

## The economy and ecology of queer, east and west

If we are to believe James Rogers' *Dictionary of Clichés*, the word "queer" has been applied to counterfeit money for more than 250 years. The example quoted in the dictionary comes from a 1877 novel and it clearly juxtaposes "queer" in the sense of "fake" or "counterfeit" with "straight" in the sense of "genuine." "Queer as a \$3 bill" has become a fixed phrase meaning "highly suspect."<sup>1</sup> *The Wordsworth Book of Euphemism* extends the history of the word "queer" as denoting "of questionable character" all the way back to 1315.<sup>2</sup> "Straight" indeed seems to be a proper antonym of "queer," given the latter's probable etymological link with the Germanic "quer" - "oblique, cross, adverse." Toward the end of the 19th century the word acquired another, more specialized meaning - as a derogatory term for homosexuals.

It is instructive to trace the meanders of the word's usage. In particular, it is interesting to see how the terms referring to monetary operations are being transferred into the realm of sexual manners in the context of capitalism's rapid expansion (Marx's extensive analysis of the system - *Das Kapital* - was published between 1865 and 1894). At about the same time the consolidation of "homosexual identity" was taking place, as evidenced in the works and lives of, say, Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde. Foucauldians see the construction of modern gay identity as a result of the regulatory workings of the regimes of medicine and criminology, but also as the immense public demand for "truth," where truth becomes increasingly invested in the realm of sexuality. The connection between the formation of gay identities and communities on the one hand, and capitalism-driven social changes has been noticed and commented upon by John D'Emilio, who argues that

In divesting the household of its economic independence and fostering the separation of sexuality from procreation, capitalism has created conditions that allow some men and women to organize a personal life around erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex. It has made possible the formation of urban communities of lesbians and gay men and, more recently, of a politics based on sexual identity.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> James Rogers, *The Dictionary of Clichés* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Judith S. Neaman and Carole G. Silver, *The Book of Euphemism* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *The Columbia Reader: On Lesbians and Gay Men in Media, Society and Politics*, eds. Larry Gross and Lillian Faderman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p 50.

My argument, however, focuses more narrowly on the linguistic questions of naming and self-naming. That "queer" became the term for the new identity formed around same-sex desire seems to indicate that within the capitalist framework homosexuality was assigned a status similar to that of counterfeit money. In the general social economy (by which term I mean, loosely, the complex networks of economic, social, political and cultural relations) regulated to a large extent by the notions of "truth" and "authenticity," overt homoeroticism marks the realm of the fake and the illicit. There is a certain paradox in the fact that much as the system strives to categorize same-sex desire into a fixed and well-defined identity (through medical and legal definitions), the "truth" of this identity is from the outset silently called in question. "Queer" points to a fake identity and a fake lifestyle, a parody of "real" love, "real" relationship and "real" sex. As a medium of exchange, queer - this newly forged coin - has a purchasing capacity close to none: it will *not* buy you social status or a position of power, which is not tantamount to saying that gay men may not enjoy general respect or exercise significant political influence as long as they remain firmly fixed within the structures of the general social economy of truth. (Counterfeit money may remain in circulation as long as it is not recognized as false.)

Right from the beginning, then, the status of queer identity was treated as secondary: homosexual is to heterosexual as counterfeit money is to genuine cash. Fantasized as a copy of the "original" straight sexuality, queer was given the role of a specimen of falsehood; we all need to have a look at counterfeit money sometimes in order to be able to distinguish it from the "real stuff." Wilde's famous case shows the operations of this economy in full swing: once proved "queer," Wilde is withdrawn from social and cultural circulation.

Precisely to what extent the term "queer" was imposed externally on a group of people against their will is a question which may never find an answer. The fact is that even before the word was reclaimed by the political and academic movements of the 1980s and 1990s, it had been adopted by some gay men as a term of self-reference.<sup>4</sup> This move may reflect a certain strategy within "queer" communities, the strategy of a self-affirmative *acceptance* of one's status as a *fake*. Indeed, the development of the aesthetics of "camp" as defining a distinct queer sensitivity seems to prove that a large part of the queer world found some firm ground for self-definition in "inauthenticity." Camp - inherently associated with such practises as parody, acting, pretense or posing - accepts the fake as fake, never laying claims to the underlying truth. It is no less significant that the performative practice of drag has been posited as the defining moment of gender in the works of Judith Butler and other theorists.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Chauncey quoted in Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory. An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 74.

By embracing the fake, queer (sub)culture(s) may be argued to underlie the larger cultural formation of postmodernism. One of the ways in which the postmodern has been defined is through the revaluation of the relation between the original and the copy, the “authentic” and the “fake.” Postmodern theory undermines the concept of the original by positing the reality we live in as an endless chain of copies. In a sense, the postmodern condition consists in the realization that in our social and cultural interactions we are all inevitably paying with counterfeit money - a notion that queer subjects have entertained for more than one hundred years. Another widely accepted definition of postmodernism describes it as a late stage in the development of the capitalist project, whose logic is such that every aspect of human “being in the world” (to borrow Heidegger’s term) is necessarily subjected to commodification. Even though the medium of exchange is false, our general economy never dismisses us from the imperative of exchange.<sup>5</sup>

In his spirited discussion of the wilderness idea, Thomas Birch employs the example of a queer icon, Jean Genet, to devise a strategy that would effectively evade (though never fully escape) the imperium’s story and grant wilderness areas a degree of independence. Describing the empire’s totalizing logic of conquest and subsumption (carried out through the extension of the imperium’s legal order), Birch tries to find some space for “the other” - yet different from the space assigned for otherness by the system itself. In an illuminative passage, Birch writes:

Genet’s intractability to assimilation into this system does not permit the usual sorts of rebellion. He has no concern for justice, or for some better reshuffling of the categories of domination. A successful revolt and revolution that is confined by Western culture’s presuppositions about otherness would at best amount to reform, to nothing more than some shift in the arrangements of power [...]. *Because the imperium names the other, the other must find a way to insist on its intrinsic namelessness.*<sup>6</sup>

For Genet the only space which offers temporary escape from the System’s grip can be found in erotic play. Eroticism suspends the naming of the other, it questions the accuracy of the imperium’s maps by suggesting a “nameless world” that extends between and across the straight lines of the imperial geometry. Rather than reverse the empire’s story in a simple, symmetrical manner (“gay is NOT unnatural”), Genet’s tactics is neither to accept the term ascribed to otherness nor to negate it in a direct manner.<sup>7</sup> One must acknowledge that “[. . .] the other is more

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Chauncey quoted in Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> A queer formulation of this rule might be: no “hard currency,” just an endless current of desire.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas H. Birch, “The Incarceration of Wilderness: Wilderness Areas as Prisons,” in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, eds. J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), p. 455 (emphasis added).

than, other than, independent of, the definitions, models, and simulations that the imperium proposes as exhaustive of it."<sup>8</sup>

Early gay rights activism sprang from the resentment against heterosexist exclusion and pathologization. Gay rights activists demanded that homosexuals be admitted to the game through which power is distributed in society. Rather than question the basic channels through which power circulates in and between social structures, many gay subjects demanded public/political participation and representation as a remedy for their systematic oppression. The queer movement of the 1990s may be seen as a revision and radicalization of these claims. Participation is not enough: the question remains *who determines the rules of the game*.<sup>9</sup> The re-appropriation of the word "queer" may represent an attempt to question the System's mandate to name non-normative sexualities (disparagingly, medically or otherwise), an attempt to redefine ourselves on *our* terms.

This last assertion is certain to raise a number of objections, however. In the first place, who are "we"? The inherited, modernist view of communities as well-defined and sharply demarcated groupings of subjects that share some "essential" features (such as gay identity) - much as it may still appeal to a majority of "ordinary" gay men - has nearly lost its credibility in critical theory. The queer discourse of the 1990s has been working toward redefining queer community in terms of provisional political coalitions rather than stable identities. Morris B. Kaplan argues that community bonding should more accurately be viewed as a mode of fantasy: "How do we negotiate the interplay of our desires with the community and cultural contexts of our lives except through fantasies of integration and satisfaction? Isn't 'community' itself both a complex social construction and a fantasmatic object of desire?"<sup>10</sup> Rather than offer a more detailed description of this alternative model of community, Kaplan confines himself to a series of interrogatives. In the introduction to his essay he states humbly: "I want to suggest the *possibility* of an analysis of 'community' that maps a domain of social interaction and practice not so much by shared values and beliefs, but rather by forms of life

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<sup>7</sup> In his book *Le Parasite* Michel Serres ascertains that the "norm" is based on the geometry of right angles, which ensures maximum efficacy (265). He also observes: "One can play the game of exclusion without leaving the system, on the contrary, entering it deeper and deeper [. . .]. [T]he counter-norm is never a noise of the norm, it is the same norm inversed, I would say a twin one." The original text reads: "[O]n peut jouer le jeu de l'exclusion sans sortir du systeme et, au contraire, en s'y enfonçant plus avant [. . .]. [L]a contre-norme n'est jamais un bruit de la norme, elle est la meme norme inversée, je veux dire jumelle." Michel Serres, *Le parasite* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1980), p. 92.

<sup>8</sup> Birch, p. 459.

<sup>9</sup> The most conspicuous example is same-sex marriages: whereas for many the legalization of gay partnerships is the crowning of gay rights activism, for others such strategy derives from and reflects the assumptions of a heterosexual, "couplist" normativity.

<sup>10</sup> Morris B. Kaplan, "Constructing Queer Communities: Marriage, Sex, Death, and Other Fantasies," in *Constellations* 8.1 (2001), p. 76.

that embrace the vicissitudes of the human lifecycle."<sup>11</sup> While such a possibility clearly exists, this kind of "lifestyle pluralism" has also been criticized as yet another transformation of capitalist economy. Basing communitarian bonds on lifestyle may be seen as conforming to the market rules of late capitalism: is the only plurality we can hope for a plurality of lifestyles-as-commodities? And does the choice of a particular lifestyle depend on the effectiveness of the "packaging" and "advertising" strategies? "How is it," Stephanie A. Smith asks, "that 'diversity' now appears to denote nothing more than acceptable stylistic or cultural variations on the theme Human?"<sup>12</sup> and goes on to explain:

After all, a politics premised on the authenticity of an identity that is demonstrable primarily through the voicing of an authentic "voice" often and ironically provides the means to sustain a modernist, industrial logic of scarcity, inasmuch as the common-sense version of identity politics often provides the very means by which the logic of capital continues its devastating economic operations.<sup>13</sup>

The moment in which alternative cultures based on same-sex desire reclaim "queer" as the term of self-definition may mark an attempt to wriggle out of the regulatory machinations of capitalist/essentialist economy. This stratagem is not about queer subjects taking the "counterfeit money" of their sexual identity and trying to convince "the general public" it is genuine; instead, they take what has always been circulated as true (straight) money and argue it is as queer as anything else. The rise of the queer movement has been a reaction against the discourse of gay as a discourse based on, and embracing, the economy of authenticity, or authentic value. From this point of view, the erasure of camp may have been caused not only by the victories on the front of civil rights, as Daniel Harris points out,<sup>14</sup> but also by the postmodern shift, the general affirmation of inauthenticity, in the context of which camp must lose its distinct borders. On the other hand, the self-nominative gesture that aims to establish a new "queer" movement may stem from the false modernist conviction that self-naming entails self-control. As Judith Butler observes, "[a]s much as it is necessary [. . .] to lay claim to the power to name oneself and determine the conditions under which that name is used, it is also impossible to sustain that kind of mastery over the trajectory of those [identity] categories within discourse."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kaplan, p. 58 (emphasis added).

<sup>12</sup> Stephanie A. Smith, "Suckers," in *differences* 10.1 (1998), p. 189.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, p. 191.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), passim.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 227.

Queer grew partly out of dissatisfaction with the dubious victories of the “gay rights” politics. The legalization of gay couples in some western democracies and the code of political correctness stand out as the most conspicuous achievements of the gay movement of the last half a century. Clearly, the formal introduction of PC into public discourses, however welcome, is not the kind of “liberation” that some gay activism has been envisioning. It seems that the problem does not lie in the exclusion of gays from the civil freedoms that heterosexuals enjoy, but rather in a more general socio-cultural mechanism which reduces non-normative subjectivities to well-defined, clear-cut categories, easily legible and manipulable. If not through outright rejection or marginalization, the imperium acts through the logic of reductionism by claiming the ability to define - and define exhaustively - the subjects who take part in its economic exchanges. The essentialist gay politics is based on the “creation myth” of coming-out as the revelation of the core truth of one’s personality. But ascertaining *the* truth about oneself entails self-exposure, self-reduction to a hieroglyphic, short-cut representation of gay identity.

Take Canada. The past decade saw significant progress in recognizing the civil rights of gays and lesbians in that country. In 1996 “sexual orientation” was added to the *Canadian Human Rights Act* as prohibited grounds of discrimination. In 2000 a parliamentary act amended 68 federal statutes to effect their equal application to unmarried heterosexual and same-sex couples, by adding the gender-neutral term “common-law partner,” without affecting the existing definition of “marriage” as “a lawful union of one man and one woman.”<sup>16</sup> The rights of homosexual persons have been successfully protected, and relevant laws enforced, by a number of institutions, such as the Human Rights Commission, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal and simply through the courts. In its online report entitled “Human Rights Law in B.C.: Sexual Orientation,” the British Columbia Human Rights Commission asserts:

The struggle for a society free of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is far from over, but decisions in this area of the law during the last decade have made significant strides. Human rights tribunals and courts alike have made it clear that they will diligently apply Canadian law. They have shored up the available legal protections and showed that these protections have “teeth” and can make a concrete difference in real situations in daily life.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Act to modernize the Statutes of Canada in relation to benefits and obligations. Cf. Mary C. Hurley, “Sexual Orientation and Legal Rights,” 29 January 2002 <<http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/library/PRBpubs/921-e.pdf>>.

<sup>17</sup> “Human Rights Law in B.C.: Sexual Orientation,” 29 January 2002 <<http://www.bchrc.gov.bc.ca/HRLawSexOrientation.htm>>.

Unlike in other western democracies, whose statutes may include anti-discriminatory laws that are poorly enforced, in Canada, apparently, the law "bites."

This commitment, on the part of the state's institutions, to an effective protection of the rights of Canadian citizens regardless of their sexual orientation has led to some curious charges. People who call themselves "libertarians" have accused Canada of veering toward a totalitarian system which they have labelled - with an ease evidencing a historical blindness to gays' and lesbians' share in the Holocaust during World War II - "queer fascism." The libertarian Gregory Flanagan declares:

There can be no question that Canada is a queer fascist regime ruled by an inquisition that censors free speech and persecutes religious belief. [ . . . ] Canada's phony "Charter of Rights" is about as legitimate as their evil "Human Rights Commission," because Canada, like the former Soviet Union, claims to guarantee the right to free speech, freedom of the press and freedom of religion, but like the USSR establishes state authorities to tell the subjects what rights they will be allowed to have.<sup>18</sup>

Scorned as "the most hostile country to free speech in the Western world," Canada is being described in terms of an Orwellian nightmare which

[ . . . ] has allowed the queer lobby to raise their perversion above all else, above race, sex, religion, the family, free speech, even above human rights, to the point where discrimination against people based on their religion is not only acceptable, it is enforced by the state, while sexual disorientation is promoted and celebrated by the force of legislation.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, for people like Flanagan Canadian law not only bites, but also sucks. Rather than discard such accusations as simply absurd, I think we need to carefully investigate their potential, recognize the sites of their fallaciousness and perhaps complexify the commonsense liberal attitude endorsing the minority discourse and the civil rights rhetoric as part and parcel of the democratic system. While the inflammatory language and stubborn normativity make libertarians (or some of them, at least) unfit for a serious dialogue, they may, inadvertently, point to a certain latent danger that indeed may lie hidden in the liberal, progressive model adopted by Canada and some other western democracies. What lies behind the rules of PC may be the modernist strategies of policing, sanitation and aestheticization, a logic that seeks "social progress" in the governmental regulation of

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<sup>18</sup> Gregory Flanagan, "Politically Correct Queer-Fascism" in *Liberation Journal*, 29 January 2002 <<http://www.liberationjournal.com>>.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory Flanagan, "Big Brother Is a Queer" in *Liberation Journal*, 29 January 2002 <<http://www.liberationjournal.com>>.

the public sphere. Two aspects of the modernist paradigm seem to be at work here: the tradition of Roman/imperial legalism and the mechanistic ethos which has shaped, for instance, the U.S. political system. In combination, these two traditions promote the belief that legal regulations can ensure a smooth, machine-like functioning of the socio-political sphere. A simple inclusion of gays and lesbians in the operations of the State-machine does not, essentially, alter the underlying principle of its "mechanic regulation." Political correctness in relation to sexual minorities may be viewed as a paradoxical "straightening" of queer, a simple extension of "straight subjectivity" onto the construction of other subjectivities hitherto regarded as non-normative.

It may well be that within the legalistic framework that we have inherited from the Romans, the "civil rights" approach is a "necessary error," to borrow Spivak's term referring to the need of essentialist categories in effective political practice. On the other hand, how many "necessary errors" can one speak of? The category of a necessary error is somewhat dangerous, as it may serve to simply mask personal hypocrisy or political helplessness. So perhaps what the queer subjects of the new century should strive after is the creation of "enclaves" within, and yet apart from, this legalistic framework, some alternative spaces, or "parallel worlds," e.g. by establishing alternative family structures, or alternative ways of social bonding. What we might demand (please, excuse the communitarian "we") is the withdrawal of the government's regulatory operations from the realm of sexual and social bonding in general, a withdrawal of the state's explicit or implicit prioritization or protection of some kinds of social bonding over others. To effectively counter the empire's expansion into all spheres of life, a radical "delegalization" of morality is needed, a move that would neither preclude nor force public participation and/or expression of sexuality.

How, then, should queer discourse position itself in relation to the dominant cultural economy regulated by the hard currency of authenticity? How should it counteract the mechanics of legalistic absolutism? If we connect authenticity and legalism with the logic of capitalistic (post)modernism, then one possible alternative to this compulsive "modernizing" (responsible, among other things, for the reduction of queer discourses to the code of political correctness) is what Bruno Latour calls "ecologizing." What I am envisioning here is a form of "eco-queer theory" which would combine the subversive ambitions of queer theory with the more general strategy of destabilizing modernist arrangements through a queerly understood "ecologization." In Latour's own brave words, "ecology has nothing to do with taking account of nature, [. . .] it is rather another way of considering everything. [. . .] *Everywhere we have 'modernised' we must now 'ecologise.'*"<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Bruno Latour, "To modernize or to ecologize? That's the question," 29 January 2002 <<http://www.ensmp.fr/~latour/Articles/73-7thcity.html>>.



This, however, is a project that largely exceeds the limits of this paper, so I am only mentioning it to indicate a possible direction for future elaboration.

Queer theory has been criticized for its universalistic claims that often serve to conceal its narrow, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class focus. Judith Butler proposes a list of questions that the queer discourse must continually ask about the formation of queer subjectivities:

For whom is outness a historically available and affordable option? Is there an unmarked class character to the demand for universal “outness”? Who is represented by *which* use of the term [queer], and who is excluded? For whom does the term present an impossible conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual politics? What kinds of policies are enabled by what kinds of usages, and which are backgrounded or eased from view?<sup>21</sup>

Even the present essay seems to commit the crime of universalization in that it has been blind to social or ethnic inflections of queer. On the other hand, it might be argued that in an increasingly global context queer cultures at national, regional or local levels, as well as at different social levels, become variations on the theme of Anglo-Saxon queer. The English contributed a lot to the creation of the category of a modern homosexual and its globalization. Compared with such stable democracies as the USA or Canada, the queer discourses in Poland are much more difficult to describe. Due to its transitional character, Poland’s cultural economy is subject to external influences as well as internal forces that are shaping queer subjectivity in unpredictable ways.

Let us just have a quick look at the nominative strategies applied by both queer and homophobic communities (which do not have to be mutually exclusive). Like in English, the word “homoseksualista” has medical, pathologizing connotations and as such it is not a very comfortable term of self-description for queer subjects. However, given the high and nearly unproblematic status of the sciences in Polish society, the term would often be perceived (by both gays and non-gays) as “objective” and therefore neutral. The English borrowing “gej” has some of the advantages of its English equivalent: it is a self-adopted term that avoids links with the medical discourse. As used in Polish, it lacks a history of derogatory usage and, besides, it is adaptable and flexible, which facilitates word derivation (e.g. the adjective “gejowski”) and precludes clumsy inflections. The popular, offensive term “pedał” is, of course, a shortened and vulgarized version of the Greek “pederast,” a word closest to the English “queer” in its socio-linguistic dimension. “Queer theory,” for instance, has sometimes been translated as “teoria pedalska,” but it is hardly conceivable that such a term could be accepted by Polish academic circles as the name of a serious field of research. Besides, it excludes from the

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<sup>21</sup> Butler, p. 227.

“rainbow coalition“ all the queer people who are not necessarily gay men (lesbians, bisexuals, etc.). Another word has recently gained some circulation as a “polite“ and academic designation of a queer person: “odmieniec.“ While less stigmatizing and more acceptable, “odmieniec“ may be criticized as too general and deprived of the cultural force of the English “queer.“ (“ ‘Queer,’ “ Judith Butler observes, “derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult“).<sup>22</sup> As far as “odmieniec“ is concerned, the word’s previous usage suggests any sort of “otherness,“ not necessarily connected with sexuality.<sup>23</sup>

The rhetoric of authenticity and essentialist identity categories are hardly questioned by Polish gays and lesbians. To undermine these categories through direct critique would be rather unwise at the present moment - the socio-political situation requires the “necessary error of essentialism“ as well as the civil right approach. However, this necessity does not have to preclude attempts at complexifying queer discourses in this country. As I have argued above, queer should work in a broader framework of “ecologization,“ in Bruno Latour’s sense of the word. As “ecologizers“ whose aim is to counter the Cartesian ontology of “clear and distinct“ objects, we should emphasize the opaque and the blurred, the indistinct and the intertwined. We need to relinquish the dream of the self’s and the world’s absolute legibility, anchored in the belief in our presumably unlimited capacities as “interpreters.“ Such a new ecology would concentrate on that which cannot be subsumed, reduced, ignored, or erased. In that sense, the larger project of ecologization will insist on the ultimate namelessness of queer subjectivities, much as naming and self-naming are necessary strategies in the processes of social and psychological identification. At the same time, in order to counter the mechanics of legalistic absolutism, I would claim that in addition to laws and statutes, modern democracy (construed as a conflict-driven system) needs various forms of social negotiation as well as a proliferation of alternative spaces in which non-normative (nameless?) subjectivities may seek their expression.

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<sup>22</sup> Butler, p. 226.

<sup>23</sup> After much deliberation, the editors of the first self-conscious queer publication in the Polish academia have adopted the word “odmieniec“ as a rough equivalent of “queer.“ Still, partly due to the word’s lack of flexibility, they have not been able to coin a Polish equivalent of “queer theory.“ Cf. Tomasz Basiuk, Dominika Ferens and Tomasz Sikora, eds., *Odmiany odmieńca. Mniejszościowe orientacje seksualne w perspektywie gender / A Queer Mixture. Gender Perspectives on Minority Sexual Identities* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Śląsk, 2002).