement, and reciprocity’ (p. x). Nonetheless, Probyn makes clear that a politics of feminist solidarity and community is never straightforward. As such I concur with her when she states elsewhere that the ‘ground for figuring an alternative future vision for all of us... doesn’t lie in invocations for a harmonious sisterhood’ (Probyn 1998, p. 134). Likewise, I do not mean to advocate for a utopic feminist community on these grounds. We might, however, think about how we can ‘use shame to reevaluate how we are positioned in relation to the past and to rethink how we wish to live in proximity to others’ (Probyn 2005, p. xiv). In so doing we invoke a context of ethics and respect\(^{211}\) that speaks of shame at its most politically productive. These are political movements and peoples, after all, who may not have the luxury to employ shame otherwise (Probyn 2005, p. 92):

Not only does shaming require an a priori network of respect, but also wrongly used it may destroy respect. In the case of already damaged individuals, shaming may be lethal.

This is the biggest problem posed by conflicts such as those that broke out in the context of Feminist Futures. Tired of shaming tactics, and disconcerted by a politics of silencing and intimidation, there is the very real possibility that people will simply give up, or leave.

In a comment left on a Kill Your Darlings\(^{212}\) blog on both Feminist Futures and SlutWalk, ‘Leslie’ (2011) reflected:

As a young feminist I have felt a... lack of inclusion at events that I have attended in the very recent past. Lack of constructive engagement with opposing, or simply different, viewpoints at events such as these is dangerous as it promotes feminism as one-dimensional. This has the effect of alienating many women and men who do not share the ‘dominant’ stance on many feminist issues.

The alienation that is described here is once again about the interplay of politics and temporality. The Maltzahn protest is not only about her political positioning vis-à-vis sex work, it is also a symbolic back-turning on feminist politics past. To onlookers this solidifies the sense that there is a ‘dominant’ contemporary stance on feminist issues, which likewise appears to dictate the kinds of conversations one can have when

\(^{211}\) And modesty, or humility. I am reminded of Rubin’s ‘ethics of humility’, for example, when Probyn (2005) writes that ‘[s]hame also demands that big questions be asked in a modest way’ (p. xviii).

\(^{212}\) Kill Your Darlings is an independent Australian cultural media source. Its contributors include feminists such as Monica Dux and Clementine Ford (Kill Your Darlings, n.d.).
contemplating the question of feminist futures. As a result, many activists feel out of step with the movement. As the flier I was handed at SlutWalk Berlin says: ‘What happened to sisterhood? We can’t fight patriarchy if we’re too busy fighting each other’ (see Figure 5). The end result is that activists tend to withdraw rather than persist in what is seen as a hostile and divided community.

Fig. 5: What happened to sisterhood? 2011

I would like to conclude this chapter then by arguing that it may be precisely by questioning our convictions about what ‘proper’ feminism is and what its future entails that the movement will derive its motivational and political force. As Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman (1995) write, ‘[b]y questioning the unity and identity of feminism, we do not relinquish its political force but contingently agree that feminism’s unknowability is its very strength’ (p. 7). It is often precisely by engaging with those viewpoints different from our own that we – and the movements we belong to – expand creatively. As feminist philosopher Rosalyn Diprose (2000) argues in her conceptualisation of an ‘ethics of alterity’, ‘the creation and transformation of ideas necessary to feminist philosophy (and critical thinking)... takes place not in isolation, but within the field of the other’ (p. 116). To explain, she argues that to engage with the ‘other’s alterity is... a teaching
because it opens me to think beyond myself and therefore beyond what I already know’ (p. 125). It is telling, then, that it was those who thought temporality in non-progressivist terms who were most willing to extend a hand to alterity. One such example came from a blog post on Feminist Futures written by ‘C. Connoisseur’. As she (C. Connoisseur 2011) wrote:

> There have been some strong lines drawn in the sand around Jeffreys [sic] inclusion - either one is for her work and ideas or against them. The space for discussion and diverse views on feminism appears to have fallen by the wayside.

I am at a loss, my own feminism is created from radical feminism, queer feminism and post-structuralist ideas... these ideas don’t often agree and are rather contradictory - however that is half the fun.

I suggest this blog demonstrates the potential for a kind of hybrid or contradictory queer/feminist politics enabled by a refusal to ‘draw lines in the sand’, to assume that one knows in advance what counts as progressive or regressive, outmoded or contemporary. In the previous chapter, I drew on the work of Grosz (2004) to suggest that the past might usefully be thought of as what she terms a ‘virtuality’. The past is thus seen as full of possibilities, a virtuality that remains untapped or unresourced in the present. Indeed, the past might be helpfully considered as that which Grosz calls the ‘untimely’. As Grosz (2010, p. 48) elsewhere explains:

> ...something is untimely, out of its own time, either through its being anachronistic, which is another way of saying that it is not yet used up in its pastness, it still has something to offer that remains trapped, its virtuality remains alluring and filled with potential for the present and future.

C. Connoisseur’s feminism draws on a complicated array of seemingly contradictory ‘brands’ of feminism that is made possible by this willingness to engage the untimely. That is, C. Connoisseur is willing to raise the spectre of radical feminism, so obviously on the wrong side of that line in the sand, and it is from that willingness that an engagement with the Other (the Other of contemporary queer/feminist activism) is able to occur. This in turn means that something ‘contradictory’, something ‘fun’, something creative and different is able to emerge.

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213 C. Connoisseur identifies as a PhD student and member of ‘missing sparkles’, a group of ‘quirky queer/lgbttiqq individuals’ affiliated with Aotearoa/New Zealand (missing sparkles n.d.).
Likewise, it was Melbourne SlutWalk organiser Karen Pickering’s alternate understanding of temporality that meant she was able to engage with the contributions that past generations have made to SlutWalk. Pickering observed, for instance, that SlutWalk meant ‘walking in the footsteps of incredible people in the past who have pushed feminism forward for thousands of years’, noting that SlutWalk was ‘just another moment in feminism’ (cited in Jamieson 2011). For Pickering, then, SlutWalk exists not in a progressivist narrative from other feminist histories, but as another ‘moment’ in it. Pickering’s comments thus disrupt a linear trajectory of time by implying that SlutWalk’s moment could come at any point in that history, but that the very act of marching today is a process enabled by the ‘footsteps’ of other feminist activists and movements.

I suggest that the project of reworking feminist temporalities is crucial in a context where there remains an investment in a feminist coalitional politics. As Probyn (1992, p. 504) writes, the possibility for such a politics to succeed may thus lie in our capacity to:

...be able to care about another’s difference to go somehow from one’s own experience to another’s, and in the doubledness of this alterity reinvest “the process of community” with some sort of care.

In the following chapter I will further elaborate on my assertion that the solution is not an investment in a utopic political community. Instead, I suggest it may lie in a recognition of difference that is acknowledged and engaged by precisely this kind of ethical care.
CHAPTER FIVE - RUPAUL’S DRAG RACE, COMMUNITY, AND UNASSIMILABLE DIFFERENCE

“We’re drag queens in a competition; the only thing worse is prison”  
- Bianca Del Rio 2014, Ru Paul’s Drag Race, Season Six

In this chapter I’ll start with two moments that tell distinct, but interrelated stories about (queer) community. Both take place on Season Three of RuPaul’s Drag Race (2009-) (from now on, Drag Race), a U.S. reality television show in which drag queens compete against one another for the title of ‘America’s next drag superstar’. On a weekly basis, the queens are set a variety of tasks in which to prove their ‘Creativity, Uniqueness, Nerve and Talent’ (C.U.N.T): given the week’s designated theme they must participate in one mini and one main challenge, design and showcase a runway outfit for critique and finally, if they are up for elimination, ‘lip sync for their lives’. The show has so far proven immensely popular given its relatively low-profile distribution; at the time of writing it has had six regular seasons (with a seventh to air in March 2015 in the U.S.), a RuPaul’s All Stars Drag Race season (2012-) (with a second also confirmed), and a spin-off, RuPaul’s Drag U (2010-). In addition, each regular season runs a short behind-the-scenes feature to accompany most episodes entitled RuPaul’s Drag Race: Untucked! (2010-) (from now on, Untucked) In this chapter, and in these two anecdotes, I will refer to moments from both Drag Race Seasons Three and Six, and Untucked.

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214 The show is distributed in the U.S. by Logo TV, a digital cable and satellite television channel that is LGBTQI friendly. As a subsidiary of Viacom Media Networks (who also own MTV) the network caters to an LGBTQI audience whilst being coy about whether or not it is a ‘gay channel’. In the FAQ section of their website they answer the question ‘Is Logo TV a “gay channel”’ as such: ‘Yes! No! It depends on what you mean. If you mean TV that appeals to a gay audience, and their friends, and their families, and people who are beyond labels, and people who just happen to like a smart, well designed, often outrageous sensibility, then yes, absolutely. If you mean, like, in a more polarizing sense of a channel only for gay viewers, and that only shows programs that only have gay characters, then no, not so much. We’ve found that the majority of our viewers are happier with inclusive TV that reflects their lives and that which they can share with friends’ (Logo TV 2014).

215 RuPaul’s Drag Race: Untucked! (2010-) gives viewers behind-the-scenes insight into the accompanying episode, predominantly by focusing on what happens as the queens ‘unwind’ and ‘untuck’ during, before and after elimination. In Untucked, viewers are privy to high intensity emotional drama, since much of what features in each episode is what happened backstage around runway judgement time. At this point, the queens know who is ‘safe’ for the week, who won the main challenge, and perhaps most importantly, which two queens will be required to ‘lip sync for their lives’ to avoid elimination. Spurred on by some
The first scene I’d like to draw attention to took place in episode three of Season Three (Totally Leotarded 2011). *Drag Race* runs on a fairly predictable format, and it is at around this point in a regular season that contestants begin to open up to one another about all matters personal. Shot standing together around their hot pink work bench (see Figure 6), this episode introduces us in more depth to two of the queens: India Ferrah and Mimi Imfurst. Both are dressed casually; they are out of drag preparing for the week’s runway. This week the queens have been given relatively stress-free instructions: after starring in comedic exercise videos they have been asked to choose an item from their closet that shows off their ‘favourite or best body part’. This works strategically, in a sense, allowing the queens, who are less flustered than usual, to socialise without being required to come up with a couture runway piece. In this context, Mimi leans on the work bench and asks India if she\(^{216}\) has ‘always gone by India’. ‘Yeah,’ replies India, rummaging through a make-up box. ‘My brother’s ex-boyfriend at the time was my drag mother’. India continues at a rapid-fire pace, leaving me reeling, as I try to get my head around this intimate and unconventional familial web; ‘he got me started and then gave me the name India Ferrah’. Mimi, unlike me, does not pause, instead smiling broadly, shot in a medium close-up and remarking as much as asking ‘oh so your brother’s gay? That’s great, that’s really good’. India nods, before adding that her ‘family’ is really supportive. ‘Great,’ murmurs Mimi, before opening up on her own family situation: ‘my biological family… they threw me out of the house’. The camera stays with Mimi as India somewhat distractedly asks ‘oh really?’ Mimi, the broad smile gone, nods solemnly.

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Absolut Vodka cocktails (a *Drag Race* sponsor) the queens regularly take the opportunity to cast their own (brutal) judgement on each other’s performances for the week.

\(^{216}\) I refer to the drag queens as ‘she’ throughout this chapter to respect the fact that this is how most refer to themselves in drag. She as a pronoun is used regardless of their gendered identity when they are not in drag. The one exception is for RuPaul, who I have referred to as ‘he’, given this is how he is referred to within the television series (unless explicitly in drag).
There are several reasons why I have chosen this scene to talk about community. To begin, India’s brief reference to her ‘brother’s ex-boyfriend’ being her ‘drag mother’ gestures at what has customarily been interpreted as drag’s capacity to reconceptualise traditional (nuclear, heteronormative) family structures. In Judith Butler’s (1993) classic reading of *Paris is Burning* (Livingston 1990), for instance, she argues that the queer families that formed ‘houses’ in the underground New York-based drag ball scene of the 70s and 80s are examples of how queer culture is able to ‘resignify’ the normative terms of ‘family,’ resulting in a ‘social and discursive building of community, a community that binds, cares, and teaches, that shelters and enables’ (Butler 1993, p. 137). In the tradition of *Paris is Burning*, *Drag Race* is replete with examples of queens subverting traditional notions of ‘mothering’ and ‘care’ in their relationships to each other. This is most obvious in the figure of RuPaul, who is affectionately termed ‘mama Ru’ by the contestants. In having a drag ‘mother’ and having been taken under the wing of an older queen, India gestures at a ‘familial’ bond with other drag queens that is non-biological, although in her case, this is a type or means of support that is not absent from her biological family. By contrast, Mimi’s emotional confession to having been forced to leave home sets up a distinction between biological *family* and queer *community*, both as ‘community’ is

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217 See Edgar (2011, p. 136) for some of the ways that *Drag Race* works in the tradition of *Paris is Burning.*
imagined amongst the queens in *Drag Race* and in reference to a broader community of LGBTIQ people seeking comfort and support outside of the normative and often painful constrains of (biological) ‘family’. Mimi’s story of displacement speaks to the utopic hope that is often assigned to queer community, a story queer theorist Miranda Joseph (2002) describes as one of ‘traumatic origins and organic unities, presuming always already common essence, oppression, political needs and goals’ (p. xxii). Common essence here of course is one’s status as non-heterosexual, made manifest by Mimi’s delight that India’s brother is ‘also’ gay. Mimi imagines that simply by nature of having a gay brother, India may have found ‘family’ to be much more welcoming than her own, a ‘great’ but unusual story. In contrast, Mimi, in this episode and in the season as a whole, works to situate herself within an alternative communal family structure, both under the tutelage of Mama Ru, and in an emotional bond with her ‘sisters,’ such as India here. This is Mimi’s story of queer community, where shared sexual oppression and isolation result in an attempt to form bonds that together resemble a kind of cathartic queer family.\(^{218}\)

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The second scene I am drawn to again features Mimi Imfurst, but tells a very different story about queer community. The moment is featured in the *Untucked* accompaniment to the second episode of Season Three (*Queens in Space* 2011). This week, the queens have been split into two teams (Team Phoenix and Team Mariah) and asked to feature in a pair of short sci-fi films entitled *From Earth to Uranus* and *Return to Uranus* respectively. This episode of *Untucked* begins with footage of Team Mariah unwinding after their film, *Return to Uranus*, was announced the winner for the week. Tensions begin to run high, however, when Mariah is asked how she compiled her team. Naming each queen’s strengths in turn, she says she chose Mimi because she ‘needed a villain’. At this point the other queens remind her that Mimi was the last to be picked, and was thus a ‘default’ selection. Mimi, legs crossed and seated on a single-person couch in the corner of the room, adds that this is probably because people ‘pick their friends first,’ acknowledging her lack of popularity with the other queens. In a flashback to the task,

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\(^{218}\) There is of course a history of scholarship on the tendency for queer people to form and participate in ‘alternative’ family structures. See for example Kath Weston’s (1991) *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. 
Mimi is depicted with arms crossed, rolling her eyes and pursing her lips in bemusement as Carmen is picked before her. In Untucked Mimi remains isolated, both physically and socially (see Figure 7), removing and re-attaching her wig, purring and petting it as she goes. Footage at this point cuts to Shangela, being interviewed out of drag: ‘Mimi Imfurst,’ she says, methodically and matter-of-factually, ‘I don’t know what future she livin’ in, but I don’t wanna be there. Beam me up to another ship’.

Back in the Interior Illusions lounge tensions have escalated over the queens’ competing drag styles. Shangela tells Mariah ‘the T’: some of the other girls aren’t sure whether she should be in the competition because they think ‘she’s already a tranny’. Mariah one by one tells the other queens that they too have naturally feminine features… until she hits Mimi: ‘and… we, we…’ she hesitates, ‘…we exchanged our notes’. As the other queens howl with laughter, Mimi becomes defensive about her style of drag. She explains that unlike the others, she does not strive for ‘polish’ or to impersonate a female; she is simply ‘a man in a dress’. Besides, she adds, things are different back in New York, where queens don’t have change rooms at the venues, and have to ‘get changed at home before taking public transport’. Upon hearing Mimi’s lament about being a drag queen in New
York, Stacey, from Back Swamp, North Carolina\(^{219}\) rolls her eyes, while Shangela moves in for the kill; to the soundtrack of steadily beating drums she accuses Mimi of ‘never’ being able to do glamour. Mimi responds defensively that, unlike Shangela, she ‘will never’ look like a supermodel, while Shangela simply and flatly responds: ‘true’ (see Figure 8). Finally, it seems, Mimi has snapped, the intense, drum-based soundtrack stops abruptly as Mimi responds accusingly: ‘girl, just cos you got a sugar daddy who pays for everything for you’. At this point, a loud ‘ooooooh’ has been dubbed over both Shangela’s then-moment of recoil, as well as her cutaway interview in which she recalls the tension-charged event. Shangela, a distinctively different and quieter timbre having crept into her voice, tells Mimi that she has worked for everything that she has, abruptly jumping off the couch to stand and face Mimi: ‘I built myself from the ground up!’ comes the climax to her monologue, reaching for her Absolut Vodka cocktail and throwing it over Mimi as she screams: ‘F***ING BITCH!’

Fig. 8. Shangela angrily addresses Mimi while Alexis looks on 2011

To a RuPaul fan, this moment needed little introduction or description. It has been excessively played and re-played on YouTube and has been the subject of comedic re-cap by drag queens from other seasons as well as others who are simply fans of the show. This scene is notable not merely for its status as fan favourite, its high-intensity drama or

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\(^{219}\) Back Swamp, North Carolina (NC) is a rural town in Robeson County, NC. The most recent statistical data freely available shows that only 5,202 people live in Back Swamp, which is populated by mostly American Indian and Alaska Native peoples (51.3%) (Avdameg Inc. 2015).
ability to send me into fits of laughter in my silent, shared workspace, however. It is significant because it tells a very different story about queer community than the one offered above, and the one laid out in Joseph’s (2002) account of the assumption of community as the sharing of a ‘common essence,’ and in the case of queer, as based on one’s status as sexual outlier. In this scene, community has very little to do with harmonious, organic unity; in its place is an antagonism that works to exacerbate and highlight the very real differences between these queens. In contrast to a situation in which community is ‘deployed to lower consciousness of difference, hierarchy, and oppression within the invoked group’ (Joseph 2002, p. xxiv) this scene works to over-emphasise these differences, primarily because antagonism and difference works to create entertaining television.

The scene dwells on and works to signify difference at every turn, at first in its efforts to labour the point of Mimi’s displacement from the other queens. Mimi, a plus-size queen with acting-out tendencies who does ‘camp,’ finds herself isolated from the more ‘fishy,’ model-like and sociable queens (whom she terms ‘Judy Jetson hookers’). Mariah, in turn, finds herself singled out for her ‘too feminine’ appearance, the possibility that in a drag competition, she may have the unfair advantage of already being a woman. Mimi’s reference to being a ‘man in drag,’ therefore, implicitly accuses Mariah and the others as straying too close to being trans, or to ‘passing’ as women to be ‘authentic’ drag queens. Stacy, meanwhile, barely utters a word during this exchange, having already admitted in her private interview that she finds it hard to speak out amongst the other queens; although she makes reference to being outgoing and bubbly in the context of her small home town, she feels uncomfortable around the other ‘city’ queens who seem even louder and more outgoing than her. Having already had her class difference mercilessly referred to by Ru and the other queens, she appears to have little sympathy for Mimi’s hard luck story of having to change at home and take the subway to clubs in New York. Yara Sofia, meanwhile, always already marked by difference by nature of possessing a thick (and to the other queens, ‘indecipherable’) Puerto Rican accent, stays silent, at least in terms of the way this scene has been edited. Her distinctive speech style, in which she talks very fast and is often interrupted by other queens who cannot understand her, hardly fits with the slow but steady crescendo of drama that is purposefully exacerbated.
by the editing of this confrontation. Finally, Shangela takes issue with her characterisation, via Mimi, as having leant on the support of others to get where she has, drawing attention both to her low socio-economic upbringing but also, implicitly, to her being African American.

What this moment makes amply clear, therefore, is that sexuality can hardly be taken as a (straightforward) basis for this particular queer community. In the first scene described above, Mimi ascribes to the ideal of queer community as formed on the grounds of ostracisation from normative expectations around gender and sexuality. As sexual outliers, unified in the pain of social displacement, Mimi seeks out queer community with India Ferrah, but also presumes implicit queer community with India’s gay brother. In the second instance, however, sexuality can no longer be taken as that which holds these queens together, at least not unproblematically; nothing, in this instance, holds them together except for their contractual obligations to the show. Unable to simply exit the Interior Illusions lounge, these queens are forced into communication and confrontation with each other to the point where the irreconcilable differences between them spill over into an explosion of anger and hurled cocktails.

What I’d like to explore in this chapter, then, is how Drag Race might gesture at a form of community that does not operate on the presumption of a common essence amongst queer people: this is community as what Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) calls ‘being-in-common’, rather than community as a ‘a common being’. For Nancy (1991, p. xxxviii, emphasis in the original), that is:

Being in common has nothing to do with communion, with fusion into a body... Being in common means, to the contrary, no longer having, in any empirical or ideal place, such a substantial identity, and sharing this (narcissistic) “lack of identity”.

What interests me about such a representation and formulation of community, then, is the political potentiality that this lack of a common, knowable queer identity can have for queer politics and activism. Having argued that preconceived notions of queerness can act as a foreclosure of the political, I ask what it might mean for queerness to not be a point of convergence, but of productive antagonism. In this I am very much inspired by feminist Linnell Secomb’s (2000) work to challenge an understanding of community that enacts ‘repression or suppression of difference and disagreement in the name of unity
and consensus’ (p. 134). For Secomb, ‘community that challenges, provokes, threatens, but also enlivens, is a community of disagreement, dissonance and resistance’ (p. 147). I would argue that this embrace of difference has clear political potentiality in the queer contexts I have described, where I understand the political, as Christopher Fynsk does in his foreword to Nancy’s seminal text, as ‘the site where what it means to be in common is open to definition’, and where ‘politics [is] the play of forces and interests engaged in a conflict over the representation and governance of social existence’ (Nancy 1991, p. x). In this chapter I would like to posit Drag Race as an example, not of a ‘better’ form of community to the ones encountered so far in this thesis, but as an artificially fabricated form of queer community that both enacts a challenge to the presumption of sexual ostracism as a basis for community and enables productive encounters with unassimilable difference. In starting from a place of antagonism rather than convergence, Drag Race works to combat the foreclosure of what counts as political in a queer sense.

As such, what I am calling ‘productive antagonism’ in this chapter is very different to call out culture. As I argued in the Introduction, calling out and calling in both draw attention to difference, but tend to shut down rather than encourage dialogue and ethical encounters with other bodies. Calling in in particular presumes that we can know, in advance, what ‘oppressions’ or ‘privileges’ each other ‘possesses’, and gives us permission to call them out, and shut out debate, on that account. On the contrary, I propose that Drag Race enables what Rosyln Diprose (2000) calls ‘ethical’ encounters with difference, where she defines ethics as ‘the interruption of autonomy and the imperialism this implies… as a precondition to knowledge’ (p. 127). Building on her own definition, Diprose (2003) argues that this means understanding that others are different in a way ‘I cannot grasp but that initiates my movement towards the other and towards the world’ (Diprose 2003, p. 40). Both by nature of being a reality television

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220 Postcolonial and feminist theorist Leela Gandhi (2006) has argued similarly about ethics and autonomy. For her, an ethics of friendship entails ‘the potentially ‘agonising’ risk of self-exile which haunts any ethical capacity to become (to suffer oneself to become) foreign to ‘one’s own’ and, above, all to oneself’ (p. 19). I explore Gandhi’s conception of ethics further in the Conclusion.

221 In this, Diprose (2003) draws on Nancy’s move to theorise the political potentiality of community through the ‘exposure’ of the presumption of ‘common being’. As Nancy (1991) writes, the political way of life is realised partly through logos, where logos refers to ‘being exposed (among other ways, as when a face lights up, opening), that is, in being shared’ (p. xxxviii). For Nancy, “[e]xposition, precisely is not a “being” that one can “sup-pose” (like a sub-stance) to be in community’ (p. xxxix). In other words the exposed being is one who cannot fully ‘grasp’ or indeed ‘consume’ the other, exposure is an opening up to
program that ensures that its various contestants are held together in space and time, and via its affective network that brings very differently positioned bodies into conversation and collision, Drag Race can encourage such movements both on and off screen. I argue that this allows a politics of contradiction and creative resistance to emerge.

**Anti-social queer bonds**

I am by no means the first to attempt to think community differently. I am, however, enquiring into the state of queer community at a time when, as Joseph (2002) contends, ‘a celebratory discourse of community relentlessly returns’ (p. viii). I take Joseph’s observation to be particularly insightful in a queer context given that queer theory arose out of a critique of the implicit community imagined to be characteristic of identity politics (in the case of gay and lesbian and feminist politics in particular). Despite a history of critique, Joseph argues, ‘U.S.-based critics of identity politics’ in the present ‘have often instead pursued ever more finely grained measures of authentic identity’ (p. xxiii). As this thesis has progressed I have argued that this could be the case with queer activism in the scenes I describe, whereby one’s queerness can be defined by ever more ‘authentic’ claims to disenfranchisement. In Chapter Three in particular I connected this to the anti-social turn in queer theory, which in its disdain for the ordinary and the normative worked to codify certain lives and life trajectories as anachronistic against which queerer, more progressive politics and/or bodies could be defined. To build on this argument, I would now like to suggest that codifying queerness in this way works equally to reinscribe queer community as a unified, ‘common being’ in its opposition to normality. As such, the advent and aftermath of the anti-social turn in queer theory necessitates a renewed discussion of sociality and bonds as they are understood in queer

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the other that is not the same as the subsumption of the other under the presumption of sameness as in community as a ‘common being’. Sullivan (2003a), writing in the same special issue as Diprose, also reads Nancy’s work this way, writing that for him, ‘community, as it is conventionally understood... covers over the generativity, the unpredictability, the essentially open-endedness, the alterity, of sharing,” of the fact that ‘a “we” is the condition for the possibility of each “I”’ (pp. 57-58).

222 I have situated myself in a long history of re-thinking the grounds for community. This includes community as an ‘imagined’ entity, as in the case of the ‘nation’ (see the influential work of Benedict Anderson (2006)), and as better understood as inoperative (see, again, the seminal work of Nancy (1991)) and without unity (see Culler (1999)).
theoretical as well as activist terms. Indeed, this conversation has partly begun with *GLQ*’s special issue, ‘Queer Bonds’, of 2011, which arose out of the 2009 ‘Queer Bonds’ conference held at Berkeley. In their introduction to ‘Queer Bonds’, Joshua J. Weiner and Damon Young (2011) write that the intention of the conference was to ‘undo some of the acrimony of the debate around the so-called antisocial thesis,’ pointing out that, increasingly, scholars were being forced to adopt ‘one of two positions: one must be “for” (a queer version of) the social or one must be, as queer, “against” the social (as we know it)’ (p. 224). For Weiner and Young (p. 224), then:

Such a binary... presents a false choice, as if queer social negativity engendered no bonds and queer collectivities did not take shape precisely in relation to some negation or incommensurability to the social.

This has been my argument in relation to the schisms and conflicts I have explored from a localised vantage point, arguing that in practice, the oppositional politics engendered by, for instance, the necessity to be perceived as anti-heteronormative, results in the reification of queerness as a knowable entity by way of its predictably anti-normative stance on a number of issues (gay marriage, sex work, and so on). As such, queer collectives in the scenes I have described tend to form around, and be formed by, those who share dominant stances on a number of political issues. Such collectives likewise tend to be shored up by the social ostracisation of those whose politics and lives are perceived to be insufficiently progressive in this reified sense of (anti-normative) queerness.

Part of my project in this thesis has been tracing the roots of anti-normative queer sociality (in an activist capacity) to or from queer theory itself. How is it, I have asked, that an academic field premised on a critique of the commonality that is sometimes presumed in identity political movements, may have, in practice, worked to reify queerness as an identity based precisely on its triumph over perceived anachronistic forms of activist politics? I’ve suggested that this is one of the key paradoxes of queer theory and queer politics, especially in translation, perhaps due to what Weiner and Young (2011) characterise as the field’s two constitutive and contradictory urges: ‘a centrifugal drive away from sociality and a centripetal pressure toward sociable belonging and linkage’ (p. 223). If this is a tendency that has haunted queer theorising from its
begins, then the anti-social turn in queer theory appears to represent an even more relentless pursuit of authentic queer oppositionality\textsuperscript{223} that bears consideration in the context of sociality and community. While I have so far investigated the effects of the anti-social turn in an activist context, Weiner and Young make clear that this theoretical shift has had an impact on academic sociality too. This is apparent in the acrimony that defines the two ‘camps’ of scholars positioned against each other in the ‘anti-social’ debate; one defined by its more radical (and ‘cutting-edge’) rejection of sociality than the other. The ‘anti-social’ camp thus clearly cannot be divorced from sociality entirely if it is this very theoretical move that bonds one to those who are likewise on the sexier side of the debate. This bond in turn shores up the careers of those whom adhere to its anti-social call in terms of access to symbolic and material power\textsuperscript{224} within this chosen queer (academic) community.

This is hardly a desirable or conducive place from which to start thinking differently about queer community. For this chapter then, I draw on the work of key feminist theorists of community such as Diprose (2000; 2003) and Secomb (2000)\textsuperscript{225}, who have been influential in critiquing the presumption of commonality and community as the natural or best basis for political activism. Yet I also take Joseph’s (2002) point that it is despite the strength of such feminist (academic) critiques of community – and a push towards

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\textsuperscript{223} Weiner and Young (2011) point out, as I have, that the anti-social thesis is in part a response to the ‘new liberalism’ of a conservative U.S. context (p. 229). One strategy pursued by queer theorists and activists has thus been to ‘redouble our investment in queerness as a resistance to the gay and lesbian normative’ (p. 229). Like me, however, they express scepticism at the ethics of such a move: ‘[w]e question the enduring value of any binary that situates gay and lesbian on one side and queer on the other. As long as we continue to inhabit a homophobic social-symbolic order, there will remain something queer about the most ostensibly “homonormative” iterations of gay and lesbian desire’ (p. 229).

\textsuperscript{224} Weiner and Young (2011) have also focused on the material benefits available to scholars associated with the anti-social turn in queer theory (and the ascendancy of the field more generally to a ‘prestigious place’ within U.S. academies). As they write: ‘however antisocial queerness may be, it is hardly incompatible with more or less traditional forms of academic sociality (debate, publication, tenure, etc.)’ (p. 230).

\textsuperscript{225} I am particularly indebted in this chapter to the work of those scholars featured in the special edition of \textit{Cultural Studies Review} entitled ‘Affective Communities’ from 2003. This special edition gave space to mostly feminist scholars of community to further pursue the affective dimensions of the call to community. I have found this particularly helpful in the affect-laden context of ‘queer community’ as presumed escape from traumatic biological origins, as well as in terms of the affective network and community that reality television shows can instantiate, which I explore via the work of Misha Kavka (2008) as this chapter progresses.
difference rather than sameness as productive in a political context\textsuperscript{226} – that the romance of community returns in queer activist and social practice. For Joseph, then, community ought to be theorised from the ‘ground up’ and indeed, Nancy and others have long concluded that – in Fynsk’s words – ‘[s]omething other than a theoretical discourse is required to answer the exigency of community’ (Nancy 1991, p. xxv). As such, this chapter takes Drag Race as an example of a popular (non-academic) text replete with political potentiality for re-thinking queer community; one which, in its ‘theoretical excess... [might] oblige us to adopt another praxis of discourse and community’ (Nancy 1991, p. 25-26)\textsuperscript{227}. Drag Race is of particular or special appeal for this project, since on the surface it reads as anything but ‘political’ in a reified non-normative or oppositional queer sense. In this I am talking about Drag Race’s mainstream appeal (and location within the so-called low brow genre of reality TV\textsuperscript{228}), its comfortable relation to capitalism\textsuperscript{229} and its penchant for political controversy, all of which I’ll explore as this chapter proceeds. I’d like to suggest that its political potentiality is not despite these elements, but rather made possible through them.

\textbf{Reading – for difference - is Fundamental}

It’s now episode eight of Season Three (Ru Ha Ha 2011). Mimi Imfurst and India Ferrah have ‘sashayed away,’ and only six queens remain. With competition becoming ever

\textsuperscript{226}See for example Chantal Mouffe’s (2000; 2005; 2013) extensive work to distinguish agonism (as a struggle between adversaries) from antagonism (as a struggle between enemies) as productive in a democratic political context.

\textsuperscript{227}In this I am not proposing that Drag Race offers a better model for queer community, or something akin to a politics of Nancy’s (1991) ‘being-in-common’. I see Drag Race as an interesting example of fabricated (aka not replicable) community, and as exposing some of the political problems with reified presumptions of queerness and commonality amongst ‘queer communities’. Like Nancy (1991) I believe that specifying ‘the possible forms of such a politics, of this politics that one might call the politics of the political, if the political can be taken as the moment, the point, or the event of being-in-common... would be beyond my competence’ (p. xi).

\textsuperscript{228}As Kavka (2008) argues, ‘[n]o genre in television has come under more fire than reality TV’ (p. 20). Kavka also importantly notes, however, that ‘reality TV may be the most normal form of television, without necessarily permitting this to collapse into normative’ (p. 20, emphasis in the original).

\textsuperscript{229}RuPaul himself is often spoken about in these terms. In her study of RuPaul’s life writing, for instance, Elizabeth Schewe (2009) argues that RuPaul ‘embraces both the confessional autobiographical mode and the pop-culture marketplace that make his “rags to riches story” possible’ (p. 670). While Schewe nonetheless attempts to find evidence of RuPaul’s ‘questioning’ of ‘the consumer logic of late capitalism’ (p. 670), I read Drag Race as situated comfortably within late capitalism, but no less potentially politically productive because of it.
fiercer, RuPaul introduces the only mini-challenge to appear on every season of *Drag Race* (both before, and after, this season). ‘In the grand tradition of *Paris is Burning,*’ he hollers, ‘the library is OPEN’. This mini-challenge, called ‘Reading is Fundamental,’ borrows directly from the Harlem drag ball culture made famous by Jennie Livingston’s documentary of the same name (Livingston 1990). In *Paris is Burning,* reading is explained by Dorian Corey, a larger-than-life\(^\text{230}\) aging drag queen. Depicted in medium close-up, a cigarette still burning out of shot and surrounded by her various competition trophies (see Figure 9), Corey explains that reading ‘is the real art form of insult,’ where a queen taps into someone’s ‘flaw’ and ‘exaggerates it’. Clever quips are rewarded with ‘laughs and kikis,’ but to be clever, explains Corey, the insult must depart from what you already have in common and avoid reproducing simple ‘fact’. Two black queens, she elaborates, can’t ‘read’ each other as black: ‘that’s just fact… when you are all of the same thing [sic], then you have to go to the fine point’. As examples, she suggests reading another queen for her ‘ridiculous shape’, ‘saggy face’ or ‘tacky clothes’.

![Dorian Corey explaining ‘reading’](image)

*Fig. 9. Dorian Corey explains ‘reading’ 1990*

\(^{230}\) Indeed, drama and intrigue followed Corey right until her death, when a corpse was discovered in her wardrobe. It was assessed that the victim - Robert Wells - had been dead for over 15 years, the cause of death a gunshot wound to the back of the head. It was rumoured that Corey shot Wells in self-defence (Hays 1993).
In the Reading is Fundamental mini-challenge (Ru Ha Ha 2011), RuPaul thus invites his queens to pay homage to this subcultural art form. With a new pair of shades for each season (this year they are white and narrow and flare at the sides) the queens step up one by one to read their fellow contestants. This season’s reading session, however, invites more frowns than kikis: the queens are both unoriginal and tend to read each other based on seemingly factual identity categorisations. Manila Luzon, who is Filipino, and Delta Work, who is a plus-size queen, for example, have their race and size relentlessly referred to: by each other as well as the other queens. Hands on hips, Delta asks Manila what she’ll do ‘when a hurricane hits all of Asia - you won’t have any material left!’ to a chorus of ‘ooohs’ and an ‘uh oh’ from RuPaul. Manila, meanwhile (see Figure 10), lowers her shades in the direction of Delta and announces that it’s ‘dinner time… and you are serving body-ody-ody,’ at this point accentuating her own (absent) curves, ‘well I guess that solves the problem with all those starving kids in Africa!’ This time RuPaul is the only one who chuckles, while Delta simply raises an eyebrow. In a cutaway interview she laments that every queen so far has read her for her size: ‘if all they can read is my size,’ she says, ‘that’s so obvious, now tell me something funny’.

For Butler, reading is fundamental to the capacity for drag to ‘work’. ‘A performance that works,’ she writes (1993, p. 129, emphasis in the original), is one that:
...cannot be read. For “reading” means taking someone down, exposing what fails to work at the level of appearance, insulting or deriding someone. For a performance to work, then, means that a reading is no longer possible... the artifice works, [and] the approximation of realness appears to be achieved231.

Butler thus focuses her attention on the political potentiality of the drag performances in *Paris is Burning* insofar as they – despite their successful appropriation of the normative – evade hegemonic recuperation. Her hope, in other words, is that the queens enact a ‘parodic inhabitation’ of these norms; that the ‘phantasmatic attempt to approximate realness... also exposes the norms that regulate realness as *themselves* phantasmatically instituted and sustained’ (Butler 1993, p. 130). What Butler’s analysis misses, however, is that reading is fundamentally about the artifice of community, and that its success, or capacity to ‘work,’ relies traditionally on the presumption of community amongst the reader and who is being read. This is gestured at when Corey specifies that two black queens cannot read each other for their blackness. This is the line that cannot be crossed, Corey’s observation implies, since it is their mutual experience of racial disenfranchisement that allows them to ‘read’ each other in the first place. To demonstrate this point, Livingston interweaves footage of a queer African-American drag queen reading a group of (coded as) straight African-Americans. In this context, the queen is shown to work at establishing their shared ethnicity: ‘if you cut me,’ she says, ‘I bleed the same colour’. The group thus become her ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters,’ such as in her reading of the girl in jeans and a FILA sweatshirt: ‘she don’t wanna admit she my sister... [cos] she’s a bull dagger’. The film implies that the group has homophobically slurred the queen, and her readings reflect their homophobia back at them: ‘and she, she my girlfriend’ she says to another, while the group erupts in fits of laughter and appreciative head-nodding.

231 Butler’s argument here relies heavily on her consideration of ‘realness’ in the context of the Harlem ball scene. Populated by African-American and Latino queens, the balls often featured categories in which the contestants were encouraged to ‘appropriate’ certain social norms: like the ‘executive’ or ‘Ivy League student’. The irony in these categorisations, was, of course, the likely impossibility of any of these queens - on account of their poverty and racial disenfranchisement if not their queerness - ever occupying them in everyday life. Thus realness was very much about appropriating norms that the contestants both aspired to and resented in their oppressive inaccessibility.
In her explanation of reading, drag queen Corey relatively simplistically analogises race to sexuality to make the same point about the necessity of commonality and established community to reading. Reading can’t happen, she says, between the ‘straight world’ and the ‘gay world’. In this case, she argues, an insult doesn’t constitute a read, but merely a ‘vicious slur’. The implication here of course is that slurs towards queers are an all-too-common occurrence, and so there is nothing funny or creative about a straight person reading a queen. As Livingston’s footage goes to show, however, the line between the straight and gay world can be crossed for reading, so long as another shared basis for oppression is established (such as one’s status as belonging to a racial minority). In this scene from Paris is Burning then, a very clear relationship is established between reading and community. One must only read one with whom you already have community.

Both race and sexuality in this scene thus become essentialised bases for community and reading: a safe space in which throwing shade is accepted to the extent that this is family. I would like to suggest that this essentialised appeal to community is partly

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232 In a sense the contemporary queer activist practice of calling in mirrors this logic. As I mentioned in the Introduction, the ostracising effects of calling out are presumed to be offset by first drawing attention to those bodies’ common axes of oppression. Nonetheless, as I have argued, this process explicitly presupposes silence and acceptance on part of the recipient, rather than the opening up of dialogue between those bodies to facilitate further understanding and learning. Thus calling out, even when prefaced by calling in, does not encourage the affective augmentation of the bodies involved so much as their diminution; a movement away from, rather than towards each other.

233 ‘Shade,’ explains Corey in Paris is Burning, is a developed form of reading: ‘you’re so ugly... I don’t need to tell you you’re ugly, cos you already know’. More recently, however, the phrase ‘throwing shade’ tends to refer to the more general practice of insulting someone, and has even been added to the Oxford Dictionary online. The entry describes ‘throw shade’ as an informal, U.S. phrase which means to ‘publicly criticize or express contempt for someone’ (‘Shade’ 2015).
contextual, in the sense that it was a shared disenfranchisement based on race (with most of the contestants African American or Latino) and poverty\textsuperscript{234} as much as gender or sexuality that united the participants in the Harlem scene. Reading in this context may not necessarily have challenged the presumption of one’s minority status as a basis for community (and thus reading) since what was often of more concern was one’s safety, health and wellbeing\textsuperscript{235}.

In the very different context of \textit{Drag Race}, reading’s traditional relationship to essentialised commonality and community is undermined by the show’s efforts to reward those who honour one of the golden rules of reading: avoiding apparent ‘fact’. If reading is masterful insult then reading a queen for her size or race is seen as boring, insulting and deeply inadequate. While eventual season winner Raja lazily calls Delta ‘fat,’ Shangela, who wins this mini-challenge, instead reads Delta by pausing before her and declaring: ‘Mimi Imfurst’. Of course Mimi is also a plus-size queen, and so Shangela’s reading still references Delta’s size as an identifying feature. The ultimate source of derision, however, is not Delta’s size, but the suggestion that she is as annoying as Mimi. With Mimi having been socially shunned by practically every other queen on the series, this insult works as an in-joke amongst this season’s contestants and viewers. Affective community is established not by way of sexuality, race or even size, but by shared bemusement at poor old Mimi\textsuperscript{236}. I would argue, then, that \textit{Drag Race} enacts a challenge to the presumption of sameness as a grounds for reading, and ultimately, for queer community. Reading is far from ‘free for all’ by nature of the queens’ presumed common status as sexual (raced, or sized) outliers. Reading ‘works,’ and sets one up to win the challenge, when one explicitly undermines the capacity for the queens to be

\textsuperscript{234} This is especially pertinent in terms of Madonna’s appropriation of ‘voguing’ from these scenes. Whilst voguing brought Madonna fame and fortune, many of those who appeared in the film later died from AIDS-related complications or hate crimes. Butler (1993) very convincingly makes this point with reference to Venus Xtravaganza, a transwoman and sex worker featured in \textit{Paris Is Burning} who was murdered by a client.

\textsuperscript{235} I would thus read attempts to approximate ‘realness’ in the form of the ‘executive’ or ‘Ivy League student’ as an attempt to negotiate one’s exclusion from and paradoxical appreciation of the ‘lifestyle’ and ‘fashion’ of these more privileged social positionings.

\textsuperscript{236} In her reading of \textit{Project Runway}, which like \textit{Drag Race} has predominantly queer contestants and features \textit{RuPaul} judge Santino Rice, reality TV scholar Kavka (2008) argues that sexuality is treated ‘as one factor amongst many in the affective particularity of the participants’ which is politically interesting because it ‘normalise[s] queerness’ (p. 159). I would suggest that queerness indeed is reworked in \textit{Drag Race} as being one affective particularity amongst many – \textit{all of which are insufficient as grounds for reading someone’s identity positioning.}
straightforwardly interpellated by their race, class, size and so on. In the context of performances on *Drag Race*, Eir-Anne Edgar (2011, p. 138) argues that:

> ...mere subversion of gender performance is not enough to win... gender performance is complicated by slippages and references to what is ultimately the performers’ maleness peeking through the layers of makeup and artifice.

Likewise, when it comes to reading, reading for (creative) slippage in another queen’s performance is what makes one’s approach to the reading challenge successful. To simply read a queen for their size or race, however, is neither unique nor necessarily about slippage; it is an effort to simplify the excesses of another queen’s performance by way of conventional reference to so-called defining identity characteristics. An analogy might be to read another queen for ‘actually’ being a man, rather than, as Corey suggests, their ‘ridiculous shape’ or ‘saggy face’ that are suggestive of their failure to successfully appropriate feminine norms.

Not only does *Drag Race* undermine the presumption of disenfranchised community amongst these queens, then, it also wards off a reading of ‘difference’ within the community through a simplistic ‘additive’ model of oppression. Delta can’t be taken to represent fat queens in the same way that Manila can’t be taken to represent queens of colour: what is interesting about either is their own particular confluence of set-ups that for whatever reason ‘fail’ at the level of normative approximation. Although reality TV often necessitates what might be read as a ‘tokenistic’ spread of difference amongst its contestants, *Drag Race* goes to show that both the show’s format – in terms of what defines success in this challenge – and the contestants themselves, have the capacity to

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237 Edgar (2011) actually ends up arguing that ‘the show does not reward or recognize the complexity of drag performances’ and so ‘becomes merely entertainment’ (p. 145). This I would very much disagree with, particularly by drawing attention to a history of *Drag Race* winners challenging conventional drag norms. See for example Raja from Season 3 as a self-identified ‘artist’ and ‘anti-pageant queen’ and Sharon Needles on Season 4 as often derided for her ‘weirdness’ and lack of ‘effeminacy’ in drag. Likewise, Milk, who appeared on Season 6, was congratulated for her runway performance in which she wore a long grey beard with a dress, as well as her ‘brave’ choice to wear a tuxedo when the queens were asked to channel RuPaul for their runway.

238 See once again Nikki Sullivan’s (2003b) discussion of the inadequacy of the ‘additive’ model of oppression in her chapter ‘Queer Race’.

239 By this I refer to the work of Bruno Latour (2004) who argues that bodies learn to be affected by particular bodies, and in particular ways through their ‘set-ups’. Bodies acquire what he calls ‘articulations,’ ‘through the mediation of an artificially created set-up’ (p. 209). This opens them up to ‘learning to be affected by hitherto unregistrable differences’ (p. 209).

resist such simple categorisations of difference. This might be the difference, then, between what Diprose (2003) theorises as a community of ‘shared meanings that at best tolerate difference’ and a community that instead ‘lives from difference’ (p. 36, emphasis in the original). For Diprose, a community lives from difference when one is able to move towards the Other we ‘cannot grasp’ (p. 40). Reading teaches that we cannot understand others simply by way of their so-called defining characteristics, their ‘privileges’ or ‘oppressions’, as if that were so simple. The best readers (of others as well as themselves) know that things are much more complicated than that. In this next section I will argue that the movement towards the Other that Diprose calls for is in part enabled through the affective communities that form around and are enabled by the nature of Drag Race as a reality TV program.

**Reality TV and political potentiality**

In this last section I consider an event that took place on Season Six of Drag Race, which screened in 2014 in the U.S. In the three year gap between Seasons Three and Six there have been few significant changes: Absolut Vodka and Interior Illusions are no longer sponsors (although Colorevolution Cosmetics is), while ‘Sissy That Walk’ is the new runway theme song and ‘Dance With U’ plays over the opening credits. The format remains largely the same (with one tweak: the 14 contestants are split into two groups at the beginning of the season for the first time ever). After the airing of episode four of Season Six (Shade The Rusical 2014), however, it appeared that the political milieu of its audience had shifted dramatically. This episode starts, as they all do, with a page from Mama Ru. A siren sounds to coincide with increasing excitement from the queens who know what’s coming; it is, of course, the iconic line that has been with the show from its beginning: ‘oooooh gurl, you got “She-Mail!”’

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241 The show, for example, is replete with examples of the queens resisting obvious categorisations: both by the show and by the other queens. Stacy, for instance, finds the constant reference to her class off-putting, and surprises the others - I would argue deliberately - by using the cake-decorating mini-challenge to draw attention to her American Indian ancestry as a defining feature of her identity.

242 Both songs are from RuPaul’s sixth studio album, *Born Naked* (2013). The album was released to coincide with the airing of Season Six, further shoring up my contention that Drag Race is very comfortable in its relation to capitalistic enterprise.
The newsflash is a deliberate pun on Tyra Banks’ announcement to the contestants of *America’s Next Top Model* (2003-) that ‘You’ve Got Mail!’ RuPaul (in drag) then appears on screen to give the queens a cryptic clue about what this week’s main challenge will entail, before he appears in person (and out of drag) to explain the week’s mini-challenge. In this episode, RuPaul provides the following disclaimer: ‘when you’re famous, people scrutinise every inch of your Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve and Talent,’ (cut to Jocelyn Fox’s sleazily appreciative grin) ‘and when you’re a famous drag queen there’s even more pressure to be unspookable!’ He then runs over the rules: the queens are to be shown an extreme close-up of a famous ‘she-lebrity’ and will then have to guess whether she’s a ‘biological woman’ or a ‘psychological woman’. ‘It’s time to play,’ Ru announces in a high-pitched tone, ‘Female! Or,’ this time in a low-pitched, gruff tone, ‘She-Male’. At this point we are simultaneously shown a graphic of a woman in either pink (an elegant font declaring this a ‘Female’) or blue (for ‘She-Male’).
The game proceeds as explained: the queens guess – and often fail – to distinguish between cis women and drag queens (all of the ‘she-males’ here are drag queens, with strictly no trans women appearing in this segment). The drag queens’ failure is largely thanks to the dubious and clearly failed performances of femininity highlighted by the cis women in these pictures: included here are ‘tan mom’ (a self-confessed ‘tanorexic’); Chyna, female bodybuilder and wrestler (Courtney Act, having guessed that Chyna is a she-male confesses after the reveal: ‘I’m still not sure whether I got it right or wrong’); Tyra Banks (the photo homing in on a failed blend between her face makeup and hairline); and, regular judge Michelle Visage (Delta almost without hesitation guesses that this is a ‘she-male’: ‘that definitely looks like one of those cheap knock-off breast plates!’)

Humour here is thus derived predominantly from the perceived insult of determining that
the cis women are drag queens, and the game is set up so that they inevitably commit this faux pas. Adore Delano, in fact, clues onto this when shown the photo of Tyra Banks’ failed blend: ‘this could be a trick question!’ she exclaims. The blend, after all, is a key tenet of drag prowess. During Season Three, for example, Shangela is constantly criticised for her poor blending, a weakness put down to her background in comedy rather than drag per se. Blending, then, is something drag queens quickly learn is essential to the successful approximation of femininity; failed blending is a sign of inexperience or poor attention to detail. For these cis women, failure is analogously determined by their excessive attempts to pull off normative femininity (see tan mom’s over-the-top bronzing, or Visage’s obvious boob job) or perceived proximity to ‘manliness’ (as in Chyna’s stocky legs).

It was partly this attention to so-called failed femininity that turned the reception of this episode into a veritable social and commercial media storm. Jonathan Doucette (2014) from The Daily Dot wrote that the segment was little more than ‘an opportunity for cis gay men to re-draw the very gender lines they claim to push against’ and many interpreted the policing of femininity as a direct slight on trans women, particularly given the use of the traditionally transphobic slur ‘she-male’. On popular gay news website The Advocate, Parker Marie Molloy (2014) argued that she-male as a term should be off-limits to drag queens:

“Shemale” is a word that historically refers to transgender women, most prominent in pornography. The word originated with transgender porn and doesn’t have roots in “drag culture,” as some have argued is the case with the word “tranny”.

Molloy thus works to drive a wedge between drag and trans cultures; drag queens may only (potentially) argue for their right to resignify a word like ‘tranny’ since it (arguably) has its roots in these scenes, whereas ‘shemale’ ‘belongs to’ (has been used to shamefully interpellate) and thus ought to be open to resignification by, trans women alone. A similar distinction was made between trans women and drag queens in Rafi D’Angelo’s

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243 The Daily Dot is ‘[a] one of the top 50 media outlets in the United States’ and prides itself on its rigorous ‘fact-checking’ and ‘primary research’ (Daily Dot, LLC 2015).

244 This was very similar to the argument made by GLAAD vice president of communications Rich Ferraro, who argued: ‘[w]hile some drag queens may use the term to refer to themselves, ‘she-male’ is too often used by others as an offensive term to denigrate and hypersexualize transgender women. Unfortunately, most Americans are still unaware that there is a difference between gay men who perform in drag and transgender women’ (Ferraro cited in Molloy 2014).

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(2014) blog on the issue for Slate. The segment was offensive, D’Angelo argued, because it conflated drag queens and trans women:

Part of the problem with this little game is that a drag queen is not, in fact, a “psychological woman.” A drag queen is a drag queen… to put drag queens, who pretend to be something like women as a profession or hobby, in the same category as trans women – which is to say, real women – is offensive.

What strikes me about these arguments is the efforts they go to to define the drag community as mutually exclusive from the trans community. This is despite a history of two trans women having competed on Drag Race (Carmen Carrera and Monica Beverley Hillz) and, of course, the lack of distinction between the two ‘communities’ in its formative past (Paris is Burning providing a clear example\(^\text{245}\)). In the popular outcry to this segment, then, the drag community becomes a site for exclusion and policing: a site for ‘border wars’ about the legitimacy of one’s relationship to so-called ‘real’ womanhood. This may, I would argue, have something to do with the increasing visibility (apparent between seasons Three and Six\(^\text{246}\)) of trans identities in the queer community, where trans people have increasingly sought to have their chosen gender identities recognised and verified as legitimate and authentic. Indeed, in her response to the segment, Carmen Carrera (2014), who transitioned after her appearance on Season Three, argued that:

> We live in a new world where understanding and acceptance are on the rise. Drag Race should be a little smarter about the terms they use and comprehend the fight for respect trans people are facing every minute of today. They should use their platform to educate their viewers truthfully on all facets of drag performance art.

Carrera here thus draws attention to the changing landscape of queer communities, whereby transitions are increasingly common. What is interesting about Carrera’s account is that she suggests that this likewise changes the scene of ‘drag performance art’. Drag Race, in Carrera’s account, becomes responsible for ‘educating’ viewers on all facets of drag culture, its trans-constitutive histories and the presence of trans women amongst drag queens today. Likewise, Monica Beverly Hillz, in her statement on the

\(^{245}\) As I have argued, both cis gay men and trans people frequently mixed in the Harlem drag ball scene (united, perhaps more importantly, by their shared experience of racial and economic disenfranchisement).

\(^{246}\) In Drag Race this includes Carmen’s transition post Season Three, as well as Monica Beverly Hillz’s appearance on Season Five, where she explained to judges that she was in the process of transitioning. At a local level it also reflects an exponential increase in the number of people self-identifying as trans.
segment, argued that Drag Race is ‘not just a drag show anymore. We have beautiful transgender cast mates paving the way for all transgender showgirls’ (Hillz cited in Reynolds 2014). As such she argues that ‘some things need to be changed about the show’ (Hillz cited in Reynolds 2014). For both Carrera and Hillz, then, it would be arbitrary to separate out the ‘drag’ and ‘trans’ communities, and it is on these grounds that Drag Race can be held responsible for its transphobia. In the effort by some commentators on this segment to critique Drag Race for this offense, however, some contradictory and paradoxical claims to community are at play. On the one hand the discourse around this episode flags that trans identities have changed the nature of drag itself to the extent that there is no easy way to separate out the two ‘communities’. On the other, it presumes that drag queens will never be, nor understand the experience of, trans women, and so have no right to claim or re-signify terms like ‘she-male’.

Such border wars over the nature of drag and trans community do little justice to a show that actively works against the presumption of unified, queer community. By this I mean not just the way that what happens on-screen works to challenge conservative understandings of queer commonality. Rather, I mean to draw attention to what happens off-screen too; to the way the show brings into being an affective network of viewers, fans and contestants that promotes conversation and a sense of community. It wasn’t only on news websites, for instance, that this segment was discussed; it was blogged about, tweeted, and perhaps most commonly, debated on Facebook. Carrera’s statement, for example, was released on her official Facebook page, after she had been approached by a number of fans asking her to comment on the controversy. By nature of its social media presence, in other words, Drag Race invites dialogue and debate amongst former contestants and fans, bringing people of a vast array of backgrounds and political

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247 It is worth pointing out that the effort to distinguish between the two communities can only work by way of a conservative and limiting reading of drag as the domain of sexual outlaws (as in cis gay men) and not ‘true’ gender outlaws (as in trans people), which leads to a rather messy attempt to assert the exclusivity of the right to resignify insults like ‘she-male’ to trans people at the expense of drag queens, while something like ‘tranny’ remains on murkier terms. Monica Beverley Hillz (cited in Reynolds 2014), for example, in her condemnation of the segment, argues against the use of all of tranny, she-male and lady boy by drag queens (despite some arguing that ‘tranny’ might be available for reclamation by drag queens given its history of usage in drag culture).

248 As Kavka (2008) argues, reality TV collapses ‘distance and time... through the production of affective proximity’ between those on and off screen (p. 7). This in turn produces ‘the effect of social community... a sense of intimacy among viewers as well as with performers’ (Kavka 2008, p. 19).
persuasions into potentially productive encounters. It was in comments below Carrera’s status update, for example, that debate erupted amongst fans of the show about the potentially transphobic nature of the ‘Female or She-Male’ mini-challenge, eventually prompting Logo TV to make a statement – via the RuPaul’s Drag Race (2014) Facebook page – that they would be making some significant changes to Drag Race programming:

We wanted to thank the community for sharing their concerns around a recent segment and the use of the term ‘she-mail’ [sic] on Drag Race. Logo has pulled the episode from all of our platforms and that challenge will not appear again. Furthermore, we are removing the ‘You’ve got she-mail’ intro from new episodes of the series.

This is an example, in other words, of productive political change that occurs as a direct result of grass-roots conversation and debate, made possible by the affective network of social media that ties together fans of the show, its former contestants, and those with the power to make substantive changes at the level of programming (representatives of Logo TV, for example). The political potentiality of shows like Drag Race may thus lie in its capacity to bring into contact and proximity – both on and off screen – those whom we are unable to understand or agree with. Along these lines, Diprose (2000) argues that thinking happens through the process of affecting and being affected: ‘the other affects me, gets under my skin, and that is why I am made to think’ (p. 116). Carrera indeed found herself at the whim of the negative affects of many fans who felt that ‘You’ve Got She-Mail!’ had been caught in the crossfire of her seemingly hypocritical politics. Many fans argued that she had had no problem with the announcement during her (pre-transition) time on Drag Race, and was unfairly criticising the very show that had allowed her to pursue trans activism. Despite Carrera’s eventual complaint that the removal of ‘You’ve Got She-Mail’ had only resulted in harassment of her, then, I would argue that these affective encounters are examples of productive, grass-roots political change. Whether or not one agrees with Logo TV’s response, the segment and subsequent controversy prompted a number of debates around the use of words like ‘tranny’ in the

\[\text{\footnotesize 249 Carrera is the most high-profile contestant to have transitioned post Drag Race. Carrera in particular made news headlines when she was interviewed, along with Laverne Cox, by Katie Couric. Couric interrogated both Carrera and Cox about surgery and their genitalia, prompting Cox to passionately argue that ‘[t]he preoccupation with transition and surgery objectifies trans people… The reality of trans people’s lives is that so often we are targets of violence. We experience discrimination disproportionately to the rest of the community. Our unemployment rate is twice the national average; if you are a trans person of color, that rate is four times the national average. The homicide rate is highest among trans women. If we focus on transition, we don’t actually get to talk about those things’ (Cox cited in McDonough 2014).}\]

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context of the drag community. In an interview on the topic, RuPaul (cited in Duffy 2014), for example, argued that he was not offended by the word ‘tranny’ and disagreed with the assessment that it was ‘offensive’ to the trans community:

No, it is not the transsexual community... these are fringe people who are looking for story lines to strengthen their identity as victims. That is what we’re dealing with... It’s not the trans community, because most people who are trans have been through hell and high water and they know - they’ve looked behind the curtain at Oz and went, “Oh, this is all a f**king joke”.

RuPaul thus provides yet another provocation to harmonious queer community.

Controversially, he suggests that those who oppose the use of ‘tranny’ are those with ‘fringe’ politics, who may or may not be trans. For RuPaul, then, they do not ‘represent’ the trans community in any clear-cut way. Doing the ‘right’ thing, politically, by trans people, he implies, may be about more than just taking these voices as indicative of trans experience. In addition, he once again muddies the waters of where the ‘queer,’ ‘drag’ and ‘trans’ communities overlap, by asserting his own right to the use of ‘tranny’ as a slur that is directed at drag queens as well as trans people.

To conclude, Drag Race provides a challenging provocation to queer community since the political questions it raises, and the political changes it instantiates, come from the least predictably queer of places. In this last section, for example, I have shown that it is by way of the affective network instantiated by its status as low-brow, reality TV program, that many important debates and potentially productive political shifts take place. In this I am very much inspired by Povinelli’s (2011, p. 306) contribution to the GLQ special edition ‘Queer Bonds’, where she asks:

...what is gained or lost by plugging the hole opened by these foreclosed worlds and actual corpses with the figure of the queer? Does this reassure us too soon, before queer theory has itself come to terms with its own situated histories, that queer social bonds can become so general that no history, no social division, no differential situation of bodies and subjects can disturb them?

250 And, indeed, while I have not had time to go into it here, this mirrored localised debates about the use of ‘tranny’ after controversy arose out of an event called ‘Tranny Bingo’ at the Cooper’s Hotel in Newtown. Norrie May-Welby, a prominent and successful transgender activist who won a High Court battle to allow legal recognition of transgender people on their birth certificates, defended the use of ‘tranny,’ arguing that ‘it’s a wonderfully inclusive word, because it’s not clear whether or not it’s short for transvestite or trans-sexual or transgender’ (cited in Gregoire 2014). A number of prominent LGBTIQ activists, however, disagreed with Norrie’s argument. This included Kelly Edwards from the advocacy group ‘Wipe Out Transphobia’ who argues strongly that there is a ‘link between the term tranny and the violence perpetrated upon the transgender community’ (Gregoire 2014).
In the foreclosed interpretations of queerness that I have outlined in this thesis so far, *Drag Race* is a site too ‘mainstream’ and too ‘offensive’ to be considered politically productive. I hope that in my reading of its challenge to unified community, in my exposition of its ability to draw together a diverse affective community, and in my brief summation of the political debates and changes that arose out of this community and in response to the show, that I have gone some way towards combatting this perception; towards opening up ‘queer’ and ‘queer community’ to productive encounters with difference.
CHAPTER SIX - PIRATE JENNY’S AND WICKED WOMEN: GENDER, AUTHENTICITY AND VISIBILITY

January 2012, an event with a much-loved predecessor arrives on the inner-city Sydney queer scene. Named Pirate Jenny’s, the night is billed as a strip club, not as ‘burlesque’ and not as queer performance, but working within and around the confines of those loosely defined genres and their popularity on the inner-West queer Sydney stage. Just two years earlier had seen the end of one of the community’s most loved and enduring events, Gurlesque. Playing regularly to sold-out audiences, Gurlesque can retrospectively be identified as the first ‘women only (trans inclusive)’ strip night in Australia that was ‘unabashedly dyke’ (‘Gurlesque’ 2002, p. 14) in content and following. The event began when Glitta, ‘along with Sex Intents (and later Imogen Kelly and Meredith Williams)’, conceived of ‘Gurlesque’ as a ‘strip club for women’ (O’Halloran 2011b). In my interview with Glitta for queer street press magazine SX (O’Halloran 2011b), she explained that Gurlesque addressed a need for a sexualised space that was neither a ‘straight strip club’ nor located within a ‘straight lezzo scene’:

Stripping in the straight strip clubs as lezzos, we always fantasised... if the room was full of women how different would that be? What would happen if we took stripping and did exactly what we wanted with it; look the way we wanted to look, act the way we wanted to act?

It was kinda like a social experiment for us [but] the lezzo scene had become quite straight. We were often told by lesbians why we couldn’t just ‘dance around and be pretty and sexy’. It was the same pressure from the straight strip clubs as we were getting at the lezzo bars, they all wanted us tamed and pretty and not saying much. The places that we could do our untamed work were at the subculture sex parties that were more poofta based with wild shows of anal fisting and crazy characters or Club Kooky that was very queer before ‘queer’ was labeled and mixed.

Glitta adds that an event like Gurlesque allowed for more ‘radical’ expressions of sexuality than the more ‘traditional’ or ‘conservative’ lesbian scene of the time. In this way, Gurlesque was more closely aligned with ‘subcultural’ events and parties where audiences were mixed across gendered and sexualised lines. As she and Sex explained in Slit magazine, however, they also wanted Gurlesque to be a space as free of misogyny as

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251 Kooky nights began at Kings Cross’ Club 77 in the late 1980s and were set up by ‘DJ duo Seymour Butz and Gemma’ as an alternative to “classic’ gay nights’ for ‘cookie cutters’ on Oxford St (Hewitt 2008). Later in this chapter I will explore the overlaps between kink lesbian/trans and gay male communities, especially in terms of a community response to HIV/AIDS as it emerged in the early 1980s.
possible. As such, they decided that the door policy would exclude men (‘Gurlesque’ 2002, p. 16):

Glita [sic]: It’s really political being a stripper and taking it away from the men. Being a lesbian and just doing it. That’s a political issue, the fact there are no men...

Sex: One man in there means ten men will be in there, means the vibe will change. It just does you know. I’ll defend that, because even these days – like the whole thing about queer and how so many straight men hide behind the word queer and they hang out with all these lesos and maybe they suck a bit of cock every now and then – you cop a lot of masculinity at dance parties. They come up and sleaze onto you, touch you, feel you up and grope you, cause we’re leso and we are extroverted and we’re strippers and so therefore we can handle their dirty sexuality. So get fucked. We are dirty but we want to be dirty with girls, not with boys watching and wanting to join in.

The end result, however, was not a policy that excluded all men, but one that excluded cis men only252 (the ‘trans inclusive’ of its door policy referring to ‘Women and Trans of all sexual persuasions’ (Red Rattler 2009)). Having a ‘trans inclusive’ door policy probably reflected Gurlesque’s positioning of itself in a legacy from sex-positive performance competition night Wicked Women, a trailblazing ‘SM/BDSM based’ event that was likewise ‘about the broad sexuality of women and trans’ (Glitta cited in O’Halloran 2011b). Such a door policy at Gurlesque, however, was subject to scrutiny and debate within the community over the years, with patrons uncertain whether ‘trans inclusive’ meant (or should mean) women only (inclusive of trans women) or women and trans people more generally.

As Gurlesque’s self-defined successor, then, the arrival of Pirate Jenny’s brought with it a great weight of expectation and a not-uncomplicated history of attachments to and investments into the space it provided. The complexity of this attachment was made manifest in a fight that broke out on the ‘PirateJenny’s Stripclub’ Facebook event page. In the comments section, ‘Esther Diamond’253 (PirateJenny’s Stripclub 2012a) wrote:

hi just wondering why you’ve chosen to make this “women and trans”?

This is a pretty gross and transphobic policy, as it implies that trans women are not included in “women” and it also makes out that trans men are somehow not real men, so they are ok.

252 It’s important to note that this assumes that trans men do not have the same privileges as cis men, and are less likely to be misogynistic as a result. I return to this presumption as the chapter proceeds.

253 In this chapter I have again used the names that were used on the event page, as it is accessible to the public.
If you want a women’s only space then just say so, and make sure it’s obvious you include and welcome trans women within that.

As is suggested in this quote, the community’s investment in the Pirate Jenny’s door policy is largely informed by the controversial nature of its predecessor’s door policy, and its history as a trans inclusive space. No longer the first event of its kind, however, there is a perception that unlike Gurlesque, Pirate Jenny’s policy of gender exclusion needs to ‘move with the times’ by opening up the event to a wider audience to reflect the gendered diversity of the present-day queer scene. Although in this particular post Diamond does not imply that a better approach to the door policy would be an all-inclusive policy, they later insisted: ‘If you are really about celebrating all “gender expressions” just make it open to all genders’ (PirateJenny’s Stripclub 2012a). As such, what could at first be read as a defence of ‘women’s only (trans women inclusive)’ but not ‘women’s and trans only’ spaces soon makes way to an insistence that the only way to put on a truly queer strip night is to put no parameters around who can participate in that space. This was backed up by ‘Luna’, another participant on the thread, who approached the issue with an appeal to common decency (PirateJenny’s Stripclub 2012a):

...it doesn’t have to be a big deal to change words and if its [sic] not intentional to hurt people then wouldn’t it be easier to update then [sic] to have everyone go through what you said you went through for years?

The quote begins by reflecting Diamond’s logic that a truly inclusive and welcoming queer night would put no parameters on who could attend. This moreover is couched in the language of ‘common sense’: if you’re not out to hurt anybody, why not just include everybody? This appeal to common courtesy places the organisers in the impossible position of insisting on an outdated door policy that wilfully seeks to exclude and harm.

Both Diamond and Luna here appear to overlook the fact that the policy was created as a means of creating as safe a space as possible for women and trans people sick of the patriarchal overtones of certain ‘straight’ sex venues. In the queer scene, then, a consideration of these dynamics can become secondary to the necessity for queer spaces to be welcoming of a diversity of gender identifications: cis men included. The question that I would like to return to throughout this chapter is thus: to what extent has the shift from ‘dyke/lesbian and trans’ to ‘queer’ necessitated a different way of thinking about

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254 Again I have used ‘they’ as a pronoun where I am aware that it is preferred.
investments in gender, that, on the one hand, invalidates attachments to the specific experience of being gendered female (as in the idea that queer and trans women in particular may find the presence of men in these spaces threatening) but also on the other hand works as a peculiar re-attachment to visibility and identity politics (as in Diamond’s investment in who counts as ‘real’ men)? I’ll spend some time on both of these points, before returning to the history of dyke/trans strip nights and associated publications in Sydney to theorise the influence queer politics and scholarship has had on attachments to gender in this scene, and the ethical implications of this shift.

Is the queer scene ‘over’ gender?

At first glance, the negative reaction to Pirate Jenny’s’ door policy, of which Diamond and Luna’s comments are representative, seems to indicate a general sense in which attachments to gender, particularly gender separatism, are no longer relevant to the contemporary Sydney queer scene. In both comments, the desire for gender exclusive spaces is represented as outdated and/or insensitive. In Sara Ahmed’s (2012) work on diversity and racism in institutional life, she usefully identifies this sentiment as one of ‘overing’. By ‘overing’ she means the sense in which ‘we’ (as academics, but I would add, academically-informed activists) are assumed to be at a point where we are ‘over’ identity politics, and by extension, identity categories (2012). As Ahmed writes, ‘assuming that we are over certain kinds of critique’ creates ‘the impression that we are over what is being critiqued’ (p. 179). So not only might ‘[f]eminist and antiracist critique’ be seen as ‘old-fashioned and outdated’, the ‘identity categories’ to which they refer are themselves ‘assumed to be over’ (p. 179). This is particularly relevant to queer theory and queer politics given queer’s history as a response to earlier, more identity or rights-based movements, feminism included. In a queer activist setting then, not only is the scene expected to be over feminist critiques of male harassment in sexualised spaces, there is also a sense in which we are expected to be over the idea of gender itself. There is an assumption that the community is so far over or ‘beyond’ the idea of binary or essentialist gender categories that it makes no sense to have door policies where exclusion is gender-based. Despite the seductive nature of such an argument, however, I
would suggest that ‘overing’ has only limited utility in describing the complicated relationship that queer theory and queer politics has with gendered attachments in this scene, which I will explore in this section.

Firstly, while the disgruntled response to the Pirate Jenny’s door policy could be read as a general overing of gender-exclusive spaces, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that there is still a strong desire within the community for such a space. Sex, who returned from a post-Gurlesque hiatus to run Pirate Jenny’s with Sarah-Jane Norman, was interviewed by SX, where she made clear that it was not only her idea to run the night (PirateJenny’s Stripclub 2012b):

The Rattler approached me specifically responding for [sic] a desire in the community for a women/trans-only space... We didn’t seek to exclude anyone by having a women and trans only policy, we believed that it was important to have spaces where we could express our sexuality, sensuality... It’s not that we seek to exclude anyone, we love our gay/queer/straight boy friends but this is a party just for us. It’s really just a different vibe from a mixed night... it’s a different kind of sexy, like an oldschool lezzo speakeasy...

‘The Rattler’ here refers to the Red Rattler Theatre in Marrickville, a not-for-profit, artist-run initiative theatre in inner-west Sydney well-known as a haven of local queer culture. The theatre opened in 2009, as the project of ‘five local artists who wanted to create a legal warehouse venue to showcase alternative Sydney arts, performance and grassroots activism’ (Red Rattler 2015). In this sense the space has always existed at the juncture between politics and socialisation, a venue where activism meets the need for the local queer community to have a space to meet and party together. While Gurlesque began before the Rattler had opened, the Rattler’s present-day almost-cult status as a politically-informed queer arts venue made it the logical home for a night like Pirate Jenny’s. The approach from the Rattler for a women/trans only strip night, then, can be taken as a significant endorsement on behalf of the community\(^\text{255}\) for a women and trans exclusive space, given the Rattler’s status as the institutional voice of local, contemporary queer culture.

\(^{255}\) I will qualify my use of ‘community’ and any claims to community representation as the chapter proceeds. I am not assuming any simple conflation between online communities and queer/feminist community as it is experienced locally in Sydney and/or Melbourne. I do, however, treat online spaces as significant objects of analysis in queer/feminist activism, given that many productive conversations and encounters happen between bodies there.
Nonetheless, Sex’s justification for the night reads somewhat apologetically. She makes very clear that it is no-one’s desire to ‘exclude’, but as with Gurlesque, there is a desire to maintain the ‘different vibe’ that a women and trans only night provides in comparison with a mixed night. In this sense her reference to the desire for an ‘oldschool lezzo’ night (as well as the use of the old-fashioned term ‘speakeasy’) seems to draw attention to what she anticipates will be received as an outdated door policy. Indeed, the very premise for the event seems nostalgic, with Sex explaining that the name is drawn from the version of the song ‘Pirate Jenny’ made famous by Nina Simone. While Simone’s cover of Pirate Jenny drew attention and controversy for its anticipation of the civil rights movement in the U.S., Sex (PirateJenny’s Stripclub 2012b) retrospectively reads the song as a revenge fantasy against patriarchy:

We thought that was perhaps a fantasy that many women have had at some point, and we could certainly both identify with it... [w]e began to think of Pirate Jenny as the embodiment of a particular kind of woman, the kind of wise, sexy, tough old broad we’d both like to hang out with.

Again, Sex’s use of old-fashioned slang in ‘broad’, as well as reference to an idol of the 60s and 70s (in Simone) paints a decidedly nostalgic picture of the desire for a space like Pirate Jenny’s. I argue that this could be read as an anticipatory response to the more fluid expectations around gender in the contemporary queer scene: in this instance, the notion that door policies that do not welcome those of all gender identifications are offensive and outmoded. By referring to a fantasy of female revenge, and to an older, tough female idol, Sex conjures a far more essentialist, ‘second-wave’ or ‘old-school’ version of feminism than is commonly encountered in the queer space or scene it enters.

Yet despite seeming out of step with a queer emphasis on gender fluidity, Pirate Jenny’s door policy was supported both institutionally and at a grass-roots level. In response to Diamond’s comments on the Pirate Jenny’s Facebook page, co-organiser Sarah Jane-Norman argued that the issue was not about ‘gender identification,’ but about ‘community identification,’ and that it was important to listen to what the community wanted, especially in the context of a sexualised space (PirateJenny’s Stripclub 2012a):
Pirate Jenny’s is a strip club... This necessitates a fairly unambiguous door policy, I’m afraid... And in this instance yes, there is in fact a very real difference between trans men, who move within queer communities, and the average straight bloke who goes to strip joints, and believe me, we’d get plenty of those if we let them in... as Natalie \(^{256}\) said, she appreciates the space that Pirate Jenny provides. And she’s not alone.

‘Community’ identification in this sense, then, is discursively constructed and imagined through Norman’s perception of majority support for the door policy from those still convinced that queer strip nights are negatively affected by the presence of ‘straight blokes’. Critiques like those offered by Diamond and Luna are thus read by Norman as being out of step with what the ‘community’ wants/needs. Not only that, such critiques are taken as offensive and short-sighted (PirateJenny’s Stripclub 2012a):

Esther [Diamond], with respect, your tone is more than a little patronising and your timing is atrocious. If you do, as you say, respect the legacy of Gurlesque and her many years of movement-making, then this is poorly reflected in your decision to publically state your objection to the door policy on the eve of the opening of her successor... the biggest issue our community faces is not one of naming, representation, or inclusivity. The biggest problem is a fundamental lack of respect, bullying disguised as activism, and a seriously short collective memory.

Evidently, Norman hit a nerve, with her post receiving 19 ‘likes’, well outweighing the popularity of other posts contributed to the thread (with 21 separate posts in total). A majority of the (Facebook) community \(^{257}\), therefore, do believe in the continued need for these spaces, and further to that, appear to interpret Diamond and others’ objections as the result of historical ignorance, as well as an abstraction from the ‘reality’ of navigating patriarchal space. Norman, for instance, added (PirateJenny’s Stripclub 2012a) that ‘[i]f we get feedback from our audience or our venue regarding the door policy, then that is real for us. Anything else is, in fact, semantic and academic.’ In this sense, ‘semantic and academic’ becomes a pseudonym for theoretical or abstract critiques of identity categories that may not reflect the ‘reality’ of how gender dynamics work in this space. I would argue, then, that the use of semantic and academic is a veiled reference to queer

\(^{256}\) Natalie here refers to another contributor to the thread, and prospective audience member who had written in favour of the door policy.

\(^{257}\) In this I acknowledge that a Facebook community cannot stand in uncomplicatedly for the broader queer community. However, since a lot of discussion and debate happens online, with many productive political changes happening on the back of these conversations, I argue that there is a significant sense of (queer) activist community online. For more on how online blogs in particular open up a space for discursive activism and political community-building in a feminist context see Shaw (2012). Shaw’s work is notable for her insistence on the affective dimensions of online politics, and the fact that productive political change in these contexts if often the result of conflict and agonism (2012).
theoretical critiques of identity categories that Norman thinks may have exhausted their relevance in the scene. Indeed, Sex and Norman (PirateJenny’s Stripclub 2012a) indicate a sense of fatigue with this line of critique when they argue that they are ‘not so interested in engaging in semantic, academic dialogue on this issue (as we have done it for too long as it is...)’. Seemingly fed up with engaging for so long with queer politics, there is what I would pinpoint as a sense of being ‘over’ queer critiques of identity categories. So while it’s true that Diamond and Luna’s objections may be read through the lens of a more general, queer ‘overing’ of gender, I would argue that there is an equally strong sense within the community of being over the refusal to acknowledge the difference being gendered makes, especially in the context of a sexualised space. Indeed this is Sara Ahmed’s (2012) position; as she argues, ‘[t]o proceed as if the categories do not matter because they should not matter would be to fail to show how the categories continue to ground social existence’ (p. 182). In the case of Pirate Jenny’s, Diamond and others are seen as taking their abstract desire to do away with binary gender and applying it to a situation in which gender is far from being over. While it may be abstractly or theoretically useful to critique identity categories, Sex and Norman imply, we need to get ‘real’ about the role gender plays in a strip club. Queer theory and its insistence on the fluidity of gender categories may in this case hinder rather than help because it obscures an attention to the continued negative experience of being interpellated258 as female in a sexualised space.

A queer ethics of invisibility

In some ways, then, the door policy for Pirate Jenny’s and its subsequent defence may be a backlash against a perceived expectation in the queer scene that one ought to be over gender. This backlash sometimes meant an appeal to essentialist or separatist understandings of gender. This is clear, say, in the presumption that ‘straight’ men are necessarily straight (cis) blokes who will actively harass strippers in a way that those with

258 In this I am inspired by Teresa de Lauretis’ (1987) use of Althusser’s work on interpellation and ideology to think of ‘[g]ender’ as having ‘the function (which defines it) of constituting concrete individuals as men and women’ (p. 6). As de Lauretis explains, ‘[t]hat shift is precisely where the relation of gender to ideology can be seen, and seen to be an effect of the ideology of gender’ (p. 6).
more non-normative gender identities (trans men, for instance) won’t\(^{259}\). Including and welcoming trans men within the strip club is seen as a sufficient nod to the power of queer cultural spaces to upset traditional patriarchal power relations: but this is an exception afforded to those with non-normative gender identities only, not, for instance, straight (cis) men who have also frequented queer scenes. Diamond themselves seemed to pick up on this contradiction by pointing out: ‘you know many trans men are straight right?’ (PirateJenny’s Stripclub 2012a). Diamond here draws attention to the fact that beneath the assumption that excluding cis men is different to excluding trans men is the logic that straight trans men are somehow fundamentally different to straight cis men (and indeed Norman calls this a ‘very real difference’ above (PirateJenny’s Stripclub 2012a)). The notion that there is a fundamental difference between trans and cis men is similarly reflected in the recent uptake in these scenes of the term ‘A-FAB’ (Allocated Female at Birth), whereby A-FAB is used to refer to the experience of being (at least initially) socialised as female that is shared by queer (cis) women and trans men. A-FAB is usually employed to describe how trans men can be allies to feminist/women’s causes in a way that cis men potentially cannot; a logic that is subsequently applied in the conceptualisation of a women and trans only door policy\(^{260}\).

I would not, however, argue that it was solely those for the exclusive door policy who betrayed an attachment to (rather than simple ‘overing’) of gender. Despite arguing that the door policy should be made open to everyone, that is, the basis of Diamond’s original concern is that the term ‘women and trans’ does not recognise trans men as real and thus ‘authentic’ men - as if there were such a thing. Likewise, picking up on Diamond’s critique, ‘Jaidyn’ wrote:

> …saying that it is ok for straight trans men to come, but not straight cis men implies that trans men are not really men, or some version of men lite… articles I’ve read about the

\(^{259}\) What is left ambiguous or is unspoken about is cis gay men. Norman (PirateJenny’s Stripclub 2012b) does reference a ‘love’ for our ‘gay… boy friends’ in her insistence that Pirate Jenny’s remain ‘just for us’ (women and trans only). However most of the logic behind excluding cis men seems directed at an imagined cis straight bloke who, arguably, would be far less likely to attend one of these strip nights, than, say, gay men. The absence of gay men in this discussion is also interesting given that Sex and Glitta cite subcultural sex parties with ‘pooftas’ as the inspiration for Gurlesque (O’Halloran 2011b). It is also interesting given the historical overlap between dyke and trans BDSM and gay male communities in the 1980s, which I cover in this chapter in my discussion of Wicked Women.

\(^{260}\) I will explore the possible transmisogynist overtones of this position towards the end of the chapter with reference to Serano (2007).
term “women and trans*” also discuss how the inclusion of trans men is also quite often about their fetishisation by queer women261 (who are not attracted to cis men - hint: if you will have sex with a trans man but not a cis man, you’re being transphobic).

Jaidyn implies that being attracted to trans men at the expense of cis men is problematic because it means that one sees a difference between trans and cis men. For Jaidyn, the inherent risk in perceiving or acknowledging this difference is that one may presume the latter to have a more authentic claim to ‘real’ masculinity. This relies on an investment in being perceived as a ‘real’ man, or as having no meaningful difference to cis men, since to be seen as different from so-called ‘real’ (cis) men is taken as a denial of the authenticity of trans masculinities. Such an investment in the authenticity of gender categories, therefore, cannot be taken as a simple overing of gender. Instead, it adheres to what I would term an ‘ethics of invisibility’ whereby progressive politics is measured by one’s ‘blindness’ to gender, particularly or especially in the context of one’s sexual choices. To term this a politics of invisibility, however, should not be confused with the idea that gender is thus irrelevant to the queer scene. On the contrary, invisibility as a mode is prefaced on an investment in the ‘realness’ of gender to the extent that fluid or non-normative gender identifications must be accepted on the basis of their authentic nature - and thus recognised as no different from other so-called real gender identifications.

I argue that this investment in invisibility may be problematic for queer politics since what masquerades as an argument for gender fluidity and ‘progressive’ politics can be seen as a relatively conservative stance to take. Failing to acknowledge the difference between cis men and trans men, especially in terms of being socialised as different genders from birth, can end up reinscribing a fantasy of queer ‘sameness’ that disavows systemic forms of (gendered) oppression. David Eng (2010) has made a similar point in reference to ‘color-blindness’ as the refusal to see or acknowledge race. Far from entailing a progressive, leftist politics, Eng argues, the very notion of color-blindness is a

261 This relates to what Serano (2007; 2013) terms ‘transmisogyny’. As Serano (2013) explains ‘[t]ransmisogyny explains why the lion’s share of societal consternation, demonization, and sexualisation of transgender people is concentrated on trans female/feminine individuals’ (p. 58). The term has recently come into prominence in local queer scenes to describe a perception that queer cis women tend to be attracted to and fetishise trans men, while there is no real equivalent fetishisation of trans women. As Serano (2013) puts it: ‘in most queer communities, regardless of one’s sex or identity, people who are more masculine in gender expression are almost always viewed as more valid and attractive than their feminine counterparts’ (p. 9). Related to this is the argument (colloquially referred to as the ‘cotton ceiling’ argument) that trans women are often welcomed into queer communities but are hardly ever considered as lovers or partners (drewdeveaux 2012). I cover these ideas in more detail as the chapter progresses.
tool of contemporary capitalist, neo-liberal nation-states like the U.S. that ‘is characterized by the persistent disavowal of race in the name of freedom and progress’ (p. 2). The end result of the ‘refusal to see difference’ is that it perpetuates a ‘fantasy of an abstract U.S. community of individualism and merit’ (Eng 2010, p. 3) that fails to address broader social and raced inequalities. Certainly this is relevant in a queer activist context whereby the notion that one should not see any difference between trans men and cis men presumes an abstracted queer community in which one’s experience being interpellated as a particular gender is disavowed.

Similarly, one key issue with an ethics of invisibility is that it can conflate one’s sexual life and/or desire with one’s politics. This conflation is not only apparent in Jaidyn’s comments above; Jaidyn’s position is symptomatic of a similar logic that is evident in recent arguments within the scene around the concept of the ‘cotton ceiling’. Cotton ceiling is a term originally coined by Drew DeVeaux, a queer porn star and transwoman with a large social media presence. DeVeaux gave a keynote speech at the ‘No More Apologies’ conference in Toronto, Canada in 2012, where she argued (drewdeveaux 2012):

The exclusion experienced by trans women in our communities is most profound when it comes to sex, dating, intimacy and all the other various ways that we express our sexuality as queer women. I’m suggesting that trans women often encounter a “cotton ceiling”. The “cotton” ceiling works something like this: as trans women we have gradually been “allowed” to be enter [sic] queer women’s spaces and to varying degrees, our presence is made explicit and sometimes sought out; however, what so often happens however [sic] is that we are exoticized and most often desexualized; queer cis women may be genuinely grateful for us being there; they may flirt with us and even make out; but often there is resistance to actually considering us as people who they may wish to fuck, date, or be intimate with in one way or another.

The phrase ‘cotton ceiling’ is a playful way of referring to trans women’s underwear as the (literal) barrier at which queer cis women in particular will stop when engaging with...

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[262] This shouldn’t be conflated with the insistence that we can therefore assume that trans men won’t be misogynistic, or that some don’t benefit from male privilege like cis men do. In this sense I am sympathetic to the argument that this can be a transmisogynist position to take (Serano 2007; 2013). It is therefore important to recognise that there are crucial differences between the experience of trans men and both cis and trans women (although of course there are differences amongst these categories too, as Serano touches on by adding that trans feminine individuals are often discriminated against, regardless of whether they identify as trans men or women).

[263] The conference was entitled ‘No More Apologies: Queer Trans and Cis* Women, Coming/Cumming Together!’ It was a ‘day-long sex talk, designed to name and address the exclusion of queer trans women from broader queer women’s sexual communities’ (Check It Out: Queer Women Need Paps Too! 2012).
trans women. DeVeaux thus goes on to argue that in order to move towards ‘FULL inclusion of trans women in our communities’, the cotton ceiling must be broken by ‘challeng[ing] standards of “desirability”’ and thinking ‘much larger’ about ‘what gets us off’ (drewdeveaux 2012). DeVeaux, in other words, contends that people are unaware of the shape of their own desires and implies more or less directly that they should actively test these limits by being intimate with trans women. The somewhat contradictory expectations that thus emerge in these conversations are that one must both be ‘blind’ to others’ assigned or adopted gender, yet actively seek out a diverse range of sexual partners to prove that one acknowledges the authenticity of that gender identification: that one’s ‘welcome’ or ‘acceptance’ of trans women and trans men for instance is real and politically authentic rather than based in a logic of tolerance.

While acknowledging the legitimacy of DeVeaux’s claim that desire is often more complex or unbounded than it may subjectively seem, as I’ve argued in this thesis, expecting one’s sexual life to reflect or prove the radicalism of one’s politics seems both misled and potentially unethical. Queer theorist Tim Dean (2009), in his discussion of fetishism, desire and pornography, for example, has rightfully noted that erotic desire does not easily conform to the dictates of humanist264 politics. As he puts it, ‘[i]t is not whole persons whom we find sexually arousing but partial objects’ (Dean 2009, p. 160). As examples, he notes that one might ‘like the curve of his eyelashes or his butt; what gets me is the tilt of his head as he laughs’ (p. 160). Erotic desire, he argues, is thus inevitably ‘fetishistic’265 and as such, it may be that we are unable ‘to respect the inviolable integrity of personhood’ when it comes to sex (p. 160). By extension, then, it makes little sense for desire to be based on an ethical and political imperative to accept the integrity of one’s gendered identification, let alone their personhood. For Dean, in fact, to accept that desire is fetishistic is not at all apolitical, but rather the ethical promise of queer politics. If we acknowledge that sexual desire is not based in ‘sexual difference’, he argues, then ‘heterosexuality loses its privileged status as natural and normative’ and must instead be explained ‘as a specifically conditioned object-choice with a particular history’ (p. 161).

264 Dean (2009) argues, for example that the ‘politically incorrect tendency of erotic desire has to do not so much with an unwillingness to relinquish nasty stereotypes but with an antihumanist inability to respect the inviolable integrity of personhood in the sphere of sexuality’ (p. 160).

other words, heterosexuality can itself be historicised and in the process denaturalised (a clearly Foucauldian project). With comments like Jaidyn’s above, as well as DeVeaux’s notion of the cotton ceiling, however, this ethical promise is lost in a rather conservative and worrying effort to dictate the terms of others’ sexual relations. For Dean (2009, p. 160), this is an especially problematic position for sexual minorities to take:

Trying to make fantasy conform to political dictates, no matter how progressive the political principles involved, is misguided and dangerous... [and] smacks of thought control and censorship. Sexual minorities have faced such a dispiriting history of demands to make their erotic fantasies and desires conform to more socially appropriate, responsible or realistic criteria that it is particularly troubling when the same demand comes from someone cognizant of that history.

In other words, it is precisely those with non-normative sexual or gendered identifications who should be aware of the ethical issues and problems with trying to dictate the terms of one’s sex life. In this vein it is also important to point out the especially problematic nature of insisting that queer women sleep with cis men (as Jaidyn does above). It is not only sexual minorities after all who have struggled under the weight of heteronormative expectation: women have long been expected to desire their own sexual subjugation by men, such that to experience this as a demand from a minority sexual community is dispiriting to say the least.

A key question for this chapter, then, is how much this questionable ethics of a politics of invisibility, and especially its application to sex, has to do with the shift away from identity politics and towards queer. I have already argued that it is despite queer theory’s critique of identity categories that debate around Pirate Jenny’s can be characterised by a peculiar re-attachment to gender and gendered authenticity, even in the case of those who otherwise demonstrate an apparent overing of gender. So it is likewise troubling to consider the prospect that the arrival of queer in these scenes is accompanied by a re-politicisation of having sex: a position that has in fact bothered many key queer theorists. Before Dean’s (2009) critique, for instance, was Leo Bersani’s famous insistence (in 1987, during the AIDS epidemic) that ‘[w]hile it is indisputably true that sexuality is always politicized, the ways in which having sex politicizes are highly problematical’ (2010, p. 12, emphasis in the original). In making this argument, Bersani insisted that there was nothing especially radical about homosexuality, and more to the point, no reason to posit
that ‘radical sex means or leads to radical politics’ (2010, p. 11). Bersani (2010, p. 11) for instance took aim at ‘gay men’ who:

...could in the late ‘60s and ‘70s, begin to feel comfortable about having “unusual” or radical ideas about what’s OK in sex without modifying one bit their proud middle-class consciousness or even their racism.

Bersani likewise admonished scholars who responded to the AIDS epidemic by theorising a ‘special’ relationship between queer sex and the destruction of various norms and power relations (p. 12). Despite this history of critique, it appears that activists remain enamoured by the prospect that queer sex has a special relationship to progressive politics, particularly, in this case, to the progressive validation of non-normative gender identifications. As such, it would seem that queer activist politics invests in sex as not just the ‘apotheosis’ of ‘being-with’ (Berlant 2007b, p. 440) but the apotheosis of being-political and being-queer.

In the following section, I seek to contextualise these contemporary ethical dilemmas in a broader local history of radical dyke/lesbian and trans sex cultures. This is an especially important critical move given the perception of many in the scene that these debates can be attributed to the historical amnesia of others in the community. Here I look at long-running Sydney-based BDSM strip night and publication Wicked Women, an event and magazine which preceded, inspired and then ran simultaneous to Gurlesque. I take Wicked Women as an historical archive of the influence that the turn to queer politics on sex had on questions of gender and visibility within this community. I argue that the Wicked Women community had a different ethical relationship to these questions than the contemporary queer scene; Wicked Women promoted increased mobility across gendered and sexual lines at the same time as maintaining a deep political commitment to the experience of living as a woman in a patriarchal world. Charting the differences between Wicked Women and more contemporary events like Pirate Jenny’s goes some way towards documenting how the scene’s relationship to gender, visibility, sex and

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266 He uses the example of Dennis Altman’s (1982) argument that gay bathhouses create a sort of ‘democracy’ and ‘brotherhood far removed from the male bondage of rank, hierarchy and competition that characterise much of the outside world’ (Altman cited in Bersani 2010, p. 12). Bersani (2010) likewise critiques the scholarly argument that S&M necessarily constitutes ‘subversive parodies of the very formations and behaviours they appear to ape’ (p. 12). Bersani of course acknowledges that misleading or ‘aberrant’ as these claims may be, they must also be ‘supported’, implicitly because they work towards the destigmatisation of the practices they describe (p. 12).
ethics has shifted over time as queer theory and politics became absorbed into the community.

**Wicked Women: documenting and creating dyke culture**

Events such as Gurlesque and Pirate Jenny’s arose out of a relatively recent but rich local history of sex-positive lesbian culture in Sydney that has always in some ways been influenced by queer theory and politics. *Wicked Women* (1988-1996) combined a strip competition night (called Ms. Wicked\(^{267}\)) and a long-running dyke/lesbian/queer\(^{268}\) porn publication that operated on a not-for-profit basis and was run and contributed to exclusively by volunteers (Henderson 2013, p. 160). *Wicked Women* the magazine was unique in several ways: it was one of the very first examples of porn ‘produced for and by lesbians’, was a ‘community-based’ rather than a commercial porn publication, and ran for an impressively long time (9 years) considering its circulation relied entirely on grass-roots support (Henderson 2013, p. 160). From its very beginnings in January 1988, it was influenced largely by the feminist and queer political and academic climate in which it emerged. As Margaret Henderson (2013, p. 161) contends in her study of Australian lesbian pornography magazines, the most significant context out of which *Wicked Women* emerged was the feminist sex wars of the 1980s and 1990s in the U.S. (as I have discussed in further detail in *Chapter Four*). Although the Australian context differs importantly from the American one\(^{269}\), those involved with *Wicked Women* were familiar with the American context and debates (Henderson 2013, p. 163). This included, for instance, Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin’s influential definition of pornography which conflated consensual BDSM with the degradation of women by

\(^{267}\) For more on Ms Wicked nights and the ‘cultural movement’ of *Wicked Women* see the feature in *Slit* magazine (‘Wicked Women’ 2002).

\(^{268}\) The magazine changed its tagline various times from ‘Erotica for/by dykes’ to ‘Porn for/by queers’ to ‘A magazine of lesbian sex and sexuality’. The shift to ‘queer’ happened in 1992.

\(^{269}\) Indeed, Henderson draws on Kimberley O’Sullivan, the last editor of *Wicked Women*, for an explanation of how the contexts differed: ‘there were no Australian feminist equivalent of Andrea Dworkin or Catherine MacKinnon taking these issues to a wider heterosexual audience. The ferocious hostility between women took place almost exclusively within lesbian circles’ (O’Sullivan cited in Henderson 2013, p. 163). Henderson likewise suggests that the split amongst lesbians was not between ‘pro- and anti-sex feminists’, but, ‘between political lesbians who saw lesbian identity as a political commitment with same sex desire as secondary’ (Henderson 2013, p. 163), and, as O’Sullivan describes, ‘those who believed that their lesbianism was an emotional and sexual state’ (O’Sullivan cited in Henderson 2013, p. 163).

Wicked Women’s retaliatory response to the ascendancy of anti-porn feminism was to provide a magazine that both documented and generated a cultural archive for local sex-adventurous dykes to draw on. As such, the magazine reached outwards, by advertising On Our Backs and featuring interviews with Gayle Rubin, but it also drew heavily on its local audience, publishing fictional erotica, photographs and comics, as well as classifieds/advertisements271 all submitted by readers and/or volunteers. In the editorial to the sixth edition of Wicked Women (published 12 months after the first edition) the editors enthusiastically signalled a ‘definite market for dyke smut’, arguing that ‘these publications continue to exist and flourish... five years down the track and despite much anti-porn activism from feminist groups’ (‘Editoria’ 1989a, p. 4). Nonetheless, they conclude that ‘the genre of lesbian pornography’ is not ‘firmly established anywhere in the world. Least of all here in Australia’ (‘Editoria’ 1989a, p. 4). The editorial proceeds by encouraging more submissions from its readers, noting that ‘[i]t appears that we dykes are rather reluctant to publicly express our perversities’ (‘Editoria’ 1989a, p. 4). On a

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270 See for example how MacKinnon and Dworkin’s legal definition of pornography includes many practices that would be considered both standard and potentially desirable in a BDSM context (provided consent was present): ‘Pornography is the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or in words, that also includes one or more of the following: (i) women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities; or (ii) women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or (iii) women are presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped; or (iv) women are presented as sexual objects tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt; or (v) women are presented in postures of sexual submission, servility or display; or (vi) women’s body parts - including but not limited to vaginas, breasts, and buttocks - are exhibited, such that women are reduced to those parts; or (vii) women are presented as whores by nature; or (viii) women are presented being penetrated by objects or animals; or (ix) women are presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual’ (McKinnon 1984, p. 321).

271 Each issue featured a classified section where readers could organise to meet suitable lovers, partners, friends or even employees.
practical level, then, the magazine invested heavily in the generative work of providing and creating resources to cater to the diverse desires of the local lesbian S&M scene. The magazine’s groundbreaking array of content, as well as its ability to facilitate connections between its readers was vital to its success, with each edition regularly selling out and receiving favourable feedback from readers. As one reader commented in a letter to the editor in Issue Eight: ‘I’ve found your magazine to be very informing and it, as it seems, [it] has opened up a whole new avenue in my life’ (Angel 1989, p. 5). For many, indeed, it was the first time they had encountered lesbian S&M and reading Wicked Women was an eye-opening and life-changing experience.

Fig. 15. There’s Nothing Like a Wicked Woman 1990
Reading comments such as this one, one gets a clear sense that what was most important at this historical moment was the availability of resources about S&M that were sex-positive and non-judgemental in nature. As such the function and style of the magazine is largely one of creation as well as documentation, of culture and archive-building; a process of making visible sexualities that were largely invisible, even within leftist feminist circles. One consequence of the disillusionment that these dykes felt with the lack of support of their female feminist counterparts was an increased investment in a crossing of gender lines. *Wicked Women* magazines provide sufficient evidence that these dykes saw great potential in their interactions especially with gay men to expand their own unconventional sexual tastes and repertoires. The BDSM dyke community were particularly inspired by the mostly gay male commitment to the creation of a sexual ethic in the midst of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the early 1980s. Kane Race (2011, p. 44) documents this history locally in relation to Mardi Gras, contrasting the community’s ‘safe-sex ethic’ with the government’s more ‘punitive’ and moralistic disease control measures:

> At the beginning of the AIDS crisis in 1983-1984 there were calls to ban the parade, with one of the government’s principal advisers on AIDS describing the post-parade party as a ‘Bacchanalian orgy’. What was at issue at this juncture was the strategy for responding to AIDS: a punitive legal and medical regime or community education, partnership and participation… This transformative activity included the invention and promotion of a safe-sex ethic, and the creation and sustenance of friendship networks outside the family form, which became important in the context of social exclusion, death and dying.

Although the threat of HIV/AIDS was not as prominent for participants in the kink dyke/lesbian scene, they took inspiration from gay men’s commitment to a public sex culture that prioritised sexual experimentation as well as non-normative community. As Race (p. 39) puts it:

> Historically excluded from some of the key institutions of private life, such as marriage and the family, homoerotically inclined men have long made use of public and semi-public venues – such as bathhouses, coffee shops, parties, parks, public restrooms, bookshops and bathhouses – to meet other men and pursue social and sexual ties.

Participants in kink communities likewise found themselves on the outer of more normative institutions of public life, not to mention their own more sexually conservative

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272 The intermingling with gay men is one distinct difference between *Wicked Women* and latter-day events like Pirate Jenny’s.
lesbian feminist communities. As such they also sought new forms of sexual pleasure as well as community, sometimes inspired by and sometimes with their gay male friends. *Wicked Women* magazines from 1990 onwards, for example, veritably buzz with excitement around an event called ‘Girl Beat’ - ‘a lesbian “cruise bar”’ and first known event of its kind in Sydney (‘Choosing to go Cruising’ 1990, p. 26). In a feature on the event, the author writes: ‘God knows the boys have been cruising long enough in private clubs, dykes may as well find out what all the fuss is about’ (‘Choosing to go Cruising’ 1990, p. 26). What followed was a hugely successful night with over 80 women attending, ‘fucking on the premises, voyuering [sic] sleazy scenes and basically eyeing each other off with lustful intentions’ (‘Choosing to go Cruising’ 1990, p. 26). On nights like these, various slippages occurred between what was understood as a more risky, adventurous and ‘dirty’ gay male culture and a presumably less risqué dyke sex culture. In their ‘roving review’ (‘Choosing to go Cruising’ 1990, p. 26) of Girl Beat, for example, WILDGALS²⁷³ interviewed some of the women in attendance:

WG [WILDGALS]: Have you been back beyond the booths?
P [Person]: Yeah, I can’t believe those booths. They’re like funeral parlours with dirty sheets on a bed. I guess they’re changed after the men fuck.
(Ed: the sheets were especially brought in for us women, the men don’t usually have any!)

As is evident in the quote above, *Wicked Women* magazines from this era are littered with the exhilaration and sometimes amused perplexity of these cross-gender and cross-sexual encounters. Girl Beat, inspired by gay male public sex culture, sat alongside events which regularly involved the mixing of dykes and gay men, such as ‘G.O.D.’ (Girls and Guys of Disgrace) nights. This event, which started in September 1990, was described as ‘the first mixed gay and lesbian mistress/master/celebrity/slave auction of its kind in Sydney’, with money raised from the auctions going to both the Day Centre (an AIDS charity) as well as Victorian-based publication Lesbian News (‘G.O.D. for Sale’ 1990, p. 7). The initial event was lauded by both *Wicked Women* and G.O.D. participants²⁷⁴ as a

²⁷³ WildGals was the name of a Gay and Lesbian radio program of the time. They provided their tapes from the night to the *Wicked Women* volunteers who in turn transcribed them for the article (‘Choosing to go Cruising’ 1990, p.26).
²⁷⁴ Indeed, this kind of praise for the coming together of dykes and ‘poofs’ was a common theme in attendees’ praise of G.O.D. events in issues of *Wicked Women* around this time. As one reader wrote in issue 10, ‘I also thought the evening [G.O.D.] was an unqualified success from the angle that both gay males and lesbians got together and had a good time together’ (Alderman 1990, p. 6).
‘successful, fun and entertaining evening’ on the basis that it had initiated unexpected – possibly even sexual – encounters across gendered and sexual lines (‘G.O.D. for Sale’ 1990, p. 7):

It was good to see drag queens, dykes, leather men, poofs and lipstick lesbians rubbing shoulders with each other in the one venue and it was even more of a pleasant surprise when dykes bought poofs and poofs bought dykes.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the sex-positive dyke scene of late 80s/early 90s was fairly relaxed when it came to gender policing, providing a stark contrast to the more exclusive gender-based door policy in place at contemporary events like Pirate Jenny’s. Certainly there is sufficient evidence to suggest that community-building with gay men was very important to those in the dyke S&M scene at the time. On the opening pages of Issue Eight of the same year, for example, Wicked Women took the chance to editorialise that the ‘reunification of the gay and lesbian scenes’ was becoming a ‘stronger possibility’ thanks to events like Mardi Gras, and as such had made the conscious decision to publish a ‘one off’ piece by a ‘gay leather man for our lesbian readers’ (‘Editoria’ 1989b, p. 4). Not only did the Wicked Women community actively advocate for the ‘unification’ of gay men and lesbians via conscious publishing choices, they also facilitated events like G.O.D. nights and Girl Beat which worked to bridge perceived gaps between gay male and dyke culture275.

This should not, however, be confused with the idea that the lesbian S&M scene was not heavily invested in the political experience of living as a woman. While Wicked Women wrote that they would publish the article by a gay leather man, for instance, they made clear that they did not want to ‘offend’ their readers, and hoped that its inclusion would ‘be seen as a positive statement on the changing attitudes of gay men towards women’ (‘Editoria’ 1989b, p. 4). In other words, the magazine did its best to ‘reach out’ to gay men at the same time as at least implicitly pinning the blame for the present lack of a healthy bond between gay men and lesbians on patriarchy, and thus by extension, some gay men. I say patriarchy here deliberately rather than gay men specifically, as this comment is indicative of a broader conversation that was happening in the Wicked

Women community around how it might be possible to carve out a sexual culture

275 This likewise reflected the mingling of gays and lesbians along Oxford streets in the 80s and 90s at fetish shops like Radical Leather or at pubs and bars like The Albury Hotel.
predominantly for and by women, on their own terms. Indeed, the editors of *Wicked Women* appeared to be contemplating this question when they asked in issue 9 (‘Editoria’ 1990a, p. 4):

How does a lesbian express her innermost fantasies without using male-constructed sexual language? We haven’t yet been able to solve this dilemma, rather WW [*Wicked Women*] has taken the comparatively easy path of appropriating male-defined sexual language and turning it into what we consider to be hot, pornographic fiction… However, we wait with quivering clits for the day a woman submits her fiction written in a non-male constructed language.

A key dilemma for the *Wicked Women* community was the more general feminist dilemma of how to negotiate an autonomous female sexuality that did not conform to the dictates of a patriarchal world. Reaching out to gay men, and adopting gay male practices such as cruising, comprised one approach to this question. Yet while many felt empowered by discovering and forging a dyke sexuality that did not conform to the dictates of conservative feminists, there remained the question of how and in what ways queer women’s sexual experience would differ in significant ways from queer men’s. In part this was a difference that was difficult to forget, since despite the generally positive feedback that mixed nights received, there were still accounts of women being harassed at Ms. Wicked and other events (Veronica 1990, p. 7):

At heat one I was accosted by a [sic] inebriated straight male who could not comprehend my lack of enthusiasm for his company. Apparently he had been invited by his lesbian friends. Please girls, think of the consequences before you ask these boys to come along. As much as we love our heterosexual friends, it is simply inappropriate at a gay event to be harassed by a member of the opposite sex.

For this reader, such an experience of harassment is *especially* disappointing in the context of a queer event; this context is seen as conducive to an implicit ethics of respect whereby women can (finally) relax around men. This reflects the very similar logic evident in debates around Pirate Jenny’s’ door policy which assume that trans men who move in ‘queer circles’ are more likely to respect women’s sexual autonomy. Nonetheless, this reader was not alone in her experience of harassment, with an analysis of *Wicked Women* issues from the years that followed indicating that this was a persisting problem. Four years on, for example, debate raged around Club Libertine’s policy of allowing men

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276 Although of course I have argued that this argument works contradictorily by assuming that this is only possible in the case of those with non-normative gender identities, e.g. trans men but not cis men who also frequent queer scenes.
to attend when it was reported that the strip nights were being ‘inundated by single males hoping to see women being stripped and whipped’ (‘Club Libertine’ 1994, p. 5). Queer women thus increasingly found that not even the ‘safe’ spaces of S&M or queer events could provide complete protection from predictable, patriarchal dynamics.

As these experiences accumulated, then, some gravitated towards the belief that a more exclusive space might solve some of these problems. In reference to the ‘1st International Lesbian S/M conference’, for example, the Wicked Women editors wrote that ‘[a] lesbian-only space was created because it was felt that dykes act, talk and think differently in an exclusive lesbian space’ (‘Editoria’ 1992, p. 4). Elsewhere, Sue Kentlyn (2011) argues that the desire for ‘women’s only’ spaces is ‘grounded in the belief that women’s safety and freedom from harassment can only be guaranteed in the absence of men’ (p. 163). Certainly this is part of the logic that drove the ‘closing up’ of these events over the lifespan of Wicked Women. More than this, though, I would argue that Wicked Women was particularly invested in creating and sustaining a dyke culture that reflected the queer experience of desire for women, a desire that simply could not be captured by existing patriarchal discourses, or merely transposed via gay male culture. The tension, then, on the one hand between a desire to build community across gendered and sexual lines, and the reality that living as a woman inevitably constrains your sexual possibilities, only intensified with the official arrival of ‘queer’. In 1994, two years after the magazine had changed its tagline to ‘Porn for/by queers’, it was changed again, this time to ‘A magazine of lesbian sex and sexuality’. Editor at the time Kimberly O’Sullivan (1994) explained this as follows:

One thing I want to affirm is that Wicked Women will remain a lesbian magazine. This is not a separatist statement, but one claiming our right to our own territory. Wicked Women doesn’t have to become queer because it has always been queer, Wicked Women was queer when “queer” just meant odd.

As O’Sullivan’s editorial makes clear, adopting a queer politics for Wicked Women did not mean a simultaneous refusal of its ties to queer women’s sexuality. It did not, in other words, entail an ethics of invisibility whereby one’s progressivity is judged on one’s blindness to one’s daily experience of being gendered female. Wicked Women was staunchly lesbian in a way that did not necessarily entail a call for gender exclusivity, but might, and retained that right on the premise that dyke culture barely had enough
territory claimed to give up on a politics of visibility, culture-building and space-claiming. This continued belief in the need for dyke culture to claim and forge its own space, moreover, is taken as entirely compatible with queer politics. This is because queer here is defined simply as ‘odd’, a definition which adheres more to what I described in the Introduction as the originary ethical hope for queer never to consolidate into a particular identity, or demand on one’s politics/sex life. *Wicked Women* was seen as queer enough purely in the sense that its project was one of documenting and giving space to the ‘odd’ sexual desires and practices that had been stigmatised under politically ascendant strains of anti-pornography feminism. Its oddness, or its queerness, was thus not necessarily at odds with dyke visibility and empowerment.

![Image of the cover of *Wicked Women* vol. 2, no. 6 1992](image)

*Fig. 16. Cover of Wicked Women vol. 2, no. 6 1992*
What I suggest, then, is that *Wicked Women* proceeded with an ethical negotiation of a queer politics that did not disavow an emphasis on the realities of being gendered female. While O’Sullivan’s (1994) statement above may be read as ‘separatist’ from a present-day perspective, one must contextualise the attachment to ‘lesbianism’ in its time. In the issue directly preceding the shift to ‘queer’, for instance, O’Sullivan (1992) very clearly distanced herself from essentialised understandings of lesbianism:

> We may have a shared identity as “lesbianism”, within this we dramatically differ from each other in sexual attitude and sexual practise. Sexuality is complex. What needs to be acknowledged by our community as a whole is that lesbian variations of sexual pleasure and desire are as diverse as any other group.

In other words, for those involved with *Wicked Women*, lesbianism did not refer to an essentialist category; rather lesbianism was seen as an appropriate term to describe what these dykes had in common, while at the same time acknowledging the dramatic differences between those who united under its banner. Far from an identity-driven and essentialist base from which queer departed, then, lesbian *like* queer was seen as a way of capturing what was odd or different about these dykes, whilst acknowledging the diversity of experiences that inevitably exist in sexual subcultures. As such, this meant asking difficult questions about the possible inadequacy of that category itself. Volume One, Issue Eleven, for instance ran an editorial on the relatively new emergence of ‘Female to Male’s’ [sic] (FTMs) which noted that it was ‘unfortunate that sexual minorities, such as female-to-male transsexuals/cross dressers, are not readily accepted within our midst’ (‘Editoria’ 1990b, p. 4). The editors went on to ask: ‘[d]oes sisterhood extend to our female brothers or does the concept of gender re-alignment immediately place these men into the realm of male untouchables?’ (‘Editoria’ 1990b, p. 4). These were difficult questions for a still growing community coming to terms with what it meant – and indeed if it was possible – to experience queer women’s sexuality *outside* of existing patriarchal power relations. Nonetheless, reading *Wicked Women*, one finds a consistent willingness to challenge and broaden the categories to which the community were politically attached, in line with a broad ethic of embracing difference to an oppressive status quo. The editorial concluded, for instance, by noting that ‘[l]esbian support for other sexual minorities need not be gender based’ (‘Editoria’ 1990b, p. 4):
...rather, one sexual minority can join others in a united front against the sexually repressive government and heterosexism of the society in which we live. To this end, we encourage women to accept and support those other men and women around us that are in need because of their specific sexual orientations.

The above quote, then, is very much in line with a queer political emphasis on opposing heterosexism and heteronormativity as a better basis for community-building than more essentialist appeals to constraining identity categories like ‘women’ or ‘lesbian’. The editorial does, however, refer to FTMs as being ‘female brothers’, referencing the same logic that underlies newer terms like A-FAB which are designed to capture the shared experience of being socialised female that unites queer women and FTM trans men. Although from a contemporary perspective this reference to FTMs as ‘female brothers’ may read offensively, it is clear that the purpose of the editorial is to conceptualise FTM identity in a way that makes fighting transphobia central to the dyke cause. What is apparent is the almost constant process of negotiation that took place between validating the often-negative experience of living as a woman – especially as a lesbian – in a patriarchal world, whilst also validating and forging an alternative, sex-positive culture that could not neatly be defined on essentialist, gendered lines. In both their queer commitment to fighting sexual repression under a heteronormative regime, as well as their attachment to the experience of being gendered female, these wicked women situated themselves on the fence of the emerging question: to what extent should solidarity (as well as exclusion) be ideologically, rather than gender-based?

**Ideological vs. gender-based exclusions**

The question remains as to how to practically and logistically proceed with events like Pirate Jenny’s. In their argument with the Pirate Jenny’s organisers, Diamond had a better alternative in mind for the door policy, embodied by U.S. (Oakland, CA) based organisation ‘NOLOSE’. NOLOSE is a ‘volunteer-run organization dedicated to ending the oppression of fat people and creating vibrant fat queer culture’ (Shuai et al. 2011). Diamond posted an article on the Pirate Jenny’s discussion thread which explained the history of NOLOSE’s ‘inclusion’ policy. The article describes how the organisation began ‘firmly fixed in identity politics, as a community of fat dykes and bisexual women’ (Shuai
et al. 2011). As time wore on, NOLOSE targeted a ‘broader community of queer women—dykes, lesbians and bisexual women, including trans women— but also transgender people overall’ (Shuai et al. 2011). Shortly after, another shift occurred, with the event inviting ’all fat queer women (regardless of assigned sex or gender at birth), and all fat trans and gender-variant folks and our allies of *all* sexual orientations, with the specific exclusion of cisgendered men’ (Shuai et al. 2011). Finally, the organisation felt that their policy:

...continues to marginalize transgender people by requiring that they negate parts of their identities in order to be welcomed into the conference. For example, at this time trans men who attend can do so on the basis of having been formerly identified or socialized as female, but not on the basis of being men. At best, they can attend on the basis of being trans-men, which assumes a natural divide between cisgender and trans men. This division can be dehumanizing.

I have deliberately laboured over the shifts undertaken in NOLOSE’s inclusion policy to outline what seems a relatively familiar historical trajectory. Here, the NOLOSE board directors narrate the story of their present-day ‘inclusion’ policy via a progressivist, linear model of queer history. The shifts here described mirror those that took place in the Sydney queer sex-positive and BDSM scene. To narrate this community’s story similarly, we can tell the story of a progression from Wicked Women’s beginnings as a dyke magazine, to its inclusivity of trans people, to Gurlesque and Pirate Jenny’s women and trans only door policy, to, finally, Pirate Jenny’s decision to open up the event to all genders in the face of accusations of transphobia\(^\text{277}\). Told as such, this narrative charts the seeming inevitability of this shift, and a sense of having arrived at the best and most ethical place of ‘inclusion’ (as opposed to the ‘exclusion’ that comes with identity categorisations). This is evident in the NOLOSE board members’ explanation of how ‘women and trans only’ policies are ‘dehumanizing’ (Shuai et al. 2011, bold in the original):

Identity politics have their use and appeal, but they’ve also been constricting for us and many social justice movements... We think there’s a better way for us. Rather than

\[^{277}\text{This was announced via the PirateJenny’s Stripclub Facebook page in December 2012. Sarah-Jane Norman announced that Pirate Jenny’s would return to the Rattler in January 2013, before adding: ‘Pirate Jenny is very happy to announce that this will be a mixed event, queers of all gender-schmenders welcome’ (Norman 2012).}\]
trying to agree about “who we are,” we want to come together around what is desired-
what kind of ethics/politics we hold, and what kind of world we want to create...
because we believe that our NOLOSE community is shaped by the consciousness,
ideological intent, and action of our participants rather than by identity, we’ve decided
to change the criteria for conference attendance from an identity-based one to one
that’s ideologically-based. This means that anyone aiming to help create queer, fat
positive, anti-racist, anti-ableist, anti-ageist, anti-classist, anti-colonialist, feminist
space will be welcome at NOLOSE.

I would argue, however, that a policy like this one far too easily collapses into an ethics of
‘invisibility’. Charting the progression from identity politics to one of ‘ideological’
solidarity, that is, fails to take into account the very real differences participants in queer
communities bring to questions of ideological and political positioning. As Ahmed (2012,
p. 182) has aptly pointed out, categories like race, gender and sexuality ‘continue to
ground social existence’ in a way that cannot be erased by a simple intellectual
commitment to ‘queer’, ‘feminist’ or ‘anti-racist’ politics or spaces. This presumes that
the shape and affective quality of those spaces is both definable and shared amongst
different minoritarian bodies. As only one example I am drawn to Serano’s (2007)
argument that queer spaces need to take seriously ‘transmisogyny’ as opposed to
transphobia per se. Indeed, as she argues, ‘the majority of violence and sexual assaults
committed against trans people is directed at trans women’ (2007, p. 15). As she

> While trans people on the female-to-male (FTM) spectrum face discrimination for
> breaking gender norms (i.e., oppositional sexism), their expressions of maleness or
> masculinity themselves are not targeted for ridicule—to do so would require one to
> question masculinity itself.

In this sense, trans women occupy a unique position ‘at the intersection of multiple
binary gender-based forms of prejudice: transphobia, cissexism, and misogyny’ (Serano
2007, p. 12). Thus, what is of particular value of Serano’s work, I would argue, is that it
draws our attention to the fact that claims of ‘cissexism’ and ‘transphobia’ are never
straightforward, but must take into account the very different ways that cis men are

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278 Although I haven’t had the space to cover it in this thesis, this reflects a very similar shift in Sydney-
based queer porn magazine Slit. Slit emerged six years after the end of Wicked Women and, inspired by
Wicked Women, proudly held onto the label of ‘dyke sex mag’ for many years. Nonetheless, Slit later
editorialised a shift to the tagline ‘queer and feminist’: ‘...if the goal of representation is to counter
the mainstream exclusion of marginalised voices, then identity-based inclusion is not enough. Regardless of
who is featured in the mag, Slit strives to represent through politics and ethics more than identity’
(Meredith & Domino 2012).
privileged over and above cis women, and trans men over and above trans women. In calling for all-inclusive and ideological based policies at queer events, however, such intricacies are smoothed over. Opening up a space to ‘all genders’ does nothing to shift the realities of living as women and trans women (not to be conflated) in everyday life, with all the complications that arise once class and race and other points of difference come into play. To intellectually commit to ‘queer’ and ‘feminist’ spaces should not mean that these conversations can’t take place; as seen in the example of Wicked Women there is the capacity to simultaneously practice ‘queer’ and ‘separatist’ politics once we open up these definitions themselves to contestation. Imperfect as the Pirate Jenny’s door policy may be, it is an effort to negotiate the realities of being interpellated as female without presuming them to be intellectually passé and therefore ‘over’. Ethical politics aren’t therefore ‘held’ or shared in such a way that grants bodies access to ‘queer’ and ‘feminist’ space, but are forged within the contexts of those spaces and the affective mixture of those particular bodies.

To contest the idea that there is an agreed upon idea of what it means to be ‘queer’ or ‘feminist’ then is to maintain the ethical promise of queer politics to be open to its own contestation and reformation on the basis of different challenges to its historically and contextually dominant shape. In this chapter I’ve posed a challenge to queer politics in terms of its engagement with questions of gendered embodiment, but throughout the thesis I’ve also written about class and ordinariness, and all the various other ways that one can find oneself on the ‘outside’ of queer politics in the scenes I’ve described. This is not to suggest that any of the aims listed in the NOLOSE policy are undesirable. Instead, what I’ve tried to show in this chapter is that what it means to be trans positive, what it means to be feminist, and how one proves it can involve as many ethical problems of visibility and authenticity as more ‘identity-based’ movements betray. In the example of Pirate Jenny’s, the desire to be seen as authentically and ideologically queer can entail a contradictory politics of invisibility whereby one’s progressivity is measured by conservative and constraining demands on what kinds of sex one has, which I have argued is a particularly dubious ethical position for a queer community to take. Charting the ethical differences between the Wicked Women scene and the community-based
discourse that forms around events like Pirate Jenny’s shows that a queer ideological imperative can create as many ethical problems as it solves.
CONCLUSION - ETHICS, ALTERITY AND POLITICS

In his auto-ethnographic account of white, heterosexual masculinity and surfing in Australia, Clifton Evers (2004) describes what he calls ‘a surf-rider’s code of ethics’ (p. 34). These rules of the surf, he says, ‘have now been engraved on plaques and set up at prominent surfing spots throughout Australia’ (p. 34). But ‘[e]xperienced surfers know these rules, plaque or no plaque. They form a ““tribal law” for activity in the surf’ (p. 34). What draws me to Evers’ account is that he describes the enforcement of this code of conduct in a way that could very well describe the policing characteristic of the scenes I’ve focused on in this thesis. Evers’ definition of ‘localism’ helps me to think about the experiences of displacement that result from finding oneself ‘outside’ the very particular codes of behaviour that govern such localised spaces. That these experiences of ostracisation are experienced very differently for minoritarian bodies, for example, is evident in Evers’ (2008) discussion of the now infamous Cronulla riots. Evers describes how Anglo-Australians turned to violence when they perceived that their local beach was under threat by Middle Eastern ‘outsiders’. He recounts how some ‘Arab’ youths had failed to swim inside the flags at the beach, which led to an altercation between them and some off-duty life guards (pp. 417-418). The (Anglo) ‘locals’ reacted angrily to the boys’ transgression of the unspoken laws of Australian beach embodied by the nationalist, iconographic image of the life-saver. Their violent response can be traced back to what Evers (2008, p. 417) defines as the characteristic defensiveness of locals when they perceive the space they have made their ‘own’ to be under threat.

In my own work I have tried to understand some of the comforts that are being protected when ostracisation and silencing takes place in queer activist circles. At times I have concluded that these comforts, and the tactics undertaken to protect them, take the form of contextual privilege and social capital in these scenes. This is particularly important given that it is precisely ‘privilege’ that one is accused of when one does not straightforwardly conform to the norms of queer spaces. Those most at risk of transgression are the ‘grommets’279; those who don’t possess adequate cultural or social

279 ‘Grommet’ is slang for a young surfer. As Evers (2004) explains ‘[w]hile punishment tends to follow transgression of power and epistemic practices of surfing, it can still be meted out to grommets – young
capital to navigate the implicit codes of behaviour that have taken root. As such, I have tried to unpack some of the privileges and tensions that are implicit in being an ‘insider’ in these scenes.

This has involved interrogating the ethics of the different configurations that presently define local queer and feminist activist spaces. I have analysed and critiqued a culture of ‘call out’ politics, political policing in the form of ‘localism’, purported solutions to misogyny in the form of gender segregation and a re-instatement of claims to gendered authenticity. All constitute differing attempts to configure queer and feminist spaces in a way that most ‘works’ for those bodies affectively implicated in them. In undertaking this project I do not claim to have the answer to which configuration (or combination) best ‘works’, instead I have invested in a practice of what Probyn (1996) calls ‘strategic writing’ that forms not a ‘solution’ but a provocation. In her discussion of her disciplinary commitments to queer, feminist and cultural politics, for example, Probyn (1996, p. 130) writes:

> Rather than sedimenting one point of departure from which one would then look upon what is happening, I want to move laterally... This program is then not a blueprint but one possible way of negotiating the theoretical present. As a strategic writing practice it attempts to embody certain notions and directions and to tug at others to see if they may be led astray.

I have not wanted to claim a privileged viewpoint that can ‘map’ the path for queer and feminist politics to take towards a better more ‘ethical’ future. To tug at these present configurations is to try and set the ‘conditions of possibility’ (Foucault 2002) for what could occur if these spaces were no longer so affectively ‘poisonous’. I have tried to make room for different ethico-political assemblages to be imagined, practised and forged by differently relating to each other. In this I aim to, as Probyn (1996, p. 141) writes:

> ...take up the challenge of rethinking the very terms of the social and cultural: to place sexuality within their interalignments, the diagram of forces that produce at given times the space in which change and the nature of the social can be considered and reconceived.

One thing I have tried to keep in mind is that instances of conflict in these spaces often arise from competing claims to ‘safety’ (or the expectation of safety). In this I have argued

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surfers – without any obvious transgression’ (p. 35). He describes ‘grommet bashing’ as a ‘rite of passage’ which is ‘part of learning how to “become-surfer”’ (p. 35).
that the desire to find ‘community’ or ‘family’ within these local, subcultural spaces, might be particularly fraught in, and unique to, a queer context. As Julie Serano (2013, p. 8) explains:

...those of us who are gender and sexual minorities are stigmatized and excluded by our culture’s insistence that only “normal” bodies, and “straight” and “vanilla” expressions of gender and sexuality are valid. This sense of exclusion drives many of us to become involved in feminism and queer (i.e., LGBTQIA+) activism. We seek out like-minded people who share our goals to eliminate sex-, gender-, and sexuality-based hierarchies, and together, we work hard to build new movements and communities with the intent that they will be safe and empowering for those of us who have been shut out of the straight male-centric mainstream. And yet, somewhere along the way, despite our best intentions, the movements and communities that we create almost always end up marginalizing and excluding others who wish to participate.

As I have demonstrated, marginalisation and exclusion are acutely felt in a queer context, by a range of different bodies. Given what Serano describes as the initial experience of stigmatisation that many feel when forming such communities in the first place, it’s perhaps no wonder that people so staunchly police those spaces once they find (relative, temporary) safety and comfort inside particular configurations of them. As such, and as feminists Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd (1994) insightfully argue, fear of ‘ostracism’ or ‘being held in poor regard’ becomes a ‘powerful source’ of ‘collective conformity’ (p. 95). In a rumination on the imaginary workings of community through a Spinozist frame, Gatens and Lloyd (p. 94) suggest that collective life is formed by way of ‘common notions’ which can be defined as:

...a more complex development of sociability in which individuals gain an understanding of what they are, what they have in common with others, and why it is in their interests to join themselves in friendship with others.

As I have argued, and as Serano’s quote makes clear, it is the expectation of finding friendship and commonality that leads activists to imagine harmony in the context of queer collective life. Hope lies in this shared social positioning (marginalisation) being turned into collective political gain. As Gatens and Lloyd (p. 106) explain:

The power to compose compatible relations with others, and the endeavour to harmonise our powers of composition, are capacities within each individual. Harmonious forms of sociability emerge when these two forces converge, that is, when both the powers of the individual and the powers of the collective are in harmony, they become mutually reinforcing and together constitute a well-functioning unity.
As I have laboured over in this thesis, however, this is not always the case in the queer/feminist political communities I have described. In moments of conflict and antagonism, there are temporary victories or ascendancies to positions of privilege and comfort within the scene for some, while the collective body flounders and the capacities of others are diminished. At times this looks more like what Foucault (2000b) calls ‘polemic’ rather than ethical politics. In contrast, I have argued that a truly ethical politics will proceed from the place of a more ‘cosubstantial’ ethical framework, with bodies defined affectively by their relationship with each other. To define them as such would mean understanding that the increase of the powers and capacities of some bodies does not need to compete with, or decrease the powers and capacities of others of different social positionings. It is an invitation for us all to think about how, in our collective lives, we can take other bodies into our world, even alert them to our various forms of suffering, ‘while preserving or respecting the other’s own relations and world’ (Deleuze 1992, p. 628). That this is particularly crucial to a queer/feminist context was made clear when I drew on Probyn (2005) to argue that practices of calling out and ‘shaming’ in these communities need to begin from a ‘an a priori network of respect,’ because, ‘wrongly used it may destroy respect. In the case of already damaged individuals, shaming may be lethal’ (p. 92). In an already stigmatised community, ‘stigmatising’, rather than reintegrative shaming has particularly devastating political and affective effects.

The points I have made about ethics and politics in this thesis, however, are not only relevant to the collectives I describe. To begin this conclusion with Evers’ work then, is not just to show that his observations about the code of conduct that pertains to surfing are generalisable to broader subcultural movements; it is also to show that the work I have done in this thesis to excavate the particular problems of ethics and politics in queer spaces may be generalisable to the way we understand respect and generosity in the context of collective life. One thing I should be clear on, however, is that the tone of this thesis is specific. My insistence on a more ethical politics in these scenes was inspired by

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280 In the Introduction I drew on Povinelli’s (2008) use of the term ‘cosubstantial’ to describe the way Le Guin understands ethics. I use the concept ‘cosubstantial ethics’ to refer to an affective understanding of bodies that does not see the increase in powers of bodies of other social positionings as automatically threatening or ‘diminishing’ to our capacities and those of the communities we are implicated in.
what I described in the opening paragraph of this thesis as a sense of banging my head against a brick wall every time I engaged with local queer and feminist collective politics. This has meant, to a significant extent, a ‘negative’ approach to the issues that I have encountered. One might even call my approach ‘paranoid’ in Sedgwick’s (1997) terms in the sense that paranoid writing is about ‘placing, in practice, an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se - knowledge in the form of exposure’ (p. 15). It has been my belief that exposing the issues that plague these scenes presently, and of which people are far too afraid or ‘frozen’ to speak out about, might enable a more ethical, expansive and hopeful politics to proceed. Again, I am indebted to Sedgwick (1997, p. 22) who herself draws on Melanie Klein to figure this as a temporal politics of (reparative) possibility:

...to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and partial-objects she encounters or creates. Because she has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically critical possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did.

I have taken very seriously Sedgwick’s provocation that hope for the emergence of different ethico-political assemblages can often be ‘fracturing’. This is to emphasise the often-traumatic nature of reconfiguring the spaces in which we are so invested and want so much to be safe. But it also describes the sense in which, again, a ‘better’ queer/feminist politics cannot simply be mapped or outlined in advance. It is a necessarily fractured hope, because as Secomb (2000, p. 147) argues:

Community is not static or sedentary but nomadic, flowing, disruptive, fractured unbecoming. Community is not an organized corpus or body but a disorganized and polymorphous field of forces and intensities... fractured community is not an unfortunate reality to be overcome through congenial unity but is the passion, rapture, and ecstasy which enriches and sustains being-with-others.

This mirrors my discussion in Chapter Five of the community that lives from difference (Diprose 2003, p. 36), and initiates an ethical movement towards other bodies whom we ‘cannot grasp’ or understand (p. 40). Thinking reparatively about the present ethical dilemmas of queer and feminist community can indeed be traumatic and fracturing, particularly because it necessitates surprise and further rupture. But these can be
approached from a mutual place of interest and investment. It may not be best to think of ‘interest’ and passion as ‘uniting’ us in any simplistic way, but we can think about these affective investments as being the ‘glue’ that positions us in the bodily configurations broadly definable under the rubrics of ‘queer’ and ‘feminist’ spaces. Approaching each other, and our investments in these communities from a recognition of this shared interest can open up the conditions of possibility for a more ethical politics to proceed.

Building on Sedgwick then, I hope to contribute to the virtual possibilities not just of an abstract, hopeful politics, but a concrete practice of something more politically and ethically viable for the collectives I describe and am invested in to emerge. In keeping with my assertion that what I have undertaken in this project is also a broader, leftist, ethico-political project, I would like to end on the hope I envision in what postcolonial theorist Leela Gandhi (2006) has advocated for as a ‘politics of friendship’. Gandhi begins by telling us a story that makes this hope concrete. This (real-life) story describes a white Australian woman who has travelled to Woomera detention centre to visit the ‘unprocessed’ asylum seekers who have sewn their lips shut in a protest against their inhumane confinement (pp. 26-27). The woman brings a placard that states: ‘You are not alone’. Gandhi describes this as a ‘minor… gesture of self-endangerment in the name of a peace’ and a ‘politics of friendship’ (p. 27). In this she means ‘friendship’ not in a Western, philosophical tradition defined by mutual benefit, similarity or reciprocity. Instead, Gandhi (2006, p. 30) uses ‘friendship’ here to designate the:

...rather more existentially profound... potentially “agonizing” risk to self-exile which haunts any ethical capacity to become (to suffer oneself to become) foreign to “one’s own” and, above all, to oneself.

For Gandhi (2006, p. 27) this woman’s story becomes a concrete embodiment of such a politics, in that her actions ‘forfeit’:

...the not inconsiderable pleasures of consensus with her own community and elected government for the sake of an ephemeral communication with “aliens” widely perceived as a political threat to the integrity of the Australian state.

Gandhi’s observation has profound implications for an ethical politics. At various points in this thesis I have advocated – following Rosalyn Diprose (2000; 2003)– for an ‘ethics of alterity’ to the extent that imagining a better future for queer/feminist activist politics might involve taking a virtual leap to engage with those unpopular, backward, or
‘ordinary’ others who might yet take these movements creatively forward. For Gandhi, however, ‘alterity’ is not just about extending a hand to the Other, it is about a willingness or capacity to be ‘other’ to oneself and one’s community. In a queer and feminist context this could mean the risk of exile that takes place when speaking out against currently dominant norms that produce stigmatising forms of shaming, silencing and social ostracisation. This risk, however, is a temporary exile geared towards the broad-based increase in powers and capacities that ethico-political collectivity can offer marginalised peoples. To reiterate, this is not a call for a utopic politics of united community, rather this kind of politics takes place precisely from the recognition that difference – even in the most unlikely of forms – can be creatively productive. The overwhelming experiences of negativity, and the practice of activist withdrawal that this thesis documents attests to the need for such a change. My hope therefore is that this thesis has been a necessary, if painful, process, not of banging my head up against a brick wall, but of opening up a space for a more ethical politics of queer/feminist collectivity to proceed. It most certainly comes from a place of interest and investment in following that through in a way that is of collective benefit.
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