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QUEER CRITIQUE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

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SUMMARY

The dissertation analyses, on the one hand, the notion of queer critique as it emerges from the queer theoretical canon, and on the other hand, some key debates voicing a discontent with critique in general and queer critique in particular. Queer theory was born at the turn of the 1990s in the U.S. as a way to take distance from mainstream theories and politics of sexuality. This distance is marked by the rejection of the binary distinction between homo- and heterosexuality, the refusal to take sexual and gender identities to be natural, and an emphasis on the differences within sexual minorities. Therefore, it is not surprising that queer theory is, by definition, critical. This dissertation, however, aims to delve deeper into that critical practice that queer theory often takes for granted.

The first chapter focuses on the notion of critique in the work of Michel Foucault, who is possibly the main inspiration for the queer critics to come. In the two texts scrutinised – 'What is Critique?' (1978) and the first lecture of the course *The Government of Self and Others* (1983) – Foucault reflects on critique by way of Kant's notion of the Enlightenment. From these texts, critique emerges as a practice that operates on at least three terrains: historical-philosophical analysis (critique as genealogy), ethics (critique as a parrhesiastic lifestyle or ethos), and politics (critique as the art of not being governed like that [*comme ça*] as well as, later on, critique as what emerges from the enthusiasm for the spectacle of the revolution). Queer theory in its multiple ramifications reflects, although not without tensions, each of these definitions.

The second chapter centres on two figures whose trajectories have been highly influential to the field: Judith Butler and Eve K. Sedgwick. Its focus is set on the notion of theory as well as on the different critical practices deployed by Butler and Sedgwick. The two authors perform, respectively, a philosophical critique (Butler) and a literary criticism (Sedgwick). The chapter shows that these two critical practices are not as different as they seem, especially considering the interdisciplinary character of queer theory. Regarding the notion of theory, the chapter analyses how, in Butler's and Sedgwick's early works, Foucault's open-ended critique crystallises into a theory. In

their later works, instead, both Butler and Sedgwick partly break with this same theory that, paradoxically, they had contributed to build. The chapter pays special attention to Sedgwick's notions of 'paranoid reading' and 'reparative reading', through which she signals her discontent with reading practices that follow the mandates of theory and, in so doing, produce routinised modes of critical analysis.

The third chapter aims to explore recent dissatisfactions with critique following in Sedgwick's footsteps. On the one hand, it analyses Rita Felski's project of a postcritique, which aims at overcoming the limits of critique and reinstating contingency and affect at the core of literary analysis. While agreeing with some of the arguments put forward by those who criticise Felski's proposal and defend critique, especially when formulated from a queer perspective, the chapter argues that postcritique's most crucial interventions concern, first, the denunciation of the ossification of critique, and second, the indication of alternative reading practices. On the other hand, the chapter discusses Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson's project of a queer theory without antinormativity. Just like Felski, Wiegman and Wilson aim to counter the imperative of the critique of normativity, which they see as an unreflective automatism of the queer theoretical field. However, the solution they put forward – a rethinking of normativity itself in less rigid terms – is not fully convincing. Thus, the thesis closes with a possible way out of the routines of queer critique by means of José E. Muñoz's proposal for a utopian and hopeful critique.

SOMMARIO

La critica queer e i suoi scontenti

La tesi esamina sia la nozione di critica che emerge dal canone della teoria queer, sia alcuni dibattiti recenti che esprimono insoddisfazione nei confronti della critica in generale e della critica queer in particolare. La teoria queer, nata fra gli anni Ottanta e Novanta del Novecento in ambiente anglofono, prende le distanze tanto dalle politiche quanto dalle teorie *mainstream* della sessualità, decostruendo il binarismo fra omo- ed eterosessualità, rifiutandosi di considerare naturali le categorie di sesso e genere ed evidenziando le molteplici differenze interne alle minoranze sessuali. Che tale teoria sia per definizione critica non stupisce. La tesi, tuttavia, vuole approfondire il significato di quella pratica critica che il campo queer dà spesso per scontato.

Il primo capitolo si concentra dunque sull'idea di critica che emerge nell'opera di Michel Foucault, considerato la maggiore ispirazione per le/gli intellettuali queer a venire. Esso prende in esame due testi in cui Foucault si confronta con la nozione di critica e con l'idea kantiana di Illuminismo: 'Qu'est-ce que la critique?' *(Illuminismo e critica,* 1978) e la prima lezione del corso *Il governo di sé e degli altri* (1983). Da questi scritti si evince che la critica, per Foucault, è una pratica che investe almeno tre ambiti: quello storico-filosofico (critica intesa come genealogia del presente), quello etico (critica come condotta o ethos parresiastico) e quello politico (critica come arte di non essere eccessivamente governati e, più tardi, critica come ciò che emerge dall'entusiasmo di fronte allo spettacolo della rivoluzione). La teoria queer nelle sue varie ramificazioni si rispecchia, pur non senza tensioni, in ciascuna di queste definizioni.

Il secondo capitolo s'impernia attorno a due figure che hanno determinato la traiettoria della teoria queer sin dalle origini: Judith Butler ed Eve K. Sedgwick. In particolare, esso si concentra sia sulla nozione di teoria, sia sulle diverse pratiche critiche messe all'opera da Butler e Sedgwick. Le due autrici, infatti, sono fautrici, rispettivamente, di una critica filosofica (Butler) e di una critica letteraria (Sedgwick), sebbene il capitolo

mostri come questi due modi di 'fare' critica non sono poi così distanti fra loro, specialmente in un campo – quello queer – caratterizzato da una marcata interdisciplinarietà. Riguardo alla nozione di teoria, il capitolo analizza come la critica di Foucault si cristallizzi, nei primi scritti di Butler e Sedgwick, in una vera e propria teoria. Negli scritti più maturi, invece, Butler e Sedgwick prendono le distanze, seppure attraverso percorsi diversi, da quella stessa teoria cui avevano contribuito a dare forma. Il capitolo si sofferma in particolar modo sulle nozioni di 'lettura paranoide' e 'lettura riparativa' formulate da Sedgwick per dar voce alla propria delusione per quelle modalità ermeneutiche che pongono al centro la teoria intesa come pratica critica fossilizzatasi nel tempo e divenuta routine.

Il terzo e ultimo capitolo esamina le insoddisfazioni contemporanee nei confronti della critica che proprio da Sedgwick prendono spunto. Da un lato, esso si concentra su Rita Felski e sulla sua proposta postcritica: una pratica che ambisce a superare i limiti della critica e a riportare la contingenza e gli affetti al centro dell'analisi letteraria. Pur riconoscendo le accuse che le difenditrici e i difensori della critica le muovono, soprattutto quando queste provengono da una prospettiva queer, il capitolo suggerisce che l'intervento della postcritica ha l'indubbio pregio di sottolineare la fossilizzazione della critica e di segnalare possibili alternative alle cosiddette 'ermeneutiche del sospetto'. Dall'altro lato, il capitolo discute la proposta, formulata da Robyn Wiegman ed Elizabeth A. Wilson, di una teoria queer senza antinormatività. Come Felski, anche Wiegman e Wilson si scagliano contro un imperativo irriflesso che domina il campo queer: quello della critica alla normatività. Anche in questo caso, viene riconosciuta a Wilson e, soprattutto, a Wiegman l'importanza di aver evidenziato l'irrigidimento di certe modalità critiche all'interno della teoria queer. Tuttavia, la soluzione da loro avanzata per muoversi oltre l'antinormatività, ovvero di ripensare la normatività in termini meno rigidi, non viene presentata come del tutto convincente. La tesi si conclude dunque con un diverso tentativo di superare l'insoddisfazione verso la critica queer: la critica utopica e piena di speranza di José E. Muñoz.

INTRODUCTION

One famous slogan of contemporary radical queer activism reads: 'not gay as in happy, but queer as in fuck you'.[1] This slogan has been widely reproduced on banners and t-shirts, at pride parades and on embroideries, in academic articles and activist leaflets. It has also become a meme featuring a smiley housewife holding a gun.[2] The meaning is rather transparent to those familiar with queer theory and politics: just like the word 'gay' means 'happy' – which in fact it *does* – the word 'queer' means 'fuck you' – which in fact it does *not*. 'Queer', an English slur historically deployed to insult LGBT people, has been reappropriated and resignified at the turn of the 1990s both as a political and a theoretical project, in the U.S. context and beyond. In this sense, it means 'faggot' or 'dyke' more than 'fuck you'. Rather than providing a concise set of synonyms, the slogan seems to signify a proportion: gay is to happiness as queer is to fuck you. 'Well, yes. "Gay" is great', reads the well-known manifesto circulated at the 1990 New York pride parade by Queer Nation – perhaps the first self-defined queer collective, born to campaign for an end of the AIDS crisis[3] – '[b]ut when a lot of lesbians and gay men wake up in the morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So we've chosen to call ourselves queer'.[4]

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[1] See, for instance: Erin J Rand, *Reclaiming Queer. Activist and Academic Rhetorics of Resistance*.

[2] See: princesstokyomoon, 'enamoured with this image', *Tumblr*, 22 June 2021, https://princesstokyomoon.tumblr.com/post/654672714657841152/enamoured-with-this-image (accessed 2 January 2022).

[3] Queer Nation is a short-lived group founded in 1990 in New York City by ACT UP activists. ACT UP itself (acronym for AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) is a group born a few years earlier in New York City; some of its chapters continue their activities up to this day. Both collectives aimed to protest the management of the HIV epidemic by U.S. institutions and its dire repercussions on LGBT people's lives. Their highly spectacular direct actions have been an inspiration to contemporary queer modes of activism, in the U.S. and beyond. For a historical overview, see: Gavin Brown, 'Queer Movement', in D Paternotte & M Tremblay (eds), *Ashgate Companion to Lesbian and Gay Activism*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015, pp 53–68. See also chapter 1 of this dissertation, pp 90–93.

[4] ACT UP, 'Queer Nation Manifesto: Queers Read This' (1990), in B Fahs (ed), *Burn It Down! Feminist Manifestos for the Revolution*. London & New York: Verso, 2020, pp 28–40: 37.

To be sure, 'gay' and 'queer' are more contiguous than the slogan suggests. Consider this short history of 'gay' by Annemarie Jagose:

> in the 1960s, [gay-liberation activists] made a strategic break with 'homosexuality' by annexing the word 'gay', thus redeploying a 19th-century slang term which had formerly described women of dubious morals. 'Gay' was mobilised as a specifically political counter to that binarised and hierarchised sexual categorisation which classifies homosexuality as a deviation from a privileged and naturalised heterosexuality. Much conservative – not to mention linguistically naïve – criticism was levelled at this appropriation on the grounds that an 'innocent' word was being 'perverted' from its proper usage.[5]

Three important parallels between gay and queer emerge from this passage. First, gay is surely synonym for happy, but it is not free of derogatory connotations, for it was formerly used to describe 'women of dubious moral'. Secondly, when gay was first annexed to homosexuality, it was meant to signify not political complacency, but 'a specifically political counter' to dominant heterosexuality – and to any simple binary between heterosexual norm and homosexual deviation. Thirdly, the appropriation and redeployment of gay was not met exactly with joy. Keith Thomas' observation, in 1980, that a minority 'is scarcely entitled to expect those who do not belong to [it] to observe this new usage [of gay]'[6] is a reactionary argument that could as well be put forward by the detractors of 'queer'.

But, if both gay and queer used to be slurs that were subsequently resignified and reclaimed as tools for struggle by those originally targeted by them, how come that the slogan 'not gay as in happy, but queer as in fuck you' is so apt to describe the contemporary divide between merry gays and angry queers? As the story goes, people who continue mobilising under the sign of gayness today keep themselves busy with such political issues as the right to marriage and the possibility to be drafted in the

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[5] Annemarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press, 1996, pp 72–73.

[6] Keith Thomas, 'Rescuing Homosexual History', *New York Review of Books*, 4 July 1980, pp 26–29: 26. See also: Jagose, *Queer Theory*, p 73.

army. Those mobilising under the sign of queerness, instead, embrace a radical politics that resists inclusion in straight (and state) institutions. Accordingly, the slogan performs the same gap that, in 2003, Lisa Duggan detects between Andrew Sullivan – a fervent right-wing champion of the mainstreaming of gays and lesbians – and the queer politics she herself supports:

> [In Sullivan] [t]here is no vision of a collective, democratic public culture, or of an ongoing engagement with a contentious cantankerous queer politics. Instead we have been administered a kind of political sedative – we get marriage and the military, then we go home and cook dinner, forever.[7]

Here, Duggan's goal is not to reify a stable divide between 'gay' and 'queer'. On the contrary, she aims to recover the uncompromising spirit of the lesbian and gay liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s precisely in order to counter the assimilation of LGBT people into contemporary neoliberal projects. Queer is thus configured, in Duggan, as a 'contentious cantankerous' politics vis-à-vis LGBT political claims whose horizon does not extend beyond the clichés of family life and military service. 'Fuck you' versus 'happy', indeed.

Before and beyond signalling two political camps, however, 'not gay as in happy, but queer as in fuck you' is an affective proposition. There is something in gayness standing for happiness, joy, and the like, and something in queerness equalling anger, rage, disgust. This difference echoes what Sara Ahmed theorises about 'happiness' and 'killjoy'. On the one hand, happiness, for Ahmed, marks a discourse that saturates present-day society and that takes marriage as one of its core indicators.[8] On the other hand, queer feminists who deviate from social scripts become the bearers of a killjoy attitude that resists the many ways in which 'happiness is used to redescribe social norms as social goods'.[9] In light of this distinction, the slogan secures the link of

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[7] Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality. Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2003, p 62.

[8] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness.* Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2010, pp 3–7. This same work is discussed in chapter 1 of this dissertation, pp 72–74.

[9] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p 2. See also the chapter 'Unhappy Queers', pp 88–120.

happiness with gayness as the upholding of assimilationist politics, and of 'fuck you' (or Ahmed's 'killjoy') with queerness as the countering of how happiness is framed in a straight world. 'Happy' and 'fuck you' are thus the affective registers in which the difference between 'gay' and 'queer', today, often plays out.

I chose to start with this slogan because it condenses a few characteristics pertaining not only to queerness, but to critique as well. Just like queer, critique is often said to be always 'against', invariably angry, utterly negative. If the slogan were to read, 'not uncritical as in happy, but critical as in fuck you', scholars trained in the protocols of critique would probably subscribe to it. For many of them, everything that is uncritical is held to be 'naïve, immature, unexamined',[10] Michael Warner says, as if uncriticality must always coincide with the thoughtless happiness of fools. What is critical, instead, is taken to be clever, mature, and deeply self-aware. Additionally, just like queer activists, critical scholars understand themselves 'to be engaged in some kind of radical and/or intellectual political work'.[11] There seems to be a close affinity between 'queer' and 'critique': in this sense, a study on 'queer critique' seems bound to double down on anger, oppositionality, radicalism, and negativity.

This dissertation is an exploration of what a queer critique is. Such exploration is not carried out by casting queer critique against an alleged gay critique, as the opening slogan seems to suggest. 'Queer' is taken to be a comprehensive ('convergentist', in Robyn Wiegman's vocabulary)[12] noun, which includes rather than excludes 'gay', 'lesbian', 'trans', and the other markers of gender and sexual dissidence that the LGBTQIA+ acronym encapsulates. Most importantly, this dissertation aims to unpack the reasons for the current discontents with queer critique. By 'discontents' I do not

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[10] Michael Warner, 'Uncritical Reading', in J Gallop (ed), *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical?* New York & London: Routledge, 2004, pp 13–38: 25. This same text is discussed in chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp 99–100, in relation to the distinction between 'critique' and 'criticism' in the English language, as well as in chapter 3, p 203–204, in relation to postcritique.

[11] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2015, p 2.

[12] Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2012. The second chapter is titled 'Telling Time. When Feminism and Queer Theory Diverge' (pp 91–136). About the meaning of 'convergentist', see chapter 3 of this dissertation, pp 230–231.

mean the conservative attacks aimed at delegitimising and debunking queer critique and other forms of 'minority knowledge', in Roderick Ferguson's phrase.[13] These attacks, which can be called 'anti-gender' even though their scope extends well beyond the countering of the concept of gender, provide an important background to reflect on the status of queer critique today, yet they are not the objects of this investigation.[14] The discontents under scrutiny here are internal and sympathetic to queer critique, not set against it. With Eve K. Sedgwick, this dissertation wonders if a queer critique is bound to be paranoid.[15] With Rita Felski, it asks whether critique is alive and kicking or has run its course.[16] With Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson, it doubts that a stance against normativity is the most suited for queer theory to adopt.[17] Finally, with José E. Muñoz, it speculates on the possibility of a queer critique filled with hope instead of despair.[18] To none of these questions, however, can this dissertation provide an easy or immediate answer. Most importantly, it does not ask, like Bruno Latour does, *why* critique – and specifically queer critique – has run out of steam, thus assuming *de facto*

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[13] Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

[14] About present-day 'anti-gender' movements, see: Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (eds), *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*. London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. While these movements are not at the core of the dissertation, they nonetheless appear in chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp 157–158, in order to contextualise my discussion of queer critique in the present moment.

[15] Eve K Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You', in E K Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2003, pp 123–152: 146, 147, 149. For a discussion of Sedgwick's reparative reading, see chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp 164–166, as well as several moments in chapter 3 and the 'coda'.

[16] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*. On Felski's postcritical project, see the first and second sections of chapter 3 of this dissertation.

[17] Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A Wilson, 'Introduction: Antinormativity's Queer Conventions', *differences 26*(1), special issue on 'Queer Theory without Antinormativity', 2015, pp 1–25: 5. For a detailed discussion of Wiegman and Wilson's project, see the third and fourth sections of chapter 3 of this dissertation.

[18] José E Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). 10th anniversary edition. New York & London: New York University Press, 2019, p 11. Muñoz's proposal is explored in the 'coda' of this dissertation.

its ending. Rather, it intends to understand the current status of queer critique in light of its inner contestations.[19]

I have briefly hinted at the political deployment of 'queer' at the beginning of the 1990s. Around those years, that same word activated an intellectual turmoil that produced a shift ('divergence', in Wiegman's vocabulary) between gay and lesbian studies, on one side, and a new, queer way of theorising sexuality, on the other side. Teresa de Lauretis was perhaps the first intellectual to resignify 'queer' and juxtapose it to 'theory'.[20] For her, 'queer' signals a distancing from lesbian and gay mainstream politics and theory, the rejection of the binary distinction between homo- and heterosexuality, the refusal of the naturalisation of sexual and gender identities, and the accentuation of the differences (in terms of class and race, for instance) *within* sexual minorities. In these respects, De Lauretis' theoretical enterprise is in line with that of Judith Butler and Eve K. Sedgwick, whose *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) are considered to be two of the founding texts of the field.[21] It did not take long before a number of strands came to populate the queer theoretical field, so much so that we should rather talk about queer *theories* in the plural.[22] For Butler themselves, who thinks along French feminist and poststructuralist philosophy, 'the

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[19] Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry 30*, 2004, pp 225-248.

[20] Teresa de Lauretis, 'Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities. An Introduction', *differences 3*(2), 1991, pp iii–xviii.

[21] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York & London: Routledge, 1990; Eve K Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley, CA & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990. Both works are amply discussed in the first section of chapter 2 of this dissertation.

[22] I borrow this insight from Lorenzo Bernini, *Queer Theories: An Introduction. From Mario Mieli to the Antisocial Turn* (London: Routledge, 2020). According to Bernini '[q]ueer […] is a polysemic term, or better, a floating signifier, which transfers its own instability to the nouns it modifies when it is used as an adjective. This is especially true when queer accompanies the noun "theory", which I would rather use in the plural: queer theories encompass a broad range of studies in which many different methodologies and opinions are at stake' (p 26). This dissertation recognises the variety of methodologies and opinions at stake in queer theory, but, for reasons that are not unrelated to the mobilisation of 'critique' in the singular and that will soon become clear, it sticks to 'queer theory' in the singular.

term "queer" is to be a site of collective *contestation*'.[23] For Warner, largely influenced by Jürgen Habermas' social theory, queer 'rejects a minoritising logic of toleration […] in favour of a more thorough *resistance* to regimes of the normal'.[24] Working within a psychoanalytic framework, Lee Edelman suggests that, '[r]ather than rejecting [the] ascription of *negativity* to the queer, we might […] do better to consider accepting and even embracing it'.[25] In spite of the vast differences between them, these three authors emphasise the antagonistic, oppositional, and negative character of queerness.

Through the past two decades, however, other strands have emerged that follow a different path. For many of them, Sedgwick's reflections on the sceptical outlook of the queer theoretical field are a pivotal moment in order to imagine a less antagonistic, oppositional, and negative form of critique. At the turn of the 21st century, against 'paranoid' modes of reading that she sees at work not only among other queer scholars, but also in her own (early) work, Sedgwick put forward 'reparative reading' as an 'additive and accretive' approach to texts which refuses to surrender to the jargon of criticality and scepticism.[26] Those who follow in Sedgwick's footsteps similarly accentuate the non-paranoid, affirmative, imaginative side of queerness. Heather Love, Ann Cvetkovich, and the above-mentioned Muñoz and Wiegman are but a few names of people who rework Sedgwick's legacy in this direction. What this inevitably quick summary shows, for now, is that queer is a highly polysemic noun whose meaning

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[23] Judith Butler, 'Critically Queer', *GLQ 1*(1), 1993, pp 17–32: 19. My emphasis. Butler's definition of 'queer' is discussed in the first section of chapter 2 of this dissertation. I refer to Butler as they/them based on a recent interview: 'I still rather think that pronouns come to me from others, which I find interesting, since I receive an array of them – so I am always somewhat surprised and impressed when people decide their own pronouns or even when they ask me what pronouns I prefer. I don't have an easy answer, though I am enjoying the world of "they"' (Jules Gleeson, 'Judith Butler: "We need to rethink the category of woman"', *The Guardian*, 7 September 2021, np https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/sep/07/judith-butler-interview-gender (accessed 3 January 2022)).

[24] Michael Warner, 'Introduction' (1991), in M Warner (ed), *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp vii–xxxi: xxvi. My emphasis.

[25] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2004, p 4. My emphasis.

[26] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 149.

cannot be restricted to antagonism, oppositionality, and negativity, and that, at some point in the queer theoretical trajectory, the critical attitude dominating the field began to feel constrictive.

So far, 'queer theory' and 'queer critique' have been deployed rather interchangeably. But why does this dissertation take queer *critique* and not *theory* as its object, if the most conventional way to address the field is the latter? The goal is not to replace 'theory' with 'critique' and thus rename the field. Rather, I identify queer critique as a practice that is ubiquitous in queer theory and that, to a large extent, has come to define it. This dissertation traces the ubiquity of critique back to the work of Michel Foucault, whose influence on the queer theoretical field is amply acknowledged. Yet, while the first volume of his groundbreaking *History of Sexuality* (1978[1976]) underlies the work of most (early) queer scholars, his remarks on critique have been partly left on the side.[27] This project begins with an analysis of how Foucault conceives of his own critical practice and of critique in general, as well as how his understanding of critique, in turn, resonates with the work of his queer epigones.

While Foucault constitutes a significant starting point for an investigation of queer critique, the term 'critique' itself has a larger history that is worth briefly outlining. Even though its roots lie in ancient Greek, critique can be understood as the definitional feature of modernity.[28] According to Reinhart Koselleck, modern understandings of critique originate from the political crisis of the absolutist regime and the ascendance of the bourgeoisie, which enacted a thorough critique of the habits and institutions of the *ancient régime*.[29] Habermas further emphasises the political character of critique: to

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[27] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction* (1976). New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. The works considered in the first chapter of this dissertation in which Foucault spells out his notion of critique are: Michel Foucault, 'What is Critique?' (1978), in M Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007, and Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others. Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–1983*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

[28] Carlo Galli, 'Le forme della critica. Epoca, contingenza, emergenza', *Filosofia politica 3*, 2016, pp 395–418.

[29] Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (1959). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988. Koselleck's notion of critique is further discussed in chapter 1

him, it is through the rational-critical debate taking place in the public sphere that the hegemonic class of modernity – the bourgeoisie – politically and intellectually emancipates itself.[30] Immanuel Kant is perhaps the first philosopher who turns critique into the cornerstone of thinking tout court. By deeming it 'transcendental', he endows it with the fundamental task of discerning the universal conditions of knowledge.[31] The Kantian path, however, is but one of the many trajectories that critique has taken in modernity. In the wake of a tradition more indebted to Hegel than Kant, many 19th- and 20th-century philosophers conceive of critique as a way to historicise and particularise those same categories that Kant took to be universal. Karl Marx and the intellectuals following in his footsteps, for instance, understand critique as a practice aimed at exposing the economic structure behind worldly phenomena.[32] For Sigmund Freud and the practitioners of a psychoanalytically-informed criticism, instead, phenomena are symptoms of deeper dynamics rooted in the collective or individual subconscious.[33] Importantly, 'critique' designates not just a philosophical enterprise, but also the activity of the professional (literary, art, cultural) critic as much as that of whoever expresses a judgement on a novel, a piece of art, or any other cultural object.[34] Critique is thus a multifaceted term that applies to a set of different operations ranging from high-level philosophy to the realm of opinion.

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of this dissertation, pp 35–37; 84–85.

[30] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991. Habermas' understanding of critique in relation to the notion of public sphere is further discussed in chapter 1 of this dissertation, pp 76–81.

[31] See: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Both Kant's 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' (1784) (in M Gregor (ed), *Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp 11–22) and *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798) (New York: Abaris Books, 1979) are discussed in the first and second sections of chapter 1 of this dissertation.

[32] See: Karl Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction' (1844), in R C Tucker (ed), *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York & London: W W Norton & Company, 1978, pp 53–65.

[33] See: Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

[34] For this acceptation of critique, see the second chapter of this dissertation, which delves into the distinction (as well as the overlapping) between philosophical critique and literary criticism.

But, if critique is internally so differentiated, then why stick to its usage in the singular? First off, Foucault – the compass of this dissertation's journey across queer theory – does not shy away from critique as a unitary signifier. As David M. Halperin states, Foucault conceives of critique

> as an expression or manifestation of a larger phenomenon which he calls 'the critical attitude': namely, 'a certain manner of thinking, of speaking, also of acting […]'. [He] apologis[es] for seeming to ascribe a specious unity to something which, 'by its nature, its function, and (so to speak) its profession', is dedicated to dispersion and heteronomy. Nonetheless, he [treats] the critical attitude as a single phenomenon.[35]

Unsurprisingly, Butler themselves, whose work is largely indebted to Foucault and whose essay 'What is Critique?' is a commentary on his understanding of critique, prioritises the singular.[36] And so do the other main sources on which Butler's essay draws: for Raymond Williams, 'criticism' is a word that retains a 'general sense of fault-finding […] as primary'; for Theodor W. Adorno, 'critique is essential to all democracy'.[37] Even those who express their discontent with critique reproduce this same idea, more or less willingly. Take Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (2015): a present-day manifesto for an approach to texts beyond the protocols of critique which Felski calls 'postcritique', as well as the most updated collection of arguments against the critical attitude. In it, Felski takes aim at a number of reading practices – 'symptomatic reading, ideology critique, Foucauldian historicism, various techniques of

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[35] David M Halperin, 'The Art of Not Being Governed. Michel Foucault on Critique and Transgression', unpublished paper, nd, pp 5–6. I would like to thank the author for providing me with a copy of the paper. The quotes from Foucault are taken from his 'What is Critique?'

[36] Judith Butler, 'What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue', *Transversal 5*, 2001, np https://transversal.at/transversal/0806/butler/en (accessed 3 January 2022).

[37] Raymond Williams, 'Critique' (1976), in R Williams, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp 47–49: 47; Theodor W. Adorno, 'Critique', in T W Adorno, *Critical Models. Interventions and Catchwords* (1969). New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, pp 281–288: 281. Butler's discussion of Adorno and Williams can be found in chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp 159–162.

scanning texts for signs of transgression or resistance' – that, in spite of their differences, she gathers under 'the rubric of critique'.[38]

There is also another reason for mobilising critique in the singular. This dissertation moves with some agility between philosophical critique and literary criticism. Even though the distinction between 'critique' and 'criticism' is an accident of the English language – in German, '*kritizismus*' specifically designates the Kantian effort, opposed to '*dogmatismus*', to subject reason to critical scrutiny[39] – I follow Butler in appreciating the advantages it can offer.[40] One such advantage is precisely the fact that it helps distinguishing between the critical practice carried out in the realm of philosophy and the one at work in literary and cultural studies. Not that philosophical critique and literary or cultural criticism are inherently uncoupled: what I suggest is that criticism is what literary and cultural critics by definition do. For them, the question is not whether to practice criticism or not, but *how* to practice it. This does not mean that criticism is the same as interpretation and reading, but that criticism as one historical form that commentary has taken is something that scholars such as Sedgwick and Felski do not wish to abandon, even as they question the value of a critical disposition. In this sense, Sedgwick's call for a reparative reading and Felski's call for a postcritique are not expressions of a discontent with literary and cultural studies as such. Their discontent is directed at reading protocols that are marked by suspicion, which they name either 'theory' or 'critique' – always in the singular.[41]

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[38] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 3.

[39] See: Friedrich W J Schelling, 'Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism' (1795), in F W J Schelling, *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge. Four Early Essays (1794–1796)*. London & Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1980, pp 156–196. This same meaning applies to the French '*criticisme*' and the Italian '*criticismo*'. About the distinction between critique and criticism as an accident of the English language, see the second chapter of this dissertation, pp 99–100.

[40] Judith Butler, 'The Sensibility of Critique: Response to Asad and Mahmood', in T Asad, S Mahmood, J Butler & W Brown, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2009, pp 101–136: 108–109.

[41] About suspicion, I refer to Paul Ricoeur's 'hermeneutics of suspicion', which connotes the philosophies of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation* (1965). New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 1970). This fortunate phrase is discussed in chapter 2 of this dissertation, p 168, as well as chapter 3, pp 185–187.

While 'theory' and 'critique' appear almost interchangeably in the work of Sedgwick and Felski, among others, it is important to note that the contemporary discontents voiced against these two objects have produced diverging debates. As already mentioned, the debates on the limits of critique are often *internal* to critical knowledges. Those attacking theory, instead, are usually less lenient towards the hermeneutics of suspicion and their intellectual offsprings, such as queer theory.[42] In this sense, discontents with theory are more likely to undermine the queer theoretical field in its entirety, as they are often articulated from conservative political and intellectual standpoints.[43] My hope is that a focus on critique – a practice that cannot do without the object criticised – allows for a more nuanced discussion of the status of queer critical

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[42] I take Latour's 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?' and Felski's works on postcritique, both of them discussed in chapter 3, as paradigmatic of the current discontents with critique. Discontents with theory, on the other hand, range from a queer scholar such as Sedgwick to liberal (right-wing) authors such as Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, whose *Cynical Theories* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2020) explicitly rallies against what they call 'wokeism', 'identity politics', 'cancel culture', 'political correctness', and other questionable signifiers. Slightly more nuanced yet equally unforgiving attacks on theory include Barbara Carnevali's 'Against *Theory*' (*The Brooklyn Rail*, September 2016, np, https://brooklynrail.org/2016/09/criticspage/against-theory (accessed on 10 January 2022)) and the interventions that are part of Daphne Patai and Will H Corral's edited volume *Theory's Empire. An Anthology of Dissent* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). This monumental anthology does not refrain from describing Butler's style as an example of 'bad writing' (D G Myers, 'Bad Writing', in Patai & Corral, *Theory's Empire*, pp 354–359), Sedgwick's work as 'a twisting labyrinth of mad interpretations' (Lee Siegel, 'Queer Theory, Literature, and the Sexualisation of Everything', in Patai & Corral, *Theory's Empire*, pp 424–442: 434), and the first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* as 'the bible of queer theory […], resulting in an explosion of bad scholarship' (Siegel, 'Queer Theory', p 398). Because of the evident attempt by these texts at delegitimising theory and its practitioners, I prefer to discuss other texts that critically address theory, as shown in the second section of chapter 3.

[43] By this, I do not mean to say that critique is sheltered from conservative, Christian, and/or right-wing attacks: think of the current attacks on gender studies, which often function as a first step toward the dismantling of critical knowledges (David Paternotte, 'Gender Studies and the Dismantling of Critical Knowledge in Europe', *American Association of University Professors*, Fall 2019, np. https://www.aaup.org/article/gender-studies-and-dismantling-critical-knowledge-europe (accessed on 10 January 2022)); or think of the current wave against 'critical race theory': a definition featuring criticality and theory together (Leslie S Kaplan and William A Owings, 'Countering the Furor Around Critical Race Theory', *NASSP Bulletin 105*(3), 2021, pp 200–218).

knowledges: one that is possibly not so easy to hijack. Following Wiegman, queer theory is that form of minority knowledge shaped around 'a divergentist critique of both feminist and gay and lesbian studies'.[44] Critique, in turn, is the engine that allowed queer theory to emerge in the first place, that keeps animating it from inside, and that gestures towards what will come after it. Queer critique is ductile, transformative, always on the move, never content with itself. For these reasons, it is difficult to disentangle it from its – reparative, postcritical, anti-antinormative, utopian – discontents. Just like reparative reading, postcritique, a queer theory without antinormativity, and a hopeful utopianism try to move beyond the pitfalls of critique, so is critique always one step ahead of itself. One of the goals of this dissertation is *not* to adjudicate between queer critique and its discontents, but to blur the lines between the two.

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The first chapter of this dissertation functions as a genealogy of queer critique and centres on Foucault, who did not survive long enough to see queer theory come to life, but whose work has immensely influenced the field to come. The chapter focuses on two lectures that marked Foucault's reflections on critique: 'What is Critique?' (1978) and the introductory lecture of his course on *The Government of Self and Others* (1983).[45] What these texts reveal is a shift from critique understood as the art of not being governed *comme ça* (like that) and as a genealogical analysis committed to historicising what is taken to be immutable, to critique understood as an ethical practice of 'parrhesia', aimed at changing the self through acts of truth-telling. According to this partial revision, critique does not exactly coincide with politics, but happens in proximity to it. In the wake of Kant, Foucault argues that such proximity allows us to see the relation between critique and the enthusiasm that the spectator, or critical

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[44] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 329. Wiegman talks about 'identity knowledges'; following Ferguson and Muñoz, I choose to refer to them as 'minority knowledges'. See pp 42 and 229–230, footnote 874, of this dissertation.

[45] Foucault, 'What is Critique?'; Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*.

observer, experiences in front of the unfolding of political events – such as the French revolution.

The chapter also connects each and every definition of critique offered by Foucault to its multiple reverberations in queer theory. Critique as the art of not being governed *comme ça* – which, for Foucault, entails 'the insurrection of subjugated knowledges'[46] – can be detected in the queer and protoqueer reappraisal of discredited forms of knowledge. One such example is the slow and often twisted path toward the institutionalisation of minority studies. Regarding critique as genealogy, what is perhaps Foucault's most famous genealogical enterprise is the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*. In spite of the centrality of this book for its de-essentialisation of sex, the chapter shows that several strands in queer theory in fact do not align with Foucault's genealogical project, particularly as they engage with psychoanalytic and Marxist theory. Moving on, critique as an exercise in truth-telling for the sake of transforming oneself can be read into Sara Ahmed's killjoy attitude as well as Paul B. Preciado's textual terrorism, which I suggest to interpret as modes of parrhesiastic critique.[47] Lastly, just like the gap between critique and politics is filled, for Foucault reader of Kant, by the enthusiasm before the revolution, the gap between queer critique and queer politics is (partly) filled by the enthusiasm accompanying sexual liberation movements and the knowledges they bring to the surface. Enthusiasm, however, is not the exclusive affect of a queer critique: equally significant were the disenchantment, grief, and rage that queer activists and theorists felt as a consequence of the AIDS crisis. What Foucault does, to the dismay of those who take his critical practice to epitomise a spirit of unengaged distance, is to connect queer critique with the moods and affects that animate it.

The second chapter proceeds by showing how, in early queer theory, Foucault's critique increasingly crystallises into a theory. The chapter analyses two different yet equally

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[46] Michel Foucault, *'Society Must Be Defended'. Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-76*. New York: Picador, 2003, p 7.

[47] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017; Paul B Preciado, 'Terror anal: apuntes sobre los primeros días de la revolución sexual', in G Hocquenghem, *El deseo homosexual*. Santa Cruz de Tenerife: melusina, 2009, pp 133–172.

foundational modes of practicing a queer critique through the 1990s: Judith Butler's philosophical critique and Eve K. Sedgwick's literary criticism. In their early works, and in *Gender Trouble* and *Epistemology* in particular, both authors turn Foucault-the-critic into Foucault-the-theorist of sexuality.[48] The chapter traces the key moments in Butler and Sedgwick when this transformation occurs. To do so, it follows scholars like Lynne Huffer who warn against the reiteration of a mystifying picture of Foucault.[49] Through the 1990s, however, Butler and Sedgwick increasingly distance themselves from the very reception of Foucault they had contributed to consolidate. While the seeds of this move are visible in their early works – in Butler's willingness to combine Foucault with psychoanalytic theory, for instance, or in Sedgwick's detection, in Foucault, of the same repressive structure he is committed to countering – it is not until the turn of the 21st century that the distancing fully takes place. To be sure, in Butler's scene of ethical accountability we witness a bracketing of Foucault's notion of critique rather than a real departure, for critique remains central to their thought.[50] In Sedgwick, on the other hand, we witness the quest for a real alternative to critique, which finds expression in her proposal for reparative reading and her discontent with the protocols of theory.[51]

By discussing the process through which Butler and Sedgwick contributed to turn Foucault's critique into a theory of sexuality, this second chapter nonetheless does not aim at reinstating the truth about Foucault. Its goal is to unpack how his fourfold notion of critique has been variously taken up, reinterpreted, dismissed, and restored. Furthermore, the chapter is less about Foucault than about Butler and Sedgwick and their own takes on critique. While the chapter argues that their respective background in philosophy and literature does matter, it also complicates this all-too-simple narrative by analysing the moments in which Butler and Sedgwick 'invade' each other's field. Such moments coincide, in the chapter, with the discussion of the notion of

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[48] Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*.

[49] Lynne Huffer, *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

[50] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.

[51] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading'; Eve K Sedgwick and Adam J Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins', *Critical Inquiry 21*(2), 1995, pp 496–522.

performativity and of Willa Cather's literary work. In queer theory, the subject of performativity is strongly associated with Butler, whose theory of gender performativity is a core analytic of the field.[52] Sedgwick's intervention can be easily overlooked as a mere corollary.[53] The chapter, instead, brings them together in order to show, first, that Butler is committed to an antiessentialist agenda while Sedgwick is not; secondly, that Butler's theory of gender performativity is located between the linguistic and the theatrical, whereas Sedgwick focuses on what escapes or lies around the performative. A second terrain of encounter and divergence is Willa Cather's literary work. For Sedgwick, Cather's novels are exemplary of what she calls the literary 'closet', and the cross-gender, cross-sexual identifications they stage hide an underlying 'lesbian truth'.[54] What interests Butler, instead, is less the lesbian plot that fails to fully emerge in Cather than the cross-identifications present in all identification processes.[55] Building on this discussion, the chapter argues that, despite their differences, Butler and Sedgwick do not confront us with two opposite ways of doing critique, but with a single practice that applies to a plethora of different objects. Yet, while Butler's philosophical practice tends toward the concretion of critique as theory, Sedgwick's open-ended criticism facilitates her own discontent with precisely such concretion.

Sedgwick's pushback on paranoid modes of reading as well as theory is the entry point into the third chapter, which explores the discontents with critique in general and with queer critique in particular. This last chapter scrutinises two recent proposals that are meant to overcome the limits of critique and rethink queer theory beyond oppositionality: Felski's postcritique and Wiegman and Wilson's queer theory without antinormativity.[56] These two proposals mirror, respectively, Sedgwick's and Butler's

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[52] Judith Butler, 'Critically Queer', in *GLQ 1*(1), 1993, pp 17–32; Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech. The Politics of the Performative*. New York & London: Routledge, 1997.

[53] Eve K Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', *GLQ 1*(1), 1993, pp 1–16; Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*.

[54] Eve K Sedgwick, 'Across Gender, Across Sexuality: Willa Cather and Others', in R R Butters, J M Clum, & M Moon (eds), *Displacing Homophobia: Gay Male Perspectives in Literature and Culture*. Durham, NC & London, Duke University Press, 1989, pp 53–72.

[55] Judith Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing": Willa Cather's Masculine Names', in J Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. London & New York: Routledge, 1993, pp 143–166.

[56] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*; Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction'.

critical practices: Felski's intervention is embedded in literary studies while Wiegman and Wilson's has an eminently theoretical character. Yet, just like Sedgwick and Butler can hardly be confined within their disciplinary boundaries, neither is Felski's intervention only about literature nor is the scope of Wiegman and Wilson's investigation restricted to philosophy. To be sure, postcritique is not exactly a queer project, yet Sedgwick's plea for a reparative reading is one of Felski's key starting points. This chapter accentuates the intellectual trading between postcritique and queer scholarship, arguing that the former's most important interventions concern, first, the denouncing of critique's routines and automatisms, and second, the need to pursue alternative modes of reading. The chapter proceeds to review some crucial arguments formulated against Felski's proposal and its political implications. While recognising that the politics of postcritique should be crafted in such a way as to avoid siding with reactionary or universalist stances, I emphasise those insights which are often missed by those who defend critique and refuse to engage with the postcritical intervention – that critique's claim of political relevance is often stated but rarely accomplished, and that critique may run the risk to share the same structure as conspiracies. My argument is developed through a reading of Patricia Stuelke's *The Ruse of Repair* (2021): a work against reparative reading as well as postcritique, which stages a few of those very limitations that postcritique aims to counter.[57]

The project of a queer theory without antinormativity, on the other hand, is deeply embedded in the queer theoretical field. In their provocative special issue of the journal *differences*, Wiegman and Wilson imagine a queer theory freed from the imperative to be against normativity, normalisation, and norms. I read this intervention through Wiegman's *Object Lessons* (2011), which elaborates on the need to understand (hetero)normativity not as a static analytic, but as a changing and mutable object of investigation.[58] Even though Wiegman does not conceive of her and Wilson's project as postcritical, I contend that one of its main contributions, similar to postcritique, is to warn us against the routines of critique as it functions in the queer theoretical field –

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[57] Patricia Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair. US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2021, p 4.

[58] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*.

that is, against the automatisms of the queer critique of normativity. Wiegman and Wilson's proposal is a reminder that, if normativity is a structure of proliferations, then antinormativity may not be the best strategy for queer critics to adopt. However, unlike postcritique, it does not provide a fully convincing alternative to the counterning of normativity.

The 'coda' of the dissertation ventures into imagining what a queer critique beyond its routines may look like. To do so, I turn to Muñoz, who invites 'us' – practitioners of minority knowledges – to interpret the discontents with our own critical habits in terms of heartbreak. In order to move past the end of our romance with critique, Muñoz suggests that we accept the incommensurability between the politics we hold dear and the objects of investigation at hand. What he puts forward is a queer critique that does not let disappointment linger, that does not shy away from utopianism, and that dares to launch itself 'into a kind of mad […] hopefulness, a groundless hope in the face of a structuring incommensurability'.[59]

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[59] José E Muñoz, 'Hope in the Face of Heartbreak' (2013), in Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, pp 207–213: 212.

1. TOWARDS A QUEER CRITIQUE. MICHEL FOUCAULT'S CRITICAL ENTERPRISE BETWEEN POLITICS, GENEALOGY, AND ETHICS

> I can't help but dream of the kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgements but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes – all the better. All the better. Criticism that hands down sentences [*la critique par sentence*] sends me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightening of possible storms.[60]

In January 1980, Michel Foucault was invited to deliver an interview for the Sunday supplement of the paper *Le Monde*. He accepted on condition to be published anonymously. For him, in an intellectual scene dominated by the principle of stardom, 'what is said counts less than the personality of the one who speaks':[61] thus, anonymity was meant as a strategy to let the reader focus on the content of the interview rather than on the identity of the interviewee.[62] *Le Monde* kept his name secret until Foucault's sudden death in 1984, and perhaps because of this secrecy, Foucault allowed himself to deploy a more hyperbolic and more poetic vocabulary to define the place of criticism than in other essays on this subject. The opening quote of this chapter is an excerpt from this interview, titled '*Le philosophe masqué*' ('The Masked Philosopher'). In it, Foucault imagines a critical practice beyond judgement, one capable to create new

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[60] Michel Foucault, 'The Masked Philosopher' (1980), in M Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings of Michel Foucault 1977–1984*. London: Routledge, 1988, pp 323–330: 326.

[61] Michel Foucault, 'Le philosophe masqué' (1980), in M Foucault, *Dits et écrits 1954–1988, IV: 1980–1988*. Paris: Gallimard, 1994, pp 104–110: 104. My translation. The quote is from the brief introduction to the interview by the editors of *Dits et écrits*, Daniel Defert and François Ewald, which is missing from the English translation.

[62] This idea is in line with Foucault's own depiction of the (end of the) author's function in his 'What is an Author?' (1969) (in P Rabinow (ed), *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, pp 101–120). See also chapter 2 of this dissertation, p 149.

modes of thought and existence. Foucault's own dissatisfaction with the principle of sovereignty and with Marxist analysis ('[i]t would not be sovereign or dressed in red') is evoked in-between the lines. But more interestingly, Foucault's idea of critique, in this excerpt, is different from judgement, sentencing, and opinion. The criticism he wishes for does not judge a text, but brings it to life; it does not hand down sentences, but works through imaginative leaps. When another interviewer, one year later, asked him whether sexual behaviour is innate or socially constructed (something he was supposed to have a say on), Foucault chose not to comment, for he had 'only an opinion; since it is an opinion it is without interest'.[63] Critique, for him, belongs to another genre than the realm of judgements and opinions: it is a distinct discursive modality altogether. This chapter aims to shed light on what, for Foucault, critique is, has been, and should be.

One may wonder why a study on queer critique is to begin with someone who did not survive long enough to witness the appropriation and resignification of the term 'queer' in the early 1990s. Why is Michel Foucault so important in a discussion about queer critique? To begin with, Foucault has an almost hagiographic status among queers, not just from a philosophical point of view. In David M. Halperin's account, New York ACT-UP activists campaigning to end the AIDS pandemic at its peak were carrying copies of the first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1976) in the pockets of their leather jackets.[64] Foucault, Halperin argues, 'anticipated and embraced a queer conception of homosexual identity and gay politics'[65] by conceiving of homosexuality not in terms of essence, but in opposition to the heterosexual norm. Lynne Huffer,

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[63] Michel Foucault, 'Sexual Choice, Sexual Act: Foucault and Homosexuality' (1982–1983), in Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, pp 286–303: 288. To an extent, this response by Foucault is counterintuitive, for his philosophy is often taken as the inaugural example of the social construction of sexuality. However, as we shall see in this chapter, one thing is to historicise sexuality, like Foucault did in *History of Sexuality*, and another thing is to say that sexuality is not a biological given but a social construct, which he says he does not have an opinion about.

[64] David M Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp 15–16. The book referenced is Foucault's magisterial *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction* (1976) (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). About ACT-UP, see the introduction of this dissertation, p 8, as well as pp 92–93 of this chapter.

[65] Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, p 67.

whose *Mad for Foucault* (2010) is no less emphatic than Halperin's *Saint Foucault* (1995), recounts how her reading of Foucault's works coincided with her personal trajectory towards the embracing of queerness.[66] The switch from feminist to queer theory and politics *via* Foucault was not just hers: Gayle Rubin too, in 'Thinking Sex' (1984), turned to the French author 'to make the case for "an autonomous theory and politics specific to sexuality" […] distinct from a feminist "theory of gender oppression"'.[67] And to mention here Judith Butler and Eve K. Sedgwick, whose understanding of both sexuality and of how to conduct criticism is vastly informed by Foucault's thought, is superfluous – or better: it is the topic of the next chapter.[68]

Yet, beyond the relevance of Foucault for a genealogy of the queer theoretical field, we can recognise some features in Foucault's formulation of critique which can help us delineating the features of a queer critique. Foucault sketches a fourfold picture of critique as the art of not being governed *comme ça* (like that), as a genealogical analysis, as an ethos oriented to the transformation of the self and others according to a practice of parrhesia (truth-telling), and as something that takes place in relation to politics without fully coinciding with it.[69] A queer critique, as we shall see in this

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[66] Lynne Huffer, *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. Huffer makes the case for rethinking the foundations of queer theory starting not from Foucault's project of a history of sexuality, which is recognised as one of the most fundamental texts of the field, but from his *History of Madness* (1961) (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), which amounts for her to a more experientially nuanced understanding of sexuality that can complement Foucault's historical-genealogical project.

[67] Huffer, *Mad for Foucault*, p 46. See also: Gayle Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', in C S Vance (ed), *Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality*. Boston, MA & London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, pp 267–319.

[68] About Foucault's influence on Butler and Sedgwick, see the first paragraph of chapter 2 of this dissertation.

[69] To formulate these definitions, I take the cue from Linda Zerilli's 'Critique as a Political Practice of Freedom' (in D Fassin & B E Harcourt (eds), *A Time for Critique*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, pp 36–51. See p 37 in particular). In it, Zerilli argues that, to understand Foucault's eminently political idea of critique as a 'practice of not being governed (in a certain way)', we should distinguish it from both his philosophical idea of critique as an 'ontology of ourselves' and his ethical idea of critique as a practice of 'self-transformation'. In my view, the philosophical idea of critique cannot be detached from Foucault's genealogical practice, since the former is always-already genealogical, as this chapter

chapter, is akin to all such definitions, as it is a plea for being governed differently, it positions itself along (and sometimes against) Foucault's project to historicise what is taken to be immutable, it commits itself to tell the truth no matter the consequences, and it coincides with the enthusiasm (as well as, sometimes, less positive affects) emerging at a relative distance from politics. This chapter delves into Foucault's different meanings of critique to underscore the continuities and discontinuities between his project and that of a queer critique. In so doing, it certainly does not want to suggest that Foucault's import to the field of queer theory is limited to his reflection on critique, or that Foucault's view of critique can exhaust all possible forms of queer criticism. But it does suggest that Foucault's idea of critique at the intersection of politics, genealogy, and ethics is crucial even at a time when queer theory seems to have moved past Foucault, as the next chapters are going to show.

To single out Foucault's notion of critique – one that bears 'the light of possible storms', as the initial quote suggests, and that attempts at constructing 'an other life' (*une vie autre*) in view of 'an other world' (*un monde autre*)[70] – this chapter analyses two lectures by Foucault: 'What is Critique?' delivered on 27 May 1978 at the Sorbonne, and the introductory lecture of his course on *The Government of Self and Others*, delivered on 5 January 1983 at the Collège de France (which, as we will see, is an extended version of Foucault's wide-known piece 'What is Enlightenment?').[71] Despite the five-years gap between them, these two lectures are closely in dialogue with one another, not just because they both lay out Foucault's definition of critique, but because they both engage with Immanuel Kant's 'Was ist Aufklärung?' ('An Answer

intends to suggest. Additionally, instead of returning to Hannah Arendt in order to restore a 'politically public' conception of critique like Zerilli does, I choose to go back to Foucault's late political understanding of critique, which allows for further nuances.

[70] Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth. The Government of Self and Others II. Lectures at the Collège de France 1983–1984*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p 287.

[71] Michel Foucault, 'What is Critique?' (1978), in M Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007; Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others. Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–1983*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', in Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, pp 32–50. On the reasons why Foucault's 'What is Enlightenment?' is more known than the lecture of 5 January 1983 on the same subject, see footnote 179.

the Question: What is Enlightenment?' 1784).[72] Foucault's turn to Kant is a rather unexpected move, given his philosophical uneasiness with the subject of modernity championed by the German philosopher. Yet, it is in the footsteps of Kant's idea of the *Aufklärung* where Foucault locates his own notion of critique. Overall, the first and second sections of this chapter are a commentary on Foucault's 'What is Critique?' while the third and fourth sections centre on the first lecture of his 1983 course.

Any operation to narrow down critique – and Foucault's conception of it in particular – to a handful of features runs the risk of trivialisation. Additionally, critique as a practice carried out in the interaction with politics inevitably resists theorisation. While commenting on Foucault's 'What is Critique?' Judith Butler rightly observes that 'critique is always a critique *of* some instituted practice, discourse, episteme, institution, and it loses its character the moment in which it is abstracted from its operation and made to stand alone as a purely generalisable practice'.[73] This does not mean, for Butler, that no generalisation about critique is possible. 'We tread here in an area of constrained generality, one which broaches the philosophical, but must, if it is to remain critical, remain at a distance from that very achievement'.[74] I take Butler's injunction as my (second) epigraph to start exploring what a queer critique looks like in the wake of Foucault. It is indeed hard to generalise when the object at hand resists generalisation. At the same time, one shall strive not to be mired in particularity. This chapter is an attempt at making 'constrained' generalisations on critique, delimited by the discourses, epistemes, and institutions in which the critical practice takes place and always open to further corrections, additions, and, in fact, *criticisms*.

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[72] Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' (1784), in M Gregor (ed), *Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp 11–22.

[73] Judith Butler, 'What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue', *Transversal 5*, 2001, np, https://transversal.at/transversal/0806/butler/en (accessed 3 January 2022).

[74] Butler, 'What is Critique?, np.

1.1 Critique as the art of not being governed *comme ça*

On 27 May 1978, at the Sorbonne, Foucault begins his lecture before the French Society of Philosophy titled 'What is Critique?' by acknowledging that

> there has been in the modern Western world (dating, more or less, empirically from the 15th to the 16th centuries) a certain way of thinking, speaking and acting, a certain relationship to what exists, to what one knows, to what one does, a relationship to society, to culture and also a relationship to others that we could call, let's say, the critical attitude.[75]

In continuation, he provides a context for the emergence of critique. The latter is portrayed not as a universal or transhistorical practice, but as a discourse that appeared at the onset of Western modernity. Accordingly, in his earlier *The Order of Things* (1966), Foucault locates criticism in the frame of what he calls 'Classical episteme', that is, the early modern system of knowledge, which dates from around 1600 to 1700.[76] In that epistemic moment, criticism, for Foucault, was part of the discursive field of 'general grammar', which subsequently evolved into what we now know as linguistics. As a derivative of commentary, criticism is a form of 'secondary language', in that it only exists as a comment on a primary text. In this sense, as Foucault repeats in 1978 at the Sorbonne, 'critique only exists in relation to something other than itself'.[77] Historically, this 'something other' of critique consisted in the Biblical Scriptures. For Foucault, commentary morphed into criticism precisely because it was 'no longer a question [...] of repeating what had already been said, but of defining through what figures and images, by following what order, to what expressive ends, and in order to declare what truth, God or the prophets had given a discourse the particular form in which it was communicated to us'.[78] Thus, Foucault's critique is historically rooted in the *mise en question* of what the Scriptures consider sacred and true.[79]

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[75] Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p 42.

[76] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (1966). London & New York: Routledge, 2001, pp 86–90.

[77] Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p 42.

[78] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p 89.

[79] Five years later, as we will see in the third section of this chapter, Foucault revisits this historical account by dating critique back to Greek and Roman antiquity.

Importantly, critique is to be found again, in *The Order of Things*, when Foucault discusses the 'modern episteme', which dates from the end of 1700 up to his days.[80] In this new epistemic configuration that breaks with the centrality of representation of the Classical episteme, critique becomes a foundational element or the edifice of knowledge. The early-modern capacity of language to 'represent representations', as Foucault puts it, is disrupted when, at the turn of the 18th century, words start pointing at 'a sort of behind-the-scenes world even deeper that the world of representation itself'.[81] Kant's three *Kritiken*, in this respect, are exemplary, for they suggest that knowledge is attained not at the level of representations, but at the level of the conditions that make representations possible – what Kant deems 'transcendental criticism'. By exploring the very capacity and limits of humans to produce representations, Kant sanctions, for Foucault, 'the withdrawal of knowledge and thought outside the space of representation',[82] and in so doing, he extends critique beyond the realm of 'general grammar' to enter that of epistemology more proper. This Kantian tradition is not the one that Foucault pursues in 1978 and 1983. To borrow a late distinction by Foucault (to which I will return in the third part of this chapter), the 'transcendental criticism' discussed in the section of *The Order of Things* devoted to the 'modern episteme' forms part of Kant's project to build an 'analytic of truth'. Instead, the tradition Foucault follows in view of his own formulation of critique is one that began with Kant's 'An Answer the Question: What is Enlightenment?' – in Foucault words, one committed to building an 'ontology of the present' or 'of ourselves'.[83]

What is perhaps most interesting in Foucault's 'What is Critique?' compared to his previous *The Order of Things* is that the portrayal of critique emerging from it exceeds the boundaries of discursivity. Critique, for Foucault, is a matter not just of writing, but also of thinking and existing in relation to others: it is an 'attitude', he says, which has something 'akin to virtue'.[84] Foucault continues the lecture by explaining that, in the

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[80] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, pp 257–264.

[81] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p 259.

[82] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p 263.

[83] See pp 66–67 of this chapter.

[84] Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p 43.

15th and 16th centuries, next to criticism 'a veritable explosion of the art of governing men [*sic*]' emerged.[85] The question about how to be governed, crucial for people at that time, inevitably brought about, in Foucault's view, a counter-question: how *not* to be governed? With this question, Foucault does not mean

> that governmentalisation would be opposed in a kind of face-off by the opposite affirmation, 'we do not want to be governed and we do not want to be governed at all'. [He] mean[s] that, in this great preoccupation about the way to govern and the search for the ways to govern, we identify a perpetual question which would be: 'how not to be governed like that [*comme ça*], by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them'.[86]

The problem about how *not* to be governed is not a plea for a fundamental or radical anarchy,[87] but the inauguration of a certain attitude or virtue that resists specific

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[85] Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p 43.

[86] Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p 44.

[87] At the end of the lecture, to the discussant who asks for clarifications about the will not to be governed *comme ça*, Foucault specifies: 'I was not referring to something that would be a fundamental anarchism, that would be like an original freedom, absolutely and wholeheartedly resistant to any governmentalisation' (Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p 75). This suggests that Foucault disagrees not so much with political anarchism as with the idea that freedom can altogether be detached from all forms of power. Judith Butler, however, brings this argument one step further by focusing on the *comme ça* that characterises Foucault's will not to be governed. She writes: 'Foucault does not propose, in "What Is Critique?" or elsewhere, the possibility of radical anarchy (although he makes room for a provisional anarchic relation to existing law). The problem for him is not to produce a subject who will be radically ungovernable for all time. The question, how not to be governed? is always the question of how not to be governed *in this or that way*. But it is not a question of how not to be governed at all'. (Judith Butler, 'Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity', *Critical Inquiry 35*(4), 2009, pp 773–795: 791. Italics in the original). My argument about how Foucault can illuminate the idea of a queer critique follows on Butler's intuition. At the same time, it does not intend to disavow either the intersection between Foucault and (post)anarchist thought (see: Gayatri C Spivak and Michael Ryan, 'Anarchism Revisited: A New Philosophy', *Diacritics 8*(2), 1978, pp 66–79) or the possibility – very much present – of a queer (post)anarchism (see: Lena Eckert, 'Post-Anarchism as a Tool for Queer and Transgender Politics and/or Vice Versa?', *Liminalis 3*, 2009, pp 100–109; C B Daring, J Rogue, Deric Shannon, and Abbey Volcano (eds), *Queering Anarchism. Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire*. Chiko, CA: AK Press, 2012).

practices, strategies, and techniques of governing. In other words, it is around the question of how not to be governed *comme ça* that a critical mode of being began to emerge, according to Foucault, in early modernity.

To better understand this argument, I suggest to look more closely at the concept of governmentality developed throughout Foucault's course *Security, Territory, Population* in 1977–1978.[88] A few months before delivering his lecture on critique at the Sorbonne, Foucault was busy with the annual seminars he held at the Collège de France since 1970. The subject of the 1977–1978 academic year was the problem of government in the 16th and 17th centuries. This problem, Foucault argues, is broader than that of governing people, for early modern European societies were concerned with the question about how to govern in a general sense. Such a question included the (religious) government of souls, the (pedagogical) government of children, the (ethical) government of oneself, and the (political) government of people, among other items. Descartes' *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* (1628-1701) for instance, was meant to tackle the question about how ethically govern oneself, while Christian doctrine at the time was concerned with the government of people's souls.[89] All such practices of government were understood as arts or *technai*: that is, they were strategies about the problem of governing. When looking at them, even in their political acceptation, Foucault claims that one should not deploy the lenses of sovereignty. Sovereignty is exercised by a state on a territory; the art of governing, instead, acts upon humans as part of a population. While sovereignty functions through means that can guarantee its own preservation such as the principle of obedience, governmentality has 'a plurality of specific ends'[90] that can be achieved through such disciplines and tools as political economy, statistics, and demography. As a result, the art of government is a novel form of exercising power that emerged in parallel with the administrative apparatuses of 16th-century monarchies, yet without either coinciding with or completely supplanting the monarch's sovereign power.

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[88] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. See, in particular, pp 87–134.

[89] René Descartes, *Regulae ad directionem Ingenii – Rules for the direction of the natural intelligence. A bilingual edition of the Cartesian treatise on Method* (1628–1701). Amsterdam & Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998.

[90] Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, p 99.

By positing critique as the problem about 'how not to be governed *comme ça*?', Foucault frames it as one form that, historically, the antonym of the question 'how to govern?' has taken. Two characteristics of the art of governing – and of critique as its opposite – emerge. First, just like governmentality, critique has a clear political character, but it cannot be completely equated with politics. It relates to political disobedience as long as it designates the discursive practice that questions what a text holds to be true and as long as it functions as an alternative to the art of governing in general. Critique, in other words, is at once the refusal of the politics of one's times, of what 'an authority tells you [...] it is true',[91] and of the attitude that requires the meek acceptance of present configurations of power/knowledge. What we should retain in view of a queer critique is a sense that critique is both continuous and discontinuous with respect to politics.[92] Secondly, critique as the art of not being governed *comme ça* is a form of disobedience to specific arrangements of power. According to Foucault, the art of governing yielded alternative if not oppositional modes of government: what he calls the 'counter-conducts' of early modernity.[93] Luther's reform movement, for instance, was one empirical way to counter the art of governing souls promoted by the Roman Church; 18th-century secret societies cultivated their own alternative to absolutism. Opposition to governmentality and a relative discontinuity to politics are thus two features of Foucault's definition of critique in 1978.

The picture of critique that Foucault draws up to this point is not all too dissimilar from the history sketched by Reinhart Koselleck in *Critique and Crisis* (1959), a work that Foucault does not directly engage with.[94] According to Koselleck, criticism stemmed at the onset of modernity: it coincided with the bourgeois challenge to absolutism carried out in the secret societies and the *salons* of the time. In such venues, however, the political character of critique was not manifest, because, in Koselleck's account, it was

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[91] Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p 46.

[92] This is the subject of Foucault's last two courses at the Collège de France. The problem of the relation between critique and politics is spelled out, once again, in the fourth section of this chapter.

[93] See: Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, pp 191–254.

[94] Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (1959). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988. See, in particular, pp 98–123.

concealed under a layer of morality. In fact, 18th-century bourgeois intellectuals rejected the absolutist state in name, not of a different political project but of morally enlightened principles. This challenge to state authority on the ground of moral principles is what Koselleck considers to be the fundamental 'hypocrisy' of the Enlightenment. For him, bourgeois criticism, by drawing a clear-cut distinction between morality and politics while claiming to stand on the side of the former, awarded itself the morally superior task to submit everything, including state politics, to its scrutiny. In so doing, it disavowed its own political commitment to the dismantling of the absolutist state. Masonic lodges and the Republic of Letters are, for Koselleck, a case in point: both communities comprised bourgeois members who claimed to carry out non-political activities in the secrecy of their spaces removed from society. But what they actually did, in his view, was to morally judge the absolutist state and undermine its foundations.

Koselleck's account of the rise of critique does not exactly mirror Foucault's. For the latter, the rise of critique shows that the boundaries between politics and other domains are far from clear-cut. Critique's challenge to the state in the form of the refusal to be governed *comme ça* cannot be sequestered from the attempt at governing oneself differently, from the religious struggles around how to govern people's souls, and from the resistance to submit reason to the authority of Biblical Scriptures. From a Foucauldian standpoint, the bourgeois critique of the absolutist state, instead of being 'hypocritical' (a judgement that does not belong to Foucault), should be seen as a form of counter-conduct that, in early modernity, resisted the art of being governed *comme ça*. My argument is that there are two different grids to analyse power at work in Koselleck and Foucault. Foucault repeatedly states that governmentality is an alternative to frameworks centred on sovereignty. In the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* (a work we will soon explore more in depth), he clarifies that the analytic he has in mind is not the same as the juridical-discursive notion pertaining to sovereign power.[95] Although he does not (yet) name it governmentality, he seems to hint at it when intending to move away from an analysis of sexuality based on a conception of power shaped around the law, working through subjection, and requiring obedience. The political critique of absolutism in 18th-century France, says Foucault, followed a

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[95] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*. See, in particular, pp 81–91.

similar logic, for it was meant to counter the monarch's sovereign power even though the representation of power it deployed 'remained caught in the same system':

> Political criticism availed itself […] of all the juridical thinking that had accompanied the development of the monarchy, in order to condemn the latter; but it did not challenge the principle which held that law had to be the very form of power, and that power always had to be exercised in the form of law.[96]

This analytical grid seems to feature not only in 18th-century critiques of absolutism, but in Koselleck's account as well. In Foucault's view, a big part of 'political thought and analysis [has] not cut off the head of the king', or sovereign, and Koselleck seems to make no exception.[97] In other words, Koselleck's analysis of political critique is constrained by a framework that takes sovereignty as its model, thereby positing an unbridgeable gap between moral and political criticism. By understanding the workings of power through governmentality, instead, Foucault provides an analysis of critique that keeps politics, ethics, and textuality together.

As anticipated, in 'What is Critique?' Foucault traces his own conception of critique back to Kant – more specifically, to Kant's well-known essay 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?'[98] At the very beginning of the lecture, Foucault says that he would have preferred a different title, were it not too 'indecent'.[99] Only towards the end does he reveal that such ambitious title coincides with the Kantian question about the Enlightenment. 'What Kant was describing as the *Aufklärung*', Foucault writes, 'is very much what I was trying before to describe as critique, this critical attitude which appears […] in the Western world starting with what was historically, I believe, the great process of society's governmentalisation'.[100] In Kant's idea of the *Aufklärung* as a way out of a minority condition preventing people from using their reason there is something, for Foucault, that resonates with his own idea of critique.

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[96] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, p 88.

[97] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, pp 88–89.

[98] Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?'.

[99] Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p 41.

[100] Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p 48.

Foucault aims to underscore, in Kant, not the opposition between the analysis of the *Aufklärung* and the project of a transcendental critique, which is what he explores in 1983, but the emergence of critique as the art of not being governed *comme ça*.[101] For Kant, everything that keeps people in a minority condition – religion, medicine, knowledge – requires blind obedience.[102] The *Aufklärung*, instead, is the freedom to question the accepted truths that religion, medicine, and knowledge put forward. If people choose to obey after exercising this freedom, their act of obedience does not result from the imposition of authority, but is grounded on autonomy. As Halperin points out, Foucault's definition of critique is akin to Kant's notion of the *Aufklärung* 'insofar as immaturity in Kant's sense consists in submission to being governed' and the *Aufklärung* itself, conceived of as a way out of such immaturity, consists in something like the art of not being governed *comme ça*.[103]

The question of truth and its relation to power was a central preoccupation of Foucault's around the time he delivered his speech at the Sorbonne.[104] An understanding of power beyond the juridical-discursive framework of sovereignty, as we have seen, is consistently developed in his course *Security, Territory, Population*, as well as in the next two courses at Collège de France up to 1980.[105] This is not the place to dig into the different-yet-related concepts that try to grasp the workings of power for Foucault – disciplinarity, surveillance, pastoral power, biopolitics. For the sake of a discussion on critique, 'governmentality' is a notion broad enough to designate 'the exercise of [a]

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[101] 'The *Aufklärung* harbours, for Foucault, the key of the intractable and active relation of man with actuality. This is critique. Kant's transcendental enterprise, more than critique, is a contingent weapon in the critical battle' (Laura Bazzicalupo, 'Critica senza criterio, senza giudizio né legge. Dal decostruzionismo a Deleuze e Foucault', *Filosofia politica 3*, 2016, pp 487–506: 500. My translation).

[102] 'If I have a book that understands for me, a spiritual advisor who has conscience for me, a doctor who decides upon a regimen for me, and so forth, I need not trouble myself at all. I need not think […]' (Kant, An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?', p 17).

[103] David M Halperin, 'The Art of Not Being Governed. Michel Foucault on Critique and Transgression', unpublished paper, nd, pp 5–6.

[104] Foucault reconsiders this preoccupation in his course *On the Government of the Living. Lectures at the Collège de France 1979–1980* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[105] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*.

very complex power that has population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument'.[106] In a 1976 interview titled 'Truth and Power', Foucault juxtaposes the question of power to the problem of truth.[107] In Western modernity, truth, he argues, is prompted by scientific discourse, is subject to political incitement, is produced and controlled by a few apparatuses and institutions, and is always contested.[108] Much as the exercise of power depends on the effects of truth produced by demography, political economy, social sciences, and other disciplines, truth depends on the effects of power produced by scientific discourses, political forces, and social institutions. In this sense, truth and power are the two sides of the same coin, for Foucault. Or, as he summarises in his 1979–1980 course, 'I won't say simply that the exercise of power presupposes something like a useful and utilisable knowledge in those who [govern]. I shall say that the exercise of power is almost always accompanied by a manifestation of truth'.[109]

In the frame of an analytic that keeps truth and power together, a criticism borne out of Kant's notion of the *Aufklärung* is, for Foucault, an anti-authoritarian gesture that opposes, not only a certain configuration of power, but also its accompanying discourse on truth.

> If governmentalisation is indeed this movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth, well, then! I will say that critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself [*sic*] the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth. Well, then!: critique will be the art of voluntary insubordination [*inservitude volontaire*], that of reflected intractability [*indocilité réfléchie*].[110]

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[106] Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, p 108.

[107] Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power' (1976), in Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, pp 51–75. This interview is a shortened version of Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino's original interview to Foucault included in their co-edited volume: Michel Foucault, *Microfisica del potere. Interventi politici*. Turin: Einaudi, 1978.

[108] Foucault, 'Truth and Power', p 73.

[109] Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, p 6.

[110] Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p 47.

In this passage of 'What is Critique?' the art of not being governed *comme ça* morphs into the art of voluntary insubordination and reflective *indocilité*. This definition combines an oppositional stance to power/truth with an intentional and a reflective element. Both intentionality and reflectivity are borrowed from Kant's reading of the *Aufklärung*. According to Kant, people's self-incurred minority is ultimately caused by the lack of decision and courage on the part of the individual subject. 'Sapere aude!' reads Kant's Enlightened motto, which calls people to be audacious enough in order not so much to overthrow power as to let themselves be guided – or better, governed – by reason alone.

The discussion of the courage needed to get out of the condition of minority or tutelage by making a public use of reason is deferred to Foucault's later engagement with Kant in 1983: in 1978, his reference to Kant's 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' ends here. Following Halperin, Foucault's depiction of critique as the art of not being governed *comme ça* and of voluntary insubordination presented thus far has two main implications. First, it designates 'not just an intellectual procedure, but also […] an expression of political resistance'; second, as an expression of political resistance, it is essentially negative.[111] Much as a definition of critique as the art of not being governed *comme ça* and of voluntary insubordination is unquestionably negative, it nonetheless entails a few positive consequences. To begin with, the resistance to what is accepted as true, for Foucault, requires the reappraisal of what has been dismissed as untrue, unscientific, or naïve. In his inaugural lecture of the 1975–1976 course *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault highlights the increasing success, at the time he is speaking, of local modes of criticism over dominant systems of knowledge.[112] Such local criticisms, he argues, can be detected in what he calls 'the insurrection of subjugated knowledges', that is, the uprising of marginalised, neglected, and disqualified contents that aim to challenge what is held to be true.[113] Even if Foucault, in *Society Must Be Defended*, does not draw a direct line between subjugated

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[111] Halperin, 'The Art of Not Being Governed', pp 33–34.

[112] Michel Foucault, *'Society Must Be Defended'. Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-76*. New York: Picador, 2003, pp. 1–21.

[113] Foucault, *'Society Must Be Defended'*, p 7.

knowledges and the *connaissances* produced by minority groups, the former can be said to include the activities of contemporary social movements.[114] Commenting on Guy Hocquenghem's *Le désir homosexuel* – a crucial work of the French gay liberation movement of the beginning of the 1970s – Paul B. Preciado highlights that, in the years following 1968, gay, lesbian, and trans groups started challenging, not only traditional class-based politics, but also the system of knowledge that kept them at the margins of society.[115] By recovering a form of politics and knowledge centred on anal pleasure and the horror it provokes, *Le désir homosexuel* is a case in point for Preciado, as it expresses a form of activist knowledge emerging not just and not only from the politics

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[114] The relation between Foucault and the social movements of his time is no secret. Such an early book by Foucault as *History of Madness* (1961) (London & New York: Routledge, 2006) was heralded by the anti-psychiatric movement of the 1960s and 1970s, despite Foucault troubled – and often critical – relation to it (Mario Colucci, 'Michel Foucault e il potere psichiatrico: Isterici, internati, uomini infami', *Aut Aut 323*, special issue 'Michel Foucault e la resistenza al potere', 2004, pp 111–134). Foucault himself, as one of the founders of the *Groupe d'Information sur le Prisons* active in the early 1970s, was directly involved in the prison abolition movement. And his later project on a history of sexuality can hardly be detached from the sexual liberation movements of the time. In a 1982 interview, Foucault states that, over the monopoly of political life by parties and institutions, he prefers the innovation and experimentation carried out at the bottom level of society. The social movements 'from the early 1960s to now', he contends, 'have really changed our whole lives, our mentality, our attitudes, and the attitudes and mentality of other people – people who do not belong to these movements' (Michel Foucault, 'Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity' (1982), in M Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. New York: The New Press, 1997, pp 163–173: 172–173). This does not mean that Foucault's works are immediately political, or that they deal with exactly the same problems that social movements face. 'Take the book on madness', says Foucault himself in 1981: 'its description and analysis end in the years 1814 to 1815. Thus, the book did not appear to be a critique of contemporary psychiatric institutions, but I knew their functioning well enough that I could question their history. It seems to me that the history I wrote was sufficiently detailed for it to pose questions for those who currently live in the institution' (Michel Foucault, 'Interview with Christian Panier and Pierre Watté' (1981), in M Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling. The Function of Avowal in Justice*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014, pp 247–252: 248).

[115] Paul B Preciado, 'Terror anal: apuntes sobre los primeros días de la revolución sexual', in G Hocquenghem, *El deseo homosexual*. Santa Cruz de Tenerife: melusina, 2009, pp 133–172. The English translation of Hocquenghem's *Le désir homosexuel* (1972), which does not include Preciado's afterword, is published for the Q series and titled *Homosexual Desire* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 1993).

of the time or from the author's experience, but also from the rewriting of the critical canon. This is why, according to him, Hocquenghem's work is an anticipation 'of a form of knowledge that we now call queer theory'.[116] Queer theoretical strands of the past three decades as well as their forerunners of the 1970s, of which Hocquenguem is no less an example than Foucault, mobilise forms of subjugated knowledge (what, with Roderick Ferguson, I prefer to call 'minority knowledges')[117] in order to overturn accepted truths and to dispute the networks of power sustaining them.

Interestingly, in the continuation of the inaugural lecture of *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault connects the insurrection of minority knowledges to his own genealogical project. Because genealogies explore forms of knowledge deemed untrue or naïve, he writes, they are not 'positivistic returns to a form of science that is more attentive or more accurate. Genealogies are, quite specifically, antisciences'.[118] A similar turn to genealogy, though differently phrased, is to be found in 'What is Critique?' When one poses the question of the *Aufklärung* in the wake of Kant, Foucault argues, one explores the constitutive moment of her/his times. The Enlightenment is an event that defines 'the formation of capitalism, the constitution of the bourgeois world, the establishment of state systems, the foundation of modern science [and] the organisation of a confrontation between the art of being governed and that of not being quite so governed'.[119] As such, it is a privileged site, for Foucault, to conduct a 'historical-philosophical work' that underscores the relation between power, truth, and subjectivity in modernity.[120] Thus, the Enlightenment (as well as critique as its defining attitude) is configured as a historical-philosophical enterprise, or, in Joan W. Scott's words, as a

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[116] Preciado, 'Terror anal', p 150. My translation. On Hocquenghem as a forerunner of queer theory, see also Annemarie Jagose (*Queer Theory: An Introduction*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996, pp 4–5): 'On the back-cover blurb of the 1993 edition of Guy Hocquenghem's *Homosexual Desire*, Douglas Crimp argues that […] the book […] "may well be the first example of what we now call queer theory"'.

[117] Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

[118] Foucault, *'Society Must Be Defended'*, p 9.

[119] Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p 57.

[120] Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p 57.

practice of 'history-writing', which Foucault calls genealogy.[121] Contrary to what the expression '*not* being governed' and the word 'insubordination' suggest, such practice can hardly be reduced to an instance of negativity, as the next section aims to show.

2.2. Critique as genealogy

Foucault was keen to draw generalisations out of his past research, reinterpreting his previous works as part of a bigger project devoted to the workings of power, the will to truth, the constitution of the subject, or all these things together. One such generalisation (perhaps one of his earliest) resulted in the publication of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* in 1969.[122] In it, Foucault argues that what constitutes the red thread between his previous works on madness, on the prison system, and on the human sciences is *archaeology*. Foucault's archaeological method as it unfolds in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* takes linguistics as a model and discourse as a unit. What it aims to do, very schematically, is to analyse discursive formations:

> [I]t must compare them, oppose them to one another in the simultaneity in which they are presented, distinguish them from those that do not belong to the same time-scale, relate them, on the basis of their specificity, to the non-discursive practices that surround them and serve as a general element for them.[123]

At the very beginning of the 1970s, however, archaeology is replaced – or better, complemented – by a new analytical frame that takes its cue from Nietzsche's *genealogy*. On 2 December 1970, during his first lecture ever at the Collège de France

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[121] Joan W Scott, 'History-writing as critique', in K Jenkins, S Morgan & A Munslow (eds), *Manifestos for History*. New York & London: Routledge, 2007, pp 19–38.

[122] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). London & New York: Routledge, 2002.

[123] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p 174. Lorenzo Bernini expands on the thread linking Foucault's early works: 'in the 1960s, Foucault's investigation into the historical *a priori* stays on the surface of discursive formations, and it is named *archaeology* (the French subtitles of *The Birth of the Clinic* and *The Order of Things* are, respectively, *Une archéologie du regard médical* and *Une archéologie des sciences humaines*)' (Lorenzo Bernini, *Le pecore e il pastore*. Naples: Liguori, 2008, p 62. My translation).

known as 'The Order of Discourse', Foucault introduces the idea that discourses, to be analysed, cannot be simply traced back to the relations between discursive formations or the ways they function within a certain historical epistemological field.[124] For him, they must be considered as events, that is, as contingent, mutable, and discontinuous formations. Additionally, they must question the very will to truth of the investigating subject. This new analytic is organised around two *ensembles* ('modalities' or 'sets') of investigation: the critical *ensemble*, which 'show[s] how [discourses] are formed, in response to what needs, […] what constraints they have effectively exerted, [and] to what extent they have been evaded',[125] and the genealogical *ensemble*, which 'concern[s] the effective formation of discourse[s] either within the limits of [discursive] control, or outside them, or more often on both sides of the boundary at once'.[126]

Interestingly enough, while introducing his genealogical method in 1970, Foucault connects it to critique – or better, to the *ensemble 'critique'* as contiguous to the *ensemble 'généalogique'*. This new analytic, however, is still caught in the framework of the analysis of discursive formations. Only in 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' (1971) does genealogy get rid of the remnants of discursivity and enter the realm of history proper. In it, Foucault claims that genealogical research is related to both Nietzsche's project and to the practice of historians.[127] As it is customary in Foucault, genealogy is initially defined in opposition to what it is not: it does not coincide with a quest for origins or for the essence of things and it cannot be recomposed in a superhistorical, metaphysical unity. Positively, genealogy is described as a form of 'effective history' that debunks the idea of essence by looking at events in their dispersion. Genealogy understood as an 'effective history' has three major implications for Foucault: first, because it assumes the fictional and contingent character of events, it 'offers […] the

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[124] Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse' (1970), in R Young (ed), *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*. Boston, London & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, pp 48–78.

[125] Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', p 70.

[126] Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', p 71.

[127] Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' (1971), in Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, pp 86–100.

possibility for alternative identities';[128] second, it is committed to the dissipation of such identities; third, by interrogating the very consciousness that moves historians to truth, it 'risk[s] the destruction of the subject who seeks knowledge in the endless deployment of the will to knowledge'.[129] Against the traditional paradigms for historical research such as Hegelian and Marxist historicism, Foucault's genealogy promotes the exploration of historical events in their contingency and in view of social change.[130] With 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', Foucault's genealogical project is fully configured as a practice of 'history-writing', in Scott's words, or, perhaps more emphatically, as 'the culmination of history', as his friend Paul Veyne says.[131]

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[128] Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', p 94.

[129] Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', p 97.

[130] Recent studies, rather than stressing the divide between the archaeological and the genealogical approach, tend to focus on the continuities between them, particularly in light of Foucault's late concept of *problématisation*. Giovanni Maria Mascaretti argues that Foucault's idea of *problématisation* 'does not represent a third methodological tool alongside those of archaeology and genealogy, but rather that it should be regarded as a methodological strategy informing both of them' (Giovanni Maria Mascaretti, 'Michel Foucault on Problematisation, Parrhesia, and Critique', *Materiali Foucaultiani 3*(5–6), 2014, pp 135–154: 137). Similarly, the main argument of Colin Koopman's *Genealogy as Critique*, which is mostly – though not exclusively – devoted to Foucault's genealogical analysis, is that 'genealogy at its best involves a practice of critique in the form of the historical problematisation of the present' (Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013, p 2). *Problématisation*, in Foucault's own words, is the study of how an object has become a problem: '[i]t is the totality of discursive or non-discursive practices that introduces something into the play of true and false and constitutes it as an object for thought' (Michel Foucault, 'The Concern for Truth' (1984), in Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, pp 255–267: 257). In one of the habitual moves to reread his own work through new lenses, Foucault argues that his previous books on madness, prison, and sexuality explore the mechanisms through which the fool, the criminal, and the pervert have become a problem for politics. Foucault's critical enterprise, from the perspective of *problématisation*, is thus the exploration of how things have historically turned into problems more than the solution to those very problems. In this sense, a chapter on critique-as-genealogy can very well be read as a chapter on critique-as-problematisation, even though a focus on Foucault's genealogical analysis is more in line with what Foucault had in mind when he started his *History of Sexuality*.

[131] Scott, 'History-writing as critique'; Paul Veyne, 'Foucault Revolutionises History' (1978), in A I Davidson (ed), *Foucault and his Interlocutors*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997, pp 146–182: 147.

Foucault's most recognisable genealogical enterprise is his project on sexuality, which he conducted from the second half of the 1970s up to his death. This project cannot be reduced to the status of example: an investigation of queer critique can hardly eschew Foucault's take on sexuality and sex, if only because its influence on the field of queer theory is unparalleled.[132] The French title of the first volume of this unfinished project is *La volonté du savoir* (1976). The title refers to the questioning of the system of knowledge in which an investigation of sexuality takes place.[133] From the very beginning, Foucault makes it clear that the history he is drawing is not about sexual behaviours, but about how sexuality as an object of knowledge has come into being.[134] It was at a time when power began to function in terms of governmentality rather than sovereignty that the idea of sexuality first emerged. Contrary to the narrative promoted by psychoanalysis and sexual liberation movements, Western modernity has witnessed, for Foucault, not the repression of sexual desires, but the proliferation of discourses around sexuality, that is, an incitement to talk about sex. This incitement is modelled on the practice of confession, which requires individuals to tell the truth about themselves within the framework of Christianity. In modernity, this practice travelled to such secularised disciplines as medicine, pedagogy, philosophy, literature, psychology, psychoanalysis itself, and many others, which require people to tell the truth about themselves. These disciplines compose the modern apparatus of knowledge around sexuality, or what Foucault calls *scientia sexualis*.[135] Such apparatus is sustained not just by the incitement to talk about sex, but also by the medicalisation of sexuality, the conviction that sex is principle and cause of almost everything, and the belief that the

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[132] 'Foucault's work and life, achievements and demonisation, have made him a powerful model for many gay, lesbian and other intellectuals, and his analysis of the interrelationships of knowledge, power and sexuality was the most important intellectual catalyst of queer theory' (Tamsin Spargo, *Foucault and Queer Theory*. Cambridge & New York: Icon & Totem, 2000, p 8).

[133] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*. The first English translation in 1978 – the one deployed here – does not display Foucault's original title. Subsequent editions, however, translate the French *la volonté de savoir* as either 'the will to know' or 'the will to knowledge'.

[134] Foucault explicitly makes this point in the preface to the Italian edition of *The History of Sexuality Volume I*. See: Michel Foucault, 'Prefazione all'edizione italiana' (1977), in M Foucault, *La volontà di sapere. Storia della sessualità 1*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 2017, pp 7–8.

[135] See, in particular: Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, part III: pp 51–74.

deep, hidden, and repressed essence of human beings lies in their sexual life.

What is perhaps the most important trait of sexuality, in Foucault's account, is the fact that it functions by discerning what is normal from what is not. Put simply, sexuality functions as a norm.[136] To recall Foucault's idea of governmentality, one of the main differences between the art of government and sovereignty is that the latter takes the law as a model for how power works – in Foucault's vocabulary, sovereignty relies on a juridical-discursive framework. The art of government, instead, is characterised not so much by the absence of laws (in fact, laws continue to exist in modernity) as by the fact that laws increasingly function as norms. One consequence of this, for Foucault, is that our society has become a 'normalising' one,[137] for it hinges on the sharp distinction between what is normal and what is not. Sexuality is crucial in such a landscape, because it organises a whole field of fantasies, practices, and identities in order to distinguish normality from its deviations. Foucault groups the lines of differentiation between normality and abnormality operated by sexuality around 'four great strategic unities':[138] the hysterisation of women's bodies, the pedagogisation of children's sex, the socialisation of procreative behaviour, and the psychiatrisation of perverse pleasure. With reference to the latter, Foucault mentions the appearance, in the 18th and 19th centuries, of the 'pervert' as that individual whose sexual behaviour deviates from the norm. A feature of modern sexuality compared to non- or pre-modern practices, in fact, is to crystallise deviant behaviours into identities, as the figure of the 'pervert' exemplifies.

It is at this point – in what is perhaps queer theory's foundational passage – that Foucault introduces the subject of (male) homosexuality. Let me quote it extensively:

> [The] new persecution of peripheral sexualities entailed an incorporation of perversions and a new specification of individuals. As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The 19th-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case

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[136] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, p 144.

[137] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, p 144.

[138] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, p 103.

history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. [H]is sexuality [...] was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than a singular nature. We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized – Westphal's famous article of 1870 on 'contrary sexual sensations' can stand as its date birth – less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration, the homosexual was now a species.[139]

Foucault's suggestion – one that will be widely taken up and reworked in the years to come – is that, on the one hand, same-sex acts within the (pre- or non-modern) juridical-discursive framework were only sanctioned by the force of law. Consequently, sodomy was considered as nothing but a crime. In Western modernity, on the other hand, same-sex acts become 'a type of life, a life form, and a morphology'. This does not mean that they are not legally sanctioned – the persecution of same-sex practices does not end with modernity, because governmentality never fully replaces sovereignty – but it does mean that they are subjected to forces that turn them into an inner quality of the soul. Such forces, which have less to do with the legal system than with *scientia sexualis* as a system of knowledge, function as mechanism of normalisation. This way, same-sex acts become 'homosexuality', which is no longer – or better, not mainly – sanctioned as a sin, but it is analysed, classified, and eventually pathologised due to its deviating character.

Besides the birthdate of homosexuality, questioned on many fronts,[140] it is important to

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[139] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, p 43.

[140] 'Foucault's confident dating of the emergence of the homosexual as "a species" is rhetorically impressive', writes Annemarie Jagose. 'However, there is no critical consensus on the historical circumstances that gave rise to the modern homosexual' (Jagose, *Queer Theory*, p 11). In *How To Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), Halperin dates homosexuality back to 1869, when it appeared 'in two anonymous pamphlets published in Leipzig by an Austrian translator of Hungarian literature who took the name of Karl Maria Kertbeny' (p 130). Jagose

highlight that Foucault's account of sexuality in general, and of homosexuality in particular, is by all means a form of genealogy as 'effective history'. Homosexuality, for Foucault, is a contingent and historical formation, and the exploration of its genealogy points to alternative understandings of same-sex practices as well as the dissipation of homosexuality itself.[141] This claim is to be put in the context of the sexual liberation movements that were active at Foucault's time, which advocated for the emancipatory force of homosexuality. In a 1981 interview, while looking back at the first volume of *History of Sexuality*, Foucault says:

> On this point [about the indispensability of the question 'who are you sexually?'] I have not always made myself well understood by certain movements for sexual liberation in France. In my opinion, as important as it may be, tactically speaking, to say at a given moment, 'I am a homosexual', over the long run, in a wider strategy, the question of knowing who we are sexually should no longer be posed. It is not then a question of affirming one's sexual identity, but of refusing to allow sexuality as well as the different forms of sexuality the right to identify you. The obligation to identify oneself through and by a given type of sexuality must be refused.[142]

Foucault's rare confessional moment should not be missed. The main argument, however, is that the act of coming out – that very incitement to utter the truth about one's sexuality – partakes in those modes of subjugation that sexual liberation movements intend to counter. Instead of offering a solution to the dilemma of identity,

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herself lists different accounts of the birth of both male and female homosexuality: Alan Bray's (end of the 17th century), John D'Emilio's and Jeffrey Weeks's (end of the 19th century yet due to the development of capitalism), Lillian Faderman's and Valerie Traub's (ranging from the 16th to the 20th century). Even though Foucault's 'confident dating' is clearly objectionable, his general point, in Halperin's view, seems to remain valid, for the 'crucial and decisive break with tradition comes when Westphal defines "contrary sexual feeling" not in terms of its outward manifestations but in terms of its inward dynamics, its distinctive *orientation* of the inner life of the individual' (David M Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love*. New York & London: Routledge, 1990, p 163. Italics in the original).

[141] 'The purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity, but to commit itself to its dissipation' (Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', p 95).

[142] Michel Foucault, 'Interview with Jean François and John De Wit' (1981), in Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, pp 253–270: 261.

which is voiced perhaps more explicitly when hinting at 'a different economy of bodies and pleasures',[143] Foucault, in this quote, highlights a paradox: homosexuality cannot not be embraced yet must be resisted. Queer theories and politics of the past three decades, in this respect, are not that dissimilar when they make the case for the destabilising force of 'queer' while, at the same time, adding it to the LGBT acronym as yet another identity category. In the wake of Foucault, 'queer' is a de-essentialising device which, in order to work, must be first embraced, no matter how contradictory this is.

Foucault's signature difference with sexual liberation movements does not stop at his paradoxical take on the imperative of identification. To be sure, the most radical theorists of his time did not advocate for the embracing of homosexuality either. Hocquenghem, whom we have encountered in the previous section, carries out a thorough critique of homosexual identity. For him, desire is not bounded to the categories of hetero- and homosexuality, for these are an invention of the so-called 'normal world': '[t]here is no innocent or objective position on homosexuality', to him, because 'there are just situations of desire where homosexuality intervenes'.[144] Similarly, Mario Mieli, one of the leaders of the Italian gay liberation movement of the 1970s, argues that liberation is not achieved through the mobilisation of homosexuality. Instead, by reworking the Freudian idea of the infant's bisexual disposition and polymorphous perversity, which he rereads in terms of 'transsexuality', Mieli suggests that 'the resolution of the present separate and antithetical categories of sexuality will be transsexual, and that transsexuality discloses the synthesis […] of the expressions of a

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[143] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, p 159. The indictment to focus on bodies and pleasure is opposed to the current configuration of sexuality, which privileges an economy of sex as desire. Elsewhere, Foucault suggests that the economy of bodies and pleasures is best explored by S&M communities: through the eroticisation of unexpected body parts, sadomasochistic practices contribute to the degenitalisation of pleasure and the decentring of desire (see: Foucault, 'Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity').

[144] Guy Hocquenghem, *Le désir homosexuel*. Paris: Jean-Pierre Delarge, 1972, p 36. My translation. Curiously, this passage at the very end of the first chapter on anti-homosexual paranoia is missing from the English translation.

liberated Eros'.[145]

Nor does the difference between Foucault and his proto-queer contemporaries such as Hocquenghem and Mieli entirely lie in their different take on psychiatry and psychoanalytic theory.[146] What distinguishes Foucault from them is the take on repression. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), Hocquenghem and Mieli argue against Freud's Oedipal narrative, which requires the child to repress all homosexual attachments in order to develop a 'normal' sexual life.[147] But, by interpreting the Oedipus complex as an instance of a repressive society, they remain tied to the paradigm of repression. For Hocquenghem, liberation is a matter of countering the Oedipal sublimation of homosexual desires: 'the gay movement […] desublimates everything it can by putting sex into everything'.[148] Mieli further explains: '[t]he revolutionary homosexual struggle is […] waged against a form of oppression that is prior to Oedipus'.[149] Contrary to them, repression alone, for Foucault, is not sufficient to understand the workings of sexuality: strategies of liberation of repressed (or oppressed, or sublimated) desires, in his view, are not effective in resisting power.[150]

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[145] Mario Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism. Elements of Homosexual Critique* (1977). London: Pluto Press, 2018, p 9.

[146] Although it is unquestionable that Foucault rejects the tools of psychiatry and psychoanalysis whereas such members of sexual liberation movements as Mieli and Hocquenghem deploy them extensively, the latter are certainly not fans of the sciences of the mind either. One of Mieli's most famous pictures portrays him protesting, together with the comrades of FUORI (an Italian group that was born on that occasion) and of FHAR (a French group Hocquenghem was part of) a gathering of sexologists and psychiatrists in San Remo in 1972 (Massimo Prearo, 'Introduction', in M Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism*, pp xv–xxiv: xvi).

[147] The book referenced is: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (1972). London & New York: Continuum, 2004. About this book's influence on Hocquenghem, see: Jeffrey Weeks, 'Preface to the 1978 Edition', in Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, pp 23–47: 30–34. About its influence on Mieli, see: Tim Dean, 'Foreword: "I Keep My Treasure in My Arse"', in M Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism*, pp vi–xiv: x.

[148] Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, p 138.

[149] Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism*, p 53.

[150] To an extent, the first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* can be interpreted as a response to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. While most commenters stress the continuities between these two works when it comes to their critical take on psychoanalysis (e.g., Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance.*

Both the idea of repression and that of liberation as its corollary, for Foucault, are embedded in an outdated legal-discursive conception of power. 'This does not mean', he declares, 'that I am claiming that sexuality is not repressed. Repression seems to me to be the global effect [and] not the very principle of the transformation'.[151]

Something similar to repression can be said about the notions of ideology and revolution. In the same way as the repressive hypothesis assumes that desire is constrained and awaits release, ideology assumes that individuals break the chains of their alienation by grasping truth. This is evident in Mieli and Hocquenghem, both of whom were members of *revolutionary* movements (FUORI–*Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano*, and FHAR–*Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire*, respectively). For them, the sublimation of homosexual desire and the repression of 'transsexuality' are ideological operations connected to the advancement of capitalism and other systems of oppression enforcing heterosexuality. If sexual liberation is ever to be attained, these systems, for both Hocquenghem and Mieli, are to be overthrown.[152] Genealogical analysis, instead, aims to do away with the notion of ideology and that of revolution as its corollary. In 1975, Foucault states: 'what troubles me with [the] analyses which prioritise ideology is that there is always presupposed a human subject on the lines of the model provided by classical philosophy, endowed

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A study of women in contemporary philosophy. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, p 66), others focus on their discontinuities. Lorenzo Bernini, for instance, stresses the mutual influence and long-lasting collaboration between Deleuze and Foucault. At the same time, he argues that 'desire, for Deleuze and Guattari, is a *machine*; for Foucault, instead, it is an *apparatus* of modern *biopower*' (Bernini, *Le pecore e il pastore*, p 92. My translation; italics in the original). Wendy Grace goes one step further when she argues that 'Foucault's account on sexuality is incompatible with desire as formulated by Deleuze and Guattari' (Wendy Grace, 'Faux Amis: Foucault and Deleuze on Sexuality and Desire', *Critical Inquiry 36*(1), 2009, pp 52–75: 53). In this sense, the first volume of *History of Sexuality* is configured not just as the politically-inflected complement to the critique of psychoanalysis carried out in *Anti-Oedipus*, but also as a critique of the very notion of desire that Deleuze and Guattari mobilise.

[151] Foucault, 'Interview with Jean François and John De Wit', p 257. About how, for Sedgwick, Foucault himself does not entirely overcome the structure of repression that he counters, see chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp 118–119 and pp 165–167.

[152] Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism*, pp 101–109; Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, pp 93–95.

with a consciousness which power is then thought to seize on'.[153] By drawing a distinction between consciousness and the power acting upon it, ideological critique misses the fact that, for Foucault, consciousness itself is the product of a specific configuration of power. As such, a configuration of power cannot be overthrown unless consciousness (that is, subjectivity) is dissolved. This is why Foucault prefers to talk about forms of resistance to power instead of deploying the vocabulary of revolution.

Another problem of Foucault's with psychoanalytic and ideological critique is the revolutionary horizon in which their promises of disalienation and emancipation operate.[154] Struggles that are enacted in view of a liberation to come – by virtue of the force of desire, of a certain class of people, or of both – are projected onto a future whose outcome is uncertain. When talking about the local and everyday struggles of prisoners, feminists, and farmers before a Japanese audience in 1978, Foucault states:

> These immediate struggles no longer expect a future moment that would be the revolution, the liberation, the disappearance of classes, the withering of the state, the solution of all problems. […] Whatever vocabulary one employs, whatever the theoretical references of those participating in these struggles are, it is absolutely clear that we have to do with a process which [is not] characterized by a revolutionary form, a revolutionary morphology in the classical sense of the word 'revolution', where revolution designates a global and unitary struggle of a whole nation, people or class, a struggle that promises to overturn the established power from top to bottom.[155]

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[153] Michel Foucault, 'Body/Power' (1975), in M Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980, pp 55–62: 58. This idea is reiterated in 1984: 'I've always been a little distrustful of the general theme of liberation: there is the danger that it will refer back to the idea that there does exist a nature or a human foundation which […] found itself concealed, alienated or imprisoned in and by some repressive mechanism' (Michel Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An Interview with Michel Foucault on 20 January 1984', *Philosophy and Social Criticism 12*(2–3), 1987, pp 112–131: 113).

[154] Michel Foucault, 'The analytic philosophy of politics' (1978), *Foucault Studies 24*, 2018, pp 188–200. See, on this point, also Bernini, *Le pecore e il pastore*, pp 194–195, and Veyne's depiction of Foucault as someone who 'believed neither in Marx nor in Freud; neither in the Revolution nor in Mao' (Paul Veyne, *Foucault: His Thought, His Character*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010, p 118).

[155] Foucault, 'The analytic philosophy of politics', pp 196–197.

Foucault's interest, in 1978, is cast on a myriad of dispersed struggles that cannot be subsumed under the signifier 'revolution'. Even when he begins to recover this signifier by way of his controversial appraisal of the Iranian revolution in 1979 (a process culminating in 1983 with the recovery of the enthusiasm surrounding the French revolution, as we shall see further on in this chapter), Foucault refuses to predict the outcome of what will come after the upheaval.[156] In sum, Foucault's departure from sovereignty as a framework to conceive of power relations coincides with his departure from the idea of consciousness and of power being two discrete entities, and consequently, with his demise of ideological critique as a useful tool for the genealogical project on the one hand, and of the revolution as the (exclusive) horizon of social struggles on the other hand.

Where does this discussion leave us on the subject of a queer critique? The historicising and de-essentialising task of genealogical practices is surely one of Foucault's main legacies for any critical study of sexuality, as it is the questioning of the repressive hypothesis and ideological critique. Additionally, Foucault's own genealogical analysis carried out in the first volume of *History of Sexuality* – one in which homosexuality as deviation from the norm plays a crucial role – has become pivotal in queer theory. However, it does not follow from this that queer critique is exclusively shaped around Foucault's genealogical investigation. Several queer theoretical strands, in fact, departed from Foucault's antagonistic take on psychoanalytic and ideological critique.[157] Teresa de Lauretis, a founding figure of the field, locates Foucault's discontent with psychoanalytic theory within the overall discontent, in the European and especially French academic environments of the time, with Freud – or more exactly, with a

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[156] 'There'll come a moment when the phenomenon that we are trying to apprehend and which has so fascinated us – the revolutionary experience itself – will die out. There was literally a light that lit up in all of them and which bathed all of them at the same time. That will die out. At that point, different political forces, different tendencies will appear, there'll be compromises, there'll bet his or that, I have no idea who will come out on top and I don't think there are many people who can say it now'. (Michel Foucault, 'Iran: The Spirit of a World Without Spirit', in Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, pp 211–224: 219).

[157] Even though most strands do not dismiss Foucault's genealogy of sexuality altogether, but try to combine it with a psychoanalytical and/or historical-materialist take.

Lacanian reading of Freud. Such discontent 'promoted a reductive and […] false dichotomy between two views on the subject of sexuality known as essentialism and social constructionism',[158] whereby Foucault's genealogy is assigned to the latter and psychoanalysis to the former end of the dichotomy. But things, for de Lauretis, are more nuanced, and the two views on sexuality are not as irreconcilable as they seem. By retrieving such Freudian notions as the unconscious and the drive, de Lauretis accomplishes, in Lorenzo Bernini's words, 'a complex vision of sexuality that recognises the historical character of current sexual identities while […] avoid[ing] the mistake of thinking that desire can be easily manipulated by reason'.[159] In de Lauretis' vein, queer theory does not disdain the use of psychoanalytic theory: suffice it to mention Butler's take on the 'psychic life' of normalising power,[160] or the so-called 'anti-social thesis' in queer theory, exemplified by the works of Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman.[161]

The notion of ideology as an analytical tool, together with the historical-materialist approach it carries along, has found its way in queer theory too. When exploring the Marxist vein of the field, James Penney argues that one of the reasons for the difficulty to engage with a historical-materialist approach is precisely Foucault's take on sexuality:

> The later work of Michel Foucault was instrumental in calling into question the assumption that we've emancipated sexuality from repression. Much less commonly acknowledged is the fact that Foucault's decisive turn away from the Marxist tradition before he undertook his *History of Sexuality* project is significantly responsible for queer theory's general

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[158] Teresa de Lauretis, *Freud's Drive: Psychoanalysis, Literature, and Film*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p 40.

[159] Lorenzo Bernini, *Queer Apocalypses: Elements of Antisocial Theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p 13.

[160] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997. Butler's take on psychoanalysis is explored in the second chapter, pp 122–123.

[161] Leo Bersani, *Homos*. Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1995; Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). The antisocial thesis in queer theory returns in the 'coda' of the dissertation, p 269, footnote 1008.

allergy to materialist analysis.[162]

Foucault's genealogical analysis of sexuality is as much a critique of psychoanalysis as it is of Marx's 'dogmatic framework',[163] which was challenged by the new kind of politics that appeared after 1968. Foucault's critique, in this sense, is an alternative to Marx's, but not the only one. Other critique appeared in the intellectual scene of those years, which reinvented Marxism beyond its dogmatic coordinates. Outside of France, Stuart Hall, founder of the field of cultural studies at the University of Birmingham, combined a class-based analysis with the demands for recognition of the emerging (feminist, black, and other) movements of the 1970s and 1980s. He did so by recovering a Gramscian conception of ideology detached from the deterministic logic of the structure/superstructure scheme and capable to account for the different ways in which concepts, imaginaries, and systems of representation of different groups become hegemonic in society.[164] Inside of France, materialist feminism was on the rise at the time of Foucault's writing. According to such thinkers as Monique Wittig, Christine Delphy, and Colette Guillaumin, the oppression of women cannot be detached from the modes of production, and the very relation between sexes is to be understood in terms of class struggle; as such, it is mutable. 'Women' and 'men' are historical products kept in place by the ideology of sexual difference, which constructs the two sexes as two natural and perennial groups.[165] Both the emerging field of cultural studies and feminist materialism, with their different reworking of Marxist categories, have been taken up by queer theorists: Rosemary Hennessy, Roderick Ferguson, Kevin Floyd, and Judith Butler are but a few names.[166]

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[162] James Penney, *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics*. London: Pluto Press, 2014, p 73.

[163] Michel Foucault, 'The Minimalist Self' (1983), in Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, pp 3–16: 8.

[164] Stuart Hall, 'The Problem of Ideology-Marxism without Guarantees', *Journal of Communication Inquiry 10*(8), 1986, pp 28–44.

[165] Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (1979). Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002.

[166] About the influence of Stuart Hall on the queer theories to come, see: Gianmaria Colpani, *Queer Hegemonies: Politics and Ideology in Contemporary Queer Debates* (doctoral dissertation). Verona: University of Verona, 2017, https://iris.univr.it/handle/11562/963338 (accessed 10 January 2020). About a discussion of the influence of French feminist materialism – and of Monique Wittig in particular – on the queer theoretical field, see: Benoît Auclerc and Yannick Chevalier (eds), *Lire Monique Wittig aujourd'hui*. Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2013. For an agile overview of the queer Marxist field,

Does the fact that Foucault does not buy into theories of sexual liberation or the revolutionary promises of Marxism imply that his genealogy is a quietist practice confined within the boundaries of theory?[167] By refuting the idea of an emancipation or revolution to come, does he forsake social transformation tout court? At the beginning of the decade of the 1980s, in an interview conducted by his friend Didier Eribon and titled 'Practicing Criticism', to the question about whether he considers himself a revolutionary or a reformist (in fact, 'the reproach [is] often made that the criticism made by intellectuals leads to nothing', says Eribon),[168] Foucault replies by refuting the opposition between reformism and revolution, as much as that between an allegedly inert criticism and 'real' transformation. After all, the practice of criticism, he argues,

> is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest. […] Criticism is a matter […] to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such. Practising criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult.[169]

Genealogical criticism is that practice that challenges what is familiar, problematises what is accepted as self-evident, and de-essentialises what seems to be unchangeable. It does so in order to show that things can be arranged otherwise, though it does not say which political practice must be pursued. Foucault's genealogical criticism, in other words, is not prescriptive: it points to the urgency of transformation without setting the

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see: Peter Drucker, 'Queer Marxism', *historical materialism*, nd, np, https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/reading-guides/queer-marxism-peter-drucker (accessed 10 January 2022).

[167] The accusation of 'political quietism' is famously moved against Foucault by Palestinian-American literary scholar Edward W Said in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983, p 245). Halperin's reply mobilises a wide repertoire of citations to prove that Foucault's political engagement is everything but quietist (Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, pp 21–24).

[168] Michel Foucault, 'Practicing Criticism' (1981), in Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, pp 152–156: 154.

[169] Foucault, 'Practicing Criticism', pp 154–155.

instructions about how to achieve it.[170] Thus, far from being the opposite of transformation, criticism is the condition of it. As Foucault states, '[i]t is not […] a question of there being a time for criticism and a time for transformation […]. In fact I think the work of deep transformation can only be carried out in a free atmosphere, one constantly agitated by a permanent criticism'.[171] The alternative to the revolution, for Foucault, is not necessarily reformism, and to abandon the idea of liberation does not lead to immobility.

'What is Critique?' makes the case for a 'historical-philosophical practice' that 'question[s] the relationship between power, truth, and the subject' and is oriented 'towards the problem of the subject and the truth about which historians are not usually concerned'.[172] Only at the end of the lecture does Foucault indicate that the analytic he has in mind is genealogical:

> Let us say, roughly, that as opposed to a genesis oriented towards the unity of some principial cause burdened with multiple descendants, what is proposed instead is a *genealogy*, that is, something that attempts to restore the conditions for the appearance of a singularity born out of multiple determining elements of which it is not the product, but rather the effect.[173]

Critique-as-genealogy is a historical investigation that refuses causality and centres on the immanence and singularity of events in the present. It is carried out, Foucault says, through an understanding of power away from the legal-discursive framework, one that needs 'to be considered in relation to a field of interactions […] which cannot be dissociated from forms of knowledge'.[174] In the next sections, I am going to explore Foucault's (partial) departure from a genealogical analysis embedded in relations of

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[170] About the difference between a normative critique and Foucault's critical project, see the fourth section of this chapter. On Foucault's political critique 'without guarantees', see: Butler, 'What is Critique?'.

[171] Foucault, 'Practicing Criticism', p 155.

[172] Foucault, 'What is Critique?', pp 56–57.

[173] Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p 64. Italics in the original.

[174] Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p 66.

power/knowledge and, concomitantly, his further elaboration of the gap between critique and politics.

1.3 On parrhesia. Critique as ethos

Five years after 'What is Critique?', Foucault engages once again, and more extensively, with Kant's 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?'. The most well-known outcome of his novel engagement with Kant, particularly among an English-speaking audience, is what appeared in 1984 in Paul Rabinow's edited collection *The Foucault Reader* under the title 'What is Enlightenment?'.[175] This piece, however, is a revised and shortened version of the inaugural lecture of the course *The Government of Self and Others*, which Foucault delivered at the Collège de France on 5 January 1983.[176] In the opening of this lecture, Foucault states that the course will be on the subject of parrhesia: that is, on a certain mode of truth-telling (*dire-vrai*) or frankness (*franc-parler*) related to the art of government and rooted in Greek antiquity.[177] But, instead of diving immediately into the subject, he chooses to start with 'not exactly an *excursus*: a little epigraph [*exergue*]'.[178] The discussion of Kant's idea of the Enlightenment is, thus, an epigraph or *exergue* to Foucault's broader reflection on parrhesia. This connection is missing from the text included in Rabinow's collection. In order to show the continuity between Foucault's analysis of the Enlightenment and his notion of parrhesia, this section focuses on the inaugural lecture of *The Government of Self and Others*, except from a few incursions into 'What is Enlightenment?' when it significantly differs from the original source.[179]

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[175] Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?'.

[176] Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, pp 1–40.

[177] Foucault's return to antiquity with a study on parrhesia is crucial for this discussion, as it suggests, as we shall see, that the origins of critique largely predate modernity.

[178] Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, p 6.

[179] It should be noticed that the first official transcription, in French, of Foucault's 1982–1983 course at the Collège de France was only published in 2008 (Michel Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres. Cours au Collège de France (1982–1983)*. Paris: Seuil/Gallimard, 2008). The English translation appeared in 2010. Before that, only recordings were available. This might contribute to explain why

Obviously, a few things have changed between 'What is Critique?' in 1978 and the inaugural lecture of *The Government of Self and Others* in 1983. Notably, in-between these two moments, Foucault argues that the focus of his investigation has switched from the exercise of power to the manifestation of truth that accompanies it, or what he calls 'alethurgy'. During his 1979–1980 course *On the Government of the Living*, alethurgy is described as 'the set of possible verbal or non-verbal procedures by which one brings to light what is laid down as true as opposed to false, hidden, inexpressible, unforeseeable, or forgotten'.[180] For Foucault, all exercise of power requires a discourse of truth and vice versa. This is the case in modern societies, where the art of government is rationalised through such alethurgic devices as political economy, statistics, or demography. But it is equally true for antiquity, as Foucault demonstrates through the example of emperor Septimius Severus, for whom 'a ritual manifestation of the truth maintain[s] a number of relations with the exercise of power'.[181] That of the art of government in connection to the manifestation of truth, Foucault contends, is a new subject of investigation alternative to his previous focus on knowledge-power.

> That theme, knowledge-power, was itself only a way of shifting things in relation to a type of analysis in the domain of the history of thought that was more or less organized by, or that revolved around the notion of dominant ideology. So there are two successive shifts if you like: one from the notion of dominant ideology to that of knowledge-power, and now, a second shift from the notion of knowledge-power to the notion of government by the truth.[182]

Against ideology as an analytical tool and the legal-discursive framework it relies upon, as seen in the previous sections, Foucault developed, during the 1970s, an

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Foucault's 'What is Enlightenment?' circulated more widely than the original lecture, particularly among the English-speaking audience. Additionally, despite a few additions, 'What is Enlightenment?' lacks the discussion on the French Revolution, which was translated into English and published separately a few years later as: Michel Foucault, 'Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution', *Economy & Society 15*(1), 1986, pp 88–96. This part is obviously included in the inaugural lecture of 5 January 1983.

[180] Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, p 6.

[181] Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, pp 1–6.

[182] Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, p 11.

understanding of power entwined with the effects of truth produced by scientific discourses: what he calls 'the notion of knowledge-power'. He did so in order to argue against the founding opposition between truth and falsehood at the roots of ideological critique, as well against the idea of domination underlying sovereign power. In 1980, he claims that this focus must be partly relinquished: 'the second shift in relation to […] knowledge-power involves getting rid of this in order to try to develop the notion of government by the truth; getting rid of the notion of knowledge-power as we got rid of the notion of dominant ideology'.[183] The idea of government, for him, is now more operative and heuristically richer than the idea of power, because it encompasses a mode of conducting or leading oneself and the others according to what is true. It should be reminded that the theme of governmentality is not new in Foucault, as the first section of this chapter has shown. What is new is Foucault's insistence not just on the effects of truth, but on the very manifestation of truth in relation to government and conduct.

Foucault's departure from the notion of knowledge-power and his novel focus on alethurgy shed light on the review of his own work carried out at the very beginning of the inaugural lecture of *The Government of Self and Others*.[184] In one of the characteristic reassessments, Foucault argues that the general project he has been pursuing so far is a 'history of thought', whereby three different yet interrelated areas (or 'points of experience) can be unravelled: the formation of knowledges (*savoirs*), the normative matrices of behaviour, and the potential modes of existence. The first point of experience, he contends, is explored in his *The Order of Things*, the subject of which is not the content but the discourses of knowledge – or better, the 'discursive practices as regulated forms of veridiction (*véridiction*)'.[185] The second point of experience is explored in *Discipline and Punish*, in which he 'tried to pose the question of norms of behaviour first of all in terms of power, and of power that one exercises, and to analyse this power as a field of procedures of government'.[186] The third and last point of

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[183] Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, p 12.

[184] Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, pp 1–5.

[185] Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, p 4.

[186] Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, p 4.

experience is developed through 'the example of sexual behaviour and the history of sexual morality',[187] that is, in the second and third volume of *History of Sexuality*, which required a shift from an analysis of the subject to an analysis of 'what could be called the pragmatics of the self'.[188] In this account, we can witness the same move away from the notion of knowledge-power operated in *On the Government of the Living*. In both cases, Foucault reinteprets the analysis of discursive practices in terms of veridiction, that of power relations in terms of governmentality, and that of modes of subjectivation in terms of pragmatics of the self. Veridiction, governmentality, and pragmatics (or techniques) of the self are, in 1983, the three 'points of experience' at the core of Foucault's attention.

The first volume of *History of Sexuality* is notably absent from this review. This is hardly surprising, not just because the notion of power-knowledge is the trademark of that book, but because Foucault admits his failure to address broader techniques of the self in it.[189] In the introduction of the second volume of *History of Sexuality*, Foucault writes:

> After studying the games of truth […] in their interplay with one another, as exemplified by certain empirical sciences in the 17th and 18th centuries, and then studying their interaction with power relations, as exemplified by punitive practices – I felt obliged to study the games of truth in relationship of self with self and the forming of oneself as a subject […]. But it was clear that to undertake this genealogy would carry me far from my original project. I had to choose: either stick to the plan I had set, supplementing it with a brief

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[187] Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, p 5.

[188] Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, p 5. The work that combines all three points, in Foucault's view, is *History of Madness*.

[189] In the 1983 interview 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress' (in Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, pp 341–372), to the interviewer who registers that '[t]he first volume of *The History of Sexuality* was published in 1976, and none has appeared since' (in fact, the subsequent volumes were ready by then but still unpublished) and asks: 'do you still think that understanding sexuality is central for understanding who we are?', Foucault replies: 'I must confess that I am much more interested in problems about techniques of the self and things like that than sex… sex is boring' (p 341). Further in the interview, Foucault expresses his dissatisfaction with many points he made in the first volume of *History of Sexuality* (pp 347–348).

historical survey of the theme of desire, or reorganise the whole study around the slow formation, in antiquity, of a hermeneutics of the self. I opted for the latter.[190]

Once again, the implicit reference to *The Order of Things* and *Discipline and Punish*, with their analyses of discourses of truth and power relations, serves to pinpoint the novelty of the second volume of *History of Sexuality*, centred around the 'relationship of self with self' or 'hermeneutics of the self' – a phrase that, not incidentally, echoes the title of his 1981–1982 course *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*.[191] This does not mean that Foucault abandons genealogy: on the contrary, it is the object of his genealogical investigation what changes, shifting from sexuality to modes of subjectivation. Nor does it mean that sexuality disappears from the picture altogether. What it means is that sexuality, in Foucault's late work, is traced back to the broader *problématique* of the pragmatics of the self. In this new light, sexuality is as important an object as, for instance, eating habits and other pleasures.[192] The decentring of sex allows the late Foucault to operate a genealogy that is not constrained within the boundaries of modernity and that can explore the *longue durée* of the pragmatics of the self from Greek and Roman antiquity to medieval Christianity.[193]

Antiquity and early Christianity are under scrutiny in Foucault's investigation of parrhesia too. The 1982–1983 course *The Government of Self and Others* focuses on the transformations of political truth-telling from the height of Athenian democracy in the

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[190] Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure. Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality* (1984). New York: Vintage, 1990, p 6.

[191] Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject. Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

[192] 'I think it is very, very interesting to see the move […] from the privileging of food, which was overwhelming in Greece, to interest in sex. Food was still much more important during early Christian days than sex. For instance, in the rules for monks, the problem was food, food, food' (Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics', p 340).

[193] These eras are explored in the second, third, and (posthumous) fourth volumes of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Next to the above-mentioned *The Use of Pleasure. Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality*, see: Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self. Volume 3 of The History of Sexuality*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984; Michel Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh. The History of Sexuality, Volume 4* (2018). New York: Pantheon Books, 2021.

5th century to its decline in the 4th century BC. The 1983–1984 course *The Courage of Truth*, often referred to as the second part of *The Government of Self and Others*, centres on the parrhesiastic activity in Greek and Roman antiquity, particularly during the Hellenistic period and up to the transition to Christianity. Parrhesia, for Foucault, is a form of alethurgy emerging from the encounter between the person telling the truth and the one being told the truth. In this sense, it is different from other rhetorical devices. It is not a performative utterance, for the parrhesiast does not hold the authority to bring words to life, and it has no demonstrative form, for it does not coincide with the structure of argument but emerges from the encounter between the parrhesiast and her/his interlocutor. Nor is parrhesia the same as a dialogic encounter, because the person who utters the truth exposes her- or himself to risk.[194] To be sure, parrhesia can hardly be called a rhetorical device – or *techne* – at all. The art of rhetoric developed in antiquity, Foucault says, disentangled the speaker from her/his obligation to speak the truth. The parrhesiast, on the contrary, has a strong faith in the truth being uttered. A classical example of parrhesia, for Foucault, is the encounter between Plato and the tyrant, in which the former says something so straightforward and blunt that it shakes the latter's consciousness.[195] While the rhetorician says what the person in power wants to hear and thus performs no parrhesia at all, for she or he abandons any commitment to truth,[196] the philosopher performs parrhesia understood as 'the courage of the truth in the person who speaks and who, regardless of everything, takes the risk of telling the whole truth'.[197]

Because of the gap between parrhesia and the art of rhetoric, Foucault is hesitant to

[194] Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, pp 52–66.

[195] Foucault's exploration of parrhesia in ancient Greece begins with Plutarch's *Dion*, 'an average example of parrhesia from almost exactly mid-way between the classical age and the great Christian spirituality of the fourth to fifth century' (Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, p 47). Dion, a disciple of Plato and in-law of both Dionysius the Elder and Dionysius the Younger, tyrants of Syracuse, was a political advisor at their courts. In this role, he invited Plato multiple times to Syracuse to advise the tyrants. As Plutarch recounts, Plato's practice of truth-telling before Dionysius the Elder and Dionysius the Younger is a typical example of parrhesia, and particularly of a political kind of parrhesia that the tyrant cannot easily bear. See: Plutarch, *Life of Dion*. Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, & Co. 1952.

[196] Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 180–184.

[197] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p 13.

describe the former in terms of art or *techne*. Instead, he prefers to deploy the word 'ethos', which points both to a lifestyle and to the moral conduct one chooses to pursue. In the 5th century, parrhesia was considered a form of truth-telling in relation to the city; as such, it was strongly connected, for Foucault, to the procedures and workings of democratic institutions.[198] Only through the 4th century did parrhesia become 'individualised' as a form of conducting (and constituting) oneself, which is what 'ethos' designates. This shift in meaning corresponds, for Foucault, to the crisis of democratic institutions in ancient Athens. The practice of truth-telling, in fact, was increasingly displaced, in the course of the 4th century, from the scene of the democratic assembly to that of the court, in which the tyrant needs to be told the truth in order to be able to govern himself and the city.[199] In such new configuration, the correlate of parrhesia is not democracy but the king's soul, and the shaping of one's soul is precisely, for Foucault, an act of *ethopoiesis*. In sum,

> With these shifts and changes in parrhesia, we are confronted with basically three […] poles: the pole of *aletheia* and truth-telling; the pole of *politeia* and government; and finally the pole of what, in late Greek texts, is called *ethopoiesis* (the formation of *ethos* or of the subject). […] *Aletheia*, *politeia*, *ethos*: the essential irreducibility of these three poles, their necessary and mutual relationship, and the structure of the reciprocal appeal of one to the other, has underpinned […] the very existence of all philosophical discourse from Greece to the present.[200]

As this brief (though inevitably reductive) summary displays, a remarkable feature of

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[198] Euripides' *Ion* exemplifies, for Foucault, the connection between parrhesia and Athenian democracy. Like Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Euripides' *Ion* is a play about alethurgy yet it has political parrhesia instead of oracular truth-telling at its core. The 'truth' about Ion's Athenian birth, in fact, awards him with the possibility to participate in the life of the city: in this sense, this play, in Foucault's reading, is Euripides' commentary on the debate about who was allowed to participate in Athenian politics of the time and who was not. Thus, political parrhesia (i.e., the audacity to utter the truth by virtue of one's ascendancy) emerges as an essential element of the Athenian constitution (Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, pp 75–111). See: Euripides, *Ion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

[199] The philosopher advising the king is the typical example of 4th-century parrhesia, for Foucault. See footnote 195 of this chapter.

[200] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p 66.

Foucault's understanding of parrhesia is the triangulation of three poles or, as he puts it in the inaugural lecture of *The Government of Self and Others*, 'points of experience': veridiction, governmentality, and techniques of the self. '[W]ith parrhesia', says Foucault, 'we have a notion which is situated at the meeting point of the obligation to speak the truth, procedures and techniques of governmentality, and the constitution of the relationship to self'.[201] The practice of living in conformity with one's own truth, or parrhesiastic ethos, is a crucial corner in this triangulation.

Why, then, is a discussion of Kant's Enlightenment an *exergue* to a study on parrhesia, as Foucault claims? Kant's *Aufklärung*, as we have seen, coincides with what Foucault calls critique. This point is further elaborated in Foucault's inaugural lecture of 5 January 1983, in which two different philosophical traditions stemming from Kant are introduced. On the one hand, the tradition that Foucault calls 'analytic of truth' emerged in the wake of Kant's three *Kritiken* and investigates the conditions of possibility of true knowledge grounded in the rational subject.[202] On the other hand, the 'ontology of the present', 'of modernity', or 'of ourselves' is a tradition preoccupied with the exploration of the limits of what can be presently experienced and known.[203] It is within the latter, pursued by Kant in his 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' as well as, later, in *The Conflict of the Faculties* (*Der Streit Der Fakultäten*, 1798),[204] where Foucault locates his own critical trajectory. In these texts, Foucault argues, one can detect the first appearance of the question of the present in modernity. This question is no longer about a philosopher's adherence to a certain doctrine, but about her/his membership to a collective 'we'. What Kant wonders for the first time in history, for Foucault, is: 'what is this present to which I belong?'[205]

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[201] Foucault, *On the Government of Self and Others*, p 45. See also: Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p 8: 'It seems to me that by examining the notion of parrhesia we can see how the analysis of modes of veridiction, the study of techniques of governmentality, and the identification of forms of practice of self interweave. Connecting together modes of veridiction, techniques of governmentality, and practices of the self is basically what I have always been trying to do'.

[202] Foucault, *On the Government of Self and Others*, p 45.

[203] Foucault, *On the Government of Self and Others*, p 46.

[204] Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798). New York: Abaris Books, 1979.

[205] Foucault, *On the Government of Self and Others*, p 12.

Following Foucault, Kant's *Aufklärung* shows how this question mobilises three relations: of ourselves to truth, of ourselves to the authority holding something to be true, and of ourselves to ourselves while questioning or accepting what an authority takes to be true. The *Aufklärung* is that event in which these three relations are at play. These three relations, in turn, correspond to the three 'points of experience' – veridiction, governmentality, and techniques of the self – around which parrhesia is organised.[206] First, the *Aufklärung* is people's way out of the condition of tutelage (*Unmündigkeit*) and towards to the use of their own reason. Tutelage, however, is kept precisely because people cannot do without an authority that decides for them what is true, good, or apt. This leads to the second definition of the *Aufklärung* as the questioning of authority. Thirdly, the autonomous use of reason is hindered not only by the external force of authority, but also by a certain laziness or lack of courage on the part of the individual. The *Aufklärung*, in this sense, coincides with the Kantian motto *sapere aude!*, which exhorts people to make use of their autonomous reason. For Foucault, veridiction, governmentality, and techniques (or *ethoi*) of the self characterise Kant's account of the *Aufklärung* as much as his own account of parrhesia.

The affinity between critique and parrhesia is clear, as both practices are defined by a certain relation of the subject to truth, to authority, and to her- or himself. Their correlation, however, goes much further. In his last two courses at Collège de France, Foucault repeatedly hints at the continuity between modern critique and ancient parrhesia. In 1983, he puts the continuity in the form of a question and a hypothesis:

> [C]ould we not consider modern philosophy, at least the philosophy which reappears from the 16th century, as the reallocation of the main functions of parrhesia back within philosophy […]? [T]o that extent, maybe the history of European philosophy from the 16th century should not be seen as a series of doctrines which undertake to say what is true or false concerning politics, or science, or morality. Maybe we could envisage the history of modern European philosophy as a history of practices of veridiction, as a history of practices of parrhesia.[207]

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[206] See this same chapter, pp 61–62.

[207] Foucault, *On the Government of Self and Others*, pp 348–349.

Here, Foucault wonders whether parrhesia can be seen to re-emerge in the critical tradition he previously called the 'ontology of ourselves'. After all, the Enlightenment, for him, is not just a fact of the 18th century, but a transhistorical event that returns each time the question of the present is being asked.[208] 'Kant's interrogation of the *Aufklärung*', Foucault writes, 'did not remain localised within the 18th century or even within the process of the *Aufklärung*. In [it], we see one of the first manifestations of a certain way of philosophising which has had a long history over the following two centuries'.[209] Just like the *Aufklärung*, parrhesia is a transhistorical mode of philosophising too. In 1984, Foucault ventures to speculate that parrhesia can be seen in the spiritual movements of the Middle Age and, later, in the life of members of secret societies and revolutionary movements, or even in such artistic expressions as the Modernist avant-garde of the late 19th and early 20th century.[210]

In all such examples of parrhesiastic resurgence, critique is *the* defining feature. At the beginning of *The Courage of Truth*, Foucault sets out to distinguish the parrhesiastic discourse from other ancient forms of truth-telling: most notably, the prophetic, the wise, and the technical discourses[211] – all of which take 'different guises and forms, in other societies, as well as our own'.[212] The truth-telling of the prophet, he speculates, can be found in modern revolutionary discourse, for it speaks in view of a future world;

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[208] In Butler's summary of Foucault's critique, if 'the Enlightenment is *not* to be understood exclusively as a time or a place but rather as that which recurs every time a certain kind of question is asked under conditions in which doxa has reigned', then it is somehow dehistoricised (Butler, 'Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity', p 784).

[209] Foucault, *On the Government of Self and Others*, p 15.

[210] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, pp 177–190.

[211] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, pp 15–19. Parrhesia is not the same as prophecy, for Foucault, as it is does not take the form of a riddle and it does speak only in its own name. Nor is it the same as the discourse of the wise person, because of the structural silence of the latter – the sage is wisest when s/he remains silent; the parrhesiast, instead, is defined by her/his free speech. Finally, parrhesia is not a technique, as we have seen in this section, because it is not something one has learnt and can pass onto a disciple. Parrhesia is often antagonistic in shape and is better described as an ethos rather than an art or *techne*.

[212] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, pp 14–15.

that of the sage can be found in certain strands of modern philosophical discourse; the technical one can be detected in modern science. Parrhesia , however, does not have its place in modernity, for it has disappeared 'except where it is grafted on or underpinned by one of these three modalities':

> [r]evolutionary discourse plays the role of parrhesiastic discourse when it takes the form of a critique of existing society. Philosophical discourse as analysis, as reflection on human finitude and criticism of everything which may exceed the limits of human finitude, whether in the realm of knowledge or the realm of morality, plays the role of parrhesia to some extent. And when scientific discourse is deployed as criticism of prejudices, of existing forms of knowledge, of dominant institutions, of current ways of doing things – and it cannot avoid doing this, in its very development – it plays this parrhesiastic role.[213]

While parrhesia as such has disappeared, it has survived within each and every mode of truth-telling, for Foucault. And it has survived as an ethos, I would add, in that it underlies prophetic, wise, and technical modes of truth-telling in the shape of critique – critique of society, of knowledge, of prejudices, of institutions. It is thus fair to say that Foucault's study of parrhesia explores the longer roots of the critical tradition understood as an 'ontology of the present' rather than an 'analytic of truth'. As Foucault himself states in concluding a seminar he delivered in Berkeley in 1983, his notion of parrhesia targets 'a genealogy of the critical attitude in Western philosophy'.[214]

Clearly, parrhesia is a crucial step in the genealogy of critique. Instead of stopping at the threshold of modernity, as Foucault's 'What is Critique?' suggests, critique as a parrhesiastic ethos dates back to antiquity. In 'What is Enlightenment?', Foucault equals the critical edge of the *Aufklärung* with ethics in a more explicit way than he does in the inaugural lecture of January 1983. 'Enlightenment is not faithfulness to doctrinal elements', he writes, 'but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude – that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era'.[215] Like parrhesia, the *Aufklärung* is configured as an ethos: as such, it is constantly

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[213] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p 30.

[214] Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (1983). Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001, pp 170–171.

[215] Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', p 42.

reactivated throughout modernity. According to Foucault, in order for an attitude to qualify as ethos it must be incorporated in one's lifestyle. Accordingly, the *Aufklärung* is not just a doctrine professed by philosophers, but a way of conducting and shaping oneself. In a 1983 interview, Foucault states: '[t]he key to the personal poetic attitude of a philosopher is not to be sought in his ideas, as if it could be deduced from them, but rather in his philosophy-as-life, in his philosophical life, his ethos'.[216] The example Foucault brings forth in 'What is Enlightenment?' of modern philosophical ethos is Charles Baudelaire.[217] Baudelaire's embrace of modernity resulted, for him, in the constant elaboration and reinvention of himself according to both the aesthetics of dandyism and the coordinates of critique.

In sum,

> The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.[218]

This summary towards the end of 'What is Enlightenment?' brilliantly manages to hold critique-as-genealogy and critique-as-ethos together. What does an understanding of critique as a parrhesiastic ethos add to the exploration of a queer critique? In the queer theoretical field, Foucault's notion of parrhesia has been discussed much less than that of Enlightenment, let alone sexuality. Even the last three volumes of *History of Sexuality* have a much harder time to enter the queer canon than the first volume. Foucault's explicit departure, in his late works, from the subject of sexuality may

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[216] Michel Foucault, 'Politics and Ethics: An Interview' (1983), in Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, pp 373–380: 374.

[217] Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', pp 39–42. The reference to Baudelaire in the context of critique-as-ethos appears in 'What is Enlightenment?', not in Foucault's introductory lecture of *On the Government of Self and Others*.

[218] Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', p 50.

explain such reluctance.[219] In ending this section, let me focus on what is perhaps the ultimate example of parrhesia for Foucault: the Cynic life.[220]

In *The Courage of Truth*, Foucault argues that Plato splits parrhesia in a way that will affect all the philosophy to come.[221] On the one hand, Plato's 'Alcibiades' inaugurates 'a mode of truth-telling […] the role and end of which is to lead the soul back to its mode of being and its world', says Foucault.[222] This form of parrhesia corresponds to a philosophical tradition that Foucault deems 'metaphysics of soul'. On the other hand, Plato's 'Laches' delineates a more interstitial tradition, which has long been buried under the weight of the metaphysics of soul, for is corresponds to a 'mode of truth-telling […] whose role and end is to give some kind of form to […] existence'.[223] Foucault calls this second form of parrhesia 'stylistics of existence'. The distinction between 'metaphysics of soul' and 'stylistics of existence', as well as Foucault's preference for the latter, mirrors the distinction that Foucault operates in Kant between the 'analytics of truth' and the 'ontology of ourselves'.[224] In both cases, against the predominance in the history of philosophy of the first element of the conceptual couple, Foucault is committed to rediscovering and giving new impetus to the second element. The different philosophical schools of antiquity, for Foucault, did not just put forward different accounts of the human soul or different set of doctrines. Rather, they asked their members to practice truth-telling through their very forms of existence, or lifestyles. One such example – or better, the philosophical school that stages truth-telling 'without doctrinal mediation' and up to the point of insolence – is, for Foucault,

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[219] According to Spargo, '[a]lthough some critics have recently turned to these later studies in order to explore the possibilities of non-normalising sexual and ethical practices, it was Foucault's overall model of the discursive construction of sexualities that was the main initial catalyst for queer theory' (Spargo, *Foucault and Queer Theory*, p 26).

[220] Mascaretti ('Michel Foucault', p 148) argues that Socrates' parrhesiastic imperative is *the* fundamental example of parrhesia in Foucault. I disagree: the Cynic life is at least as fundamental as Socrates'.

[221] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, pp 157–165.

[222] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, pp 159–160. See also: Plato, 'Alcibiades', in Plato, *Complete Works*. Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997, pp 557–596.

[223] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth,* p 160. See also: Plato, 'Laches', in Plato, *Complete* Works, pp 664–686.

[224] See this chapter, p 66.

Cynicism.[225] In the discourse of the Cynic, Foucault contends, parrhesia is never as harmonious as in Socrates, but it is always present in the form of scandal and inappropriateness.[226] The Cynic life, or '*bios kunikos*', has four characteristics: it is unconcealed, in the sense that it dares to do everything in public (Diogenes the Cynic masturbating in the square is quintessential);[227] it is unalloyed, for it dramatises the principle of autonomy; it is straight, in that it is indexed only to nature; finally, it is sovereign, because the Cynic is the master of her/his own life.[228] It is easy to see why Cynicism, in ancient Greek, is named after dogs. Cynic life displays no such human features as modesty or shame: it does in public what others do not dare to do, it is indifferent to people's opinions, it barks at enemies. Cynics are like dogs, not just because of their common bestiality, but because of their common frankness.

Even though shame plays a crucial role in queer critique, as the next chapter aims to show,[229] Foucault's account of parrhesia as a lifestyle strongly resonates with the feminist and queer ethos of a killjoy life. In *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), Sara Ahmed draws a list of points for feminist and queer killjoys which is not just a normative set of conducts or doctrines to be followed, but a way for the subject to change her- or himself in order to resist the imperatives of decency and appropriateness in an unjust society. 'When we refuse to be women, in the heteropatriarchal sense as beings for men, we

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[225] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p 165

[226] As Foucault recounts in *The Government of Self and Others* (p 292), what is perhaps the most significant example of the difference between Socratic and Cynic parrhesia is the encounter between Plato and Diogenes the Cynic: 'One day, Plato would have seen Diogenes the Cynic washing his salad. Plato sees him washing his salad and, recalling that Dionysius had appealed to Diogenes and that Diogenes had rejected his appeal, he says to him: If you had been more polite to Dionysius you would not have to wash your salad. To which Diogenes replies: If you had acquired the habit of washing your salad you would not have been the slave of Dionysius'.

[227] Foucault recalls this image in the second volume of his *History of Sexuality* (pp 54–55), when discussing pleasures (*aphrodisia*) in ancient Greece, and particularly, how they were informed by a different logic than the one infusing today's distinction between what is permitted and what is forbidden: a logic of 'of need, timeliness, and status' (p 54), which has to do with the correct dosage of pleasures in life.

[228] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, pp 251–283.

[229] See chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp 136–137.

become trouble, we get into trouble. A killjoy is willing to get into trouble'.[230] Like the parrhesiast, the killjoy is not afraid to put her- or himself at risk in order to speak the truth. This truth, for Ahmed, is a critique of the mandate of happiness, used 'to justify social norms as social goods'.[231] For her, a killjoy is someone who, in public as much as around the family table, refuses to laugh at jokes that can cause harm, who calls people out when they affirm heteropatriarchy, who holds on to unhappiness for as long as necessary. Like the parrhesiast, the killjoy is frank, inappropriate, shameless, and invariably autonomous.

The feminist and queer killjoy, however, lacks the sense of indecency expressed by Diogenes the Cynic. Preciado may be once again of help to reinstate the kind of disconcert that a queer critique begets. While commenting on Hocquenghem, Preciado reminds us that, for Roland Barthes, some texts are 'terrorist', 'not because of their popularity or success, but because of the 'violence that enables [them] to exceed the laws that a society […] establishes for [it]self'.[232] Hocquenghem's *Homosexual Desire* is a case in point, as it textually expresses what Preciado calls 'the revolution of the anus'. This irreverent, outrageous form of politics is the one enacted by proto-queer activists and writers during the fury of May 68, in U.S. riots of 1969, and even in the interstices of Francoist Spain, says Preciado. It mobilises around an organ that makes all of us equal – everyone has an anus – but is nonetheless hidden from the public eye and divested of pleasure. To suggest that the revolution of the anus is a form of parrhesia is to paraphrase what Preciado says about Hocquenghem: that 'there are two kinds of writers: those who lie in order to tell the truth and those who tell the truth to expose a collective lie. Guy belongs to the latter'.[233] And so does a queer critique, I add.

To be sure, Foucault warns against any easy translation of past *ethoi* to contemporaneity. 'I think there is no exemplary value in a period which is not our

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[230] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017, p 155.

[231] Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, p 154.

[232] Preciado, 'Terror anal', p 138. My translation. See also: Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (1971). Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989, p 10.

[233] Preciado, 'Terror anal', p 156. My translation.

period… it is not anything to get back to', he states.[234] At the same time, he does not refuse to draw connections between ancient forms of parrhesia and their modern offspring – critical philosophy, revolutionary life, artistic avant-gardes. In describing the cynical life, Foucault does not hesitate to call it, even though by means of 'an obvious anachronism', a 'militant life', for the Cynic is in a constant struggle to change the self and the world.[235] Both a killjoy life and one committed to the politics of the anus are militant, for they are devoted to changing the world. The militant life of the Cynic, for Foucault, is meant to construct 'an *other* life [*une vie autre*] for an *other* world [*un monde autre*]',[236] against all metaphysics wanting to achieve 'the other world in another life (*l'autre monde dans une autre vie*)'.[237] The Cynic, the queer killjoys, and the revolutionary of the anus are thus cognate in the parrhesiastic ethos they cultivate. The next section complicates this narrative by reflecting on the link between critique and politics through the figure of the revolution and the enthusiasm it prompts.

1.4 Critique/politics and the spectacle of the revolution

Queer critique is political, if only in the minimal, feminist sense that the personal is political. A queer parrhesiastic life, for instance, requires the constant re-enactment of a critique of heteropatriarchy: it is a 'militant life', in Foucault's words, which hinges on queer people's everyday experiences of exclusion. Foucault himself, when asked about his interest in such groups as prisoners, fools, and sexual 'perverts', cannot help but resort to 'the relationship between personal experience and those events of which we are part'.[238] Politics, in this sense, underpins queer critique as much as it underpins Foucault's own idea of critique. The first section on critique as the art of not being governed *comme ça* is perhaps the clearest illustration of critique's political character. Such a character is also present in the genealogical and ethical acceptations of critique presented in the second and third section. Foucault's idea of critique cannot be

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[234] Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics', p 347.

[235] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p 283.

[236] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p 287.

[237] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p 320.

[238] Foucault, 'The Minimalist Self', p 7.

sequestered from the realm of politics, even though, as we are now going to explore, there is no exact coincidence between the two.

To be sure, it would be easier to argue for the political character of critique from a Marxist rather than a Foucauldian standpoint. When commenting on 'Marx's 1843 definition of critical theory as "self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age"', Nancy Fraser writes:

> What is so appealing about this definition is its straightforwardly political character. It makes no claim to any special epistemological status but, rather, supposes that with respect to justification there is no philosophically interesting difference between a critical theory of society and an uncritical one. But there is, according to this definition, an important political difference. A critical social theory frames its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan though not uncritical identification.[239]

Here, Fraser underscores the eminently political character of a critical theory rooted in Marx's analysis of society and in dialogue with oppositional social movements. This character is perhaps even clearer in Theodor W. Adorno, the critical theorist *par excellence*. For him, critical theory is a necessary tool not only against totalitarianism, but also against the antidemocratic tendencies of consumer societies.[240] "Critique is essential to all democracy," he states, and conversely, "democracy is nothing less than defined by critique."[241]

To take Foucault as an entry point into queer theory as this dissertation does is a very selective choice, for it sidesteps other influences on the queer theoretical field. One such influence is that of the critical theory – or 'Frankfurt School' – that Fraser traces back to Marx's definition of critique and of which Adorno is a representative. Within such

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[239] Nancy Fraser, 'What's Critical About Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender', *New German Critique 35*, 1985, pp 97–131: 97.

[240] Theodor W Adorno, 'Critique' (1969), in T W Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, pp 281–288.

[241] Adorno, 'Critique', p 281.

tradition, let me mention two authors whose interventions are crucial for a queer critique. On the one hand, Herbert Marcuse's 1955 *Eros and Civilisation* is a landmark of any critical account of sexuality.[242] Marcuse's work largely informs Hocquenghem's and Mieli's ideas discussed above, not Foucault's genealogical history of sexuality. Or better: Foucault's genealogical account takes aim at precisely a Marcusian model of sexuality, centred on a Freudian-Marxist paradigm of repression and liberation. Clearly Foucault does not work within the horizon of either Freudianism or Marxism, and he eagerly distinguishes himself from people 'like Marcuse who give the notion of repression an exaggerated role – because power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress […] in the manner of a great Superego, exercising itself only in a negative way'.[243]

On the other hand, Jürgen Habermas is the thinker who carves a space for critique in between the realm of politics proper and that of private individuals – what he calls 'the bourgeois public sphere'[244] – thereby securing the link between critique and politics. Not dissimilarly to Koselleck's account of critique presented earlier in this chapter, Habermas understands the bourgeois public sphere as something that emerged in the course of the 18th century in parallel with the decline of the royal court, the rise of such institutions as the press and the *salons*, and the struggle against absolutism. In such sphere, critique takes place in the form of opinions being exchanged between private individuals who discuss issues of collective import. Critique, however, does not just 'happen', but it is practiced in accordance to reason and through a set of rules. Following Kant, the principle of the unity of reason – or, in Habermas' terms, the

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[242] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955). Boston: Beacon Press, 1974.

[243] Foucault, 'Body/Power', p 59. Many commenters read the first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* as 'speak[ing], in important respects, to Marcuse's diagnosis of repressive civilisation' (Jeffrey Renaud, 'Rethinking the Repressive Hypothesis. Foucault's Critique of Marcuse', *Symposium 17*(2), 2013, pp 76–93: 79).

[244] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991. The English translation of the word *Öffentlichkeit*, 'public sphere', is contested. 'Publicity', 'public opinion', and 'openness' seem to be more correct, in that they do not necessarily point to the spatial dimension of 'sphere'.

possibility of an 'agreement of all empirical consciousnesses'[245] – guides the kind of criticism carried out within the public sphere. For this reason, he talks about the 'rational-critical public debate' taking place therein.[246] The public sphere, for Habermas, has thus a strong 'normative core'.[247]

Just like Foucault's critique is not grounded in Marxism or Freudianism, it does not have a 'normative core' either. The main difference between Foucault and Habermas, in fact, is played out on the ground of normativity. In March 1983, two months after Foucault delivered his inaugural lecture on Kant's Enlightenment, Paul Veyne invited Habermas to the Collège de France to hold a seminar on modernity. The published version of this seminar includes two lectures that focus on a few aporias of Foucault's critical enterprise.[248] One such aporia, for Habermas, is that Foucault cannot account for the normative foundations of his criticism.[249] In Habermas' view, Foucault refuses to make his normative values explicit; at the same time, he sets out to undermine such tenets of modernity as the autonomy of the subject and the possibility of objective knowledge. But, for Habermas, only normative justifications can tell what is wrong with modernity: the absence of these – or better, the 'cryptonormativity' underpinning Foucault's thought – results in a problematic ambiguity.

Nancy Fraser makes a similar point as Habermas. However, and perhaps more generously, she attempts at understanding the reasons behind the absence of normative values in Foucault. While recognising that a 'cryptonormative' criticism can be confusing,[250] Fraser refutes to label Foucault 'a young conservative', as Habermas

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[245] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p 108.

[246] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p 28.

[247] Richard J Bernstein, 'The Normative Core of the Public Sphere', *Political Theory 40*(6), 2012, pp 767–778.

[248] Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985. The 9th and 10th lectures are about Foucault: in the latter, the argument is developed about Foucault's philosophy being presentist, cryptonormative, and relativist.

[249] Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp 282–286.

[250] Nancy Fraser, 'Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions', *Praxis 3*, 1981, pp 272–287.

does.[251] In a 1981 lecture, in fact, Habermas deems Foucault, just like George Bataille and Jacques Derrida, as such. These thinkers, in his view, adhere to liberal values and dismiss '[t]he project of modernity formulated in the 18th century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment'.[252] *Contra* Habermas, Fraser clarifies that Foucault is not against modernity per se, but against its humanist ideals. 'Foucault', she contends, 'has shown that one does not need humanism in order to criticise prisons, social science, pseudoprograms for sexual liberation, and the like. That humanism is not the last word in critical social and historical writing. That there is life – and critique – after Cartesianism'.[253] Here, Fraser does justice to Foucault's take on humanism: in 'What is Enlightenment?', Foucault clarifies that one should avoid 'too facile confusions between humanism and the Enlightenment'.[254] The latter is an event; as such, it can be located at a specific moment in European history. Humanism, on the other hand, is 'a set of themes that have reappeared on several occasions, over time, in European societies'. Thus, it is too vague and inconsistent to be deployed.[255] Although Fraser accounts for the difference between humanism and Enlightenment theorised by Foucault, this does not mean that the latter, for her, is successful in producing a non-normative critique: 'without a nonhumanist ethical paradigm, Foucault cannot make good his normative case against humanism', she concludes.[256]

Certainly, Foucault has no strong antinormative theory to counter the Habermasian cohort. What is certain is that, while in the U.S., he planned to invite Habermas and other colleagues to a conference to be held in 1984.[257] His untimely death, however, 'deprived us of perhaps one of the most important debates of […] this century', Ehrhard

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[251] Nancy Fraser, 'Michel Foucault: A "Young Conservative"?', *Ethics 96*, 1985, pp 164–184.

[252] Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity versus Postmodernity', *New German Critique 22*, special issue on 'Modernism', 1981, pp 3–14: 9.

[253] Fraser, 'Michel Foucault', p 171.

[254] Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', p 43.

[255] Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', p 44.

[256] Fraser, 'Michel Foucault', p 182.

[257] Jürgen Habermas, 'Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present', in D Hoy (ed), *Foucault: A Critical Reader*. New York & Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, pp 103–108: 103–104.

Bahr says.[258] In this sense, Foucault's argument against Habermas can only be reconstructed in bits and pieces. In their 'What is Critique?', obviously named after Foucault's homonymous essay, Butler takes the side of the French philosopher in the controversy. Foucault's critical enterprise, for Butler, does not result in the adherence to a normative set of rules opposing a certain configuration of power even though it asks people to make an autonomous use of their reason. In Foucault's critique, there is a kind of commitment that has 'no reassuring answers to give', which is illegible to Habermas.[259] The lack of a normative framework seems a point of strength more than weakness, because it permits to conceive of critique as a practice of resistance to contingent and mutable configurations of power.[260] In 'What is Enlightenment?', Foucault himself warns that one should not

> be 'for' or 'against' the Enlightenment. [...] [O]ne has to refuse everything that might present itself in the form of a simplistic and authoritarian alternative: you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism [...]; or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from its principles of rationality.[261]

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[258] Ehrhard Bahr, 'In Defense of Enlightenment: Foucault and Habermas', *German Studies Review 11*(1), 1988, pp 97–109: 97.

[259] Judith Butler, "What is Critique?," op. cit., np.

[260] Along similar lines, Richard J Bernstein argues that Foucault's reading of the Enlightenment is a succinct *apologia* against the criticisms he received through time, and against the accusation of lacking a normative account in particular (Richard J Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*. Cambridge & Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1991. See, in particular, pp 142–171) Lorenzo Bernini argues that the main difference between Habermas and Foucault is a matter of perspective: Foucault speaks from the point of view of the 'completely disenfranchised' (*governato assoluto*), while Habermas speaks from that of the democratic citizen (Bernini, *Le pecore e il pastore*, pp 231–232). Foucault's commitment, for him, should be understood as a form of resistance without finalism: 'According to Habermas, Foucault would not be able to answer to the question "why should not we want to be governed as such?". But no answer can be found in Foucault if the "why" of the question is understood in a finalistic sense. Foucault, in fact, cannot indicate the *aim* of his critique [...]. But [he] is capable to provide an answer to such "why" if understood in a causal and hypothetic sense: for him, we must resist power if we *want* to be free' (Bernini, *Le pecore e il pastore*, pp 258–259. My translation. Italics in the original).

[261] Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', p 43.

This misleading alternative, which Foucault calls the 'blackmail' of the Enlightenment, is one to which Habermas subscribes. In fact, Habermas believes that Foucault is committed to debunking the Enlightenment, whereas in reality Foucault is committed to recovering the Enlightened ethos and stretch it away from the coordinates of modern rationality.[262]

But the main difference between Habermas' and Foucault's versions of critique, I contend, rests in their different understanding of the relation between politics and criticism. Queer theorist Michael Warner, whose idea of counterpublics is shaped around (as well as in opposition to) Habermas' public sphere, introduces this difference most adamantly.[263] Warner focuses on an interview conducted by Rabinow in May 1984, right before Foucault's death, in which Foucault explains why he refuses to engage in polemics.[264] Foucault draws a distinction between polemics and dialogue, positioning himself on the side of the latter – surprisingly enough, given that an orientation to dialogue 'seem[s] to be oddly Habermasian', for Warner.[265] Foucault's

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[262] '[T]here is the problem raised by Habermas: if one abandons the work of Kant […], one runs the risk of lapsing into irrationality. I am completely in agreement with this, but at the same time, our question is quite different: I think that the central issue of philosophy and critical thought since the eighteenth century has always been, still is, and will, I hope, remain the question: *What* is this Reason that we use? What are its historical effects? What are its limits, and what are its dangers? How can we exist as rational beings, fortunately committed to practicing a rationality that is unfortunately crisscrossed by intrinsic dangers?' (Michel Foucault, 'Space, Knowledge, and Power' (1982), in Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, pp 239–256: 248–249. Italics in the original).

[263] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*. Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2002. See, in particular, pp 151–158. About the idea of counterpublics, Warner writes: 'The bourgeois public sphere consists of private persons whose identity is formed in the privacy of the conjugal domestic family and who enter into rational-critical debate around matters common to all by bracketing their embodiment and status. Counterpublics of sexuality and gender, on the other hand, are scenes of association and identity that transform the private lives they mediate. Homosexuals can exist in isolation; but gay people or queers exist by virtue of the world they elaborate together, and gay or queer identity is always fundamentally inflected by the nature of that world' (pp 57–58).

[264] Michel Foucault, 'Polemics, Politics, and Problematisations', in Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, pp 381–390: 381–383.

[265] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p 152. I should add that, in *The Courage of Truth* (p 27), Foucault understands 'the veridiction which speaks polemically about individuals and situations' as a

self-positioning on the side of dialogue is to be interpreted, according to Warner, as an answer to why he does not engage with Habermas' frontal assault on him. For Foucault, dialogue is something else than the Habermasian rational-critical debate aimed to reach consensus: its morality 'is to be grounded not in the transcendental conditions of speech situations […] oriented to understanding and […] implying norms of rational morality',[266] but in the very genre to which it belongs and its different ethical implications. Dialogue, for Foucault, implies a 'serious play of questions and answers, in the work of reciprocal elucidation'.[267] Polemics, on the other hand, is modelled on war, for 'the person [confronted] is not a partner in the search for the truth, but an adversary, an enemy who is wrong'.[268] Based on this, Foucault draws a distinction between intellectual work (positioned on the dialogic side) and politics proper (which prefers polemics even when, as in Habermas, it 'might seem to be about agreement').[269] Following Warner's cue, the kind of critique that Foucault has in mind cannot be fully grasped as political: it is a form of 'problematisation' in relation to which politics is located at a relative distance.[270]

Such distance is equally clear in Foucault's lessons on parrhesia. When commenting on Plato's 'Letter VIII' addressed to Dion's companions,[271] Foucault argues that Plato is faced with the problem of political advice and, more specifically, with the fundamental question about the relation between philosophy and politics:

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speech act in continuity with parrhesia. This remark may help complicate Foucault's relation with polemics.

[266] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p 153.

[267] Foucault, 'Polemics, Politics, and Problematisations', p 381.

[268] Foucault, 'Polemics, Politics, and Problematisations', p 382.

[269] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p 154.

[270] How Foucault conceptualises such distance remains a problem for Warner, not so much because of the lack of a normative account, but because, in Warner's view, Foucault eschews issues of circulation and mediation (i.e., publicity). About Foucault's notion of problematisation, see footnote 130 of this chapter.

[271] About Dion, see footnote 195 of this chapter. It shall be added that Dion himself became tyrant of Syracuse after seizing power from Dionysius the Younger. He was then assassinated: Plato's *Letter VIII* addresses the political chaos the Sicilian city was experiencing in the aftermaths of Dion's death. See: Plato, 'Letter VIII', in Plato, *Complete Works*, pp 1667–1671.

Must philosophy's need to confront politics, must philosophy's need to seek its reality in the confrontation with politics consist in formulating a philosophical discourse which is at the same time a discourse that prescribes political action, or is something else involved?[272]

It is clear by now that, for Foucault, philosophy does not work within a normative horizon, i.e., it does not prescribe what should or should not be done. But, what is Plato's answer to this question? For Foucault, Plato 'enables three important things to be brought out'[273] about the confrontation between political action and philosophy, two of which concern us here. First, philosophy does not tell politics what to do, for Foucault, but it 'has to exist as truth-telling in a certain relation' to it.[274] Such relation takes the form of pedagogy in Plato, and perhaps more significantly for a queer critique, that of challenge and derision in Cynicism. Foucault's example of the latter is, once again, Diogenes the Cynic. To Alexander the Great's question 'who are you?', the cynic philosopher replies: 'I am Diogenes the dog'. Foucault argues that, through this answer, Diogenes shows 'himself in his natural nakedness, outside all the conventions and laws artificially imposed by the city'.[275] Diogenes declares his extraneousness to both the affairs of the king and the conventions of the city; concomitantly, the sovereignty of the philosopher on his own life – his parrhesiastic ethos or mode of existence – is reasserted.

Secondly, Foucault argues that there is a point in which, despite their divergence, philosophy and politics meet. Such point – the site where truth-telling is oriented to political action – is the king's soul in Plato and the public square in Cynicism. Interestingly, another site that attempts at eclectically' holding the public square and the soul of the king together is, in Foucault's view, Kant's *Aufklärung*.[276] In all such figurative as well as material places, the relation between philosophy and politics is never of full coincidence as of intersection. Philosophy does not tell the truth *of* political action, but *in relation to* it: it does not say what doctrine to follow in order for the city

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[272] Foucault, *On the Government of Self and Others*, p 262.

[273] Foucault, *On the Government of Self and Others*, p 285.

[274] Foucault, *On the Government of Self and Others*, p 286.

[275] Foucault, *On the Government of Self and Others*, p 287.

[276] Foucault, *On the Government of Self and Others*, pp 292–293.

to prosper, even though it does 'speak truth to power' in the name of the doctrine it preaches, to borrow from Edward W. Said.[277] In Foucault's own words,

> [t]he philosophical theory of sovereignty, the philosophy of basic rights, philosophy envisaged as social critique, all these forms of […] philosophical veridiction, in no way have to say how to govern, what decisions to take, what laws to adopt, or what institutions to develop. But […] for a philosophy to put itself to the test of its reality, it is indispensable now as in Plato's time that it be able to tell the truth in relation to [political] action, that it tell the truth in the name of a critical analysis, or in the name of a philosophy, of a conception of rights [or] of sovereignty.[278]

All philosophical discourses, far from being normative, have to test their effectiveness in relation to the politics of their time. Critical analysis, as this quote makes clear, makes no exception.

A similar and perhaps more nuanced argument is developed in Foucault's inaugural lecture of 5 January 1983, once again in connection to Kant's reflections on his present. This time, the subject is not the Enlightenment per se, but the main political event that came out of it: the French revolution. In *The Conflict of the Faculties*, a work devoted to justifying the autonomy of academic knowledge vis-à-vis the edict of censorship of the Prussian king Frederick II, Kant distinguishes between higher faculties (religion, law, medicine) and lower ones, which he names 'philosophy'.[279] Both higher and lower faculties are governed by reason, but their stakes are different. The practitioners of the higher faculties – whom Kant calls 'businessmen' (*Geschäftsleute*) – work in the service of state interests, thereby making what, in 'Was ist Aufklärung?', he defines as private use of reason.[280] The lower faculties, instead, are practiced by proper 'scholars'

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[277] Edward W Said, 'Speaking Truth to Power', in E W Said, *Representations of the Intellectual. The 1993 Reith Lectures*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996, pp 85–102.

[278] Foucault, *On the Government of Self and Others*, 288.

[279] Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*.

[280] Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?', p 13. Foucault points out that Kant's idea of making a 'private' use of reason is counterintuitive: in fact, it designates the way public officials use reason in in the service of state interests. 'In other words – and there is an ingenious little trick here […] – what [Kant] calls private is in fact what we call public, or at any rate professional. Why does he

(*Gelehrte*)*,* who make a free and public use of reason according to the principles of the Enlightenment. The function of the lower faculties, or philosophy, is to control the higher ones: this same function is at the roots of the conflict or contest (*Streit*) that the title refers to. It is at this point, and particularly when discussing the conflict between philosophy and the faculty of law, that Kant introduces a crucial dilemma: is the human race progressing towards betterment, and if so, how can such a progress be known? If humanity is in the way of its self-improvement, Kant argues, then there must have been an event to signal it. The French revolution is, for Kant, such event: Foucault turns exactly to it in his 1983 inaugural lecture. What is significant in Kant's account of the revolution as a sign of progress, Foucault points out, is not that it is bound to succeed bot that it raises 'a wishful participation that borders closely on enthusiasm' in the people who witness it.[281] Two points are worth highlighting: that the revolution raises an affection or inclination (*Neigung*) of enthusiasm, not so much in those who actively participate in it as in its spectators; accordingly*,* that it is not the revolution as a historical event what prompts such enthusiasm but the revolution as spectacle.

Both aspects of the revolution – the enthusiasm it elicits and its spectacular character – are crucial to a debate around critique, since Foucault's reflection on the revolution is a continuation of that on the *Aufklärung* and the *Aufklärung* itself is, in essence, Foucault's proxy for critique.[282] According to Koselleck, at the roots of criticism there lies a distinction between morality and politics which is exemplified by what he calls 'the moral jurisdiction of the stage,' where stage is understood in its physical dimension.[283] In fact, what constituted the moral ground from which, in the 18th century, opposition to politics began was, literally, the theatrical stage – and, by extension, art and aesthetics. The stage is the site where political criticism was born, and this could happen because the moral authority stemming from it was altogether different, in Koselleck's view, from politics. 'The stage becomes a tribunal', he writes. 'At the point

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call it private? [Because,] in all these forms of activity, […] [w]e are parts of a machine, placed in a given spot, (with) a precise role to play, with other parts of the machine having to play different roles' (Foucault, *On the Government of Self and Others*, p 35).

[281] Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, p 153.

[282] See pp 37–38 of the present chapter.

[283] Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, pp 98–123.

at which […] dominant politics are subjected to a moral verdict, that verdict is transformed into a political factor; into political criticism'.[284] Clearly, as we learnt in the first section, Koselleck interprets the moral jurisdiction of the stage as yet another step toward the hypocrisy of critique, which claims to be merely moral while it is to all effects political. Aside from Koselleck's verdict, what his historical reconstruction suggests – and what Foucault approximates when he locates the critical force of the revolution in its spectacularity – is that the gap between critique and politics is mediated by the stage as well as by spectatorship. To Koselleck's account, Kant adds an emphasis on the enthusiasm that the revolution-as-spectacle elicits in its viewers. As Foucault comments, '[w]hat then is important in the revolution is not the revolution itself, which in any case is a mess, but what goes on in the minds of those not making the revolution […]. What is significant is the enthusiasm for the revolution'.[285]

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[284] Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, p 101.

[285] Foucault, *On the Government of Self and Others*, p 18. In other sections of *The Conflict of the Faculties* (pp 47–53) – the text on which Foucault's argument about the revolution is based – Kant argues that such inclinations (*Neigungen*) as pleasure and enjoyment should be controlled by reason, which pertains to philosophy and requires a longer temporality, instead of being immediately fulfilled by the practitioners of the higher faculties. But, if these inclinations are to be governed by reason, then how are we to understand the 'wishful participation that borders closely on enthusiasm' experienced by the spectators of the Revolution? To what extent does this enthusiasm escape the logic of other inclinations? In a passage of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1978) (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996, pp 175–177), Kant discusses the 'inclination to freedom as a passion'. The inclination to freedom is a passion because, for Kant, it only belongs to humans. Evidence of it is the newborn, who 'enter[s] the world with a loud shriek just because it [*sic*.] considers the inability to make use of its limbs a restraint; consequently it [*sic*.] announces this claim to freedom' (*p* 176). In adults, this same inclination to freedom produces enthusiasm. This does not mean, for Kant, that enthusiasm is the cause of freedom, for freedom can only be established as a concept by reason, but that enthusiasm *comes to coincide* with the concept of freedom. Thus, in his Anthropology – not accidentally published in the same year as *The Conflict of the Faculties* and introduced and translated in French, curiously enough, by Foucault himself. See: Michel Foucault, *Introduction to Kant's Anthropology* (1961). Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008) – Kant provides the anthropological ground for that enthusiastic feeling experienced by the witnesses of the Revolution. From a feminist and queer perspective, Kant's anthropocentric account of enthusiasm begs to be questioned. In *Inclinations*: *A Critique of Rectitude* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), Adriana Cavarero critiques the self-standing subject of Western philosophy conceived as upright and erect. Within this tradition, the idea of 'inclination' has often been repudiated because unsuited for 'vertical' anthropological projects, such as Kant's. In *Anthropology*,

According to Linda Zerilli, such enthusiasm is telling, not only of the fact that Kant's (as well as Foucault's) critical practice must depart from the contemplative attitude of the philosopher in solitude (enthusiasm before the revolution *does* require collective spectatorship), but also of the gap between critique and politics:

> [C]ritique is figured not as the event, the actual historical revolt against arbitrary power […], but as the *relation* to the event that harbours a judgment: the right of a people to decide the question of which art of governance is appropriate for them. It is a judgment based on neither the success nor the failure of the revolution, which characterizes historicist and determinative forms of judgment, but on radical contingency: the revolution did not have to happen. Yet it did happen and – moreover – it could happen again.[286]

Critique, for Zerilli, does not equal revolution, as the definition of critique as the art of not being governed *comme ça* seems to suggest, but it happens *in relation to* it: the enthusiasm it elicits in its spectators is the name for that relation.[287]

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however, something else happens. When discussing the inclination to freedom as a passion, Cavarero argues that, for Kant, 'two worlds between which man is divided: the rational sphere of freedom and the natural sphere of passion' (Cavarero, *Inclinations*, p 28) seem to meet. But the inclination to freedom is brought in merely in order to be immediately brushed off. The cry of the newborn, in fact, does not originate, for Kant, from the child's separation from the mother's womb or from her/his own defencelessness, but because s/he is not yet an adult. 'In this sense', Cavarero contends, 'the inclination to freedom as passion, far from distressing only the infant, is an entirely Kantian pathology that manifests itself precisely as an absolute passion for the idea of autonomy' (p 30). Following Cavarero, the enthusiasm for the Revolution seems to be grounded more on Kant's own passion towards the erect, self-standing subject of Western philosophy than on an innate representation of freedom and the good. A queer critique cannot share the same anthropological assumptions as Kant's, if only because the queer subject is everything but vertical, upright, and, for that matter, *straight*.

[286] Zerilli, 'Critique as a Political Practice of Freedom', p 44. Italics in the original.

[287] Zerilli's intent in the article is to turn Foucault's political account of critique into a proper 'politically public' enterprise (Zerilli, 'Critique as a Political Practice of Freedom', pp 41–46). For her, Foucault's reading of the Enlightenment inherits from Kant the conflation between individual will and collective freedom. Critique appears to be an act of individual self-transformation – that is, an act of free will – producing emancipation. But the connection between the individual and the collective – between self-transformation and emancipation – is far from evident, in Zerilli's view. This gap, she contends, is filled by Foucault's reading of the revolution. There, the critical act is not grounded on the revolution as the

Does this same point hold for a queer critique? In other words, is a queer critique located in proximity to politics yet without fully coinciding with it? And does it result from the enthusiasm that a political outcry – the revolution-as-spectacle – raises, or does it involve other kinds of affect? Our context is obviously different from Kant's, particularly when it comes to the entanglement between politics and critique. As we have seen, early forms of minority knowledge began to enter the academic world in Foucault's times.[288] Geoffrey de Lagasnerie reminds us that the 'insurrection of knowledge' Foucault points at in *Society Must Be Defended* refers to how women's, workers', anti-colonial, and the emerging lesbian and gay movements were transforming the field of knowledge production in the wake of the student protests of May 68.[289] What these struggles put into question, for Foucault, is 'the way in which knowledge circulates and functions, its relations to power. In short, the *régime du savoir*'.[290] Foucault himself established the department of philosophy at the experimental University of Vincennes that same year:

> [In] reaction to the student revolts of May 1968, it was decided that Paris should have a new university in which a new type of teaching was propagated; a radical and very liberal educational institute where Marxist thought was experimented with and where not the professors and the hierarchy that accompanied the traditional academic system was central to its functioning, but the ideas. In a very short period, especially for academic standards, the *Centre universitaire expérimental* opened its doors in Vincennes already in December 1968, and the students followed only a month later. […] The most radical department was its department of philosophy where, under supervision of Michel Foucault, an

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product of either an individual will or a collective freedom, but on the relation between spectators and spectacle. Yet, in order to fully account for a 'politically public' form of critique, Zerilli abandons Foucault and turns the attention to Arendt's notion of plurality, which, to her, offers a more elaborate picture of a 'politically public' critique.

[288] See pp 39–42 of this chapter.

[289] Geoffroy de Lagasnerie, *L'empire de l'université. Sur Bourdieu, les intellectuels et le journalisme*. Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2007, pp 77–81.

[290] Michel Foucault, 'Afterword: The Subject and Power', in H Dreyfus & P Rabinow (eds), *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp 208–226: 212.

extraordinary strong and influential group of professors got together, producing a most progressive teaching program, taking the lessons of May 68 more than serious.[291]

The politically radical experiment of Vincennes was short-lived: in 1970, the legal value of the degrees awarded by the philosophy department was withdrawn and Foucault moved to the Collège de France, where he was offered the professorship in *histoire des systèmes de pensée* that he held until the end of his life.[292] However, the consequences of this and other experiences were far-reaching. The multidisciplinary and critical approaches to knowledge promoted at Vincennes were a central step towards the establishment of interdisciplinary studies (*etudes*) in the French academy, including area and women's studies.[293] The legacy of the experimental University of Vincennes, itself part of a broader process of institutionalisation of critical and minority knowledge, was bound to stay.

The emergence of different forms of minority knowledge between the end of the 1960s and the 1970s was not just a French phenomenon. In *The Reorder of Things* (2012) – a title that cannot but echo Foucault's *The Order of Things* – Roderick Ferguson draws a similar history about the institutionalisation of critical and minority knowledge in the U.S.[294] There, the student protests yielded, in Ferguson's account, the interdisciplinary fields of ethnic and women's studies, which eventually led to the institutionalisation of the studies on race, sexuality, and the history of LGBT movements. This process was

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[291] Rick Dolphijn, 'An Apprenticeship in Resistance. May 68 and the Power of Vincennes (Université de Paris VIII)', *New Horizons in Education 55*(3), 2007, pp 22–33: 24.

[292] The very *Centre universitaire expérimental* was soon renamed *Université Paris 8* and moved to the Parisian suburb of Saint-Denis.

[293] Christelle Dormoy-Rajramanan, 'L'institutionnalisation de domaines d'études pluridisciplinaires autour de 68. Entre intérêts savants, économiques et militants', *Revue d'anthropologie des connaissances 3*(11), 2017, pp 351–377.

[294] Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*. Interestingly, part of Ferguson's argument (pp 9–11; 134–135) is built on Kant's *The Conflict of the* Faculties. Ferguson contends that Kant builds a paternalistic architecture that ends up turning the state into the guarantor of academic freedom. Kant's university is configured, for Ferguson, as an entity responsible towards the state. But what social movements did when they entered the university in the 1960s and 1970s was to reshape academic responsibility as a challenge to state authority.

essentially contradictory, because it provoked both the affirmation and the repression of modes of knowledge along the lines of racial and sexual differences – what Ferguson calls 'minority difference'.[295] The accession of minority groups to higher education, in fact, pressured universities to radically transform themselves; at the same time, while being incorporated ('archived') in the canon, these same modes of knowledge got 'disciplined', in the Foucauldian sense that they 'sealed the contract between epistemology and power relations'.[296]

Whereas the overall focus is on the 'archiving' or 'disciplining' of studies on ethnic and racial differences,[297] the last chapter of *The Reorder of Things* attends, more specifically, to the institutionalisation of studies on sexuality and how 'the histories of the gay and lesbian movement were brought into the purviews of institutional consideration, representation, and management'.[298] To trace the history of the institutionalising of studies on sexuality in the U.S. academy, Ferguson goes back to both the sociology of deviance of the 1960s and 1970s, which promoted homosexuality as an object of investigation, and the gay and lesbian liberation movements of those years, with their critical take on heterosexuality, the family, and gender roles. These movements, for him, concurred to connect (homo)sexuality to feminist and antiracist

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[295] Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*, p 75.

[296] Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*, p 31.

[297] In Ferguson's account, the U.S. government's welcoming of foreign students during the early cold-war years was part of a wider geopolitical strategy to train members of the postcolonial elite into capitalist ideology (*Ferguson, The Reorder of Things*, pp 149–152). Similarly, the inclusion of ethnic groups such as African Americans and Puerto Ricans into higher education through grants and programs was meant to 'reconcile the commodification of knowledge with the assertions of diversity' (p 84). This new and diverse populace, however, was not just passively incorporated in the U.S. academic system: in the wake of the student movements and other liberation struggles, several actors started to address the exclusions they witnessed and to challenge the canon they were taught (pp 49–59). This, in turn, produced change, as universities had to meet the requests advanced by the body of students. But the process was inherently contradictory: the very horizon that universities started promoting – that of the liberal individual – became increasingly intertwined with ideas of excellence and merit, so that 'minority affirmation [was rerouted] away from the critique of institutional seductions and toward the hegemonic appeals of liberal capitalism' (p 55).

[298] Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*, p 209. The chapter 'Administering Sexuality; or, The Will to Institutionality' runs from p 209 to p 226.

politics: '[w]hile sociological sympathisers observed homosexuality mainly, and often only in terms of sexuality, many gay and lesbian activists understood [it] in relation to liberation struggles around race and gender'.[299] Initially successful, this 'intersectional'[300] understanding of homosexuality was soon dropped in favour of the compartmentalisation of sexuality, gender, and race:

> This move would inaugurate the closing of a critical universe in which homosexuality was poised in a competitive opposition to U.S. racial and imperial projects and to patriarchy. Homosexuality as a single-issue politics is significant because it became the grammar for institutional participation […] and the barricade against alternative forms of queerness.[301]

Queer theory, to be sure, is born out of the discontent with the 'single-issue politics' of lesbians and gays of the 1980s, who, for the most part, militated for their own interests and focused on the recognition of such items as same-sex marriage and anti-homophobic legislation. As Teresa de Lauretis argues in the introduction of the special issue of *differences* in which the word 'queer' was first juxtaposed to theory, the queer critic is someone who grapples with questions 'such as the respective and/or common grounding of current discourses and practices of homo-sexualities in relation to gender and to race, with their attendant differences of class or ethnic culture, generational, geographical, and socio-political location'.[302] Queer theory, in this sense, aims to relink (homo)sexuality with other forms of 'minority difference' in the spirit of the early liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, for whom gay and lesbian emancipation had to happen in concert with other struggles.

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[299] Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*, p 217.

[300] The idea of intersectionality, famously coined by Kimberlé W Crenshaw in 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics' (*University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, pp 139–167) around the same years as queer theory was born, describes how gender, race, sexuality, class, and other axes of difference intersect with one another to produce specific identity-positions. As such, to deploy it – as in fact Ferguson does – to define the overlapping of the gay and lesbian liberation agenda with anti-racist and feminist politics in the 1960s and 1970s is a (productive) anachronism.

[301] Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*, p 217.

[302] Teresa de Lauretis, 'Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities. An Introduction', *differences 3*(2), 1991, pp iii–xviii: iii–iv.

But queer theory is born out of the devastating effects of the AIDS pandemic on the queer population too. 'A common front or political alliance of gay men and lesbians', Teresa de Lauretis continues, 'is made […] necessary in the United States today by the AIDS national emergency'.[303] Whilst early gay and lesbian studies emerged in the wake of the enthusiasm that followed the riots at Stonewall in 1969 and elsewhere,[304] with the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and its hard repercussions on the LGBT community, the mood soon turned gloomy. Some contemporary strands in queer theory appear to reflect this mood, either by insisting on processes of mourning or by seeing the future as something dim if not undesirable. Butler, for instance, argues that melancholy is a constitutive element of gender, for all gender identifications are accomplished through the melancholic disavowal of homosexual desire. This explains why our culture 'can mourn the loss of homosexual attachments only with great difficulty', Butler says.[305] On his

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[303] De Lauretis, 'Queer Theory', p v.

[304] One example of 'enthusiastic' post-Stonewall writing is John d'Emilio's pioneering investigation into the U.S. homophile movement in *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities. The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940–1970* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983). 'Since June 1969, when a police raid of a Greenwich Village gay bar sparked several nights of rioting by male homosexuals, gay men and women in the United States have enlisted in ever growing numbers in a movement to emancipate themselves from the laws, the public policies, and the attitudes that have consigned them to an inferior position in society. In ways pioneered by other groups that have suffered a caste-like status, homosexuals and lesbians have formed organizations, conducted educational campaigns, lobbied inside legislative halls, picketed outside them, rioted in the streets, sustained self-help efforts, and constructed alternative separatist institutions on their road to liberation. They have worked to repeal statutes that criminalize their sexual behaviour and to eliminate discriminatory practices. They have laboured to unravel the ideological web that supports degrading stereotypes. Like other minorities, gay women and men have struggled to discard the self-hatred they have internalized. Many of them have rejected the negative definitions that American society has affixed to their sexuality and, instead, have begun to embrace their identity with pride' (p 1).

[305] Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p 138. In *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993, p 236), Butler further explains that it is precisely in order to make the mourning of queer deaths possible 'that there has been an insistent politicisation of grief over those who have died from AIDS […]. Insofar as grief remains unspeakable, the rage over the loss can redouble by virtue of remaining unavowed. And if that very rage over loss is publically proscribed, the melancholic effects of such a proscription can achieve suicidal proportions. The emergence of collective

part, Edelman writes that '[t]he queer comes to figure the bar to every realisation of futurity […]. Rather than rejecting […] this ascription of negativity to the queer, we might […] do better to consider accepting and even embracing it'.[306] Even the founding event of the gay and lesbian imaginary – Stonewall – is critically reassessed rather than celebrated in today's scenario.[307] The affects mobilised by these strands seem to spring from the sorrows that queer people experienced between the 1980s and early 1990s more than from the enthusiasm enticed by the early riots.

At the same time, there seems to be the will, by other critics, to reinstate the excitement of the movement's beginnings. Politically, this move has been carried out by ACT-UP and Queer Nation. Both groups, active in the U.S. and founded, respectively, in 1987 and 1990, were committed to countering the hegemonic representation of queer people living with AIDS through confrontational and often spectacular actions. About them, Ann Cvetkovich writes: '[q]ueer activism insisted on militancy over mourning, but also remade mourning in the form of new kinds of public funerals and queer intimacies […], embrac[ing] camp, shame and the perverse', in a way that is not dissimilar to the parrhesiastic ethos of Cynics.[308] Even though, as de Lauretis admits, there is 'little in common between Queer Nation and […] queer theory',[309] it is unquestionable that the

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institutions for grieving are thus crucial to survival, to the reassembling of community, the reworking of kinship, the reweaving of sustaining relations'.

[306] Edelman, *No Future*, p 4.

[307] Susan Stryker's 'Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity' (*Radical History Review 100*, 2008, pp 145–157) is an example of a queer critical reassessment of Stonewall. In it, the author not only stresses the participation of non-cisgender and non-white actors in the Stonewall riots, but also pinpoints that another riot – which happened in 1966 in San Francisco outside the Compton's Cafeteria – preceded Stonewall and displayed a similar involvement of trans people. Another example is Roderick Ferguson's more recent *One-Dimensional Queer* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), a work that criticises the mainstream representation of the Stonewall riots as being carried out by white gays only, particularly as it emerges from the 2015 movie *Stonewall*. This representation erases all the other actors involved in the riots; additionally, it contributes to the production of what Ferguson calls the 'one-dimensionality' of queerness.

[308] Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003, p 5. About the parrhesiastic ethos of Cynics, see p 72 of this chapter.

[309] Teresa de Lauretis, 'Queer Theory', p xvii.

academic travels of the word 'queer' are somewhat connected to these groups. Theoretically, the same reactivation of an enthusiastic attitude is expressed with an investment in futurity and utopianism. 'Queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future', José E. Muñoz writes – an author who returns in the 'coda' of the dissertation to make an argument for a queer critique filled with hope.[310] Thus, Foucault's (account of Kant's) enthusiasm before the event of the French revolution does not immediately translate into the mood of queer critics before the political events they witness. At best, queer feelings are mixed: there is a kind of hope, excitement, and even felicity in them, which however does not signal the human disposition towards progress, as in Kant, but is traversed by disenchantment, grief, rage, and shame.

1.5 Conclusion

The trajectory of Foucault's critical enterprise sketched in this chapter begins in 1978 with 'What is Critique?' and ends on 5 January 1983 with the inaugural lecture of the course *On the Government of Self and Others*, even though the temporal frame covered by this chapter is longer. In the 1970s, Foucault's understanding of critique is much influenced by his early reflections on the knot knowledge/power as well as by his genealogical project. Thus, in 1978 he defines critique as the art of not being governed *comme ça*: a conception specular to his theorisation of the art of government in those same years. The art of government, for Foucault, designates not just the art of governing people, but also that of governing things in general, including oneself. Conversely, critique as the art of not being governed *comme ça* designates the plea not just for an alternative arrangement of power, but also for a different relation to knowledge and a new mode of subjectivation. Critique, in this sense, is conceived in opposition to configurations of knowledge/power that determine what is true and require the subject to bend to such truth – in other words, critique is conceived as the art of voluntary

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[310] José E Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). 10th anniversary edition. New York & London: New York University Press, 2019, p 1. For a more thorough discussion of Muñoz utopian queer theory and politics, see the 'coda' of this dissertation.

insubordination and of reflective *indocilité*, in line with Kant's rendition of the *Aufklärung*. The path towards this mode of insubordination and indocility that Foucault pursues in 1978 coincides with his genealogical project. In partial revision of the archaeological method developed throughout the 1960s, genealogy is, for him, a form of critique committed to the historicising of events considered to be immutable, in order to show their contingent character. What is perhaps the foremost application of genealogy in Foucault is the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, where he shows how the categories through which sexuality functions as well as sexuality itself have been manufactured throughout Western modernity.

In the 1980s, however, Foucault's focus switches again. This time, he is no longer interested in the apparatus of sexuality as such, but in the broader arts or techniques of the self, of which sexuality is but one instance. This switch, exemplified by the second and third volumes of *History of Sexuality*, influences his 1983 take on critique. Rather than being the art of not being governed *comme ça* carried out through a genealogical practice of historicisation and de-essentialisation, critique, in Foucault's lecture of 5 January 1983, emerges as an ethos or technique of the self. As such, it is configured as a descendant of the ancient practice of parrhesia, which consisted in a mode of truth-telling or frankness aimed at transforming the speaking subject. Like parrhesia and Kant's *Aufklärung*, critique is a form of speech that confronts an authority, requires courage, and puts the utterer at risk. Critique thus conceived is a political enterprise, particularly when it questions what is held to be true. However, it cannot be reduced to politics, for it happens in relation to it, but always at a distance. Foucault's account of Kant's reading of the French revolution, understood as a spectacle raising enthusiasm in the spectators, encapsulates both the continuities and the gaps between critical and political practice.

Many of the critical traits sketched by Foucault can be translated into a queer critique – if only because the field of queer theories is immensely indebted to the French philosopher. Like Foucault's, a queer critique refuses to be governed *comme ça*. Thus, it pays attention to the knowledges produced by queer subjects in order to challenge what is taken to be true. Additionally, a queer critique aims at historicising and de-

essentialising categories connected to gender, sex, and sexual orientation. In queer theory, this eminently Foucauldian task does not shy away from the reappraisal of psychoanalytic theory and historical materialism, which Foucault disengages from. Queer modes of critique are also parrhesiastic in nature, as they coincide with the attitudes, *ethoi*, or lifestyles that are not afraid to 'kill the joy' and enact a 'politics of the anus' in front of what society deems appropriate and respectable. Finally, a queer critique entertains a complex relation with politics and activism: it is not exactly the same as a queer politics, but it stems from a constant interplay with political forces – those promoting it as much as those working against it. One result of this troubled relation is the wide range of affects – from enthusiasm, joy, and hope to disillusionment, rage, and grief – that pervades a queer critique. The next chapters deal with the different ways in which a queer critique is put to work as well as with the different affects it carries along.

2. THE USES AND ABUSES OF THEORY. THE QUEER CRITICAL PRACTICES OF JUDITH BUTLER AND EVE K. SEDGWICK

A 1995 essay by Eve K. Sedgwick and Adam J. Frank begins with the assertion that there are 'a few things theory knows today'.[311] That 'theory', as they call it, knows a few things is actually not a good news for Sedgwick and Frank, for it means that the knowledge it conveys – that objects are not biological givens but contingent and changeable; that everything can be understood through language; that the hierarchised binaries through which we grasp the world (subject/object, self/other, etc.) are to be dismantled; that such dismantling proceeds via an 'unresting critique'[312] – has become a routine, an automatism, a habit. Perhaps more remarkable than the few things theory *knows* is the authors' definition, between brackets, of what theory *is*:

> (theory not in the primary theoretical texts, but in the routinising critical projects of 'applied theory'; theory as a broad project that now spans the humanities and extends into history and anthropology; theory after Foucault and Greenblatt, after Freud and Lacan, after Lévi-Strauss, after Derrida, after feminism).[313]

Sedgwick and Frank understand theory as something more specific than the definition provided by *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* as 'a way of looking at a field that is intended to have explanatory and predictive implications'.[314] Their referent corresponds to what, according to literary critic Jonathan Culler, 'has come to designate works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those to which they

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[311] Eve K Sedgwick and Adam J Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins', *Critical Inquiry 21*(2), 1995, pp 496–522: 496. This piece was republished as: Eve K Sedgwick and Adam J Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins', in E K Sedgwick & A J Frank (eds), *Shame and Its Sisters. A Silvan Tomkins Reader*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 1995, pp 1–28. It subsequently appeared in Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2003) as: Eve K Sedgwick with Adam J Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins', pp 93–122. Throughout the dissertation, I use the original version of *Critical Inquiry*.

[312] Sedgwick and Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold', pp 496–497.

[313] Sedgwick and Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold', p 496.

[314] Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p 363.

[…] belong'.[315] Theory, in this sense, is something that inhabits, as a methodology and a theoretical framework (or, in Sedgwick and Frank's words, as an 'applied theory'), a number of (inter)disciplines, including 'anthropology, art history, film studies, gender studies, linguistics, philosophy, political theory, psychoanalysis, science studies, social and intellectual history, sociology', and, of course, literary studies.[316] What theory does in all such domains, Culler notes, is to dispute 'common-sense views about meaning, writing, literature, experience', so that 'anything that might have been taken for granted' is challenged and unsettled.[317] Not accidentally, Sedgwick and Frank trace theory thusly understood back to Michel Foucault, whose efforts in disputing what is taken for granted have been extensively presented in the previous chapter. Right after him, they mention Stephen Greenblatt, one of the founders of New Historicism: a literary-studies approach akin to Foucault's genealogical practice.[318] Culler's own list of scholars affiliated to theory includes a plethora of (mostly French) names: 'Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Lacan, Judith Butler, Louis Althusser, Gayatri Spivak'.[319] All such authors and the intellectual trajectories they represent are at the root of something called 'theory', which is quite different from the way 'theory' is commonly understood.

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[315] Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p 3.

[316] Culler, *Literary* Theory, p 4.

[317] Culler, *Literary* Theory, pp 4–5.

[318] 'It seems to me that an openness to the theoretical ferment of the last few years is precisely what distinguishes the new historicism from the positivist historical scholarship of the early 20th century. Certainly, the presence of Michel Foucault on the Berkeley campus for extended visits during the last five or six years of his life, and more generally the influence in America of European (and especially French) anthropological and social theorists, has helped to shape my own literary critical practice' (Stephen Greenblatt, 'Towards a Poetic of Culture' (1990), in M Payne (ed), *The Greenblatt Reader*. Malde, MA & Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, pp 18–29). As this quote makes it clear, Foucault is not the only source of Greenblatt's New Historicist approach: notably, Raymond Williams largely inspired it too. This chapter, however, does not focus on Greenblatt, if only because Sedgwick and Frank mention his name only in passing and, obviously, he does not play the same role in the queer theoretical field as Foucault.

[319] Culler, *Literary Theory*, p 2.

To be sure, theory in this unusual acceptation is somewhat a simplification and a caricature. As a category, it gathers a variety of theories – ranging from Foucault's genealogy and Derrida's deconstruction to feminist and, in fact, queer theory – that can hardly be addressed to in the singular. The singularisation of the word, however, functions as a useful 'nickname', in Culler's words,[320] as it designates a cognitive attitude or interpretive disposition that takes things to be 'changeable' instead of 'biological givens', that observes reality through the lens of language, and that approaches objects via an 'unresting critique'. Importantly, the term is mobilised not just by its practitioners, but also – and especially – by its detractors. According to the latter, 'theory' artfully condenses all the deadlocks of present-day literary studies. In a provocative piece significantly titled 'Against *Theory*' (2016), Barbara Carnevali contends that theory – 'a simulacrum of philosophy' – is something academically fashionable which 'does not have the ability to raise truly defamiliarising questions' as it claims to have, because it is 'conformist and predictable'.[321] Antipathy to theory 'is nothing new', Jeffrey R. Di Leo reminds us in *What's Wrong with Antitheory?* (2020). 'The rise […] of antitheory coincides with the rise of literary and cultural theory on the 1970s', and 'just as theory in the new millennium is stronger and more robust than it has ever been […], so too is antitheory'.[322] Somewhere in-between antitheorists *à la* Carnevali and anti-antitheorists (protheorists?) *à la* Di Leo, Sedgwick and Frank express a fatigue with theory yet without buying into provocative if not plainly reactionary accounts aimed at discrediting theory tout court.[323] Their fatigue, in fact, comes from a place – that of queer scholarship – which they do not intend to relinquish or smash. Because my dissertation is embedded in their same field, I focus on the 'uses

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[320] Culler, *Literary Theory*, p 3.

[321] Barbara Carnevali, 'Against *Theory*', *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 2016, np, https://brooklynrail.org/2016/09/criticspage/against-theory (accessed on 7 January 2022).

[322] Jeffrey R Di Leo, 'Introduction: Antitheory and Its Discontents', in J R Di Leo (ed), *What's Wrong with Antitheory?* London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2020, pp 1–24: 1.

[323] A review of reactionary discontents with theory that this dissertation does *not* engage with can be found in the introduction, p 19, footnote 42.

and abuses' of theory, to paraphrase Joan W Scott,[324] as they emerge from within the queer canon.

More specifically, this chapter discusses the trajectory of two queer intellectuals who, more than others, contributed to shaping the field through the 1990s: Judith Butler and Eve K. Sedgwick. By this, I do not mean to say that Butler and Sedgwick are the only intellectuals in the early days of queer theory. The choice of Butler and Sedgwick is due, first, to their exemplarity. No queer studies handbook can overlook Butler's *Gender Trouble* and Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, published two months apart in 1990.[325] More importantly, it is due to the different critical practices they enact: Butler's philosophical critique, on the one hand, and Sedgwick's literary criticism, on the other hand. I borrow this distinction from Butler themselves, who defines 'criticism' as a practice that 'usually takes an object' (in order, for instance, '"to judge, to censure, to reproach, to find fault, to mock, to evaluate, to construe, to diagnose"') and 'critique' as what is 'concerned to identify the conditions of possibility under which a domain of objects appears'.[326] This distinction, however, results from the use of the French word

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[324] See: Joan W Scott, 'The Uses and Abuses of Gender', *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies 16*(1), 2013, pp 63–77.

[325] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York & London: Routledge, 1990; Eve K Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990.

[326] Judith Butler, 'The Sensibility of Critique: Response to Asad and Mahmood', in T Asad, S Mahmood, J Butler & W Brown, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2009, pp 101–136: 108–109. Butler distinguishes 'criticism' from 'critique' to try to convince Talal Asad, who is rather dismissive of critique as a Eurocentric secular attitude, that what she calls 'critique' as something 'not precisely about judgement, but an inquiry into the conditions of possibility that make judgement possible' is preferable over 'criticism' and 'perhaps closer to Asad's project than would at first appear' (p 115). This distinction is borrowed from Wendy Brown's introduction to *Is Critique Secular?* (pp 7–19), which, in turn, builds on the distinction, in Karl Marx's 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction' (1844) (in R C Tucker (ed), *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York & London: W W Norton & Company, 1978, pp 53–65), between the 'mere criticism' of religion carried out by the Young Hegelians and Hegel's own critical analysis of the state. Notice, however, that neither Marx nor his English translator distinguishes between 'critique' and 'criticism' (were it not for the title of the essay). In fact, Marx deploys the German '*Kritik*', consistently translated as 'criticism' throughout the English text.

'*critique*' to translate the German '*Kritik*' as it is used by Kant, 'thus creating within English a difference between *criticism* and *critique*' which did not originally exist, Michael Warner reminds us.[327] In this sense, the divide between philosophical critique and literary criticism is not as clear-cut as it seems, and Butler's and Sedgwick's engagements with both philosophical and literary objects show how reductive it is to confine them to one discipline. At the same time, disciplinary affiliations matter, and to distinguish someone trained in literary studies from someone trained in philosophy is no idle task. An argument of this chapter, in fact, is that the different critical practices Butler and Sedgwick enact are informed by their different disciplinary backgrounds. Here, I take up Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson's suggestion that,

> In the differences between the canonical literary archive that determines *Epistemology*'s itinerary and Butler's now signature engagement with Foucault and the canon of contemporary critical theory, a range of issues emerges that might direct our attention to the way that literary study, on the one hand, and philosophy, on the other hand, generate distinct critical idioms and interpretative practices.[328]

Butler's and Sedgwick's critical practices, schooled in the philosophical and the literary canon respectively, produce not just two different strands – the philosophical and the literary – that have held sway since the field's beginnings, but also two different outlooks on theory and its affordances in the queer theoretical field. Mine is not an attempt at redrawing disciplinary boundaries. Against all objections to theory that wish to put each and every intellectual enterprise in its own disciplinary box, I intend to show the richness and complexity that an interdisciplinary approach can provide – and continues to provide – for queer research.

Let me add a few words on the moment of the 1990s when 'queer', a term that 'suggested a more confrontational, radical politics', as Carolyn Dinshaw has it, was

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[327] Michael Warner, 'Uncritical Reading', in J Gallop (ed.), *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*. New York & London: Routledge, 2004, p 24.

[328] Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A Wilson, 'Introduction: Antinormativity's Queer Conventions', *differences 26*(1), special issue on 'Queer Theory without Antinormativity', 2015, pp 1–25: 6.

traded between activism and the academy.[329] As much as I am invested in discussing Butler's and Sedgwick's works of that decade, I do not intend to transpose them to the present or commemorate their timelessness. There is a sense – if not common sense – that today's queer theoretical landscape asks different questions than the ones posed in early times. This shift seems to be best exemplified by the special issue of *Social Text* 'What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?' (2005), which summarises post-2000s queer commitments in terms of 'theories of race, […] problems of transnationalism, […] conflicts between global capital and labour, […] issues of diaspora and immigration, and […] questions of citizenship, national belonging, and necropolitics'.[330] An even more recent special issue of the same journal, 'Left of Queer' (2020), promotes a 'subjectless' critique informed by materialism and animated by the 'sublation' of such terms as '*debility*, *indigeneity*, and *trans*'.[331] In both cases, questions of gender and sexuality, which are at the core of Butler's and Sedgwick's interventions, are remarkably out of the picture (with the equally remarkable exception of '*trans*' in 2020). While these special issues seem to suggest that a reinvention of queer theory has to begin by complicating queerness, underscoring its alternative genealogies, and (partly) detaching it from gender and sexuality, I contend that such reinvention should start, instead, from theory. In the phrase 'queer theory', it is the latter term what ossified into an automatic gesture. The former, instead, has always been – at least for Butler and Sedgwick, at least since the 1990s – 'the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings' (Butler),[332] 'a continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, *troublant*' (Sedgwick).[333] Rather than restating the centrality of sex and gender, my reading of the queer 1990s aims to shed light on how

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[329] Carolyn Dinshaw, 'The History of *GLQ*, Volume 1. LGBTQ Studies, Censorship, and Other Transnational Problems', in *GLQ 12*(1), 2006, pp 5–26: 8.

[330] David L Eng with Judith (Jack) Halberstam and José E Muñoz, 'Introduction. What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?', *Social Text 84–85*, 23(3–4), 2005, pp 1–17: 2.

[331] David L Eng and Jasbir K Puar, 'Introduction. *Left of Queer*', in *Social Text 145*, 38(4), 2020, pp 1–23: 2. Italics in the original.

[332] Judith Butler, 'Critically Queer', in *GLQ 1*(1), 1993, pp 17–32: 19.

[333] Eve K Sedgwick, 'Foreword', in E K Sedgwick, *Tendencies*. London: Routledge, 1994, pp vii–xi: viii. Italics in the original. About this reading of 'queer', see: Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments. Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2017. See, in particular, 'Epilogue. Haunted by the 1990s: Queer Theory's Affective Histories', pp 176–190.

different queer critical practices, epitomised by Butler and Sedgwick, have led to the stagnation of theory and, concomitantly, have fuelled the discontents with it from within the field. A grasp on this trajectory helps to make sense of contemporary proposals to rethink queer theory and its critical ethos, as the next chapter aims to show.

I am aware that the terminology of this chapter can create some confusion, so let me try to disentangle it. As it has been mentioned, one thing is theory as a 'way of looking at a field that is intended to have explanatory and predictive implications' and another thing is theory in the specific sense that Sedgwick and Frank provide, which is what this chapter is about. The 'theory' of 'queer theory' belongs to both definitions, as it comprises a certain *regard* on gender and sexuality while sharing the same assumptions, references, and attitudes that Sedgwick and Frank attach to theory. Additionally, 'theory' appears in such phrase as 'affect theory', which Sedgwick borrows from Silvan Tomkins and has nothing to do with the theory she is tired of.[334] 'Critique' and 'criticism', on the other hand, designate the many sides of what the previous chapter – and the dissertation as a whole – analyses. As such, the two terms are synonyms. However, in order to distinguish the way in which the critical practice unfolds in philosophy from the way it unfolds in literary studies, the chapter tends to use critique in the former and criticism in the latter case. Finally, the ending of the last section ventures into another meaning of critique, which largely coincides with theory as it appears in Segdwick and Frank – but this is a topic for the next chapter.

This chapter starts by arguing that, in their early works (roughly, from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s), Butler and Sedgwick contribute to the concretion of the signifier 'theory', especially when engaging with Michel Foucault. They turn the latter's genealogical critique of sexuality into, basically, a theory, thus setting the ground for the queer reception of Foucault-as-theorist. The second and third sections are temporally set at the high spot of Butler's and Sedgwick's intellectual production (around the mid-1990s), and are meant to confront the two authors on two subjects they both investigate: the concept of performativity (second section) and Willa Cather's fiction (third section). The analysis of Butler's and Sedgwick's different takes on performativity and Cather

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[334] See this same chapter, pp 169–170.

helps outline both the similarities and the dissimilarities between their critical styles. The final section argues that, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Sedgwick's and Butler's trajectories part ways, both from Foucault and from one another. At the turn of the century, Butler turns their attention partly away from questions of gender and sexuality and toward ethical problems. In her late works, Sedgwick deepens her discontent, not only at theory, but also at paranoid modes of reading that follow its protocols. As an alternative to 'paranoid reading', she puts forward 'reparative reading': a hermeneutic and a suggestion immensely successful in phrasing the discontents with (queer) critique in the years to come.

Finally, there is a personal reason why I am focusing on early queer theory, and on Butler and Sedgwick specifically. To try to formulate it, I want to borrow a question by Lauren Berlant. How can Sedgwick (and Butler, I would add) 'live for a generation of scholars who can assume queerness, paradoxically, as a theoretical field from the beginnings of their career?'[335] As one such (junior) scholar for whom the access to feminism was always-already mediated by the queer moment, my goal is to account for the persistence of Butler and Sedgwick not only in what I think and write, but also, I hope, in the critical practices I happen to encounter.[336]

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[335] Lauren Berlant, 'Preface: Reading Sedgwick, Then and Now', in L Berlant (ed), *Reading Sedgwick*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2019, pp 1–5: 2.

[336] Let me tell an anecdote. As a student of philosophy with a strong interest-cum-obsession in feminist theory, I used to measure the seriousness of a book based on its references to Judith Butler. I would skim through the bibliography, check how often Butler's name appeared, and if the number seemed insufficient to me, then conclude that the text was not to be trusted. Rather than a unit to measure a book's seriousness, this habit of mine seems to be, in retrospect, the unit to measure my own infatuation with Butler. I have been recently reminded of this habit when reading the newly-released book of a friend – a hard-core Butlerian indeed – just to find out that Butler was quoted only once and that, to my surprise, it did not matter any longer. This is not because Butler did something wrong or because they morphed into something I do not recognise. I am still blown away by Butler's prose and there is something deeply familiar in a style that many detractors consider arduous, if not senseless (see: Denis Dutton, 'The Bad Writing Contest Press Releases, 1996-1998', *denisdutton.com*, nd, np, http://www.denisdutton.com/bad_writing.htm (accessed on 7 January 2022); Martha Nussbaum, 'The Professor of Parody. The hip defeatism of Judith Butler', *The New Republic*, 22 February 1999, np, https://newrepublic.com/article/150687/professor-parody (accessed on 7 January 2022). I am not as self-transparent as to be able to state the reason for this detachment: I suspect it might have to do with some of

2.1 Foucault's undutiful disciples

To trace the roots of queer theory back to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and Eve K. Sedgwick's *Epistemology*, both published in 1990, is a truism of the field.[337] While this origin story is not untrue, given the immense fortune of these two works as well as their fortunate coincidence with the self-defined queer activism of those years, one shall not forget, not just the longer history of queer and proto-queer approaches to sexuality dating back to the 1970s and 1980s, of which the previous chapter provides an overview, but also the longer engagement with the subject of sexuality by Butler and Sedgwick themselves in such early works as, respectively, *Subjects of Desire* (1987) and *Between Men* (1985).[338] This engagement is marked by the lingering presence of Foucault in almost all writings roughly dating from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. Obviously, Butler and Sedgwick are located at the crossroads of myriad theoretical and political traditions, a comprehensive recompilation of which is beyond the scope of this chapter, if only because each would deserve a dissertation of its own.[339] Butler and

my questions being left unanswered or, most likely, with the fact that my questions have changed and my intellectual crushes have been multiplying. One such crush is Sedgwick – a surprisingly recent one to be sure, considering Sedgwick's foundational status in queer theory. Sedgwick's writings did not cross my curricular or extra-curricular path until the beginning of my PhD, when I started exploring her plea for a reparative instead of a paranoid reading which the current debate around postcritique is inspired to, as the next chapter intends to show. In between the lines, this chapter is an attempt at doing justice to my own enchantments and disenchantments with Butler and Sedgwick.

[337] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Eve K Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*. About their foundational status in queer theory see, for instance, Lorenzo Bernini, for whom these 'two books […] are often considered the inaugural texts of queer philosophy and queer cultural studies, respectively' (Lorenzo Bernini, *Queer Apocalypses: Elements of Antisocial Theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p 4) or Kadji Amin, who emphasises that both *Gender Trouble* and *Epistemology* were published 'before the inception of the queer theory that [they were] immediately taken up as exemplifying' (Kadji Amin, 'Genealogies of Queer Theory', in S Somerville (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp 17–29: 20).

[338] Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire. Hegelian Reflections in 20th-Century France* (1987). New York: Columbia University Press, 2012; Eve K Sedgwick, *Between Men. English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York & Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1985.

[339] Some of the traditions that are *not* treated in this chapter include: Butler's relation to existentialism (Sara Heinämaa, 'What is a Woman? Butler and Beauvoir on the Foundation of Sexual Difference',

Sedgwick, committed to reworking, rewriting, and reassembling Foucault's insights on sexuality, subjectivation, and power are far from being the transparent mirror of his ideas. In so doing, they are complicit not just in producing the *scavenger effect* that Jack Halberstam has so aptly attached to queer studies (a field that 'combine[s] methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and [that] refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence'),[340] but also, and importantly, in turning Foucault's genealogical critique of sexuality into a theory: a conception that dominates in contemporary queer studies.

Butler's *Gender Trouble* opens with five epigraphs – by Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, and, of course, Michel Foucault – which testify to the French theoretical legacy of the work.[341] Butler famously builds on Foucault as well as on the other French feminists invoked[342] to challenge the distinction

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Hypatia 12(1), 1997, pp 20–39); Butler's Hegelian legacy (Sari Roman-Lagerspetz, *Striving for the Impossible. The Hegelian Background of Judith Butler* (doctoral dissertation). Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2009, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/14917265.pdf (accessed on 7 January 2022). See also: Lorenzo Bernini, 'Riconoscersi umani nel vuoto di dio. Judith Butler, tra Antigone ed Hegel', in L Bernini & O Guaraldo (eds), *Differenza e relazione. L'ontologia dell'umano nel pensiero di Judith Butler e Adriana Cavarero*. Verona: ombre corte, 2009, pp 15–38); the Buddhist influence on Sedgwick (Lauren Berlant, 'The Pedagogies of "Pedagogy of Buddhism"', *Supervalent Thought*, 18 March 2010, np, https://supervalentthought.com/2010/03/18/after-eve-in-honor-of-eve-kosofsky-sedgwick/ (accessed on 8 January 2022).

[340] Judith (Jack) Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 1998, p 13.

[341] In the 1999 Preface to the book, Butler clarifies what this legacy implies: '*Gender Trouble* is rooted in "French Theory", which is itself a curious American construction. Only in the United States are so many disparate theories joined together as if they formed some kind of unity. […] *Gender Trouble* tends to read together, in a syncretic vein, various French intellectuals (Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva, Wittig) who had few alliances with one another and whose readers in France rarely, if ever, read one another. Indeed, the intellectual promiscuity of the text marks it precisely as American and makes it foreign to a French context' (Judith Butler, 'Preface (1999)', in J Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). New York & London: Routledge, 1999, pp vii–xxvii: x).

[342] The idea of French feminism I am reproducing here is no less a U.S. invention than the idea of 'French Theory' sketched out in the previous footnote. Beauvoir, Irigaray, Kristeva, and Wittig are, of course, French-speaking intellectuals. Yet, they belong neither to the same generation (Beauvoir is older than the rest) nor to the same intellectual stream (Beauvoir's existentialism has little to do with Irigaray's and

between sex as a biological given and gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, encapsulated by Beauvoir's motto 'one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one'.[343] In *Gender Trouble*, Butler does acknowledge the historical relevance of the sex/gender distinction to 'dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation';[344] at the same time, they posit a radical discontinuity between sex and gender, for, '[i]f gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way'.[345] Additionally, neither sex nor gender is binarily structured, in Butler's view: one should think not just of the number of meanings that bodies can be invested with (drag performances being an instance of that), but of those bodies (such as intersexed) exceeding the boundaries of masculinity and femininity. Following this reasoning, Butler famously asserts:

> gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive', prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts. […] This production of sex *as* the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural constructions designated by gender.[346]

Terms like 'apparatus', 'discursive', and 'prediscursive' are clear hints at Foucault's place in Butler's thesis on the production of 'natural sex'. To be sure, in the first volume of *History of Sexuality*, 'gender' is mentioned nowhere while 'sex' refers to sexual desire more than sexual difference.[347] In this sense, Butler's understanding of sex is less indebted to Foucault than to such feminist texts as Monique Wittig's 'The Straight

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Kristeva's projects of *écriture feminine*, which in turn have nothing to do with Wittig's radical materialist feminism), nor, for that matter, to France (Irigaray is Belgian and Wittig left France in 1976 and spent the rest of her life in the U.S.). Butler's creative combination of different and often contradictory perspectives is itself an instance of queer theory's 'scavenger methodology' mentioned above.

[343] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 1.

[344] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 6.

[345] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 6.

[346] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 7. Italics in the original.

[347] Think, for instance, of Foucault's suggestion that 'the rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures' (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction* (1976). New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, p 157).

Mind' (1980) and Gayle Rubin's 'The Traffic in Women' (1975).[348] Foucault, moreover, conceives of sexuality as an apparatus 'around and apropos sex',[349] while for Butler, the apparatus contributing to the naturalisation of sex as a prediscursive unity – i.e., as a biological given standing outside social and political norms – is 'designated by gender', as the quote reads.[350] This does not mean that the category of sex is subsumed under that of gender – something that would resonate with a form of constructivism likely to fall 'into the trap of cultural determinism'[351] which Butler aims to avoid – but it means that the definition of sex is as contingent and mutable as that of gender. The focus on gender does not obliterate the force of the apparatus of sexuality either. In Butler, sexuality plays a crucial role in structuring the sex/gender distinction. *Gender Trouble* invokes Monique Wittig's argument that sex 'as a mark somehow applied by an institutionalised heterosexuality'[352] is always defined as the desire for the opposite sex. In other words, it is less an unmarked sexuality than concrete heterosexuality what shapes configurations of sex and gender. This way, the apparatus of sexuality morphs into the apparatus of compulsory heterosexuality, which Butler translates as 'the heterosexual matrix'.[353]

The heterosexual matrix, in turn, stands in a reciprocal relation to the gender system:

> The institution of a compulsory and naturalised heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine

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[348] Monique Wittig, 'The Straight Mind', *Feminist Issues I*(1), 1980, pp 103–111; Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex', in R R Reiter (ed), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. New York & London: Monthly Review Press, 1975 pp 157–210.

[349] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, p 56.

[350] In the next section, I am going to expand on Butler's account of the performative functioning of gender.

[351] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'.* London & New York: Routledge, 1993, p x. *Bodies That Matter* was written a few years after *Gender Trouble* to counter some misconceptions that arose among Butler's readers, including a model of gender constitution conceived as 'a culture or an agency of the social which acts upon nature, which is itself presupposed as a passive surface' (p 4).

[352] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 26.

[353] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 35.

term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire.[354]

Butler's elegant account of the 'coherence of sex, gender, and desire' originates from the will to radically question 'the category of "women"' as the subject of feminism.[355] The assumption that 'women' is to be considered the universal and unitary signifier around which feminist politics should coalesce cannot hold any longer, to Butler. If sex is an effect of an apparatus of knowledge/power designated by gender, and if both gender and sex draw their meanings from a heterosexual matrix of signification, then 'women' is not and cannot be the founding unit of feminism. Butler subscribes to Wittig's motto 'the lesbian is not a woman', because 'a lesbian […] in refusing heterosexuality is no longer defined in terms of that oppositional relation' to men.[356] '"Women"', for Butler, is 'discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation':[357] Wittig's account is here complemented by Foucault's understanding of power as a productive rather than repressive force that comes to shape the very subjects countering it. Butler's goal, in sum, is to 'expose the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire as effects of a specific formation of power', and to do so, for them, 'a form of critical inquiry that Foucault […] designates as "genealogy"' is required:

> [A] genealogical critique refuses to search for the origins of gender, the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic sexual identity that repression has kept from view; rather, genealogy investigates the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin.[358]

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[354] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp 22–23.

[355] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 4.

[356] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 113.

[357] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 2.

[358] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp viii-ix. Italics in the original.

This summary of Foucault's genealogical critique is indisputable, were it not for the fact that Butler's own critique is not exactly genealogical. Foucauldian genealogy is a practice of 'history-writing', in Scott's terms, which refuses to look for the 'origin' or 'cause' of such phenomena as, indeed, sex and desire.[359] As such, it *is* a mode of historicisation: the aim of Foucault's genealogical critique, Colin Koopman says, 'is not to demonstrate *that* our present is contingently formed but to show *how* we have contingently formed ourselves so as to make available the materials we would need to constitute ourselves otherwise'.[360] In *Gender Trouble*, Butler assumes *that* sex, gender, and desire are historical formations, but does not show *how* they have come into being. Kevin Floyd, whose goal is precisely to provide Butler's account with a historical-materialist ground, summarises this point concisely by saying that 'Butler's focus […] is less on history than on the "historicity" of discourse'.[361] It is precisely in the gap between 'history' and 'historicity' where Foucault's critical genealogy of the present morphs into Butler's 'critical genealogy of the naturalisation of sex and bodies *in general*'.[362]

Admittedly, Butler's is a 'theoretical inquiry' rather than a historical one: as such, it takes Foucault as a theorist rather than as a historian of sexuality.[363] In *Subjects of Desire* (1987), the book that resulted from their doctoral research, Butler investigates

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[359] Joan W Scott, 'History-writing as critique', in K Jenkins, S Morgan & A Munslow (eds), *Manifestos for History*. New York & London: Routledge, 2007, pp 19–38.

[360] Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique. Foucault and the Problems of Modernity*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013, p 44.

[361] Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p 115.

[362] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 147. Italics mine.

[363] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 147. While this section is meant to show Butler's investment in theory, let me do justice to what they say in 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination' (in D Fuss (ed), *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. New York & London: Routledge, 1991, pp 13–31): 'I do not understand the notion of "theory", and am hardly interested in being cast as its defender' (p 14). Rather than expressing a discontent with theory, however, this statement is meant to blur the distinction between theory and politics: '[i]f the political task is to show that theory in never merely *theoria*, in the sense of disengaged contemplation, and to insist that it is fully political (*phronesis* or even *praxis*), then why not simply call this operation politics, or some necessary permutation of it?' (pp 14–15).

the treatment of desire from Hegel to 20ᵗʰ-century French philosophy. Foucault appears extensively in the last chapter of this book as the philosopher whose 'reflections on history, power, and sexuality take their bearings within a radically revised dialectical framework'[364] – one with no point of origin or teleological destination. Foucault's desire, in Butler's account, is the product of the same discourse that is supposed to repress it: '[b]ecause discourse is fundamentally determined by […] modern power dynamics, and because desire is only articulated […] in terms of this discourse, desire and power are coextensive'.[365] Butler's stylisation of the argument of the first volume of *History of Sexuality* serves to counter the widespread assumption that there is something like an original desire that is either irredeemably repressed or harbours the possibility to disrupt power. 'Foucault's theory of productive discourse', Butler writes, 'suggests that the very notion of an original desire is manufactured',[366] and that power, in turn, 'is not a self-identical substance […], but a relation that is continuously transformed'.[367]

Butler is well aware that Foucault's 'theory' of how power and discourse work in co-producing desire is the result of a genealogical analysis that 'exposes a body imprinted by history'.[368] But this analysis, in their view, remains too narrow, for it privileges 'a single history in which all culture requires the subjection of the body'[369] and does not capture the variety of cultural inscriptions on concrete bodies:

> Rather than assume that all culture is predicated upon the denial of the body, and that inscription is both a moment of regulation and of signification, it seems that a more thoroughly historicised consideration of various bodies in concrete social contexts might illuminate 'inscription' as a more internally complicated notion.[370]

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[364] Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p 177.

[365] Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p 220.

[366] Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p 223.

[367] Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p 225.

[368] Foucault quoted in Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p 236.

[369] Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p 237.

[370] Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p 237.

Butler, however, does not proceed – in *Subjects of Desire*, *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies That Matter*, or elsewhere – to carry out the more thorough historicisation advocated. What they do, more than historicising Foucault's account of how bodies are culturally inscribed, is to generalise it by means of further theoretical insights, such as Gayle Rubin's. In 'The Traffic in Women', Rubin shows not that all cultures deny the body, but that all cultures are structured by a set of norms and prohibitions – the incest taboo, the sexual division of labour – which produce different arrangements of sex and gender, or what Rubin calls 'the sex/gender system'.[371] Following Rubin, the forms that kinship and economic relations assume in modern Western societies – the bourgeois family, capitalism – can be seen to structure specific modes of inequality and exploitation, such as heterosexual marriage or the feminisation of reproductive labour. Even though, to them, 'Rubin's essay remains committed to a distinction between sex and gender'[372] and assumes the ontological anteriority of the former, Butler refers to it to show how desire is inscribed in bodies and, crucially, how the sex/gender system we live in 'involves a taboo against homosexuality as well'.[373] This way, Butler combines Foucault with Rubin – the historical account of how the discourse on repression works with a topological account of where and through what social constraints the discourse on repression is perpetuated. That Rubin, in her later 'Thinking Sex' (1984), 'appropriates Foucault for her own work, retrospectively raises the question of how ['The Traffic in Women'] might be rewritten within a Foucauldian frame,"[374] Butler admits.

This detour into Rubin's presence in Butler, inevitably unrepresentative of the variety of sources influencing their thought yet characteristic of the multidisciplinary protocols of queer theory, testifies not only to Butler's will to partly depart from Foucault – an operation carried out more consistently after *Gender Trouble* – but also to the transformation of Foucault-the-critic into Foucault-the-theorist. Throughout *Gender Trouble*, Foucault's genealogical critique of the repressive hypothesis morphs into a

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[371] Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women', p 159.

[372] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 74.

[373] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 73.

[374] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 72. See also: Gayle Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', in C S Vance (ed), *Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality*. Boston, London & Melbourne: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, pp 267–319.

theory of how, in Western modernity, 'the desire which is conceived as both original and repressed is the effect of the subjugating law', where 'law' translates Foucault's 'legal-discursive framework' in terms of Lacan's 'symbolic law'.[375] The difference between these two Foucault is not minimal: in the first case, he is the genealogist for whom 19th-century bourgeois societies 'put into operation an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning [sex]'.[376] There is no theory of sex here – or better, all theories claiming the truth of sex are traced back to the modern incitement to talk about sex. In the second case, sexuality is recognised as a historically-specific apparatus, yet one which invests the body 'with an "idea" of natural or essential sex',[377] such that 'this construct called "sex" is as culturally constructed as gender'.[378] 'Culture' and 'construction', in this account, are two key terms on which Foucault, instead, has nothing to comment.[379]

My goal in this section is not to tell the truth about Foucault or to determine how far away from him Butler moves. What I want to show is the extent to which his figure, in early queer theory, has been canonised, more or less willingly twisted, and invariably remixed with other intellectual traditions. Consider the following quote from *Gender Trouble*:

> A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender.[380]

Here, the political genealogy of gender ontologies ('Foucault-as-Foucault', to borrow Lynne Huffer's terminology) is purported to be an agent of deconstruction ('Foucault-

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[375] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 65.

[376] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I,* p 69.

[377] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 92

[378] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 7.

[379] See chapter 1 of this dissertation, p 27.

[380] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 33.

as-Derrida').[381] The context is, famously, that of Butler's own deconstruction of identities according to a theory of gender performativity, discussed in the next section. What I want to retain, for now, is a sense of conflation between Foucault's genealogy and Derrida's deconstruction; that is, between two philosophical trajectories that hardly belong together (were it not for the signifier 'French Theory') and that Butler, in their characteristic accretive style, juxtaposes. Butler is well aware that, even though Foucault and Derrida are both concerned with 'difference', they are far from being the same, for 'the philosophers of difference have differences among them'.[382] But this does not prevent them from creatively combining genealogical critique with deconstruction – and successfully so, considering *Gender Trouble*'s fortune.

Like Butler, Sedgwick is indebted to Derrida's deconstruction and Foucault's genealogical critique too. The former is, for her, a more specific practice than Butler's revealing of the subject 'as a fiction of language'.[383] A self-defined 'deconstructive and very writerly close reader',[384] Sedgwick is trained 'to dismantle [*déconstruire*] the metaphysical and rhetorical structures which are at work in [texts], not in order to reject or discard them, but to reinscribe them in another way'.[385] In many of Sedgwick's early writings, a deconstructive take is evident in the analysis of oppositional terms that are seemingly symmetrical, but that, at a closer inspection, reveal to be hierarchically organised. Sedgwick detects in several works of literature a number of oppositional terms or 'binarisms' (knowledge/ignorance, natural/unnatural, secrecy/disclosure, etc.) which, to her, structure the main opposition of Western modernity: the one between homo- and heterosexuality, or what she calls 'homo/heterosexual definition'.[386] In this sense, deconstruction relates to Sedgwick's own critical practice – literary criticism – and it is configured as an approach to literary objects. The influence of Foucault's

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[381] Lynne Huffer, *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, pp 170–171.

[382] Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p 184.

[383] Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p 179.

[384] Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p vii.

[385] Jacques Derrida quoted in Gayatri C Spivak, 'Translator's Preface' (1974), in J Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, pp ix–lxxxviii: lxxv.

[386] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 1.

genealogy, on the other hand, is perhaps less pervasive than in Butler yet not less relevant. First off, Foucault is 'axiomatic' for Sedgwick, because he shows how "[n]ew, institutionalised taxonomic discourses – medical, legal, literary, psychological – centring on "homo/heterosexual definition" proliferated and crystallised with exceptional rapidity in the decades around the turn of the [20th] century'.[387] More than on (male) homosexuality, however, Sedgwick's early interest focuses on 'male homosocial bonds'. Sedgwick's earlier *Between Men* (1985), in fact, is an account of how, over the centuries, homophobia discriminated between permissible and impermissible male bonds. As such, it looks at the literary as the place in which the mechanisms of homophobic discrimination can be retrieved.

Because Foucault does not exactly practice literary criticism, Sedgwick reinvents him for the sake of her own interpretive goals. One such place of reinvention is the figure of the 'closet' at the core of *Epistemology*. In the chapter on Henry James' 1903 novella *The Beast in the Jungle* 'which represents genetically, as it happens, the inaugurating investigation of [*Epistemology*]',[388] the relation is analysed between the female character, May Bartram, and the male one, John Marcher. While most criticisms of the novella moralistically assume that the story is about a woman loving a man who, in turn, fails to love her back, Sedgwick strives to do justice to the homosexual theme looming in the text. This theme seems to be absent, partly because 'it was only close to the end of the 19th century that a cross-class homosexual role and a consistent […] discourse of male homosexuality became entirely visible', and partly (but more importantly) because

> an embodied male-homosexual thematics has […] a precisely liminal presence. It is present as a – as a very particular, historicised – thematics of absence, and specifically of the absence of speech. The first (in some ways the only) thing we learn about John Marcher is that he has a 'secret' […]. I would argue that to the extent that Marcher's secret has *a* content, that content is homosexual.[389]

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[387] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 2.

[388] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 183.

[389] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 201. Italics in the original.

The homosexual content of Marcher's secret is precisely that closet after which Sedgwick's book is named: that is, what appears through its very absence. This absence does not lie outside the text, but it emerges in figures of speech structured around omission such as paraleipsis.[390] In fact, Marcher's secret is 'unspeakable', 'unnameable', 'not to be named'. Literature is the privileged site where to look at textual omissions, and ultimately, as Sedgwick states, it is also part of the taxonomic discourses constitutive of the modern system of knowledge. Rather than focusing on knowledge, however, Sedgwick is interested in its opposite: *ignorance*. The latter is, to her, 'as potent and as multiple [as] knowledge',[391] and her goal is to pluralise and to specify it. 'If ignorance is not [...] a single Manichaean, aboriginal maw of darkness from which the heroics of human cognition can occasionally wrestle facts, insights, freedoms, progress', Sedgwick writes, 'perhaps there exists instead a plethora of ignorances'.[392] Sedgwick's reversal of Foucault's take on sexuality with a focus on the apparatus of ignorance instead of knowledge is clear. And because ignorance is the correlative of specific systems of knowledge, it is produced by, and circulates as part of, 'particular regimes of truth'.[393]

But, why is the secret content of the closet eminently homosexual, for Sedgwick, and why is the main binary in modernity structured around the homo/heterosexual definition? Sedgwick herself is famous for theorising queerness beyond same-sex object choice and as something that 'can signify only *when attached to the first person*'.[394] The simplicity of Axiom 1 of *Epistemology*, '*people are different from each other*', exemplifies the effort to do justice to the irreducible variety of humankind.[395] It is once again in the first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* where Sedgwick locates the

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[390] A typical example of paraleipsis is someone saying that something will not be mentioned: a rhetorical device that draws attention precisely on that unmentioned object.

[391] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 4.

[392] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 8.

[393] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 8. This same quote can be found in *Tendencies* (p 25), in a chapter aptly called 'Privilege of Unknowing' (pp 23–50). In it, Sedgwick focuses on the empowering force of ignorance in connection to the protagonist of Diderot's *The Nun*.

[394] Eve K Sedgwick, 'Queer and Now', in Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, pp 1–22: 8. Italics in the original.

[395] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, pp 22–27.

answer to the historical concretion of the homo/heterosexual definition. In it, Foucault presents a set of sexual taxonomies emerging through the 20th century – the masturbator, the homosexual, and many other 'deviancies'. But only the homosexual (and, conversely, the heterosexual) has been elevated to the status of species[396] – a status, Sedgwick observes, precluded to the masturbator.[397] 'It is a rather amazing fact', she writes, 'that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another […], the gender of object choice emerged […] and has remained […] *the* dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of "sexual orientation"'.[398] Notoriously, as evidenced in the previous chapter, Foucault frames the modern understanding of homosexuality against the background of pre-modern sodomy, which designates acts that do not qualify as a species.[399] In so doing, Sedgwick argues that Foucault posits a 'paradigm shift' between pre-modern sodomitic acts, on the one hand, and homosexuality as a species (or 'the homosexuality "we know today"'), on the other hand.[400] Such a shift, for Sedgwick, hinges on the assumption that, for Foucault, sodomy is superseded by the modern discourse on sexuality: an assumption that obliterates how homosexuality, even today, is a site of contested definitions. Instead of reproducing Foucault's 'narrative of supersession',[401] Sedgwick suggests that different models of same-sex relations coexist at present, sodomy included, and that there is no such a univocal thing as 'the homosexuality "we know today"'.

It is clear, I believe, that Sedgwick rereads, reinvents, and to some extent rejects some of Foucault's tenets in her attempt at detecting the workings of the homo/heterosexual definition in culture. Her distress about Foucault is best expressed in the 1986 Preface to *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* – Sedgwick's very first book published in

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[396] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, p 43.

[397] I refer here to the argument Sedgwick builds in 'Jane Austin and the Masturbating Girl' (*Critical Inquiry 17*(4), 1991, pp 818–837), reprinted in *Tendencies* (pp 109–128).

[398] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 8. Italics in the original.

[399] See chapter 1 of this dissertation, p 48.

[400] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 46.

[401] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 46.

1980.[402] In it, Sedgwick underscores hysteria and paranoia as the characteristics of, respectively, the heroine and the hero of the gothic novel.[403] These two diagnoses, she observes, are highly differentiated in psychoanalytic theory by means of gender. Hysteria is traditionally attached to women: in such gothic novels as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1817), for instance, it comes to shape the trope of maternity.[404] Paranoia, on the other hand, is virilised and usually attached to the trope of homosociality.

> If 'My monster, my self' is the slogan of the feminocentric or hysterically-oriented reading of the Gothic, that of the masculocentric or paranoically-oriented would have to be 'It takes one to know one'. In this latter slogan it is, or is claimed to be, a specifically epistemological project – to know – that cultivates the mirroring self-transformation of the subject.[405]

This insight on paranoia as an epistemology that follows the dictum 'it takes one to know one' is further elaborated in *Between Men* and *Epistemology*, where, additionally, it is connected to the functioning of homophobia. Drawing on Freud, Sedgwick contends that paranoia is the psychosis that 'makes graphic the mechanisms of homophobia'[406] as it distinguishes the male bonds that are acceptable from those that are not. Such paranoid panic – which can be called, plainly, homophobia – is not irrational: as we have seen, it corresponds to particular apparatuses of knowledge and ignorance and, as such, it relies on specific epistemic configurations. This is evidenced, to Sedgwick, in Herman Melville's late Victorian novella *Billy Budd*, which inaugurates, together with Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (both written around 1890), the modern discourse around homo- and heterosexuality in literature.[407] Melville's is the story of naïve, young, handsome sailor Billy Budd. The homosexual character in the tale is his fellow sailor John Claggart, whose attributions ('secretive',

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[402] Eve K Sedgwick, 'Preface', in E K Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980). New York & London: Meuthen, 1986, pp v–xv.

[403] Sedgwick, 'Preface', p vii.

[404] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1817). Peterborough & Buffalo: Broadview Editions, 2012.

[405] Sedgwick, 'Preface', p viii.

[406] Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p 91.

[407] Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1924). London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1995; Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). London: Penguin Classics, 2010.

'mysterious', of 'evil nature' and 'depravity') are rich with omissions – i.e., the classical tropes of the closet. The third relevant character in *Billy Budd* is Captain Vere, the person who dictates and enforces the law on the ship. While ingenuous Billy Budd displays no cognition at all (and yet, when triggered, ends up murdering his fellow sailor), Claggart and Captain Vere have '*knowledge of the world*, which is linked to the ability to recognise same-sex desire [and] a form of vulnerability as much as […] of mastery'.[408] All characters, in the end, are trapped in the labyrinth of paranoid knowing: Captain Vere knows the content of Claggart's open secret and, via discipline, instils paranoia on others; Billy, in turn, is imbued with such a strong paranoid fear that he murders Claggart; Claggart himself – the homosexual – knows the others in the same way as the others know him, so that 'to know and to be known become [to Claggart] the same process'.[409] Paranoid homophobia, therefore, informs the cognitive structure of all characters on the vessel.

Given that paranoia and homophobia, for Sedgwick, are mutually imbricated, it is surprising to see the charge of paranoia being moved against Foucault in the Preface of *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. Let me quote Sedgwick extensively:

> The 19th-century problem of paranoia is perhaps especially disturbing today in the paranoia of knowledges that claim – and that we who need change *need* – to be political, those on which we would like to rely to cause change in a powerfully inertial set of inequalities. I think, for instance, of the beautiful and influential reconstructions of a Foucault – the premium placed, in his work, on a poise of alertness and unsurprisability, the exhilarating sensation into which his readers, too, are getting a head-turning induction. Yet, a Foucauldian reading of western history is actually – everyone confesses it – overtaken by every wave of change. The problem here is not simply that paranoia is a form of love, for – in a certain language – what is not? The problem is rather that, of all forms of love, paranoia is the most ascetic, *the love that demands least from its object* […]. The gorgeous narrative work done by the Foucauldian paranoid, transforming the simultaneous chaoses of institutions into a consecutive, drop-dead-elegant diagram of spiralling escapes and recaptures, is also the paranoid subject's proffer of himself and his cognitive talent, now

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[408] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 100. Italics in the original.

[409] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 100.

ready for anything it can present in the way of blandishment or violence, to an order of things *morcelé* that had until then lacked *only* narratability, a body, cognition.[410]

It would be of little help to read this passage as an account of Foucault's internalised homophobia or, for that matter, as an example of Sedgwick's own homophobic understanding of Foucault, in a sort of self-feeding paranoid loop. It is more fruitful, instead, to look at the way Huffer understands not just this passage or Sedgwick's relation to Foucault, but how queer theory in general insists in misreading Foucault.[411]

According to Huffer, all too often do people miss the irony at play in Foucault, and most notably, in Foucault's formulation of the repressive hypothesis and of homosexuality-as-species. Through a wit textual analysis, Huffer demonstrates that the free indirect speech deployed by Foucault throughout the first volume of *History of Sexuality* produces 'headless utterances […] riven with doubt'[412] whose aim is to disorient and to destabilise the reader rather than to validate a history of sexuality. The (French) incipit of the book is paradigmatic in this respect. '*Longtemps nous aurions supporté, et nous subirions aujourd'hui encore, un régime victorien*', writes Foucault,[413] with clear reference to the first sentence of Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way* (*Du côté de chez Swann*, 1913), the first volume of *Remembrance of Things Past*.[414] Unlike Proust, Foucault's opening is an example of free indirect speech, which makes sense, for Huffer, only if a main clause ('*on disait*') is implied. Foucault's stylistic choice contributes to throw the reader into the fictional world of the book, which is only partly rendered by the English translation: '[f]or a long time, the story goes, we supported a Victorian regime'.[415] Besides the plain mistranslation of the *faux ami* '*supporté*' with

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[410] Sedgwick, 'Preface', p xi. Italics in the original.

[411] Lynne Huffer, 'Foucault and Sedgwick: The Repressive Hypothesis Revisited', *Foucault Studies 14*, 2012, pp 20–40: 31.

[412] Huffer, 'Foucault and Sedgwick, p 31.

[413] Michel Foucault, *La volonté de savoir: Histoire de la sexualité, vol. 1*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976, p 9.

[414] '*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure*' (Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu. Tome 1: Du côté de chez Swann* (1913). Paris: éditions de la nouvelle revue française, 1919, p 9). The English translation reads: 'For a long time I used to go to bed early' (Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way. Remembrance of Things Past, Volume I*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1922, p 1).

[415] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, p 3.

'supported' instead of 'tolerated' or 'endured', Huffer argues that 'the verbal transposition that marks the sentence as free indirect [speech] is somewhat lost […]: "the story goes" doesn't quite capture the strangeness or cognitive disorientation of the French original'.[416] Sedgwick, likewise, seems uninterested in this disorientation when she sarcastically praises Foucault's talent in providing our parcelled, postmodern world with 'narratibility, a body, cognition'.

In the queer theoretical scene, Sedgwick is surely not alone in overlooking Foucault's ironic and disorienting style. Elsewhere, Huffer focuses on the oft-quoted passage of the first volume of *History of Sexuality* on the birth of homosexuality in 1870, as well as on how this assertion has circulated in queer theory.[417] Not only does Huffer underscore the irony behind Foucault's 'notorious' (*fameux*) date of the emergence of the homosexual,[418] but she also reminds us that, '[i]n the passage, [Foucault] uses the words *individus* (individuals), *personnage* (character), and *figure* (figure) to name a phenomenon of emergence that Anglo-American readers have interpreted, again and again, as identity'.[419] Homosexuality-as-species is not the same as homosexuality-as-identity, says Huffer: Foucault's story, rather than referring to 'a general sense of identification […] in one's relation to oneself or to others; [or], more importantly, [to] identity politics',[420] narrates how sexual interiority and moral experience are produced. The shift from sodomy as a set of acts to homosexuality as an identity is, for Huffer, a 'queer dogma'. Drawing on both *History of Sexuality* and *History of Madness*, Huffer concludes that

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[416] Huffer, 'Foucault and Sedgwick', p 35.

[417] Huffer, *Mad for Foucault*. See, in particular, the chapter 'How We Became Queer', pp 44–83.

[418] 'We can only hear Foucault's "confident dating", as Jagose puts it, of homosexuality's birth as the parodic repetition of what a serious scientist might confidently assert. And in case we didn't get it, that irony is underscored by the French *fameux* which describes the scientific paper where the birthday declaration is so notoriously made; unlike *célèbre*, which carries the "straight" meaning of famous, *fameux* is almost always tinged […] with a slightly derisive irony' (Huffer, *Mad for Foucault*, p 75).

[419] Huffer, *Mad for Foucault*, p 70.

[420] Huffer, *Mad for Foucault*, p 70.

Foucault's story is not about an absolute historical shift from sexuality as acts to sexuality as identities; rather, it is about the internalisation of bourgeois morality which produces, eventually, the 'fable' of an inner psyche, soul, or conscience.[421]

Contrary to Huffer, Sedgwick interprets Foucault's move from sodomy to homosexuality as a paradigm shift and, concomitantly, invests the latter with the status of identity.[422]

This discussion is not meant to do justice to Foucault, as Huffer intends to do, or to restore a philological interpretation of his critique. What it aims to highlight, once again, is that Foucault's critical genealogy of sexuality, both in Sedgwick's and in Butler's rendition, morphs into a theory of sexuality: a theory that prefigures a space for discontent not just with Foucault, but with the kind of criticism initiated within the queer theoretical field in the name of Foucault. In Sedgwick, such discontent holds sway since her early works and is further elaborated in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as the last section of this chapter is going to show. What I argue is not so much that Sedgwick's discontent originates from her 'difficulty in separating Foucault from the queer Foucauldianism that draws on his work', as Huffer contends,[423] but that, as a queer Foucaldian, Sedgwick herself is complicit in hypostatising a version of Foucault-as-theorist that she gets soon tired of. After all, Sedgwick follows Rubin's call to develop 'an autonomous theory and politics specific to sexuality'[424] removed from gender determinants. Axiom 2 of *Epistemology* reads: '*[t]he study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender; correspondingly, antihomophobic inquiry is not coextensive with feminist inquiry*'.[425] For Sedgwick, an autonomous theory (and politics) of sexuality is needed in order not to align with some anti-sex feminists who,

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[421] Huffer, *Mad for Foucault*, p 76. See also: Michel Foucault, *History of Madness* (1961). London & New York: Routledge, 2006.

[422] 'Foucault […] assumed that the 19th-century intervention of a minoritising discourse of sexual identity in a previously extant, universalising discourse of "sodomitic" sexual acts must mean, for all intents and purposes, the eclipse of the latter' (Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 47).

[423] Huffer, 'Foucault and Sedgwick', p 25.

[424] Rubin, 'Thinking Sex', p 9.

[425] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 27. Italics in the original.

during the so-called 'sex wars' of the 1970s and 1980s, would cast 'every node of sexual experience' under the 'whole fabric of gender oppression'.[426] Foucault is crucial to this enterprise, as much as to all queer and proto-queer attempts at detaching sexuality from gender. This might explain, at least in part, why Foucault's genealogical critique of sexuality was turned into a theory.

Butler is no less committed to canonising Foucault's critique than Sedgwick and no less hesitant to move away from it. *Bodies That Matter* (1993) creatively combines Foucault with psychoanalytic theory: a combination partly featured in *Gender Trouble*, in which Freud and Lacan figure extensively, yet fully accomplished only in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997).[427] In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler seeks 'a way to subject psychoanalysis to a Foucauldian redescription even as Foucault himself refused that possibility'.[428] Psychoanalysis, here, figures not as a device that tells the truth about the subject, but as a tool to explain how processes of othering work. In other words, while Foucault's account of the materialisation of bodies in history remains indispensable to Butler, it nevertheless fails consider the field of unintelligibility (or 'set of constitutive exclusions')[429] that such materialisation produces.

The Psychic Life of Power expands on this point by contending that 'Foucault is notoriously taciturn on the topic of the psyche' and that 'an account of subjection, it seems, must be traced in the turn of psychic life'.[430] Accordingly, Butler investigates how, against all odds, one comes to be 'passionately attached' to one's own subjection.[431] I do not aim to rehearse their argument here; what I aim to show is how, in Butler's distancing from Foucault, Foucault himself ossifies as a theorist. In the third chapter of *The Psychic Life of Power*, significantly subtitled 'Between Freud and Foucault', Butler hinges on Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* to argue, through the

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[426] Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p 7.

[427] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*; Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.

[428] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p 22.

[429] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p 42.

[430] Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p 18.

[431] Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p 6.

exemplary case of how a prisoner's body comes into being, that subjects are constituted in subjection (*assujettissement*):

> Foucault suggests that the prisoner is not regulated by an *exterior* relation of power, whereby an institution takes a pregiven individual as the target of its subordinating aims. On the contrary, the individual is formed or, rather, formulated through his discursively constituted 'identity' as prisoner. Subjection is, literally, the *making* of a subject.[432]

Following Foucault, Butler contends that what makes someone a prisoner is less an external relation of power such as the one embodied by the carceral institution than a deeper, internal relation akin to 'a kind of psychic identity, or what Foucault will call a "soul"'.[433] Because Foucault 'appears […] to be privileging the metaphor of the prison to theorise the subjectivation of the body',[434] Butler extends this insight to all modes of subjectivation, so that the prisoner stands for subjectivity tout court and the idea of 'psychic identity' or 'soul' becomes the device that constitutes all subjects in subjection. This way, Butler turns Foucault's genealogy of the penal system into a genealogy of subjectivation in general.

Butler continues:

> If discourse produces identity by supplying and enforcing a regulatory principle which thoroughly invades, totalises, and renders coherent the individual, then it seems that every 'identity', insofar as it is totalising, acts as precisely such a 'soul that imprisons the body'. In what sense is this soul 'much more profound' than the prisoner himself? […] How are we to understand such a claim in the context of Foucault's theory of power?[435]

In their shift from Foucault to psychoanalytic theory, Butler translates Foucault's 'soul' into the psychoanalytic notion of 'psyche'; concomitantly, they turn to Lacan to show how the unconscious and the social can coexist. But, in this quote, they also equate

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[432] Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p 84. Italics in the original.

[433] Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p 85.

[434] Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p 85.

[435] Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, pp 85–86.

'soul' with 'identity', as if, in order to extend the subjectivation of the prisoner to all processes of subjectivation, the equivalence between the soul, the psyche, and identity must be posited. It may be superfluous to remind that the term identity nowhere occurs in *Discipline and Punish* – not at least in the same acceptation as Butler's. Additionally, Butler seems preoccupied to keep psychoanalytic theory tied to Foucault's 'theory of power'. But Foucault has no such theory to offer: what he champions is an *analytics* of how and with what tools power works. In Foucault's own words: '[t]he aim of [my] inquiries […] is to move less toward a "theory" of power than toward an "analytics" of power: that is, toward a definition of the specific domain formed by relations of power'.[436] In sum: in the queer moment of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Butler and Sedgwick collect the legacy of Foucault while reinventing him as a theorist of sexuality, power, and subjectivation: someone Foucault did not mean to be, but whom the practitioners of theory largely recognise as such.

2.2 Doing philosophical critique: Butler and Sedgwick on performativity

It would be tempting to ascribe Butler to the realm of philosophy and Sedgwick to that of literature, if such clear-cut distinction could easily be drawn. After all, in the previous paragraph we have seen Butler dealing with the canon of the 20th-century (mostly French) philosophy and Sedgwick privileging the analysis of (mostly English) literature. This paragraph and the next, however, intend to complicate the distinction and blur the boundaries between the philosophical and the literary. They do so by confronting Butler and Sedgwick on two subjects they both have written about: performativity – a concept enormously fortunate in the field of queer studies, gender studies, and beyond – and Willa Cather's fiction – a classical piece of North-American literature widely discussed by queer and feminist scholars alike. That Butler and Sedgwick cannot be solely confined to the realm of philosophy and literature is something they themselves say in two different interviews:

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[436] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, p 82.

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[Judith Butler:] It is true that when I started *Gender Trouble* I proposed to write a book on 'the philosophical foundations of gender' […]. But it is interesting how my engagement with scholars in anthropology, history of science, feminist history, and literary theory all turned my head, as it were, and I ended up writing, I think, an anti-foundational treatise on gender. What a deviation that was! […] The fact that I remain, at whatever level, 'wedded' to the concept (hilarious phrase!), makes it difficult for some people who have a criticism of the concept […]. So I do still sometimes register an anti-philosophical prejudice within queer or cultural studies even as I am derailed from philosophy. It is an awkward place to be, but surely bearable.[437]

[Question:] what might the truths of literature be for you? After all, literature is a distinctly privileged kind of writing in your own work. What is it for you that makes literature deserve that kind of distinction?

[Sedgwick's answer:] Well, it doesn't interest me greatly to call it literature or not. I'm always compelled by the places where a project of writing runs into things that I just can't say – whether because there aren't good words for them, or more interestingly because they're structured in some elusive way that just isn't going to stay still to be formulated. That's the unrationalisable place that seems worth being to me, often the only place that seems worth being.[438]

Both excerpts perform what Butler would call 'an account of oneself'. On the one hand, Butler says they are constantly pushed into the realm of philosophy despite their equally constant derailment from it. Sedgwick, on the other hand, is asked about the importance of literature to her: the answer points to something ineffable that she cares for and that is not quite the same as literature. The philosophical and the literary, therefore, do not exhaust the variety of objects and disciplines the two authors engage with. After all, the queer intellectual field itself refuses demarcation and is nourished by a plurality of disciplines and objects. Butler's and Sedgwick's takes on performativity and Willa Cather, however, do differ. Such difference, I argue, is not unrelated to their disciplinary backgrounds as well as to the different critical practices they enact –

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[437] Judith Butler in Sara Ahmed, 'Interview with Judith Butler', *Sexualities 19*(4), 2016, pp 482–492: 487.

[438] Eve K Sedgwick, Stephen M Barber, and David L Clark, 'This Piercing Bouquet: An Interview with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick', in S M Barber & D L Clark (eds), *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*. New York & London: Routledge, 2002, pp 243–262: 246.

philosophical critique and literary criticism, respectively – and it plays out not so much at a disciplinary level as in the very ways Butler and Sedgwick understand the objects at stake.

In this section, I analyse what is perhaps the most overstated concept in queer theory since its inception: performativity. The very first issue of *GLQ*, the groundbreaking journal in the field of lesbian, gay, and queer studies founded by David M. Halperin and Carolyn Dinshaw in 1993, begins with two articles by Sedgwick and Butler on this subject: Sedgwick's 'Queer Performativity' and Butler's 'Critically Queer'.[439] Sedgwick's own piece acknowledges the magnitude and importance of Butler's formulation of gender performativity in the emerging field of queer theory:

> Anyone who was at the 1991 Rutgers conference on gay and lesbian studies, and hear *Gender Trouble* appealed to in paper after paper, couldn't help being awed by the productive impact this dense and even imposing work has had on the recent development of queer theory and reading […]. Probably the centrepiece of Butler's recent work has been a series of demonstrations that gender can best be discussed as a form of performativity.[440]

Needless to say, thirty years after the publication of *Gender Trouble*, Butler's theory of gender performativity is being appealed to time and again, with the only difference being that, nowadays, almost all critical fields of knowledge refer to it. Even though *Gender Trouble* is canonised as *the* work on gender performativity, for the sake of a dialogue between Butler's and Sedgwick's understanding of performativity it may be useful to detach 'gender' from 'performativity' and begin from the latter.

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[439] Eve K Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', *GLQ 1*(1), 1993, pp 1–16; Judith Butler, 'Critically Queer'. Parts of Sedgwick's article are incorporated in the first two chapters of *Touching Feeling*: 'Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*' (pp 35–66) and 'Around the Performative: Periperformative Vicinities in 19th-century Narrative' (pp 67–92). An adaptation of Butler's article, on the other hand, can be found in the last chapter of *Bodies That Matter*, titled 'Critically Queer'. (pp 223–242)

[440] Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p 1.

In *Excitable Speech* (1997), Butler dives into the linguistic edge of the theory of performativity in a more thorough way than they did before.[441] The context is the debate around hate speech in the U.S. and the harm it produces. On one side, Butler says, the supporters of free speech at all costs – those whom they call the '[s]trict adherents of First Amendment absolutism'[442] – conceive of hate speech as a non-performative utterance: an assertion, that is, which does not produce consequences. On the other side, those who perceive the harm that hateful words can cause – a vast and diverse camp to which Butler belongs – consider hate speech to be a performative utterance. J. L. Austin, the first philosopher discussing the performativity of language, defines a performative utterance as a speech act 'that, in saying do[es] what [it] say[s], and do[es] it in the moment of that saying'.[443] Examples of performative assertions range from 'let's open the meeting' to 'I sentence you to prison', which enact exactly what they say – they open a meeting and sentence a person to prison. The example Butler provides in the context of hate speech is someone burning a cross in the courtyard of a black family. This act, which is not exactly linguistic, harbours the performative power to injure the addressee if understood as a form of hate speech equivalent to '"I am of the opinion that black people ought not to live in this neighbourhood"' or, plainly, '"Die!"'[444] While an understanding of hate speech as performative can account for its capacity to harm, a too radical version of it promoted by some advocates of hate-speech legislation is untenable, according to Butler. Catharine MacKinnon, for instance, equates hate speech with pornography and argues that both, as performative acts, have the capacity to injure women.[445] This understanding, for Butler, renders performativity inescapable, as it makes no room for resistance, reversal, or 'critical response' to harmful

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[441] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech. The Politics of the Performative*. New York & London: Routledge, 1997. Many chapters of *Excitable Speech* have been previously published in other shapes. Most notably for the sake of this discussion, chapter 2 titled 'Sovereign Performatives' first appeared in Eve K Sedgwick and Andrew Parker's edited volume *Performativity and Performance* (New York & London: Routledge, 1995, pp 197–227). Earlier reflections on performativity, though embedded in phenomenology more than the theory of language, can be found in Butler's 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory' (*Theatre Journal 40*(4), 1988, pp 519–531).

[442] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p 72.

[443] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p 3.

[444] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p 57.

[445] Catharine MacKinnon, *Only Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

pronouncements[446]. An example of such critical response is, for Butler, the very revaluation of the term 'queer', which suggests that 'speech can be "returned" to its speaker in a different form [and with] a reversal of effects'.[447] Promoters of anti-hate-speech legislation like MacKinnon, however, would disagree: to explain why, Butler turns once again to Foucault.

Accounts that structure hate speech around the performative, for Butler, tend to locate its force less in the utterance than in the utterer. Additionally, they perceive the State as an entity capable to regulate hate speech. Both visions – of the individual utterer and of the regulatory State – are modelled on the 'figure for the one who speaks and, in speaking performs what she/he speaks':[448] that is, the idea of sovereign subject. After Foucault, however, Butler reminds us that 'power is no longer constrained by the parameters of sovereignty'.[449] Foucault's model of power – diffused, delocalised, horizontal – is often dismissed by the fantasy that hate speech functions as 'a power of absolute and efficacious agency'.[450] In other words, the notion of performativity that opponents of hate speech rely on goes hand-in-hand with an outdated model of sovereignty. But, if power does not emanate from a sovereign core, where does the force of the performative proceed from? At this point, Butler departs from Foucault (who may as well provide a *theory* of power, for Butler, but surely no theory of performativity) and moves to J. L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, and Pierre Bourdieu: three authors whose aim is

> to offer an alternative view of how one might at once affirm that language does act, even injuriously, while insisting that it does not directly or causatively 'act on' the addressee in quite the way that proponents of hate-speech legislation tend to describe.[451]

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[446] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p 19.

[447] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p 14. Butler anticipates this argument in 'Critically Queer', pp 19–21.

[448] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p 48.

[449] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p 78.

[450] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p 77.

[451] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p 72.

Austin knows very well that the force of performativity cannot be located in an utterance. 'Besides the uttering of the words of the so-called performative, a good many other things have […] to be right and go right if we are to be said to have happily brought off our action', he writes.[452] One such thing, for Austin, has to do with the circumstances around a speech act, which include not only the disposition of the participants in the performative scene but also, and importantly, the 'accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect'.[453] Thus, the force of performativity, in Austin's account, is drawn from conventions. While this assertion introduces the idea, largely appropriated by Butler, that the effectiveness of performative utterances rests social conventions, it is nonetheless built on an unspecific or 'thin' theory of the social, as Bourdieu points out.

Bourdieu, on his part, provides what Butler calls a fully 'social account of performative force'.[454] In his view, multiple rituals have to be carried out in order for performativity to work, ranging from the institutional setting in which a performative utterance takes place to the social status of the utterer. Thus, the context, for Bourdieu, comes to determine the force of performativity. As much as Butler agrees with Bourdieu, his interpretation runs the risk, once again, to reify the social and not to account for its transformation. To overcome this limitation, Butler turns to Derrida's idea of iterability and citationality as core elements of performativity. Derrida disagrees with Austin (and, implicitly, with Bourdieu) that performative utterances, to be 'felicitous' – that is, in order to enact what they say – should not be uttered out of context. While Austin contends that what is 'said on the stage, […] in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy' is not performative because it functions, at most, as a (re)citation of performative utterances,[455] Derrida contends that exactly in these settings does performativity display that 'a general citationality – or rather, a general iterability' is what makes it

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[452] J L Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962, p 14.

[453] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, p 14.

[454] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p 141. See also: Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (1982). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

[455] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, p 22.

work.[456] According to Butler, in positing iteration as a crucial element of performativity, Derrida powerfully reminds us of the possibility to reappropriate and resignify language, as it is the case for 'queer'. By being (re)cited out of the injurious context where it emerged, 'queer' can become – and indeed it has now become – the signifier of wilful sexual insubordination.

Derrida's insight, however, comes at the expense of context altogether, for Butler. In fact, he posits iterability not as the effect of social conventions, but as a 'structural characteristic of every mark'[457] – and performative utterances, to him, function in the same way as all written marks. 'For a mark to be a mark', writes Butler, 'it must be repeatable': such repeatability rests in the capacity of a mark to break with context.[458] In this Derridean scenario, the force of performative utterances comes not from social conventions, but from their iterability or repeatability as marks. In sum,

> Whereas Bourdieu fails to take account of the way in which a performative can break with existing context and assume new contexts, Derrida appears to install the break as a structurally necessary feature of every codifiable written mark, thus paralysing the social analysis of forceful utterance.[459]

Butler's own idea of performativity draws Bourdieu and Derrida together. *Excitable Speech* gestures to such an account yet without fully developing it, for this was the task of Butler's earlier works. *Gender Trouble*, especially towards the ending, focuses on the performativity of gender; *Bodies That Matter* takes up the same discussion to argue for the performative character of sex and bodies in general. In both works, Butler moves toward a formulation of the performative that,

> If [it] provisionally succeeds (and I will suggest that 'success' is always and only provisional), then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech,

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[456] Jacques Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context' (1971), in J Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*. Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982, pp 307–330: 325.

[457] Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context', p 324.

[458] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p 149.

[459] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p 150.

but only because that action echoes a prior action, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices*.[460]

Gender Trouble and *Bodies That Matter* provide 'an account of the social iterability of the utterance'[461] in the realm of gender and sexuality. In them, performativity 'carries the double-meaning of "dramatic" and "non-referential"',[462] and, as such, it is often conflated with performance. In fact, Butler's early inspiration is phenomenology more than Austin's theory of language. Phenomenology allows Butler to talk not just about speech acts and utterances, but, more generally, about 'acts, gestures, and desire [that] produce the effect of an internal core or substance'.[463] 'Acts, gestures, and desire' eventually give the impression, through repetition and citation, that the body has an inner – masculine or feminine – essence. They are thus 'performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs'.[464] 'Fabrications', here, does not point at a pre-existing subject who willingly does (or fabricates) its essence. On the contrary, the fiction of the subject itself is fabricated through the iteration of acts:

> if gender is constructed, it is not necessarily constructed by an 'I' […] who stands before [it]. [T]he 'I' neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves.[465]

What this quote puts forth is not only gender as what defines the inner essence of the body, but also the context that turns the iteration of acts into a ritual, i.e., the heterosexual matrix. Bodily acts are iterated precisely because they follow conventional patterns and social norms: in Butler's words, '[p]erformativity is thus not a singular "act", for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms'.[466] Because such norms are sedimented in bodies through iteration, they are not congealed in time but can be

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[460] Butler, 'Critically Queer', p 19. Italics in the original.

[461] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p 150.

[462] Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', p 522.

[463] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 136.

[464] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 136. Italics in the original.

[465] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p 7.

[466] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p 12.

reappropriated and transformed. 'The iterability of performativity is a theory of agency', writes Butler in the 1999 Preface to *Gender Trouble*.[467] As a theory of agency, it allows for configurations of gender norms to change.

Drag performances are a case in point, as they show that there is no inner (masculine or feminine) essence behind or before the enactment of gender norms.[468] Masculinity and femininity are the effects of what is performed: they do not *express* an inner core or identity, but *derive from* the very iteration, slightly out of context, of the social conventions habitually associated with them. '*In imitating gender*', Butler emphasises, '*drag reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*'.[469] Here, performativity and performance – gender as the iteration of acts and the iterative structure of gender revealed on stage – come together. Even though Butler clarifies that one should not think that there is something unique in drag performances compared to everyday social relations, and that '*the reduction of performativity to performance* [*is*] *a mistake*',[470] they state:

> my theory sometimes waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting is as theatrical. I have come to think that the two are invariably related, chiasmically so, and that a reconsideration of the speech act as an instance of power invariably draws attention to both its theatrical and its linguistic dimensions.[471]

The incessant shift, in Butler, between performativity and performance – between the linguistic and the theatrical – is one of the very first features Sedgwick notices:

> 'Performative' at the present moment carries the authority of two quite different discourses, that of theatre on the one hand, of speech-act theory and deconstruction on the other.

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[467] Butler, 'Preface', p xxiv.

[468] 'Though there were probably no more than five paragraphs in *Gender Trouble* devoted to drag, readers have often cited the description of drag as if it were the "example" which explains the meaning of performativity' (Butler, 'Critically Queer', p 24).

[469] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 137. Italics in the original.

[470] Butler, 'Critically Queer', p 24. Italics in the original.

[471] Butler, 'Preface', p xxv.

Partaking in the prestige of both discourses, it nonetheless, as Butler suggests, means very differently in each.[472]

Because of its polysemy, 'performative' is a rather queer word, for Sedgwick, yet one that strikes the queer reader when confronted with one of Austin's most prominent examples of performativity: the 'I do' that sanctions marriage and literally fabricates wife and husband. Such 'exemplary' speech act, she says, is the one where the linguistic and the theatrical most clearly coincide. 'I do', for Sedgwick, cannot work without the spectacle of marriage, and marriage itself is a theatrical act, 'a kind of fourth wall or invisible proscenium arch that moves through the world (a heterosexual couple secure in their right to hold hands in the street)'.[473] In order for marriage to produce effects, it needs spectators as well as the force of the State. Thus, Sedgwick draws performativity and performance together in the 'I do' of the wedding scene. The 'I' constituted in marriage, however, can hardly be queer, for queer subjectivity 'is lodged in refusals or deflections of (or by) the logic of the heterosexual supplement; in far less simple associations attaching to state authority; in far less complacent relation to the witness of others'.[474] Sedgwick intends neither to dismiss Butler's theory of performativity nor to offer an alternative theory more suited for queer subjects. What she wants to do is to hint at a few places where a queer performativity can be reimagined.

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[472] Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p 2.

[473] Andrew Parker and Eve K Sedgwick, 'Introduction: Performativity and Performance', in Parker & Sedgwick, *Performativity and Performance*, pp 1–18: 11.

[474] Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p 4. Sedgwick's argument may struck the reader who habitually sees 'queer' being deployed as the umbrella term for those LGBT political claims advocating for such equal rights as, in fact, same-sex marriage. But Sedgwick's formulation is in line with – and to an extent contributes to inaugurate – another kind of politics that calls itself 'queer', aimed to counter the inclusion of LGBT subjects into such heteronormative and state-sanctioned institutions as, in fact, marriage (see the introduction to this dissertation, pp 9–13, as well as Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003). Paraphrasing Sedgwick's argument about homosexuality coexisting with sodomy instead of superseding it, which appears in the first section of this chapter, one might say that, today, 'queer' is a site of contested definitions too.

A quick bibliographical note: Sedgwick's reflections on performativity, launched in 'Queer Performativity', are scattered in a number of texts. Only in *Touching Feeling* (2003) all the insights are collected and, if not systematised (a verb that does not match Sedgwick's style), at least reordered.[475] Additionally, many of Sedgwick's pieces are co-authored: when Sedgwick's name refers to the Introduction to the collective volume *Performativity and Performance*, it appears next to Andrew Parker's, just like the words that open this chapter are by Sedgwick and Frank.[476] Sedgwick's path towards queer performativity is all but linear, systematic, and solitary.

One of Parker and Sedgwick's main points on performativity concerns Austin's idea that the performative does not produce effects (hence, that is not properly *felicitous*) when uttered in such unserious locations as a stage, a poem, or a soliloquy. Austin: '[l]anguage in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use – ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language'.[477] Parker and Sedgwick's point is not that a stage, a poem, and a soliloquy display the citational character of performativity, as in Derrida and Butler, but that it is precisely in such settings where queer performativity emerges. To build this argument, they follow Austin's remark that, on stage, in poetry, and in a writer's soliloquy, performative language is used in 'parasitic' and etiolating ways over conventional language:

what, to our knowledge, has been underappreciated (even, apparently, by Derrida) is the nature of the perversion which, for Austin, needs to be expelled as it threatens to blur the difference between theatre and the world.[478]

The perverse character of *parasitism* seems clear; less clear is what is meant by 'etiolations of language'. Etiolation, as Parker and Sedgwick have it, is the act of growing plants in the absence of light. By extension, it is the act of depriving something

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[475] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, See, in particular, 'Introduction' (pp 1–25), 'Interlude, Pedagogic' (pp 27–34), and the first two chapters mentioned in footnote 439 of this chapter.

[476] Parker and Sedgwick, 'Introduction'; Sedgwick and Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold'.

[477] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, p 22. Italics in the original.

[478] Parker and Sedgwick, 'Introduction', p 4.

of strength: in this acceptation, it is cognate with decadence, according to Parker and Sedgwick. As they argue, the chain of associations between theatricality, poetry, parasitism, and etiolation-as-decadence is a characteristic trope of homophobia. As such, it shows that '[t]he performative has […] been from its inception already infected with queerness'.[479]

To be sure, even marriage, when happening into works of fiction rather than in the world, is an exercise in etiolation-as-decadence. 'Think of all Victorian novels', Sedgwick writes, 'whose sexual plots climaxes [when] marriage is, however excruciatingly, displaced: when the fact of marriage's unhappiness ceases to be a […] secret, and becomes a bond of mutuality with someone outside marriage'.[480] Queer performativity, in this sense, is not necessarily absent from the allocution 'I do' that inaugurates marriage. Its presence, however, is signalled not by the felicitous outcome of pronouncing marriage vows (which would be quite unqueer), but by the possibility for marriage not to happen ('*I do – not!*'),[481] and, more generally, by what happens away from, in the vicinities of, and around the wedding scene. In *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick summarises this argument with a neologism: namely, *periperformativity*.[482]

> [Periperformative] sentences […] do not, as I say, fall into [the category of the performative]. What is distinctive about them […] is that they *allude to* explicit performative utterances: not, that is, 'we dedicate' or 'we hereby consecrate', but we *cannot* dedicate, we *cannot* consecrate. Indeed, it is because they refer to or describe explicit performatives, as much as because they sometimes negate them, that they do not themselves fall into that category: thus, 'We get a kick out of dedicating this ground' or 'We wish we had consecrated it' are similarly not performative utterances, even though (or, I am suggesting, exactly because) they explicitly refer to explicit performative utterances.[483]

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[479] Parker and Sedgwick, 'Introduction', p 5.

[480] Parker and Sedgwick, 'Introduction', pp 11–12.

[481] Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p 3.

[482] Sedgwick, 'Around the Performative', pp 67–92.

[483] Sedgwick, 'Around the Performative', pp 67–68. Italics in the original.

The periperfomative lies in the proximity of the performative without coinciding with it.[484] In Sedgwick's words, it is *about* and *around* the performative, and it is often phrased in the negative, not because it is the opposite of the performative or because it asks *not* to do something (it does not function as the repressive hypothesis, she reminds us), but because it takes the performative as its object, it stages and theatricalises it, and, oftentimes, it does not accomplish what it states.

Sedgwick's most prominent example of queer performative (or periperformative, in her later reformulation) is 'shame on you'.[485] This locution is a rather unusual performative: there is no verb as in 'I do' or in other performatives, and it has no explicit 'I' who is in command – or believes to be in command – of the performative scene. Nonetheless, it has illocutionary effects (it does what it says) and it depends on an audience of people to work. Sedgwick understands shame in the wake of psychologist Silvan Tomkins as one of the human affects emerging after interest or enjoyment have been activated. There is no shame without an investment in the same object or situation that eventually becomes shameful – like when 'one started to smile but found one was smiling at a stranger'.[486] In this sense, shame results from a breach in communication: this means that it is not defined by prohibition and repression, as psychoanalysis would hold, but by failure and unsuccess. Additionally, shame is constitutive of identity, for it 'floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication'.[487] Queer identification is a case in point, if not *the* case in point. In being told 'shame on you' – an address that has the force of a negative stigma – the queer subject is identified, paradoxically, through the very shame-inducing mechanism that interrupts identification: 'in interrupting identification, shame too, makes identity'.[488] Thus, 'shame on you' induces shame and, simultaneously, produces

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[484] In this sense, 'periperformative' is reminiscent of Sedgwick's reading of vicariousness as a trope in such novels as Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, where the experience of the protagonists is always mediated by others (see: Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, pp 150–157).

[485] Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p 4.

[486] Silvan Tomkins in Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p 7.

[487] Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p 5.

[488] Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p 5.

a few unexpected effects – queer identity and politics emerge away from, in excess of, and around the performative.

Sedgwick proceeds to analyse the queer performativity of shame at work in Henry James, and specifically, in the prefaces to the New York Edition of his *opera omnia*, written between 1907 and 1909 and subsequently collected in *The Art of the Novel* (1934).[489] This text, for Sedgwick, is 'in the most active imaginable relation to shame'.[490] Two circuits (and erotics) of shame take place: an outward-looking, public-oriented one between James and his audience, and an inward-looking, self-absorbed one between James and his younger self. The book emerges out of James' failure as a playwright in the 1890s as well as the fiasco of the New York Edition itself. In this sense, it displays a circuit of shame between the writer and the audience he failed to reach out to. But *The Art of the Novel*, Sedgwick says, stages another circuit of shame that originates from James's narcissistic act of 'rereading, revising, and consolidating' his own work by, in fact, redacting the prefaces.[491] Here, we witness an almost erotic relation between the older James of the prefaces and the younger James whose novels are prefaced. This scene, Sedgwick says, is enacted through 'the metaphor that presents one's relation to one's own past as a relation*ship*, intersubjective as it is intergenerational. And, it might be added, almost by definition homoerotic'.[492] This intersubjective, intergenerational, homoerotic metaphor allows James to turn the shame he may have felt about his earlier writings into love. This love, Sedgwick writes, 'occur[s] both in spite of shame and, more remarkably, through it'.[493] What is also important, for Sedgwick, is that the eroticisation of James' relationship with his younger self seems 'to be the condition of [James'] having an interiority at all, a spatialised subjectivity that can be characterised by absorption'.[494]

With this interpretation of *The Art of the Novel*, Sedgwick clarifies,

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[489] Henry James, *The Art of the Novel* (1934). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

[490] Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p 7.

[491] Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p 7.

[492] Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p 8. Italics in the original.

[493] Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p 8.

[494] Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p 11.

The thing I *least* want to be heard as offering […] is a 'theory of homosexuality'. I have none and I want none. When I attempt to do some justice to […] the explicitness of James' particular erotics, it is not with an eye to making him an exemplar of 'homosexuality' or even of one 'kind' of 'homosexuality', though I certainly don't want, either, to make him sound as if he *isn't* gay. Nonetheless I do mean to nominate the James of the Prefaces as a kind of prototype of – not 'homosexuality' – but *queerness*, or queer performativity. In this usage, 'queer performativity' is the name of a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame and to the later and related fact of stigma.[495]

Sedgwick's focus on what lies away from, in excess of, and around the performative, as in her reading of James' queer performativity enacted through two circuits of shame, has a few important implications. First, Sedgwick's is not a theory of (periperformative) subject formation, as she herself reminds us, but a strategy to look for disruptive moments in literary texts and cultural representations. Secondly, by introducing the affective force of the performative, Sedgwick moves not only beyond Austin's conflation of performativity and speech acts, but also beyond the debate between the (Derridean) pole of the iterability of the sign and the (Bourdieuan) pole of context-determination. Butler, in a dialectical fashion, supersedes this opposition with an understanding of performativity as a bodily speech act. But dialectics, as revised and unteleological as it can be, is not for Sedgwick, according to whom queer performativity does not reduce all phenomena to language even when it plays out in literature. Both Derrida and Butler, Sedgwick argues,

seem to have interest in unmooring Austin's performative from its localised dwelling in a few exemplary utterances or kinds of utterance and showing it instead to be a property of language or discourse much more broadly. […] [T]he move from *some* language to *all language* seems required by their antiessentialist project. Perhaps attending to the textures and effects of particular bits of language […] requires a step to the side of antiessentialism.[496]

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[495] Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p 11. Italics in the original.

[496] Sedgwick, 'Introduction', pp 5–6. Italics in the original.

That Sedgwick's queer performativity is not invested in antiessentialism is all the more clear from Axiom 4 of *Epistemology*, in which she 'vigorously demures' from any attempt at adjudicating between 'constructivist versus essentialist views of homosexuality'.[497] To be sure, Butler refuses to play the essentialist/constructivist game too. Contrary to radical linguistic approaches, Butler does not deny the materiality of bodies.[498] Their theory of gender performativity, however, remains committed to an antiessentialist agenda. Sedgwick, instead, mobilises her homo/heterosexual definition precisely in order to do away with the constructivist/essentialist dyad. One of *Epistemology*'s most notorious achievements is that definitions of homosexuality are located at the intersection of minoritising/universalising and gender transitive/intransitive[499] accounts. According to the first pole, homosexuality is understood as either demarcating a subgroup of people (a sexual *minority* indeed) or as characterising everyone's sexuality (in Freud's account of the Oedipus complex, for example, all infants come to desire the parent of their same sex at some point in life: in this context, homosexuality is *universal*). The second pole, on the other hand, takes homosexuality as either a condition of liminality – or *transition* – across genders (as when gays are considered effeminate and lesbians virile) or as the consolidation – or *intransitivity* – of one's gender (as in Adrienne Rich's understanding of lesbian existence as a quintessentially feminine experience akin to maternity).[500] Let me take Foucault's story about the birth of (mostly male) homosexuality as an example of what Sedgwick means. Foucault teaches us that, in contrast with the 'temporary aberration' of sodomitic acts, 19th-century psychiatric, medical, and pedagogic discourse began to conceive of homosexuality as a category denoting a specific group of people characterised by 'a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine'.[501] In Sedgwick's interpretation, Foucault's account comprises a minoritising understanding of the homosexual-as-species and a gender-transitive understanding of the homosexual-as-inverted.

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[497] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 40.

[498] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, pp 4–10.

[499] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, pp 1–2.

[500] Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', *Signs 5*(4), 1980, pp 631–660.

[501] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, p 43. About Foucault's account of homosexuality, see chapter 1 of this dissertation, p 48.

If '[t]he deepest interest of any notion of performativity', for Sedgwick, 'is not finally in the challenge it makes to essentialism',[502] then where does it lie? Here we come to the third and perhaps most crucial implication of Sedgwick's rereading of the performative:

> [my deepest interest] lies in the alternatives [performativity] suggests to the […] repression hypothesis [*sic*]. In a myriad of ways in contemporary thought – ways in which Foucault himself was hardly unimplicated – his critique of the repression hypothesis has been all but fully recuperated in new alibis *for* the repression hypothesis: in accounts of institutional, discursive, and intrapsychic prohibitions as just so many sites for generating and proliferating – what if not repression?; in neatly symmetrical celebrations of 'productive' 'multiplicities' of 'resistance' – to what if not to repression?; in all the dreary and routine forms of good/bad dog criticism by which […] we persuade ourselves that deciding what we like or don't like about what's happening is the same thing as actually intervening in its production.[503]

In these lines, Sedgwick is more upset at a certain (queer) Foucauldianism – at a vocabulary that confounds criticism with action and keeps the repressive hypothesis alive – than at Foucault per se. What is important in this context is that performativity, for Sedgwick, is a bulwark against an understanding of psychic processes (which include but are not limited to sexuality) as rooted in prohibition and repression. This preoccupation is only partly shared by Butler: their move away from the framework of sovereignty to understand power is, in fact, a move away from narratives of repression as well as liberation. But, when turning to psychoanalysis, Butler seeks to recast prohibition in the symbolic domain (thereby making it contingent and changeable) instead of doing away with it. Consider this excerpt from *The Psychic Life of Power* – itself an elaboration of a passage in *Bodies that Matter*:

> It is not enough to say that gender is performed, or that the meaning of gender can be derived from its performance, whether or not one wants to rethink performance as a compulsory social ritual. […] Psychoanalysis insists that the opacity of the unconscious

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[502] Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p 14.

[503] Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p 15. Italics in the original.

sets limits to the exteriorisation of the psyche. It also argues – rightly, I think – that what is exteriorised or performed can only be understood by reference to what is barred from performance, what cannot or will not be performed.[504]

A focus on the limits sets on performativity by what is 'barred', 'foreclosed', 'abject', or lies out of the social coordinates of intelligibility is typically Butlerian. What is probably Butler's main addition to their own theory of gender performativity after *Gender Trouble* is that all identifications require an 'exclusionary matrix [which] enables certain sexed identification and forecloses and/or disavows other'.[505] To paraphrase Sedgwick, the repressive hypothesis as such may as well be absent from this account, but its fundamental structure made of 'institutional, discursive, and intrapsychic prohibitions', seemingly, is not.[506]

In this section, while tracking Butler's and Sedgwick's different takes on performativity, I have detected a couple of differences in their critical styles. Butler's philosophical critique engages with a few theories of language (Austin's, Derrida's, Bourdieu's) to build a theory of gender performativity – one that accounts for the theatrical dimension of bodily acts and aims to overcome the excesses of a radical linguisticism. Their understanding of 'queer' as a term that 'derives its force through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to […] insult' and 'produces the subject it names […] *through* that shaming'[507] is aligned with the performative workings of gender. Sedgwick's take, on her part, engages both with the linguistic canon (including Butler's theory itself) and with literature more proper through her reading of Henry James' *The Art of the Novel*. The latter is not so much an example of

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[504] Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, pp 144–145. See also: Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, pp 234–235.

[505] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p 3.

[506] The last paragraph of Sedgwick's 'Queer Performativity' (p 15. Italics in the original) is highly significant in this respect: 'I seem to see [what is now happening with Foucault] in some of the uses scholars are trying to make of performativity as they think they are understanding it from Judith Butler's and other related recent work: straining eyes to ascertain whether particular performances (e.g. of drag) are really *parodic and subversive* (e.g. of gender essentialism) or just *uphold to the status quo*. The bottom line is generally the same: kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic. I see this as a sadly premature domestication of a conceptual tool whose powers we really have barely yet begun to explore'.

[507] Butler, 'Critically Queer', p 18. Italics in the original.

how a theory of queer performativity should look like – Sedgwick has no such theory and wants none – as an opportunity to see how, '*at least* for certain ("queer") people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity'.[508] The gap between the production of queer subjects through insult and shaming (Butler) and shame as the affect structuring certain people's identity (Sedgwick) marks the difference between a philosopher who does not shy away from constructing a theory and a literary critic who refuses to draw a theory from the texts scrutinised.[509]

2.3 Doing literary criticism: Sedgwick and Butler on Willa Cather

Before moving on to explore, in the next section, the increasingly different trajectories that critique takes in Butler and Sedgwick, I would like to pause on another place where the difference between them plays out. This place is not that of philosophy of language but that of literature, i.e., the work of Pulitzer Prize winning novelist Willa Cather (1873–1947). Both Butler and Sedgwick engage with Cather's fiction. This is unsurprising for Sedgwick, a literary critic who cannot and in fact does not overlook a novelist for whom the closet plays a crucial role. It is perhaps more surprising for Butler, who, however, has reminded us that they are not '"wedded" to the concept',[510] for they like to venture in the realm of culture. Think, for instance, of Butler's well-known chapter of *Bodies That Matter* on *Paris is Burning* (1990), a movie that 'calls

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[508] Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p 14. Italics in the original.

[509] Sedgwick's position is reminiscent of Foucault's critical practice, for which theory is less the outcome of a genealogical/archaeological investigation than one of the very historical records to be analysed to understand how a discursive formation works. In this sense, Sedgwick can be viewed as being closer to Foucault's critical spirit than Butler. But Sedgwick is a literary critic; Foucault, instead, moves within the realm of philosophical critique like Butler. Additionally, while Sedgwick's earlier works are closely inspired by Foucault, the later ones are much more distant from him than Butler's. And both Sedgwick and Butler, as the first section shows, contribute to turn Foucault into that theorist he did not mean to be. For all these reasons, the rapprochement of Foucault with Sedgwick is arduous to determine. Yet a certain similarity remains between Sedgwick's and Foucault's refusal to draw a theory from their critical practices.

[510] See p 125 of this chapter.

into question whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them'.[511] This is a reminder for me, too, not to buy into the hasty equation Sedgwick:literature=Butler:philosophy, if only because evidence points at a more complex picture. If there is something eminently theoretical in Butler's critique and something that eschews theory in Sedgwick's criticism (and my point is that, in fact, there is), it cannot be presumed from the start. My reading of Sedgwick's and Butler's own readings of Cather aims not at offering an alternative queer interpretation of Cather's work – there are already many of outstanding quality[512] – but at underscoring what their critical practices do.

In Sedgwick's 'Across Gender, Across Sexuality' (1989), the treatment of Cather's work proper – of the short story 'Paul's Case: A Study in Temperament' (1920) and the novel *The Professor's House* (1925) – is preceded by an extensive discussion of how to theorise sexuality.[513] Interestingly, this discussion the same that appears, in a revised form, in the introduction to *Epistemology* as part of Axiom 2.[514] Cather's work is thus configured as a complement to the discussion of a core tenet of Sedgwick's intervention in queer theories: i.e., that the homo/heterosexual definition, rather than comprised between the poles of constructivism and essentialism, is better understood as a movement between the 'minoritising/universalising' and the 'gender transitive/gender intransitive' poles.[515] 'Paul's Case', the first text Sedgwick analyses, is about an

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[511] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p 125. See: *Paris is Burning*, directed by Jennie Livingston. Academy Entertainment & Off White Productions, 1990.

[512] For queer readings of Cather, see: Marilee Lindemann, *Willa Cather: Queering America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999; Jonathan Goldberg, *Willa Cather and Others*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2001. All interpretations that take into account how sexual attachments inform Cather's work are indebted to the pioneering *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (1987) by Sharon O'Brien (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[513] Eve K Sedgwick, 'Across Gender, Across Sexuality: Willa Cather and Others', in R R Butters, J M Clum, & M Moon (eds), *Displacing Homophobia: Gay Male Perspectives in Literature and Culture*. Durham, NC & London, Duke University Press, 1989, pp 53–72. About Cather's novels, see: Willa Cather, *The Professor's House* (1925). New York: Dover Editions, 2021; Willa Cather, 'Paul's Case' (1920), in W Cather, *Paul's Case and Other Stories*. New York: Dover Editions, 2012.

[514] See p 121 of this chapter.

[515] About Sedgwick's homo/heterosexual definition, see pp 113–114 of this chapter.

effeminate boy, Paul, who is bullied by teachers at school and who courageously manages to escape provincial life and go to New York, where his life tragically ends. In Sedgwick's interpretation, this short tale (Cather's long-time favourite, Sedgwick says) allows the author – herself a lesbian – to cross-identify with the protagonist of the novel and make up for the homophobic remarks she wrote about Oscar Wilde a few decades earlier. On the occasion of Wilde's 1895 sentence on the charge of sodomy, in fact, Cather infamously joined his public scapegoating by publishing a column in which she contended he was 'deservedly' sent to prison for giving up to 'the deepest infamy and the darkest shame of his generation'.[516] As Sedgwick argues,

> [i]f Cather, in ['Paul's Case'], does something to cleanse her own sexual body of the carrion stench of Wilde's victimisation, it is thus (unexpectedly) by identifying with what seems to be Paul's sexuality not in spite of but *through* its saving reabsorption in a [gender transitive] artifice […]. In what I am reading as Cather's move in 'Paul's Case', the mannish lesbian author's coming together with the effeminate boy on the ground of a certain distinctive position of gender [transitivity] is also a move toward a minority gay identity whose more effectual cleavage, whose more determining separatism, would be that of homo/hetero*sexual* choice rather than that of male/female *gender*.[517]

Sedgwick's argument is that, in 'Paul's Case', we witness the rapprochement of Cather with Wilde by means of the author's cross-identification with the effeminate male character – Paul himself. The textual transition from one gender to another goes in parallel with Cather's move towards a minoritising definition of homosexuality, thus privileging a solidarity across the axis of (homo)sexuality instead of (female) gender.

Cather is not alone in staging cross-gender and cross-sexual identifications in her novels: this, for Sedgwick, is a typical artifice of the literary closet of the late 19th and 20th century. Additionally, 'Paul's Case' is not the only place in Cather's works where these gender and sexual crossings are at stake. *The Professor's House* – the story of Professor Godfrey St. Peter's tedious heterosexual marriage interspersed with memories of his homosocial romance with his student Tom Outland – is also charged with gender

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[516] Willa Cather, 'The Passing Show', *The Courier (Lincoln Nebraska)*, 28 September 1895, p 7.

[517] Sedgwick, 'Across Gender, Across Sexuality', p 66. Italics in the original.

and sexual displacements. The domesticity of the Professor's life 'is biographically thought to allude to the enabling provision for Cather's own writing a room of her own, first by Isabelle McClung and then perhaps by her [...] companion of decades, Edith Lewis'.[518] In this novel, lesbian love (or some sort of 'lesbian truth', in Sedgwick's wording) is readable not in the plot itself, but in refraction, that is, in the 'pockets of value and vitality that can hit out in unpredictable directions'[519] and that Sedgwick – who is versed in the closet – helps us detect. The absence of an explicit lesbian plot in Cather is due, for Sedgwick, to 'the early and still-fragile development of *any* lesbian plot as a public possibility for carrying value and sustaining narrative'.[520] Not that explicitly lesbian plots, to Sedgwick, are impossible: it is just that they were not available to Cather at the time she wrote *The Professor's House*, contrary to what lesbian-centric analyses of her work contend.[521] The sailing of the she-vessel *Berengaria* at the very end of the novel – a name rife with anagrammatical possibilities: 'the {green} {aria}, the {eager} {brain}, the {bearing} and the {bairn}, […] the {begin} and {rebegin} {again}', etc. – seems to hint precisely at the possibility of such future plots.[522]

Butler's 'complex and important'[523] essay included in *Bodies That Matter* and titled '"Dangerous Crossing"' picks up on Sedgwick's insight about gender and sexual cross-identifications in Cather's work, but with a closer look at names and pronouns.[524] It begins by taking aim at three readings of Cather: Sharon O'Brien's, which accounts for Cather's lesbianism but not for the cross-identifications she stages in her fictional works; Hermione Lee's, which accounts for the cross-identifications in Cather's texts

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[518] Sedgwick, 'Across Gender, Across Sexuality', p 68.

[519] Sedgwick, 'Across Gender, Across Sexuality', p 70.

[520] Sedgwick, 'Across Gender, Across Sexuality', p 69..

[521] In Sharon O'Brien's 1987 work (p 127), for instance, Cather appears as a 'lesbian writer forced to disguise or to conceal the unnameable emotional source of her fiction'.

[522] Sedgwick, 'Across Gender, Across Sexuality', p 71.

[523] Goldberg, *Willa Cather and Others*, p 20.

[524] Judith Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing": Willa Cather's Masculine Names', in Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, pp 143–166.

but disengages from the biographical question of sexuality altogether; and, finally, Sedgwick's, which

> offers a more complex reading of cross-identification in Cather's novel *The Professor's House* (1925), in which a homoerotic relationship between two men is quite literally contained within the narrative frame of a heterosexual family, arid almost to the point of death. According to Sedgwick, Cather makes two 'cross-translations', one across gender and another across sexuality […], assum[ing] the position of men and that of male homosexuality.[525]

Butler is well aware that, in Sedgwick, these cross-translations – i.e., identifications across gender and sexuality – are staged both in *The Professor's House* and in 'Paul's Case', in which they function as substitutes for a lesbian love that cannot rise to the status of plot. Butler continues:

> Sedgwick offers us the choice between a refracted love, one which is articulated through a double-translation, and one which has the possibility of a direct and transparent visibility, what she refers to as 'lesbian truths' which appear to exist prior to the possibility of their constitution in a legitimating historical discourse.[526]

This reading, to Butler, contradicts what Sedgwick states in *Epistemology*, where the closet is conceived as a site of textual displacements rather than a repository 'of an original "truth" of lesbian sexuality which awaits its adequate historical representation' in order to be disclosed.[527] Butler's own interpretation of Cather figures her texts as sites of contested and, indeed, 'dangerous' crossings.

Butler begins by reading Cather's original introduction to the novel *My Àntonia* (1918), where a shift is operated from the narrating 'I', supposedly coinciding with Cather's own voice, to Jim Burden, the old friend whom the 'I' meets on a train and who, as a

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[525] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', p 144. About the other works, see: O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*; Hermione Lee, *Willa Cather: Double Lives*. London: Virago Press, 1989.

[526] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', p 144.

[527] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', p 145.

matter of fact, narrates Àntonia's story throughout the book.[528] The *burden* of narration is thus transferred from the 'I' onto Burden, who comes to represent both Àntonia (in the aesthetic sense) and the 'I''s passion for her (in the vicarious sense). 'How are we to read this transfer of authority and desire in the name?' Butler wonders.[529] The answer is, at least, twofold. First, the 'I' may as well fade into the background and the authority be attached to Jim's masculine name, but it remains the condition for the story to be told. 'If Cather's texts often appear to idealise masculine authorship through a displaced identification', Butler speculates, then 'it may be that the displacement of identification is the very condition of the possibility of her fiction'.[530] (Butler's understanding of critique as a Kantian enterprise that looks at the conditions of possibility for something to exist is discussed in the next section.) The idea that a displaced identification allows a narrative to begin resonates with what Butler describes, borrowing from the psychoanalytic vocabulary, as 'foreclosure': 'the production of an "outside", a domain of unlivability and unintelligibility that bounds the domain of intelligible effects'.[531] Cather's illegible 'I' is to be interpreted as the constitutive outside – and condition of legibility – of Jim's tale about Àntonia.

The psychoanalytic vocabulary frames another insight by Butler. In the introduction to *My Àntonia*, we discover that Jim is a lawyer. His masculine name, according to Butler, stands for the name-of-the-Law: 'a token of a symbolic order […] that […] legislates viable subjects through the institution of sexual difference and compulsory heterosexuality'.[532] The transfer of the 'I''s (homosexual) desire onto Jim is concealed under the name-of-the-Law that institutionalises sexual and gender norms while, paradoxically, enabling that same desire. This paradox, for Butler, features in all modes of subjectivation, because 'the subject who […] resist[s] such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by [them]',[533] and informs Butler's analysis of 'Tommy the Unsentimental' (1896) as well. This last short-story by Cather is about a girl called

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[528] Willa Cather, *My Àntonia* (1918). Boston & New York: Mariner Books, 1995.

[529] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', p 146.

[530] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', pp 148 – 149.

[531] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p 22.

[532] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', p 152.

[533] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p 15.

Tommy Shirley – where 'Shirley' is the surname and 'Tommy' is the name.[534] In it, Butler says, identification figures as 'an ambivalent process, a taking on of a position that is at once a taking over, a dispossession, and a sacrifice'.[535] The cross-identification (one of the many in this tale) is of Tommy with her father Thomas, while the sacrifice, or the costs at which identification comes about, is the degradation of Tommy's love for her friend Jessica. Once again, there is nothing intrinsically or ahistorically 'lesbian', for Butler, which stands for the love between Tommy and Jessica apart from the prohibitions and foreclosures that are constitutive of it.

> If what we might now be tempted to call 'lesbian' is itself constituted in and through the discursive sites at which a certain transfer of sexuality takes place, a transfer which does not leave intact the sexuality it transfers, then it is not some primary truth awaiting its moment of true and adequate historical representation and which in the meantime appears only in substitute forms. Rather, substitutability is a condition for this sexuality.[536]

Accordingly, Butler says that it is not by accident that the reader witnesses, in Cather's texts, a proliferation of names – the W-shaped snake into which young Àntonia and Jim stumble ('W' as in Willa or Will: Cather's early pen name), the many variations on 'Tom' (Tommy, Thomas, Tom Outland) throughout Cather's novels. Homosexuality may well be the love that dare not speak its name; its 'darelessness', however, resides not in the impossibility to be named, but in the multiplications and displacements it undergoes. 'The name thus functions as a kind of prohibition', Butler writes, 'but also as an enabling occasion',[537] for it fails to stabilise identity and opens up, just like performativity, the '*possibilities of its repetition and subversion*'.[538]

Clearly, Butler and Sedgwick have different takes on Cather's work – takes that, for the most part, mirror their respective views of gender and sexuality. But let me focus, first,

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[534] Willa Cather, 'Tommy the Unsentimental' (1896), in S O'Brien (ed), *Willa Cather: 24 Stories*. New York: Penguin, 1987, pp 62–71.

[535] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', p 148.

[536] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', p 162.

[537] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', p 152.

[538] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', p 152. Italics in the original.

on their similarities. To begin with, in both Butler and Sedgwick, the author *does* matter. The shift from Cather's to Jim Burden's authorship, for instance, is crucial to Butler's reading of *My Àntonia*, and Cather's life-long female partners are central in Sedgwick's interpretation of *The Professor's House*. More generally, Cather's lesbian attachments – no matter how differently conceived – figure in both. This focus is everything but obvious, given that the poststructuralist philosophy championed by Butler and Sedgwick has long advocated for the death of the author. 'The Death of the Author', in fact, is the title of a famous essay by Roland Barthes (1967), which argues for the removal of the author from the interpretive scene.[539] Only this way, Barthes contends, can a text become 'a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings [*des écritures variées*], none of them original, blend and clash'.[540] Along similar yet more elaborated lines, in 'What Is an Author?' (1969) Foucault explores how 'the author function', as he calls it, survives at the time of the author's alleged death, even when interpretation centres on anoymity and writing [*écriture*].[541] As a historical formation, however, the author function, for Foucault, is bound to change and possibly dissolve. Butler and Sedgwick, in this case, seem not to follow a Barthesian or even a Foucauldian framework. As Seàn Burke writes, in literary criticism 'the struggles of feminism have been primarily a struggle for authorship'.[542] As queer feminists, Butler and Sedgwick take into account Cather's biographical facts to interpret the cross-gender and cross-sexual vicissitudes at play in her work.

This does not mean that their readings aim to unveil the true homosexual content of fictional works. In Axiom 6 of *Epistemology*, Sedgwick writes:

[539] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' (1967), in R Barthes, *Image Music Text*. London: Fontana Press, 1977, pp 142–148. About this argument, see my 'The author, the text, and the (post)critic: notes on the encounter between postcritique and postcolonial criticism', *Postcolonial Studies 24*(4), 2021, pp 498–513: 505.

[540] Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p 146.

[541] Michel Foucault (1969), 'What is an Author?', in P Rabinow (ed), *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon, 1984, pp 101–120: 108. See also my 'The author, the text, and the (post)critic', p 505.

[542] Seán Burke (ed), *Authorship: From Plato to Postmodernism: A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995, p 145.

Has there ever been a gay [Socrates/Shakespeare/Proust]? […] A short answer, though a very incomplete one, might be that not only have there been a gay Socrates, Shakespeare, Proust; but that their names are Socrates, Shakespeare, Proust […]. What's now in place, in contrast, in most scholarship and most curricula in an even briefer response […]: Don't ask. Or, less laconically: You shouldn't know. The vast preponderance of scholarship and teaching, accordingly, even among liberal academics, does simply neither ask nor know.[543]

One instance of scholarship invested in a 'don't ask, don't tell' mode of reading is, as both Jonathan Goldberg and Christopher Nealon point out, Joan Acocella's.[544] In Acocella's view, the lesbian politics underwriting feminist and queer readings of Willa Cather are plainly misguided, because they reduce Cather's work to an academic play of identity politics and turn the author into someone she was not. I hope my survey of Sedgwick's and Butler's respective criticisms suffices to show how preposterous it is to conclude that the goal of queer criticism is turn Cather into a feminist and a lesbian. The cross-identifications that Cather-the-author stages in her texts should be attended to in order to defy those interpretations that bypass all identifications – as if the sexual attachments of an Oscar Wilde, a Henry James, or, in fact, a Willa Cather did not matter. Nealon beautifully summarises the relevance of queer criticism when he writes:

far from coldly manipulating Cather in the name of a purely political 'lesbian agenda', […] contemporary queer theorists are struggling to use theoretical insights to bring them closer to what they love. This attempt at claiming, at bringing close, is also deeply political, of course […]. But the politics involved are not merely some kind of 'special interest' politics […]: they are an attempt to understand, through an identification with an ancestor, how history works, what it looks like, what possibilities has offered in the past, and what those possibilities suggest about our ineffable present tense.[545]

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[543] Eve K Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 52.

[544] Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings. Lesbian and Gay historical Emotion Before Stonewall*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2001, pp 92–94; Jonathan Goldberg, 'Willa Cather and Sexuality', in M Lindemann (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp 86–100: 96–99.

[545] Nealon, *Foundlings*, p 96.

This place 'closer to what they love' – let me call it queerness – is nonetheless bound to differ in Butler and Sedgwick, particularly when it comes to the lesbian love they both analyse. For Sedgwick, there are some 'lesbian truths' lingering on the horizon of Cather's texts which do not manage to become a plot – and for good reasons, considering the pervasive homophobia in Cather's times. What Cather makes visible, for Sedgwick, are moments of cross-gender and cross-sexual identification: 'shadows of the brutal suppressions by which a lesbian love did not in Willa Cather's time and culture freely become visible as itself'.[546] Cather's cross-identifications with such male characters as Paul and Professor St. Peter are meant to make up for (or in Sedgwick's later terminology, *repair*) the gender-intransitive biographical record of the author, which led to the scapegoating of Oscar Wilde. Cather's literary trajectory, for Sedgwick, moves from gender intransitivity to gender transitivity, that is, from a separatist approach to lesbian sexuality to the possibility of an 'alliance or identity between lesbians and gay men'.[547] In the early-20th-century alliance between a lesbian writer and her male homosexual characters we can hear the echoes of the anti-separatist ethos of today's queerness, which Sedgwick notoriously champions.[548]

Seemingly, in their reading of Cather, Butler eschews Sedgwick's preoccupation with the trope of gender transitivity/intransitivity altogether. Their problem has to do more

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[546] Sedgwick, 'Across Gender, Across Sexuality', p 69.

[547] Sedgwick, 'Across Gender, Across Sexuality', p 60.

[548] Sedgwick's predilection for non-separatist politics and criticism is evident since *Between Men* (pp 19–20): 'As a woman and a feminist writing (in part) about male homosexuality, I feel I must be especially explicit about the political groundings, assumptions, and ambitions of this study in that regard, as well. My intention throughout has been to conduct an antihomophobic as well as feminist inquiry. However, most of the (little) published analysis up to now of the relation between women and male homosexuality has been at a lower level of sophistication and care than either feminist or gay male analysis separately. […] [T]his literature has […] subscribed to one of two assumptions: either that gay men and all women share a 'natural', transhistorical alliance and an essential identity of interests […]; or else that male homosexuality is an epitome […] of woman-hating. I do not believe either of these assumptions to be true. […] I am not assuming or arguing either that patriarchal power is primarily or necessarily homosexual (as distinct from homosocial), or that male homosexual desire has a primary or necessary relationship to misogyny. […] I will, however, be arguing that homophobia directed by men against men is misogynistic, and perhaps transhistorically so'.

with the lesbian love 'visible as itself' as well as the 'lesbian truths' posited by Sedgwick than the politics of mannish lesbian/sissy boy alliance. Sedgwick's speculation, for Butler, 'rests on a missed opportunity to read lesbian sexuality as a specific practice of dissimulation produced through the very historical vocabularies that seek to effect its erasure'.[549] In fact, cross-gender and cross-sexual identifications, in Butler's account, are devices not so much of textual dissimulation as of gender and sexual identification. At stake in Cather's work, Butler argues, is how 'to read the name as an occasion for the retheorisation of cross-identification or, rather, the crossing that is, it seems, at work in every identificatory practice'.[550]

Butler's and Sedgwick's different conceptions of lesbianism and of cross-identifications reveal at bottom a different style of thinking, or better, a different stylistic affiliation that has to do with the respective fields – literary criticism, philosophical critique – to which Sedgwick and Butler are genetically ascribed. Butler charges Sedgwick with the presumption of 'an ahistorical sexuality constituted and intact prior to the discourses by which it is represented'.[551] This may as well be at odds with what Sedgwick contends in *Epistemology*, as Butler says, but it is not at odds with Sedgwick's refusal to take a position in the debate between essentialism and constructivism, if not to find any usefulness in an antiessentialist stance. Nor is it at odds with Sedgwick's conception of literature as what 'represents a continuing negotiation between historicising and de-historicising motives'.[552] There is something disturbing, Butler is right, in Sedgwick's stepping on the side of historicisation: queer theory, after all, is born out of the historicising ethos inaugurated by Foucault's genealogical critique of sexuality.[553] I propose to understand Sedgwick, on the one hand, as expressing a discontent with Foucauldian modes of critique – that paranoid 'love that demands least from its object'[554] – which the next paragraph expands upon. On the other hand, the gender and sexual refractions Sedgwick detects in Cather are not part of a *theory* of how cross-

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[549] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', p 145.

[550] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', p 143.

[551] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', p 145.

[552] Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p 16.

[553] See the second section of chapter 1 of this dissertation.

[554] See p 118 of this chapter.

identifications work. In Cather's early-20th-century context, lesbianism is certainly in the making, but this does not mean it is not available as a mode of identification, no matter its fragility. A 'visible' or 'true' lesbian love, in this sense, is less a claim about the transhistorical permanence of some lesbian essence[555] than a set of attributes epistemologically associated with the closet: i.e., a regime of ignorance modelled on 'particular regimes of truth',[556] which mandates a choice between secrecy and disclosure.[557] In other words, a 'visible', 'true' lesbian love may not exist in absolute terms, as Butler points out, but it may exist for Willa Cather.

I am not sure Butler would disagree with this summary: after all, they are also committed to 'read[ing] Cather's text as a lesbian text'.[558] But their intent is to bring Cather to the terrain of the theory of subject formation through cross-identification and the ambiguity of the name. Consider the following excerpts from Butler's essay: 'the crossing is, it seems, at work in *every* identificatory practice';[559] '[i]dentification is *always* an ambivalent process';[560] 'the name is *never* permanent, and […] the identity secured through the name is *always* dependent on the social exigencies of paternity and marriage'.[561] How to account for the proliferation of such timeless, totalising determiners and adverbs in a text authored by a champion of historicity? One possible

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[555] Sedgwick's 'critical interpretations of culture', Ramzi Fawaz writes, 'refuse to congeal into a once-and-for-all, transhistorical explanation for any given aesthetic, social, or political phenomenon or text' (Ramzi Fawaz, 'Introduction: "An Open Mesh of Possibilities"', in Berlant, *Reading Sedgwick*, pp 6–33: 9).

[556] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 8. For a discussion of how ignorance is framed in Sedgwick, see pp 117 – 118 of this chapter.

[557] 'I want to argue that a lot of the energy of attention and demarcation that has swirled around issues of homosexuality since the end of the 19th century, in Europe and the United States, has been impelled by the distinctively indicative relation of homosexuality to wider mappings of secrecy and disclosure […], mappings whose enabling but dangerous incoherence has become oppressively, durably condensed in certain figures of homosexuality. "The closet" and "coming out", now verging on all-purpose phrases for the potent crossing and recrossing of almost any politically charged lines of representation, have been the gravest and most magnetic of those figures' (Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, pp 70–71).

[558] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', p 162.

[559] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', p 143. Italics mine.

[560] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', p 148. Italics mine.

[561] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', p 153. Italics mine.

answer, already hinted at in this chapter, relates to the difference between history (what Foucault does) and historicity (what Butler does).[562] A second and perhaps fairer answer is that these timeless markers are very Butlerian indeed, but that they are also extrapolated from a more complex engagement with Cather's fiction.

In a *post mortem* tribute to Sedgwick, about the difference between Sedgwick and themselves, Butler writes:

> Our sensibilities are in some ways profoundly different. [Sedgwick] is a passionate literary scholar and innovative theorist, and my own formation is as a more conceptually linear philosopher, for better or worse. But I have needed the encounter with literature again and again in order to nudge me out from the tight grip of my conceptual threads. And this possibility for a kind of thinking that moves against the strictures of the rigorously logical has been part of the challenge of Sedgwick's work for me.[563]

The difference outlined in this quote gestures to a third answer. True: when reading Cather, Butler and Sedgwick lay out their two major interventions in queer theory – Butler resorts to gender performativity and Sedgwick insists on the homo/heterosexual definition. Yet, whereas Butler shows through Cather how identification is always a process of cross-identification, Sedgwick applies her conceptual frame to show how cross-identifications work in Cather's plots. To put it differently: Butler's Cather is someone whose 'texts […] have as one of their persistent features the destabilisation of gender and sexuality through the name'.[564] As such, Cather's fiction becomes the illustration of how performativity works, and performativity itself becomes a theory to be invariably applied to different cultural objects. Sedgwick's Cather, on the other hand, is the precipitate of the homo/heterosexual definition at some point in Cather's life trajectory. Sedgwick's own purpose 'is not to adjudicate between the two poles' – minoritising/universalising and gender transitive/intransitive[565] – but to stage a set of contradictions and ambiguities through those poles. Accordingly, her

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[562] See p 109 of this chapter.

[563] Butler, 'Capacity', in Barber & Clark, *Regarding Sedgwick*, pp 109–120: 109.

[564] Butler, '"Dangerous Crossing"', p 143.

[565] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 2.

homo/heterosexual definition is less a theory than a heuristic device to let a text bespeak such contradictions. The gap between Butler-the-philosopher and Sedgwick-the-literary-critic is thus a gap between a theory – of gender performativity, antiessentialist in scope – and a non-theory – of what the homo/heterosexual definition can illuminate beyond the essentialist/constructivist dyad. Unsurprisingly, the latter's contribution in shaping theory as a set of de-essentialising and de-naturalising procedures is much inferior to the former.[566] After all, it is not by accident that Sedgwick, who is soon going to militate against theory and the reading protocols it elicits, fails to be fully included among its ranks. The place where Sedgwick's legacy largely survives is the field of queer literary criticism, which is in fact less prone to turn a text into the case study of theory, and from which, as we shall see, many of the discontents with theory proceed.[567]

2.4 Parting ways

Thus far, the aim of the chapter has been not to reconcile Butler's and Sedgwick's interventions in queer theory as some hasty summaries of their work seemingly do,[568] but to emphasise their differences. Such differences become increasingly evident at the turn of the 21st century. On the one hand, Sedgwick's renewed interest in affect, textile art, poetry, and even Buddhism are forcibly stopped by her premature death due to breast cancer – a subject she never shied away from and that drew her closer to queer

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[566] In Culler's *Literary Theory*, for instance, Sedgwick's name is mentioned next to Butler's in the (very short) paragraph on queer theory (pp 131–132), but there is no specification of what her intervention in the field is. To the concept of performativity, instead, Culler devotes an entire chapter, a section of which discusses 'Butler's performatives' (pp 101–105).

[567] Felski's project of a postcritique, discussed in the first and second section of the next chapter, is largely inspired by Sedgwick's writings and emerges out of the field of literary studies. See: Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

[568] Consider this excerpt from Gayle Salamon's 'Queer Theory' (in K Q Hall & Ásta (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, pp 506–516: 208): '[b]oth Butler and Sedgwick claimed that our identities are always circumscribed by forces beyond our choice or control while simultaneously arguing for the lived possibility, and political necessity, of enacting our identities in other than normative ways'.

friends living with terminal AIDS.[569] Butler's production, on the other hand, continues to this day, but it has moved toward politically- and ethically-oriented concerns about the status of democracy, the relation to others (or 'the Other'), the critique of violence, notions of precarity and vulnerability, post-9/11 scenarios of heightened Islamophobia, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, etc.[570] The gap between Butler and Sedgwick, however, is marked not just by their diverging interests, but also by their diverging critical practices. Not that there was ever a moment the latter coincided: as this chapter has argued, critique always meant something different for each of them. Their divergence, however, deepens between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. This section aims to show that such divergence is not unrelated to Butler's and Sedgwick's different takes on theory.

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[569] The most powerful account of her own diagnosis in parallel with AIDS is put forward in Sedgwick's 'White Glasses' (*Tendencies*, pp 247–260): an obituary to Michael Lynch which is also an exercise in sentimentality and in the possibility of multiple queer cross-identifications. About the texts where Sedgwick's late interests can be found: affect theories, which the present chapter discusses, is largely treated throughout *Touching Feeling*; textile art infuses the introduction to *Touching Feeling* as well as the chapter 'Making Things, Practicing Emptiness' of Sedgwick's posthumous *The Weather in Proust* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2011, pp 69–122): Sedgwick' textile artworks are archived online at: https://evekosofskysedgwick.net/art/artworks/ (accessed 8 January 2022); Sedgwick's own poetry is published in her *Fat Art, Thin Art* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 1994) and collected in Jason Edwards (ed), *Bathroom Songs: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as a Poet*. Goleta, CA: Punctum Books, 2017, https://punctumbooks.com/titles/bathroom-songs-eve-kosofsky-sedgwick-as-a-poet/ (accessed on 8 January 2022); the most representative text of Sedgwick's engagement with Buddhism is 'Pedagogy of Buddhism', in Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, pp 153–182).

[570] A non-exhaustive list of Butler's works of the 21st century on those themes include: Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004; Judith Butler and Gayatri C Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging*. London: Seagull Books, 2007; Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London & New York: Verso, 2009; Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012; Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015; Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2020.

Regarding Butler, I consider two texts that engage with Foucault's 'What is Critique?' as well as with the meaning and the purpose of critique more broadly.[571] The texts under scrutiny are the homonymous 'What is Critique?' (2001) and *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), a lecture Butler originally delivered in 2002 at the University of Amsterdam.[572] Importantly, neither of these works revolves around thematics of gender and sexuality: this is because, at the turn of century, Butler moves toward 'a universalist ethics of responsibility that requires one to be aware of [one's] dependence on the Other'.[573] A notable exception to this all-too-linear narrative is Butler's *Undoing Gender* (2004) a compendium of some of their latest (and clearest) writings on gender and sexuality.[574] Butler's commitment to critique, however, remains unquestioned, even in works that are not eminently queer. Suffice is to say that, in 2016, Butler co-founded the International Consortium of Critical Theory Programs (ICCTP), the goal of which is 'to provide an inclusive framework for critical theoretical work that […] responds to contemporary crises that currently challenge intellectuals and artists throughout the globe'.[575]

Additionally, Butler has been forced to look back at issues of gender and sexuality under the pressure of events. I am referring to the current 'anti-gender' wave: that is, a global mobilisation of political and social actors who identify with the political (Far)Right, embrace a rather fundamentalist version of Christianity, and target a phantasmagorical 'gender'.[576] The latter, in these actors' view, is a signifier (or better,

[571] Michel Foucault, 'What is Critique?' (1978), in M Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007. The text is discussed in the first and second section of chapter 1 of this dissertation.

[572] Judith Butler, 'What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue', *Transversal 5*, 2001, np, https://transversal.at/transversal/0806/butler/en (accessed on 8 January 2022); Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.

[573] Bernini, 'Riconoscersi umani nel vuoto di Dio', p 20.

[574] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*. New York & London: Routledge, 2004.

[575] ICCTP, 'About the ICCTP', *International Consortium of Critical Theory Programs*, nd, np, https://criticaltheoryconsortium.org/about/ (accessed on 8 January 2022).

[576] For a quick overview of the 'anti-gender' movement, the origins of its rhetoric, the contexts where it plays out, and the many actors it involves, see: Heinrich Böll Foundation (ed), *Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise? Strategising for Gender Equality in Central and Eastern Europe*. Volume 38 of the Publication Series on Democracy. Berlin: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2015. Roman Kuhar and David

'symbolic glue') vague enough as to conflate equality education, gender studies, women's and LGBT rights, and other causes that are seen as a threat to the 'natural' order of society.[577] For many such people, Butler's name is paradigmatic as it inaugurates an 'ideology' according to which 'individuals represent themselves through masks and artifices, becoming lesbian, drag, transgender, and so on'.[578] One consequence of such mystifying misreading of gender performativity is the attack Butler suffered in November 2017 at her departure from São Paulo, as well as the burning of their effigy during her stay in the city.[579] The event Butler was attending – the 'International Colloquium on the Ends of Democracy' – had nothing to do with the queer knowledges and politics against which 'anti-gender' activists were protesting. This and other events have led Butler to take a stance in defence of the field of gender and sexuality studies and the knowledge it produces.[580]

Paternotte (eds), *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilising against Equality*. London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017; Sara Garbagnoli and Massimo Prearo, *La croisade 'anti-genre'. Du Vatican aux manifs pour tous*. Paris: Textuel, 2017.

[577] Andrea Pető, 'Epilogue: "Anti-gender" mobilisational discourse of conservative and far right parties as a challenge for progressive politics', in E Kováts & M Põim (eds), *Gender as symbolic glue. The position and role of conservative and far right parties in the anti-gender mobilizations in Europe*. Brussels & Budapest: Foundation for European Progressive Studies & Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015, pp 126–131: 126–128.

[578] La Manif pour Tous – Italia, *L'ideologia di genere* (self-published booklet), 2014, p 12, http://www.lamanifpourtous.it/sitehome/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/ideologia-di-genere.pdf (accessed on 8 January 2022). My translation.

[579] To read about these events, see the articles by Sexuality Policy Watch: 'Judith Butler attacked in Brasil: a briefing' and 'Knowledge against fear', both published on the *Sexuality Policy Watch* website on, respectively, 11 January 2018 and 2 October 2019, https://sxpolitics.org/judith-butler-in-brazil-a-briefing/17916; https://sxpolitics.org/judith-butler-on-gender-ideology/20136 (both accessed on 8 January 2022). It is worth reminding that the consequence of the 'anti-gender' discourse are far reaching: in 2018, for instance, gender studies was banned from the list of accredited Master programmes in Hungary; between 2019 and 2020, 'LGBT-free zones' have been created in rural Poland; the proposals to restrict the right to abortion, both in the U.S. and elsewhere, are uncountable.

[580] See: Judith Butler, 'The Criminalisation of Knowledge', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 May 2018, np, https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-criminalization-of-knowledge (accessed on 17 December 2020); Judith Butler, 'The backlash against "gender ideology" must stop', *New Statesman*, 21 January 2019, np, https://www.newstatesman.com/2019/01/judith-butler-backlash-against-gender-ideology-must-stop (accessed on 8 January 2022).

Butler's 'What is Critique?' locates Foucault in a tradition that departs from an understanding of critique as judgement. This tradition, for Butler, is to be traced back to Raymond Williams, who worries 'that the notion of criticism has been unduly restricted to the notion of "fault-finding"',[581] as well as to Theodor W. Adorno, who turns critique even more explicitly into a *praxis*. Butler understands Foucault's contribution as an invitation 'to rethink critique as a practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing, what Williams referred to as our "uncritical habits of mind" and what Adorno described as ideology'.[582] To be sure, this interpretation seems more significant about Butler's own definition of critique than about Foucault's, not just because the link between Williams, Adorno, and Foucault himself is questionable. In fact, Foucault's exploration of the 'constraints and limitations which, at a given moment, are imposed on discourse'[583] is not quite the same as Butler's definition of critique as what 'asks after the occlusive constitution of the field of categories themselves'.[584] The kind of critique Butler has in mind is akin to the analysis of mechanisms of foreclosure: that is, the production of a 'constitutive outside' which, by virtue of its very occlusion, shapes what's 'inside' – be it the self or a certain epistemological configuration. Butler, who knows very well that Foucault does not account for any such mechanism,[585] provides a novel understanding of critique inspired to Foucault but, in quite some respects, alien to him.

Consider, for instance, Butler's insistence on the distinction between judgement and critique, from which the aforementioned definition is taken:

> Judgements operate for both [Williams and Adorno] as ways to subsume a particular under an already constituted category, whereas critique asks after the occlusive constitution of the field of categories themselves. What becomes especially important for Foucault in this

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[581] Butler, 'What is Critique?', np.

[582] Butler, 'What is Critique?', np.

[583] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p 212. Italics mine.

[584] Butler, 'What is Critique?', np.

[585] See p 122 of this chapter.

domain [is] to think of the problem of freedom and, indeed, ethics in general, beyond judgement: critical thinking constitutes this kind of effort.[586]

Unquestionably, Foucault is in search of a mode of critique that can also be a form of ethical life,[587] but he is well aware that critique is *also* a mode of judgement, for to criticise is to say 'no' to specific modes of being governed.[588] What he refuses to do is to ground judgements on ahistorical a priori as Kant's transcendental critique does – which is not the same as to say that critique and judgements are set apart from each other, as Butler suggests. Williams himself, whom Butler invokes against the conflation of critique with judgement, has a more complex understanding of the two terms than Butler's account suggests:

> Criticism has become a very difficult word, because although its predominant general sense is of fault-finding, it has an underlying sense of judgment and a very confusing specialised sense, in relation to art and literature. […] While criticism in its most general sense developed towards *censure* […], criticism in its specialised sense developed towards *taste*, *cultivation*, and later *culture*.[589]

In this quote, Williams does not mention the philosophical meaning that criticism acquired after Kant. He reminds us nonetheless that there is another realm in which the critical practice is carried out and that Butler eschews altogether: the domain of '*taste*', '*cultivation*', '*culture*'. In it, criticism acquires at least three meanings: a more unspecific one as in 'fault-finding', a more specialised yet not less confusing one as in art and literary criticism, and a more encompassing one that underlies the other

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[586] Butler, 'What is Critique?', np. The distinction between judgment and critique resonates with another distinction Butler draws between criticism and critique in 'The Sensibility of Critique'.

[587] Foucault's idea of critique as ethos is discussed throughout the third paragraph of chapter 1 of this dissertation.

[588] Foucault's idea of critique as 'the art of not being governed *comme ça*' is discussed in the first paragraph of chapter 1 of this dissertation. To be sure, Butler themselves, in 'What is Critique?', refers to this definition, yet emphasises the 'originary freedom' that the will not to be governed *comme ça* seems to imply, which I am going to analyse further on in this paragraph.

[589] Raymond Williams, 'Critique' (1976), in R Williams, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp 47–49: 47. Italics in the original.

meanings, i.e., critique as judgement. Following Williams, criticism covers a wide range of activities, ranging from non-specialised judgements discriminating good from bad (the acceptation, to be sure, that Reinhart Koselleck locates at the inaugural moment of critique, as we have seen in the first chapter)[590] to an intellectual enterprise that deploys a wide range of tools to analyse a variety of cultural objects. More than a pitfall in the argument or proof of inaccuracy, Butler's disinterest in critique as judgement, I contend, is definitional to a philosophical understanding of critique that leaves little to no room to the aesthetic. By this, I do not mean to say that Butler pays no attention to literature, art, or any other cultural object: their reading of Willa Cather proves quite the opposite. What I mean is that their understanding of critique is divorced from literary, artistic, or cultural preoccupations, and that this divorce is crucial to their leaning towards theory.

What is, then, this critique that explores the limits of an epistemological field and is linked to virtue, as the title of Butler's essay reads? Butler turns the attention to the late Foucault of parrhesia to argue that critique is a practice of self-transformation with a 'critical relation to […] norms'[591] at its core. If an epistemological field comprises, among other things, a set of norms and rules establishing what is true and how a subject should relate to truth, then critique is a practice that refuses the blind acceptance of such norms and rules: in so doing, it implies a different relation between the self and truth. Here, Butler fully borrows from Foucault the idea that critique is a 'stylisation of the self in relation to the rules':[592] as such, it is an act of courage, for it questions the societal norms one lives in to enact a different self. Among the many terms that Foucault offers to define critique (including 'ethos', 'art', and 'attitude', encountered in the previous chapter), Butler hinges on those passages where Foucault suggests that 'there is something in critique which is akin to virtue'.[593] 'Virtue' is Butler's name of

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[590] See Reinhart Koselleck's remarks on non-political critique in his *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (1959) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988, pp 98–102). See also chapter 1 of this dissertation, pp 35–47; 84–85.

[591] Butler, 'What is Critique?', np. Foucault's reading of parrhesia is amply discussed in the third section of the first chapter of this dissertation.

[592] Butler, 'What is Critique?', np.

[593] Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p 43.

choice for critique as the 'art of voluntary insubordination' through which the subject constitutes itself anew.[594]

Now, while this conceptualisation is fully resonant with Foucault, it also displays a few differences. One such difference relates to Butler's fascination for Foucault's ambiguous appeal to originary freedom at the end of his 'What is Critique?' When he states that critique is the art of not being governed *comme ça*, he distinguishes it from 'an originary freedom, absolutely and wholeheartedly resistant to any governmentalisation', but he does not fully exclude the coincidence between the two.[595] Butler speculates that Foucault, who posits and immediately withdraws the idea of originary freedom, performs the very act of desubjugation he talks about in his lecture. Foucault's antifoundationalism does not allow him to posit such freedom as the ontological ground of critique. Yet, because he does not 'absolutely exclude it', he moves toward the limits of the epistemological field he is embedded in, Butler says. 'Who would Foucault be', they wonder, 'if he were to utter such words?'[596] In stating the possibility of an originary freedom, Foucault seemingly resignifies a philosophical trope out of the coordinates it belongs. Without doubts, by understanding Foucault's originary freedom as a speech act that '*performs* a certain desubjugation of the subject', Butler is rehearsing their own theory of performativity.[597]

Another important difference between Butler's and Foucault's conception of critique emerges from the lines of *Giving an Account of Oneself*. There, Butler posits the question of responsibility in the frame of an antifoundationalist theory of the subject. They wonder: '[d]oes the postulation of a subject who is not self-grounding, that is, whose conditions of emergence can never fully be accounted for, undermine the possibility of responsibility and, in particular, of giving an account of oneself?'[598] To answer this question, Butler turns once again to Foucault's critique. Ethical deliberation,

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[594] Butler, 'What is Critique?', np.

[595] Foucault, 'What is Critique?', p 75. See also chapter 1 of this dissertation, p 33, footnote 87.

[596] Butler, 'What is Critique?', np.

[597] Butler, 'What is Critique?', np. Italics mine. About Butler's theory of performativity, see the second section of the present chapter.

[598] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p 19.

Butler repeats, is connected to the subject's critical relation to the norms she/he/they are embedded in. Consequently, it implies a degree of reflexivity on the part of the self.[599] But this self-reflexive, inward-looking stance is not sufficient to explain how someone can account for one's own actions. An account of oneself, Butler contends, is always given under someone else's request. Butler moves on to Foucault's discussion of parrhesia in the context of the lectures he delivered at Berkeley in 1983.[600] There, self-examination takes the form of being addressed by a partner in dialogue: '[t]he self's reflexivity is incited by an other, so that one person's discourse leads another person into self-reflection', writes Butler.[601] But the role of the other in Foucault is not as constitutive and fundamental as Butler would want it to be. Ideas of 'self-stylisation' and 'care of the self' hint, for Butler, at a certain rapprochement to psychoanalysis by Foucault, yet one not fully achieved.

How is responsibility configured in a scene marked by antifoundationalism, self-reflexivity, and the address of the other? Interestingly, one can provide an account of oneself, for Butler, only at the expense of critique:

> In Foucault, it seems, there is a price for telling the truth about oneself, precisely because what constitutes the truth will be framed by norms and by specific modes of rationality that emerge historically and are, in that sense, contingent. Insofar as we do tell the truth, we conform to a criterion of truth, and we accept that criterion as binding upon us. To accept that criterion as binding is to assume as primary or unquestionable the form of rationality within which one lives. So telling the truth about oneself comes at a price, and the price of that telling is the suspension of a critical relation to the truth regime in which one lives.[602]

If truth conforms to a specific set of norms within a certain episteme, then, when a subject holds her-/him-/themselves responsible, she/he/they must suspend the critical

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[599] 'Critique is not merely *of* a given social practice or a certain horizon of intelligibility within which practices and institutions appear, it also implies that I come into question for myself. Self-questioning becomes an ethical consequence of critique for Foucault' (Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p 23).

[600] These lectures have been posthumously collected in: Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (1983). Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2001.

[601] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p 125.

[602] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, pp 121–122.

relation to those norms and provide an account within the terms set by the episteme she/he/they lives in. This 'surprising statement'[603] shows that the problem of ethics cannot be exhausted within the frame of critique, like Foucault seemingly does. Additionally, the question of accountability marks Butler's turn toward ethics, which has been a fundamental knot in most of Butler's thought for the past two decades. While a few queer theoretical strands have eagerly followed Butler in paying a greater attention to ethical questions,[604] there is also dissatisfaction with ethics from within the field. Huffer, for instance, feels a 'sense of impasse, or even exhaustion' in today's queer theory, which 'is evidenced by the abandonment of politics in some quarters and a return to ethics'.[605] This statement may not reflect Butler's own theoretical practice, for, as we have seen, their work keeps being infused with political concerns. Huffer's is a reminder to queer scholars that a focus on ethics runs the risk of depoliticise the field, and that a depoliticised queer theoretical field is at odds with the ethos animating critique.

Sedgwick's take on queer critique at the turn of the 21st century is altogether different from Butler's. Habitually, commenters trace Sedgwick's discontent with critique back to a chapter included in Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling*: 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading' (2003).[606] That chapter, however, results from a longer reflection which began with a shorter version of the same essay, published as the introduction to a special issue of *Studies in the Novel* (1996) and elaborated in the introduction to the edited volume *Novel Gazing* (1997).[607] Because the version included in *Touching*

[603] Kim Sang Ong-Van-Cung, 'Critique et subjectivation. Foucault et Butler sur le sujet', in *Actuel Marx* *49*(1), 2011, pp 148–161: 148. English translation available at: https://www.cairn-int.info/journal-actuel-marx-2011-1-page-148.htm (accessed on 10 January 2022).

[604] See, for instance: Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007; Mari Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory's Defiant Subjects*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017; Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.

[605] Huffer, *Mad for Foucault*, p 163.

[606] Eve K Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You', in Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, pp 123–152.

[607] Eve K Sedgwick, 'Introduction: Queerer Than Fiction', *Studies in the Novel 28*(3), special issue 'Queerer Than Fiction', 1996, pp 277–280; Eve K Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading;

Feeling is the most referenced and famous, this dissertation refers to it. Additionally, it makes use of other chapters included in the same book which are relevant to contextualise Sedgwick's argument, as well as a later essay by Sedgwick, 'Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes' (2007), which touches upon some loose threads.[608]

As the first section of this chapter has shown, Sedgwick doubted Foucault's critical style since, at least, the 1986 Preface to *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. In it, she argues that Foucault's historical reconstructions are paranoid, in that they turn the 'chaoses of institutions into a consecutive, drop-dead-elegant diagram of spiralling escapes and recaptures'.[609] This observation, however, is more suggestive than substantial, and mostly based on the paranoid structure she detects in 19th-century novels staging the trope of homophobic homosociality.[610] It is not until the end of the 1990s that her argument is fully developed. In 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold' (1995), Sedgwick and Frank introduce the work of Silvan Tomkins, a psychologist who is neither a cognitivist, nor a behaviouralist, nor, for that matter, a psychoanalyst. Tomkins puts forward a theory of affects to analyse human behaviour which is structured, not on a binary model – what Sedgwick calls an 'on/off (*digital*)'[611] understanding of affects – but on an '*analogical* system [that] refers to more than two but also to finitely many values or dimensions'.[612] Sedgwick knows that such analogical model is at risk of essentialism: 'analogically structured thought realm of finitely many (n>2) values', she writes, 'is available today only in some relation to biological models'.[613] At the same

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or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You', in E K Sedgwick (ed), *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 1997, pp 1–37. Notice that this last text, which largely overlaps with the 2003 version included in Touching Feeling, is *not* referenced in the remainder of the dissertation.

[608] Eve K Sedgwick, 'Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes', *South Atlantic Quarterly 106*(3), 2007, pp 625–642.

[609] Sedgwick, 'Preface', p xi. See also p 119 of this chapter. This same quote is repeated in 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 132.

[610] See pp 116–118 of the present chapter.

[611] Sedgwick and Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold', p 509. Italics mine.

[612] Sedgwick and Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold', p 511. Italics mine.

[613] Sedgwick and Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold', pp 514–515.

time, this risk is worth being taken for her, as this model makes room for a variety of affects, it accounts for a (plural yet finite) number of combinations among them, and it does not reduce them to a univocal principle such as a fundamental drive or claim the primacy of one affect over the others.[614]

At a first sight, Tomkins' theory of affects seems to be in line with Foucault's critique of those conceptions of sexuality that are framed within the on/off scheme of the repressive hypothesis – i.e., that understand sexuality as something repressed and awaiting liberation. But this, for Sedgwick, is not the case due to a number of reasons. The first is to be found in the introduction to *Touching Feeling*.[615] In it, Sedgwick explains that her dissatisfaction with the first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* has to do with its 'delirious', unfulfilled promise that there is a way to get around the repressive hypothesis. After reading Foucault's work on sexuality, Sedgwick says, one understands that the language of repression may as well be countered, subverted, and resisted, but never fully escaped. This clarifies what she means by the drop-dead elegance of Foucault's work when prefacing *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. Foucault sees sexuality from a different perspective than the one commanded by the modern episteme (through a notion of power conceived not as prohibitive but as productive; with an understanding of reality as changeable rather than immutable). Yet, his account seems to remain as coherent, well-ordered, and elegant as the discourse on sexuality has always been in modernity. Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis has at least two implications for Sedgwick: first, that the paradigm of repression and liberation, more than being replaced with something else, is displaced, multiplied, and ultimately hypostatised and propagated, particularly by Foucault's disciples.[616] Second, that Foucault himself seems to posit no rupture between the repressive hypothesis and the critical analysis of it. His 'triumphally charismatic rhetorical force', Sedgwick

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[614] In Sedgwick and Frank's account of Tomkins ('Shame in the Cybernetic Fold', p 500), shame has no more fundamental status than any other affect – 'interest, surprise, joy, anger, fear, distress, disgust, and, in his later writing, contempt ("dissmell.")' '[U]nlike the drives', Sedgwick sums up, '"[a]ny affect may have any object". […] [A]lso unlike the drives, "affective amplification is indifferent to the means-end difference"' (p 503).

[615] Sedgwick, 'Introduction', pp 9–12.

[616] On this point, see also: Sedgwick, 'Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes', pp 634–636.

writes, 'suggests that Foucault convinced himself – certainly he has convinced many readers – that that analysis itself represented an exemplary instance of working outside of the repressive hypothesis'.[617]

That there seems to be something intrinsically subversive in the act of the Foucauldian critic who historicises an object and unmasks the mechanisms of power underlying it is one of Sedgwick's most fortunate insights, as the next chapter shows. 'Always historicise' is the mandate of critique: but '[w]hat have less to do with historicising than the commanding, atemporal adverb "always"'?[618] Sedgwick wonders. Similarly, if power is everywhere, like Foucault holds,[619] then what exactly one should look at to see its workings? These difficulties are less Foucault's own than the result of the reception and circulation of his work, which has produced habits, routines, and automatisms – what Sedgwick calls 'a near-ineradicable Foucauldian common sense'.[620] One such example, for Sedgwick, is Ann Cvetkovich's *Mixed Feelings* (1992), a work that she sees as committed to 'theoris[ing] [how] affects [are] discursively constructed' against all 'essentialist conceptions' of them.[621] Sedgwick comments:

Although Cvetkovich undertakes this inquiry in the name of 'theorising affect', it is not immediately clear why her rather minimal specification that affect is 'discursively constructed' rather than 'natural' should claim the status of a theory. Unless, that is, precisely that specification is today understood to constitute *anything* as theory. Rather than broaching or summarising an actual theory of affect, these sentences instead 'theorise affect' in the sense of rounding up affect and herding it into the big tent of what is already understood to constitute the body of theory. The brand on that body is relentlessly legible:

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[617] Sedgwick, 'Introduction', p 11.

[618] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 125.

[619] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, p 93.

[620] Sedgwick, 'Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes', p 635.

[621] Ann Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992. For the critique of this work, see: Sedgwick and Frank 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold', pp 512–514.

'theory' has become almost simply coextensive with the claim (you can't say it often enough) *It's not natural*.[622]

'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold', from which this excerpt is taken, begins with a rather sarcastic summary about the 'few things theory knows today', with which this chapter opens.[623] Here, let me just mention one commonplace piece of knowledge that today's practitioners of theory, according to Sedgwick, subscribe to: namely, an 'unresting critique' that ends up 'reproduc[ing] and popularis[ing] the structure [of such] binaries [as] repression/liberation'.[624] In the quote above, we witness not only the re-emergence of Sedgwick's frustration with Foucault's repressive hypothesis, but also – and importantly – the delineation of a trajectory between 'theory', a seeming mode to understand objects not as natural or biological givens but as historical and discursive constructs, and 'critique', a practice that demystifies, dismantles, and deconstructs objects to show they are contingent, performative, changeable. Theory and critique are thus configured, in Sedgwick, as two sides of one coin: this is something the next chapter is going to expand upon, given that most of today's discontents are addressed to critique instead of theory.

Sedgwick's 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading' begins by taking aim at the 'hermeneutics of suspicion': a phrase deployed by Paul Ricoeur to designate Marx's, Nietzsche's, and Freud's philosophies, and extended by Sedgwick to their 20th-century 'intellectual offspring', including 'New Historicist, deconstructive, feminist, queer, and psychoanalytic criticism'.[625] By deploying a category she had previously investigated, Sedgwick defines the suspicious attitude of these interpretive modes 'paranoid'. In particular, she develops Freud's insight that 'the delusions of paranoiacs have an unpalatable external similarity and internal kinship to the systems of our

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[622] Sedgwick and Frank 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold', p 513. Italics in the original. Ann Cvetkovich's subsequent works on affect effectively incorporate Sedgwick's critique.

[623] See p 96 of this chapter.

[624] Sedgwick and Frank 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold', p 497.

[625] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', pp 124–125. About Ricoeur's phrase, see: Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation* (1965). New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 1970.

philosophers'.[626] The analogy between paranoia and a certain way of philosophising is all the more visible, according to Sedgwick, in queer theory: a field that seems to have 'a distinctive history of intimacy with the paranoid imperative'.[627] In fact, Freud's most prominent example of paranoia – the Schreber case – locates the origins of paranoia in the repression of homosexual desire.[628] In contrast to this account, gay liberationist works of the 1970s such as Hocquenghem's *Homosexual Desire*,[629] Sedgwick points out, reverse Freud's analysis to conduct their anti-homophobic inquiry:

> if paranoia reflects the repression of same-sex desire, Hocquenghem reasoned, then paranoia is a uniquely privileged site for illuminating not homosexuality itself, as in the Freudian tradition, but rather precisely the mechanisms of homophobic and heterosexist enforcement against it. What is illuminated by an understanding of paranoia is not how homosexuality works, but how homophobia and heterosexism work.[630]

How come that paranoia, Sedgwick wonders, has now become a dominant style of the same field of studies – 'anti-homophobic theory' – that was once committed to exposing the paranoid character of society? Sedgwick refuses all psychoanalytic accounts of this ironic displacement and focuses, instead, on a few features that make paranoia such a powerful hermeneutic motive. Paranoia is anticipatory, as it seeks to eliminate surprise and, thus, wants to know beforehand what lies ahead; it is mimetic, as it needs to be imitated to be reproduced; it understands knowledge in the form of exposure and demystification; and finally, it is a strong theory of a negative affect. This last point is crucial, for it connects paranoia to affect theory – not just in Tomkins's but also in Melanie Klein's sense. Paranoia is a strong theory because it organises a vast field of

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[626] Sigmund Freud 'Preface to Reik's *Ritual: Psycho-analytic Studies*' (1919), in S Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVII (1917–1919). London: The Hogarth Press & The Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1958, pp 257–263: 261.

[627] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 126.

[628] Sigmund Freud 'Psycho-analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia' (1911), in Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XII (1911-1913). London: The Hogarth Press & The Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1958, pp 9-82.

[629] Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire* (1972). Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 1993.

[630] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 126.

affects, leaving as little as possible to chance. This coherence is what makes it particularly teachable and, in fact, *strong*. Additionally, paranoia is a strong theory not just of any affect, but of a *negative* affect. This, for Sedgwick, does not mean that paranoia is 'too pessimistic or insufficiently utopian'[631] (what some readers charge critique with).[632] Nor does it mean that the alternative mode of interpretation Sedgwick proposes – reparative reading – is grounded on positive affects alone. In Klein's terms, paranoia and reparation are two 'positions': as such, they are not inescapable character traits. The affect that grounds them both, for Sedgwick, is humiliation. While the paranoid position is a strategy aimed at avoiding humiliation (and it is thus self-defeating, for humiliation cannot evaporate through paranoia), the reparative position is a variation on depression, i.e., a strategy that instils, together with guilt, 'an empathetic view of the other as at once good, damaged, integral, and requiring and eliciting love and care'.[633] The reparative/depressive position, for Sedgwick, is an affective disposition in the realm of empathy, care, and love, which inaugurates a mode of reading that breaks with the protocols of paranoia. To practice reparative reading means to welcome what is surprising and unexpected, no matter the horror it can cause. It means not to surrender to narratives prompted by anxiety, which are caught in 'drop-dead-elegant diagram[s] of spiralling escapes and recaptures'. It means that 'mistakes can be good rather than bad surprises'.[634]

In Sedgwick's account, Butler's *Gender Trouble* is an example of paranoid reading, particularly in the form of exposure and demystification. In it, Sedgwick says,

> Butler offers a programmatic argument in favour of demystification as 'the normative focus for gay and lesbian practice' (124), with such claims as that 'drag implicitly *reveals* the imitative structure of gender itself' (137); 'we see sex and gender *denaturalised* by means of a performance' (138); 'gender parody *reveals* that the original identity… is an imitation'

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[631] Sedgwick, 'Introduction', p 10.

[632] See, for instance, Felski's understanding of critique as a practice that responds to the 'protocols of professional pessimism' (Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 128). Felski's proposal for a postcritique is unpacked in the next chapter.

[633] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 137.

[634] Joseph Litvak in Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 147.

(138); 'gender performance will *enact and reveal* the performativity of gender itself' (139); 'parodic repetition… *exposes* the fantasmatic effect of abiding identity' (141); 'the parodic repetition of gender *exposes*… the illusion of gender identity' (146); and 'hyperbolic exhibitions of "the natural"… *reveal* its fundamentally fantasmatic status' (147) as well as '*exposing* its fundamental unnaturalness' (149; all emphases added).[635]

Sedgwick's turn against *Gender Trouble* – a book she deems no longer 'representative of [Butler's] most recent work'[636] – signals that 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading' is more concerned with a certain critical practice committed to demystifying, revealing, denaturalising, and exposing than with Foucault himself. Consider Sedgwick's example of 'camp': a style or sensibility that Susan Sontag, in 1960, held to be 'in a peculiar relation' with such queer tropes as artifice, extravagance, androgyny, and, obviously, homosexuality.[637] To read it as a 'parody, denaturalisation, demystification, and mocking exposure of the elements and assumptions of a dominant culture'[638] – that is, in line with *Gender Trouble*'s reading of drag performances[639] – is quite reductive, for Sedgwick, for it misses a number of typically-camp features, including:

> the startling, juicy displays of excess erudition […]; the passionate, often hilarious antiquarianism, the prodigal production of alternative historiographies; the 'over'attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste or leftover products; the rich, highly interruptive affective variety; the irrepressible fascination with ventriloquistic experimentation; the disorienting juxtapositions of present with past, and popular with high culture.[640]

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[635] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 139. Italics in the original. All references in the quote are to Butler's *Gender Trouble*.

[636] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 129.

[637] Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"' (1964), in S Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Picador, 2001, pp 275–292: 291.

[638] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 149.

[639] See p 133 of this chapter.

[640] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 150.

A reparative approach to camp aesthetics tries to account for its artificiality and excessiveness; it tries to bring its different and often clashing registers to the fore; most importantly, it tries to do justice to the queer reader's affective investment in it. A camp performance or piece of literature, in fact, is not meant to be camp in the first place, for it is only 'a camp way at looking at things' what makes something as such.[641] And not all things can be camp, but only those displaying passionate erudition and over-exuberance. In the reparative reading of camp practices one hears the echoes of Sedgwick's long-standing preoccupation with queer (especially with queer youth's) ability to attach to 'objects of high or popular culture or both, […] whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available'.[642] Such stubborn attachment, for Sedgwick, is not a mere aesthetic preference, but a 'prime resource for survival' for queer kids and adults living in world made by straight people for straight people.[643] In this sense, camp objects like the "queer little gods" Sedgwick detects in Proust and Cavafy[644] or, to quote Sontag again, 'a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers [and] Gaudí's lurid and beautiful buildings in Barcelona',[645] if read reparatively, can be interpreted as strategies of queer survival vis-à-vis what is 'most readily available' in this world. As Sedgwick states in concluding 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', reparation allows the reader to grasp 'the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture […] whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them'.[646]

If (the early) Butler epitomises paranoid criticism, and if queer studies in general, in Sedgwick's own words, has a 'history of intimacy' with the paranoid imperative,[647] then what is left of the project of a queer reading? Is it bound to go hand-in-hand with

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[641] Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', p 2.

[642] Sedgwick, 'Queer and Now', p 3.

[643] Sedgwick, 'Queer and Now', p 3.

[644] Eve K Sedgwick, 'Cavafy, Proust, and the Queer Little Gods', in Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, 42–68.

[645] Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', p 7.

[646] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', pp 150–151.

[647] See p 169 of this chapter.

paranoia, or can it practice reparation? Paranoid reading seems to be at home in queer theory, Sedgwick argues, not just because of the force of the paranoid motive, but also because, when 'queer theory was still a tentative, emergent itinerary' and 'AIDS was a new and nearly untreatable disease', the lesbian and gay movement was infused with paranoia – and understandably so.[648] Between the 1980s and the 1990s, in fact,

> dread, intense dread, [was] the dominant tonality […] for queer people, at least for those who survived. The punishing stress of such dread, and the need of mobilising powerful resources of resistance in the face of it, did imprint a paranoid structuration onto the theory and activism of that period, and no wonder.[649]

There seem to be good reasons prompting a paranoid outlook on the world among the queer population during the AIDS crisis: reasons that Sedgwick summarises as 'intense dread' – of pain, of death, of the social stigma associated with the disease. Sedgwick's problem with queer criticism concerns not what a paranoid attitude has meant for the LGBT community of the past, but what it has become at the time she writes, when the 'temporality of the lives of many women and men with HIV seem[s] […] extended if not normalised' and 'mainstream gay and lesbian culture and politics […] have resolutely pushed the whole AIDS experience behind them'.[650] In this renewed scenario, Sadgwick says, queer theory seems to retain the structure of paranoia, turning the latter into a 'hollowed out, brittle, and banalised' tool.[651]

Much as Sedgwick's argument is compelling, my question is: how is one to decide when the time is ripe for paranoia and when it is not? It seems that, for Sedgwick, the turn of the 21st century is not a moment for paranoia but for reparation. Would the same hold true in our times, criss-crossed by right-wing authoritarian governments, social movements, and political institutions that target women's and LGBT rights, and bearing the marks of a pandemic that, if not specifically affecting or stigmatising queer people,

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[648] Sedgwick, 'Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes', p 638.

[649] Sedgwick, 'Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes', p 639.

[650] Sedgwick, 'Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes', p 640.

[651] Sedgwick, 'Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes', p 640.

is widening social inequalities?[652] I am not sure one can ultimately determine whether it is the right moment for reparative motives or not. After all, as Lee Edelman suggests, Sedgwick deploys the connective 'and' rather than the disjunctive 'or' in the title of her essay, thereby suggesting an analogical model of addition instead of a digital one of mutual exclusiveness.[653] To give up to the articulation between paranoia and reparation is to forcibly take a stance between two 'binary pairings of elements'[654] – paranoia and reparation – that are cast in two incommensurable times and places. But this would mean to succumb precisely to the binary logic Sedgwick is committed to countering.

I would like to close this section by restating something seemingly obvious: that Sedgwick does not talk about paranoid and reparative thinking or writing, but *reading*. This minimal observation does not mean that the practices of thinking and writing are divorced from that of reading, or that the faculty of thinking and the act of writing can function or even exist without reading. But it does mean that Sedgwick talks about a practice that pertains not to the domain of philosophy, of which *theōria* is definitional,[655] but to literary experience – that of professional and lay readers alike expressing a judgement on a text. When Sedgwick discusses the pros and cons of paranoid and reparative reading, she has in mind that branch of 'general grammar' called 'criticism', which, as Foucault recounts, emerged between the 17th and the 18th centuries and has been flourishing up to this day.[656] It is thus unsurprising that Sedgwick's work, and her distinction between paranoid and reparative reading in particular, has been mostly taken up by literary and cultural scholars such as Rita Felski, Robyn Wiegman, Heather Love, and José E. Muñoz.

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[652] See: Paul B Preciado, 'Learning from the Virus', *Artforum*, 7 May 2020, https://www.artforum.com/print/202005/paul-b-preciado-82823 (accessed on 8 January 2022).

[653] Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, 'What Survives', in Berlant, *Reading Sedgwick*, pp 37–62: 46.

[654] Sedgwick and Frank 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold', p 497.

[655] I am thinking, for instance, of Aristotle's distinction between *bios apolaustikos* (life of pleasure), *bios politikos* (political life), and *bios theoretikos* (contemplative life), with the primacy of the latter over the former (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (I, 5, 1095b). Translated and edited by R Crisp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p 6).

[656] See chapter 1 of this dissertation, p 32.

Butler, on the other hand, understands criticism as the virtue of those willing to be insubordinate – or, alternatively, of those not willing to be governed *comme ça*, in Foucualt's words. To distinguish such virtue from the critical practice 'that usually takes an object' (i.e., criticism proper),[657] they choose to stick to 'critique': a term that evokes the Kantian exploration of the limits of knowledge and from which Foucault himself draws inspiration for his critical project. I would not go as far as to say that Butler's 'critique' harbours the ambition to offer a *theory* of critique – or better, a *critical theory*. This is not quite exactly what Butler aims to do, and Butler's own assertion that 'critique is always a critique of some instituted practice, discourse, episteme, institution, and it loses its character the moment in which it is abstracted from its operation' is there to warn us against the conflation of critique with theory.[658] But I do want to stress that Butler's account of critique is filled with *theories* – the psychoanalytically-inflected idea of the 'occlusive constitution of the field of categories',[659] Butler's own theory of performativity applied to Foucault's ambiguous anti-foundationalism, and even Foucault's purported 'theories' of power, subjectivation, and sexuality. Additionally, Sedgwick herself gathers the paranoid tendencies of such

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[657] See this chapter, p 99.

[658] Butler, 'What is Critique?', np. This same quote guides the examination of Foucault's critical enterprise in chapter 1 of this dissertation (see, in particular, p 30). About Butler's complicated relation with Critical Theory in the specific sense commonly associated to the Frankfurt School, I would say a few words. First-generation representatives of the Frankfurt School are widely referenced by Butler: their appeal to Adorno to distinguish critique from judgement at the beginning of 'What is Critique?' is one such example (see this chapter, p 163). Adorno reappears in Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* (pp 101–111) to show how ethics gives rise to a critique that moves away from Kant's moral narcissism. Walter Benjamin, on his part, is crucial to Butler's reflections on both ethical violence and Jewishness (see, for instance, the chapters 'Walter Benjamin and the Critique of Violence' and 'Flashing Up: Benjamin's Messianic Politics', included in Butler's *Parting Ways*, pp 69–98 and 99–113). At the same time, Butler openly and publicly disagrees with second-generation members of the Frankfurt School such as Jürgen Habermas. In 'What is Critique?', they question the 'grammar of normativity' underpinning Habermas' notion of critique. The differences between the two emerge even more clearly in: Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. For all these reasons, it is not quite correct to equate Butler's thought with 'critical theory', unless the latter is understood as a critical practice with a theoretical edge or, conversely, as a theoretical practice with a critical edge.

[659] See this chapter, p 159.

'hermeneutics of suspicion' as (Butler's version of) queer theory under the banner 'critical theory',[660] not unlike other literary scholars who make little or no distinction between theory and critique.[661] Butler's understanding of critique, in sum, is eminently theoretical, while Sedgwick's 'reading' encapsulates a critical practice connected to the study of literary and cultural objects.

Where philosophical critique and literary criticism meet is in Sedgwick's notion of paranoid reading, which comes to define the place where the protocols of theory are applied onto the critical analysis of texts. Its opposite – or better, complement, if we trust Love and Edelman – is configured as a different mode of literary and cultural criticism voided of the automatisms and crystallisations of theory. One of Sedgwick's most valuable insights is that reparative reading is first and foremost a warning not to mechanically reproduce the dogmas of theory and lose sight of the objects at hand. And yet, reparation is not just defined 'less by any project of its own than by its recoil from a

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[660] 'In the context of recent U.S. *critical theory*, however, where Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud by themselves are taken as constituting a pretty sufficient genealogy for the mainstream of New Historicist, deconstructive, feminist, queer, and psychoanalytic criticism, to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion is, I believe, widely understood as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities'; '[e]ven aside from the prestige that now attaches to a hermeneutics of suspicion in *critical theory* as a whole, queer studies in particular has had a distinctive history of intimacy with the paranoid imperative' (Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', pp 125, 126. Italics mine).

[661] In *Literary Theory*, Jonathan Culler states that '[t]heory is often a pugnacious critique of common-sense notions' (p 4), thereby equating theory with critique. Felski, whose discontent is oriented at critique more than theory, does something similar when, in *The Limits of Critique*, she invites readers to '[t]hink […] of the ubiquitous theory course that often provides a conceptual toolkit for the English major, where "introduction to theory" effectively means "introduction to critical theory"' (pp 4–5). Not by chance does she charge Culler's *Literary Theory* with schooling readers 'to become suspicious of whatever is identified as natural and taken for granted' (Elizabeth S Anker and Rita Felski, 'Introduction', in E S Anker & R Felski (eds), *Critique and Postcritique*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2017, pp 1–28: 3). Jeffrey R. Di Leo, on his part, gathers Felski's postcritical project under the category, not of 'anticritique', as one would expect, but of 'antitheory' (Jeffrey R Di Leo, 'The New New Criticism. Antitheory, Autonomy, and the Literary Text from Object-Oriented Ontology to Postcritique', *The Comparatist 44*, 2020, pp 135–155: 146–150). This short review is meant to show that the signifiers 'theory' and 'critique' are often interchangeably deployed, if not merged with one another. More on this in chapter 3 of this dissertation, p 191.

manically programmatic intensification of the critical', as Michael Warner holds.[662] There are also positive reasons to read reparatively – reasons that have to do with the resurfacing of strategies of queer survival, as in Sedgwick's interpretation of camp, or with diving into 'the heart of many histories of gay, lesbian, and queer intertextuality'[663] that are either untainted by the AIDS epidemics or that, if tainted, are determined to look elsewhere. As it is customary in Sedgwick, reparative reading is not a theory of how a queer reading should look like, but one way to account, time and again, for the basic fact that *'people are different from each other'*.[664]

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter navigates the concretion of theory in the works of Judith Butler and Eve K. Sedgwick through the 1990s. More specifically, it shows how Butler's philosophical critique and Sedgwick's literary criticism contribute to shape the signifier 'queer theory' not just by reinventing the adjective 'queer', which they both define in rather open-ended terms as 'a discursive site whose uses are not fully constrained in advance' (Butler)[665] and a 'mash of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning' (Sedgwick),[666] but also by building 'theory' on the foundations of the critical analysis of gender and sexuality. The first section opens with the examination of how, in Butler's and Sedgwick's early works, Foucault's genealogical critique of sexuality morphs into a theory of gender and sexuality. This metamorphosis, as we have seen, is carried out through the mobilisation of several authors – mostly (but not only) philosophers in the case of Butler, and mostly (but not only) writers in the case of Sedgwick – thereby contributing to the interdisciplinary nature of the queer theoretical field. The second and third sections push the emphasis on interdisciplinarity further while arguing that the queer intellectual field remains haunted by disciplinary formations. Butler's and Sedgwick's interventions move beyond the

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[662] Warner, 'Uncritical Reading', p 18.

[663] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 149.

[664] This is a reference to Axiom 1 of *Epistemology*, p 115 of the present chapter.

[665] Butler, 'Critically Queer', p 21.

[666] Sedgwick, 'Queer and Now', p 7.

boundaries of, respectively, philosophy and literary studies, as evidenced by their takes on performativity (second section) and Willa Cather (third section). At the same time, their disciplinary backgrounds inform their critical practices as well. On the one hand, Butler's antiessentialist critique of identification as an unsteady and mutable process is reflected in their analysis of performativity as well as in their reading of Cather. Not by chance has their theory of gender performativity become a cornerstone of theory at large. On the other hand, Sedgwick's deconstructive criticism, centred on a homo/heterosexual definition no longer constrained by the poles of essentialism and constructivism, characterises not just her reading of Cather, but her approach to queer performativity too. Admittedly, Sedgwick offers no theory to the queer intellectual field, but only a few heuristic tools that eschew hypostatisation.

The difference between Butler and Sedgwick widens in their writings at the turn of the 21st century, analysed in the fourth and last section of this chapter. In the early 2000s, Butler partly departs from matters of gender and sexuality to follow Foucault in conceiving critique, squarely positioned in the realm of ethics, as a virtue connected to the will not to be governed *comme ça*. Not that Butler is the upholder of critique at all costs: the issues raised by the question of accountability, for instance, require the suspension of the critical attitude. But they do hold on to a philosophical understanding of critique whose merit is to explore the limits as well as the occlusive constitutions of an epistemological field. Sedgwick, on her part, is interested not in what Butler calls critique, but in criticism as it unfolds in the practice of reading. She takes aim at that theory dominating the field of literary criticism as well as queer theory, which she sees as imposing the dogma of suspicion onto the texts scrutinised. Sedgwick deems the protocols aimed at denaturalising and demystifying literary and cultural objects 'paranoid reading': in contrast to it, she puts forward 'reparative reading' as a strategy to restrain the pitfalls of theory and do justice to queer attachments and modes of survival. Sedgwick's reparative reading hints at a way out of paranoia in the realm of literary criticism. But what about philosophy? In other words, is theory bound to be paranoid, as in Freud's intuition that all philosophy is cognate with the delusions of paranoiacs, or there can be something like a *reparative theory* that, just like a reparative reading, 'requires and elicits' love and care, as per Sedgwick, if not hope, as per

Muñoz?[667] This question is my entry point into the next chapter, which is going to examine not just how to possibly practice non-paranoid modes of literary criticism, in accordance to Felski's proposal for a postcritique, but also how to think of a different (non-paranoid?) queer theory, which Wiegman and Wilson's project of a queer theory without antinormativity prefigures.

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[667] About Sedgwick's reparative reading, see the fourth section of this chapter. About Muñoz's hopeful critique, see the 'coda' of this dissertation.

3. PARSING THE LIMITS OF QUEER CRITIQUE. ON POSTCRITIQUE AND A QUEER THEORY WITHOUT ANTINORMATIVITY

This dissertation has been following the trajectory of critique through a handful of moments in queer theory. For Michel Foucault, who predates the inception of queer theory and to whom the field is largely indebted, critique appears in its fourfold dimension as the art of not being governed *comme ça*, as a genealogical enterprise, as an ethos of truth-telling, and as a practice that takes place in proximity to politics without fully coinciding with it.[668] The very founding figures of queer theory – Judith Butler and Eve K. Sedgwick – have different understandings of critique that roughly mirror their respective backgrounds. For Butler, critique is 'a practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing',[669] whether we apply it to gender and sexuality or to other objects of study. Sedgwick, on her part, carries out a criticism of the literary canon to show the large extent to which the homo/heterosexual definition infuses 'virtually any aspect of modern Western culture'.[670] At the turn of the 21st century, however, their convictions about the affordances of critique vacillate. Butler's turn to ethics, which requires a suspension of the critical attitude in order for someone to give an account of oneself, is a partial detour from critique.[671] A similar – and, for the sake of this chapter, more relevant – move is enacted by Sedgwick, who is exhausted by some routinised modes of interpretation in literary and queer studies. As Sedgwick contends in 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading' and other writings, all too often do these fields proceed through automatic gestures that, on one side, are canonised as 'theory', and, on the other side, are permeated by a paranoid outlook.[672] This chapter

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[668] See chapter 1 of this dissertation.

[669] Judith Butler, 'What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue', *Transversal 5*, 2001, np, https://transversal.at/transversal/0806/butler/en (accessed on 8 January 2022).

[670] Eve K Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990, p 1.

[671] I am referring to Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), discussed in chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp 162–163.

[672] Next to Sedgwick's pivotal 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You' (in E K Sedgwick *Touching Feeling*. Durham, NC & London:

explores two different trajectories away from critique and its concretions that are largely though differently inspired by Sedgwick: Rita Felski's project of a postcritique and Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson's project of a queer theory without antinormativity.[673]

Felski's project, explored in the first section of this chapter, aims at rethinking interpretation beyond the injunctions of critique. It rejects all hermeneutics based on suspicion, in the wake of previous discontents within literary studies and the social sciences – Sedgwick's and Bruno Latour's most notably – and proposes a less sceptical approach to texts. While seemingly wanting to move *past* critique, Felski's postcritique intends not to 'criticise critique', but to reassess it in view of a renewed criticism that does not resort to ready-made frameworks and categories of analysis. Similarly, Wiegman and Wilson's queer theory without antinormativity, unpacked in the third section of this chapter, rethinks the queer theoretical field beyond its antinormative imperative. A stance against normativity is, to Wiegman and Wilson, a mechanical gesture turning an object of study (i.e., normativity in all its inflections) into an immutable entity. Wiegman and Wilson aim at restoring the contingent and flexible character at the core of normativity and antinormativity alike. Curiously, Felski's proposal emerges within literary studies in the form of a discontent with a few interpretive modes; Wiegman and Wilson's, instead, is a study in field formation that calls into question an object – normativity – widely mobilised in queer theory. In this sense, the two projects seem to mirror the distinction between Sedgwick' literary and Butler's philosophical itinerary sketched out in the previous chapter. Not by chance does Felski target *critique* as something encompassing 'taste', 'cultivation', and 'judgement', to borrow from Raymond Williams,[674] while Wiegman and Wilson take

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Duke University Press, 2003, pp 123–152), I am thinking of Sedgwick and Frank's 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins' (*Critical Inquiry 21*(2), 1995, pp 496–522). These and other works are discussed in the fourth section of chapter 2.

[673] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2015; Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A Wilson, 'Introduction: Antinormativity's Queer Conventions', *differences 26*(1), special issue on 'Queer Theory without Antinormativity', 2015, pp 1–25:.

[674] Raymond Williams, 'Critique' (1976), in R Williams, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp 47–49: 48.

aim at queer *theory*: a word meant 'to designate works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking', as Jonathan Culler has it.[675] However, just like the previous chapter, this one too refuses to compartmentalise the two interventions in the realm of, respectively, literary studies and philosophy. The ambitions of both postcritique and a queer theory without antinormativity exceed the disciplinary boundaries of their emergence; concomitantly, a closer look at their disciplinary legacies allows for a more exact understanding of the objects and the politics at stake.

I would like to make it clear that postcritique is *not* a queer project. Felski is a feminist literary critic who extensively borrows from (and, to an extent, counters) a queer theoretic, especially as it materialises in Sedgwick's proposal for a reparative reading as well as in the descriptive turn of which Heather Love is an initiator.[676] But this does not turn her into a queer scholar. This chapter is an attempt at drawing connections between postcritique and queer theory.[677] Furthermore, it interrogates postcritique on the basis of a few queer problematics it begets. Wiegman and Wilson's proposal for a queer theory without antinormativity, on the other hand, is put forward within the queer theoretical field by queer scholars. What is scarcely emphasised is the connection it entertains (or can entertain) to postcritique, which Wiegman writes off as a merely literary proposal that casts the debate as being '"for" or "against" critique'.[678] By reading a queer theory without antinormativity postcritically, this chapter aims to show that, similar to Felski,

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[675] Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p 3.

[676] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2007; Heather Love, 'Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn', *New Literary History 41*(2), 2010, pp 371–391.

[677] Attempts at bridging queer theory and postcritique are carried out by, among others: Mariano Croce, 'Queer in the law: critique and postcritique', in E Christodoulidis, R Dukes & M Goldoni (eds), *Research Handbook on Critical Legal Theory*. Cheltenham & Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2019, pp 79–94; David Kurnick, 'A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Our Method Melodramas', *ELH 87*(2), 2020, pp 349–374; Selina Foltinek, 'Creative Openings and World-Making: Postcritique, Reparative Readings, and Anzaldúa's Borderlands', *COPAS 21*(1), 2020, pp 25–42.

[678] Robyn Wiegman and Salla Peltonen, 'Investigating Desires, Political Projects, and Epistemic Habits in Academic Feminism: A Conversation with Robyn Wiegman', *Feminist Encounters 1*(1-11), 2017, pp 1–7: 2.

Wiegman and Wilson (though, Wiegman especially)[679] are concerned with the routines, automatisms, and concretions of critique, as well as with an all-too-quick conflation of critical practices with politics, thus missing the gap between the two.

To be sure, most strands in queer theory neither mobilise against antinormativity nor aim at questioning critique. While alternative modes of reading have been flourishing since Sedgwick's plea for reparation,[680] the critical ethos of queer theory remains largely unchallenged. Think, for instance, of queer of colour *critique*, which 'addresses minority cultural forms [that] are eccentric to the normative and racialised properties of canonical formations' and features criticality in its definition.[681] There are very good reasons for queer theory to hold on to critique: politically, Nancy Fraser reminds us of its entwinement with the progressive, emancipatory, and even revolutionary claims of minority groups such as, in fact, queer constituencies;[682] theoretically, Wiegman understands critique as the very engine that animates minority fields of knowledge.[683] How, then, can we seemingly go 'past' critique if the latter is such a powerful political

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[679] This chapter focuses on Wiegman's work more than Wilson's. This is not just because Wiegman is a core figure of queer theorising, but also because, as footnote 876 of this chapter argues, Wilson's concerns revolve around a subject that is central neither to the project of a queer theory without antinormativity nor to the present dissertation. Wiegman's insights on critique, instead, are highly relevant to both her and Wilson's project and, crucially, to my discussion, especially as they play out in her *Object Lessons* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2012).

[680] I am thinking not only of such strands as the affective turn in queer studies, which are strongly influenced by Sedgwick's reparative reading, but also of Michael Warner's 'Uncritical Reading' (in J Gallop (ed.), *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*. New York & London: Routledge, 2004), Tyler Bradway's 'bad reading' (Tyler Bradway, *Queer Experimental Literature: The Affective Politics of Bad Reading*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), and Heather Love's focus on description, detailed in footnote 679.

[681] Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black. Toward a Queer of Colour Critique*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p 26. See also: Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', pp 8–9.

[682] Nancy Fraser, 'What's Critical About Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender', *New German Critique 35*, 1985, pp 97–131: p 97.

[683] I defer the discussion of Wiegman's *Object Lessons* to the third section of this chapter. Suffice it to say that Wiegman uses the word 'identity' instead of 'minority' to designate such realms of knowledge as women's, gender, and queer studies. About my lexical choice, see footnote 877 of this chapter.

and theoretical tool? How can we be anti-antinormative if a critique of normativity is often synonym for queer agency? In other words, how can the postcritical and the anti-antinormative project be queer if 'queer' itself 'is to be a site of collective contestation', as per Butler?[684] These crucial issues are discussed in the second and fourth sections of this chapter, devoted to analysing the politics of, respectively, postcritique and a queer theory without antinormativity. My argument is that the two projects are provocations rather than attempts at moving beyond critique or along with normativity. What they express is a fatigue and a discontent with certain ossified critical practices in literary and queer studies. Much as they are provocative, the two proposals cannot be brushed off as upholding the status quo or being politically reactionary, neoliberal, and imperialist, as many critics hold.[685] By this, I do not mean to say that postcritique and a queer theory without antinormativity are unproblematic. I do mean to suggest, however, that the labour of attending to them not only sheds light on the sites where queer critique has lost incisiveness (or 'run out of steam'),[686] but it also points to a few paths toward its reinvigoration.

3.1 Postcritique (I): a queer overview

Felski's project of a postcritique is developed in her *The Limits of Critique* (2015) and in the introduction to the volume *Critique and Postcritique* she co-edited with Anker (2017).[687] Without discounting their affirmative moments, these two works mostly account for what postcritique *is not* and *does not* do instead of focusing on what it *is* and *does*. In other words, they focus on critique and its limits instead of postcritique and its

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[684] Judith Butler, 'Critically Queer', *GLQ 1*(1), 1993, pp 17–32: 19.

[685] I refer to Bruce Robbins' objections to postcritique that appear in the second section of this chapter, as well as Lisa Duggan's and Jack Halberstam's objections to a queer theory without antinormativity presented in the fourth section.

[686] I borrow this phrasing from Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry 30*, 2004, pp 225–248. Latour's legacy is explored in the first section of this chapter.

[687] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*; Elizabeth S Anker and Rita Felski (eds), *Critique and Postcritique*. Durham, NC & London: 2017.

potentialities. To find a *pars construens* of the project, one should look at other works by Felski, which may not feature postcritique explicitly but provide nonetheless a few elements so as to compose a fuller picture of it, such as *Uses of Literature* (2008), *Hooked* (2020), and other texts.[688]

In *The Limits of Critique*, the very first thing postcritique is defined against is a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. This category is inspired to Paul Ricoeur and points to the interpretive modes derived from the three 'masters of suspicion': Marx, Nietzsche, Freud.[689] Felski takes aim not only at the critical methods associated to the three philosophers – notably, ideological critique and symptomatic reading – but also at the forms of critique emerging in their footsteps, such as Foucauldian historicism, Derridean deconstruction, and other 'techniques of scanning texts for signs of transgression and resistance'.[690] Felski gathers these and other reading styles marked by suspicion under the rubric 'critique'. She is well aware that this label is a conflation of critical trends that can be very different from one another; she deploys it nonetheless to signal a few features that, for her, all critical trends share:

> a spirit of sceptical questioning or outright condemnation, an emphasis on [their] precarious position vis-à-vis overbearing and oppressive social forces, the claim to be engaged in some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work, and the assumption that whatever is not critical must therefore be uncritical.[691]

Understood this way, critique is less as 'systematically grounded theoretical framework' than '*a matter of style, method, and orientation*': it indicates 'a certain attitude', a 'mood or disposition', if not the 'genre' and '*ethos*' of today's most common

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[688] Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature*. Malden, MA & Oxford: Blackwell, 2008; Rita Felski, *Hooked. Art and Attachment*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2020.

[689] See: Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation* (1965). New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 1970. On Felski's adaptation of the concept of suspicion, see *The Limits of Critique*, pp 2, 4. For an earlier account of suspicion, see: Rita Felski, 'Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion', *M/C Journal* 15(1), 2011, np, https://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/431 (accessed on 10 January 2022).

[690] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 3.

[691] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 2.

hermeneutics and approaches.[692] As an attitude and mood, critique commands '"suspicion without limits"'[693] as a genre and ethos, it urges a kind of rhetoric that is *diagnostic* ('look[ing] closely and intently, in the belief that such scrutiny will bring problems to light that can be deciphered by an authoritative interpreter'), *allegorical* (taking texts as objects 'stand[ing] for broader philosophical meanings or social structures'), and *self-reflexive* ('demanding a hypervigilance on the part of the critic').[694] In sum: nowadays, critique is the 'dominant metalanguage' in literary and cultural studies, codified as customary and obscuring other interpretive modes.[695]

Felski is not the only (post)critic taking the hermeneutics of suspicion as the background against which new interpretive projects are formulated. Along similar lines, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus mobilise Ricoeur's definition to qualify their 'surface reading': a proposal that looks at 'what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts'.[696] Heather Love too conceives of a mode of reading attentive to description and alternative to what, 'following […] Ricoeur, has come to be known as critical

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[692] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp 3–4, 26, 127. Italics in the original.

[693] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 20.

[694] Anker and Felski, 'Introduction', pp 4, 6, 8.

[695] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 5. Even though the present chapter aims to discuss postcritique as it emerges and circulates in literary and cultural studies together with its philosophical and political repercussions, it must be acknowledged that the postcritical project has been extensively taken up out of the field of its emergence. I am thinking, in particular, of the ways postcritique has been received out of the U.S. academic context. In Italy, Mariano Croce has shifted the debate toward the field of social theory (see: Mariano Croce, 'Postcritica: oltre l'attore niente', *Iride 2*, 2017, pp 323–339; Mariano Croce, 'Etnografia della contingenza: postcritica come ricerca delle connessioni', *Politica & Società 1*, 2017, pp 83–106). At the same time, his recent work (Mariano Croce, *Postcritica. Significanza, materia, affetti*. Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019) returns to literary (post)criticism through the analysis of such writers as Giorgio Manganelli, Raymond Queneau, and Clarice Lispector. In France, Laurent de Sutter's edited volume *Postcritique* (Paris: PUF, 2019) collects a number of essays intervening in literary studies, social theory, and critical legal studies. The intersection between critical legal studies and literature is explored by Elizabeth S Anker and Bernadette Meyler in their edited book *New Directions in Law and Literature* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). If anything, this short review shows how hard it is to pin postcritique down to one disciplinary domain.

[696] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations 108*(1), 2009, 1–11: 4, 9.

hermeneutics or the hermeneutics of suspicion'.[697] Sedgwick's own discontent with paranoid reading – a set of hermeneutics that award methodological centrality to suspicion – is largely indebted to Ricoeur, as the previous chapter has shown.[698] As an alternative to it, she puts forward reparative reading: a project aimed 'to assemble and confer plenitude on an object'.[699] It should be pointed out that Ricoeur labels Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud 'masters of suspicion' with no denigrating intention. As Elizabeth Weed reminds us, 'unlike Ricoeur, who saw the hermeneutics of suspicion […] as something crucial to philosophical contemplation, Sedgwick sees it as something that has become ossified in its domination of critical thinking'.[700] Sedgwick's same view is shared by Felski, Love, and Best and Marcus, who appropriate Ricoeur's descriptor and morph it into a critical device for their reparative, postcritical, descriptive, and/or surfacist ends.

While most commenters stress the many continuities and similarities between postcritique and reparative/descriptive/surface reading,[701] Felski admits how distinctive her own postcritical concerns are.[702] She is not entirely at ease, for instance, with an emphasis on 'reading' in place of 'interpretation', which she considers 'a more apt umbrella term for the various genres of academic commentary'.[703] Interpretation, to Felski, is not necessarily linked to a quest for depth: '[w]hile suspicion spurs

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[697] Love, 'Close but not Deep', p 382.

[698] See chapter 2 of this dissertation, p 168.

[699] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 149.

[700] Elizabeth Weed, 'Intervention', *History of the Present 2*(1), 2012, pp 95–106: 95.

[701] Winfried Fluck, 'The Limits of Critique and the Affordances of Form: Literary Studies after the Hermeneutics of Suspicion', *American Literary History 31*(2), 2019, pp 229–248; Bruce Robbins, 'Critical Correctness. Some literary scholars would like to escape politics. But is that even possible?', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 12 March 2019, np, https://www.chronicle.com/article/critical-correctness/ (accessed on 10 January 2022).

[702] To be sure, Felski acknowledges her indebtedness to reparative, descriptive, and surface reading (Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 197, endnote 4; Anker and Felski, 'Introduction', p 16). But she certainly does not omit the specificities of her project compared to other modes of reading (Felski, 'Both/And', *American Literary History 31*(2), 2019, pp 249–254: 249).

[703] Felski, *Hooked*, p 122. In this book – her newest – Felski devotes a chapter to the reappraisal of interpretation as a relational tool (pp 121–163).

interpretation, not all interpretation is suspicion'.[704] Nor does critique only look for things that are concealed and buried, as Best and Marcus' surface reading seemingly implies. The process of excavating meaning from texts to bring to light their deep and hidden meaning coincides with what Felski calls the 'digging-down' methodology of literary and cultural criticism, traditionally associated with symptomatic and Marxist reading.[705] Next to this example of applied critique, there is another methodology marked by criticality: i.e., what she calls 'standing-back' attitude. In her view, poststructuralist critics and their acolytes 'stand back' from texts in order to attend to their surface and denaturalise them.[706] 'Demystification without depth!' exclaims Felski,[707] who sees the tendency to 'stand back' as a re-enactment of the fantasy that distance allows for a better grasp on reality.[708] Lastly, Sedgwick's prefers to avoid terminology of paranoia and reparation, which, to her, 'conjures up the picture of a clinician peering suspiciously into the soul of a recalcitrant patient'.[709]

In spite of this, there are several contact points between Felski and Sedgwick. The most prominent is their common exhaustion with the habits of theory. Sedgwick's relation to theory has been amply discussed in the previous chapter.[710] Here, let me recount Felski's relation to theory, which can be seen as a movement from enchantment to disenchantment. Felski begins by giving credit to the 'waves of energy and excitement' that theory used to unleash in the past:

> [f]or a generation of graduate students – including myself – […] the explosion of literary
> theories and critical methods was irresistible. The intellectual passions of the 1980s […]

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[704] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp 32–33.

[705] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp 56–69.

[706] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp 69–81.

[707] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 70.

[708] Against the idea that lay readers are naively attached to cultural objects whereas literary critics are dispassionately observing them from the distance, Felski writes: '[t]he difference between academic and lay audiences is not one of detachment versus attachment; it is, rather, the difference between attachment to an object and attachment to a method' (Felski, *Hooked*, p 133). Thus, critical readings that 'dig down' or 'stand back' are not voided of attachment.

[709] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 35.

[710] See, in particular, pp 96–99 of chapter 2 of this dissertation.

were intense, feverish, and palpable. […] Each new framework promised […] to overcome the limits of previous ones: to deliver the definitive theory of the subject or concept of power that would nail things down once and for all. These frameworks would eventually yield ground to postcolonial studies and queer theory, to New Historicism and cultural materialism. Theory was contested, revised, and rewritten throughout the 1980s and '90s, in response to internal debates and disputes as well as the visibility of new political actors. […] To immerse oneself in the last few decades of literary and cultural theory is thus to be caught up in a dizzying whirlwind of ideas, arguments, and world pictures.[711]

If theory used to be capable to energise young critics, what has now happened? How could theory, from being an object of 'intense cathexis and emotional investment',[712] become "Theory with a capital *T*" – that is, an academic exercise in suspending ordinary beliefs and perpetuating a sceptical and suspicious mind-set?[713] Like Sedgwick, Felski understands this shift as the sedimentation, ossification, and routinisation of critical practices and their concomitant transformation into quasi-dogmatic protocols. When theory was 'institutionalised as the obligatory framework for any form of engaging with literature or art', she writes, '[l]ittle room was left with the reckoning with the force of aesthetic experience'.[714] This does not mean that her aim is to recover aestheticism per se. What she does is to advocate for the possibility of retrieving a few aspects of aesthetic experience – passionate attachments to literary works, identifications and disidentifications with characters, an attention to pleasure and beauty – without falling back 'into notions of pure, unmediated feeling or the picture of a self cut off from the world'.[715] Theory, for Felski, with its 'spirit of ceaseless scepticism and incessant iconoclasm' has had its day; now we are 'left nursing a Sunday morning hangover and wondering what fragments, if any, can be retrieved from ruins'.[716]

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[711] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp 18–20.

[712] Felski, *Hooked*, p 133.

[713] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 25.

[714] Felski, *Hooked*, p 133.

[715] Felski, *Hooked*, p 76. In this same book, Felski is very careful in crafting a space for postcritique capable to mediate with some crucial aspects of critique – in order, for instance, to avoid falling back into plain aestheticism.

[716] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 15.

One difference between Sedgwick's and Felski's accounts of theory, though, concerns temporality. Sedgwick and Frank's consideration that there 'are a few things theory knows today', with which the previous chapter opens,[717] refers to a present – that of 1995 – seemingly dominated by theory. Twenty-something years later, Felski reads theory as something that galvanised scholars of the past and has lost its traction. In this sense, her opinion coincides with what Frank and Wilson – the same Adam J. Frank writing with Sedgwick and the same Elizabeth A. Wilson advocating for a queer theory without antinormativity – write in 2020 as an update of those early considerations on theory:

> [i]t is gratifying to observe that what 'theory knows today' […] is not the same as what theory knew twenty-five years ago. First, the antibiologism that Sedgwick and Frank note had become an important point of departure for so many routines of theory in the humanities and social sciences is no longer so habitually deployed. […] Second, language is no longer 'assumed to offer the most productive, if not the only possible, models for understanding representation'. [Third], [t]oday's critical projects […] are less attentive to the operations of binarised thinking. […] There has been, if not a broadening, then certainly a reorientation of the methodological field, and there remains considerable ambiguity around the question of what criticism does and is for.[718]

According to Frank and Wilson, the current intellectual landscape seems to have radically departed from the heydays of theory in the 1980s and 1990s. Felski, instead, is more ambiguous about today's status of theory. 'While the era of Theory with a capital *T* is now more or less over', she writes, 'this same disposition remains widely in force, carried over into the scrutiny of particular historical or textual artifacts'.[719] There is something, for Felski, that keeps theory alive and kicking. After all, she would not feel the need to write books and books on the need to rethink the protocols of theory if the latter was *passé*.

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[717] Sedgwick and Frank 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold', p 496. See chapter 2 of this dissertation, p 96.

[718] Adam J Frank and Elizabeth A Wilson, 'Introduction', in A J Frank & E A Wilson (eds), *A Silvan Tomkins Handbook: Foundations for Affect Theory*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2020, pp 1–10: 7.

[719] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 25.

My argument, following Felski, is that it is the suspicious attitude – or better, the critical spirit – what makes theory thrive at a time of heated contentions over its purpose. This leads to an additional difference between Felski's and Sedgwick's takes on theory. Even though there is a clear connection, in Sedgwick, between theory and paranoid reading, the two objects, to her, are distinct. Paranoid modes of reading draw critics toward theory (that is, toward antibiologism, linguisticism, and the undoing of binaries); theory itself, however, is not inherently paranoid, and paranoia is certainly not a synonym for theory, as per Sedgwick and Frank's definition.[720] It is worth recalling the two notions of theory at stake in Sedgwick: theory in the sense so far described as the   outinized critical projects applied to the humanities, and the 'affect theory' she borrows from Tomkins to designate '"a simplified and powerful summary of a larger set of affect experiences"'.[721] It is according to this second sense that paranoid reading, for Sedgwick, is a theory: more exactly, it is a strong theory of negative affects, for it organises a vast field of such negative emotions as indignation, humiliation, and horror.[722] Felski's use of critique, instead, can hardly be distinguished from theory conceived of as a set of doctrines to which literary critics pledge allegiance. 'Think […] of the ubiquitous theory course that often provides a conceptual toolkit for the English major', says Felski,[723] where '"introduction to theory" effectively means "introduction to critical theory"'.[724] Such overlap between theory and critique also emerges from the fact that Felski posits the latter as the attitude that keeps the former alive. Even though, for her, the current canon of theory yields 'a paucity of rationales for attending to literary objects', its critical and suspicious spirit remains the 'holy grail' of the literary field.[725]

But, if theory and critique to a large extent coincide, then why does Felski opt for the

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[720] Sedgwick and Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold', p 496.

[721] Sedgwick and Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold', p 520. See also chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp 165–166.

[722] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', pp 133–138.

[723] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 5.

[724] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 5.

[725] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p 2.

word 'critique' instead of 'theory'? Why is her project postcritical and not, say, post-theoretical? Is it a matter of academic branding or does this choice entail something else? In the past two decades, voices against critique have been louder than those against theory. While complaints like Sedgwick's may have circulated among queer and literary scholars, what spread across a much wider array of disciplines is Bruno Latour's 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?' (2004).[726] Despite – or perhaps because of – the fallacy of the title, which assumes that critique has run out of steam before proving it actually has,[727] Latour's piece is a milestone in popularising how, in his words, 'a certain form of critical spirit has sent us down the wrong path'.[728] Contrary to most discontents with theory, Latour does not intend to embrace reactionary positions.[729] Rhetorically, he conjures up a collective to which he claims affiliation; in so doing, he sets out to scrutinise '*our* critical equipment' to underscore what '*we* [were] really after when *we* were so intent on showing the social construction of scientific facts'.[730] Even though the politics of Latour are not unquestionably progressive, issues such as environmentalism, the AIDS pandemic, global warming, and the countering of conspiracies form part of Latour's concerns.[731] It is thus unsurprising that Felski's postcritique relies so extensively on Latour's account of – and discontent with –

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[726] Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?'.

[727] Bruce Robbins, 'Fashion Conscious Phenomenon', *American Book Review 38*(5), 2017, pp 5–6. There, Robbins writes: 'out-of-streamers who applauded Latour's essay […] do not seem to have noticed that the title is a logical fallacy [i.e., *petitio principii*] and a variant of the comic line "When did you stop beating your wife?" In both cases, the reader is tricked into answering a question that, no matter what the answer is, will involve accepting a false premise – that you *have* been beating your wife, that critique *has* run out of steam. No grounds for the premise are given, although you or your husband might feel inclined to dispute it' (p 5. Italics in the original).

[728] Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?', p 231.

[729] A reactionary-leaning discontent with theory, as mentioned on p 19, footnote 42, is: Daphne Patai and Will H Corral (eds), *Theory's Empire. An Anthology of Dissent*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

[730] Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?', pp 227, 231. Italics mine.

[731] All such issues are explored in Latour's 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?', as well as in his *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), and, more recently, in *Down to Earth. Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge, UK & Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018). About the politics of Latour, particularly in connection to the countering of conspiracies, see the next section of this chapter.

critique.[732]

Furthermore, Felski wants to resist the dogmas of theory, but she does not forsake theory altogether. Even though she emphasises the aesthetic side of literary and cultural texts, she refuses to capitulate to the belief that these texts can be scholarly approached without theory. 'Championing literature against theory turns out to be a contradiction in terms', she writes, 'for those who leap to literature's defence must resort to their own generalities, conjectures, and speculative claims'.[733] Thus, while refusing theory in Sedgwick and Frank's acceptation, Felski *does* champion *one* theoretical approach. This approach results from the literary adaptation of Latour's proposal to stir the social sciences towards an Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), as formulated in his *Reassembling the Social* (2005).[734] Latour's influence on Felski's project, which goes much beyond their shared dissatisfaction with critique, cannot be overstated. Hence, I would like to pause on Latour's ANT and see how it travels to the literary field.

In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour extends a few insights from the sociology of science to sociology tout court, which he takes to be monopolised by critical modes of analysis (what he calls 'sociology of the social') aimed at showing that facts are socially constructed. Social-constructivist explanations, for Latour, collapse before the reality of scientific facts, not so much because the latter are not socially made (the lab is exactly the place where scientists fabricate facts, he says) as because their very artificiality proves their objectivity and sturdiness rather than illusoriness and feebleness. 'In other words', he writes,

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[732] Felski (*The Limits of Critique*, p 9): 'To ask what comes after the hermeneutics of suspicion is not to demolish but to decentre it, to decline to see it as the be-all and end-all of interpretation, to wonder, with Bruno Latour, whether critique has run out of steam'. Notice that Latour does not wonder *whether* critique has run out of steam, as Felski contends, but *why* it has done so, whence the fallacy mentioned above.

[733] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p 2. To be sure, Felski does not forsake critique either: the 'post-' of postcritique is an attempt, not at overcoming critique but at exploring 'fresh ways of interpreting literary and cultural texts that acknowledges, nonetheless, its inevitable dependency on the very practices it is questioning' (Anker and Felski, 'Introduction', p 1).

[734] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

'constructivism' should not be confused with 'social constructivism'. When we say that a fact is constructed, we simply mean that we account for the solid objective reality by mobilising various entities whose assemblage could fail; 'social constructivism' means, on the other hand, that we replace what this reality is made of with some other stuff, the social in which it is 'really' built.[735]

Social constructivists, according to Latour, deploy 'all-terrain entities like Society, Capitalism, Empire, Norms, Individualism, Fields, and so on' to explain social facts.[736] But these entities – which Latour groups under 'the social' – cannot ground any explanation, for they do 'not designate a thing among other things […], but *a type of connection* between things that are not themselves social'.[737] He thus proposes to drop such overarching entities and to trace, in their stead, the provisional connections human and non-human actors (or better, 'actants') produce. His ANT is precisely a way to describe and to map these connections without resorting to ready-made categories. What Latour puts forward, in his own words, is a 'sociology of associations': one that follows 'actants' and the networks they construct; one that does not seek hidden motivations but is content with thorough descriptions; one that embraces empiricism and objectivity without denying the contingency and mutability of social facts.

Felski adopts Latour's social-scientific method and translates it into the literary field. In *The Limits of Critique*, she formulates three propositions based on ANT: '*History is not a box*' (meaning that works of art and of literature should not be explained by merely ascribing them to a 'period box' filled with such attributes as economic structure, political ideology, and cultural mentality); '[l]iterary texts can be usefully though of as *nonhuman actors*' (meaning that works of art and literature are not inert objects but have an agency of their own); and '*postcritical reading* can better do justice to the […] coconstitution of texts and readers' (meaning that interpretation is a coproduction between human and non-human 'actants' and requires something other than the

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[735] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p 91.

[736] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p 137.

[737] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p 5. Italics in the original.

unveiling of a text's hidden meanings).[738] Felski's indebtedness to Latour is spelled out even more clearly in *Hooked*. In it, ANT is configured as a practice that allows literary scholars to move away from 'concepts such as ideology, discourse, and representation',[739] and to appreciate other interpretive modes, including the capacity of readers to get attached to texts – and, conversely, that of texts to hook readers. Felski dissects the three terms that make up the acronym ANT. 'Actor', in her and Latour's view, is not a consciousness, will, or intention behind interpretation, but an agent entangled with the world, which refers both to human readers/spectators and to non-human entities such as novels, movies, and artworks. By 'network', Felski means that 'things exist only via relations', and that 'these relations can take on radically variant forms'.[740] Finally, the conglomerate of actors and networks forms a 'theory' which is less a set of instructions about how objects should be approached than a *caveat* about how they should *not* be approached. 'In steering clear of the usual presorting mechanisms', writes Felski, '[ANT] allows us to appreciate the many ways we can become attached'.[741]

In *Hooked*, among the many ways of becoming attached to a literary and cultural object, Felski lists attunement, identification, and interpretation. The examples she provides for each of these modes of attachment are innumerable, so let me mention only a handful. Attunement – i.e., the experience of 'find[ing] [one]self drawn, abruptly and without recourse, into a […] narrative'[742] - is the same set of feelings that novelist Zadie Smith describes in relation to Joni Mitchell's music. While the latter was, for a long time, insignificant and disagreeable to her, at some point it abruptly began to prompt an intense emotional response: what Smith calls '"[a] sudden unexpected attunement"'.[743] Identification is another kind of attachment that corresponds neither to empathy nor to identity. The spectator or reader, in this case, does not just empathise with the characters

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[738] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 154. Italics in the original. For an in-depth scrutiny of these three propositions, see pp 154–182.

[739] Felski, *Hooked*, p 21.

[740] Felski, *Hooked*, p 22.

[741] Felski, *Hooked*, p 27.

[742] Felski, *Hooked*, p 44.

[743] Zadie Smith quoted in Felski, *Hooked*, p 48.

in a story or recognise an affinity with them, but actually wants to resemble them, just like camp identifications with "'tragic figures of ridicule'".[744] Interpretation is, for Felski, a third attachment that 'draw[s] connections – between words, images, sounds, genres, and worlds.'[745] One such example is David Scott's *Stuart Hall's Voice*, which, instead of interpreting Hall's thought in the hermeneutic sense of the term, 'capture[s] the virtues and sentiments of an intellectual friendship, the ebb and flow of a decades-long conversation'.[746] All such attachments are gathered, in *The Limits of Critique*, under the banner 'affective engagements', conceived of as the 'very means by which literary works are able to reach, reorient, and even reconfigure their readers'.[747] Thus, when transposing ANT from the sociological to the literary field, Felski puts an emphasis on affectivity: what human and non-human 'actants' trace are not arid networks, but passionate modes of engagement.[748]

Postcritique's focus on affective engagements and attachments is largely inspired by queer theory, even though 'the account of queer studies in *The Limits of Critique* is too

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[744] Felski, *Hooked*, p 83. About camp aesthetics, see chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp 174–175.

[745] Felski, *Hooked*, p 123.

[746] Felski, *Hooked*, p 148. See also: David Scott, *Stuart Hall's Voice. Intimations of an Ethics of Receptive Generosity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.

[747] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 177. Let me add that, in a way similar to *Hooked*, Felski's earlier *Uses of Literature* explores four additional modes of attachment: recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock.

[748] This does not mean that Felski adds an emphasis on affects and attachments that is missing from Latour. It means that she emphasises what is already present in ANT: '[a]ttachment is […] an indispensable term in the Latourian lexicon. We become attached to art objects in a literal sense: the dog-eared paperback that rides around town in a jacket pocket, the lyrics streaming through the headphones glued to a person's ears, the Matisse postcard propped up on a desk that is transported from one sublet to the next. […] Attachment, of course, also points us towards the adhesiveness of affect: being entranced by a work of fiction, dreaming in from of a painting – or falling in love with the protocols of critical theory and academic reading. […] Through direction of tone as much as argument, Latour draws us away from the prototype of the knowing, ironic, detached critic. And finally attachment is an ontological fact, an inescapable condition of existence' (Rita Felski, 'Latour and Literary Studies', *PMLA 130*(3), 2015, pp 737–742: 740).

thin', Felski admits.[749] 'Most recently', she writes, 'queer theory […] has fielded a number of significant challenges to the sovereignty of suspicion'.[750] And again: '[f]eminist and queer scholars have done most work' analysing how readers or viewers' responses 'are shaped by investments, how they are entangled and affectively thick'.[751] The queer scholarship hinted at includes Heather Love (a thorough reader of Sedgwick's reparation and an inspiration to Felski),[752] José E. Muñoz (a student of Sedgwick whose focus on hope aligns with both postcritique and a queer theory without antinormativity, as the 'coda' of this dissertation will show),[753] and others.[754] Such queer genealogy of postcritique is contrasted by Felski with another queer tendency:

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[749] Rita Felski, 'Response', *PMLA 132*(2), 2017, pp 384–391: 390, endnote 4. The citation forms part of Felski's response to Heather Love's piece on *The Limits of Critique* (Heather Love, '"Critique is Ordinary"', *PMLA 132*(2), 2017, pp 364–370), in which the author points out the partial trivialisation of queer studies in the book. I interpret Felski's increased engagement with queer studies in *Hooked* as an attempt to do justice to the queer field.

[750] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 30.

[751] Felski, *Hooked*, p 5.

[752] About Love's discussion of Sedgwick's paranoid and reparative reading, see her 'Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading' (*Criticism 52*(2), 2010, pp 235–241), in which she suggests that paranoia and reparation should go hand-in-hand – or that, at least, they do so in Sedgwick's work. About the continuities between Love's and Felski's reading projects for literary criticism, see pp 186–187 of this chapter.

[753] When writing that Muñoz calls for 'an "affective reanimation" of queer theory – a blending of critique with hope, passion, aesthetic pleasure, and utopian longing' Felski (*The Limits of Critique*, p 30) refers to Muñoz's 2009 *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. 10th anniversary edition. New York & London: New York University Press, 2019), discussed in the 'coda' of this dissertation. Additionally, Felski's idea of identification-as-attachment is, for her, not dissimilar to the idea of disidentification as 'a scrambling and recoding of received meanings' (Felski, *Hooked*, p 117), developed by Muñoz in *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

[754] Let me mention Michael Snediker's *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), upheld by Felski as an example of optimism 'against the fixation on melancholia, shame, and self-shattering in queer theory' (Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 151), and the queer call for 'unhistoricism' voiced, on one side, by Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon in their 'Queering History' (*PMLA 120*(5), 2005, pp 1608–1617), and on the other side, by Carolyn Dinshaw in *How Soon Is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

one 'long associated with the […] deconstructive troubling of identity' and aimed at pursuing critique as a 'unique vantage point of critical insight and sceptical judgement'.[755] This tendency coincides with Butler's intervention in the field and, more generally, with Foucault's legacy. By drawing a line between a postcritical (Sedgwick, Love, Muñoz) and a critical (Butler, Foucault) trajectory in queer studies, Felski contributes to widen the gap, not just between reparative and paranoid reading, but between queer attempts at exploring alternative modes of interpretation and a canonised version of queer critique. These two trajectories, however, are not as opposed to one another as Felski seems to imply: in fact, the postcritical language can canonise much in the same way as the queer critical canon can offer glimpses on alternative and less canonical modes of critique.

Regarding Foucault, Felski admits she 'still get[s] a kick out of teaching [him],'[756] even though he epitomises, to her, a specific mode of suspicion. Foucault – or better, the Foucauldian critic – quintessentially embodies a critique that 'stands back' and focuses on the surface of events instead of 'digging down' into the unconscious motives of individual action or hidden structure of society. Felski writes:

> [t]he stance of the surface-oriented critic […] is more circumspect and equanimous. Weaned on Foucault, she looks sceptically at a Freudian language of repression and symptoms. Instead of reading deep, she prefers to reads [*sic*] wide, swapping the close-up view of the microscope for a wide-angle lens that offers a panoramic view of systems of discourse and grids of power.[757]

Such reading mode, for Felski, seems to depart from a hermeneutics of suspicion, but in actuality it does not, for it is caught up in its same logic of demystification and exposure. Felski pays particular attention to poststructuralist critics' tendency to 'stand-back': that is, to defamiliarise and denaturalise what people take to be self-evident and natural. A case in point, for her, is Butler, who argues that gender and sex are not natural facts to which cultural practices are superimposed but discursive effects

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[755] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp 30, 142.

[756] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 5.

[757] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 70.

informed by culture from the start.[758] Butler's language of denaturalisation, Felski argues, has been an important tool for marginal social groups to counter the *status quo*, often justified in terms of nature. Yet, one thing is to say that the language of nature sides with inequality, and another thing is to deploy a cultural explanation (or, in Felski's favourite terms, the 'rhetoric of constructionism')[759] to explain basically everything. The risk of Butler's 'antinature animus', in Felski's view, is to discount everyday, ordinary language as backward and in need to be superseded by the vocabulary of social construction.[760] In sum: Butler's account of the workings of sex, gender, and desire exemplifies, to Felski,

> many of the characteristics of fin-de-siècle critical theory: an exposure of the grip of linguistic and semiotic systems, an emptying out of selfhood and interiority, a vigilant interrogation of the power-laden structures of everyday language and belief.[761]

Felski's take on Foucault and Butler is suggestive, but it hardly exhausts the scope of their critical practices. On the one hand, the 'standing-back' metaphor she attaches to them does not seem to capture the full extent of what they do. While it gives a sense that the surface of things, not their inner truth, is worth exploring – Foucault's archaeological analysis *does* move across the surface of events – it gives an additional sense that the person carrying out such exploration takes an impassionate distance from the objects analysed. But this is not the case either for Foucault or for Butler. Foucault is perhaps the first 'specific intellectual' who draws a genealogy of – and does justice to – the social causes he has an affinity with.[762] 'No matter what Felski believes', writes Lorenzo Bernini, 'such books as *History of Madness* (1961), *Discipline and Punish* (1975), and the first volume of *History of Sexuality* (1976) were written on the basis of

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[758] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp 77–82.

[759] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 77.

[760] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 80.

[761] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 78.

[762] 'It seems to me that what must now be taken into account in the intellectual is not the "bearer of universal values". Rather, it is the person occupying a specific position – but whose specificity is linked, in a society like ours, to the general functioning of an apparatus of truth' (Foucault, 'Truth and Power', p 132). About the connection between Foucault's though and his contemporary social movements, see chapter 1 of this dissertation, p 41, footnote 114.

[Foucault's] shared experience with political movements that were protesting and, concomitantly, creating new subjectivities, new practices, and new communities'.[763] When commenting on Latour, Butler themselves points out that critique should not be 'sequestered from social engagement and activism'.[764] To conceive of these stances as example of 'standing back' is to miss the closeness they build with the objects at stake.

Additionally, Felski considers the terms 'demystification', 'defamiliarisation', 'exposure', and 'denaturalisation' to be equivalent to one another, whereas in fact they designate very different operations. In the tradition of the masters of suspicion, 'demystification' stands for the 'reduction of illusions',[765] thereby positing common-sense knowledge and everyday perceptions of reality as caught up in lies and falsehoods. In a non-specific sense, however, it means that criticism can bring clarity onto a scene that was previously perceived, or known, in a fuzzy and confused way. If we follow the second meaning, then why would postcritique be less demystifying than, say, critique? Does not postcritique aim at ridding interpretation of the concretions that critique precipitated on it? Does not it aim at demystifying interpretation itself? 'Defamiliarisation', on its part, seems to designate quite the contrary: that something initially clear needs to be made unfamiliar, strange, or, as critics like to say, complex. I wonder to what extent postcritique, with its focus on the networks and associations between actors as well as on the affective responses ensued, can be equally seen as a way to defamiliarise the interpretive tools deployed by critics and let them embrace a more complex (i.e., postcritical) approach. Learning processes in general would not learn much if they were to confirm what people already know. 'Exposure', in turn, is

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[763] Lorenzo Bernini, 'Nel bel mezzo della cosa stessa. Freud, Foucault, Agamben e il (post)o della critica in tempi di emergenza', *Le Parole e le cose*, 25 September 2020, np, http://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=39335 (accessed on 10 January 2022). My translation. The works referenced are: Michel Foucault, *History of Madness* (1961). London & New York: Routledge, 2006; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (1975). New York: Vintage Books, 1995; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction* (1976). New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

[764] Judith Butler, 'The inorganic body in the early Marx. A limit-concept of anthropocentrism', *Radical Philosophy 2*(6), 2019, pp 3–17: 4.

[765] Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, p 27.

yet another strategy, which is different from all the above in that it necessitates an audience, it works by bringing something to light, and it is defined not the content revealed but by the sheer act of revealing. Last but not least, 'denaturalisation' is, in Felski's view, the signature activity of what feminist and queer critics do:

> [w]hen [these] critics declare that sexuality [is] socially constructed, their point [...] is to take a sledgehammer to the very idea of nature and the natural, to drive home that what we take to be ingrained or self-evident is stamped by culture all the way down.[766]

But is this really the case? Are Foucault's history of sexuality and Butler's 'critical genealogy of the naturalisation of sex and bodies'[767] social-constructivist endeavours? After all, Foucault historicises and de-essentialises objects that are commonly taken to be immutable, but he refuses to say whether they are innate or socially constructed.[768] Similarly, Butler's theory of gender performativity is aimed at de-essentialising categories of gender, sex, and desire that have been naturalised; this, however, does not imply that such categories are just socially or culturally constructed.[769] Butler's 'Doing Justice to Someone' (2001), for instance, is meant to highlight the damaging consequences of both social constructivism and biological essentialism as they play out in a case of sex reassignment – namely, in the so-called 'David/Brenda case'.[770] John

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[766] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 77.

[767] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p 147. Italics mine.

[768] See chapter 1 of this dissertation, p 27.

[769] See the first section of chapter 2 of this dissertation.

[770] Here, I quote from: Judith Butler, 'Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality' (2001), in J Butler, *Undoing Gender*. New York & London: Routledge, 2004, pp 57–74. The original version of this book chapter appeared, with the same title, as an article for *GLQ 7*(4), 2001, pp 621–636. In this essay, Butler aims at doing justice to David Reimer, who suffered an accident when he was a little boy, which led his parents reach out to psychologist John Money for help. At the end of the 1960s, Money was the head of the Johns Hopkins Gender Identity Clinic and held a radical constructivist view about the malleability of gender and 'the primary role of socialisation in the production of gender identity' (p 62). Because of the nature of the accident, which affected David's genital area, it was decided that he undergo further surgery and be socially and psychologically raised as Brenda. Years later, David realised he was not a girl and his gender identity was once again put into question. Doctor Milton Diamond, a strong opponent of Money and advocate for 'the hormonal basis of gender identity' (p 60), took up the case and turned David into a boy through hormonal and surgical means, including the

Money's radical constructivist theory is designed to reassign gender through whatever means, reinstating a form of social rather than biological determinism, as when he suggested that David be turned into Brenda. His opponents advocate for a naturalness of gender that, paradoxically, must be artificially reconstructed, as when Brenda was remade into David. Butler's point in recounting the story of David Reimer's vicissitudes is 'to suggest that there may be another way of reading [it], one that neither confirms nor denies the theory of social construction, one that neither affirms nor denies gender essentialism'.[771] Butler's effort is to account for David's own self-reporting and self-observing acts, which show his own will not to conform to any kind of bodily normativity. That Foucault and Butler's goal is 'to "denaturalise" text[s], to expose [their] social construction', like Felski writes, seems to result less from Butler's and Foucault's writings than from the circulation, appropriation, adaptation, and canonisation of their work.[772]

Sedgwick's suggestion that most problems with Foucault and Butler are due to the scholarship that follows in their footsteps seems more apt to grasp the complications rising from 'standing-back' modes of criticism.[773] To be sure, Felski clarifies that her focus is on the dominance of certain critical styles and practices rather than on those very styles and practices. 'My beef […] is not with […] Foucault, but with […] "Foucault" – the selective citation of names to authorise a predictable practice of reading'.[774] The same inverted commas should apply to Butler, who, contrary to Foucault, has theoretical ambitions, but whose theory of gender performativity is often taken to signify a social constructivism they do not fully endorse. Felski's account, in

reconstruction of the penis. Obviously, the two camps involved (the gender-is-a-social-construct one and the biology-is-destiny one) used David's case as a proof of their own success and the failure of the opposite camp. Against Money and Diamond, Butler follows the intersex movement in 'bring[ing] to public attention the brutality, coerciveness, and lasting harm of the unwanted surgeries performed on intersexed infants' and 'try[ing] to imagine a world in which individuals with mixed genitals attributes might be accepted and loved without having to transform them into a more socially coherent or normative version of gender' (p 65).

[771] Butler, 'Doing Justice to Someone', pp 66–67.

[772] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 54.

[773] See chapter 2, pp 166–167.

[774] Felski, 'Response', p 387.

sum, wavers between the discontent with Foucault and Butler, on one side, and the discontent with 'Foucault' and 'Butler', on the other side, thus feeding the ambiguity between what these authors do and the way they are appropriated and   outinized   ed.

While the first pole of this ambiguity relies on a trivialised understanding of Foucault's and Butler's interventions in the queer and feminist field, the second pole is much in line with a few preoccupations uttered within the field itself. In fact, it is not just Sedgwick who feels uneasiness with the circulation of Foucault and Butler. Around the time Sedgwick was writing about theory and paranoid reading, David M. Halperin was pointing out that scholars tend to forget that Foucault 'did not propound a theory of sexuality' and that the 'doctrinaire theoretical tendencies in "queer theory" [are] strikingly at odds with the antidogmatic, critical, and experimental impulses that originally animated […] the canon of theory'.[775] Around the same years, Veronica Vasterling was arguing that Butler's theory of gender performativity offers 'a sophisticated version of radical constructivism that overcomes the charges of linguistic monism and determinism'.[776] According to Vasterling, this sophistication is what Butler's readers often miss, no matter whether they celebrate or demonise their work. The fact that 'Butler' and 'Foucault' have become theoretical dogmas at the expense of Butler's and Foucault's critical insights is something that has long been on the radar of feminist and queer scholarship. One valuable contribution of postcritique is to detect the points where such dogmas break apart.

A second and equally valuable contribution is encapsulated in postcritique's invitation to look for alternative modes of reading. A notable antecedent of this invitation from within queer studies is Michael Warner's call to read 'uncritically', that is, beyond the protocols of critique as 'the folk ideology of a learned profession'.[777] 'Why is it

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[775] David M Halperin, 'Forgetting Foucault: Acts, Identities, and the History of Sexuality', *Representations 63*, 1998, pp 93–120: 109, 111. As we have seen in chapter 2 (pp 119–121), Lynne Huffer contends something similar with respect to the transmutation of Foucault-the-genealogist of homosexuality-as-species into Foucault-the-theorist of homosexuality-as-identity.

[776] Veronica Vasterling, 'Butler's Sophisticated Constructivism: A Critical Assessment', *Hypatia 14*(3), 1999, pp 17–38: 18.

[777] Warner, 'Uncritical Reading', p 14.

apparently the case', Warner wonders, 'that any style of actual reading that we can observe in the world counts as uncritical?'[778] In the effort to account for the importance of allegedly uncritical forms of reading such as 'identification, self-forgetfulness, reverie, sentimentality, enthusiasm, literalism, aversion, distraction',[779] Warner mentions, unsurprisingly, Sedgwick's proposal for a reparative reading, as well as Saba Mahmood's reading of the politics of piety and modesty among women in Cairo's mosque movement, which to him underscores a mode of agency ungraspable within the parameters of critique.[780]

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[778] Warner, 'Uncritical Reading', p 15. Along similar lines, Felski (*The Limits of Critique*, p 2) observes that, for the practitioners of critique, 'whatever is *not* critical must therefore be *un*critical'.

[779] Warner, 'Uncritical Reading', p 15.

[780] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. In this pivotal book, Mahmood argues that the agency of pious women taking part in Cairo's mosque movement is not legible in secular and progressive terms, according to which these women would 'be associated with terms such as fundamentalism, […] subjugation […], social conservatism, reactionary atavism, cultural backwardness, and so on (p 5). Following Butler's understanding of how subjects relate to norms as well as Foucault's late formulation of ethics, Mahmood 'suggest[s] alternative ways of thinking about agency' (p 7) which do not conform to the Western mandate of freedom as the exclusive political ideal. To her, the modesty and piety of the Egyptian women, which translate into an elaborate practice of bodily discipline, mutual correction, and self-reflexivity, is a way to delink 'the concept of agency […] from the goals of progressive politics' (p 34). Warner ('Uncritical Reading', p 18) recognises that Mahmood's intervention, located in the field of anthropology, is 'not especially concerned with texts'. He highlights nonetheless that her account speaks to the debates around critique: 'Mahmood argues that piety in this context cannot be seen as an uncritical attitude, or a survival of a premodern tradition, or passivity, or unreflective conformity; it must rather be seen as an ethical project […] that has as its end a particular conception of the human being […]. The standard of the critical, Mahmood suggests, could and should be parochialised […] as an ethical discipline of subjectivity rather as the transparent medium of knowledge (p 18). Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* is at the core of the 'postsecular turn' within feminism, for it 'makes manifest the notion that agency, or political subjectivity, can actually be conveyed through and supported by religious piety, and may even involve significant amounts of spirituality' (Rosi Braidotti, 'In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism', *Theory, Culture & Society 25*(6), 2008, pp 1–24: 2). A discussion of how critique (a typically modern and secular enterprise, as we have seen in chapter 1) can be thought along postsecularism is developed in: Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, Judith Butler, and Wendy Brown, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2009. Here, Asad and Mahmood take the side of postsecularism: focusing on the controversy around the Danish Islamophobic cartoons, they understand critique as a Western modality of suspicion,

Queer and feminist scholars, in sum, questioned critique, signalled its concretions, and put forward a few alternatives to it way before Felski's postcritical project. With this, I do not mean to say that Felski is merely repeating what other people argued for (though certainly, as I pointed out in this section, Felski is closely in dialogue with her queer and non-queer precursors). Rather, I want to suggest that some of Felski's preoccupations are largely shared by other queer and feminist scholars, and that, among such preoccupations, the most relevant concern the   outinized   and predominance of a few critical practices. This implies, among other things, that postcritique is, among other things, an eminently *critical* project. In fact, it asks for rethinking critique instead of dismissing it, contrary to what its opponents contend,[781] and, as per the title of Felski's manifesto, it explores the limits of critique in order to say *no* to   outinized and dominant reading practices.

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stemming from the dismissal of religiosity and serving as a disciplinary device. In responding to their dismissal of critique, Butler observes that, though tied to the logics of Western modernity, critique is such 'that we can only subject to [it] that which we need in order to live' (Judith Butler, 'The Sensibility of Critique: Response to Asad and Mahmood', in Asad, Mahmood, Butler, and Brown, *Is Critique Secular?* pp 101–136: 110). In this sense, Butler refuses to cut ties with critique in the same way as Asad and Mahmood do. In *The Limits of Critique* (p 149), Felski discusses postsecularism, even though very briefly, in order less to extrapolate a postcritical mode of reading like Warner does than to denounce Asad's reinstatement of critique at the very moment he 'has so painstakingly dismantled' it. In effect, Felski's postcritical project does not pledge for religiosity or piety. Even when promoting a way of reading capable to account for such affects as shock and attachment, postcritique remains ostensibly grounded in an orientation towards an 'unmistakably worldly rather than otherworldly text' (p 176). I tend to agree more with Felski's (and Butler's, and Foucault's) secular perspectives than with Mahmood's and Asad's emphasis on spiritual forms of agency and the insurmountable Eurocentric biases informing critique. Even though Mahmood's interpretation of pious practices is fascinating, I follow Robbins in contending that her postsecularism is likely to become an 'antisecularism' (Bruce Robbins, 'Afterword', in S Ponzanesi & A J Habed (eds), *Postcolonial Intellectuals in Europe: Critics, Artists, Movements, and Their Publics*. London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, pp 285–291: 290), particularly at a time when religious fundamentalisms of all signs are taking a big toll on the queer population in the global North as much as in the South.

[781] I defer this discussion to the next section.

A postcritical intervention, however, should not eschew the question of politics. In Foucault and Butler, critique assumes different meanings and shapes, but one thing is constant: that, for them both, critique is linked to the art of voluntary insubordination; that it is an ethos and a virtue akin to the willingness not to be governed *comme ça*; that it is the desubjugation of the subject in the play of the politics of truth.[782] That critique, in sum, is a political – and politically emancipatory – endeavour. If the politics of critique entail insubordination, resistance, and desubjugation, then what do the politics of postcritique entail, if they entail anything at all? The next section explores the political implications of postcritique and the debates they prompt.

3.2 Postcritique (II): objections and counterobjections

Felski's postcritical project, embryonic in Felski's previous writings but baptised thusly in 2015, is quite recent. Understandably, reactions to its release are recent too. This section focuses on a few (critical) objections to postcritique, which emerged both in and out of queer studies. All the objections selected keep an eye on politics, for their authors are committed to a 'political critique' (Jeffrey R. Di Leo)[783] that 'open[s] up to the concerns of the public' (Bruce Robbins);[784] they agree that we are in 'a time *for* critique' (Didier Fassin),[785] not in a time *after* it (Tim Dean),[786] and that, when it comes to queer theory, a 'continuing critique' of the exclusions operated by queerness is

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[782] I refer, here, to the late Foucault discussed in the fourth section of chapter 1, as well as to Butler – not only their Foucault-inspired 'What is Critique?', but also to their later 'Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity' (p 795), which makes the case for critique to be understood as 'a revolution at the level of procedures, […] secur[ing] rights of dissent and processes of legitimation'.

[783] Jeffrey R Di Leo and Peter Hitchcock, 'Introduction: Before the Beginning, After the End: Toward the New Public Intellectual', in J R Di Leo & P Hitchcock (eds), *The New Public Intellectual. Politics, Theory, and the Public Sphere*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp ix–xxix: ix.

[784] Bruce Robbins, 'Less Disciplinary Than Thou: Criticism and the Conflict of the Faculties', *Minnesota Review 45–46*, 1995–1996, pp 95–115: 111

[785] Didier Fassin and Bernard E Harcourt (eds), *A Time for Critique*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

[786] Tim Dean and Robyn Wiegman, 'What Does Critique Want? A Critical Exchange,' *English Language Notes 51*(2), 2013, pp 107–122, p 107.

essential to the 'field's key theoretical and political promises' (David L. Eng).[787] Clearly, the critiques of postcritique presented in this chapter, which come from such a varied set of fields as literary studies, anthropology, and queer studies, are deeply infused with political concerns. Not all of them address Felski's project directly: Eng, for instance, takes aim at the idea of reparation instead of postcritique, while Fassin talks more generally about the 'critiques of critique'. They all emphasise, however, the extent to which critique is essential to formulate progressive, emancipatory, and queer claims to knowledge.

This section does not rehearse all existing arguments against postcritique, but only those that are relevant to a queer theoretical debate. To repeat, for instance, that Felski makes a caricature out of critique is useful to show the variety of critiques that the label conflates, but it is not a challenge to the postcritical project as such.[788] It is true that critique, in Felski's account, is somewhat trivialised, but it is purposefully so. As the first chapter of this dissertation has shown, Foucault does not shy away from describing critique less as a specific tradition than as the recurring ethos, mood, or attitude of modernity. This does not mean that analytical distinctions between different critical trajectories should be glossed over: throughout the second chapter, the argument has been developed that a primary difference that the word 'critique' obscures is the one between philosophical critique and literary criticism. What it means is that the debate should *start from* instead of *stopping at* the contested and multifarious definitions of critique, and that any insistence in pinning them down runs the risk to restrict the debate around critique to those who agree in advance on its definition.

I would like to begin by reviewing Robbins' harsh review of postcritique. 'Postcriquers', as Robbins calls Felski and her acolytes, embody, to him, a dangerous trend in contemporary literary and cultural criticism: i.e., the 'impulse to do away with politics' and to embrace, more or less willingly, a neoliberal logics.[789] '[V]ague and

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[787] David L Eng with Judith (Jack) Halberstam and José E Muñoz, 'Introduction. What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?', *Social Text 84–85*, 23(3–4), 2005, pp 1–17: 3.

[788] See: Ronan McDonald, 'Critique and anti-critique', *Textual Practice 32*(3), 2018, pp 365–374: 367

[789] Robbins, 'Critical Correctness', np.

overused as the term can be', neoliberalism, he says, works through depoliticisation, because 'it abandons to the silent authority of the market questions that had earlier been seen as matters [of] politics'.[790] Robbins sees this logics materialising in Felski's emphasis on the reader's affective attachments to texts. A focus on attachments activates a mode of criticism that is closer to fandom than to an actual academic practice. 'In lieu of critically examining literature or the culture it is part of', Robbins writes, 'postcritique encourages a rhetoric of helpful and largely positive advice to the would-be consumer'.[791] While retaining a sense of elitism (after all, there is nothing intrinsically bad in the fact that an academic enterprise can start from a place of fandom), and even though his piece is more a provocative exposé of postcritique than a full-fledge article, Robbins points out the possible connivance of postcritique with the upholding of the neoliberal status quo.

Fassin's opinion about postcritique is more cautious than Robbins'. '[W]e must resist both the facile disqualification of critique as a practice passé and the hyperbolic use of critique as mere mantra', Fassin writes.[792] He is committed to understanding the reasons of the discontents with critique in the current moment; additionally, he contextualises critique within the academic need to produce new ideas that are competitive on the intellectual market. 'My impression', he writes,

> is that over the past two decades there has been an acceleration of the emergence of critical moments claimed to be radically new. […] The academic world is in need of innovation and novelties, and academics are expected to create constantly and label or patent their creations. […] In that regard, it is rightly said that grand theories have disappeared from our field as they have from others: evolutionism, functionalism, culturalism, structuralism, Marxism, and a few more. But it is less noted that the 'isms' have been replaced by 'turns', thus transforming scholars into whirling dervishes at risk of theoretical vertigo.[793]

Next to the 'isms' and 'turns' upon which academic consumption thrives, one could add

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[790] Robbins, 'Critical Correctness', np.

[791] Robbins, 'Critical Correctness', np.

[792] Didier Fassin, 'The endurance of critique', *Anthropological Theory 17*(1), 2017, pp 4–29: 5.

[793] Fassin, 'The endurance of critique', p 20.

the prefix 'post', which marks not just Felski's but many projects in the humanities. Not by chance does Robert T. Tally Jr. talk about a 'postcritical turn' to signal Felski's wish to enact a paradigm shift.[794] In a strongly oppositional language, Tally contends that postcritique is symptomatic of the capitulation of literary studies to neoliberalism in higher education. To him, 'postcritical […] scholars have ceded the territory to the enemy, allowing opponents of literature and the humanities to set the terms of the debate'.[795] Tally's implicit polemic is with Felski's argument that '[l]iterary studies is currently facing a legitimation crisis', for its value is put under constant question, and that a hermeneutics of suspicion may not be the best tool to confront such crisis.[796] To Tally, a methodological and theoretical renewal of literary criticism is a complacent acquiescence to the demands of the neoliberal institution. In fact, '[t]he enemies of literature, the humanities more widely, or higher education in general are not apt to change their minds based on some postcritical readings', he writes.[797] Additionally, Felski's 'multi million-dollar grant' awarded by the Danish National Research Fundation 'to support her investigation into various postcritical approaches to literature' is to him a further proof that '[b]eing opposed to critique is extraordinarily lucrative'.[798] Tally's friend-or-foe rhetoric, however, seems too manichean to capture the negotiations between the humanities and the institutional settings they are embedded in. Moreover, his insistence on the grant awarded to Felski – an insistence widely reproduced throughout the volume in which the contribution appears[799] – turns the analysis of the postcritique's possible drift towards neoliberalism into, basically, a resentful call out. While the articulation of postcritique with progressive, emancipatory, Leftist, and ultimately queer politics is the question this section aims to explore, an exact equation between postcritique and neoliberalism seems unfair. Which practice conducted inside today's academia, after all, can claim extraneousness to neoliberal interests?

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[794] Robert T Tally Jr, 'Critique Unlimited', in J R Di Leo, *What's Wrong with Antitheory?*, pp 115–133: 123.

[795] Tally, 'Critique Unlimited', p 117.

[796] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 5.

[797] Tally, 'Critique Unlimited', p 128.

[798] Tally, 'Critique Unlimited', p 123.

[799] Di Leo, 'Introduction', p 10.

The link between neoliberalism and postcritique is more suggestive than fully developed by Tally, but questions about the current legitimation crisis of literary studies and the humanities are important. Robin Truth Goodman, who also argues that Felski accommodates to '"what is", even if the "what is" is destructive to the humanities', contends that literary studies is facing not a crisis of legitimation, 'but a defunding of educational institutions and a demonising of educators, caused by market culture, that is part of an attack on critique involving Felski herself'.[800] Several claims are conflated in this sentence. That 'defunding' and 'market culture' are somewhat related sounds reasonable, but that the 'demonising of educators' follows from 'market culture' seems more of a stretch. And can the current defunding of literary studies, both in and out of the U.S., be so sharply disconnected from its delegitimation? From a gender-studies (European) perspective, the picture looks quite different. As David Paternotte recounts, the current attacks on feminist and queer knowledges by the populist far-Right are prompted by exquisitely political concerns more than financial reasons. The Hungarian government's decision, in 2017, to revoke the accreditation of gender studies (held to be 'corrupting' and 'ideological') and to ban this and other disciplines from the country, is just one step toward 'the dismantling of critical knowledge more broadly'.[801] Such decision goes against the interests of many corporate institutions, including the Central European University (CEU), which, through an *ad-hoc* legislation voted by the Hungarian parliament, has been evicted from the country and forced to relocate to Austria. The ostracising of CEU hints at a more radical legitimation crisis of critical knowledges than defunding. Another issue conflated in Goodman's assertion is to determine whether postcritique is part of the attacks on critique (she contends it is) or whether it can be a tool for counter-attacks. But, is everything that is not critical really bound to be uncritical and supportive of the status quo?

The category of reactionism may prove to be more useful than neoliberalism to illuminate a few possible misalignments of postcritique with non-progressive, anti-

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[800] Robin Truth Goodman, 'How Not to Be Governed Like That: Theory Steams On', in J R Di Leo, *What's Wrong with Antitheory?*, pp 134–148: 145.

[801] David Paternotte, 'Gender Studies and the Dismantling of Critical Knowledge in Europe', *American Association of University Professors*, Fall 2019, np. https://www.aaup.org/article/gender-studies-and-dismantling-critical-knowledge-europe (accessed on 10 January 2022).

queer politics. Jeffrey R. Di Leo suggests to understand postcritique as a form of 'New New Criticism'.[802] New criticism is a reactionary approach to literature that dominated the interpretive scene of the mid-20th century and that, in Di Leo's summary, advocated for the autonomy, stability, coherency, and identity of texts. This approach declined through the 1970s, when it was superseded by forms of criticism – semiology, structuralism, poststructuralism, and their offspring, including cultural studies and feminist and queer studies – aimed precisely at undoing textual autonomy, stability, coherency, and identity. These approaches inaugurated what, with Joseph North, we may call 'the historicist/contextualist paradigm', according to which, 'for academic purposes, works of literature are chiefly of interest as diagnostic instruments for determining the state of the cultures in which they were written or read'.[803] In Di Leo's account, we are now witnessing the return of New Criticism in the guise of both object-oriented criticism and, more surreptitiously, Felski's postcritical defence of the singularity, autonomy, and identity of texts. Di Leo sees postcritique as part of the 'current wave of reactionary criticism' and closes with a question and a pun: '[w]hat is going to happen now that [New Criticism] has been made "great again?"'[804]

If anything, Di Leo urges us to engage with – and to discuss – the politics of postcritique. It seems arduous, however, to believe that a postcritical approach leads to Trumpism or any other conspiratorial politics. On the contrary, critics often tend to forget that the two main sources of postcritique – Latour's 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?' and Sedgwick's 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading' – aim precisely at countering conspiracy theories, as we shall soon see. In a section aptly titled 'Critique and Politics', Anker and Felski wonder: '[w]hat, then, are the *political* stakes of the current reassessment of critique? What are its relations to capitalism, democracy, radicalism, revolution, or social change?'[805] Instead of replying to these questions by showing what postcritique can offer, Anker and Felski choose to reiterate what is wrong

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[802] Jeffrey R Di Leo, 'The New New Criticism: Anti-Theory, Autonomy, and the Literary Text from Object-Oriented Ontology to Postcritique', *The Comparatist 22*, 2020, pp 135–155.

[803] Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History*. Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2017, p 1.

[804] Di Leo, 'The New New Criticism', p 151.

[805] Anker and Felski, 'Introduction', p 13.

with critique. They rehearse a few arguments against critique from the left (Michael Hardt's, Robyn Wiegman's, Talal Asad's, Saba Mahmood's, Stefano Harney's, Fred Moten's, and others'), after which, they conclude:

> It is no longer feasible, in short, to assume that critique is synonymous with leftist resistance or that rethinking critique implies a retreat to aestheticism, quietism, belle-lettrism, or other much maligned '-isms' of literary studies. Indeed, the shift away from suspicion may conceivably inspire a more nuanced vision of how political change comes about.[806]

If political change is still a goal of postcritique – or better, if political change is something Anker and Felski hold on to, at least nominally – then how are we to trust that the postcritical project aims for a progressive future and not, as many of Felski's detractors contend, for a reactionary kind of politics?

To tackle this question, let me go back to the last chapter of *The Limits of Critique* titled 'Context Stinks!'[807] – a citation of Latour's own citation of architect Rem Koolhaas.[808] Following Latour, Felski argues that, in literary analysis, the historical context is 'simply a way of stopping the description when [critics] are tired or too lazy to go on'.[809] In this sense, it is correct to read postcritique as a willingness to suspend the historical/contextualist paradigm in favour of description. Robbins highlights the risks of this willingness when stressing that, '[w]hat the postcritique people seem to be trying to get away from […] is not critique but context, conceived (correctly) as the relativiser that impedes universalistic statements'.[810] From this observation, he draws the conclusion that postcritique is an attempt at returning to the universalistic tendencies of both aesthetics and science. Felski, however, carefully distances herself from those who

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[806] Anker and Felski, 'Introduction', p 15.

[807] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp 151–184. An earlier version of this chapter appeared as: Rita Felski, 'Context Stinks!', *New Literary History 42*, 2011, pp 573–591.

[808] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p 148. See also: Croce, 'Postcritica: oltre l'attore niente', pp 324–328.

[809] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p 148. Also quoted in: Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 152.

[810] Robbins, 'Fashion Conscious Phenomenon',p 6.

do so. She writes, for instance, that she does 'not champion aesthetics over politics',[811] and she acknowledges that 'the language of "nature" has often been invoked to justify racial inequality, condone homophobia, and defend the subordinate status of women'.[812] In this sense, postcritique cannot be easily equated to the attempts at rescuing either aesthetic judgements or scientific values such as objectivity and description, like Robbins claims. Nonetheless, the bracketing of the historical/contextualist paradigm – Felski's argument, for instance, that 'there is no historical box and no society, if we mean by this term a bounded totality governed by a predetermined set of structures and functions'[813] – calls for explaining how historical and cultural dynamics intervene, if they intervene at all, in postcritical reading practices.

Such explanation is needed, not only because one assumes that Felski does not want to side with Margaret Thatcher's assertion 'there is no such thing as society',[814] but also because, as Robbins points out once again, the demise of context-as-relativiser can entail serious consequences:

> Criticism arguably surrendered the right to speak for everyone, becoming, in fact, much humbler than it had been, sometime around the 1970s, when political movements by women and minorities made it clear that they had not been consulted, that whose who were in the habit of speaking for everyone […] were not necessarily speaking for *them*.[815]

Robbins makes an important point for a discussion of the queer politics of postcritique, in that he recalls the political potential of the historical/contextualist paradigm in cultural and literary criticism between the 1970s and 1980s, as well as its deployment

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[811] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 11. In *Hooked* (p 12), she specifies this point further: '[m]ight the language of aesthetic experience be worth rescuing? It conveys, after all, a widespread intuition that encounters with art can be valuable, absorbing, meaningful, and distinctive […]. Can we do justice to this intuition without falling back into a view of art and aesthetics as cut off from the rest of life?'

[812] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 80.

[813] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 157.

[814] Margaret Thatcher, 'Interview for *Woman's Own* ("no such thing as society")' (1987), *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, nd, np, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689 (accessed on 10 January 2022).

[815] Robbins, 'Fashion Conscious Phenomenon', p 6. Italics in the original.

by minority groups to bring social dynamics of exclusion to the fore. My point, here, is less to make the case for the politicisation of critique than to question postcritique on how exactly it distances itself from old-fashion modes of universalistic criticism and, further, how it can help conceptualise – and be supportive of – a queer politics. Anker and Felski's assertion that postcritique is 'linked to, rather than at odds with, progressive commitments' [816] does not suffice to prove the transformative potential of their project. Additionally, such statements as 'context stinks' or 'there is no historical box', often followed by exclamation marks, sound like sheer rejections of context and history, regardless of those minority groups that turned contextualisation and historicisation into tools for political emancipation.

To qualify my points, I would like to turn to Latour and, more exactly, to his understanding of the social. In *Reassembling the Social*, he corroborates his critique of sociology with the idea that society has become a substitute for that of body politic.[817] Both notions, for Latour, come to designate a human collective. On the one hand, the idea of body politic provides a provisional, contingent, and fictitious unity to the collective it names, for it was originally meant to 'solve the impossible problem of political representation'.[818] On the other hand, the more recent idea of society, equally fictitious, was conceived from the start as fixed, for it provided the foundations of a new science – sociology – that takes society as its object of study.[819] The social thusly

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[816] Anker and Felski, 'Introduction', p 2.

[817] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, pp 161–164. This same argument is developed in my 'Teorie e politiche della postcritica. Note su un dibattito transdisciplinare', *Filosofia Politica 2*, 2020, pp 337–348: 343–344.

[818] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p 162. Here, Latour implicitly refers to Thomas Hobbes, who argues that the body politic 'is a fictitious body' (Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* (1640). London: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p 93), for it derives from a contract between people aimed at constituting a sovereign. In this sense, the 'body politic' is an artificial unity distinct from the 'body natural' of the actual sovereign.

[819] Here, Latour takes Zygmunt Bauman as main reference. No matter how mutable and 'liquid' the idea of society is, '[t]he "society" of sociologists', Bauman argues, 'is, by and large, a unified and organised spaces, a "structured" space [that] enables sociologists to speak of social laws of regularities, of the *normative regulation* of social reality, of *trends* and *developmental* sequences' (Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*. New York & London: Routledge, 1992, p 60. Italics in the original).

understood, Latour argues, has contributed through time to make the idea of body politic increasingly more stable, so much so that that the two notions – that of body politic and that of society – are now virtually indistinguishable from one another. In other words, '[t]he body politic transmogrified into a society […] hold[s] up under its own force *even in the absence of* any political activity'.[820] In Latour's view, social theorists know very well 'that society is a virtual reality, a *cosa mentale*, a hypostasis, a fiction'.[821] The majority of them, however, think of it as always being there, 'stranded like a whale […] on a beachshore'.[822] 'There is no way to succeed in renewing social theory', Latour concludes, 'as long as the beach has not been cleared and the ill-fated notion of society entirely dissolved'.[823]

Two points are worth of attention in Latour's reconstruction of the 'stranding' of society and its shoring up of body politic. The first one concerns Latour's refusal to crystallise society and to try, in his own words, to keep it flat.[824] To turn the social into a Latourian 'flatland' means to trace the contingent associations between human and non-human 'actants' (in line with his ANT) instead of resorting to ready-made sociological categories. More than a refusal, Latour's move appears to be a rethinking of the social: a way to multiply contexts instead of doing away with contextualisation tout court. Felski translates Latour's concerns into the field of literary studies and argues for a theoretical framework capable to 'clarify how agency is distributed among a larger cohort of social actors […] and to more fully acknowledge the coimplication and entanglement of text and critic'.[825] Latour's and Felski's claims are obviously different from Thatcher's, as they intend to say, not that there are individuals (who, additionally, have to take there of

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[820] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, pp 162–163. Italics in the original.

[821] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p 163. Italics in the original.

[822] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p 163.

[823] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p 164.

[824] About Latour's metaphor of an ANT-inspired social theory as a 'flatland', see: Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, pp 219–220.

[825] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 152. In her 'Latour and Literary Studies' (p 741), Felski clarifies that what she does, '[r]ather than [to]apply Latour to literary studies in one-sided fashion', is to 'elucidate overlapping interests and common concerns'.

themselves by themselves), but that society is always the provisional result of the social interactions.

The second and, for the sake of this dissertation, most relevant point is that such crystallised notion of society reinforces the idea of body politic and secures its unity and persistence '*even in the absence* of any political activity'. This is not something reprehensible per se, for it is a function that society has historically acquired in order for sociology to exist. What Latour deprecates is that, even today, sociology – especially the one qualifying as critical – claims political relevance *before* analysing society. In other words, Latour counters the deployment of sociological categories infused with political and critical concerns *before* mapping out the contingent associations between actors. To borrow from Mariano Croce, Latour demonstrates 'that context needs to be unfolded and explained [*(di)spiegato*]', because 'in no case can it function as a presupposition'.[826] This does not mean that an ANT-inspired social analysis is divested of political ambitions: '"critical relevance" and "political edge" [are] not automatic and most of the time [they] will fail'.[827] What it does mean is that critical relevance and political edge 'require[…] another set of extraordinary circumstances', in Latour's words.[828] Along similar lines, Felski deems 'ideological' the reading practices that squarely place texts into social frameworks, thereby turning them into transparent vehicles of social transformation and insubordination.[829] She thus explores what texts can do apart from attaching sociological categories that make them politically and critically relevant from the start. The kind of interpretation she has in mind 'does not exclude the political – it is deeply interested in conflicts, asymmetries, struggles – but its antipathy to reductionism means that political discourse cannot serve as a metalanguage into which everything can be translated'.[830]

Rather than a project for de-contextualisation, de-historicisation, and de-politicisation, I take postcritique to be a warning and an injunction against the crystallisation and

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[826] Croce, 'Postcritica: oltre l'attore niente', p 327.

[827] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p 155.

[828] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p 155.

[829] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, pp 5–6.

[830] Felski, 'Latour and Literary Studies', p 740.

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automatisms of certain critical practices within literary studies, which resort to the categories offered by the historical/contextualist paradigm to stress the political relevance and critical edge of their objects of study before actually studying them. In this sense, critique and postcritique are not mutually exclusive (just like a paranoid and a reparative reading are not mutually exclusive either), but the latter serves to keep the former in check when it too quickly endows its objects with politically significant connotations. This does not mean that postcritique is politically unproblematic and/or exempt from becoming a habit and a routine. The postcritical jargon, as this section has been showing, is still to build a convincing argument against the charge of siding with reactionary positions. And, as Felski herself admits, 'all critical approaches, including any postcritical methodology that may arise in the future, settle into recognisable genres and patterns of predictability'.[831] But insofar as it signals both the stylisations of critique and the moments in which literary and cultural objects are reduced to their social and historical circumstances, postcritique's intervention is utterly important. This statement looks a lot like a downsizing of postcritique, for it focuses on its negative capacity (i.e., to underscore the limits of critique) instead of its potentialities (i.e., to suggest what postcritique can offer). Nonetheless, I contend that the above is a remarkable contribution not just to the field of literature but to queer studies as well. To make my case, I am going to pause on a recent writing that is critical of postcritique and, concomitantly, reproduces the exact problems that postcritique denounces.

In *The Ruse of Repair* (2021), Patricia Stuelke aims to unravel the history of U.S. academics' 'flight from critique', which she glosses in terms of reparation.[832] Her referent is Sedgwick's reparative reading as well as the reading practices that emerged in the wake of it. Postcritique is one such practice, for it welcomes 'the arrival of the reparative [as] a relief'.[833] The overall argument of the book is that the genealogy of reparation – 'a consoling mode for responding to state and racial capitalist violence [and] for accepting such violence as known or intransigent to the power of critique', for

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[831] Felski, 'Both/And', p 252.

[832] Patricia Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair. US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2011, p 4.

[833] Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair,* p 15.

Stuelke[834] – can be traced back to the solidarity movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Theoretically, the book focuses on the opening of 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', where Sedgwick recalls a conversation with her friend Cindy Patton about the origins of HIV and the conspiracies around it. Stuelke recovers a passage in which Patton asserts that, even if all conspiracies were true – 'that the lives of Africans and African Americans are worthless in the eyes of the United States; that gay men and drug users are held cheap where they aren't actively hated; that the military deliberately researches ways to kill noncombatants whom it sees as enemies; that people in power look calmly on the likelihood of catastrophic environmental and population changes' – 'what would we know then that we don't already know?'[835] From it, Stuelke infers that, for Patton as much as for Sedgwick who builds her argument on the reparative based on her insight, a paranoid lens to look at the world is no longer needed because there is nothing left for academics to know and no injustice left to unmask. Stuelke adds that Sedgwick's conviction that we do not live in a time marked by the collective paranoia around HIV shows her capitulation to a neoliberal logic.[836] 'Embracing the reparative', Stuelke says,

> meant for Sedgwick, as it has often come to mean for the scholars who write in her wake, ceasing to anticipate trouble to come or hunt for evidence of violence the academy already knows or suspects, and instead finding joy where one can, honouring practices of survival, finding comfort in contact across temporal and other scales of difference, and celebrating reforms as a win.[837]

Far from embracing reparation, Stuelke utterly criticises it by going back to such U.S. solidarity movements as those active in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua between the 1970s and the 1980s, which intended to repair the violence enacted by their

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[834] Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair*, p 16.

[835] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 123.

[836] Stuelke's argument is based on Eve K Sedgwick, 'Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes', *South Atlantic Quarterly 106*(3), 2007, pp 625–642. For a discussion of this article, see chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp 172–173.

[837] Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair*, p 13.

country.[838] In her view, these movements overestimated – just like Sedgwick and Patton – the legibility as well as the outreach of the critiques of U.S. imperialism, which they knew all too well. Therefore, they shifted towards inward-looking, compensating, and sentimental practices of reparation in order to simply 'feel good'. 'My sense', Stuelke concludes, 'is that the current life of reparative [as well as postcritical] reading in the academy […] is less invested in a fantasy of a post oppression present than it is concerned with the problem of how to live and survive in a world that remains terrible even after one has learned to critique it'.[839]

This last remark encapsulates a few problems that Sedgwick's reparative elicits when it becomes a virtue-signalling signifier 'promising to make [queer critics] better ethically, epistemologically, and affectively', Dean points out.[840] However, and at the cost of doubling down on paranoia, Stuelke's account cannot be taken at face value. To begin with, a portrait of Sedgwick as a 'reformist' whose preoccupation is how to defuse the violence of the imperialist and neoliberal state in the face of the shortcomings of critique is mystifying. Not only does this portrait bypass Sedgwick's personal vicissitudes and political struggles, but it also deforms her belief that mainstream gay and lesbian constituencies afford to forget about the AIDS experience because of a 'programmatic disavowal of trauma and dread', not because they engage in reparation.[841] As the previous chapter argued, Sedgwick's call for queer people to overcome the paranoid stance they assumed in times of heightened AIDS crisis is less an appeal to state complacency and political immobility than a cry for going 'at the heart of many histories of gay, lesbian, and queer intertextuality'.[842]

When Sedgwick takes Patton's question seriously, she does not intend to suggest that academics have nothing left to learn. A crucial aspect of Sedgwick's reparative reading is not to stop at what the critic always-already knows, but to open up her/his perspective

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[838] See chapter 3 of Stuelke's *The Ruse of Repair*, titled 'Solidarity as Settler Absolution' (pp 107–148).

[839] Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair*, p 29.

[840] Tim Dean, 'Genre Blindness in New Descriptivism', *Modern Language Quarterly 81*(4), 2020, pp 528–552: 530.

[841] Sedgwick, 'Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes', p 640.

[842] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 149.

onto cognitive horizons that s/he has never explored. As José E. Muñoz aptly summarises, the reparative is 'meant to help us consider something other than the unveiling of that thing we kind of already knew anyway'.[843] Let me quote Sedgwick's exchange with Patton in full length:

> [s]ometime back in the middle of the first decade of the AIDS epidemic, I was picking the brains of a friend of mine […] about the probable natural history of HIV. This was at a time when speculation was ubiquitous about whether the virus had been deliberately engineered or spread, whether HIV represented a plot or experiment by the U.S. military that had gotten out of control, or perhaps that was behaving exactly as it was meant to. After hearing a lot from her about the geography and economics of the global traffic in blood products, I finally, with some eagerness, asked Patton what she thought of these sinister rumours about the virus's origin. 'Any of the early steps in its spread could have been either accidental or deliberate,' she said. 'But I just have trouble getting interested in that. I mean, even suppose we were sure of every element of a conspiracy: that the lives of Africans and African Americans are worthless in the eyes of the United States; that gay men and drug users are held cheap where they aren't actively hated; that the military deliberately researches ways to kill noncombatants whom it sees as enemies; that people in power look calmly on the likelihood of catastrophic environmental and population changes. Supposing we were ever so sure of all those things – what would we know then that we don't already know?'[844]

And a few lines below:

> To know that the origin or spread of HIV realistically might have resulted from a state-assisted conspiracy – such knowledge is, it turns out, separable from the question of whether the energies of a given AIDS activist intellectual or group might best be used in the tracing and exposure of such a possible plot. They might, but then again, they might not.[845]

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[843] José E Muñoz, 'Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate. Gary Fisher with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick' (2013), in Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, pp 193–205: 201.

[844] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 123.

[845] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 124.

The alternative, here, is not between political action and political inaction, or between '[t]racking the complicities with neoliberal racial capitalism and empire' and silently acquiescing to them, as Stuelke suggests,[846] but between political action aimed at unmasking conspiracy plots and political action aimed at doing, well, something else. What Sedgwick advocates for, via Patton, is the need to displace political energies away from the uncovering of conspiracies. After all, it is very unlikely that either Sedgwick or Patton believed in a state-engineered conspiracy on the origins of HIV, even though their conversation happened at a time when such speculation, as Sedgwick admits, 'was ubiquitous'. What they believed, most likely, was in the necessity to keep track of stories about the AIDS epidemic and its consequences on queer lives.

The countering (or, at least, sidestepping) of conspiracies is a crucial element not only of Sedgwick's reparative, but also of other contemporary discontents with critique. In a historical moment exacerbated by the events of 9/11 and the conspiracy theories around them, Latour's 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?' asks:

> What's the real difference between conspiracists and a popularised, that is, teachable version of social critique […]? Of course, we in the academy like to use more elevated causes – society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism – while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents, but I find something troublingly similar in the structure of explanation. […] Of course conspiracy theories are an absurd deformation of our own arguments, but, like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party, these are our weapons nonetheless.[847]

According to Latour, the exhaustion of critique is configured not just as the void repetition of a historical/contextualist jargon, but as the siding of the 'structure of explanation' it provides with conspiracist plots. On his part, as someone who witnessed many conspiracies while researching on the spread of HIV in South Africa, Fassin acknowledges that postcritique takes stock at conspiracies.[848] In this same vein, Bernini takes the postcritical project (which, like Fassin, he does not fully embrace) to be a

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[846] Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair*, p 17.

[847] Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?', pp 228–229.

[848] Fassin, 'The endurance of critique'.

reminder of the need to distinguish good from bad criticism.[849] A case in point, to him, is the current Covid-19 pandemic, which prompts a proliferation of critical narratives that are not always valuable. Notably, Giorgio Agamben's interventions on the 'invention of the epidemics'[850] result from 'a well-oiled critical machine […] mobilised to comment on the event of the pandemic without really examining it'.[851] What Latour, Fassin, and Bernini (and, in retrospect, Sedgwick) warn against is the weaponising of critique for conspiracist aims, particularly in times of crisis. In other words, none of them thinks that critique has run out of steam – or is at risk thereof – because critics feel the need to defuse imperialist violence in order to 'feel good', as Stuelke suggests.

Mine is not an argument for idealising reparation and cleansing it from its violent or even colonialist implications, as Eng's interpretation of Melanie Klein brilliantly contends.[852] What I would like to suggest is that, in building a macronarrative of

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[849] Bernini, 'Nel bel mezzo della cosa stessa'.

[850] Giorgio Agamben, 'L'invenzione di un'epidemia', *Quodlibet*, 26 February 2020, np, https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia (accessed on 10 January 2022).

[851] Bernini, 'Nel bel mezzo della cosa stessa', np. My translation.

[852] In 'Colonial Object Relations' (*Social Text 126*, *34*(1), 2016, pp 1–19), Eng argues that, for Klein, reparation is borne out of the infant's attempt to undo (in fact, *repair*) the harm done to her/his own mother in fantasy. Because this harm is checked by the infant's dependency on the mother, guilt and morality emerge as consequences of this fantasy. Eng turns the attention Klein's analytical leaps from the relation between mother and child to the family scene (in which hate for the mother takes the form of sibling rivalry), to the classroom setting (where children learn to project hate onto people not far removed from them), to, finally, the wider social world. In the latter, the mother/child relation morphs into the individual/motherland relation. Concomitantly, hatred is displaced onto people who belong to a different land, Eng points out, and the moral act of reparation comes to coincide with the colonial fantasy of genocide and repopulation. As Klein herself writes, '[i]n former times when ruthless cruelty against native populations was displayed by people who […] conquered and colonised […] '[s]ome of the early fantasised attacks [against siblings] were […] expressed in reality by the attitude towards the natives. The wished-for restoration, however, found full expression in repopulating the country with people of their own nationality. (Melanie Klein, 'Love, Guilt, and Reparation', in M Klein & J Riviere, *Love, Hate, and Reparation*. New York: Norton, 1964, pp 55–119: 104–105). Thus, Eng concludes that reparation, in Klein, is 'a function of a colonial history of war and violence' (Eng, 'Colonial Object Relations', p 9). Far from discounting the colonial and genocidal implications of Klein's account, I wonder whether the term 'reparation' is bound to re-enact the violence associated to it. If it ever can, then its colonial legacies should certainly not be swept under the carpet of history, as Eng (and Stuelke with him) remind us.

reparation ranging from Sedgwick to U.S. solidarity movements – that is, from reparative reading to reparation as a form of political complacency and imperialist violence – Stuelke overlooks the complexities as well as the political nuances of the term. Additionally, in so doing, she seems to approximate a view that undermines the specificity of a queer analysis of sexuality. In the first chapter of *The Ruse of Repair*, Stuelke criticises the 'reparative fantasy that the celebratory defence of desire constituted a revolutionary political project'.[853] In particular, she targets Samuel R. Delany's book *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999): a memoir and an essay on Times Square's gay porn scene from the 1960s up to the mid-1990s, when gentrification took over. Such porn venues as movie theatres and bathrooms used to display, according to Delany, the possibility of interclass relations (or, in his words, 'contact') among men having sex with men.[854] In Stuelke's interpretation, Delany's book 'demonstrates how the […] celebratory defence of desire was recruited to perform for neoliberalism the reparative work of remediating by eroticising, rather than eliminating, racial capitalist violence and inequality'.[855] By reading Delany's sexual encounters with working-class men as well as his own theory of interclass contact in sexual venues as reparative acts, Stuelke argues that Delany 'codifies the sex-radical feminist discourse of liberatory desire', 'reconceptualises cross-racial, cross-class sexual contact as the ultimate act and end of solidarity' in a way that forecloses anticapitalist critique, and, ultimately, becomes undistinguishable from the 'developers trying to make Times Square a [capitalist] space […]', whom he forcefully combats.[856]

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[853] Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair*, p 34. The chapter 'Freedom to Want' is in this same book pp. 31–69.

[854] Samuel R Delany *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999). New York: New York University Press, 2019. In the same chapter, Stuelke takes aim at U.S. radical feminist Kate Millett too. Millett's celebration of women's desire through the 1970s and 1980s led, for Stuelke, to her upholding of a neoliberal version of freedom. The move is clear, in Stuelke's narrative, in moments of international solidarity such as Millett's trip to Iran in 1979, when she witnessed the oppression of women by the Iranian regime and projected onto them U.S.-centric fantasies of sexual liberation. See: Kate Millett, *Going to Iran*. New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1982.

[855] Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair*, p 62.

[856] Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair*, pp 61–63. The last quotation includes a passage from Ricardo Montez, '"Trade" Marks: LA2, Keith Haring, and a Queer Economy of Collaboration' (*GLQ 12*(3), 2006, pp 425–440), on which Stuelke extensively draws.

It is not entirely clear or convincing why, for Stuelke, Delany's argument about the capacity of desire to connect people across class and race divides would codify the radical feminist discourse and not, say, a gay liberationist discourse that equally, if not more forcefully, centres on a 'celebratory defence of desire'. But, more to the point, Stuelke's depiction of Delany as someone embodying the 'willingness to look for pleasure even in spaces and practices that might carry painful or violent histories',[857] thus consoling himself with sexual encounters instead of racing against oppression, obviates the ambiguities that sexuality brings to the fore. After all, the race and class differences presented in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* would not be visible were it not for Delany's deliberate staging of them. In no way does sexual contact, for Delany,

> obviate the socioeconomic antagonism between the classes. But it tend[s] to stabilise relationships at the personal level and restrict conflict to the economic level itself – keeping it from spilling over into other, personal situations.[858]

There is no upholding of what Stuelke calls the 'sanctity of interclass sexual exchange' in this quote.[859] What we have is an account of how, even under capitalism, class conflict can be temporarily bracketed. To say that Delany's desiring position makes him 'myopic' towards 'the racial capitalist violence that is responsible for his [sexual] partners' tragedies', as Stuelke holds,[860] is not the same as to say that Delany's theorisation of interclass contact is compromised by his desiring position, which is what other scholars contend.[861] To make a paranoid point, one could say that Stuelke's emphasis on the class divide between Delany and his partners at the expense of sexuality prioritises the violence of the neoliberal state over the systematically

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[857] Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair*, p 65.

[858] Delany, *Times Square Red*, p 114. The context of these words is Delany's account of his grandmother's relation to her landlord: the class tensions between the two were mitigated by the landlord's regular visits to the tenant, which would guarantee leniency, mutual understanding, and aversion of overt confrontation. This scene, as Delany implicitly suggests and Stuelke acknowledges, provides a template for Delany to theorise interclass contact in Times Square's porn theatres.

[859] Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair*, p 62.

[860] Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair*, p 62

[861] Which is in fact the argument made by Montez in '"Trade" Marks', p 430.

homophobic policies adopted by then-mayor Rudy Giuliani to shut down Times Square's porn scene.[862] However, instead of adjudicating between the primacy of heterosexism *versus* neoliberal racial capitalism, which is a rather unintersectional thing to do, I prefer to argue, along with Kadji Amin, that the field of queer theory is traversed by such 'disturbing attachments' as Jean Genet's desire for Arab and black men or, in this case, Delany's unequal sexual encounters.[863] These figures – Genet, Delany – fail to meet the expectations of the queer reader, who either retreats into an uncompromising idealisation that eclipses their problematic traits or, like Stuelke, invokes them in order to debunk them. 'What is needed', to Amin, 'is a more nuanced method for parsing desires, identifications, and attachments that go the "wrong" way', which requires queer scholars to be 'more attentive to the opacities of [their] objects of study [and] less zealous about the radicalism, reach, and portability' of their critique.[864]

I have taken *The Ruse of Repair* as a case study of how a politicised critique of postcritique, here equated to reparation, can be a very steamy enterprise even though what burns inside is often obscure. By this, I do not mean to downplay queer commitments to issues other than sexuality. Queer theory can and must be invested in analysing and countering the workings of capitalism, racism, patriarchy, homolesbobitransphobia, and other systems of inequality and oppression. What postcritique in general and my critique of Stuelke's book in particular intend to signal is that such signifiers should neither function as empty mantras nor exhaust the objects they designate. Mine is an argument for analytical distinctions instead of conflations. The capitalist gentrifiers of Times Square are not bound to be the same as the gay men whose desires, in Amin's words, are disturbing. Similarly, the deployment by U.S. solidarity movements of a benevolent rhetoric of reparation to make up for the violence of their country is not the same as Sedgwick's take on reparation in the face of

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[862] I deliberately avoid to posit any racial divide between Delany and his (black) sexual partners, because this would lead to either subsume race to class (Delany was a black gay writer) or enter a discussion about different shades of blackness, which is beyond the scope of this chapter.

[863] Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments. Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2017. About Genet's orientalist and racial fantasies, see, in particular, chapter 3, 'Racial Fetishism, Gay Liberation, and the Temporalities of the Erotic', pp 76–108.

[864] Amin, *Disturbing Attachments*, 83–84, 18.

conspiracy plots. In my understanding, Sedgwick's reparative reading and Felski's postcritique do not aim at delinking academic activities from social engagement or doing away with critique's 'progressively oriented politics'.[865] What they do is to remind us that, first, a critique-turned-jargon is a mannerist, self-absorbed practice whose touch with the political humus it originates is lost, and second, that there are other modes of interpretation beyond the disclosing of oppressive structures, which are often deemed naïve, merely descriptive, or plainly uncritical.

The previous section introduced the postcritical project, defined its contours, and listed a few directions that Felski has taken in order to circumvent the dogma of suspicion and the fossilisations of critique. The present section, instead, has explored the political problems raised by the debate around (and against) postcritique. While the latter does not expound a clear politics (and, oftentimes, it risks becoming complicit with political acquiescence if not reactionism), it pinpoints where politicised modes of critique become routines. The next two sections move (partly) away from postcritique to explore a proposal emerged within the ranks of contemporary queer theory, which also takes aim at a critical imperative: i.e., the injunction to be antinormative. I suggest reading this proposal postcritically, in order not to reduce it to yet another example of postcritique, but to illuminate the main stakes and politics that a queer stance against normativity harbours.

3.3 A queer theory without antinormativity (I): a postcritical overview

In 2015, a special issue of *differences* titled 'Queer Theory without Antinormativity' sparked debate among queer scholars.[866] In their introduction, the editors of the special issue, Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson, argue that antinormativity has become definitional of – if not synonym for – queer theory. In their view, authors as different as

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[865] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 140. More on the politics of postcritique can be found in my 'Teorie e politiche della postcritica'.

[866] Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A Wilson (eds), 'Queer Theory without Antinormativity', special issue of *differences 26*(1), 2015, pp 1–187.

David M. Halperin (a hardcore anti-psychoanalytic Foucauldian) and Lee Edelman (who works in the wake of Lacanian psychoanalysis) have nothing in common but a shared stance against normativity, that is, the 'consignment of critical value to antinormative interpretations and intuitions'.[867] Antinormativity, for Wiegman and Wilson, extends beyond Halperin and Edelman, for it encompasses the quasi-entirety of the queer theoretical field. Additionally, it takes many different guises. Next to the foundational 'heteronormativity' conceived of as the 'ideology of heterosexual society', as per Warner,[868] a number of variations have emerged in past decades: 'homonormativity', 'cisnormativity', 'able-bodied heteronormativity', etc.[869] In spite of their differences, all such normativities originating from the critical work of queerness are significant about the on-going centrality, in queer studies, of the struggle against norms, against what is normative, and against what is normalised. Thus, the special

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[867] Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', p 5.

[868] Michael Warner, 'Introduction' (1991), in M Warner (ed), *Fear of a Queer Planet. Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp vii–xxxi: xvi. For a genealogy of antinormativity in queer studies, see: Annemarie Jagose, 'The Trouble with Antinormativity' *differences 26*(1), 2015, pp 26–47: 'If the queer project was not always defined explicitly in terms of antinormativity, it did from the outset, as in de Lauretis' work, carry a strong sense of resistance to social forces characterised as dominant or hegemonic. Lisa Duggan, for instance, describ[ed] "a new stance of opposition, which many theorists now call «queer»" […] and Alexander Doty took up the term "to mark a space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception". Increasingly, however, the dominant or hegemonic force that queer resisted came to be specifically identified as *normativity*, and *queer* in turn came to be characterised as non- or antinormative. […] These descriptions are typical of the many definitional sketches of queer that proliferated in the early to mid-1990s where identity is recognised as an artifact of the normalising force of modern power, and queerness is therefore characterisable not in terms of any positive substance but in oppositional relation to normativity' (pp 31–32. Italics in the original).

[869] On homonormativity, see: Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality*. On cisnormativity, see: Greta R Bauer, Rebecca Hammong, Robb Travers, Matthias Kaay, Karin M Hohenadel, and Michelle Boyce, '"I don't think this is theoretical; this is our lives": how erasure impacts health care for transgender people', *The Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care 20*(5), 2009, pp 348–361; on able-bodied heteronormativity, see: Robert McRuer, 'As Good As It Gets: Queer Theory and Critical Disability', *GLQ 9*(1–2), 2003, pp 79–105.

issue is organised around the question: 'can queer theorising proceed without a primary commitment to antinormativity?'[870]

Admittedly, Wiegman and Wilson's is a 'provocation', for it does not command to get rid of antinormativity in queer theory but questions its pervasive nature. Their proposal, in this sense, is not all-too-different from Felski's, aimed at reformulating rather than overcoming critique. Additionally, the 'anti-' in 'antinormative' targets a typically critical attitude: that of countering something that conforms to norms by defamiliarising and demystifying it. The project of a queer theory without antinormativity and that of a postcritique seem akin to one another. At the same time, there are also significant differences between them, not just because Wiegman herself spends quite some words stressing the gap between Felski's project and her own, but because Felski is embedded in the literary field whereas Wiegman and Wilson's is an eminently conceptual analysis. This difference might explain why the former focuses on critique despite the wider scope of her project, while the latter talk about theory, thereby locating themselves on the (queer) theoretical side.[871] Because Wiegman has a complex understanding of the interaction between queer critique, queer theory, and queer studies, I would like to start from her definition of these terms in order to find out to what extent her and Wilson's preoccupations match those of postcritique, and further, what a postcritical reading of a queer theory without antinormativity can add to the debate on the status of the field.[872]

In *Object Lessons* (2012), Wiegman draws a distinction between queer theory, queer studies, and, more implicitly, queer critique.[873] The overall idea of the book is that

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[870] Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', p 1.

[871] On theory and critique as they are traded between the philosophical and the literary, see chapter 2 of this dissertation.

[872] My postcritical reading of a queer theory without antinormativity is partly inspired by a special issue of *Feminist Encounters 1*(1) edited by Marianne Liljeström and Salla Peltonen, titled 'A Critique of Our Own? On the Epistemic Habits of Academic Feminism' (2017). However, I choose not to put postcritique and a queer theory without antinormativity in the same box from the start, as many contributions in the special issue seemingly do. Rather, I want to unpack the productive exchanges as well as the tensions between the two.

[873] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*. I single out Wiegman's work rather than Wilson's because the former is not only more attentive at the conceptualisations of normativity and antinormativity, but also more

'identity studies' – what, with Roderick Ferguson, we can call 'minority knowledges': women's studies, gender studies, queer studies, American studies, critical whiteness studies, etc.[874] – are animated by the force of critique. Critique, in other words, grounds

explicit in positioning itself vis-à-vis critique and postcritique. To be fair, Wilson's position regarding the status of theory today, as the first section of this chapter has shown (p 190), is unambiguous: to her and Frank, present-day theory means something else than sheer de-essentialisation and linguisticism as they were canonical in 1995. Frank and Wilson acknowledge that there has been 'if not a broadening, then certainly a reorientation of the methodological field'. Yet, 'there remains considerable ambiguity around the question of what criticism does and is for' (Frank and Wilson, *A Silvan Tomkins Handbook*, p 7). This 'considerable ambiguity' is reflected in the special issue of *differences*. But, besides this, Wilson does not pursue, from my point of view, a reflection on normativity, antinormativity, critique, or postcritique. One thing must be pointed out, though. Wilson largely criticises, especially in her *Gut Feminism* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2015), the antibiologist bias in feminist and queer theory. She makes the case for the intra-action and codetermination of biology and culture, given that 'biology is not a synonym for determinism and sociality is not synonym for transformation' (p 9). While opening up an entire terrain of investigation into the materiality of sex and gender, into biology and the neurosciences, and into the importance of ontology over epistemology – all issues beyond the scope of my investigation – this argument does resonate with Sedgwick's remark about theory taking distance 'from a biological basis' (Sedgwick and Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold', p 496) as well as with postcritique's discontentment with critique's 'antinaturalist' ethos (Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp 73–74). These concerns, however, do not enter the project of a queer theory without antinormativity – or, at least, not the introduction to the special issue. Vicky Kirby's essay, in fact, wonders along Wilson's lines: 'is nature really culture, a human ideational manufacture/invention? […] [W]hat would happen if we were to reverse this statement's direction? Does a return to nature as origin and end imply that political arguments for change will prove impossible because norms and determinations are, as Butler feared, truly prohibitive? […] [W]ould biology inevitably prove to be destiny?' (Vicky Kirby, 'Transgression: Normativity's Self-Inversion,' *differences 26*(1), 2015, pp 96–116: 106). However, as I argue on pp 201–202 of this chapter, denaturalisation (and antibiologicism as its correlative) does not exactly capture the ethos of queer theory or, for that matter, Butler's own theory of gender performativity. Additionally, to address the alleged departure of queer critique and antinormativity from biology requires a set of concepts and competences beyond my capacities. One can obviously stop at the oft-tired question '"[w]hat about the materiality of the body, *Judy*?"' (Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. London & New York: Routledge, 1993, p ix. Italics in the original), but that would simply not do justice to either the complexity of Butler's conceptualisation of bodies or the (new) materialist turn embraced by Wilson.

[874] Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. See also chapter 1 of this dissertation, p 89. I follow José E Muñoz, who, while commenting on *Object Lessons*, says that he 'prefer[s] "minoritarian"

the procedures underlying each and every minority field of knowledge and guides the movement from one field to the next. Gender studies, in Wiegman's account, is born out of the dissatisfaction of women's studies practitioners with 'women', as well as with the impossibility for the latter to fulfil the (progressive) political promises opened up by 'gender'.[875] Queer theory follows a similar path, as it critically departs from both feminist theory and lesbian and gay studies by questioning the coherence and ahistoricity of sexual identities. Importantly, 'women', 'gender', and 'queer' are *objects* onto which, according to Wiegman, the practitioners of minority knowledges project their fantasies of emancipation and progress.[876] In this logic, critique functions as a

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to "identity" knowledge' (José E Muñoz, 'Hope in the Face of Heartbreak' (2013), in Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, pp 207–213: 212). I stick to Ferguson's (and Muñoz's) terminology instead of Wiegman's in this dissertation despite the fact that neither 'minority knowledges' nor 'identity knowledges' manages to fully capture the conglomerate of women's, gender, queer, trans, ethnic, American, and other studies. To cast women as a minority is possibly as incorrect as to misrecognise queer as being (only) about identity. However, when choosing between these two inevitably faltering signifiers – 'minority' and 'identity' – I prefer to emphasise the fact that such studies result from the accession of minority or minoritised social groups into the realm of knowledge production over the fact that these social groups' claim to knowledge are marked by identity. Additionally, my choice to centre on 'minority' reflects Kant's argument that the state of minority or 'tutelage' human beings are kept at is not a matter of numbers (i.e., its antonym is not 'majority'), but it coincides with the condition of captivity (i.e., its antonym is 'freedom'). About this argument, see chapter 1 of this dissertation, p 67.

[875] For a discussion of the shift from women's to gender studies, see the chapter 'Doing Justice with Objects. Or, the "Progress" of Gender' (Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, pp 36–90).

[876] Wiegman's use of 'object' instead of such equivalent terms as 'concept' or 'category' is crucial, not only because 'object' features in the title of her book, but also because it losely hints at object relations theory: a psychoanalytic perspective largely inspired to Melanie Klein, which takes people's attachments to objects – be they external things, inner representations, or other people – to be constitutive of their sense of identity. Wiegman, however, clarifies from the start that she does not intend to take part in a psychoanalytic discussion: 'I remain deaf to psychoanalysis still', she declares, because 'at no point […] do I review, argue, or align myself with specific psychoanalytic authorities' (Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 18). Accordingly, her '*object relations* is not, then, a theoretical commitment to a distinct body of psychoanalytic thought': by object, she means 'to designate targets of study that reflect a seemingly material existence in the world (as in people, good, laws, books, or films) and those that do not reveal such materiality in any immediately graspable way (as in discourse, ideology, history, personhood, the unconscious, and desire itself)'; by relation, she means 'the constitutive dependence of one thing on another, such that no critical practice can be considered the consequence of its own singular agencies' (p

mechanism that creates, in Wiegman's words, political and theoretical 'divergences' (as when a gap widens between those attached to lesbian and gay studies and those moving towards a queer approach) as well as 'convergences' (as when a new term such as 'queer' is taken to comprise progressive claims that exceed the boundaries of sexual dissidence – including, for instance, racial and class justice).[877] In this sense, critique is not something one can easily do without, and even if one did, 'there [would] be no way to arrive into a newer version of the field' sheltered from further criticisms, Wiegman says.[878] Within this frame, two definitions begin to emerge: that of critique in general as a "rhetorical and methodological staple of [minority] knowledge domains"[879] which produces convergencies and divergencies and invests new objects with the promise of political transformation, and that of queer theory as a form of minority knowledge – one shaped around 'a divergentist critique of both feminist and gay and lesbian studies'.[880]

What is queer studies in this conceptual landscape, for Wiegman? And how does it differ from queer theory? To answer these questions, antinormativity becomes crucial. The inception of queer theory at the turn of 1990s in the U.S. academy, according to Wiegman, originated not from a critique of normativity, but from the critique of identity and the divergence from lesbian and gay studies. Normativity was indeed essential to

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20). Notice that Wiegman often talks about 'objects and analytics' throughout *Object Lessons*, thus adding to *what* 'we' study a focus on *how* 'we' approach it.

[877] See, in particular, the second chapter of *Object Lessons* (pp 91–136). Wiegman borrows this lexicon from Janet Halley's *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006). For Halley, a convergence happens when 'whatever comes into conflict [is] harmoni[sed] into a [single] frame (p 26). On the other hand, a divergence happens when a single frame 'is prepared to see political splits and split decisions within itself (p 26). Clearly, as the title of her work reads, Halley's focus is on the divergencies – within feminism as well as between feminist theory and queer theory. Wiegman, who is enormously inspired by Halley, radicalises the latter's terminology in order to 'pursue divergence as something more than a theoretical predilection' (Robyn Wiegman, 'Dear Ian', *Duke Journal of Gender, Law, and Policy 11*(7), 2004, pp 93–120: 103). Divergence, for Wiegman, 'is not an option within nor a mere effect of institutionalisation; it is the very act of institutionalisation: the critical motion of political change' (p 103).

[878] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 335.

[879] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 302.

[880] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 329.

discern 'sexuality's travels across networks of power', but it was *not* definitional of the emerging field.[881] Accordingly, Wiegman and Wilson call attention to the fact that Sedgwick's *Epistemology*, Butler's *Gender Trouble*, and de Lauretis' introduction to the 1991 special issue of *differences* feature an anti-homophobic commitment, an understanding of sexuality as imbricated in the heterosexual matrix, and the necessity to draw differences in terms of race, class, generational, geographical, and socio-political location between – and within – lesbians and gays.[882] None of these foundational texts, however, makes the case for antinormativity as such.[883] It is queer studies what puts antinormativity at the centre:

> in accommodating identity's irresolution in queer theory, queer studies dispenses the sign of the *queer* across the incommensurate registers that comprise its social and intellectual itineraries – and with far less debate, consternation, or critical stress than in the past. […] [Q]ueer has come to be wielded, even in critique, as a term of mobility and dereferentialisation while also collating a host of identificatory projects (including those that render *it* as a category of identity). […] Through its own self-animating antinormative intentions, then, queer studies gets to have its cake and it eat too: […] it can fulfil queer theory's anti-identitarian commitments while proliferating identity commitments of its own; it can refuse institutionality while participating in and generating its own institutionalised forms.[884]

Notice that the impartial tone of *Object Lessons* – a study in field formation aimed to analyse the shifts from one politically-invested object to another – crumbles before the

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[881] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 329.

[882] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*; Teresa de Lauretis, 'Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities. An Introduction', *differences 3*(2), 1991, pp iii–xviii.

[883] Wiegman writes: '[w]hile Michael Warner deployed the concept [of heteronormativity] first in 1991, its analytic origin is routinely traced to critical developments the year before, when two books changed the way [minority] knowledges would figure gender and sexuality as objects of study altogether. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve K Sedgwick offered a theoretical understanding of sexuality that measured the force of heterosexuality's disciplinary compulsion without conforming to it, while Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* […] critiqued 'the heterosexual matrix' that attended familiar feminist approaches to gender' (Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 303).

[884] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, pp 330–332. Italics in the original.

antinormative ethos of queer studies. The latter, to Wiegman, 'gets to have its cake and eat it too' because it extends '*queer* across incommensurate registers': in so doing, it resolves a set of antinomies (the refusal of institutionality and the institutionalisation that queer studies undergoes; an anti-identitarian commitment and the proliferation of identities that the signifier 'queer' promotes) under the banner of antinormativity.[885] Wiegman does not claim that antinormativity has nothing to do with queer theory: what she claims is that only in queer studies antinormativity becomes definitional of the field.

The fact that Wiegman and Wilson call to rethink queer *theory* beyond antinormativity and not queer *studies* is rather consequential. While queer studies' 'precondition for [its own] self-constitution and managed incoherence' is to be cast against normativity,[886] queer theory can return normativity to the status of object of investigation, divesting it of its imperative to 'circumscribe[…] a domain of inquiry […], define[…] its political aim, and route[…] practitioners to the horizons, habits, and formulations thus inscribed'.[887] Wiegman and Wilson's deployment of 'theory' appears to be different from the definition explored in the previous chapter, according to which the term signifies stagnation. It is also different from the postcritical use of it, whereby 'theory' and 'critique' are equated, and the status of 'studies' is left unproblematised.[888] But, if critique is configured as the very engine of minority knowledges, then does Wiegman and Wilson's project of a queer theory without antinormativity entail a project of a queer theory *without critique*? In other words, to what extent can a queer theory without antinormativity be understood as a variation on postcritique?

In order to search for an answer, let me go back, once again, to Wiegman's conceptualisation of critique. The latter, to her, is 'a world-building political agency'[889] that animates minority fields of knowledge and puts forward new objects on which progressive political fantasies can be projected. Critique, in this sense, is strictly related

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[885] Both antinomies are explored in chapter 1 of this dissertation: p 50 (about identity) and p 89 (about institutionalisation).

[886] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 334.

[887] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 334.

[888] In fact, Felski locates her postcritical project squarely within the field of literary and cultural *studies*.

[889] Robyn Wiegman, 'Wishful Thinking', *Feminist Formations* 25(3), 2013, pp 202–213: 205.

to minority knowledges; queer critique, accordingly, is the propulsive mechanism at work in both queer theory and queer studies. Antinormativity is thus configured as one of the most pugnacious shapes that queer critique takes: so much so that 'the prevailing presupposition' among queer scholars is that 'a critique of normativity marks the spot where *queer* and *theory* meet'.[890] But it is indeed *one* shape: the moving force of the field is not antinormativity, but critique. As such, the latter inevitably exceeds the boundaries of the antinormative imperative even when it is constrained by them. Wiegman writes,

> in the consolidation of queer 'studies' as an institutionalised project of antinormativity, queer critique has undergone its most sustained and confounding normalisation, one that operates to define the contours of the field and the core critical grammar that drives its political intentions – all this, no matter the fact that the core feature of the field's contemporary self-definition pivots on its commitment to a liberating body of critical reflection, one that promises to resituate the social, psychic, and historical complexity of sex and sexuality on antinormative terrain.[891]

Here, Wiegman underscores a crucial contradiction. Queer studies is grounded in the commitment to criticising normative configurations of sex and gender. However, by institutionalising this critique (the institutional life of minority knowledges, for Wiegman, is a *fait accompli*), its carries out its 'most sustained and confounding normalisation'. In queer studies, in sum, queer critique is a synonym for the struggle against normativity, and the struggle against normativity, in turn, is normalised 'as the single most important disciplinary norm for critical legibility in the field'.[892] Wiegman refuses to align with those who, 'in a rather nostalgic embrace of [queer studies'] founding radicality', lament its normalisation.[893] In *Object Lessons*, she is uninterested in restoring the fantasmatic radical character of queer critique at its origins. This is not

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[890] Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', p 1. Wiegman and Wilson's project can also be rephrased as an attempt to let 'queer' and 'theory' meet on a different terrain than the critique of normativity.

[891] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, pp 305–306.

[892] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 334.

[893] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 306, footnote 8. Wiegman's targets are: David M Halperin, 'The Normalisation of Queer Studies', *Journal of Homosexuality 45*(2–4), 2003, pp 339–343; David L Eng, 'Queering the Black Atlantic, Queering the Brown Atlantic', *GLQ 17*(1), 2010, pp 193–204.

exactly the same as what happens in her and Wilson's 'Queer Theory without Antinormativity', committed to rethinking queer theory through a different – perhaps originary – understanding of normativity, normalisation, and norms.[894]

Wiegman and Wilson's project seems to resonate with the postcritical reassessment of critique beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion and in order to acquire 'a more nuanced vision of how political change comes about'.[895] However, when asked about postcritique, Wiegman sees it as an endeavour 'staked to an ethics of *reading*'.[896] She thus locates postcritique within literary studies and concludes that her interest lies elsewhere: namely, in understanding 'why critique has become *the* central figure' in current feminist and queer debates.[897] Much as her account is correct, Wiegman's refusal to see a possible 'convergence' (do deploy her own terminology) between a queer theory without antinormativity and postcritique is a bit rushed. Postcritique, in fact, does not 'cast the debate in strictly oppositional terms, as if one must be "for" or "against" critique',[898] as Wiegman contends. Nor does postcritique claim that 'it is time to be after [critique]'.[899] Instead, just like Felski in the literary field, Wiegman aims at

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[894] For a detailed discussion of these terms as they emerge in Wiegman and Wilson, see pp 241–243 of this same section.

[895] Anker and Felski, 'Introduction', p 15.

[896] Wiegman and Peltonen, 'Investigating Desires', p 1. Italics in the original.

[897] Wiegman and Peltonen, 'Investigating Desires', p 2. Italics in the original. On whether *Object Lessons* is a critical work or not, Wiegman offers contradictory inputs. She states: '*Object Lessons* is not […] a critique' (Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 34). But, a few lines before, she also states: '*Object Lessons* is not an argument against critique as much as an encounter with its excessive reach' (p 33). And critique itself, she writes elsewhere, is 'neither a mode of judgement nor a form of criticism, but rather a practice aimed at analysing the very conditions of legibility in which the social world "appears" at all' (Wiegman, 'Wishful Thinking', p 207), pretty much in line with Butler's understanding of critique analysed in chapter 2 of this dissertation, p 159.

[898] Wiegman and Peltonen, 'Investigating Desires', p 2.

[899] Dean and Wiegman, 'What Does Critique Want?', p 107. This conversation predates the publication of Felski's *The Limits of Critique*: thus, it addresses not postcritique as such, but a wide range of discontents with the hermeneutics of suspicion in literary studies and the concomitant turn to the reparative by 'Rita Felski, Stephen Best, and Sharon Marcus' (p 114). Additionally, it rightly locates those discontents in the footsteps of Sedgwick's reparative. 'I wouldn't say that reparative readers are naïve about politics', Wiegman registers, 'but that, in lowering the heat of their political claims, they are trying to find a value

'pars[ing] the utility and limit of critique' in fields of minority knowledge.[900] Furthermore, Wiegman's will to understand 'when our habits become routine'[901] and 'to interrupt […] a reification of the complexity of politics in the name of being political'[902] – antinormativity being the name of both the routinising of critical habits and the reifying of politics – is strikingly similar to Felski's unease with the habits of critique and the iteration of sociological categories to signal political relevance.[903] Wiegman, in sum, correctly frames postcritique as an attempt at exploring alternative modes of reading, but she overlooks its ambitions in relation to knowledge production and political investment. To recognise these ambitions is my first step in bringing the two projects – of a queer theory without antinormativity and of postcritique – close to each other.[904]

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for contemporary criticism they can (still) believe in' (p 113). She and Dean share with reparative readers an exhaustion with critique. 'But as much as we are exhausted by [it]', they say, 'we are also against the proposition that it is time to be *after* it, as if the ways that critique has been worn out or abused are its fault alone' (p 107. Italics in the original).

[900] Wiegman and Peltonen, 'Investigating Desires', p 2.

[901] Wiegman and Peltonen, 'Investigating Desires', p 4.

[902] Wiegman, 'Wishful Thinking', p 206.

[903] These two arguments are developed in the first and second section of this chapter.

[904] To be sure, Anker and Felski ('Introduction', p 13) misrepresent Wiegman's project as well. 'The 20th century', they write, 'witnessed an intensifying affinity between critique and the ethos of the avant-garde: that is to say, an ever greater emphasis on critique's oppositional, marginal, and embattled status and a concomitant distrust of any form of institutionalisation as a sign of co-optation. This history is reanimated in one recent objection to critique: the claim that critique has been normalised, domesticated, or defanged through its own popularity. The sheer success of critique in disseminating and reproducing itself, in this line of thought, is a sign of its ultimate failure: no longer marginal, it is now part of the mainstream, at least within academia. […] For Robyn Wiegman, American studies confronts a conundrum – namely, that it continues to look to critique for social and political transformation despite the wholesale institutionalisation of critique as a methodology. Such objections, while forceful and impassioned, also reveal a continuing commitment to the ethos of critique: contemporary forms of reading and reasoning are called to account for being insufficiently radical or oppositional. The ideals of critique are thus invoked in order to accuse critique of licensing or being oblivious to its own compromised and co-opted status'. Here, Anker and Felski refer to 'Refusing Identification': a chapter of *Object Lessons* which analyses the critical engine at work in a 'bad' rather than 'good' object of minority knowledge: that is, 'America' as it is configured in American studies. *Contra* Anker and Felski, however, Wiegman (*Object Lessons*) distances herself from positions that denounce the co-optation of minority studies by the neoliberal

In the wake of postcritique, I suggest to interpret Wiegman and Wilson's project as voicing a discontent with how queer critique crystallises into a critique of (hetero)normativity, turning the latter into an unquestioned assumption rather than an object of inquiry for the field and, additionally, lending an immediate political relevance to it, regardless of the incommensurability between 'our' concepts and the political work 'we' want them to do.[905] In the chapter 'The Vertigo of Critique' of *Object Lessons*,[906] Wiegman recalls a presentation she intended – and failed – to deliver on today's proliferation of what she sees as a desire for gender transitivity: i.e., a desire for 'cross-sex, androgyny', as Sedgwick has it,[907] or for '[o]pen, unapologetic,

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academia and lament their institutionalisation. *Object Lessons*, she says, 'is not a diagnosis of complicity, since that diagnosis is staked to the possibility of arriving into a conceptual if not material relation where complicity is not. For this reason, [it] has spent no time lamenting institutionalisation or arguing that with just the right object of study, critical concept, or analytic perspective, the routes and routines of critical practice can be disarticulated from the disciplinary apparatus that now governs and reproduces identity-based fields' (p 237).

[905] As we will see in the 'coda' of the dissertation, it is Muñoz ('Hope in the Face of Heartbreak', p 289) who points out Wiegman's use of the first-person plural in *Object Lessons*.

[906] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, pp 301–343. Previous versions of this chapter appeared as: Robyn Wiegman, 'Heteronormativity and the Desire for Gender', *Feminist Theory 7*(1), 2006, pp 89–103; Robyn Wiegman, 'The Desire for Gender', in G E Haggerty & M McGarry (eds), *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*. Malden, MA, Oxford & Carlton, AU: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, pp 217–236.

[907] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p 88. On the idea of gender transitivity/intransitivity as it appears in Sedgwick, see chapter 2 of this dissertation, p 139. As Marianne Liljeström says, Wiegman's discussion, located at the intersection of queer and trans studies, 'continu[es] to elaborate on [Sedgwick's] terms' (Marianne Liljeström, 'Feminism and Queer. Temporal Complexities', *SQS: Journal of Queer Studies in Finland 13*(1–2), 2019, pp 23–38: 28). It is perhaps worth recalling Sedgwick's argument once again. In Liljeström's summary, Sedgwick 'points out that a gendering of homosexual desire can be dealt with through two oppositional understandings: first, a transitive understanding according to which desire originates in a threshold space between gender categories, and second, a separatist, intransitive understanding, according to which desire's expression is either masculinity or femininity' (p 28). Wiegman borrows from Sedgwick the gender transitivity/intransitivity divide, meant to designate the two ends between which definitions of homosexual desire are comprised, and substantialises it by introducing the *desire* to uphold to either end.

nonconforming gender', in Wiegman's update of Sedgwick's terminology.[908] Wiegman's hypothesis back then, pretty much in line with queer theory, was that the proliferation of this desire signals a widespread refusal of heteronormativity. The latter, for her, 'was the reference and the text against which queer gender did its most inventive, antinormative, and decidedly transitive work'.[909] Thus conceived, however, heteronormativity is nothing but a 'compulsion' that conflates gender with sex and makes the former 'not simply tacitly, but definitely *intransitive*'.[910] In Patricia Elliot's summary of Wiegman's point, 'in requiring an […] heteronormative gender as a consistent object of critique, queer theory entrenches the fantasy that femininity belongs naturally to women and masculinity to men, if only to oppose it'.[911]

But, Wiegman wonders,

> [h]ow precisely was dimorphic gender – the allocation of two sexes as two genders – intransitive? […] [W]hat historical conditions generated the rendition of gender I was citing, in which sex was to be dimorphically conceived, and why was I willing to take *that* particular traffic in embodiment and identity as intransitivity?[912]

Here, Wiegman reflects on her own failure to properly account for the proliferation of the desire for gender transitivity. She does so by considering that the kind of intransitivity heteronormativity installs is but one reified form that gender transitivity has taken at some point in time. If gender intransitivity is an instance of a 'particular traffic in embodiment and identity' – that is, if it results from a specific configuration of gender – then there may be, in absolute terms, no gender intransitivity at all, but only historical concretions and sedimentations of gender's intrinsic openness, variability, and, in fact, *transitivity*. Accordingly, Wiegman concludes that

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[908] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 308.

[909] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 317.

[910] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 317. Italics are mine.

[911] Patricia Elliot, *Debates in Transgender, Queer, and Feminist Theory. Contested Sites*. Farnham & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010, p 153.

[912] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 318. Italics in the original.

gender is constitutively, inherently transitive: […] [w]hatever fixity it seems to achieve […] does not render it intransitive […]. To assume otherwise, especially within queer critique, might say more about a desire for the political reach of the concept of heteronormativity than about a distinction (between transitivity and intransitivity) that properly accrues to gender itself.[913]

To be sure, the veracity of this conclusion is quite undisputed in queer studies: a field that knows very well that gender is constantly traded across time *and* that the dimporphic allocation of two sexes as two genders is a particular historical rendition. In accounting for her failure, Wiegman, in my postcritical reading of *Object Lessons*, is parsing the critical routines of the queer theoretical field more than disputing its assumptions. What she counters is neither the concept of heteronormativity nor the gender-intransitive work it does, but the crystallisation of heteronormativity as a gender-intransitive agency at the expense of the inherent transitivity of gender.

Wiegman's argument is built against the background of a transgender critique of queer theory. Not only does a transgender critique emphasise the irreducible transitivity of gender, Wiegman says, but it also refuses to 'forward queer as a[n] […] inclusivist' (or, we can say, convergentist) noun, as well as to 'call every […] alignment of sex and gender heteronormative'.[914] Ki Namaste's work charging queer theory – and Butler's theory of gender performativity in particular – for allegorising transsexuality and perpetuating the 'distortion of transgender realities' can be considered an example of such refusal.[915] According to Wiegman, this and other critical moves serve, among other things, to create a divergence between queer studies and transgender studies, so that the latter consolidates itself vis-à-vis the domain it intends to overcome.[916] However, just

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[913] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, pp 319–320.

[914] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 322.

[915] Ki Namaste, '"Tragic Misreadings": Queer Theory's Erasure of Transgender Subjectivity', in B Beemyn & M Eliason (eds), *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology*. New York: New York University Press, 1996, pp 183–203: 188.

[916] Wiegman explains this divergence with the reference to Susan Stryker's 'Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin' (*GLQ 10*(2), 2004, pp 212–215): 'Stryker […] figures the difference between queer theory and transgender studies in such performative gusto that readers of *Object Lessons* will no doubt experience déjà vu. She writes, "If queer theory was born of the union of sexuality studies and feminism,

like Wiegman's aim is neither 'to subordinate the content of the critique of queer theory in trans scholarship nor merely to append some of the most urgent recent debates to a tableau of prior critique and field-forming successions'[917] my own aim is neither to make an intervention in transgender studies nor to track the chain of divergences between minority fields of knowledge. Rather, I want to pause on the 'desire for the political reach of the concept of heteronormativity' showcased above, which I believe is crucial in order to understand Wiegman and Wilson's discontent with the antinormative imperative in queer theory.

If, as Wiegman contends, gender is always open, variable, and 'constitutively' transitive, then the kind of intransitivity produced by heteronormativity is nothing but the temporary fixing of gender in dimorphic terms. But, cannot the same be said about heteronormativity? Just as gender intransitivity is a temporary fixity, so must be the entity that produces it. The fixity of both heteronormativity and the intransitive gender emanating from it 'might say more about a desire for the political reach of the concept of heteronormativity' than about heteronormativity itself, to paraphrase Wiegman. For her, the critical pursuit of an object of study – be it heteronormativity or gender – 'is never different from the critical desire invested in it'.[918] More to the point: the queer critique of heteronormativity is less the 'emblem of political good'[919] than the expression of one's desire for that object – heteronormativity or gender – to do the political work one wants it to do. Both heteronormativity and gender, however,

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transgender studies can be considered queer theory's evil twin: it has the same parentage but wilfully disrupts the privileged family narratives that favour sexual identity labels (like *gay, lesbian, bisexual*, and *heterosexual*) over the gender categories (like *man* and *woman*) that enable desire to take shape and find its aim". The reproductive language that Stryker uses here to authorise the divergence between trans and queer mimics queer theory's earlier deployment as the term for critically transcending feminism and its various discourses of gender normativity. When Stryker writes, then, that transgender studies investigate "forms of embodiment and subjectivity that do not readily reduce to heteronormativity, yet that largely fall outside the analytic framework of sexual identity that so dominates queer theory", it is not surprising that transgender studies is offered as the emergent emblem to fulfil the "radical queer potential" that queer theory cannot' (Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, pp 320–321. Italics in the original).

[917] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 322.

[918] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 325.

[919] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 324.

inevitably fall short of their political promises: at this point, the ambition to perform 'political good' is displaced onto a new and more promising object.[920] In Wiegman's words:

> [w]henever we constitute a [minority] object of study, we are trafficking in a desire for critical practice to do emancipatory work. If we find ourselves disappointed that our objects and analytics do not live up to what we need from them, as we inevitably do, the problem we face cannot be resolved simply by finding something new.[921]

Here, Wiegman points to the 'incommensurability between political movements and theoretical projects'[922] – i.e., between minority knowledges and the political reach of their objects and analytics. When the latter fail, the solution, for Wiegman, is not to displace one's political wishes onto 'something new'. But, if one is disappointed with her or his objects and analytics, and if concomitantly she or he recognises that the solution does not lie in projecting the desire for emancipation onto 'something new', then what is left to be done? To put it in the terms of a queer theory without antinormativity: if the queer critic is disappointed with both the canonical object (normativity) and the privileged analytic (the critique thereof) of the queer theoretical field, is there a solution other than the illusion of finding new and more promising objects and analytics?

Whereas Wiegman's *Object Lessons* puts forward the desire for gender transitivity less as an answer to this question than a desire that pertains to queer theory at large (something beyond the scope of this dissertation), Wiegman and Wilson's 'Queer Theory without Antinormativity' puts forward a conception of norms, normativity, and normalisation which is not exactly 'new', for it looks back at the very roots of queer

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[920] 'Condensing this into the terms of an object lesson would entail repeating this: that the consolidation of any identity form into the figural fulfilment of the political desire that brings it into being is tentative and transitory, the site not only of on-going revision and differentiation, and of optimism and attachment, but of predictable disappointment, if not at times political despair. Such affective failure is […] necessary […], in part because it restores the horizon of possibility by delivering optimism for new objects or analytics to achieve the political resolution invested in them' (Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 322).

[921] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 337.

[922] Wiegman, 'Heteronormativity and the Desire for Gender', p 92.

theory. Hinging more decidedly on a disciple of Foucault – François Ewald – than on Foucault himself, Wiegman and Wilson suggest conceiving of norms not as rules or 'juridical constraints', but as averages or 'a set of measurements, comparisons, adjudications, and regulations'.[923] An average, they argue, 'is the measurement of every member' of a group.[924] Norms thus conceived are equalising, because, as Ewald contends, they make 'each individual comparable to all others'.[925] To say so is not the same as to argue that norms are egalitarian: on the contrary, they work through differentiation and individualisation. To borrow from Ewald once again,

> the norm affirms the equality of individuals just as surely as it makes apparent the infinite differences among them. […] The norm is not totalitarian but individualising; it allows individuals to make claims on the basis of their individuality and permits them to lead their particular lives. However, despite the strength of various individual claims, no one of them can escape the common standard.[926]

In equalising individuals by measuring and comparing them according to a common standard, norms are *normalising*. Concomitantly, the functioning of norms is not random, but systemic: '[w]hen the norm appears, it establishes itself necessarily as an order: *the normative order* that characterises modern societies'.[927] Following Ewald's conceptual leap from norms to normalisation and normativity, Wiegman and Wilson conclude that there is no place or position divested of norms, that there is no absolute escape from processes of normalisation, and that 'normativity is a structure of proliferations':

> some of these normative proliferations duplicate already existing terms, some twist those terms or minimise or amplify or warp them. None of them definitively breaks with the systematicity that they are.[928]

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[923] Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', p 15.

[924] Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', p 15. Italics in the original.

[925] François Ewald, 'Norms, Discipline, and the Law', *Representations 30*, 1990, pp 138–161: 154.

[926] Ewald, 'Norms, Discipline, and the Law', p 154.

[927] Ewald, 'Norms, Discipline, and the Law', p 153. Italics in the original. See also: Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', p 17.

[928] Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', p 17.

Accordingly, Wiegman and Wilson wonder what becomes of antinormativity if norms are taken to generate 'the conditions of differentiation that antinormativity so urgently seeks'.[929] By way of an example rather than a full-fledged answer, they suggest that the proliferation of gender identifications – 'Facebook's expansive list of fifty-something gender designations', for instance – is neither a frontal assault on heteronormative conventions nor (just) a marketing strategy, but 'one more wrinkle in the fabric of […] normativity'.[930] In the language of *Object Lessons*, we may say that the queer desire for gender transitivity, exemplified by Facebook's fifty-plus gender options, challenges heteronormativity in a way that is hardly legible in oppositional terms. Such desire is not cast against an alleged desire for gender intransitivity: after all, there is no gender intransitivity as such, according to Wiegman, but only historical renditions of an always-transitive gender. Rather, the queer desire for gender transitivity emerges within the ranks of a normativity understood as a structure of proliferation, differentiation, and individualisation. 'If we want to call [this] system[…] *heteronormative*', Wiegman and Wilson conclude, 'we must keep in mind that what is "hetero" about [it] is not [its] insistence on the rule of two (man and woman […]), but [its] barely containable, ever mobile hetero-geneity'.[931]

Much as Wiegman and Wilson attempt to reconfigure antinormativity as a breach in – instead of a departure from – normativity, thus breaking with a totalising conception of norms, normalisation, and (of course) normativity, their reconfiguration is not problem-free. In this section, I have read the introduction to Wiegman and Wilson's special issue along with Wiegman's *Object Lessons* in order to emphasise the theoretical and political openings of a queer theory without antinormativity. In the next section, I am going to focus on a few theoretical and political objections that this same proposal has received.

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[929] Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', p 16.

[930] Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', p 16.

[931] Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', p 17.

3.4 A queer theory without antinormativity (II): objections and counterobjections

That Wiegman and Wilson's provocation sparked controversy is all but unexpected. In September 2015, three months after the special issue on 'Queer Theory without Antinormativity' appeared, prominent queer scholars Lisa Duggan and Jack Halberstam published two blog posts on *Bully Bloggers*.[932] According to them, the project of a queer theory without antinormativity makes a straw man ('straw womyn')[933] out of queer scholarship. Duggan, for instance, points out that many post-2000 works in queer studies abandon the idea that queer politics is intrinsically oppositional, and that Wiegman and Wilson conveniently overlook them.[934] Halberstam, on his part, argues that many of the authors charged with antinormativity do actually champion an understanding of norms similar to the one Wiegman and Wilson advocate for.[935] According to Duggan, a queer theory without antinormativity is a mode of 'queer complacency' that refuses to see how 'statistical norms', hailed by Wiegman and Wilson as the solution to all queer evils, are imbued with a racist and imperial history.[936] For Halberstam, it is an attempt at abandoning antinormativity which can easily drift into 'straight thinking' and political 'acquiescence'.[937]

Duggan's and Halberstam's interventions echo the critiques of postcritique analysed in the second section of this chapter. They accuse Wiegman and Wilson of upholding the

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[932] Jack Halberstam, 'Straight Eye For the Queer Theorist – A Review of "Queer Theory Without Antinormativity"', *Bully Bloggers*, 12 September 2015, np, https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2015/09/12/straight-eye-for-the-queer-theorist-a-review-of-queer-theory-without-antinormativity-by-jack-halberstam/ (accessed on 10 January 2022); Lisa Duggan, 'Queer Complacency without Empire', *Bully Bloggers*, 22 September 2015, np, https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2015/09/22/queer-complacency-without-empire/ (accessed on 10 January 2022).

[933] Halberstam, 'Straight Eye For the Queer Theorist', np.

[934] Duggan, 'Queer Complacency without Empire', np.

[935] Halberstam, 'Straight Eye For the Queer Theorist', np.

[936] Duggan, 'Queer Complacency without Empire', np.

[937] Halberstam, 'Straight Eye For the Queer Theorist', np.

status quo (if not racism and imperialism), of caricaturising queer theory, and of adding nothing new to the queer theoretical field. Likewise, Felski is accused of upholding the status quo (if not plain reactionism), of caricaturising critique, and of adding nothing new to the debate around critique, in literary studies and beyond. In this sense, a queer theory without antinormativity shares with postcritique not just the promise to escape 'our' critical routines, but also the pitfalls that 'a break' from critique may entail.[938] Instead of focusing on these arguments, which are more polemical than critical, I prefer to look at Samuel A. Chambers' extensive account of Wiegman and Wilson's problematicity as it is spelled out in 'On Norms and Oppositions' (2017).[939] This will allow me to formulate my own idea about the politics of a queer theory without antinormativity: one that, critically, recognises the intellectual shortcomings of the project while applauding, postcritically, the denunciation that certain queer critical tropes (such as, in fact, antinormativity) may run out of steam.

When presenting Wiegman and Wilson's project, Chambers usefully clarifies that a queer theory without antinormativity is not a queer theory *pro* normativity, but one *against* antinormativity.[940] This means that Wiegman and Wilson's is not a Habermasian quest for providing queer theory with normative foundations,[941] but a reminder that queer theory sould emphasise the proliferating rather than constricting force of norms. Yet, Wiegman and Wilson's formulation of such norms, for Chambers, is highly disputable. First off, he suggests that Ewald, to whom Wiegman and Wilson largely refer, can hardly be considered a queer Foucauldian. Much as his conception of normativity is shaped around Foucault's, there is a significant gap between the two, and not just because Ewald has now become 'the house intellectual of the French insurance

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[938] I am paraphrasing the subtitle of Halley's *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism*.

[939] Samuel A Chambers, 'On Norms and Oppositions', *No Foundations: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Law and Justice 14* (2017), pp 1–26.

[940] Chambers, 'On Norms and Oppositions', p 5.

[941] On queer theory and normativity, see chapter 1 of this dissertation, pp 77–79.

industry'.[942] According to Chambers, whereas Foucault has a critical take on norms, Ewald sees them – as well as normalisation itself – 'as the central element of an all-inclusive, modern, and fundamentally democratic society'.[943] In their rendition of his take on norms as averages, Wiegman and Wilson eschew the political motive behind Ewald's account, thus running the risk of siding with a 'thoroughly conservative' political stance grounded on the societal importance of normalisation.[944] Following Chambers, one can say that the project of a queer theory without antinormativity, just like that of a postcritique, should craft its political stakes more carefully in order not to drift toward a rhetoric of normalisation that does not suit a queer theoretic.

Chambers' second and perhaps main problem with Wiegman and Wilson concerns their conflation of three terms – norms, normativity, and normalisation – that do not mean the same. Norms, to him, cannot be reduced to statistical measurements. Take gender and sexual norms, for instance: they are '*enforced by being built into social ethics, laws, customs, traditions, expectations, and even physical structures*', writes Chambers.[945] Accordingly, normativity connotes 'a distribution understood to be […] proper, truthful, and/or right'.[946] Because norms involve 'a principle of valorisation'[947] (as Ewald recognises but Wiegman and Wilson seemingly elide), normativity results less from the distribution of statistical averages than from the distribution of values – i.e., from the allocation of what is 'proper, truthful, and/or right'. A focus on the distribution of values, Chambers says,

> lets us see a crucial distinction between, on the one hand, the bare fact of a normal distribution of some characteristics within a population – a simple norm – from [*sic*], on the other, the production of standards and ideals – a normative force.[948]

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[942] Michael C Behrent, 'Accidents Happen: François Ewald, the Anti-Revolutionary Foucault, and the Intellectual Politics of the French Welfare State', *The Journal of Modern History 82*(3), 2010, pp 585–624: 585.

[943] Chambers, 'On Norms and Oppositions', p 13.

[944] Chambers, 'On Norms and Oppositions', p. 19.

[945] Chambers, 'On Norms and Oppositions', p 16. Italics in the original.

[946] Chambers, 'On Norms and Oppositions', p 22.

[947] Ewald, 'Norms, Discipline, and the Law', p 140.

[948] Chambers, 'On Norms and Oppositions', p 17.

An example of such distinction, to take gender formations once again, is the one between the mere existence of gender norms and what Chambers calls the '*normative conception of appropriate or inappropriate gender*'.[949] Normativity, in sum, is much more than an adjective etymologically linked to norms.

Normalisation, in turn, is yet a different thing. Following Foucault rather than Ewald's mediation of Foucault's ideas, Chambers argues that norms are enforced by disciplinary regimes that determine what is normal and what is not. These regimes may not be bad in and by themselves, but they can certainly be dangerous and violent.

> To take a blunt example: the distribution of the population based on genitalia would *include* some portion of babies that are born either with both male and female genitalia or with ambiguous genitalia that cannot simply be categorised as distinctly male or female. That these babies are 'included' in the distribution does not serve as any sort of mitigating factor when it comes to consideration of the medical and political history of practices that have deemed them 'abnormal' and used their pathological status as the ground for sometimes violent medical intervention.[950]

Normalisation thusly conceived is 'more than normativity', for Chambers, because it comes to coincide with the 'enforcement, through disciplinary practices […], of the normative distribution' of the population, which perpetuates the polarity between normality and abnormality.[951] If a queer antinormative stance includes the countering of

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[949] Chambers, 'On Norms and Oppositions', p 17. Italics in the original.

[950] Chambers, 'On Norms and Oppositions', pp 17–18. Italics in the original.

[951] Chambers, 'On Norms and Oppositions', pp 22–23. Chambers is fully aware of the intricacies of 'normalisation' as it appears in Foucault, as well as of its distinction from 'normation'. 'Putting it schematically', he writes, 'we can say that initially Foucault mobilised the conceptual pair discipline/normalisation in order to capture the analytics of this new form of power […]. Yet after exploring the disciplines and their normalising practices for many years, Foucault came to the conclusion that something was missing: [i.e.,] "a new technology of power [that] *is not disciplinary*". […] Foucault calls this new [technology] *biopower*, [but he] is not exactly clear about how the distinction between disciplinary power and bipower relates to the question of norms. Luckily (or perhaps more confusingly, depending on one's perspective), in […] 1978, Foucault significantly clarified his terms by proposing a more subtle distinction between the power of normativity, on the one hand, and the force of

normalisation, then it ought not to be dismissed, unless one subscribes to the perpetuation and pathologisation of such polarity. Antinormativity, thus, is not just theoretically viable, for Chambers, but it becomes politically possible and necessary:

> One can reject, resist, and in general 'be against' certain forms of normativity and certain practices of normalisation, and doing so does not commit one to an untenable understanding of norms. To the contrary, in understanding the relation between norms, on the one hand, and normativity and normalisation, on the other, we see starkly how an 'antinormative' argument entails taking proper account of what Wiegman and Wilson point to as the dynamic, inclusive, and capacious character of norms.

Chambers, in sum, puts some order in Wiegman and Wilson's terminological conflation of norms, normativity, and normalisation, while arguing decidedly in favour of queer theory's antinormative ethos. To Chambers' argument, let me add my own, which connects to Wiegman and Wilson's account of the first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* as an instance of oppositionality or 'againstness'.

In the introduction to 'Queer Theory without Antinormativity', Wiegman and Wilson write:

> [o]ne of the first questions […] in [*The History of Sexuality Volume I*] is, 'Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?' […] If much of the queer critical interest in this question has been in relation to the problematic of repression, we would like to draw attention to the methodological stance that Foucault also queries here […]: 'against'… 'against'… 'against'. Every post-Foucauldian queer theorist understands that

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normalisation, on the other. [Thus], he differentiates the process of *normation* from that of normalisation. The former is effected by disciplines and centres on the norm as an ideal model, while the latter is carried out by security apparatuses (biopower) and functions by way of normal curves that map the distribution of populations […]. Notice that Foucault here gives a new name, *normation*, to the phenomena he had previously described as normalisation, while reserving the latter term strictly for a process tied up with biopower' (p 19. Italics in the original). Because Wiegman and Wilson nowhere talk about normation, Chambers follows *Discipline and Punish* when arguing for the normalising force of disciplinary practices, thus leaving Foucault's post-1978 developments aside.

the claim that sexuality has been repressed is caught in spirals of power-knowledge-pleasure that make such a claim an enactment of norms [...]. There has been much less attention paid, however, to the way in which an oppositional posture underwrites the repressive hypothesis. Even as it allies itself with Foucault, queer theory has maintained an attachment to the politics of oppositionality (against, against, against) that form the infrastructure of the repressive hypothesis.[952]

This summary of Foucault is enough evidence, for Wiegman and Wilson, of the 'oppositional posture' detectable not just in the first volume of *History of Sexuality*, but in queer studies at large. The will to 'againstness' sketched by Foucault, however, is less a sign of 'againstness' than the mark of hegemonic narratives around sexuality. His leading question, which Wiegman and Wilson avoid quoting in full,

is not, Why are we repressed? but rather, Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed? By what spiral did we come to affirm that sex is negated?[953]

The discourse of repression, for Foucault, forces us to say that sex is repressed and negated even in the face of its sedimentation in history ('our recent past'), its current proliferation ('our present'), and our own investment in talking about sex and making it central to our existence ('ourselves'). We should thus exit the spiral that takes sex to be repressed and say, *along* our recent past, *along* our present, and *along* ourselves, that we are *not* repressed – or at least, that we are *more* than just repressed. How this question maintains the infrastructure of the repressive hypothesis, as Wiegman and Wilson contend, is not clear, unless one is to give excessive agency to a preposition – 'against' – whose rhetorical function is to compel us to think 'along'.[954]

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[952] Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', pp 11–12.

[953] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, p 8–9.

[954] To be sure, postcritique thinks of critique as characterised by 'againstness' as well. As Felski writes, 'Critique's fundamental quality is that of "againstness", vindicating a desire to take a hammer, as Bruno Latour would say, to the beliefs and attachments of others. Faith is to be countered with scepticism; illusion yields to a sobering disenchantment; the fetish must be defetishised, the dream world stripped of its powers' (Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 129). While this could be an argument in favour of the similarity between postcritique and a queer theory without antinormativity, I am not convinced by the

While I disagree that the iteration of 'against' in the first volume of *History of Sexuality* is evidence of an oppositional posture, I do recognise that Foucault's notion of critique involves some degree of 'againstness'. As the first chapter of this dissertation has shown, critique is certainly the art of not being governed *comme ça* – what I take as the quintessential expression of Foucault's oppositional ethos – but it is equally the art of being governed (and governing oneself) *autrement*. Furthermore, Foucault's wish to see a criticism made of 'scintillating leaps of the imagination' and bearing 'the lightening of possible storms'[955] calls not for an oppositional, but for an affirmative and imaginative critique. In this sense, I prefer to follow Sedgwick's argument that Foucault seems to posit his critical genealogy of sexuality as a way 'of working outside of the repressive hypothesis', as the previous chapter has shown.[956] According to Sedgwick, it is not so much Foucault as the crystallisation of his critique – i.e., 'Foucault', to borrow from Felski – what turns certain critical practices into automatic gestures. The problem, in other words, has more to do with the routines of certain queer Foucauldians than with Foucault as such.

Let me go back to Chambers with the problem of 'our' queer critical routines in mind.

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gathering of all critique – or of all queer theory, for that matter – under the sign of 'againstness'. 'Is againstness really an accurate description of Marx? Freud? Derrida? Foucault? Judith Butler? Do these thinkers and those who take them seriously really spend their time repeating platitudes like "liberation from oppression?"', asks Robbins ('Fashion Conscious Phenomenon', p 5). Here, I choose to follow Sara Ahmed, who argues that queer 'wilfulness' is not quite the same as 'againstness'. 'Wilfulness might be an experience of coming up against. It is important, however, that we not reduce wilfulness to againstness. It is this reduction, after all, that allows the wilful subject to be dismissed, as if she is only going "the other way" because she is *for* being *against*' (Sara Ahmed, *Wilful Subjects*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2014, p 150. Italics in the original). Following Ahmed, we can say that the charge of 'againstness' is not only too facile – it can also be used to debunk postcritique as *merely* against critique and a queer theory without antinormativity as *merely* against antinormativity, for instance – but also dangerous, as it dismisses the political vision that queer theory and critics aspire to beyond an oppositional posture.

[955] Michel Foucault, 'The Masked Philosopher' (1980), in M Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings of Michel Foucault 1977–1984*. London: Routledge, 1988, pp 323–330: 326. See also pp 27–28 of this dissertation.

[956] See chapter 2 of this dissertation, p 167.

Wiegman and Wilson argue that 'antinormative arguments […] tend to immobilise the activity of norms',[957] but arguments, Chambers says, cannot certainly immobilise anything, because they have no such power. Neither can arguments 'dislodge a politics of motility and relationality in favour of a politics of insubordination', as Wiegman and Wilson contend.[958] Most crucially, for Chambers, Wiegman and Wilson are plainly wrong when they state that 'these lifeless norms (e.g., heteronormativity) don't stand prior to our antinormative analyses, awaiting diagnosis; rather, they are one of our own inventions'[959] 'This last claim', for him,

> is utter nonsense. Heteronormativity existed long before queer theory emerged to name it, analyse it, and mobilise resistance to it. Heteronormativity existed well before queer politics identified it as a target of subversion. And heteronormativity persists not because of but in spite of the best efforts of queer theory and politics to challenge it. […] Heteronormativity is in no way an invention of queer theory: [it] is a *real-world force* related to and emanating from the norm of heterosexuality when that norm is upheld and enforced by social mores, by cultural expectations and traditions, by law, and by practices and institutions.[960]

Much as I agree with Chambers' critique of the agency that Wiegman and Wilson endow arguments with, this last remark does not seem to capture what Wiegman and Wilson's provocation aims for. It is true that antinormativity cannot be said to create heteronormativity: in this sense, to frame it as 'our invention' is an infelicitous phrasing – in line, to be sure, with the excessive agential power of Foucault's iteration of 'against' outlined above. Elsewhere in their introduction to the special issue, however, Wiegman and Wilson craft their stance more carefully:

> If […] a norm is a more capacious event than one might suspect from touring queer theory, another issue arises: what critical and political work is being done by antinormativity? Our hypothesis is this: antinormative stances project stability and immobility onto normativity. In so doing, they generate much of the political tyranny they claim belongs (over there) to

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[957] Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', p 14.

[958] Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', p 14.

[959] Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', p 14.

[960] Chambers, 'On Norms and Oppositions', pp 10–11. Italics in the original.

regimes of normativity. For in taking a stand against normativity, antinormative analyses must reduce the intricate dynamics of norms to a set of rules and coercions that everyone ought, rightly, to contest.[961]

Antinormativity is antinormative, then, in a way that it presumably does not intend: it turns systemic play (differentiations, comparisons, valuations, attenuations, skirmishes) into unforgiving rules and regulations and so converts the complexity of moving athwart into the much more anodyne notion of moving against. In ways the field has yet to address, queer antinormativity generates and protects the very propriety it claims to despise.[962]

In these quotes, Wiegman and Wilson clarify that what is wrong with antinormativity the implicit assumption that norms are coercive and unforgiving, as well as the idea of normativity as a stable system. Norms and normativity, Wiegman and Wilson remind us, are capacious, complex, and dynamic. An antinormative stance that does not fully incorporate this notion 'projects' immobility onto norms and normativity at the same time as it 'generates and protects' such immobility. This is not to say that antinormativity, for Wiegman and Wilson, invents norms, but that antinormativity misconceives norms as producing a univocal, 'tyrannical' idea of normativity. Wiegman and Wilson want to move, if not *against*, at least *athwart* normativity, in a way potentially more challenging than what the imperative of antinormativity mandates.

Let me thus turn Chambers' unequivocal assertions into questions and attempt a few answers. Did heteronormativity exist 'long before queer theory emerged to name it, analyse it, and mobilise resistance to it?' Yes, as long as heteronormativity is not taken to be an ahistorical signifier that predates the 'birth of homosexuality', as per Foucault, or the 'homo/heterosexual definition', as per Sedgwick.[963] Does heteronormativity persist 'not because of but in spite of the best efforts of queer theory and politics to challenge it?' Sure, even though those efforts are not necessarily 'the best'. What Wiegman and Wilson challenge, in fact, is precisely antinormativity as the best that a

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[961] Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', p 14.

[962] Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', p 18.

[963] About Foucault's birth date of homosexuality, see chapter 1 of this dissertation, p 51, and chapter 2, pp 123–125. About Sedgwick's homo/heterosexual definition, see chapter 2, p 116–117.

queer theory and politics can offer. Finally, is heteronormativity a 'real-world force emanating from the norm of heterosexuality?' An answer to this question cannot be straightforward. Heteronormativity is the enforcement of the heterosexual norm by social, cultural, legal, and institutional practices. At the same time, it is (also) a critical category that deems those practices 'heteronormative'. Queer theory does not create heteronormativity, but heteronormativity cannot be seen, dissected, and fought against in the absence of a queer theory and politics. In other words, heteronormativity is a 'real world force' because it is an abstraction: that is, a gathering of different phenomena (e.g., marriage, sex assignment at birth, bullying, religious mandates, etc.) under the same signifier. This does not mean that such phenomena are not real, but it does mean that the signifier they share – heteronormativity – stands for a relation between them. It is perhaps worth recalling Latour, for whom critical sociological categories designate a set of associations that, oftentimes, have lost their critical edge. 'What is called "social explanation"', he writes, 'has become a counter-productive way to *interrupt* the movement of associations instead of resuming it'.[964] To read a queer theory without antinormativity postcritically, as I have been doing in the last two sections, is to take heteronormativity as a social explanation whose relationality, in Wiegman and Wilson's terms, is 'asphyxiated' by the failure to grasp the 'rich field of dependencies, differentiations, clashes, and engenderings' within which norms operate.[965]

I take Wiegman and Wilson's provocation to be less an injunction to do away with antinormativity than a suggestion to resume and to reinvigorate antinormativity's contingent and relational character. A queer theory without antinormativity, just like postcritique, does not quite advocate for dispensing from a critique of normativity, but it is a reminder not to conceive of the latter as a static, ahistorical object. As Chambers argue, Foucault's take on norms, normalisation, and normativity is more nuanced than Wiegman and Wilson allow. Additionally, Foucault's critical practice can hardly be reduced to oppositionality, as I hope I have shown through the first chapter. In spite of this, the postcritical spirit of Wiegman and Wilson's provocation – the fact that,

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[964] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p 8. Italics in the original. See also pp 193–194 of the present chapter.

[965] Wiegman and Wilson, 'Introduction', p 18.

oftentimes, queer theory assumes a static notion of normativity and praises antinormativity as a political necessity instead of taking it for the crystallised trope that it is – should not be missed. After all, to go from a conception of heteronormativity as a descriptor of 'real-world forces emanating from the norm of heterosexuality' to a conception of heteronormativity as an omnipresent entity emanating from everywhere takes just a few steps. In the queer theoretical landscape, postcritique is a name for warning scholars that the generalisations they deploy – such as, in fact, (hetero)normativity and the imperative to counter it – risk losing touch with the ductility of the objects at hand.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I brought a queer theory without antinormativity and postcritique together by means of their shared dissatisfaction with the theoretical and political routines of, respectively, queer critiques of normativity and critique tout court. I would like to close with two sets of questions, which try to encapsulate Wiegman and Wilson's concerns about antinormativity in combination with Felski's postcritique, as well as with an attempt at answering them. First off, is antinormativity the only and most suited rallying cry for a queer theory and politics? To put it in postcritical terms: is critique the only and most suited analytic for a reading style that does not refuse to be politically progressive? This first set of questions is undergirded by a sense that critical analyses signal their relevance through routinised political mantras – the imperative to demystify, in literary criticism, and to be set against normativity, in queer critique – more than by really disclosing their objects of study. Second, can we think of normativity as something not to be necessarily countered, yet without risking political disengagement? Or postcritically: can we think of something other than suspicious criticism without being plainly uncritical and naïve? This second set of questions asks for alternative modes of engagements – beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion, in critical reading; beyond the countering of normativity, in queer critique – at the same time as it wonders whether these modes are feasible at all.

Felski's own answer to the first set of questions, just like Wiegman and Wilson's, would be a sound *no*. Critique is so overused in literary studies and queer theory that no one can guarantee it can perform the politically progressive and queer job it is expected to do. To this, Wiegman adds that politics is oftentimes a fantasmatic quality we invest 'our' objects with – the objects that 'we' study precisely because we have projected a desire for emancipation on them. On the other hand, the detractors of postcritique and of a queer theory without antinormativity alike would answer *yes*. 'Yes' to critique as a site – often the only site – of political engagement, and 'yes' to equation between the theories we uphold and the political work they perform. I share with these critics, analysed in the second and fourth sections of this chapter, their anxieties about possible misalignments between postcritique and the preservation of the status quo, or between a queer theory without antinormativity and any misguided belief that antinormativity can easily be undone. But I do not share their silence before the automatisms and the routines of critique, which run the risk of turning the latter into an empty container of political projections, as Felski, Wiegman, and Wilson warn us in different yet interrelated ways.

About the second set of questions, Felski is confident enough that alternative modes of reading – modes aimed at doing justice to people's affective engagements and tracing the contingent networks between 'actants' – do not pose a risk to feminist or other minority politics and should thus be embraced. Her intervention is pre-eminently located in the field of literary studies: as such, it recovers forms of attachment such as attunement, identification, and interpretation, which envision a different kind of literary criticism. Wiegman and Wilson, instead, are more reluctant to formulate new modes of engagement beyond antinormativity for a queer theory and politics. Wiegman's *Object Lessons*, to be sure, dissects heteronormativity and

> register[s] a methodological exhaustion with critique, but instead of turning toward alternatives, it considers *the political imaginary of the alternative* as a disciplinary feature of [minority] knowledges in all their contemporary manifestations [...].[966]

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[966] Robyn Wiegman, 'The times we're in: Queer feminist criticism and the reparative "turn"', *Feminist Theory* 15(1), 2014, pp 4–25: 20, footnote 5.

Perhaps more ambitiously, the introduction to the special issue 'Queer Theory without Antinormativity' does not shy away from rethinking norms and normativity. But, just like *Object Lessons*, what it puts forward is not so much an alternative solution as a reconceptualisation of (hetero)normativity based on its original assumptions. Not by chance does Felski deploy the prefix 'post-' to signal her venturing into modes of reading beyond the pitfalls of critique, whereas Wiegman and Wilson figure a queer theory 'without' antinormativity. What content a queer theory voided of antinormativity is to be filled with, one cannot say exactly.

Object Lessons and 'Queer Theory without Antinormativity' seem to be caught in what we may call, dialectically, the '*negatively rational* side'[967] of the argument against antinormativity: that is, the moment of scepticism toward the object analysed which eludes supersessions. Wiegman and Wilson's project is postcritical only to the extent that it denounces the routinising of critical tropes and the hasty conflation of queer theory with politics. For the rest, it remains deeply and consistently critical. This assertion is perhaps unsurprising given that critique, for Wiegman, is the *primus motor* of minority knowledges. But if this is really the case – that is, if Wiegman and Wilson, contrary to Felski, do not put forward a full-fledged alternative to imagine how a queer theory without antinormativity can look like – then where can one find a queer critique *beyond* antinormativity, in which 'beyond' does not necessarily signal dialectical supersession? How can queer theory be rethought with a less static idea of (hetero)normativity yet without losing sight of a queer politics? In the 'coda' of this dissertation, I hint at one possible direction to take in the face of queer critique's disillusionment with the objects it holds dear.

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[967] Georg W F Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part I: Science of Logic* (1817). Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p 125.

4. CODA. QUEER CRITIQUE IN THE FACE OF HEARTBREAK

Critique of any kind is a curious sort of work. The actual labour of it requires endurance, and like most kinds of endurance it is easy to be tricked by the fantasy of closure necessary to arrive at the end.

[Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 313]

This dissertation has explored what queer critique is and has attempted at redefining it in the face of its contemporary crisis. This crisis is signalled by such intellectual projects as postcritique and a queer theory without antinormativity, which, however, tend to offer a simplified account of queer criticism, and of its Foucauldian roots particularly. Accordingly, the first chapter centres on Michel Foucault and functions as a genealogical reconstruction of queer critique. It is a rather selective genealogy, to be sure, for not all queer critique can be traced back to Foucault. But a thorough examination of his work – of 'What is Critique?' as well as the introductory lecture of his course on *The Government of Self and Others*[968] – has shown how partial it is to take it as the epitome of denaturalisation, demystification, nay-saying, and 'againstness,' as many of his postcritic and anti-antinormative commenters do. Critique, for Foucault, is essentially a strategy not to be governed *comme ça* as well as an ethos of truth-telling. As such, it takes genealogy as a method to analyse how certain objects have come into being within present-day arrangements of truth and power. His account of the history of sexuality is perhaps the most famous application of his genealogical method. Furthermore, his critique has a clear political salience. As the art of voluntary insubordination, it sides with subjugated groups and aims to bring their experiences and knowledges to the surface. But it also warns against the conflation of a critical enterprise with politics, because the former happens in the gap between political engagement and, to paraphrase one of Foucault's most well-known titles, the will to know.

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[968] Michel Foucault, 'What is Critique?' (1978), in M Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007; Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others. Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–1983*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Unsurprisingly, early queer theorists committed to casting sexuality at the core of their critical arsenal, bringing the perspective of minority groups to the fore, and resisting the manifold manifestations of power, are largely inspired by Foucault. I am thinking not only of Gayle Rubin, whose 'Thinking Sex' takes the first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* as 'the most influential and emblematic text of the new scholarship on sex',[969] but also and most notably of the two figures whose trajectories are discussed in the second chapter of the dissertation. Judith Butler's and Eve K. Sedgwick's queer inaugural gestures rely extensively on Foucault's critical effort, taking it as either a framework (*Gender Trouble*) or an axiom (*Epistemology*) for thinking sexuality not as something awaiting liberation but as a disciplinary apparatus producing the discursive proliferation of sex.[970] In other words, we witness in these texts the beginning of what one could call queer theory's *romance* with Foucault, of which such emphatic titles as David M. Halperin's *Saint Foucault* and Lynne Huffer's *Mad for Foucault* are two instances.[971] Following Sedgwick, the object of queer attachment can be defined as 'theory': a word that signifies a labour of denaturalisation, defamiliarisation, and linguisticism. While the second chapter proceeds under the sign of 'theory', the third chapter returns to the term 'critique', which, in Rita Felski's designation, casts an emphasis on the fact that the denaturalising, defamiliarising, and linguisticist tendencies of theory are matters of attitude, style, and ethos. For Felski, queer critics have fallen not only for a set of demystifying practices, but also for their procedural habits and routines, which she calls critique. 'Rather than an ascetic exercise in demystification',

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[969] Gayle Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', in C S Vance (ed), *Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality*. Boston, MA & London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, pp 267–319: 276.

[970] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York & London: Routledge, 1990; Eve K Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley, CA & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990.

[971] Halperin's *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) is mentioned at the beginning of chapter 1 of this dissertation, p 27; the work of Halperin and his relation to Foucault is also explored in chapter 1, p 40, and chapter 3, p 203. Huffer's *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) is discussed in chapter 2, pp 119–121.

Felski writes, '[critique] turns out to be a style of thought infused with a range of passions and pleasures, intensive engagements and eager commitments'.[972]

Through the second and, especially, the third chapter, the affective register that defines the relation between queer theorists and their critical practice changes. This change is signalled by a shift from romance, enchantment, and passion, to a semantics of disaffection, disenchantment, discontent, disappointment, and even despair. Towards the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, both Butler and Sedgwick distance themselves from the critical practices they had contributed to craft. While Butler's relation to critique is best defined, not in terms of rupture but of complexification – whereby, for them, the ethical moment of accountability before others requires a suspension of critique[973] – Sedgwick's relation can truly be defined in terms of disenchantment. '[F]or reasons both private and public', Sedgwick writes, 'I found myself […] increasingly discontented with the predominance of the self-perpetuating kinds of thought that I increasingly seemed to be recognising under the rubric of paranoia.'[974] The third chapter delves more deeply into such discontent. It discusses, on the one hand, Felski's 'disaffection with a suspicious hermeneutics', explicitly built on Sedgwick's take on paranoia;[975] on the other hand, Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson's (but especially Wiegman's) 'disappointment, if not at times political despair,' at queer objects and analytics, including heteronormativity and its critique.[976]

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[972] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2015, p 10.

[973] See: Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.

[974] Eve K Sedgwick, 'Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes', *South Atlantic Quarterly 106*(3), 2007, pp 625–642: 640. About Sedgwick's take on paranoia, see: Eve K Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You', in E K Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2003, pp 123–152.

[975] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 30.

[976] Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2012, p 322. See also: Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A Wilson, 'Introduction: Antinormativity's Queer Conventions', *differences 26*(1), special issue on 'Queer Theory without Antinormativity', 2015, pp 1–25.

In this 'coda', I suggest to follow José E. Muñoz and look at this affective stance toward critique in a slightly more dramatic way: that is, in terms of *heartbreak*.[977] At the same time, my goal is to point, if not to a path towards a properly reparative queer critique (or queer postcritique, or queer theory with-something-else-than-antinormativity), at least to one possible way to continue practicing a queer critique in the face of heartbreak by way of hope, utopia, and a politics of incommensurability. The metaphor of heartbreak, I believe, is well suited to grasp the trajectory of a number of critics who experienced an initial attachment to and a subsequent detachment from critique. What are the feelings of disaffection, disenchantment, discontent, disappointment, and despair if not the result of a romance with critique gone wrong? As Felski aptly summarises, 'for many scholars from the 1970s onward the turn to political and philosophical approaches was exhilarating and transformative – […] another form of love'.[978] This story applies to scholars like Sedgwick, Felski, Wiegman, and many others whose careers began somewhere in the 'heyday of postmodernism' and 'poststructuralism', as Felski puts it.[979] But it equally applies to younger generations trained in those same approaches and invested in their political potential and transformative force. For many such scholars, the love story with critique has stumbled against the latter's failure 'to deliver what [they] have wanted from [it]', says Wiegman. One may well be sceptical about the evidence adduced to make sense of this break up, but the force of the feelings at stake – the shift 'from the honeymoon to the period of disenchantment', in Silvan Tomkins's terms[980] – can hardly be denied.

To be sure, even Foucault's relation with critique can be partly interpreted in terms of heartbreak. While his work epitomises, today, the protocols of queer critique and of critique at large, this was not the case at the time he was writing. As argued in the first

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[977] José E Muñoz, 'Hope in the Face of Heartbreak' (2013), in J E Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. 10th anniversary edition. New York & London: New York University Press, 2019, pp 207–213.

[978] Rita Felski, *Hooked. Art and Attachment*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2020, p 133.

[979] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp 157; 175.

[980] Silvan Tomkins, 'What Are Affects?' (1962), in E K Sedgwick & A J Frank (eds), *Shame and Its Sisters. A Silvan Tomkins Reader*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 1995, pp 33–74: 71.

chapter, Foucault's reading of Kant's 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' is not just unorthodox, but it breaks with other readings, such as Habermas', aimed at rationally discerning truth from falsehood, in accordance with the tradition that takes the Enlightenment to be an 'analytic of truth'. Foucault's 'ontology of ourselves', instead, explores the contingent limits of what can be known at present, without venturing into the universal conditions of knowledge that a transcendental critique aims to unearth.[981] Rather than opposing critique, Foucault halts its hegemonic conception by offering a fourfold definition in which politics, genealogy, and ethics are inextricable.

Whereas Sedgwick's reparative reading, Felski's postcritique, and, up to an extent, Wiegman and Wilson's queer theory without antinormativity take Foucault (or better, the recurring trope 'Foucault')[982] to condense the wrongs of critique, other lines of investigation underscore what we may call the postcritical moments in Foucault's own thought. Explicitly partaking 'in what Rita Felski calls "postcriti[que]"', Tyler Bradway puts forth 'bad reading' as a way to approach queer experimental literature through aesthetics and affects.[983] When defining bad reading as a way to 'immodestly dream up new modes of belonging', Bradway emphasises Foucault's commitment to 'an immodest affirmation of the affective potentialities unleashed by queer aesthetics':

> Foucault characterised gay cultures as 'creative force(s)' engaged in epistemological, political, and social invention; and he affirmed sadomasochistic cultures […] for teaching us that 'we can produce pleasure with very odd things... in very unusual situations', and this production of 'new possibilities for pleasure… (is) a kind of creation, a creative enterprise'.[984]

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[981] See chapter 1 of this dissertation, pp 66–67.

[982] See chapter 3 of this dissertation, pp 202–203.

[983] Tyler Bradway, *Queer Experimental Literature: The Affective Politics of Bad Reading*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p x.

[984] Bradway, *Queer Experimental Literature*, p 243. Here, Bradway quotes Foucault's 1982 interview 'Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity', mentioned in chapter 1 of this dissertation, p 41, footnote 114, and p 50, footnote 143.

Here, Bradley reminds us that Foucault is not just the author of a critical genealogy of sexuality who writes against the coupling of sex and desire, but also the explorer of a different 'economy of bodies and pleasures'[985] who sees in gay and sadomasochistic cultures the possibility to reorganise sexuality, to create new bonds, and to construct new selves. Thus, Foucault's proto-queer critique harbours a much bigger potential for transformation than its heartbroken critics are ready to admit. The first chapter of this dissertation offers a few glimpses into such potential by showing that, for Foucault, those who are committed to telling the truth aim to build an *other* life for an *other* world, and that, following both Foucault and Kant, critique results from the enthusiasm that a political outcry raises in its spectators.

On the other hand, there seem to be fewer if no attempts at detecting the postcritical moments in Butler's thought, perhaps because of Butler's on-going and explicit defence of critique vis-à-vis its denunciation 'as negative, sceptical, and anthropocentric'.[986] Here, let me point out that Butler's post-2000 turn to ethics is accompanied by an increased attention to the work and thought of Hannah Arendt.[987] As Olivia Guaraldo contends, Arendt's 'imaginative and creative force […] strongly resonates with Felski's paradigm'.[988] Philosopher Adriana Cavarero, strongly influenced by Arendt and Butler, borrows from the former 'the option not to think *against*, but rather *for* something, which is the effort to resist the *critique-only* temptation of the philosopher and the

[985] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction* (1976). New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, p 159.

[986] Judith Butler, 'The inorganic body in the early Marx. A limit-concept of anthropocentrism', *Radical Philosophy 2*(6), 2019, pp 3–17: 3.

[987] See: Judith Butler and Gayatri C Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation State? Language, Politics, Belonging*. London & New York: Seagull Books, 2007; Judith Butler, 'Hannah Arendt's Death Sentences', *Comparative Literature Studies 48*(3) 2011, pp 280–295; Judith Butler, 'Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation', *Journal of Speculative Philosophy 26*(2) 2012, pp 134–151; Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.

[988] Olivia Guaraldo, 'Postcritica: una genealogia', *Politica & Società 2*, 2018, pp 163–190: 186. My translation.

daring to imagine [...] the impossible'.[989] Accordingly, Cavarero understands her own critical work as performing such effort, thereby locating herself on the same track as Felski's postcritique.[990] Even though Felski casts Butler's work as the epitome of the denaturalising attitude in today's criticism, and even though Butler would hardly define themselves as a postcritic, one may wonder whether Butler's works on ethics meet the postcritical need, not so much to overcome critique as to rethink and reinvigorate it.

Sedgwick, on her part, is more obviously aligned with postcritique, if only because the latter claims reparative reading as part of its origin story. A solid common ground on which Sedgwick's reparative reading and Felski's postcritique meet is the disciplinary terrain of literary criticism, distinct from philosophical critique.[991] Indeed, both Sedgwick and Felski are committed to rethinking interpretation beyond the concretions of what Sedgwick names 'theory' and Felski translates as 'critique'. But, what happens in the absence of such a disciplinary ground? That is, how can Sedgwick – a literary critic – speak to Wiegman and Wilson – whose project invests the interdisciplinary field of queer studies at large? A first answer could certainly be that the boundaries between philosophical critique and literary criticism are not as clear-cut as they seem. Just like Sedgwick's ambitions exceed the field of literature, Wiegman and Wilson – a literary scholar and a psychologist – can hardly be confined to the theoretical realm. Yet there are more organic connections between Sedgwick's work and Wiegman and Wilson's project.

In her own article for the special issue 'Queer Theory without Antinormativity', Wiegman returns to *Epistemology* to make the case for Sedgwick's open-ended understanding of heteronormativity. Despite the book's importance in providing an antinormative vocabulary for queer theory, and despite

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[989] Adriana Cavarero, 'Coda', in T J Huzar & C Woodford (eds), *Toward a Feminist Ethics of Non-Violence. Adriana Cavarero, with Judith Butler, Bonnie Honig, and Other Voices*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2021, pp 177–186: 179. Italics in the original.

[990] Cavarero, 'Coda', p 186. Not incidentally, Felski (*Hooked*, pp 149–150) sees Cavarero's reflections on inclination to be at one with her own postcritical project.

[991] On this distinction, see chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp 99–100.

the current critical consensus [that] takes *Epistemology* as partaking in the paranoid disposition that Sedgwick would come to disclaim, its predilection for incoherence, contradiction, and the political double bind signals a critical sensibility grappling with paranoid reading and its orientation toward political mastery over its objects of study.[992]

Such predilection, for Wiegman, is a reminder 'of the limitations of configuring any dualistic account of the political as a transgressive ideal'.[993] For her, *Epistemology* stages not the 'firm rejection of identity and the politics' organised around sexuality, but its 'epistemological hesitations' and 'relational complexities'.[994] Accordingly, Wiegman configures Sedgwick's text as one of the main sources for a queer theory unconstrained by a univocal notion of normativity and its political countering.[995] This does not mean that Wiegman takes *Epistemology* as an argument *against* antinormativity. Rather, she detects in it those moments of 'incoherence, contradiction, and political double bind', which can disrupt the solidity and intransigency of the field's antinormative imperative.

Interestingly, Wiegman pulls Sedgwick's paranoid reading out of its disciplinary context and generalises it as an orientation of 'political mastery over its objects of study'. In another article, 'The times we're in' (2014), she further details her relation to Sedgwick's reflections on paranoid and reparative criticism. While recognising the allure of reparation as a strategy 'to eschew the […] sovereignty of critique in favour of a practice of interpretation that privileges what the object of study needs or knows',[996] Wiegman remains sceptical about its capacity to 'assemble and confer plenitude to an

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[992] Robyn Wiegman, 'Eve's Triangles, or Queer Studies beside Itself', *differences 26*(1), 2015, pp 48–73: 54.

[993] Wiegman, 'Eve's Triangles', p 66.

[994] Wiegman, 'Eve's Triangles', p 53. On the contradictions and ambivalences at work in *Epistemology* and its deconstructive approach, see chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp 113–114.

[995] In the same special issue, Annemarie Jagose ('The Trouble with Antinormativity', pp 39–44) rereads Butler's *Gender Trouble* as offering a more nuanced understanding of how norms function than the label 'antinormativity' allows. Additionally (p 29) she rereads de Lauretis' introduction to the special issue 'Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities' (*differences 3*(2), 1991, pp iii–xviii) as a text that 'does not characterise [the] queer opposition [to dominant discourses] in relation to the explicitly normative'.

[996] Robyn Wiegman, 'The times we're in: Queer feminist criticism and the reparative "turn"', *Feminist Theory 15*(1), 2014, pp 4–25: 7.

object',[997] like Sedgwick contends. '[M]y resistance to reparative reading as a proposed counter to the hermeneutics of suspicion', Wiegman writes,

> is patently not about finding an alternative strategy to replace it. My point is […] that while pursuit of alternatives to sovereign forms of knowledge production may reorient the rhetorical pitch and hermeneutic priorities of criticism, it does not prepare any of us to explain why interpretation remains the value we resolutely cling to.[998]

'Interpretation', in this passage, encompasses the reading of phenomena beyond literariness. Not by chance does Wiegman offer as a primary example her own way to cope with her mother's bipolar disorder, to which interpretation, she says, offered no viable solution.[999] Wiegman's resistance to reparation is thus a resistance, not so much to exploring other modes of reading *texts* as to approach the world 'as a *test* […] of interpretive skills'[1000] For her, the objects that 'we' as queer feminist critics seek to repair – be they cultural products, social and political events, or 'just' a mother-daughter relation – may need no paranoid or reparative interpretation at all, and the urgency to be interpreted differently they seem to elicit may be more telling about our own interpretive needs than about those objects themselves.

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[997] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p 149.

[998] Wiegman, 'The times we're in', p 19.

[999] '[M]y relation to reading and interpretation literally operates under the sign of my mother. Cultivated in an environment that lacked sufficient ways to anchor anyone in an explicable world, interpretation offered a rich affective resource for navigating the at times awful, at times exhilarating, paces of everyday life. When feeling was high and ordinary life magical, my big worry was not that it would not last, but that it would – for too long – seducing [*sic*] us both into the alluring fantasy that life could be lived at such an upbeat pitch. To repel the affective distress of the inevitable descent into depression, I cultivated interpretative habits that allowed me to get there first. Prediction – the hallmark of paranoid reading – was a bulwark, no matter my mother's refusal to help counter repetition by planning ahead. Forgetting was the keynote of her optimism, which stoked her belief that *this time* was always *the last time*. As you might guess, the language my mother used – and uses still – has never been my own. She wants 'to be happy.' Stasis, the slow hum of something she calls "normal", is her goal. My attempts at counter narration mean nothing, in part because what she seeks is not interpretation' (Wiegman, 'The times we're in', p 8, Italics in the original).

[1000] Wiegman, 'The times we're in', p 8. My emphasis.

While Wiegman distances herself from Sedgwick's reparative reading as both a textual and a world-testing practice, I insist on reading her and Wilson's provocation as postcritical. I do so, not because I believe that Wiegman and Wilson delineate an alternative queer theory – one that can postcritically or reparatively make up for the shortcomings of a queer theory monopolised by a critique of normativity – but because the concerns they express are a warning and a cry against the automatisms of the queer theoretical field. Indeed, as I have argued in the third chapter, one of poscritique's most valuable contributions is to denounce 'our' critical routines. Hence, what a queer theory without antinormativity and postcritique share is the same brokenhearted feeling before critique's unattended promises. Yet Wiegman is not wrong when she argues that, in order for a project to be fully reparative or postcritical, it must point to an alternative path. To recapture a question formulated at the end of the third chapter: how would a queer theory not just *without* but *beyond* antinormativity look like?

Wiegman and Wilson's own attempt at reinstating contingency at the core of normativity is quite a remarkable effort against the concretions of queer critique and in view of an alternative practice. In the rest of this 'coda', however, I wish to hint at a different direction: one that rethinks not normativity as such, but the politics underlying antinormativity. To formulate it, let me turn to an author who has been quite marginal thus far, but whose work strongly resonates with many of the issues at stake in this discussion. The author in question is José E. Muñoz, who has long been committed to sharpening the queer critical imaginary by emphasising hope. Drawing on a different critical tradition than Foucault's – that of critical theory proper[1001] – Muñoz aims to

> challenge [the] theoretical insights that have […] become routine and resoundingly anticritical. The antiutopian theoretical faltering is often nothing more than rote invocation of poststructuralist pieties. The critical practices often summarised as poststructuralism inform my analysis as much as any other source from which I draw. The corrective I wish to make by turning to utopia is attuned to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's critique of the way in which paranoid reading practices have become so nearly automatic in queer studies that they have, in many ways, ceased to be critical. […] Utopian readings are aligned with what

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[1001] On critical theory and how it intersects with a queer critique, see chapter 1 of this dissertation, p 76.

Sedgwick would call reparative hermeneutics.[1002]

There are a few remarkable passages in this declaration of intent taken from *Cruising Utopia* (2009), a benchmark of present-day queer theory. First, Muñoz expresses uneasiness with the routines and automatisms of queer studies. Secondly, he compares his uneasiness to Sedgwick's discontent with 'paranoid reading practices', which have 'ceased to be critical' or have even become 'anticritical'. Muñoz's appeal to Sedgwick is not unexpected: his name, in fact, has already appeared both in relation to Sedgwick and in relation to postcritique.[1003] Yet, in a much less ambiguous way than Sedgwick or Felski, Muñoz does not do away with critique but aims to reinvigorate it. This is made all the more evident by the fact that Muñoz draws on poststructuralism, even as he labels the routines and automatisms he is uneasy about 'poststructuralist pieties'. There is thus a tension in Muñoz, as there is in postcritique, between the routinised ways in which poststructuralism circulates and its on-going usefulness – that is, between 'Foucault' and Foucault. Thirdly, and most importantly for the sake of these final remarks, Muñoz's problem with paranoid practices is not just that they are not critical enough or anticritical, but that they are 'antiutopian'. The abandonment if not dismissal of a utopian stance seems to go hand-in-hand with a certain lack of criticism; elsewhere, Muñoz refers to this same tendency in terms of 'hopelessness'.[1004] Muñoz's own reparative gesture tends toward a reengagement with utopia and hope.

On the basis of Ernst Bloch, *Cruising Utopia* famously makes the case for a critical utopianism filled with hope.[1005] Muñoz borrows from Bloch the distinction between abstract and concrete utopias:

> [a]bstract utopias falter for Bloch because they are untethered from any historical consciousness. Concrete utopias are relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualised or potential. In our everyday life abstract utopias are akin to banal optimism. […] Concrete utopias can also be daydream-like, but they are the hopes of

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[1002] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p 12.

[1003] See chapter 2 of this dissertation, p 174; chapter 3, pp 197–198.

[1004] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p 176.

[1005] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (1954). Three volumes. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995.

a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many.[1006]

Accordingly, Muñoz aims for a queer theory and politics committed to building concrete utopias: that is, utopias connected to queer collectives and their world-changing struggles. 'My investment in utopia and hope', Muñoz writes, 'is my response to queer thinking that embraces a politics of the here and now'.[1007] Such response materialises either in what Muñoz calls the 'pragmatic gay agenda' – that is, gays and lesbians campaigning for same-sex marriage rights – or in queer attempts at doing away with futurity and collectivity – a position that first emerged with the publication of Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004) and often referred to as the 'antosocial thesis' in queer theory.[1008] Against these presentist orientations, Muñoz makes the case for a politics of the 'then and there': one that looks at the future while being grounded in the historical consciousness of queer collectives.[1009] Because bits of such futurity can be glimpsed in the aesthetic realm, *Cruising Utopia* is less a treatise on utopia than a collection of artworks, poems, and performances gazed through a utopian lens.

Utopian thinking is not unrelated to some of the key debates explored in the previous chapters. While translating Felski to the Italian context in 'Etnografia della contingenza' and 'Postcritica: oltre l'attore, niente', both published in 2017, philosopher Mariano Croce has stressed postcritique's capacity to shed light on utopias. Croce's intervention

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[1006] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p 3.

[1007] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p 10.

[1008] Lee Edelman, *No Future. Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004. Muñoz (*Cruising Utopia*, p 12) decries the queer antisocial thesis (what he sometimes calls 'antirelationality') as being caught in presentism and 'the romance with negativity'. '[A]ntirelational approaches to queer theory', he writes, 'are romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference. To some extent, *Cruising Utopia* is a polemic that argues against antirelationality by insisting on the essential need for an understanding of queerness and collectivity' (p 12). Even though *Cruising Utopia* is shaped around this debate, I argue that, at this stage, a full grasp of what the antisocial thesis argues for and on Muñoz polemic with Lee Edelman is not essential. One of my aims is in fact to dislodge the centrality of the antisocial thesis as Muñoz's target and recast a politics of hope and utopia as a reaction to the dissatisfaction with queer criticism at large.

[1009] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p 1.

can be understood as a way to relocate postcritique in the realm of social theory. He advocates for an 'ethnography of contingency', as one of his titles read, against the critical obsession with context and the invisible mechanisms operating behind social phenomena.[1010] In his account, postcritique is a methodology aimed at flattening the social and emphasising the contingent connections between actors, in accordance with Latour's ANT.[1011] As such, it avoids the diagnostic style of critique, which 'feeds and favours those same […] dynamics […] it would like to unmask and remove'.[1012] An example of postcritical methodology, for Croce, is Davina Cooper's *Everyday Utopias* (2014): an investigation into such venues as London's Speakers' Corner, the project of a democratic pedagogy carried out at Summerhill School, or a Canadian bathhouse where cisgender and trans women can have erotic encounters.[1013] What these and other spaces display is a 'paradoxical articulation of the utopian and the everyday', in Cooper's words.[1014] Their participants perform ordinary tasks, but they do so in different and extraordinary ways. Like Muñoz, Cooper understands everyday utopias as 'form[ing] a kind of concrete utopia', and the concepts traded in the sites where such utopias materialise follow 'more oblique, what one might even call "queer" lines'.[1015]

According to Croce, what is postcritical in Cooper is not just the methodology she adopts, but also – and crucially – the nature of the spaces she investigates. Postcritique aims to repair the objects dissected by critique; similarly, everyday utopias are modes of

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[1010] Mariano Croce, 'Etnografia della contingenza: postcritica come ricerca delle connessioni', *Politica & Società 1*, 2017, pp 83–106; Mariano Croce, 'Postcritica: oltre l'attore niente', *Iride 2*, 2017, pp 323–339.

[1011] On Latour's ANT, see chapter 3 of this dissertation, pp 193–194.

[1012] Croce, 'Etnografia della contingenza', p 86. My translation.

[1013] Davina Cooper, *Everyday Utopias. The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2014. This same text is referenced in the special issue of *Feminist Encounters* devoted to discussing feminist and queer discontents with critique. More specifically, it is referenced in Nina Lykke's 'Academic Feminisms: Between Disidentification, Messy Everyday Utopianism, and Cruel Optimism' (*Feminist Encounters 1*(1–03), 2017, pp 1–12: 6–7).

[1014] Cooper, *Everyday Utopias*, p 3.

[1015] Cooper, *Everyday Utopias*, pp 4, 13. What Cooper means by 'oblique' and '"queer" lines' of investigation is that the concepts she wants to bring to light in each and every venue are unexpected: not 'freedom' but 'market' and 'property' are at work in, respectively, the Speakers' Corner and Summerhill School. Not 'sex' but 'care' is what cisgender and trans women perform in the Canadian bathhouse.

'reparation of the wrongs happening in the conventional world'.[1016] For Croce, postcritique and utopia come together in the interstitial settings and ordinary practices whose transformative potential is illegible under a strict critical regime. Drawing on Croce's social interpretation of postcritique and on Foucault's notion of heterotopia, Lorenzo Bernini interprets the bathhouses described by Cooper, just like the gay saunas and BDSM clubs Foucault used to go to, as 'transformative heterotopias [where] subject[s] take care of themselves'.[1017] As Bernini reminds us, the term 'heterotopia' is a Foucauldian neologism 'voided of the salvific or redemptive connotation of "utopia"', which 'highlights the impossibility to consider the social as a homogeneous totality'.[1018] Accordingly, the term 'heterotopology' designates the study of heterotopian spaces. Cooper's everyday utopias, Bernini suggests, can be read alongside Foucault's heterotopias. To this, I add that both everyday utopias and heterotopias can be read alongside Muñoz's queer utopias, if only because all the arenas that these terms designate require a different critical attitude in order to be inspected. For Felski and Croce, the name of such attitude is postcritique. For Foucault and Bernini, it is heterotopology. For Muñoz, it is hope.

To provide a vivid account of Muñoz's hopeful critique, let me turn to a piece in which he engages directly with Wiegman. In September 2013, three months before passing away, Muñoz delivers a lecture titled 'Hope in the Face of Heartbreak'.[1019] In it, he discusses an academic item, Wiegman's *Object Lessons*, alongside an aesthetic one, Anna M. Albelo's movie *Who's Afraid of Vagina Wolf?* (2013).[1020] The latter serves Muñoz to supplement Wiegman at the point where her hope in critique fades. While Muñoz's piece may not speak directly to the project of a queer theory without antinormativity, for its author did not survive long enough to witness and confront Wiegman and Wilson's provocation, it can still say something about how to collect the

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[1016] Croce, 'Postcritica: oltre l'attore niente', p 332. My translation.

[1017] Lorenzo Bernini, 'Eterotopie quotidiane. Foucault, tra critica e postcritica, le iene nella sauna e il sesso anonimo tra maschi', *Politica & Società 2*, 2018, pp 191–214: 204. My translation.

[1018] Bernini, 'Eterotopie quotidiane', p 196. My translation. About the notion of 'heterotopia', see: Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces' (1984), *Diacritics 16*(1), 1986, pp 22–27.

[1019] Muñoz, 'Hope in the Face of Heartbreak'.

[1020] *Who's Afraid of Vagina Woolf?* directed by Anna Margarita Albelo. Burning Bra Productions, 2013.

broken pieces of queer theory's romance with critique and how to repair them.

As Muñoz recounts, Wiegman's *Object Lessons* records the moments when a beloved object – 'be it another human organism or a field of knowledge that we have dedicated ourselves to'[1021] – fails to deliver on the political promises it makes. To recall the argument developed in the third chapter, such objects as 'women', 'gender', and 'queer', says Wiegman, are invested with promises of emancipation and progress by those who mobilise them. However, they inevitably fail fulfil such promises, because the 'performative rhetorics of critique'[1022] lead 'us' – practitioners in the field of minority knowledges – to search for new and more promising objects.[1023] Thus, as Muñoz aptly summarises, critique as the engine of minority fields 'has come to "haunt" Wiegman because it promises too much'.[1024] Instead of lamenting the seemingly inevitable failure of 'our' objects or pointing to the next stage of critical supersession, Muñoz chooses 'to make an argument for the "excessive reach" of critique' – in favour, that is, of the excessive promises that critique harbours. According to Muñoz,

> Wiegman writes beautifully about a personal desire to share in a 'we' that she is also suspicious of. This mistrust is rooted in the incommensurability between fields of knowledge production and the real social contests they call upon and count as their galvanising objects. How can we inhabit the politics of incommensurability, contestation, challenge, the not-lining-up of meaning, the persistence of inconsistency […] as something other than a ruse, a faulty foundation, wilful bad faith, or a set of illusory traps? What if we instead think about hope, the necessity of hope, in the face of [minority] knowledges, including but not limited to feminism, queer studies, and ethnic studies and their various infelicities, breakdowns, and falterings as a need to achieve that 'we' […]?"[1025]

How, Muñoz asks, can we be a 'we' – how can we recognise each other as a collective – if 'our' political dreams and 'our' objects of affective and political investment part

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[1021] Muñoz, 'Hope in the Face of Heartbreak', p 208.

[1022] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 303.

[1023] About this argument as it emerges from Wiegman's *Object Lessons*, see chapter 3 of this dissertation, pp 240–241.

[1024] Muñoz, 'Hope in the Face of Heartbreak', p 208.

[1025] Muñoz, 'Hope in the Face of Heartbreak', p 209.

ways, as per Wiegman's account? Muñoz suggests that we come to terms with this hiatus and acknowledge that, in his words, 'incommensurability between social justice movements and scholarly knowledge production is an actual fact'.[1026] This incommensurability is a first step towards the preservation of such objects as 'women', 'gender', and 'queer' in the face of their 'infelicities, breakdowns, and falterings'. Preservation is not an ecumenical act, as it does not seek to solve the conflicts between those objects in the name of unity. Nor is it exactly what Gayatri C. Spivak famously called 'strategic essentialism': that is, the temporarily bracketing of the differences between – and within – 'women', 'gender', and 'queer' in order to forward their shared political demands.[1027] While it may well be *strategic* to hold on to 'women', 'gender', or 'queer' at a time when reactionary and anti-emancipatory forces gather all minority fields of knowledge under equivocal descriptors – 'gender ideology', 'Cultural Marxism', '*Islamo-gauchisme*', and 'wokeism', to name a few[1028] – there is nothing

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[1026] Muñoz, 'Hope in the Face of Heartbreak', p 208.

[1027] Gayatri C Spivak coined this phrase in the context of a discussion of the Subaltern Studies group – an Indian collective of historians – and their need to make 'a strategic use of positivist essentialism' in order to forward the political interests of subaltern classes (Gayatri C Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography' (1988), in G C Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. London & New York: Routledge, 2006, p 205). Spivak's argument soon came to be applied to other subaltern positionalities. As Raksha Pande argues, '[s]ince its first enunciation as a historiographical strategy, strategic essentialism has been adopted as a rallying cry for various identity-based movements such as multiculturalism and feminism. In order to achieve their anti-essentialist goals, both movements share the constitutive paradox of strategic essentialism through which gender, class, and/or ethnicity categories are mobilised collectively in a way that tends to give them the appearance of stability and unity of identification while at the same time pursuing progressive transformation by seeking to deconstruct and undo the very categories under whose aegis the collective is organised' (Raksha Pande, 'Strategic Essentialism', in N Castree, M F Goodchild, A Kobayashi, W Liu & R A Marston (eds), *International Encyclopaedia of Geography: People, the Earth, Environment, and Technology. Volume 9*. Oxford: Wiley & Sons, 2017, pp 6817–6821: 6819).

[1028] Each of these constructs would deserve a dissertation of its own. Here, let me provide a few coordinates to navigate between them. The debate around so-called 'gender ideology' has been presented in chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp 157–158. To define 'Cultural Marxism', let me quote David Paternotte and Mieke Verloo ('De-democratisation and the Politics of Knowledge: Unpacking the Cultural Marxism Narrative', *Social Politics 28*(3), 2021, pp 556–578: 563): 'Although this notion has a long history on the Left, it has been propangadised by American conservative and right-wing thinkers from the 1980s, and later disseminated to the rest of the world. […] The core reasoning behind [it] is the following: once the

essentialist in holding on 'gender' and 'queer', whose purpose is precisely to de-essentialise what they name.[1029] More than the idea of a strategic essentialism, what should be retained from Spivak is the idea that a strategic *anti*-essentialism can help us confront our political enemies and intellectual detractors alike.

Oppositionality, however, is not what Muñoz has in mind – not even as a political strategy – when talking about the preservation of 'our' objects in the face of heartbreak. Rather, he is thinking of a 'politics of incommensurability'. As Muñoz recounts, critique is the engine of minority knowledges, for Wiegman. As such, it requires us to pursue the fulfilment of our political dreams by moving from one object to the next. In so doing, not only do we enter an endless and ultimately unfulfilling circuit, but we also get lost in what Wiegman calls 'the critical dedication to *divergence*': a dedication to the things that tear us apart.[1030] A focus on incommensurability, instead, allows for a focus on the 'convergences' between the different objects we are attached to, as well as to be lenient toward each other without losing sight of the radical potential that 'our' objects elicit. It is perhaps worth recalling an argument developed at the end of the first

Left had understood that power would only be conquered when ideological hegemony had been achieved, it would have massively invested places of knowledge production, especially the media, the cultural industry, and universities. […] It would have allowed profound transformations in the ways people think and live their everyday lives, including major changes in gender and sexuality'. The French signifier '*Islamo-gauchisme*' has recently emerged to designate the supposed alignment of the far Left with the political Islam, up to the point that the French minister of education ordered, in 2021, an investigation into the magnitude of this 'phenomenon' within higher education. In an interview, Eric Fassin not only reminds us that the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) declared that 'islamo-gauchisme' has no scientific reality, but he also calls the request by the Ministry 'a witch-hunt' (Clément Parrot, '"C'est une chasse aux sorcières": le sociologue Eric Fassin dénonce les propos de Frédérique Vidal sur l'"islamo-gauchisme' à l'université', *franceinfo*, 18 February 2021, np, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/societe/education/c-est-une-chasse-aux-sorcieres-le-sociologue-eric-fassin-denonce-les-propos-de-frederique-vidal-sur-l-islamo-gauchisme-a-l-universite_4300567.html (accessed on 10 January 2022). Lastly, 'wokeism' and its cognates 'cancel culture' and 'Critical Race Theory' indicate, once again, the appropriation of a discourse from the Left – in this case, the trope of 'being woke' mobilised by the Black Lives Matter movement – by the political Right, which has not just trivialised it but turned it into, basically, a slur.

[1029] On the de-essentialising force of these categories, see chapter 2 of this dissertation.

[1030] Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, p 98. Italics in the original.

chapter: that, for Foucault (and for Kant, whose argument he follows), critique and politics are related but they do not exactly coincide.[1031] Muñoz would certainly subscribe to this statement. While the affect characterising that relation, for both Kant and Foucault, is enthusiasm, for Muñoz it is hope.

In order to clarify what he means by a politics of incommensurability built on hope, Muñoz turns to Albelo's movie *Who's Afraid of Vagina Woolf?* 'As a cultural theorist', he says, 'I insistently make the case that aesthetics […] point[s] to incommensurability'.[1032] The plot of the movie goes roughly like this: filmmaker Anna meets and falls for Katya, a graduate student and pretentious feminist who is 'sick for theory and yearns for practice'.[1033] Anna's idea to make a feminist adaptation of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (a theatre play and a movie of the 1960s) is particularly appealing to Katya, who takes a leading role in it. But it soon becomes clear that Katya is not into Anna, and that Anna herself has come up with the idea to make a movie only to be closer to her object of desire. The situation explodes on set, where the two characters fight with one another and Anna suddenly realises that Katya 'disappointed and failed to replenish the love [she] wanted from her'. Up to this point, Muñoz says, the movie could as well be the cinematic version of *Object Lessons*: 'the scene of desire's fall, the moment when [minority] knowledge is "so excessive" it fails to grasp the object that it has both crafted and failed to properly hold'.[1034] For Muñoz, *Who's Afraid of Vagina Woolf?* stages in erotic terms the political desires at work in minority fields of knowledge and the objects they mobilise.

But, contrary to Wiegman's *Object Lessons*, Albelo's movie does not stop at the moment of heartbreak. Muñoz focuses less on its happy ending (which, in the tradition of romantic comedy, features a newborn love between Anna and her director of photography) than on its dramatic climax: that is, on the moment of Anna's despair after the collapse of the movie-within-the-movie. Heartbroken Anna wanders around Los

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[1031] See the fourth section of chapter 1 of this dissertation.

[1032] Muñoz, 'Hope in the Face of Heartbreak', p 209. Notice, in this quote, the staging of the distinction between cultural criticism and philosophical critique.

[1033] Muñoz, 'Hope in the Face of Heartbreak', p 210.

[1034] Muñoz, 'Hope in the Face of Heartbreak', p 211.

Angeles dressed in a vagina costume – what she was wearing on set while fighting with Katya – and ends up crying in a bathtub. The day after, she is rescued 'by her Latina mother who shows up and manifests Anna's greatest fear: failing so miserably that she would have to go home, a defeated forty-year-old, to live with her aging parents'.[1035] After hitting the bottom of the barrel, Anna picks up her vagina costume again and puts it to work to advertise a Brazilian waxing salon. By 'recommit[ting] herself to the zany' – that is, by embracing eccentricity, farce, out-of-placeness – Anna 'stave[s] off the nightmare of losing her illusionary independence', says Muñoz.[1036] In sum,

> *Who's Afraid of Vagina Wolf?* is not the antidote to the problematic sketched out in *Object Lessons*. If anything, there are interesting points of comparison. […] [T]he character of Anna responds with a recommitment to the zany that, she hopes, will help her find the love object that is so misaligned from her lived reality. […] *Object Lessons* refuses hope and hopelessness, and *Who's Afraid of Vagina Wolf* launches into a kind of mad […] hopefulness, a groundless hope in the face of a structuring incommensurability.[1037]

Instead of filling the gap between 'our' objects of knowledge and desire and the political work we want them to do, Albelo's movie hints at zaniness as a way to get over the end of a romance – be it with the person one loves or with the objects one invests with political expectations.

Muñoz's argument is highly evocative, but we are left to speculate how a zany queer theory would look like. The image of Anna advertising a beauty salon dressed in a vagina costume suggests that such queer theory is all but relegated into the academic ivory tower. Because it does not shy away from such a menial job, it resonates with Matt Brim's project of a 'Poor Queer Studies': one that 'turns toward an imbrication of queerness and class that schools and scholars turn away from'.[1038] The vagina costume

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[1035] Muñoz, 'Hope in the Face of Heartbreak', p 212.

[1036] Muñoz, 'Hope in the Face of Heartbreak', p 212.

[1037] Muñoz, 'Hope in the Face of Heartbreak', p 212.

[1038] Matt Brim, *Poor Queer Studies. Confronting elitism in the university*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020, p 23. In this book, Brim 'take[s] up the relationship between Queer Studies and the material conditions under which Queer Studies is done in the contemporary academy' and tackles the following questions: 'What does Queer Studies have to say about class sorting within the academy? What is the role

itself suggests that a zany queer theory cannot be divorced from feminism – or better, a sex-positive kind of feminism, which is not afraid to expose sexuality in public. Additionally, it does not follow a ready-made path like our critical routines do, for it refuses to have a destination and wanders as aimlessly as Anna does in Los Angeles. Above all, a zany queer theory is filled with hope: 'a groundless hope in the face of a structuring incommensurability'. A politics of incommensurability is not anxious to make such objects of knowledge as 'women', 'gender', and 'queer' – much as the actual woman Anna desires – align with our fantasies and projections. After all, Muñoz says, the contrary of incommensurability is equivalence: a 'myth', for him, which 'leads to not just disappointment but often violence that is political, institutional, and knowledge-based.'[1039] A politics of incommensurability is thus a politics of hope. To keep hoping in objects that have disappointed us, for Muñoz, is a first step to debunk the fantasy that things must be equivalent, or 'that commensurability is the exclusive way in which theory and practice must encounter each other'.[1040]

A queer critique that does not require 'our' objects to be commensurate to the politics we champion launches itself 'into a mad hopefulness', just like heartbroken Anna launches herself in the streets of Los Angeles. In another essay, 'Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate' (2013), Muñoz expands on what he means by incommensurability.[1041] The piece is about the controversial *Gary in Your Pocket* (1996): a post-mortem collection of Gary Fisher's short stories and poems on sexual submission edited by Sedgwick herself.[1042] In fact, it was Sedgwick who, as his long-time advisor and friend,

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of the field within the processes of stratification that can be said to divide the field from itself along the lines of class and institutional status? […] How might Poor Queer Studies galvanise interclass, cross-institutional queer formations that do not rely on a unidirectional, aspirational model of progress? […] [H]ow can rethinking the work of Queer Studies in the context of students' relative material need and raced/gendered precarity, academics' professional liminality, and underclass institutional identity inform and potentially enrich the field, its pedagogies and theories, and the academy beyond it?' (p 3).

[1039] Muñoz, 'Hope in the Face of Heartbreak', p 213.

[1040] Muñoz, 'Hope in the Face of Heartbreak', p 213.

[1041] José E Muñoz, 'Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate. Gary Fisher with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick' (2013), in Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, pp 193–205.

[1042] Eve K Sedgwick (ed), *Gary in Your Pocket. Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 1996.

collected Fisher's writings and assembled them into a book. Instead of reiterating the outrage at a white straight woman (Sedgwick) editing the writings of her submissive black gay student (Fisher), Muñoz acknowledges that, for Sedgwick, '*Gary in Your Pocket* is a reparative project tout court',[1043] as it attempts at perpetuating the memory of someone who died of AIDS and could not make a cohesive whole out of his life and work. But, especially, the book is significant about 'a kind of queer politics of the incommensurable'.[1044] Rather than pursuing the fantasy of equivalence (in this case, the fantasy of an editor whose identity markers match those of the writer), Muñoz is interested in the incommensurabilities between Sedgwick and Fisher, that is, between a female white teacher and a male black student who, in spite of their differences, come together. Politically, this relationship is, for Muñoz, a form of 'communism', understood less in a Marxian sense than as 'a certain communing of incommensurable singularities'.[1045] A politics of the incommensurable is not cleansed of violence – encounters that stage differentials of power can in fact be violent – but it opens up a space that exceeds equivalence and centres on the things we have in common. In Muñoz's own words,

> The layering of acts of mastery and submission [Fisher] narrates doesn't make sense within the logic of […] equivalence […]. Instead I suggest that there is something else to be gleaned through incommensurability. […] Fisher and Sedgwick's project, the book we know as *Gary in Your Pocket*, is the sharing of the unshareable, which is for some the shock of Gary Fisher and hopefully, for a growing number of others, the sense of Gary Fisher.

I am not sure if the critique that accompanies a queer politics of incommensurability is reparative, 'post-', or something-other-than-antinormative. But, as long as reparative reading, postcritique, and a queer theory without antinormativity denounce the routines of 'our' critical practices and point to a different, hopeful, and utopian kind of criticism, then why not to call it with all the names at our disposal?

[1043] Muñoz, 'Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate', p 201. For this argument, see also: Ellis Hanson, 'The Future's Eve: Reparative Readings after Sedgwick', *South Atlantic Quarterly 110*(1), 2011, pp 101–119.

[1044] Muñoz, 'Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate', p 193.

[1045] Muñoz, 'Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate', p 203.

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     or radiantly heightened

     mode of perception,

and that if you lose the thread of this intimacy, both your soul and your whole world might subsist forever in some desert-like state of ontological impoverishment'.

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