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Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct?
A Queer Dilemma*

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Drawing on debates in lesbian and gay periodicals and writings from and about post-structuralist "queer theory" and politics, this paper clarifies the meanings and distinctive politics of "queerness," in order to trace its implications for social movement theory and research. The challenge of queer theory and politics, I argue, is primarily in its disruption of sex and gender identity boundaries and deconstruction of identity categories. The debates (over the use of the term "queer" and over bisexual and transgender inclusion) raise questions not only about the content of sexuality-based political identities, but over their viability and usefulness. This in turn challenges social movement theory to further articulate dynamics of collective identity formation and deployment. While recent social movement theory has paid attention to the creation and negotiation of collective identity, it has not paid sufficient attention to the simultaneous impulse to destabilize identities from within. That tendency, while especially visible in lesbian and gay movements, is also visible in other social movements. It calls attention to a general dilemma of identity politics: Fixed identity categories are both the basis for oppression and the basis for political power. The insights of both sides of the dilemma highlighted here raise important new questions for social movement theory and research.

Focused passion and vitriol erupt periodically in the letters columns of San Francisco's lesbian and gay newspapers. When the *San Francisco Bay Times* announced to "the community" that the 1993 Freedom Day Parade would be called "The Year of the Queer," missives fired for weeks. The parade was what it always is: a huge empowerment party. But the letters continue to be telling. "Queer" elicits familiar arguments: over assimilation, over generational differences, over who is considered "us" and who gets to decide.

On this level, it resembles similar arguments in ethnic communities in which "boundaries, identities, and cultures, are negotiated, defined, and produced" (Nagel 1994:152). Dig deeper into debates over queerness, however, and something more interesting and significant emerges. Queerness in its most distinctive forms shakes the ground on which gay and lesbian politics has been built, taking apart the ideas of a "sexual minority" and a "gay community," indeed of "gay" and "lesbian" and even "man" and "woman."[1] It builds on central difficulties of identity-based organizing: the instability of identities both individual and collective, their made-up yet necessary character. It exaggerates and explodes these troubles, haphazardly attempting to build a politics from the rubble of deconstructed collective categories. This debate, and other related debates in lesbian and gay politics, is not only over the *content* of collective identity (whose definition of "gay" counts?), but over the everyday *viability* and political *usefulness* of sexual identities (is there and should there be such a thing as "gay," "lesbian," "man," "woman"?).

1. Although I am discussing them together because of their joint struggle against the "sex/gender system" (Rubin 1975) on the basis of same-sex desire, lesbians and gay men have long histories of autonomous organizing (Adam 1987; D'Emilio 1983). Gender has been the strongest division historically in movements for gay and lesbian rights and liberation, not surprisingly, given the very different ways in which male homosexuality and lesbianism have been constructed and penalized. This division is taken up explicitly later in the discussion.

This paper, using internal debates from lesbian and gay politics as illustration, brings to the fore a key dilemma in contemporary identity politics and traces out its implications for social movement theory and research.[2] As I will show in greater detail, in these sorts of debates—which crop up in other communities as well—two different political impulses, and two different forms of organizing, can be seen facing off. The logic and political utility of deconstructing collective categories vie with that of shoring them up; each logic is true, and neither is fully tenable.

On the one hand, lesbians and gay men have made themselves an effective force in this country over the past several decades largely by giving themselves what civil rights movements had: a public collective identity. Gay and lesbian social movements have built a quasi-ethnicity, complete with its own political and cultural institutions, festivals, neighborhoods, even its own flag. Underlying that ethnicity is typically the notion that what gays and lesbians share—the anchor of minority status and minority rights claims—is the same fixed, natural essence, a self with same-sex desires. The shared oppression, these movements have forcefully claimed, is the denial of the freedoms and opportunities to actualize this self. In this *ethnic/essentialist* politic,[3] clear categories of collective identity are necessary for successful resistance and political gain.

Yet this impulse to build a collective identity with distinct group boundaries has been met by a directly opposing logic, often contained in queer activism (and in the newly anointed "queer theory"): to take apart the identity categories and blur group boundaries. This alternative angle, influenced by academic "constructionist" thinking, holds that sexual identities are historical and social products, not natural or intrapsychic ones. It is socially-produced binaries (gay/straight, man/woman) that are the basis of oppression; fluid, unstable experiences of self become fixed primarily in the service of social control. Disrupting those categories, refusing rather than embracing ethnic minority status, is the key to liberation. In this *deconstructionist* politic, clear collective categories are an obstacle to resistance and change.

The challenge for analysts, I argue, is not to determine which position is accurate, but to cope with the fact that both logics make sense. Queerness spotlights a dilemma shared by other identity movements (racial, ethnic, and gender movements, for example):[4] Fixed identity categories are both the basis for oppression and the basis for political power. This raises questions for political strategizing and, more importantly for the purposes here, for social movement analysis. If identities are indeed much more unstable, fluid, and constructed than movements have tended to assume—if one takes the queer challenge seriously, that is—what happens to identity-based social movements such as gay and lesbian rights? Must sociopolitical struggles articulated through identity eventually undermine themselves?

Social movement theory, a logical place to turn for help in working through the impasse between deconstructive cultural strategies and category-supportive political strategies, is hard pressed in its current state to cope with these questions. The case of queerness, I will argue, calls for a more developed theory of collective identity formation and its relationship to both institutions and meanings, an understanding that *includes the impulse to take apart that identity from within.*

In explicating the queer dilemma and its implications for social movement theory, I first briefly summarize the current state of relevant literature on collective identity. Then, zeroing in on the dilemma, I make use of internal debates, largely as they took place in the letters column of the weekly *San Francisco Bay Times* in 1991, 1992, and 1993. I turn initially to

2. In this discussion, I am heeding recent calls to bring sociology into contact with queer theory and politics (Seidman 1994). It has taken a bit of time for sociologists and other social scientists to join queer theoretical discussions, which although they emerged primarily from and through humanities scholars, could hardly be "imagined in their present forms, absent the contributions of sociological theory" (Epstein 1994:2). On the relationship between sociology of sexuality and queer theory, see also Stein and Plummer 1994; Namaste 1994.

3. I borrow this term from Seidman (1993).

4. See, for example, Di Stefano (1990), Bordo (1990), and Davis (1991).

debates within lesbian and gay communities over the use of the word "queer," using them to highlight the emergence of queer activism, its continuities with earlier lesbian and gay activism, and its links with and parallels to queer theory. Next, I take up debates over the inclusion of transgender and bisexual people — the two groups brought in under an expanded queer umbrella — in lesbian and gay politics. Here I point to a distinctive (although not entirely new) element of queerness, a politic of boundary disruption and category deconstruction, and to the resistance to that politic, made especially visible by the gendered nature of these debates. Finally, in drawing out ramifications for social movement theory, I briefly demonstrate affinities between the queer debates and debates over multiracialism in African American politics, arguing that queerness illuminates the core dilemma for identity movements more generally. I conclude by suggesting ways in which social movement literature can be pushed forward by taking seriously, both as theoretical and empirical fact, the predicament of identity movements.

Social Movements and Collective Identity

Social movements researchers have only recently begun treating collective identity construction[5] as an important and problematic movement activity and a significant subject of study. Before the late 1980s, when rational-actor models came under increased critical scrutiny, "not much direct thought [had] been given to the general sociological problem of what collective identity is and how it is constituted" (Schlesinger 1987:236). As Alberto Melucci (1989:73) has argued, social movement models focusing on instrumental action tend to treat collective identity as the nonrational expressive residue of the individual, rational pursuit of political gain. And "even in more sophisticated rational actor models that postulate a *collective* actor making strategic judgments of cost and benefit about collective action," William Gamson points out, "the existence of an *established* collective identity is assumed" (1992:58, emphasis in original). Identities, in such models, are typically conceived as existing before movements, which then make them visible through organizing and deploy them politically; feminism wields, but does not create, the collective identity of "women."

Melucci and other theorists of "new social movements" argue more strongly that collective identity is not only necessary for successful collective action, but that it is often an end in itself, as the self-conscious reflexivity of many contemporary movements seems to demonstrate.[6] Collective identity, in this model, is conceptualized as "a continual process of recomposition rather than a given," and "as a dynamic, *emergent* aspect of collective action" (Schlesinger 1987:237, emphasis in original; see also Cohen 1985; Mueller 1992; Kauffman 1990). Research on ethnicity has developed along similar lines, emphasizing, for example, the degree to which "people's conceptions of themselves along ethnic lines, especially their ethnic identity, [are] situational and changeable" (Nagel 1994:154). "An American Indian might be 'mixed-blood' on the reservation," as Joane Nagel describes one example, " 'Pine Ridge' when speaking to someone from another reservation, a 'Sioux' or 'Lakota' when responding to the U.S. census, and 'Native American' when interacting with non-Indians" (1994:155; see also Padilla 1985; Alba 1990; Waters 1990; Espiritu 1992).

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5. Collective identity is variously defined. I am using it here to designate not only a "status — a set of attitudes, commitments, and rules for behavior — that those who assume the identity can be expected to subscribe to," but also "an individual pronouncement of affiliation, of connection with others" (Friedman and McAdam 1992:157). See also Schlesinger (1987).

6. There is no reason to limit this claim to "identity-based" movements, although identity construction is more visible and salient in such movements. As Taylor and Whittier argue in reviewing existing scholarship, "identity construction processes are crucial to grievance interpretation in all forms of collective action, not just in the so-called new movements" (1992:105).

How exactly collective identities emerge and change has been the subject of a growing body of work in the study of social movements. For example, Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier, analyzing lesbian-feminist communities, point to the creation of politicized identity communities through boundary-construction (establishing "differences between a challenging group and dominant groups"), the development of consciousness (or "interpretive frameworks") and negotiation ("symbols and everyday actions subordinate groups use to resist and restructure existing systems of domination") (1992:100-111; see also Franzen 1993). Other researchers, working from the similar notion that "the location and meaning of particular ethnic boundaries are continuously negotiated, revised, and revitalized," demonstrate the ways in which collective identity is constructed not only from within, but is also shaped and limited by "political policies and institutions, immigration policies, by ethnically linked resource policies, and by political access structured along ethnic lines" (Nagel 1994:152, 157; see also Omi and Winant 1986).

When we turn to the disputes over queerness, it is useful to see them in light of this recent work. We are certainly witnessing a process of boundary-construction and identity negotiation: As contests over membership and over naming, these debates are part of an ongoing project of delineating the "we" whose rights and freedoms are at stake in the movements. Yet as I track through the queer debates, I will demonstrate a movement propensity that current work on collective identity fails to take into account: the drive to blur and deconstruct group categories, and to keep them forever unstable. It is that tendency that poses a significant new push to social movement analysis.

Queer Politics and Queer Theory

Since the late 1980s, "queer" has served to mark first a loose but distinguishable set of political movements and mobilizations, and second a somewhat parallel set of academy-bound intellectual endeavors (now calling itself "queer theory"). Queer politics, although given organized body in the activist group Queer Nation, operates largely through the decentralized, local, and often anti-organizational cultural activism of street postering, parodic and non-conformist self-presentation, and underground alternative magazines ("zines") (Berlant and Freeman 1993; Duggan 1992; Williams 1993);[7] it has defined itself largely against conventional lesbian and gay politics. The emergence of queer politics, although it cannot be treated here in detail, can be traced to the early 1980s backlash against gay and lesbian movement gains, which "punctured illusions of a coming era of tolerance and sexual pluralism;" to the AIDS crisis, which "underscored the limits of a politics of minority rights and inclusion;" and to the eruption of "long-simmering internal differences" around race and sex, and criticism of political organizing as "reflecting a white, middle-class experience or standpoint" (Seidman 1994:172).[8]

Queer theory, with roots in constructionist history and sociology, feminist theory, and post-structuralist philosophy, took shape through several late 1980s academic conferences and continues to operate primarily in elite academic institutions through highly abstract language; it has defined itself largely against conventional lesbian and gay studies (Stein and

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7. Queer Nation, formed in 1990, is an offshoot of the AIDS activist organization ACT UP. Queer Nation owes much to ACT UP, in its emergence, its personnel and tactics, which are often to "cross borders, to occupy spaces, and to mime the privileges of normality" (Berlant and Freeman 1993:195). On similar tactics within ACT UP, see J. Gamson (1989). On Queer Nation specifically and queer politics more generally, see Berube and Escoffier (1991); Duggan (1992); Stein (1992); Cunningham (1992); Patton (1993); Browning (1993, especially Chapters 2, 3, and 5).

8. See, for example, Rich (1983); Moraga (1983); Hemphill (1991); Clarke (1983); Reid-Pharr (1993).

Plummer 1994).⁹ Stein and Plummer have recently delineated the major theoretical departures of queer theory: a conceptualization of sexual power as embodied "in different levels of social life, expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binary divides;" a problematization of sexual and gender categories, and identities in general; a rejection of civil rights strategies "in favor of a politics of carnival, transgression, and parody, which leads to deconstruction, decentering, revisionist readings, and an anti-assimilationist politics;" and a "willingness to interrogate areas which would not normally be seen as the terrain of sexuality, and conduct queer 'readings' of ostensibly heterosexual or non-sexualized texts" (1994:181-182).

Through these simultaneous and tenuously linked actions, then, the word "queer," as Steven Epstein puts it, has recently "escaped the bounds of quotation marks" (Epstein 1994:189; see also Duggan 1992; Warner 1993). Its escape has been marked by quite wrenching controversy within sexual identity-based communities. To understand the uses of "queer" and its links to and departures from lesbian and gay activism it helps to hear these controversies, here presented primarily through the letters column debates over "The Year of the Queer."

My discussion of this and the two debates that follow is based on an analysis of 75 letters in the weekly *San Francisco Bay Times*, supplemented by related editorials from national lesbian and gay publications. The letters were clustered: The debates on the word "queer" ran in the *San Francisco Bay Times* from December 1992 through April 1993; the disputes over bisexuality ran from April 1991 through May 1991; clashes over transsexual inclusion ran from October 1992 through December 1992. Although anecdotal evidence suggests that these disputes are widespread, it should be noted that I use them here not to provide conclusive data, but to provide a grounded means for conceptualizing the queer challenge.

The Controversy Over Queerness: Continuities With Existing Lesbian and Gay Activism

In the discussion of the "Year of the Queer" theme for the 1993 lesbian and gay pride celebration, the venom hits first. "All those dumb closeted people who don't like the Q-word," the *Bay Times* quotes Peggy Sue suggesting, "can go fuck themselves and go to somebody else's parade." A man named Patrick argues along the same lines, asserting that the men opposing the theme are "not particularly thrilled with their attraction to other men," are "cranky and upset," yet willing to benefit "from the stuff queer activists do." A few weeks later, a letter writer shoots back that "this new generation assumes we were too busy in the '70s lining up at Macy's to purchase sweaters to find time for the revolution—as if their

9. Although social constructionist thought generally informs queer theory, it is important to distinguish different strands of constructionist work and their varying contributions to the development of sexual theory. Much constructionist history and sociology, which concerned "the origin, social meaning, and changing forms of the modern homosexual" and challenged essentialist notions of homosexuality, was also "often tied to a politics of the making of a homosexual minority" (Seidman 1994:171; see, for examples, D'Emilio 1983; Faderman 1981). Post-structuralist writing on gender and sexuality, although often looking quite similar, tends to "shift the debate somewhat away from explaining the modern homosexual to questions of the operation of the hetero/homosexual binary, from an exclusive preoccupation with homosexuality to a focus on heterosexuality as a social and political organizing principle, and from a politics of minority interest to a politics of knowledge and difference" (Seidman 1994:192; see also Epstein 1994; Namaste 1994; Warner 1993; Hennessy 1993).

It is this latter strand that has most strongly informed queer theory. Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, with its famous assertion that "an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition" (1990:1), is now often taken as the founding moment of queer theory; Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990a) also made a tremendous impact in the field. For further examples of queer theoretical work, see Fuss 1991; de Lauretis 1991; Butler 1993. These theoretical and political developments in the field of lesbian and gay studies also draw from and overlap with similar ones in feminism. See Ingraham (1994), and the essays in Nicholson (1990).

piercings and tattoos were any cheaper." Another sarcastically asks, "How did you ever miss out on 'Faggot' or 'Cocksucker'?" On this level, the dispute reads like a sibling sandbox spat.

Although the curses fly sometimes within generations, many letter writers frame the differences as generational. The queer linguistic tactic, the attempt to defang, embrace and resignify a stigma term, is loudly rejected by many older gay men and lesbians.[10] "I am sure he isn't old enough to have experienced that feeling of cringing when the word 'queer' was said," says Roy of an earlier letter writer. Another writer asserts that 35 is the age that marks off those accepting the queer label from those rejecting it. Younger people, many point out, can "reclaim" the word only because they have not felt as strongly the sting, ostracism, police batons, and baseball bats that accompanied it one generation earlier. For older people, its oppressive meaning can never be lifted, can never be turned from overpowering to empowering.

Consider "old" as code for "conservative," and the dispute takes on another familiar, overlapping frame: the debate between assimilationists and separatists, with a long history in American homophile, homosexual, lesbian, and gay politics. Internal political struggle over agendas of assimilation (emphasizing sameness) and separation (emphasizing difference) has been present since the inception of these movements, as it has in other movements. The "homophile" movement of the 1950s, for example, began with a Marxist-influenced agenda of sex-class struggle, and was quickly overtaken by accommodationist tactics: gaining expert support; men demonstrating in suits, women in dresses.[11] Queer marks a contemporary anti-assimilationist stance, in opposition to the mainstream inclusionary goals of the dominant gay rights movement.

"They want to work from within," says Peggy Sue elsewhere (Berube and Escoffier 1991), "and I just want to crash in from the outside and say, 'Hey! Hello, I'm queer. I can make out with my girlfriend. Ha ha. Live with it. Deal with it.' That kind of stuff." In a zine called *Rant & Rave*, co-editor Miss Rant argues that:

> I don't want to be gay, which means assimilationist, normal, homosexual. . . . I don't want my personality, behavior, beliefs, and desires to be cut up like a pie into neat little categories from which I'm not supposed to stray (1993:15).

Queer politics, as Michael Warner puts it, "opposes society itself," protesting "not just the normal behavior of the social but the *idea* of normal behavior" (1993:xxvii). It embraces the label of perversity, using it to call attention to the "norm" in "normal," be it hetero or homo.

Queer thus asserts in-your-face difference, with an edge of defiant separatism: "We're here, we're queer, get used to it," goes the chant. We are different, that is, free from convention, odd and out there and proud of it, and your response is either your problem or your wake-up call. Queer does not so much rebel against outsider status as revel in it.[12] Queer confrontational difference, moreover, is scary, writes Alex Chee (1991), and thus politically useful:

> Now that I call myself queer, know myself as a queer, nothing will keep [queer-haters] safe. If I tell them I am queer, they give me room. Politically, I can think of little better. I do not want to be one of them. They only need to give me room.

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10. Although its most familiar recent usage has been as an anti-gay epithet, the word actually has a long and complex history. Along with "fairy," for example, "queer" was one of the most common terms used before World War II, "by 'queer' and 'normal' people alike to refer to 'homosexuals.' " In the 1920s and 1930s, "the men who identified themselves as part of a distinct category of men primarily on the basis of their homosexual interest rather than their womanlike gender status usually called themselves queer" (Chauncey 1994:14, 16). Whether as chosen marker or as epithet, the word has always retained its general connotation of abnormality (Chauncey 1994).

11. On assimilation-separation before Stonewall, see D'Emilio (1983) and Adam (1987). On assimilation-separation after Stonewall, see Epstein (1987).

12. Indeed, the "outlaw" stance may help explain why gender differences are (somewhat) less salient in queer organizing (Duggan 1992). Whereas in ethnic/essentialist lesbian and gay organizations participants are recruited as gay men and lesbian *women*, in queer organizations they are recruited largely as *gender outlaws*.

This goes against the grain of civil rights strategists, of course, for whom at least the appearance of normality is central to gaining political "room." Rights are gained, according to this logic, by demonstrating similarity (to heterosexual people, to other minority groups) in a nonthreatening manner. "We are everywhere," goes the refrain from this camp. We are your sons and daughters and co-workers and soldiers, and once you see that lesbians and gays are just like you, you will recognize the injustices to which we are subject. "I am not queer," writes a letter writer named Tony. "I am normal, and if tomorrow I choose to run down the middle of Market Street in a big floppy hat and skirt I will still be normal." In the national gay weekly *10 Percent* — for which *Rant & Rave* can be seen as a proud evil twin — Eric Marcus (1993:14) writes that "I'd rather emphasize what I have in common with other people than focus on the differences," and "the last thing I want to do is institutionalize that difference by defining myself with a word and a political philosophy that set me outside the mainstream." The point is to be not-different, not-odd, not-scary. "We have a lot going for us," Phyllis Lyon says simply in the *Bay Times.* "Let's not blow it" — blow it, that is, by alienating each other and our straight allies with words like "queer."

Debates over assimilation are hardly new, however; but neither do they exhaust the letters column disputes. The metaphors in queerness are striking. Queer is a "psychic tattoo," says writer Alex Chee, shared by outsiders; those similarly tattooed make up the Queer Nation. "It's the land of lost boys and lost girls," says historian Gerard Koskovich (in Berube and Escoffier 1991:23), "who woke up one day and realized that not to have heterosexual privilege was in fact the highest privilege." A mark on the skin, a land, a nation: These are the metaphors of tribe and family. Queer is being used not just to connote and glorify differentness, but to revise the criteria of membership in the family, "to affirm sameness by defining a common identity on the fringes" (Berube and Escoffier 1991:12; see also Duggan 1992).[13]

In the hands of many letter writers, in fact, queer becomes simply a shorthand for "gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender," much like "people of color" becomes an inclusive and difference-erasing shorthand for a long list of ethnic, national, and racial groups. And as some letter writers point out, as a quasi-national shorthand "queer" is just a slight shift in the boundaries of tribal membership with no attendant shifts in power; as some lesbian writers point out, it is as likely to become synonymous with "white gay male" (perhaps now with a nose ring and tatoos) as it is to describe a new community formation. Even in its less nationalist versions, queer can easily be difference without change, can subsume and hide the internal differences it attempts to incorporate. The queer tribe attempts to be a multicultural, multigendered, multisexual, hodge-podge of outsiders; as Steven Seidman points out, it ironically ends up

> denying differences by either submerging them in an undifferentiated oppositional mass or by
> blocking the development of individual and social differences through the disciplining compulsory
> imperative to remain undifferentiated (1993:133).

Queer as an identity category often restates tensions between sameness and difference in a different language.

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13. There is no question that part of what has happened with queer activism is simply the construction of a new, if contentious, collective identity: Queer Nation, with its nationalist rhetoric, is one clear example. My point, however (developed here), is not that queer indicates a group with no boundaries, but that it indicates a strategy for identity destabilization. This logic is not confined to a particular group formation; although it is considerably stronger in groups identifying as queer, many of which are loose associations that are very intentionally decentralized (Williams 1993), it is also often present in more mainstream organizing, albeit in more occasional and muted form. Queer is more useful, I am suggesting, as a description of a particular action logic than as a description of an empirically distinguishable movement form.

Debates Over Bisexuality and Transgender: Queer Deconstructionist Politics

Despite the aura of newness, then, not much appears new in recent queerness debate; the fault lines on which they are built are old ones in lesbian and gay (and other identity-based) movements. Yet letter writers agree on one puzzling point: Right now, it matters what we are called and what we call ourselves. That a word takes so prominent a place is a clue that this is more than another in an ongoing series of tired assimilationist-liberationist debates. The controversy of queerness is not just strategic (what works), nor only a power-struggle (who gets to call the shots); it is those, but not only those. At their most basic, queer controversies are battles over identity and naming (who I am, who we are). Which words capture us and when do words fail us? Words, and the "us" they name, seem to be in critical flux.

But even identity battles are not especially new. In fact, within lesbian-feminist and gay male organizing, the meanings of "lesbian" and "gay" were contested almost as soon as they began to have political currency as quasi-ethnic statuses. Women of color and sex radicals loudly challenged lesbian feminism of the late 1970s, for example, pointing out that the "womansculture" being advocated (and actively created) was based in white, middle-class experience and promoted a bland, desexualized lesbianism. Working-class lesbians and gay men of color have consistently challenged "gay" as a term reflecting the middle-class, white homosexual men who established its usage (Stein 1992; Phelan 1993; Seidman 1993, 1994; Clarke 1983; Moraga 1983; Reid-Pharr 1993; Hemphill 1991). They have challenged, that is, the definitions.

The ultimate challenge of queerness, however, is not just the questioning of the content of collective identities, but the *questioning of the unity, stability, viability, and political utility of sexual identities* — even as they are used and assumed.[14] The radical provocation from queer politics, one which many pushing queerness seem only remotely aware of, is not to resolve that difficulty, but to exaggerate and build on it. It is an odd endeavor, much like pulling the rug out from under one's own feet, not knowing how and where one will land.

To zero in on the distinctive deconstructionist politics of queerness, turn again to the letters columns. It is no coincidence that two other major *Bay Times* letters column controversies of the early 1990s concerned bisexual and transgender people, the two groups included in the revised queer category. Indeed, in his anti-queer polemic in the magazine *10 Percent* (a title firmly ethnic/essentialist in its reference to a fixed homosexual population), it is precisely these sorts of people, along with some "queer straights,"[15] from whom Eric Marcus seeks to distinguish himself:

> Queer is not my word because it does not define who I am or represent what I believe in. . . . I'm a man who feels sexually attracted to people of the same gender. I don't feel attracted to both genders. I'm not a woman trapped in a man's body, nor a man trapped in a woman's body. I'm not someone who enjoys or feels compelled to dress up in clothing of the opposite gender. And I'm not a "queer straight," a heterosexual who feels confined by the conventions of straight sexual expression. . . . I don't want to be grouped under the all-encompassing umbrella of queer . . . because we have different lives, face different challenges, and don't necessarily share the same aspirations (1993:14).

14. This questioning is not entirely unique to recent queer politics but has historical ties to early gay liberation calls to "liberate the homosexual in everyone" (Epstein 1987). That the current queer formulations have such affinities with earlier political activity underlines that queerness is less a new historical development than an action impulse that comes to the fore at certain historical moments. There is certainly a difference in degree, however, between the strength of a queer-style politic now and in earlier decades: With a few exceptions, earlier lesbian feminist and gay liberationist discourses rarely questioned "the notion of homosexuality as a universal category of the self and sexual identity" (Seidman 1994:170).

15. On "queer straights," self-identifying heterosexuals who seek out and participate in lesbian and gay subcultures, see Powers (1993).

The letters columns, written usually from a different political angle (by lesbian separatists, for example), cover similar terrain. "It is not empowering to go to a Queer Nation meeting and see men and women slamming their tongues down each others' throats," says one letter arguing over bisexuals. "Men expect access to women," asserts one from the transgender debate. "Some men decide that they want access to lesbians any way they can and decide they will become lesbians."

Strikingly, nearly all the letters are written by, to, and about women—a point to which I will later return. "A woman's willingness to sleep with men allows her access to jobs, money, power, status," writes one group of women. "This access does not disappear just because a woman sleeps with women 'too' . . . That's not bisexuality, that's compulsory heterosexuality." You are not invited; you will leave and betray us. We are already here, other women respond, and it is you who betray us with your back-stabbing and your silencing. "Why have so many bisexual women felt compelled to call themselves lesbians for so long? Do you think biphobic attitudes like yours might have something to do with it?" asks a woman named Kristen. "It is our community, too; we've worked in it, we've suffered for it, we belong in it. We will not accept the role of the poor relation." Kristen ends her letter tellingly, deploying a familiar phrase: "We're here. We're queer. Get used to it."[16]

The letters run back and forth similarly over transgender issues, in particular over transsexual lesbians who want to participate in lesbian organizing. " 'Transsexuals' don't want to just be lesbians," Bev Jo writes, triggering a massive round of letters, "but insist, with all the arrogance and presumption of power that men have, on going where they are not wanted and trying to destroy lesbian gatherings." There are surely easier ways to oppress a woman, other women shoot back, than to risk physical pain and social isolation. You are doing exactly what anti-female and anti-gay oppressors do to us, others add. "Must we all bring our birth certificates and two witnesses to women's events in the future?" asks a woman named Karen. "If you feel threatened by the mere existence of a type of person, and wish to exclude them for your comfort, you are a bigot, by every definition of the term."

These "border skirmishes" over membership conditions and group boundaries have histories preceding the letters (Stein 1992; see also Taylor and Whittier 1992), and also reflect the growing power of transgender and bisexual organizing.[17] Although they are partly battles of position, more fundamentally the debates make concrete the anxiety queerness can provoke. They spotlight the possibility that sexual and gender identities are not the solid political ground they have been thought to be—which perhaps accounts for the particularly frantic tone of the letters.

Many arguing for exclusion write like a besieged border patrol. "Live your lives the way you want and spread your hatred of women while you're at it, if you must," writes a participant in the transgender letter spree, "but the fact is we're here, we're dykes and you're not. Deal with it." The Revolting Lesbians argue similarly in their contribution to the *Bay Times* bisexuality debate: "Bisexuals are not lesbians—they are bisexuals. Why isn't that obvious to everyone? Sleeping with women 'too' does not make you a lesbian. We must hang onto the identity and visibility we've struggled so hard to obtain." A letter from a woman named Caryatis sums up the perceived danger of queerness:

> This whole transsexual/bisexual assault on lesbian identity has only one end, to render lesbians completely invisible and obsolete. If a woman who sleeps with both females and males is a lesbian; and if a man who submits to surgical procedure to bring his body in line with his acceptance of sex role stereotypes is a lesbian; and if a straight woman whose spiritual bonds are with other females is a lesbian, then what is a female-born female who loves only other females? Soon there will be no logical answer to that question.

16. For more bisexuality debate, see Wilson (1992) and Queen (1992).

17. For articulations of these young movements see, on bisexual organizing, Hutchins and Kaahumanu (1991), and on transgender organizing, Stone (1991).

Exactly: In lesbian (and gay) politics, as in other identity movements, a logical answer is crucial. An inclusive queerness threatens to turn identity to nonsense, messing with the idea that identities (man, woman, gay, straight) are fixed, natural, core phenomena, and therefore solid political ground. Many arguments in the letters columns, in fact, echo the critiques of identity politics found in queer theory. "There is a growing consciousness that a person's sexual identity (and gender identity) need not be etched in stone," write Andy and Selena in the bisexuality debate, "that it can be fluid rather than static, that one has the right to PLAY with whomever one wishes to play with (as long as it is consensual), that the either/or dichotomy ('you're either gay or straight' is only one example of this) is oppressive no matter who's pushing it." Identities are fluid and changing; binary categories (man/woman, gay/ straight) are distortions. "Humans are not organized by nature into distinct groups," Cris writes. "We are placed in any number of continuums. Few people are 100 percent gay or straight, or totally masculine or feminine." Differences are not distinct, categories are social and historical rather than natural phenomena, selves are ambiguous. "Perhaps it is time the lesbian community re-examined its criteria of what constitutes a woman (or man)," writes Francis. "And does it really matter?" Transsexual performer and writer Kate Bornstein, in a *Bay Times* column triggered by the letters, voices the same basic challenge. Are a woman and a man distinguished by anatomy? "I know several women in San Francisco who have penises," she says. "Many wonderful men in my life have vaginas" (1992:4). Gender chromosomes, she continues, are known to come in more than two sets ("could this mean there are more than two genders?"); testosterone and estrogen don't answer it ("you could buy your gender over the counter"); neither child-bearing nor sperm capacities nails down the difference ("does a necessary hysterectomy equal a sex change?"). Gender is socially assigned; binary categories (man/woman, gay/straight) are inaccurate and oppressive; nature provides no rock-bottom definitions. The opposite sex, Bornstein proposes, is neither.[18]

Indeed, it is no coincidence that bisexuality, transsexualism, and gender crossing are exactly the kind of boundary-disrupting phenomena embraced by much post-structuralist sexual theory. Sandy Stone, for example, argues that "the transsexual currently occupies a position which is nowhere, which is outside the binary oppositions of gendered discourse" (1991:295).[19] Steven Seidman suggests that bisexual critiques challenge "sexual object-choice as a master category of sexual and social identity" (1993:123). Judith Butler argues that butch and femme, far from being "copies" of heterosexual roles, put the "very notion of an original or natural identity" into question (1990:123). Marjorie Garber writes that "the cultural effect of transvestism is to destabilize all such binaries: not only 'male' and 'female,' but also 'gay' and 'straight,' and 'sex' and 'gender.' This is the sense—the radical sense—in which transvestism is a 'third'" (1992:133).

The point, often buried in over-abstracted jargon, is well taken: The presence of visibly transgendered people, people who do not quite fit, potentially subverts the notion of two naturally fixed genders; the presence of people with ambiguous sexual desires potentially subverts the notion of naturally fixed sexual orientations. (I say "potentially" because the more common route has continued to be in the other direction: the reification of bisexuality into a third orientation, or the retention of male-female boundaries through the notion of transgendered people as "trapped in the wrong body," which is then fixed.) Genuine inclusion of transgender and bisexual people can require not simply an expansion of an identity, but a subversion of it. This is the deepest difficulty queerness raises, and the heat behind the letters: If gay (and man) and lesbian (and woman) are unstable categories, "simultaneously possible and impossible" (Fuss 1989:102), what happens to sexuality-based politics?

18. For a more developed version of these arguments, see Bornstein (1994).

19. See also Shapiro (1991), on the ways in which transsexualism is simultaneously subversive and conservative of sex and gender organization.

The question is easily answered by those securely on either side of these debates. On the one side, activists and theorists suggest that collective identities with exclusive and secure boundaries are politically effective. Even those agreeing that identities are mainly fictions may take this position, advocating what Gayatri Spivak has called an "operational essentialism" (cited in Butler 1990b; see also Vance 1988). On the other side, activists and theorists suggest that identity production "is purchased at the price of hierarchy, normalization, and exclusion" and therefore advocate "the deconstruction of a hetero/homo code that structures the 'social text' of daily life" (Seidman 1993:130).

The Queer Dilemma

The problem, of course, is that both the boundary-strippers and the boundary-defenders are right. The gay and lesbian civil rights strategy, for all its gains, does little to attack the political culture that itself makes the denial of and struggle for civil rights necessary and possible. Marches on Washington, equal protection pursuits, media-image monitoring, and so on, are guided by the attempt to build and prove quasi-national and quasi-ethnic claims. By constructing gays and lesbians as a single community (united by fixed erotic fates), they simplify complex internal differences and complex sexual identities. They also avoid challenging the system of meanings that underlies the political oppression: the division of the world into man/woman and gay/straight. On the contrary, they ratify and reinforce these categories. They therefore build distorted and incomplete political challenges, neglecting the political impact of cultural meanings, and do not do justice to the subversive and liberating aspects of loosened collective boundaries.

Thus the strong claims of queer politics and theory — that this is not how it must be, that political and social organization can and should be more true to the inessential, fluid, and multiply-sited character of sexuality; and that gay-ethnic movements make a serious error in challenging only the idea that homosexuality is unnatural, affirming rather than exposing the root cultural system.

Yet queer theory and politics tend to run past a critique of the particular, concrete forces that make sexual identity, in stabilized and binary form, a basis for discipline, regulation, pleasure, and political empowerment. In the hurry to deconstruct identity, they tend to "slide into viewing identity itself as the fulcrum of domination and its subversion as the center of an anti-identity politic" (Seidman 1993:132); the politic becomes overwhelmingly cultural, textual, and subjectless. Deconstructive strategies remain quite deaf and blind to the very concrete and violent institutional forms to which the most logical answer is resistance in and through a particular collective identity.

The overarching strategy of cultural deconstruction, the attack on the idea of the normal, does little to touch the institutions that make embracing normality (or building a collective around inverted abnormality) both sensible and dangerous. Mall kiss-ins by San Francisco's Suburban Homosexual Outreach Program (SHOP) and other actions that "mime the privileges of normality" (Berlant and Freeman 1993:196), "Queer Bart" (Simpson, the popular cartoon character) T-shirts and other actions that "reveal to the consumer desires he/she didn't know he/she had, to make his/her identification with the product 'homosexuality' both an unsettling and a pleasurable experience" (Berlant and Freeman 1993:208), do very little to take on the more directly political: regulatory institutions such as law and medicine, for example, that continue to create and enforce gay/straight and male/female divisions, often with great physical and psychic violence. They do not do justice to the degree to which closing group boundaries is both a necessary and fulfilling survival strategy.

Interest-group politics on the ethnic model is, quite simply but not without contradictory effects, how the American sociopolitical environment is structured. Official ethnic categories

provide "incentives for ethnic group formation and mobilization by designating particular ethnic subpopulations as targets for special treatment;" politically controlled resources are "distributed along ethnic lines;" ethnic groups mean larger voting blocs and greater influence in electoral systems (Nagel 1994:157-159). Ethnic categories serve, moreover, as the basis for discrimination and repression, both official and informal, and thus as a logical basis for resistance. This is the buried insight of the border-patrolling separatists and the anti-queer pragmatists: that here, in this place, at this time, we need, for our safety and for potential political gains, to construct ourselves as a group whose membership criteria are clear.

The overwhelmingly female participation in the *Bay Times* disputes over bisexuality and transgender inclusion underscores this point. Lesbians are especially threatened by the muddying of male/female and gay/straight categorizations exactly because it is by keeping sexual and gender categories hard and clear that gains are made. Lesbian visibility is more recent and hard won; in struggles against patriarchal control, moreover, lesbianism and feminism have often been strongly linked.[20] Gay men react with less vehemence because of the stronger political position from which they encounter the queer challenge: as men, as gay men with a more established public identity. Just as they are gaining political ground *as lesbians*, lesbians are asked not only to share it but to subvert it, by declaring "woman" and "lesbian" to be unstable, permeable, fluid categories. Similar pitfalls were evident in the 1993 fight over Colorado's Amendment 2, which prohibits "the state or any of its subdivisions from outlawing discrimination against gay men, lesbians, or bisexuals" (Minkowitz 1993). The Colorado solicitor general, as reporter Donna Minkowitz put it, made arguments "that could have appeared in a queercore rant," promoting "a remarkably Foucaultian view of queerness as a contingent category, whose members can slip in and out of its boundaries like subversive fish" (Minkowitz 1993:27). "We don't have a group that is easily confinable," the solicitor general argued. Here, the fluidity of group boundaries and the provisional nature of collective identity was used to argue that no one should receive legal benefits or state protection—because there is no discernible group to be protected. Although the solicitor-general-as-queer-theorist is a strange twist, the lesson is familiar: As long as membership in this group is unclear, minority status, and therefore rights and protection, is unavailable.

Built into the queer debates, then, is a fundamental quandary: In the contemporary American political environment, clear identity categories are both necessary and dangerous distortions, and moves to both fix and unfix them are reasonable. Although it comes most visibly to the fore in them, this dynamic is hardly unique to lesbian and gay movements. The conflict between a politics of identity-building and identity-blurring has erupted, for example, in recent debates in African American movements over multiracialism. When a group lobbied the Office of Management and Budget (whose 1977 Statistical Directive recognizes four racial groups), proposing the addition of a "multiracial" classification, they were met with tremendous opposition from those who "see the Multiracial box as a wrecking ball aimed at affirmative action," since it threatens to "undermine the concept of racial classification altogether" (Wright 1994:47; see also Omi and Winant 1986; Webster 1992; Davis 1991).

As one advocate put it, "Multiracialism has the potential for undermining the very basis for racism, which is its categories" (G. Reginald Daniel, quoted in Wright 1994:48); as one observer put it, "multiracial people, because they are both unable and unwilling to be ignored, and because many of them refuse to be confined to traditional racial categories, inevitably undermine the entire concept of race as an irreducible difference between peoples" (Wright 1994:49). Opponents respond vehemently to multiracial organizing, in part because civil rights laws are monitored and enforced through the existing categories. In a debate in *The Black Scholar*, African and Afro-American Studies professor Jon Michael Spencer attacked "the postmodern conspiracy to explode racial identity," arguing that "to relinquish the notion

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20. On lesbian feminism, see Phelan (1989), Taylor and Whittier (1992), and Taylor and Rupp (1993).

of race — even though it's a cruel hoax — at this particular time is to relinquish our fortress against the powers and principalities that still try to undermine us" (in Wright 1994:55). Here, in a different form, is the same queer predicament.

Conclusion: Collective Identity, Social Movement Theory and the Queer Dilemma

Buried in the letters column controversies over a queer parade theme, and over bisexual and transsexual involvement in lesbian organizations, are fights not only over who belongs, but over the possibility and desirability of clear criteria of belonging. Sexuality-based politics thus contains a more general predicament of identity politics, whose workings and implications are not well understood: it is as liberating and sensible to demolish a collective identity as it is to establish one.

Honoring both sets of insights from the queer debates is a tall order. It calls for recognizing that undermining identities is politically damaging in the current time and place, and that promoting them furthers the major cultural support for continued damage. It means reconnecting a critique of identity to the embodied political forces that make collective identity necessary and meaningful, and reconnecting a critique of regulatory institutions to the less tangible categories of meaning that maintain and reproduce them.[21]

The neatest and most true to life means for doing so — the theoretical recognition of paradoxes and dialectics — can satisfy intellectually. Certainly a political structure that directs action towards ethnic interest group claims, and requires therefore solid proofs of authentic ethnic membership (the immutability of sexual orientation, for example), creates paradoxical forms of action for stigmatized groups. In the case of lesbians and gays, for example, gender stereotypes used to stigmatize actors (the gay man as woman, the lesbian as man) have been emphasized in order to undermine them; pejorative labels are emphasized in an effort to get rid of them.[22] But the recognition of paradox, while a significant step, is too often a stopping point of analysis. I want to suggest potentially fruitful paths forward, through research and theorizing that take the queer dilemma to heart.

The recent revival of sociological interest in collective identity has brought important challenges to earlier assumptions that identities were either irrational (and irrelevant) or antecedents to action. Yet, even as theorizing has recognized that collective identities are achieved in and through movement activity, the assumption has remained that the impetus to solidify, mobilize and deploy an identity is the only rational one. The suggestion of most social movement theory, sometimes assumed and sometimes explicit, is that secure boundaries and a clear group identity are achievable, and even more importantly, that "if a group fails in [these], it cannot accomplish any collective action" (Klandermans 1992:81); without a solid group identity, no claims can be made. These theories have little to say about the queer impulse to blur, deconstruct, and destabilize group categories. Current theories take hold of only one horn of the dilemma: the political utility of solid collective categories.

Serious consideration of queerness as a logic of action can force important revisions in approaches to collective identity formation and deployment and their relationship to political gains. First, it calls attention to the fact that *secure boundaries and stabilized identities are necessary not in general, but in the specific* — a point current social movement theory largely misses. The link between the two logics, the ways in which the American political environment

21. I am indebted here to Steven Seidman's discussion and critique of queer theory and politics, which make some of the points from different directions (Seidman 1993; see also Patton 1993, and Vance 1988). I want to push the discussion towards the ground, however, to open questions for political action and empirical research.

22. On this dynamic, see Weeks (1985, especially Chapter 8), Epstein (1987), and J. Gamson (1989).

makes stable collective identities both necessary and damaging, is sorely undertheorized and underexamined.

More importantly, accommodating the complexity of queer activism and theory requires sociology to revisit the claim that social movements are engaged in simply constructing collective identities. Queer movements pose the challenge of a form of organizing in which, far from inhibiting accomplishments, the *destabilization of collective identity is itself a goal and accomplishment of collective action.* When this dynamic is taken into account, new questions arise. The question of how collective identities are negotiated, constructed, and stabilized, for example, becomes transformed into a somewhat livelier one: for whom, when, and how are stable collective identities *necessary* for social action and social change? Do some identity movements in fact avoid the tendency to take themselves apart?

Investigating social movements with the queer predicament in mind, moreover, brings attention to repertoires and forms of action that work with the dilemma in different ways. At the heart of the dilemma is the simultaneity of cultural sources of oppression (which make loosening categories a smart strategy) and institutional sources of oppression (which make tightening categories a smart strategy). Are some movements or movement repertoires more able to work with, rather than against, the simultaneity of these systems of oppression? When and how might deconstructive strategies take aim at institutional forms, and when and how can ethnic strategies take aim at cultural categories? Are there times when the strategies are effectively linked, when an ethnic maneuver loosens cultural categories,[23] or when a deconstructionist tactic simultaneously takes aim at regulatory institutions?[24]

Such questions can point the way towards novel understandings and evaluations of social movements in which collective identity is both pillaged and deployed. These questions are not a path out of the dilemma, but a path in. The fact that the predicament may be inescapable is, after all, the point: first to clearly see the horns of the dilemma, and then to search out ways for understanding political actions taking place poised, and sometimes skewered, on those horns.

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23. The public pursuit of same-sex marriage and parenting may be an example of this. On the one hand, the call for institutions of "family" to include lesbians and gays—as a recognizably separate species—is quite conservative of existing gender and sexual categories. It often appears as mimicry, and its proponents typically appear as close to "normal" as possible: Bob and Rod Jackson-Paris, for example, a former body-builder/model married couple who have been the most publicly available symbol of gay marriage, are both conventionally masculine, "traded vows in a commitment ceremony, share a house in Seattle, and plan to raise children" (Bull 1993:42).

Yet gay families, in attacking the gender requirements of family forms, attack the cultural grounding of normality at its heart (as the religious right fully recognizes). If and when family institutions, pushed by ethnic/essentialist identity movements, shift to integrate gays and lesbians, the very markers of gay/straight difference start to disintegrate (see Weston 1991). If bodily erotic desire implies nothing in particular about the use of one's body for reproduction, its usefulness as a basis of social categories is largely gutted. In this, the gay family strategy may also be a queer one. To the degree that it succeeds, to the degree that the institution of the family changes, the categories must also lose much of their sense—and their power. This may not be true of all ethnic/essentialist actions.

24. The AIDS activist group ACT UP provides a promising starting point from this direction. Many of ACT UP's tactics have been discursive: meaning deconstruction, boundary crossing, and label disruption (J. Gamson 1989). Yet, for reasons obviously related to the immediacy of AIDS and the visible involvement of medical and state institutions, it has rarely been possible to make the argument that AIDS politics should have as its goal the deconstruction of meanings of sex, sexual identity, and disease. In much queer AIDS activism, the disruption of these meanings takes place through direct targeting of their institutional purveyors: not only media and cultural institutions, but science, medicine, and government (Epstein 1991).

For example, interventions into some spaces (medical conferences as opposed to opera houses) put queerness—its sometimes scary confrontation, its refusal to identify itself as a fixed gay or lesbian subject, its disruption of sex and gender boundaries—to use in ways that clearly mark the dangers of institutional control of sexual categories. Refusing the categories for itself, this strategy names and confronts the agents that fix the categories in dangerous, violent, and deadly ways. To the degree that the strategy succeeds, to the degree that cultural categories become frightening and nonsensical, institutional actors — and not just the vague and ubiquitous purveyors of "normality" — must also be called upon to justify their use of the categories.

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