

## *Judith Butler's Queer Conceptual Politics*

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### **Abstract**

In this article I critically examine the use of the concept “queer” in the work of Judith Butler. I investigate what kind of conceptual politics Butler performs through her use of “queer”. I suggest that “queer” was a term that particularly during the 1990s was used by Butler to repoliticise issues of identity, race, class and their relationship to sexuality. My hypothesis is that for Butler the concept “queer” is an open signifier that functions as a critical term in relation to various issues that Butler analyses.

**Keywords:** queer, concept, politics, theory, feminism

Since the early 1990s the concept of “queer” has played a crucial role in many academic and non-academic debates on sexual politics. Through this concept academics and activists have addressed various political claims. In this article I investigate what kind of conceptual politics Judith Butler performs through her use of the term “queer”. Even though Butler’s work lies at the heart of queer theory, nevertheless, no one has studied in detail her use of this concept. My study of the term “queer” in Butler’s writings will thus provide a new perspective on her work, as well as giving an insight into debates on sexuality that were ongoing in the U.S. during the 1990s and offering a broader picture of conceptual changes that were happening at that time in the U.S. in the field of gender and sexuality studies. In this article I point out how in the context of the term “queer” issues of identity, race, class and their relationship to sexuality were redescribed.

My key argument is that for Butler “queer” is a term that can be attached to various issues and it can serve several political purposes. Rather than offering one specific use of “queer” Butler attaches this term to various political issues

and presents it as an open signifier. Politics of concepts is my methodological approach towards the term “queer”. I look at how this term relates to other concepts used by Butler and also how it relates to certain debates of the time within Gender Studies.

Many researchers<sup>1</sup> who write about “queer theory” associate one particular theme of *Gender Trouble* with “queer”, and that is Butler’s concept of “performativity” or the critique of the subject (Butler 1990). I claim, however, that in Butler’s work neither of these themes is directly related to the concept of “queer”. Sara Salih, for instance, in her book on Butler, claims that Butler’s conceptualization of subjectivity is at the core of her use of the term “queer” (Salih 2002, 7-9). My study is distinct from the approach represented by Salih as she takes “queer” as a specific predefined idea and I concentrate on particular usages of the term. Quite surprisingly, my analysis shows that Butler uses the term in particular to underline the intersections of race, ethnicity and class with gender and sexuality (Butler 1993). Throughout her work, Butler proposes no theory of “queer”, nor is “queer” a central term in her writing but the term plays an important role in politicizing other issues such as class or race.

### “Queer” between different feminisms

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

It is in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) that she first reflects on the concept, meaning and theoretical place of “queer”. The word itself appears a few times in the book and the entire last chapter is dedicated to its consideration. In no other book by Butler does the term “queer” appear so often or carry so many theoretical implications.

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

This text is offered, then, in part as a rethinking of some parts of *Gender Trouble* that have caused confusion, but also as an effort to think further about the working of

heterosexual hegemony in the crafting of matters sexual and political. As a critical rearticulation of various theoretical practices, including feminist and queer studies, this text is not intended to be programmatic. (Butler 1993, xii)

Butler does not ascribe any specific meaning or limit the references of the word “queer”. Perhaps she assumes that the meaning, or at least the usage of this word in U.S. academia, is already somehow established and there is no need to discuss it in detail.

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

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

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

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

In the first two sentences in which the word “queer” appears in *Bodies that Matter* (Butler 1993, 4), “feminism” appears in the same line. These two

words, however, constitute two different fields of political enquiry and Butler situates her own work in both of them, or somewhere in between. The difference between them is further discussed by Butler in 1994/1997<sup>2</sup> article, “Against Proper Objects.” In this article, Butler argues against the strict division between feminist theory and politics and queer theory and politics, but the point of departure for her text is the existence of this division. As a primary interpretative key to social relations, Butler picks the term “queer” as being more related to sexuality, contrary to the term “feminism” that is more related to gender. At the point when the article was written, Butler notices that in the American academia, many researchers work either under the label of “queer” or under the label of “feminism”. This division is rather strong, for Butler notices that, “It seemed that the exploration of the “encounter” between feminism and queer theory was timely and potentially productive, but I forgot at that moment how quickly a critical encounter becomes misconstrued as a war” (Butler 1997a, 1). Butler first polarizes the scene in order to subsequently present herself as a theoretician who combines these two approaches in her analysis, or at least she postulates that. Readers are not informed about the context of this statement, therefore, it is hard to exactly situate this war between “queer” and “feminism”. In this article and in a few other texts from that time it seems that Butler is drawn to Gayle Rubin’s essays that focus less on gender discrimination, but more on ways of theorizing sex and sexual practices (Rubin 2011). Nevertheless, Butler continues to avoid taking a clear stance on the queer side. She only mentions that many people take her *Gender Trouble* as the beginning of queer research. “That the work (*Gender Trouble*) was taken as a queer departure from feminism signaled to me how deeply identified feminism is with those very heterosexist assumptions” (Butler 1997a, 2). This statement is again rather ambiguous. It does not reveal us much about the content of this “queer departure”, nor does it disclose anything about Butler’s own position in relationship to it. What is clear is that “queer” emerged in connection to the publication of *Gender Trouble* and as a reaction to a feminism that was predominantly focused on theorizing heterosexual issues.

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

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

Here it seems that Butler is part of the “us” that turned to studying sexual practices rather than dwelling on the traditional feminist problem of gender. Furthermore, she suggests that the aim of queer researchers is the emergence of “dissonance”. This term is reminiscent of the field of deconstruction, but at

the same time it remains political as a call to rethink the relationship between gender and sexual identity, particularly since these categories were used almost uncritically at least since the 1960s by feminist theorists and by the gay movement.

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

Importantly, “queer” in this essay stands for a coalition of minorities or excluded individuals and groups. Butler recalls this meaning of “queer”, although she states that she is doubtful whether “queer” can really stand for “sexual minorities” in general. I find it important, particularly when I focus on the political aspect of “queer”, that Butler does not draw a clear line of division between academia and activism. It seems that for her texts might be a form of political activism and activism can have academic importance.

According to Annamarie Jagose, Butler uses “queer” politically to oppose identity politics represented by many currents of the LGBT movement and feminism. According to her, by strongly focusing on community, recognition and identity these organizations lost radical political potential. Jagose writes: “For queer is, in part, a response to perceived limitations in the liberationist and identity-conscious politics of the gay and lesbian feminist movement” (Jagose 1996, 130). Clearly, Jagose has a point that Butler develops “queer” as a critical term that targets the politics of the major gay and lesbian and feminist organizations, but I think that Butler’s point is not to reject identity concepts and replace them with “queer”. I suggest that instead Butler uses “queer” to destabilize identity terms and to reformulate them so that they will remain open to new meanings and new positionings. This is how I perceive her call for *disidentification*. It is definitely more complex than a simple rejection of identity politics. “Queer” is different from traditional identity terms because it is a reiteration of an abuse and it is therefore self-critical, it reveals its own

conditions and limitations (Butler 1993, 221). As a citation, “queer” is always performative and therefore it has a possibility to remain open and can be used even as a critique of those who use it, meaning both activists and theorists. Butler writes:

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

A statement like this would not be easily accepted by many political activists. Most of them have a strong faith in what they fight for, but Butler is warning that even when fighting for a good cause one needs to remain self-critical. Many LGBT activists<sup>3</sup> consider such statements coming from academics either too theoretical or counter-political. The quote above illustrates Butler’s ambiguous relationship towards “identity”. I argue that, in this context “queer” is designed to represent an immanent criticism toward strong identity concepts but at the same time Butler does not reject identity concepts. She acknowledges the need for them, particularly in activism, but these identity terms need to be constantly re-examined.

Butler opposes queer theory as a discrete discipline and is against any theoretical institutionalization of “queer”. At the end of her article “Against Proper Objects”, Butler reveals what the function of “queer thinking” should be. She postulates that the role and function of “queer” is to be a critical category, a form of social reflection on sexuality that would help to “map power” (Butler 1997a, 25). In other words, the concept of “queer” in itself does not constitute a particular methodology or a field of study but should, according to Butler, help to provide “a more expansive conception of criticism” (Butler 1997a, 24).

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

## Queer critique

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

One of the first uses of the term in *Bodies That Matter* is in the expression “queer lives”. Butler describes this in relation to people with AIDS but she explains that the use of “queer” might be broader. For Butler, “queer lives” are agents who have a social identity that is marked by abjection. The abjection that Butler analyses generally has a sexual basis, but she clearly states that she does not want to limit her theory only to homosexuality, because homosexuality does not accommodate all the variability of the agents who are devalued by the symbolic order.

The concept “queer” is very important for Butler because it carries more theoretical implications than the feminist discussions on sexual difference. These discussions were blind to the aspects of race, ethnicity and class. As a result, according to Butler, theorists of sexual difference always discussed only “white sexuality”.<sup>4</sup> In this context, as a theoretical category “queer” has an advantage for the reason that under the umbrella term “queer” one is also able to theorize the intersections of sexuality, race, class and also perhaps other components which constitute the social position of an agent.

For Butler, sexuality cannot be theorized separately from other social factors, particularly race and class. These factors situate the subject. Race, class and sexuality overlap and, while analysing abjection, it would be a mistake to focus solely on sexual practices as if they were not connected and co-dependent on other forms of social identification. This is the point where “queer” functions in Butler’s work as a critique of traditional gay and lesbian identity as based merely on sexual orientation. I suggest that the use of “queer” with a special focus on class and race is targeting lesbian and gay studies that often tend to overlook these issues. On a broader level it is an attempt to rethink notions of sexual orientation as limited. Through “queer” Butler aims at further politicizing and destabilizing the notions of sexual identity.

The political power of “queer” arises from the specific history of this term and the possibility politically of applying this term as deconstructive in various cases related to identity, community and representation issues. In this respect it is interesting that in *Bodies That Matter*, Butler uses “queer” as an interpretative key to read two particular texts, Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and Jennie Livingstone’s

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

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

Another text that Butler explores is Larsen's *Passing*. Here Butler traces the use of "queer", examining it from the perspective of the social construction of race. This book dates back to 1929. The novel itself focuses on the problem of the link between desire and race. Oppression underlines everything: the construction of the identity of the characters, desire, race, language and sexuality. "Queer" is not used as a subversive category in the novel, at least not in a sense that it could stand for any particular subversive political acts, but it has

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

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

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

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

While Butler's attention to the implications of *queer* for personal and collective injury is crucial in recalling the mixed history of queer subjectivity, her anxious emphasis on the need of constant turning, constant reclamation, is striking. Queers are thus subject to a double imperative: they must face backward, toward a difficult

past, and forward, in the direction of “urgent and expanding political purposes.” According to this vision, the work of queering is never done. (Love 2001, 493)

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

### “Queer” and “homosexuality”

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

I find it striking when Butler mentions in the context of “queer” “the normativity of its own terms”. To me it seems that Butler argues against a particular trend in gay and lesbian thought that was initiated by Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and also represented by Monique Wittig and Guy Hocquenghem. These authors saw non-heterosexual identities and non-normative sexual practices as being sites of resistance or even as having revolu-

tionary potential. Nevertheless, Butler is not clear about whether “resistance to normalization” and “resignification of the symbolic” can be understood as some conscious, public acts or as individual choices or sexual practices. There is no one recipe for how to be queer, but clearly Butler has some ethical project and one can see a call to be queer in *Bodies That Matter*. I think that there are two alternative readings of Butler’s conceptualization of “queer”. The first would place “queer” as a rather theoretical, critical concept that resignifies the symbolic when used as an analytical term to interpret culture or politics. The second would represent the opposite interpretation, which might be partly in line with Wittig and Hocquenghem. Undoubtedly both Wittig and Hocquenghem were a source of inspiration to Butler (Wittig is mentioned several times in *Gender Trouble*), particularly the notion that individual acts, for example, non-normative sexual practices, might be subversive. The term “subversion” also seems to be closely associated with the term “queer”. Clearly, to Butler “homosexuality” and “homosexual sex” are not synonyms for “queer” but they have a subversive potential and they might therefore be related to “queer”. Butler does not offer any exact conditions under which sexual acts are “queer” and when they are normative. As an overall idea of *Bodies That Matter*, we might have the impression that “queer” is not so much about sex itself but about oppression and about the reaction towards this oppression. What is clear to me is that “queer” in Butler’s work functions against the idea of transgression or any type of idealization of sexual acts. This situates Butler in opposition to other authors who use “queer” politically as a sign of transgression of norms (see, for example, Warner 1999, Dean 2009, Munoz 2009, and Bersani and Phillips 2008). The range of authors who use “queer” in order to idealize certain sexual acts as transgressive have become very influential within recent years. I see Butler’s work as a persistent opposition to this usage of “queer”. She uses “queer” to criticize norms but these norms cannot be simply transgressed as if there would be some non-normative field that could be achieved. Subversion of norms that Butler proposes is a much more complex process of reworking oppressive norms.

In this context, it is also important to consider whether in Butler’s texts the term “queer”, in opposition to traditional sexual identity terms such as “homosexual”, means fluidity of gender and sexuality. I think that such interpretation is possible but I suggest that it would be an idealization of Butler’s concept of openness. This reading of Butler is represented for instance by Moya Lloyd, who writes: “There is, thus, no single modality of embodiment that stands for straight-ness or queer-ness. Rather there is openness, fluidity, flux; an endless possibility of de-determination and re-citation” (Lloyd 1999, 197). I do not, however, agree with Lloyd. Certainly, Butler aims at opening up identity concepts, but it is possible only to some extent and possibilities are not endless. Body, language and society impose limits on gender and sexuality and also pro-

vide us with possibilities to subvert these limits, but not everything is fluid and possible. In my understanding, Butler in her political usage of “queer” rather clearly forecloses this happy utopia when she demonstrates that in *Passing* and in *Paris Is Burning* the possibilities of embodiment are open but limited, and at the end there is death.

### Queer resistance

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

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

### The framework of “queer”

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

final chapter because it is the most recent problem for her. She is aware that by 1993 “queer” was increasingly more commonly used in the context of sexuality studies but. “Queer” also became a political concept and a sign of radical activists of the time.

In “Critically Queer” Butler does not recall any authors who were writing about “queer” during that time, although Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is mentioned once in the context of queer performativity. Regarding the political use of “queer” Butler mentions ACT UP and Queer Nation. Butler’s chapter is in no way an analysis of the use of “queer” at the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s. It is rather her own project of using “queer” in a specifically political manner. In this chapter, Butler clearly links the term “queer” to deconstruction and to her concept of “performativity”. The theorists whom she recalls in this context are, among others, Jacques Derrida, Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Gayatri Spivak, Sigmund Freud, Rubin, J. L. Austin and Paul de Man, and Butler also mentions her own work, *Gender Trouble*. With this theoretical background she invites readers to think about “queer”.

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

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

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

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

Some of Butler’s sentences clearly indicate that she considers there to be

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

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

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

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

All in all, I would claim that through her discussion of identity categories in relation to “queer”, Butler introduces the idea of radical contestation into contemporary democratic theory and practice. By bringing the unstable concept “queer” into political thought she aims at destabilizing and rethinking other concepts that are used in politics. Butler recalls at this point (Butler 1993, 229) Spivak’s formulation of identity as *a necessary error* in democracy, where democracy is understood as a pluralism of voices. Democracy is a contestation and therefore different identities are required but “queer” is not merely one more identity, it has *a democratizing force*. Following, “queer” serves here as a deconstruction of identity categories, a means for them to remain open and flexible. As an identity category, “homosexuality” tends to be exclusive and it is often associated with whiteness. By contrast, “queer” should ideally be able to accommodate other factors that intersect with the construction of desire

and sexuality. For Butler, however, “queer” seems to be primarily a negative concept, which serves as a critique of any essentialism and has a deconstructive function. She writes:

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

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

Butler demonstrates here that “queer” often works hyperbolically and as a consequence, it exposes and reverses homophobic interpellation. This might be seen as a new quality in politics, but not a politics that constitutes a struggle for rights, but a politics that searches for a different language to express what was culturally sentenced to invisibility, a politics that “acts out” and thereby brings to light the injury of abjection. As Butler puts it: “The hyperbolic gesture is crucial to the exposure of the homophobic ‘law’ that can no longer control the terms of its own abjecting strategies” (Butler 1993, 232).

It is clear that Butler does not use the concept of “queer” as a ready political concept that only lacks theoretical description. Rather she suggests a new political project of using “queer” as a “democratizing force”. Butler imagines the possible uses of “queer” that would be politically potent. She finds the post-structural framework of deconstruction to be the most fruitful in order to apply “queer” as a political category. Austin, Derrida, and Foucault do not provide any historical and conceptual background for current uses of “queer” for the simple reason that they never used the concept. But it seems that according to Butler, these thinkers are able to offer a theoretical background that

can shape a political force of “queer”. Her project in *Bodies That Matter* is a project of imagining “queer”. Here, according to Butler, deconstruction is the best tool to theorize the important political aims that excluded groups share.

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

### Modalities of queer

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

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

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

It becomes difficult to say whether the sexuality of the transgendered person is homosexual or heterosexual. The term “queer” gained currency a decade ago precisely to address such moments of productive undecidability, but we have not yet seen a psychoanalytic attempt to take account of these cultural formations in which certain vacillating notions of sexual orientation are constitutive. (Butler 2004, 114)

Here “queer” has a critical potential related to the question of the construction of sexual identity. Moreover, according to Butler, “queer” has an ability to represent something which is not yet recognized by psychoanalysis.

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

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

Butler provides the examples of the broad use of “queer” in her essays, for instance, by situating “queer” in variable contexts. There are, for instance, queer lives, queer activism, queer communities, queer crossing, queer critique, queer theory, queer studies, “the queer appropriation of ‘queer’” (Butler 2004, 223), queer comedy, queer redescription, and even “the queer post-structuralism of the psyche” (Butler 2004, 44). Butler also identifies her first book as an important intervention in feminism that opens up a space for queer theory.

In the work of Judith Butler the concept of “queer” often oscillates between psychoanalysis and post-structuralism. In many cases “queer” might be seen as a term which has a very broad meaning connected to sexual identification based on abjection, in many other cases it seems that the term does not have a

positive meaning and it works as a negative deconstructive category. However, in my opinion, this is not a contradiction. Butler mobilizes the post-structuralist framework, particularly Derrida's philosophy, in order to work politically in the field of sexuality. Here "queer" is an example of a term with a meaning that can be described only by a negation that was formative for this term and it still functions in the form of temporary alliances, which themselves can be an object of deconstruction. "Queer" does not have an exclusive definition. It is more a tool that can be mobilized to look critically at any notions of sexuality and particularly at the limits and peripheries of these notions.

### **The politics of queer**

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

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

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

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

Its political potential lies in resisting any institutionalization, both academic and practical, such as activism, or even on an individual level, identity practices. For Butler "queer" is ever-changing and it never carries a strong positive content. It can be described as a negative concept, not only in the sense that

it opposes norms, but it is even in opposition to itself as far as it can work as a self-critique. Perhaps that is also the reason why Butler never strongly identifies with this concept although she sporadically uses it in different contexts.

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

I suggest that readings of Butler that tend to theorize "queer" merely as a critique of identity (Colebrook 2009, Seidman 1995) simplify the issue. Butler herself is careful not to overvalue the denaturalization of identity. It is an important political strategy but, as she says, "there is a risk in the affirmation of denaturalization as a strategy" (Butler 1993, 93). "Queer" in Butler's work poses a challenge to traditional identity concepts but it also has a broader political function.

Several authors that focus on the gay and lesbian political movement as well as on the queer movement have accused some queer theorists, including Butler, of depoliticizing "queer". In his essays, Douglas Crimp (2002) argues strongly against a queer theory that distances itself from activism. Jeffrey Escoffier also tackles the same problem in *American Homo*. Whereas Escoffier does not analyse Butler's work in detail, he places her in the same category as those theorists who prefer literary and cultural studies over politics. According to Escoffier, theory cannot be properly political without focusing on social institutions and structures (Escoffier 1998, 178). He interprets Butler's concept of "queer" as being part of her theory of performativity. Escoffier claims that for Butler, the possibili-

ty of political mobilization follows from the performative character of discourses. Therefore, Escoffier concludes that Butler's work is part of cultural analyses that are linguistic games rather than a real political intervention. It is easy to think about Butler in this way because she rarely engages in discussion about rights or social institutions. Nevertheless, it is wrong to situate Butler entirely within cultural studies and accuse her of using "queer" as a concept within the field of literary criticism. Clearly, Butler makes no distinction between the political and cultural. She argues about this in her article "Merely Cultural". According to Butler, this distinction is both superficial and normative. In the same article Butler argues against opposition between recognition to redistribution, instead she proposes to critically analyse both of them as necessary elements of the political struggle of sexual minorities.

As a concept "queer" is a good example that politics is more than merely institutionalized politics. It is also a call for new ways of participation in society, new forms of recognition, and new forms of kinship. "Queer" in Butler's work is "a site of collective contestation" (Butler 1993, 228), but also a tool to analyse the construction of normativity. For Butler, the political dimension of "queer" lies in its possibility to articulate the very terms of political agency and to reveal that they are not neutral, but normative. The concept of "queer", even if used at points in Butler's work as a literary deconstructive category, obtains its political status from its primary function as a term of abuse and from its application by activists as a sign of protest. In this context, the term becomes a call for alternative recognition.

As a concept "queer" is a good example that politics is more than merely institutionalized politics. It is also a call for new ways of participation in society, new forms of recognition, and new forms of kinship. "Queer" in Butler's work is "a site of collective contestation" (Butler 1993, 228), but also a tool to analyse the construction of normativity. For Butler, the political dimension of "queer" lies in its possibility to articulate the very terms of political agency and to reveal that they are not neutral, but normative.

It is not easy to provide a clear conclusion and say what Butler means by "queer" and what is the political potential of the term in her work. I have not found any extensive critical analysis of this particular term in Butler's works, but I think that both its strong and its weak side is that it is an open-ended term, and is not defined in a positive way. In Butler's work, I find that "queer" occupies a peculiar position in that Butler sets "queer" as a horizon of critical political practices. At this point the influence of Foucault's thought is apparent; Butler does not aim at liberation of homosexuals from oppression, rather "queer" is for her a sign of political resistance to the dominant norms. In my reading, Butler uses "queer" as a negative concept in the sense that it does not have a meaning of its own but it gains meaning when attached to a particular context, but the politics that "queer" denotes is not negative. It is a politics of active resistance

towards the dominant forms of power. As Steven Seidman puts it: "Judith Butler proposes a variant of deconstructive analysis but one which gestures toward a constructive politics" (Seidman 1997, 159). Based on Butler's work, "queer" can be used to denaturalize and politicize norms and practices that are considered neutral in our culture. For Seidman, it also presents a problem on the ethical level; he asks which differences would be permissible and which norms could guide judgments and finally, what would organize new subjectivities in the absence of identity concepts. In my opinion, Seidman's interpretation of Butler's critique of identity concepts is too radical. The concept of "queer" would not replace identity concepts. Butler does not aim at rejecting these concepts but rather at exposing them as political constructs. In this context, "queer" disturbs the construction of identity concepts but it does not erase or replace them.

Butler uses "queer" in relation to political thought but without any direct relation to political action. According to Butler "queer" can function as a critique of identity concepts but should not be a substitute for them. Butler, moreover, does not reject identity concepts but rather aims at reworking them. "Identity", "race", "class" became topics that are repoliticised in their relation to sexuality through the term "queer". For Judith Butler queer politics seems to be situational and temporal.

## Endnotes

- 1 For example: Escoffier, Jeffrey; *American Homo*, Berkeley 1998; Sullivan, Nikki; *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, New York 2003; Huffer, Lynne; *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory*, New York 2010
- 2 The first version of this article was published in 1994 but in my article I refer to the revised version of "Against Proper Objects" from 1997.
- 3 A good example is Jeffrey Escoffier who in *American Homo* (1998) calls this type of criticism "ivory tower", out of touch with the real politics of LGBT.
- 4 In *Bodies That Matter* Butler makes this point a few times, one example being the beginning of chapter 6, p. 167.

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