

For  
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**CRITICAL HUMANISM AND QUEER THEORY:  
LIVING WITH THE TENSIONS**

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Failure to examine the conceptual structures and frames of reference which are unconsciously implicated in even the seemingly most innocent factual inquires is the single greatest defect that can be found in any field of inquiry.

John Dewey. 1938:505

Most people in and outside of the academy are still puzzled about what queerness means, exactly, so the concept still has the potential to disturb or complicate ways of seeing gender and sexuality, as well as the related areas of race, ethnicity and class.

Alexander Doty. 2000: 7

Research - like life- is a contradictory, messy affair. Only on the pages of 'how-to-do-it' research methods texts or in the classrooms of research methods courses can it be sorted out into linear stages, clear protocols and firm principles. My concern in this article lies with some of these multiple, often contradictory assumptions of inquiries. Taking my interest in sexualities /gay /queer research as a starting point, I see 'queer theory' and 'critical humanism' as one of my own tensions. I have tried to depict each and to suggest some overlaps. But my aim has not been to reconcile the two. That is not possible and probably not even desirable. We have to live with the tensions. But to be aware of them is an important background for the self reflexive social researcher.

**Social Change and Zombie Research**

This discussion should be seen against a background of rapid social change. Although for many, research methods remain the same over time (they just get a bit more refined with each generation), for others of us, changes in society are seen to bring parallel changes in research practices. To put it bluntly: many claim we are moving into a post-modern, late-modern, globalizing, risk, liquid society. A new global order is in the making which is much more provisional and less authoritative than that of the past; a society in which there is increasing self reflexivity and individuation. A network society of flows and mobilities. A society of consumption and waste. (Bauman, 2000, 2004; Beck, 2003; Giddens,1991; Urry, 2000).

And as we tentatively move into these new worlds, so our tools for theory and research need radical overhaul. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck, for example, speaks of 'Zombie categories'; we move amongst the living dead! Zombie categories are categories from the past that we go on using, even though they have long outlived their usefulness and even though they mask a different reality behind them. We probably go on using them because at present we have no better words to put in their place. Yet dead they are.

He cites the example of the concept of 'the family' as an instance of a zombie category - a term that for many now means very little. But here I would suggest we could also cite most of our massive research methodology apparatus. I am not a major fan of television, but when I select to watch a documentary I am often impressed by how much more I get from it than the standard sociological research tract. Yet the skills of a good documentary maker are rarely the topic of research methods courses; from scripts and directing, to camera movements and ethics - all this is the very stuff of good twenty first century research. And yes, some research seems to have entered the world of cyberspace: but much of it simply to replicate the methods of quantitative research- to make qualitative research disciplined, quantitative and anti--humanistic. Real innovation is lacking. Much research at the end of the twentieth century- to borrow Beck's term again- was really Zombie Research (Beck, 2003).

The following table suggests some links between social change and social research styles, The background is the authoritative scientific account with standard research protocols. But as new changes happen in the social world, so we may start to sense new approaches to making inquiries. My concern in this article is largely with the arrival of queer theory.

<b>Current Social Changes</b>	<b>Possible Changes in Research Style</b>
Towards a Late Modern World	Towards a Late Modern Research Practice
Post-modern /Fragmentation Pluralization	The 'Polyphonic' Turn
Mediazation	The new forms of Media as both technique and data
Stories and the Death of the Grand Narrative	The Story Telling/Narrative Turn
Individualization / Choices / Unsettled Identities	The Self-Reflexive Turn
Globalization-Glocalization	

Hybridization/ Diaspora	The Hybridic Turn: Decolonizing Methods (Smith, 1999)
Hi Tech/ Mediated/ Cyborg /Post-Human	The Hi-Tech Turn
Knowledge as contested	The Epistemological Turn
Postmodern politics and ethics	The Political /Ethical Turn
The Network Society	Researching flows, mobilities, contingencies
Sexualities as problematic	The Queer Turn

Table 1. Shifting research styles under conditions of late modernity

### **A Reflexive Introduction**

How research is done takes itself into a various language games- some rational, some more contradictory, some qualitative, some quantitative. Yet the languages we use bring with them all manner of tensions. Whilst they help us chart the ways we do research sometimes, they often bring their own contradictions and problems. My goal here is to address some of the incoherencies I have found in my own research languages and inquiries and to suggest ways of living with them. Although I will draw widely from a range of sources, and hopefully provide some paradigmatic instances, the paper will inevitably be personal. Let me pose the key contradiction of my inquiries (we will all have our own).

The bulk of my inquiries have focused on sexualities, especially lesbian and gay concerns, with an ultimate eye on some notion of sexual justice. In the early days I used a relatively straightforward symbolic interactionism to guide me in relatively straightforward fieldwork and interviewing in and around London's gay scene of the late 1960's whilst engaging politically initially with the Homosexual Law Reform Society and then the early years of the Gay Liberation Front. I read my Becker, Blumer, Strauss and Denzin! And at the same time I was coming out as a young gay man and finding my way in the very social world I was studying. Latterly, such straight forwardness has come to be seen as more and more problematic. Indeed there was always a tension there: I just did not always see it (Plummer, 1995).

For on the one hand, I have found myself using a language that I increasingly call a critical humanism, one allied to symbolic interactionism, pragmatism, democratic thinking, story telling, moral progress, redistribution, justice and good citizenship (Plummer, 2003a). Inspirations range from Dewey to Rorty, Blumer to Becker. All these are quite old and traditional ideas, and although I have sensed their post modernized affinities (as have others ), they still bring more orthodox

claims around experience, truths, identities, belonging to groups, and a language of moral responsibilities that can be shared through dialogues (Plummer, 2003a).

By contrast, I have also found myself at times using a much more radicalized language that nowadays moves under the name of queer theory. The latter must usually be seen as at odds with the former: it puts everything out of joint, out of order. Queer, for me, is the post-modernization of sexual and gender studies. 'Queer' brings with it a radical deconstruction of all conventional categories of sexuality and gender. It questions all the orthodox texts and tellings of the work of gender and sexuality in the modern world (and all worlds). It is a messy, anarchic affair - not that different from intellectual anarchists or political International Situationists. Queer would seem to be anti-humanist, view the world of normalization and normality as its enemy, and refuse to be sucked into conventions and orthodoxy. If it is at all sociological (and it usually is not) it is gothic and romantic, not classical and canonical (Gouldner, 1973). It transgresses and subverts.

On the one hand then I am quite happy about using the 'new language of qualitative method' (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997); on the other, I am very aware of a queer language that finds problems everywhere with orthodox social science methods (Kong, Mahoney & Plummer, 2001). Again, these tensions are very much products of their time (queer theory did not exist before the late 1980's). Yet, retrospectively, it would seem I have always walked tightropes between an academic interactionism, a political liberalism, a gay experience, and a radical critique.

But of course, as usual, there are more ironies here. Since the late 1980's I have more or less considered myself 'post gay'. So who was that young man from the past who studied the gay world? Likewise, those wild Queer theorists have started to build their textbooks, their readers, their courses, and proliferated their own esoteric cult like worlds which often seem more academic than the most philosophical works of Dewey. Far from breaking boundaries, queer theorists have often erected them. For whilst queer theorists may not wish for closure, they nevertheless find it. Queer theories have their gurus, their followers, and their canonical texts. But likewise, humanists and new qualitative researchers - finding themselves under siege from postmodernists, queer theorists, some feminisms and multiculturalists and the like have also fought back - re-writing their own histories and suggesting that many of the critiques laid at their door are simply false. Some like Richard Rorty - the heir apparent to the modern pragmatism of Dewey and James - fall into curious traps: himself labelled a postmodernist by others, he condemns postmodernists as 'posties' (Rorty, 1999). Methodological positions often lead in different directions to those originally claimed.<sup>1</sup>

So here am I - like many others- a bit of a humanist, a bit post-gay, a sort of a feminist, a little queer, a kind of a liberal, and seeing that much that is queer has the potential for an important radical change. In the classic words of

interactionism: Who Am I? How can I live with these tensions?

Now, this is not meant to be an essay of overly indulgent self analysis, but rather one where in starting to reflect on such a worry, I am simply showing tensions that many must confront these days. Not only am I not alone in such worries, I am fairly sure that all reflective qualitative inquiries will face their own versions of them. Just as most people face them in their daily lives. Ambivalence is the name of the game (1991).

In this article I plan to deal with three interconnected issues raised by qualitative research – all focused on just how far we can ‘push’ the boundaries of qualitative research into new fields, strategies and political / moral awareness – and how this has been continuously happening in my own work. New languages of qualitative method benefit from new ideas which at least initially may be seen as opposition. This is how they grow, and how the whole field of qualitative research becomes more refined. In what follows I will ask:

- What is critical humanism and how to do a critical humanist method?
- What is queer and how to do a queer method?
- How can the contradictions be lived through?

### **The Critical Humanist Project**

How different things would be ... if the social sciences at the time of their systematic formation in the nineteenth century had taken the arts in the same degree they took the physical science as models (Robert Nisbet, 1976: p. 16).

There is an illusive center to this contradictory, tension-ridden enterprise that seems to be moving further and further away from grand narratives, and single overarching ontological, epistemological and methodological paradigms. This center lies in the humanistic commitment of the qualitative researcher to study the world always from the perspective of the interacting individual. From this simple commitment flow the liberal and radical politics of qualitative research. Action, feminist , clinical, constructivists, ethnic, critical and cultural studies researchers all unite on this point. They all share the belief that a politics of liberation must always begin with the perspectives, desires and dreams of those individuals and groups who have been oppressed by the larger ideological , economic and political forces of a society or a historical moment’ ( Norman Denzin 1994: p575)

I use the term ' critical humanism' these days to suggest orientations to inquiry which focus on human experience - with the structure of experience and its daily lived nature- and which acknowledge the political and social role of all inquiry. It

moves by many names - symbolic interactionism<sup>2</sup>, ethnography, qualitative inquiry, reflexivity, cultural anthropology, life story research, etc - but they all have several concerns at heart. All these research orientations have a focus on human subjectivity, experience and creativity: they start with people living their daily lives. They look at their talk, their feelings, their actions, their bodies as they move around in social worlds and experience the constraints of history and a material world of inequalities and exclusions. They make methodological claims for a naturalistic 'intimate familiarity' with these lives, recognizing their own part in such study. They make no claims for grand abstractions or universalism - assuming an inherent ambivalence and ambiguity in human life with no 'final solutions', only damage limitations- whilst simultaneously sensing both their subjects ethical and political concerns and their own in conducting such inquiries. They have pragmatic pedigrees, espousing an epistemology of radical, pragmatic empiricism which takes seriously the idea that knowing - always limited and partial- should be grounded in experience ( Jackson, 1989). It is never neutral, value free work, since the core of the inquiry must be human values. As John Dewey remarked long ago: ' Any inquiry into what is deeply and inclusively (i.e. significantly) human enters perforce into the specific area of morals' ( Dewey. 1920: xxvi).Impartiality may be suspect; but a rigorous sense of the ethical and political sphere is a necessity. Just why would one even bother to do research were it not for some wider concern or value?

What are these values? In the most general terms critical humanism champions those values that give dignity to the person<sup>3</sup>, reduce their sufferings and enhance their well being. There are many such value systems but they would probably have to include:

1. A commitment to a whole cluster of *democratizing values* (as opposed to totalitarian ones) which aim to *reduce / remove human sufferings*. They take as a baseline *the value of the human being* and often provide a number of suggested *human rights*- freedom of movement, freedom of speech, freedom of association, freedom against arbitrary arrest etc. They nearly always include the *right to equality*. It is strongly anti-suffering, and provides a major thrust towards both equality and freedom for all groups, including those with 'differences' of all kinds (Felice, 1996;
2. An ethics of *care* and *compassion*: significantly developed by feminists, this is a value where looking after the other takes on a prime role and where *sympathy, love, and even fidelity* become prime concerns (Tronto, 1993).
3. A politics of *recognition* (as opposed to non-recognition) and *respect*: following the work of Axel Honneth (1995) (and significantly shaped earlier by George Herbert Mead), this is a value where the others are always acknowledged and a certain level of empathy is undertaken
4. The importance of *trust*: it recognizes that no social relationships (or societies for that matter) can function unless humans have at least some modicum of trust in each other (O'Neill, 2002).

Of course many of these values bring their own tensions: we must work through them and live with them. A glaring potential contradiction, for example, may be to talk of a humanistic values under capitalism, for many of the values of humanism must be seen as stressing non market place values. They are values which are not necessarily given a high ranking in a capitalist economy. Cornel West has put this well:

In our own time it is becoming extremely difficult for non market values to gain a foothold. Parenting is a non market activity; so much sacrifice and service go into it without any assurance that the providers will get anything back. Mercy, justice: they are no market. Care, service: non market. Solidarity, fidelity: non market. Sweetness and kindness and gentleness. All non market. Tragically, non market values are relatively scarce.... (West,1999: 11)

### **The methodologies of humanism**

These values strongly underpin critical humanism. In his classic book, *The Human Perspective in Sociology*, T.S. Bruyn (1966) locates this humanistic perspective as strongly allied to the methods of participant observation. Elsewhere, and much later, I have suggested an array of life story strategies for getting at human experience. The task is a 'fairly complete narrating of one's entire experience of life as a whole, highlighting the most important aspects' (Atkinson, 1998:8). These may be long, short, reflexive, collective, genealogical, ethnographic, photographic, even auto/ethnographic. (Plummer, 2001). Life stories are a prime humanistic tool but it is quite wrong to suggest that this means the stories only have a concern with subjectivity and personal experience.<sup>4</sup> Throughout all of this, there is a pronounced concern not just with the humanistic understanding of experience but also with ways of telling the stories of the research. Usually the researcher is present in many ways in the text: it is rarely just a neutral text with a passive observer. Chris Carrington's (1999) study of gay families, for example, makes very clear from the outset his own location within a single parent family ('I grew up in a working- poor, female -headed, single parent family. Throughout much of my childhood, in order to make ends meet, my mother worked nights as bar tender. There were periods where she could not get enough hours and our family had to turn to food stamps and welfare.... P7). Likewise, Peter Nardi's (1999) study of gay men's friendships is driven by his own passion for friends. ('What follows is partly an attempt to make sense of my own experiences with friends...' p 2). Humanistic inquiries usually reveal humanistic researchers.

Most commonly, as in Josh Gamson's *Freaks Talk Back* and Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor's *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, the method employed will entail triangulation - a combination of cultural analysis tools.<sup>5</sup> Here 'multiple sources of data pertaining to texts, production and reception are collected and the intersections among them analyzed. In Rupp and Taylor's study of drag queens

they observed, tape recorded and transcribed fifty drag performances - along with the dialogue, music and audience interactions including photographs and dressing up themselves. They collected data on the performances through weekly meetings of the drag artists, and semi structured life histories; and they conducted focus groups on people who attended the performances. In addition they looked at weekly newspapers (the gay paper Celebrate) and others to partially construct the history of the groups. Their research has a political aim. This is both humanistic, sociological and yet queer too, showing that combinations are possible. Enormous amounts have now been written on all this (for example see: Coles, 1989; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Coffey, 1999; Ellis and Flaherty, 1992; Ronai, 1992; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Hertz, 1992).

A further recent example of such work is Harry Wolcott's (2002) account of Brad, the Sneaky Kid. Wolcott, an educational anthropologist, is well known for his methodological writings and books, especially in the field of education. This book started life in the early 1980's as a short journal article of the life story of Brad, a troubled 19 year old. The story is aimed to get at the human experience of educational failure: especially how there is so little support for those who are not well served by our educational systems.

This would have been an interesting life story but a pretty unexceptional one, had it not been for all the developments that subsequently emerged around it. Thus, what is not told in the original story are the details of how Wolcott met Brad, how he had gay sex with him, or how he got him to tell his life story. And much follows after the original story which later takes curious turns: Brad develops schizophrenia and returns one night to Wolcott's house to burn it down in an enraged attempt to kill him. This leads to the complete destruction of Wolcott's home and all his belongings (and those of his school teacher partner). A serious court case ensues where Brad is tried and sent to prison. Despite Brad's guilt, Wolcott is himself scrutinized for his relationship, homosexuality and even his role as an anthropologist. Brad's family is especially unhappy about the relationship with Wolcott but so are many academics. Ultimately, Brad is institutionalized. Eventually, the story is also turned into an intriguing ethnographic play. I have only read the text of the play and not seen it performed. Still, judging by the text presented here, it comes across as a collage of 1980's pop music, sloganized slides, and a two layer drama – one about Brad's relationship with Wolcott, and another about Wolcott's ruminations as a professor on the plights of ethnography.

I mention this study because although it started out as a life story gloss - a simple relaying of Brad's story - because of the curious circumstances that it led to, a much richer and complex story was revealed which generated a host of questions and debates about the ethical, personal and practical issues surrounding fieldwork. And sexuality and gender were pretty much at the core. It is a gripping tale of the kind of issues highlighted by all humanistic research. Indeed, within the book a second major narrative starts to appear- that of Harry Wolcott himself. He was

always present, of course, but now his story takes over - as he reveals firstly how he had regular sex with the young man, of his partners disapproval of Brad, and of how one night he returns to his house to find a strong smell of oil and a Brad screaming 'You fucker. I'm going to kill you. I'm going to kill you. I'm going to tie you up and leave you in the house and set the house on fire'. (p74). Luckily, Harry escapes: but unluckily his house does not. It goes up entirely in flames, with all his and his partner's belongings. Possibly one of the core dramatic moments in life story telling - certainly an 'epiphany'!.! But after that a major chapter follows which tells the working of the court - how he is almost on trial himself.

When *Sneaky Kid* was first published in 1983, it was a short 30 page essay; but it has now grown into a book of over 200 pages. The original article does not tell much about the relationship which it grew from etc; now this book tells a lot more. But it raises sharply the issue of just how much has still been left out. The book serves as a sharp reminder that all social science - including life stories- are only partial selections of realities. There is always much going on behind the scenes that is not told. Here we have the inevitable bias, the partiality, the limits, the selectivity of all stories told. But I will not take these issues further here.

### **The Troubles with Humanism**

Although I think humanism has a lot to offer qualitative inquiry, it is a very unfashionable view these days as so many social scientists seem to want to turn only to discourse and language. But this approach is not incompatible with doing this, as it evokes the humanities (much more so than other traditions), widens communities of understanding by dialoging with the voices of others, and takes a strong democratic impulse as the force behind its thinking and investigating. As an imagery to think about social life, this is all to the good. It brings with it the possibility for such inquiry to engage in poetry & poetics, drama and performance, philosophy and photography, video and film, narrative and stories.

Nevertheless, these days humanism remains a thoroughly controversial and contested term - and not least from queer theorists themselves. We know of course the long standing attacks on humanism from theologies, from behavioral psychologies and from certain kinds of philosophers - there is a notorious debate between the humanist Sartre's *Existentialism and Humanism* and Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*. But the more recent attacks have denounced 'humanism' as a form of white, male, Western, elite domination and colonization which is being imposed throughout the world and which brings with it too strong a sense of the unique individual. It is seen as contra postmodernism. And in one telling statement, Foucault proclaims 'The modern individual - objectified, analyzed, fixed - is a historical achievement. There is no universal person on whom power has performed its operations and knowledge, its enquiries'. (Foucault, 1979 p159-60). The 'Human Subject' becomes a western invention. It is not a progress or a liberation- merely a trapping on the forces of power.

This loose but important cluster of positions critical of humanism - usually identified with a post-modern sensibility - would include queer theorists, multicultural theorists, post-colonialists, many feminists, and anti-racists, as well as post-structural theorists. Now while I do have much sympathy with these projects and the critical methodologies they usually espouse (e.g. Smith, 1999), I also believe in the value of the pragmatic and humanist traditions too. How can I live with this?

Let me look briefly at what the critics say. They claim that Humanists propose some kind of common and hence universal 'human being' or self: a common humanity which blinds us to wider differences and positions in the world. Often this is seen as a powerful, actualizing and autonomous force in the world - the individual agent is at the centre of the action and the universe. This is said to result in overt individualism strongly connected to the Enlightenment project (Western, patriarchal, racist, colonialist etc). which turns itself into a series of moral and political claims about progress through a liberal and democratic society. Humanism is linked to a universal, unencumbered 'self', and the 'modern' Western liberal project. Such ideas of the human subject are distinctly 'western' and bring with them a whole series of ideological assumptions about the centrality of the white, western, male, middle class/bourgeois position - hence it becomes the enemy of feminism (human has equaled male), ethnic movements (human has equaled white superiority), gays (human has equaled heterosexual) and all cultures outside of the western enlightenment project (human here has equalled the middle class west).

### **A more complex Humanism?**

But such claims made against 'humanism' demean a complex, differentiated term into something far too simple. They can, it is true, come to mean all of the above; but the term does not have to. There is as Alfred McLung Lee and others have charted, a long history and many forms of humanism. (Lee, 1978: 44-5). Attacks are usually waged at a high level of generality and specifics of what constitutes 'the human' are often seriously overlooked. But, as I have suggested elsewhere, for me, this 'human being' is never a passive helpless atom. Humans must be located in time and space: they are always stuffed full of their culture and history, and must 'nest' in a universe of contexts. Human beings are both embodied, feeling animals and creatures with great symbolic potential. They engage in symbolic communication and are dialogic and inter-subjective: there is no such thing as the solitary individual. Their lives are shaped by chance, fateful moments, epiphanies, contingencies. There is also a continuous tension between the specificities and varieties of humanities at any time and place, and the universal potentials which are to be found in all humans. And there is a continuous engagement with moral, ethical and political issues.

Curiously, it is also clear that many of the seeming opponents of humanism can

be found wanting to hold on to some version of humanism, after all. Indeed, it is odd that some of the strongest opponents lapse into a kind of humanism at different points of their argument. For instance, Edward Said - a leading post colonial critic of western style humanism - actually urges another kind of humanism 'shorn of all its 'unpleasantly triumphalist weight', and in his recent work he actually claims to be a humanist. (Said, 1992: 230; 2003))

Indeed, at the start of the twenty first century, there have been many signs that the critique of humanism which pervaded the previous century has started to be reinvigorated as a goal of inquiry. More and more contemporary commentators - well aware of the attacks above- go on to make some kind of humanist claims. It would not be hard to find signs of humanism (and even if they disclaimed it!) in major studies such as Nancy Scheper Hughes *Death Without Weeping*, Stanley Cohen's *States of Denial*, Martha Nussbaum's *Sex and Justice*: for me they are clearly inspired by a version of humanism with the human being at the heart of the analysis, with care and justice as core values, and with the use of any methods to hand that will bring the story out.<sup>6</sup> So whatever the critiques, it does appear that a critical humanism still has its place in social science and qualitative inquiry. But before going too far, we should see what queer theory has to say on all this.

### **A Queer Project**

Queer articulates a radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproductive sexuality and the family  
Cherry Smith 1996:280

Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers'  
David Halperin 1995: 62.

Queer theory started to emerge around the mid to late 1980's in North America, largely as a humanities / multi-cultural based response to a more limited 'lesbian and gay studies'. Whilst the ideas of Michel Foucault loom large (with his talks of 'regimes of truth' and 'discursive explosions'), the roots of queer theory (if not the term) are usually seen to lie in the work of Teresa de Lauretis (Halperin, 2003:339) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who argued that

....many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth century Western culture as a whole are structured - indeed fractured - by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century..... an understanding of any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern Homo/heterosexual definition.. (Sedgwick, 1990: 1)

Judith Butler's work has been less concerned with the deconstruction of the homo/heterosexual binary divide and more interested in deconstructing the sex/gender divide. For her, there can be no kind of claim to any essential gender: it is all 'performative', slippery, unfixed. If there is a heart to queer theory, then, it must be seen as a radical stance around sexuality and gender that denies any fixed categories and seeks to subvert any tendencies towards normality within its study (Sullivan, 2003)

Despite these opening suggestions, the term is very hard to pin down (some see this as a necessary virtue for a theory that refuses fixed identity). It has come to mean many things, and Alexander Doty can suggest at least six different meanings for the term. Sometimes it is used simply as a synonym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT). Sometimes it is an 'umbrella term' which puts together a range of so-called 'non straight positions'. Sometimes it simply describes any non-normative expression of gender (which could include straight). Sometimes it is used to describe 'non-straight things' not clearly signposted as lesbian, gay etc but which bring with them a possibility for such a reading even if incoherently. Sometimes it locates the 'non-straight work, positions, pleasures and readings of people who don't share the same sexual orientation as the text they are producing or responding to'. Taking it even further, Doty then suggests it may be a particular form of cultural readership and textual coding which creates spaces not contained within conventional categories like gay, straight, transgendered. Interestingly, what all his meanings have in common is that they are in some way descriptive of texts and they are in some way linked to (usually transgressing) categories of gender and sexuality. (Doty, 2000:6).

In general, 'Queer' may be seen as partially deconstructing our own discourses and creating a greater openness in the way we think through our categories. Queer theory must explicitly challenge any kind of closure or settlement and so any attempts at definition or codification must be non-starters. Queer theory is, to quote Michael Warner, a stark attack on 'normal business in the academy' (Warner, 1992: p25). It poses the paradox of being inside the academy whilst wanting to be outside of it. It suggests that a "sexual order overlaps with a wide range of institutions and social ideologies, to challenge the sexual order is sooner or later to encounter these institutions as a problem" (Warner, 1991:5). Queer theory is really post-structuralism (and postmodernism) applied to sexualities and genders.

To a limited extent, it may be seen as another specific version of what Nancy Hartstock and Sandra Harding refer to as Standpoint Theory (though I have never seen it discussed in this way). Initially developed as a way to analyse a position of women's subordination and domination, it suggests an 'opposition consciousness' can emerge which transcends the more taken-for-granted knowledge. Interestingly, hardly any men have taken this position up, but other women - women of race and disability for example - have. Men seem to ignore the stance.

And so too have queer theorists: yet what we may well have in queer theory is really something akin to a 'queer standpoint'.

Certain key themes are worth highlighting. Queer theory is a stance in which

- Both the heterosexual/ homosexual binary and the sex/gender split are challenged.
- There is a de-centering of identity.
- All sexual categories are open, fluid and non fixed (which means modern lesbian, gay identities, bisexual and transgender identities are fractured along with all heterosexual ones).
- It offers a critique of mainstream or 'corporate' homosexuality
- It sees power as being embodied discursively. Liberation and rights gives way to transgression and carnival as a goal of political action- what has been called a 'politics of provocation'
- All normalizing strategies are shunned.
- Academic work may become ironic, is often comic and paradoxical, sometimes carnivalesque. 'What a difference a gay makes', 'on a queer day you can see forever' (cf Gever et al, 1993).
- Versions of homosexual subject positions are inscribed everywhere - even in heterosexualities.
- The deviance paradigm is fully abandoned and the interest lies in a logic of insiders / outsiders and transgression
- Its most common objects of study are textual - films, videos, novels, poetry, visual images.
- Its most frequent interests include a variety of sexual fetishes, drag kings and drag queens, gender and sexual playfulness, cybersexualities, polyarmoury, sado-masochism and all the social worlds of the so called radical sexual fringe

### **A Queer Methodology?**

Drawing from this, what are its implications for method (a word it rarely uses)? In its most general form queer theory is a refusal of all orthodox methods - a 'certain disloyalty to conventional disciplinary methods' (Halberstam:1998). What, then, does queer method actually do? What does it look like? Let me give a few examples. In summary, let me give a few examples of what a queer methodology can be seen to offer.

The Textual Turn: Re-readings of cultural artifacts. Queer methods overwhelmingly employ an interest and analysis of texts- films, literature, television. opera, musicals. This is perhaps the most commonly preferred strategy of queer theory. Indeed, Michael Warner has remarked that 'almost everything that would be called queer theory is about ways in which texts - either literature or mass culture of language- shape sexuality'. More extremely he continues-' you can't eliminate queerness.. or screen it out. It's everywhere. There's no place to hide, hetero scum!' (Warner, 1992:19). The locus classicus of this way of thinking

is usually seen to be Sedgwick's *Between Men* (1985) where she looked at a number of key literary works (from Dickens to Tennyson) and re-reads these texts as driven by homosexuality, homosociality and homophobia. Whilst patriarchy might condemn the former, it positively valorises the latter (Sedgwick, 1985). In her wake have come hosts of -re-readings around such themes. In later works she gives readings to work as diverse as Diderot's *The Nun*, Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and authors such as James, and Austen (1990;1994). In her wake, Alexander Doty gives queer readings to mass culture products such as 'the sitcom' - from lesbian readings of the sitcoms *I Love Lucy* or *The Golden Girls*, the role of 'feminine straight men' such as Jack Benny, and the bisexual meanings in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Doty, 1992;2000). Indeed, almost no text can escape the eyes of the queer theorist.

Subversive ethnographies: field work revisited. These are often relatively straightforward ethnographies of specific sexual worlds that challenge assumptions. Sasho Lambevski (1999), for instance, attempts to write 'an insider, critical and experiential ethnography of the multitude of social locations (class, gender, ethnicity, religion) from which 'gays' in Macedonia are positioned, governed, controlled and silenced as subaltern people' (1999: 301). As a 'gay' Macedonian (the terms must be a problem in this context?) who had spent time studying HIV in Australia, he looks at the sexual conflicts generated between the gay Macedonians and gay Albanians (never mind the Australian connection). Lambevski looks at the old cruising scenes in Skopje, known to him from before, that now take on multiple and different meanings bound up with sexualities, ethnicities, gender playing, clashing cultures. Cruising for sex here is no straightforward matter. He describes how in approaching and recognizing a potential sex partner as an Albanian (in an old cruising haunt), he feels paralyzed. Both bodies are flooded with ethnic meaning not simple sex ones, and ethnicities wreak of power. He writes: 'I obeyed by putting the (discursive) mask of my Macedonicity over my body'. In another time and place he may have reacted very differently.

Lambevski is overtly critical of much ethnography and wishes to write a queer experiential ethnography not a confessional one (1999: 298). He refuses to commit himself to what he calls 'a textual lie', which 'continues to persist in much of what is considered a real ethnographic text'. Here bodies, feelings, sexualities, ethnicities, religions can all be easily left out. Nor, he claims, can ethnography simply depend on site observation or one off interviewing. There is a great chain of connection: 'the gay scene is inextricably linked to the Macedonian school system, the structuring of Macedonian and Albanian families and kinship relations, the Macedonian state and its political history, the Macedonian medical system with its power to mark and segregate 'abnormality' (homosexuality)' (1999: 299). There is a chain of social sites; and at the same time his own life is an integral part of this (Macedonian queer, Australian, gay). Few researchers have been so honest as to the tensions that infuse their lives and the wider chains of connectedness that shape their work.

I find it hard to believe that this is not true for all research: but it is usually silenced. Laud Humphrey's classic *Tearoom Trade* (1970) for example - admittedly written some 30 years earlier- cannot speak of Humphrey's own gayness, his own bodily presence (though there is a small footnote on the taste of semen!), his emotional worlds, his white middle classness, or his role as a white married priest. To the contrary, while he does remind the reader of his religious background and his wife, this serves more as a distraction. As important as it was in its day, this is a very different kind of ethnography. The same is true of a host that followed after it. They were less aware of the problematic nature of categories and the links to material worlds. They were, in a very real fashion, 'naïve ethnographies'- somehow thinking 'the story could be directly told as it was'. We live in less innocent times, and queer theory is a marker for this.

Scavenger Methodologies: The raiding of multiple texts to assemble new ones. A fine example of queer 'method' is Judith Halberstam's work on 'female masculinity' (1998). Suggesting that we have failed to develop ways of seeing which can grasp the different kinds of masculinities that women have revealed both in the past and the present, she writes a study which documents the sheer range of such phenomena. In her own work she 'raids' literary textual methods, film theory, ethnographic field research, historical survey, archival records and taxonomy to produce her original account of emerging forms of 'female masculinity'. (Halberstam, 1999: 9- 13). Here we have Aristocratic European cross-dressing women of the 1920's, butch lesbians, dykes, drag kings, tomboys, black -'butch in the hood' rappers, trans-butches, the tribade, the gender invert, the stone butch, the female to male transsexual (FTM), and the raging bull dyke ! She also detects through films as diverse as *Alien* and *The Killing of Sister George* at least six prototypes of the female masculine: tomboys, Predators, Fantasy Butches, Transvestites, Barely Butches, and Postmodern Butches (1998: Ch 6).

In introducing this motley collection, she uses a 'scavenger methodology ... [of] different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior'. She borrows from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 'nonce taxonomy': 'The making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical meanings concerning all the kinds it takes to make up a world' (1990: 23). This is the mode of 'deconstruction' and in this world the very ideas that types of people called homosexuals or gays or lesbians (or more to the point 'men' and 'women') can be simply called up for study becomes a key problem in itself. Instead, the researcher should become more and more open to start sensing new worlds of possibilities.

Many of these social worlds are not immediately transparent, whilst others are amorphously nascent and forming. All this research brings to the surface social worlds only dimly articulated hitherto- with of course the suggestion that there are

more, many more, even more deeply hidden. Now in one sense she captures rich fluidity and diversity - all this going on just beneath the surface structures of society. But in another sense, her very act of naming, innovating terms, categorizing tends itself to create and assemble new differences.

Performing Gender and Ethnographic Performance. Often drawing upon the work of Judith Butler who sees gender as never essential, always unfixed, not innate, never natural but always constructed through performativity - as a 'stylized repetition of acts' (1990: 141) - much of the work in queer theory has been playing around with gender. Initially fascinated by drag, transgender and transsexualism, with Divas, Drag Kings, and key cross genderists such as Del LaGrace Volcano and Kate Borenstein (1995), some of it has functioned almost as a kind of subversive terrorist drag. It arouses curious, unknown queered desires emancipating people from the constraints of the gendered tyranny of the presumed 'normal body'. (Volcano, Del LaGrace & Halberstam, 1999). Others have moved out to consider a wide array of playing with genders- from 'faeries' and 'bears', leather scenes and the Mardi Gras, and on to the more commercialized /normalized drag for mass consumption: RuPaul, Lily Savage, Graham Norton.

Sometimes performance may be seen as even more direct. It appears in the work of alternative documentaries, in 'video terrorism' and 'street theatre', across cable talk shows, experimental art works, activist tapes. By the late 1980's there was a significant expansion of lesbian and gay video (as well as film and film festivals) and in the academy posts were created to deal with this, as well as more informal groupings. (See, for example, Jennie Livingstone's Paris is Burning - which looks at the 'ball circuit' of poor gay men and transgenderists, usually black, in the late 1980's in NYC; or Ang Lee's Wedding Banquet which reconfigured the dominant 'rice queen' image).<sup>7</sup>

Exploring new / queered case studies. Queer theory also examines new case studies. Michael Warner, for example, looks at a range of case studies of emergent publics. One stands out to me: it is the details of a queer cabaret (a counter-public?) that involves 'erotic vomiting'. Suggesting a kind of 'national heterosexuality' along with 'family values' saturates much public talk, he argues that multiple queer cultures work to subvert these. He investigates the queer counter public of a 'garden variety leather bar'- where the routines are 'spanking, flagellation, shaving, branding, laceration, bondage, humiliation, wrestling- as they say, you know, the usual'. But suddenly this common garden s-m bar is subverted by the less than usual : a cabaret of what is called erotic vomiting.(Warner, 2002: 206-10).

The reading of the self. Most of the researches within queer theory play with the author's self - they are rarely absent. D.A. Miller's account , for example, of the Broadway musical and the role its plays in queer life is an intensely personal account of the musical - including snapshots of the author as child, and the albums played.

## **What's new?**

Interesting as many of these methods, theories and studies most certainly are, I would suggest that there is really very little that could be called truly new or striking here. Often it is little more than literary theory rather belatedly coming to social science tools like ethnography and reflexivity. And sometimes it borrows some of the oldest of metaphors - such as drama. Queer theory does not seem to me to constitute any fundamental advance over recent ideas in qualitative inquiry- it borrows, refashions and re-tells. What may be more radical is its persistent concern with categories and gender/ sexuality -although in truth this has long been questioned too (cf Weston, 1998; Plummer, 2002). What seems to be at stake then in any queering of qualitative research is not so much a methodological style as a political and substantive concern with gender, heteronormativity and sexualities. Its challenge is to bring stabilized gender and sexuality to the forefront of analyses in ways they are not usually, and which put under threat any ordered world of gender and sexuality. And this is just what is indeed often missing from much ethnographic or life story research.

## **The Troubles with Queer**

Responses to queer theory have been mixed. It would not be too unfair to say that outside the world of queer theorists - the world of 'straight academia' - it has been more or less ignored and has had minimal impact. This has had the unfortunate consequence of largely ghettoizing the whole approach. Ironically, those who may most need to understand the working of the heterosexual-homosexual binary divide in their work can hence ignore it (and they usually do); whilst those who least need to understand it actively work to deconstruct terms that really describe themselves. Thus, it is comparatively rare in mainstream literary analysis or sociological theory for queer to be taken seriously (indeed, it has taken three editions of this book to include something on it, and the so-called seventh moment of inquiry has so far only paid lip service to it!). More than this, many gays, lesbians and feminists themselves see no advance at all in a queer theory which, after all, would simply 'deconstruct' them, along with all their political gains, out of existence. 'Queer theorists' often write somewhat arrogantly as if they have a monopoly of political validity, negating both the political and theoretical gains of the past. Let me reflect on some of the standard objections to queer theory.

First, for many, the term itself is provocative: a pejorative and stigmatizing word from the past is reclaimed by that very stigmatized grouping and renegotiated its meaning - as such it has a distinct generational overtone. Younger academics love it; older ones hate it. And with this it serves to write off the past worlds of research and create new divisions.

Second, it brings a category problem: what Josh Gamson (1995) has described as a Queer Dilemma. He claims that there is simultaneously a need for a public

collective identity (around which activism can galvanize) and a need to take apart and blur boundaries. As he says: 'fixed identity categories are both the basis for oppression and political power'. Whilst it is important to stress the 'inessential, fluid and multiple sited' forms of identity emerging within the queer movement, he can also see that there are very many from within the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement (LGBT as it is currently clumsily called) who also reject its tendency to deconstruct the very idea of gay and lesbian identity- hence abolishing a field of study and politics when it has only just got going.

There are also many radical lesbians who view it with even more suspicion as it tends to work to make the lesbian invisible and tacitly re-inscribe all kinds of male power (in disguise) bringing back well worn arguments about s-m, porn and transgender politics as anti-women. Radical lesbian feminist, Sheila Jeffreys is particularly scathing, seeing the whole queer movement as a serious threat to the gains of radical lesbians in the late twentieth century. By losing the category of woman-identified-woman and radical lesbian in a fog of (largely masculinist) queer deconstruction, it becomes impossible to see the roots of women's subordination to men. She also accuses it of a major elitism. The languages of most of its proponents ape the language of male academic élites, and loses all the gains that were made by the earlier more accessible writings of feminists who wrote for and spoke to women in the communities and not just other academics. Lilian Faderman claims it is 'resolutely elitist' and puts this well:

The language queer scholars deploy sometimes seems transparently aimed at what lesbian feminists once called the 'big boys' at the academy. Lesbian -feminist writing, in contrast, had as primary values clarity and accessibility, since its purpose was to speak directly to the community and in so doing reflect change'. (Faderman, 1997).<sup>8</sup>

There are many other critics. Tim Edwards (1998) worries about a politics which often collapses into some kind of fan worship, celebration of cult films, and weak cultural politics. Stephen O Murray hates the word itself - it perpetuates binary divisions and cannot avoid being a tool of domination - and is worried about its over preoccupation with linguistics and with textual representation. (Murray, 2002:245-7). And even some of its founders now worry if the whole radical impulse has got lost and queer theory has become normalized, institutionalized, even 'lucrative' within the academy (Halperin, 2003).

So from many sides doubts are being expressed that all is not well in the house of queer. There are problems that come with the whole project, and in some ways I still find the language of the humanists more conducive to social inquiry.

### **Queer Theory meets Critical Humanism: The Conflictual Worlds of Research**

Conflict is the gadfly of thought... a sine qua non of reflection and

And so we have two traditions seemingly at serious odds with each other. There is nothing unusual about this - all research positions are open to conflict both from within and without. Whilst humanism generally looks to experience, meaning and human subjectivity, queer theory rejects this in favor of representations. Whilst humanism generally asks the researcher to get close to the worlds he or she is studying, queer theory almost pleads for distance - a world of texts, defamiliarization and deconstruction. Whilst humanism brings a liberal democratic project with 'justice for all', queer theory aims to prioritize the oppressions of sexuality and gender and urges a more radical change. Humanism is usually for a calmer conversation and dialogue whilst queer is carnivalesque, parodic, rebellious and playful. Humanism champions the voice of the public intellectual; queer theory is to be found mainly in the universities and its own self generated social movement of aspiring academics.

Yet there are some things in common: both for instance would ask of its researcher to adopt a critically self aware stance. Both would seek out a political and ethical background (even though in a quite major way they may differ on this- queer theory has a prime focus on radical gender change, humanism is broader). And both assume the contradictory messiness of social life such that no category system can ever do it justice.

And on closer looking several some of the above differences do overlap- there are many critical humanisms that can focus on representations (though fewer queer theorists who are willing to focus on experience). Critical humanists are often seen as social constructionists, and this can hardly be seen as that far removed from deconstructionists. There is no reason why critical humanism cannot take the value and political stances of queer theorists (I have and I do), but the moral base lines of humanism are wider and less specifically tied to gender. Indeed, contemporary humanistic method enters the social worlds of different 'others' to work a catharsis of comprehension. It juxtaposes differences and complexities with similarities and harmonies. It recognizes the multiple possible worlds of social research - not necessarily the standard interviews or ethnographies, but the roles of photography, art, video, film, poetics, drama, narrative, auto-ethnography, music, self introspection, fiction, audience participation, street theatre. It also finds multiple ways of presenting the 'data'. And it acknowledges that a social science of any consequences must be located in the political and moral dramas of its time. One of those political and moral dramas is 'queer'.

But there again, their histories, canons and gurus are indeed different- even though in the end they are not nearly as at odds with each other as one could be led to believe. Yes they are not the same; and it is right they should maintain some of their key differences. But no, they are not so very different either. No wonder then that I find that I can live with both. Contradiction, ambivalence and tension reside in all critical inquiries.

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<sup>1</sup> As Dmitri Shalin noted over a decade ago: 'The issues that symbolic interactionism has highlighted since its inception and that assured its maverick status in American sociology bear some uncanny resemblance to the themes championed by postmodernist thinkers' (1993: p303). It investigates 'the marginal, local, everyday, heterogeneous and indeterminate' alongside the 'socially constructed, emergent and plural' (p304). Likewise, David Maines (2001) has continued to sustain an earlier argument argued that 'symbolic interactionism, by virtue of its interpretive centre, finds an easy affinity with much of postmodernism, but, because of that same centre, has no need for it'. He finds valuable the resurgence of interest in interpretive work, the importance now given to writing 'as intrinsic to method', the concern over multiple forms of presentation, and the reclaiming of value positions and 'critical work' (Maines, 1996: 325). And as is well known, Norman K Denzin has been at the forefront to defend postmodernism within sociology/cultural studies and symbolic interactionism in numerous books and papers (e.g. Denzin, 1989 ;1997; 2003).

<sup>2</sup> And for some, 'Interactionism' has almost becomes synonymous with sociology- see Maines (2001) and Atkinson & Housley (2003)

<sup>3</sup> The liberal, humanist feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1999:41) suggests a long list of 'human capabilities' which need cultivating to function as a human being. These include concerns like 'bodily health and integrity' senses, imagination, thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; concern for other species; play; control over ones' environment; and life itself'. To this I might add the crucial self reflexive process - a process of communication - which is central to the way we function.

<sup>4</sup> In Bob Connell's rich study of *Masculinities* (1995) - a study that is far from being either avowedly 'humanist' or 'queer'- he takes life stories as emblematic / symptomatic of 'crisis tendencies in power relations (that ) threaten hegemonic masculinity directly' (looking at four groups of men under crisis -radical environmentalists, gay and bisexual networks young working class men, and men of the new class). Connell implies I do not take this seriously(1995: page 89) However, even in the first edition of my book *Documents of Life*, I make it quite clear that

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amongst the contributions of the life story it can be seen as a 'tool for history', as a perspective on totality, and a key focus on social change! (Plummer 1983:68-9)

<sup>5</sup> Or as Rupp and Taylor call it : ' the tripartite model of cultural investigation' (2003:223)

6. Likewise, in the works of Cornell West, Jeffrey Weeks, Seyla Benhabib, Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, Agnes Heller, Jurgen Habermas, Michel Bakhtin and many others I can sense a humanism at work. Never mind the naming game where they have to come out as humanists (though some clearly do); what matters is the goals that they see will produce adequate understanding and social change for the better. Here a lot of them read like humanists manque.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance *Jump Cut, Screen, The Celluloid Closet, Now You see it? The Bad Object Choices* collective and the work of Tom Waugh, Pratibha Parmar,

8. See also Simon Watney's critiques to be found in *Imagine Hope* (2000). Watney is far from sympathetic to radical lesbianism, but his account has distinct echoes. Queer theory has often let down AIDS activism