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### **Rude tools and material difference - Queer theory, ANT and materiality: an under-explored intersection?**

#### Abstract

*Recent advances in archaeology and Actor-Network-theory stress the agency and irreducibility of material objects. Such an approach may allow us to problematise the narrow focus on texts and the semiotics of identities still dominant in some queer theory and supplement it with more attention to lived practice.*

*This requires a shift in ways of ascribing and describing agency: rather than focusing on independent and coherent human agents in the bourgeois liberal humanist tradition, we may shift our focus to proper monsters, construed at the interface of human beings and material culture. I suggest that the queerness of e.g. *Leathermen and Skins* is realised at least as much through materialisation performed with artefacts as through any inherently human agency.*

*I also suggest that a keener materialist focus allows queer theory to return attention to the impossibility of any natural body and to the importance of class and economy in creating identities and subcultures. I suggest that such a focus must problematise any claims to coherent identity, thus queering the identities under investigation.*

In May 2007, I was fortunate enough to participate in the workshop “What’s up in queer theory”, hosted by the Centre for Gender Studies at the University of Lund. In many ways, this was a very positive experience. However, it also served to remind me, again, just how narrowly much academic research focuses on texts and pseudo-texts such as tapes, films, and prints. One of the central themes of the conference was that of archives, their ethics and technical limits. Throughout these talks, it seemed clear that an “archive” was understood as a collection of texts, both concretely and metaphorically. In this contribution, I shall argue that the metaphor of the archive might be unnecessarily limiting for queer theory. Queer theory can and should benefit enormously from an increased awareness of material culture. A queer look at recent advances in material culture studies can show how and why Viagra™, wheel-chairs, leather jackets and shavers all deserve queer theoretisation, alongside any textual archive.

I understand this specific discourse on archives to be particular to history, and perhaps especially to the Foucauldian tradition, with its heavy focus on writing, as metaphor and as concrete practice. However, I believe that disagreements among historians and archaeologists might also throw some light on other disciplines, which may sometimes have been too focused on texts. Whereas texts are probably central to historiography, there is little reason why other fields should limit themselves so.

The past decade or so has seen significant developments in material culture studies. Indeed, we are now at the point where leading theorists suggest that these have exhausted their potential (Julian Thomas at TAG Exeter 2006), echoing the claims made about queer theory in the late 1990s. Surely, such claims are a symptom of theoretical maturity! Likewise, queer theory has been changing and expanding during this period, especially in developing a new confidence and becoming more of an independent framework for research than simply a rebellion against LGBT studies (that is, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transvestite/Transsexual). Yet, there seems to be little contact between these two fields. In both cases there is some attention to “the body”, and in both cases leading theorists have noted that “the body” in question is often not a physical body but a purely semiotic or ideal construction (Grosz 2005, Sofaer 2007). However, beyond this body-that-is-not, it is my impression that queer theorists have paid little attention to materiality and material culture theorists have paid little attention to queer dimensions of our work. It is my impression that the material articulations of non-conformist sexuality remain under-explored.

The project of this paper, then, is to explore the potential for queer materiality. I want to argue that

- 1) materiality has a potential well beyond the semiotics of identity, in that artefacts directly enable specific ways of being (a central point in ANT, Actor-Network Theory);
- 2) that the necessary material culture theory is already available, and that it simply needs to be occupied for queer theory;- I shall try to document that this has not been achieved yet;
- 3) that such a project has queer potential, even if ANT theorists have largely ignored this aspect (notable exceptions include Donna Haraway); that is, the ANT erasure of

the subject-object dichotomy challenges the proper subject to a degree that makes all such subjectivities queer, independently of the identities claimed by the people in question.

My argument goes beyond a call for attention to the material dimensions of queer anthropology, and includes a call for attention to the queer dimensions of all materiality, including all human culture. I have taken George Chauncey's "Gay New York" (Chauncey 1994) as an example of the "textual" genre. Chauncey's work is very powerful, well-researched and important, and yet it begs a few questions.<sup>1</sup>

This then, is my contribution to queer theory: I submit that we have not been natural since the early Palaeolithic. We have "always" been naturecultural. People with objects are always historical constructs, and subjects are always people with objects.

### **The limits of metaphors: archives and hoards**

The question of the archive or the museum might form a useful starting point for discussion: What sorts of texts are archived, and what sort of objects are curated? What parts of the past are

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<sup>1</sup> One caveat needs to be stressed: I am not, of course, equally familiar with everything published under the broad umbrella of "queer theory". My professional attentions have necessarily been concentrated on archaeology and material culture, with some reference to history and anthropology. The present paper refers primarily to those disciplines. If it has any value beyond them, that is a bonus. Moreover, I shall not engage in any critique of queer archaeology here. The field is too new, too small and entirely too vulnerable for that. Those few brave colleagues who have dared to write queer archaeologies deserve all the encouragement I can give them, and if parts of the field remain underexplored, this is probably due to the limited number of papers written so far. Few of us are doing any kind of queer archaeology at all, fewer still are doing anything as good as the standards set by queer theorists in other fields, and practically no-one has yet developed queer archaeology to its full potential. Most remain, like me, enthusiastic amateurs trying to find our ways in this strange new world.

More specifically, I need briefly to address Insoll's venomous attack on queer archaeology (Insoll 2007, 75): based on "at least" five of the nine papers in one publication, Insoll suggests that all queer archaeology everywhere is limited to the study of same-sex attraction in the past. As I read him, this is based on his own refusal to recognise the other four papers, or anything like them, as proper queer theory. I disagree with both method and conclusion, and especially with the way in which Insoll arrogates to himself the power of disqualifying studies as queer theory. Indeed, Insoll seems to write either in bad faith or with circular logic or both. Nonetheless, he does have a slight point: so far, much queer archaeology has focused narrowly on the study of same-sex attraction in the past. I suggest that this is unnecessarily limiting, and that archaeologies of the body allow us to queer body and identity, as well as attraction. If we can dissolve the subject/object divide by showing that subjects were and are always construed through objects, then we can denaturalise not just attraction and sexuality, but being tout court. I also suggest that this is exactly what some of the papers explicitly ignored by Insoll do (for one very fine work, see Wilkie 2000).

preserved for the future? One of the few people to write on these issues, Mills asks rhetorically: “Should the queer museum contain the same kinds of thing as any other museum? I sincerely hope not.” Instead, he hopes that

“[q]ueer-history exhibitions will adopt a style of presentation partly modelled on scrapbooks and collage; in place of the representative ‘object’, they will appropriate fragments, snippets of gossip, speculations, irreverent half-truths. Museum-goers will be invited to consume their histories queerly – interacting with exhibits that self-consciously resist grand narratives and categorical assertions. It will be a mode of display, collecting and curating driven not by a desire for a petrified ‘history as it really was’ but by the recognition that interpretations change and that our encounters with archives are saturated with desire” (Mills 2006, not paginated).

While I respect Mill’s point, my counterpoint is that his challenge concerns archives of texts more than collections of things: it is possible to take “the same kinds of things” and re-use them in a very queer ways. Thus, Black artist Fred Wilson exhibited silverware and slave chains together to provide a Black perspective on the extremely traditional Museum of the Maryland Historical Society (Baltimore, Maryland), and observed that “It was not so much the objects as the way things were placed that offended me” (quoted in Pearce 1999, 22).

Of course, the museum *exhibition* is in no way innocent of power. Museum exhibitions have been heavily implicated in for instance naturalising racism (Haraway 2004, 151ff) and legitimising nationalism (Anderson 1996, 163ff). However, the *collections* created by colonialism have since then been re-interpreted in the light of revisionist history, and in some cases this has led to a re-appropriation of the museum by formerly de-privileged groups (for further discussion see e.g. Clifford 1988). Material objects offer different possibilities for resistance than do texts. Like other tools, these may be re-used for many different tasks. If we can regard our sources less as archives of documentation and more as collections of odds and ends that might be useful in the future, they may also prove more useful, politically.

### **Agency and material culture, tools for monsters**

Above, I took my starting point from the specificities of the study of the past. However, materiality is more broadly relevant. In this section, I want to explore how a focus on objects can be integrated with a queer political project. This will require some brief discussion of so-called object agency, of how some thinkers attribute “agency” or something like it to tools, landscapes and other non-human objects. The central argument here is that the independent individual agent, central to bourgeois liberal humanism is a historical construction, not a naturally occurring phenomenon.

In order to integrate the material dimension into queer theory, it may be useful to re-address the subject/object dichotomy. My original inspiration for these thoughts came from post/feminist philosopher, cyberculture theorist, biologist and activist Donna Haraway’s famous cyborg manifesto (Haraway 1991, 149ff). Haraway adopted the cyborg as one metaphor for late 20<sup>th</sup> century feminism, arguing that dreaming of pre-industrial, pre-capitalist romantic innocence was both dangerous and futile. Since the mid-eighties, when Haraway made this point, technologies have changed, and few modern feminists would argue against using communication technologies. If the cyborg seems less relevant today, this is at least partly because of the success of the project it represented.

I hesitate to use Haraway’s cyborgs as a metaphor outside the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. To do so would rob them of their important, polluted heritage. Yet I think a very similar symbol might be useful. If, say, medieval people had not yet conceived of cyborgs, they were certainly familiar enough with monstrous figures who/which blurred the same boundaries, from the Golem to Wayland smith. Latour (1999, 189) uses the phrase “shape-changers”, certainly familiar to the medieval mind. The change from man to wolf is every bit as radical and destructive as that from man to gunman, and its heritage of witch-hunts and extinction every bit as polluted.

This monstrous agency is crucial to my own understanding of material culture: for the past decade and more, archaeologists and actor network theorist have wrangled over how and why material objects do or do not have agency. These issues remain unresolved. However, the working solution that seems most useful to me is to sidestep the whole subject/object-distinction:

people with objects have a radically different agency than people without these objects. If “Guns don’t kill people... people kill people”, then people with guns kill people a lot more efficiently (see also Latour 1999, 176). I think it is more urgent to account for this *somehow* than to maintain a perfectly coherent and transparent universalist concept of conscious agency.

From a purely archaeological viewpoint, the promise of monsters is that they allow a reconstruction of the past, in the sense of feminist literary critic Gillian Beer (1997): a reconstruction is not simply an attempt at setting back the clock and returning somehow to the past, but rather a *construction* in the present which actively *recreates* a modern version of a past actant (Latour’s word; see footnote 2). That is, if I were to take a real, prehistoric stone axe, fit it with a realistic shaft of entirely modern wood and add my own, subjective body, I could cut down a tree in the present. This would be a *re-construction*, or a re-destruction, in the sense that this tree was not actually cut down by Stone Age “man”, but was actually cut down by a Stone Age axe, although one possibly changed by time. The actant axeman would not be purely prehistoric or purely modern but a modern reconstruction of prehistory. I would gain some subjective understanding of the affordances of stone axes, while retaining the specificity of my body, and we could readily repeat the experiment with someone else supplying the body. I may be radically different, by birth or experience, from the original user, *but* I am also radically different in the same way from any number of my contemporaries. If we, today, have any hope of understanding each other, then we also have a hope of understanding the past. The axe and the wheel-chair are more than documents of past agents: they are literally parts of past and future actants.

Moving from the specifics of archaeology to general observations, my point is that artefacts are tools. They are really useful in the real world, not evidence left to gather dust in drawers. If queer material culture makes any sense at all, it does so in context. These artefacts should be taken out and used to create contemporary actants, whether as exhibits, as performances, or in other ways. We are not keeping the slave chains around because we like them, but in order to use them later, in contraposition to silverware, say.

The basic idea that artefacts may have something like agency<sup>2</sup> has been argued especially by Actor network-theory doyen Bruno Latour. I shall limit the discussion here to repeating the claim made above, that a gunman and axe-man are radically different actants than either man or tool on its own. Latour makes similar claims for speed bumps and hotel keys (Latour 1999, 186; Latour 1991, 104f). The central point is that *effect* may be more important than *intention*: speed bumps, in themselves, do not "want" anything, yet they certainly affect human behaviour. They are not *conscious* agents<sup>3</sup>, yet they do influence action. A story that is only about humans leaves out half the actants, or in my vocabulary half of us monsters - not every other, but literally one half of each of us. To focus on the human part of the axe-man or werewolf alone is to misrepresent their capabilities entirely.

Thus, I think ANT has queer potential: it suggests that maybe liberal humanist are missing something, and that the world is far richer and stranger, more monstrous, queerer than their accounts credit. Yet, *Latour's* Actor-Network Theory (ANT) must raise uncomfortable political questions: he describes the speed bump as "sleeping policeman", raising the ghost of policemen on every street. This vision of total and non-negotiated, asymmetric control is uncannily similar to the effects of Bentham's panopticon, as problematised by Foucault. This is the world as prison, a system of self-enforcement, with a policeman in every head. Queer history does not inspire a lot of confidence that authority is necessary on our side (Foucault 1991; cf. Fergusson 2005, 64). Indeed, Latour himself notes as the "*male-like, hairy, gorilla-like*" aspects of his approach (Latour 2004, 16): he blithely ignores race, class and gender, cordoning them off in brackets, and clearly treating them as irrelevant (Latour 1999, 42).

This is not an inherent flaw in all ANT, but a choice specific to Latour. As Lee & Stenner argue, ANT is ethical rather than moral: it *can* consider any number of actants, but equally, it can ignore them. Latour's emphasis lies on (male) engineers and scientists and their mighty

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<sup>2</sup> The exact word for this "something like agency" has been the topic of long debates that are largely irrelevant here. It suffices to note that Latour has taken to refer to these pseudo-agents as "actants" in order to avoid confusion and hairsplitting. The gist of the problem is that Anthony Giddens insists on relating "agency" to an agent's reflective understanding of her own place in the world and her strategic possibilities of changing that place. Arguably, speed bumps and hotel keys cannot be agents proper under such a definition. Many thinkers would deny even animals this sort of agency. Yet, as Latour stresses, objects (and animals!) *do* have something *like* agency.

<sup>3</sup> I am told that Anthony Giddens, one of the front figures in formulating Agency, insists on agents being conscious. These are not, so they may not be proper Giddensian agents. Yet, they do transform action. Hence Latour's neologism "actants". See footnote 2.

machines, and explicitly disregards considerations of power and justice. Others emphasise the ethical aspects far more (i.e. Star 1991, 27ff, Law 1991, 2). Where Latour foregrounds how individuals within the elite struggle for supremacy, at the expense of any attention to the ethics of technology, thinkers like Star and Haraway foreground these very issues. Latour's focus implicitly echoes the logic of Taylorism, as it existed in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century West and has now been relocated to the developing world (Mason 2007, 255; Klein 2001 throughout). My suggestion here is that ANT offers a valuable approach to queering the actor, but these perspectives remain under-explored. This is an omission, not a flaw, but one that I think queer theorists are ideally placed to address. Thus, ANT is not inherently allied with any project for greater equality, but it can be occupied for such a project. Lee & Stenner forcefully make the point that ANT has a vast ethical potential which can be activated if we chose to include specific agents and if we focus on accountability towards them. More concretely, Donna Haraway (1997, 80) has devoted some attention to the ethical complexities of animal research in breast cancer treatments, an illness that affects poor and minority women disproportionately. Haraway's account which includes aspects of race, class and animal suffering is ethically different from any more clinical account – ANT or otherwise. I do not believe that ANT, or any other approach, will in itself guarantee sufficient attention to these issues, but I do believe that the very open nature of the Actor Network allows for possible inclusions, and for making aspects visible that would otherwise be ignored. We can, *if we want to*, include economic inequality, OncoMice<sup>TM</sup>, the Black diaspora, and other actors in our network, and recognise them as ethical persons. We can include queers sexuality, stone axes and wheelchairs, slave chains and silverware.

To do so, we need to make the composite construction of the actant visible. We need to see both the “were-“ and the “wolf”, as it were. Latour points out that most technologies are socially invisible most of the time (Latour 1999, 183). As long as I can get to work on time, no-one will care too much whether I walk or drive or arrive by train. As long as I can find the information I need, and as long as it is reliable, it does not much matter whether I find it online or through a phone-call or in a book. As long as technologies work, it does not matter much *how* they work. If they fail, it *does* matter how they fail (Latour 1991, 105).

Once technologies break down, they become visible: one of my friends tried to ferry their youngest across Copenhagen in a pram. Theoretically this was perfectly easy: he walked to the Metro, took the elevator down, caught a train for three stops, and found that the elevator at his destination was out of order. Obviously, he could walk the stairs. He could even carry the baby along. He could not carry the pram, however. In the event, the train company recommended that he ride to the next stop and walk back. Some parents chose to carry their babies in kangaroo packs, which offer a different set of affordances: be better able to get off the train, but less able to carry the shopping (see also Michael 2000; I here use “affordances” in the narrow sense of Norman 1988, 9f and note 1:3: those action possibilities which are readily perceivable by an actor). This logic applies directly to exclusion, as well: my local LGB society meets in the Student’s Union Building. There are six steps up from the street. To this date, I have never seen a wheel-chair user in there.

An account that only documents the intentions and actions of human beings, with no attention to the artefacts and material landscape involved, will only tell half the story. It might tell us *what* happened, but not *how*, in practical terms. In this contribution, then, I want to move queer theory out of the archive and into the physical world. This is especially, but not exclusively relevant for the “archive disciplines”, including history and historical archaeology.

Not incidentally, such constraints are economical as well as physical: outside my economic circle of starving students, many would solve the elevator problem simply by going by car, and trust customer demand to facilitate access. I shall return to these concerns below.

Thus far, I have outlined a narrow reading of Latour, based on people-with-tools, the implication being that “tools” are relatively small objects. However, the whole world is material. Thus, the above may be further linked with anthropologist Tim Ingold’s idea of the “task-scape” (Ingold 2002): Ingold argues that historically, the *landscape* is a fairly recent and elite invention. Most people do not devote much attention to the pure aesthetics of space. Rather, our chief interaction with space is functional: space is useful for some activities, less so for others. A field might afford agriculture, rather than transport, and various landscape features (mountains, bogs) may effectively block travel and communication. Moreover, Ingold argues, such task-scapes become part of the bodily, muscular memory. Thus, a field is not just a pretty sight but also

linked to the embodied memories of clearing off stones or making hay while the sun shines. Moving in a landscape creates a bodily knowledge of gradients and slippery surfaces, of what places are passable or impassable at in different conditions. To Ingold, the whole landscape is a setting for embodied experience of movement and work during time (cf. also Michael 2000, throughout).

In a queer perspective, we might add different subjectivities to this claim: some spaces might have universal value, but many are used differently by different groups. Notably, of course, bars and cruising grounds may be unknown or at least unvisited by the mainstream population, yet central to queer subcultural uses of space (Walcott 2005, 98, coined the term “sex-scapes” for this phenomenon). Pace Ingold, I would argue that having sex or being beaten up in some place creates a very specific body-memory. The same is true of other subcultures, of course: in divided Jerusalem, Derry or Berlin, different populations live(d) side by side with very little overlap. Different groups live in very different task-scapes, even if these overlay each other in actual, physical space. The fact that a street is physically open does not mean that it is actually safe to walk, for all people at all hours (see also Carbado 2005, throughout).

In one sense, there is nothing much that is new in this: Chauncey notes that in the 1920s, people in gay New York had finely tuned mental maps of the sexual landscape (Chauncey 1994, 195 and part II throughout). Yet, on the other hand, this penetrating and thoughtful study largely fails to address the physicality of these maps, that is, the purely bodily question of how to get from one point to the other, and what zones of experience people had to pass through along the way. Even in Chauncey’s excellent account, the city seems more a system of abstract semiotics than a physical place. This is not least due to the limits of the written sources: as Chauncey himself emphasises virtually no information is available on e.g. the physical layout of bathhouses. Indeed, this information is so rare that the single exception warrants a detailed presentation of its background (Ibid. 182)

This materiality can be internalised: as masculinity studies doyen R. W. Connell especially has argued, identities are *structured by and structuring for* the body (Connell 1995, 35 & 50) and the world (Ibid. 65). Connell takes athletes and disabled people as examples: if a person can run a marathon, this is probably because of training, but such training mainly consists

of running. Being in shape makes it a lot easier to get in better shape. Obviously, some specific bodies might rule some identities out altogether – most marathon runners have both their legs – but anatomy is not destiny, and no amount of “good genes” will remove the need for training. While sport might illustrate this claim, it is equally true for work and so many other identities: being a mason or a dry-line angler or an alcoholic all relies on performing certain activities regularly. All of these might require certain bodily abilities and at least some might in turn shape the body of the agent (see also Sofaer 2006, 70ff). The monstrous actant, then, is not just a body, any-body, who walks on stage and picks up tools. By the time we can recognise the werewolf, she has been one for some time already.

Identities, bodies and material artefacts all structure each other. Most runners wear shoes. Shoes might not be essential for running, but the right shoes significantly improve performance. Again, the shoes do not run by themselves, but people with shoes might run a lot more effectively than they would without. This is not determinism: no pair of shoes makes anyone a marathon runner (“Shoes don’t run marathons: people run marathons”). However, having access to shoes (and time, nutrition and decent road-scapes) might allow us to practice and so to build up the necessary bodily capabilities, the ability to run a marathon in shoes. In the short term, shoes afford running, in the long term running re-shapes the body.

Most human agents are more cultural than natural, then. They are so radically transformed by culture as to be something entirely different from “human nature”. Whether they are athletes who keep themselves in shape with barbells and running or singers who maintain their pitch with tuning forks and their recall of the part with recordings or sheet music or painters who use a spirit level to check the horizontal, almost all meaningful human agency incorporates some artefact. This is equally true for mundane activities like cooking a meal or going to work. Every day most of us rely on tools for transportation (bicycles, trains, cars, elevators, shoes), for communication (email, phones) and for interacting with the world around us (hammers, gas stoves, pencils). Almost all meaningful agency is in some sense mediated and empowered by artefacts.

Nowhere is this more evident than among the disabled. Large minorities rely on prosthetics, ranging from wheel-chairs and pace-makers to optics or hearing aids to allow us to

live more normal lives. Paradoxically, these artefacts make us *less natural and more normal* (see also Moser & Law 2003, throughout, Freund 2005, 185). Indeed, as disability theorist L. J. Davis stresses, dis/ability is itself a social construct, judged against social norms of normality (Davis 2005, 169). The narrower the bounds of acceptable performance, the more people will be disabled. In an example borrowed from sociologist Peter Freund, someone able to walk may not be able to walk fast enough to cross the street while the light is green (Freund 2005, 183; cf. Norman 1988, 167ff). Social decisions about how fast the “normal” able citizen walks can disable slow walkers. Conversely, a green light with sound is an out-of-body-prosthetic for the blind. In the tasc-scape, (dis)ability does not stop at the skin (for archaeology and disability, see also Cross 2007).

There is an ideological point to this: archaeologist Morag Cross laments that “*Popular culture is full of disabled villains and monsters*” (Cross 2007, 184). Yet, the heroes of popular culture, and perfectly ordinary people of real life, are no less monstrous than these villains. We may be more enabled, but as leading actor network-theorist John Law observes, we are all monsters. If some can pass for normal and others are truly wretched, then *the very normalisation of some helps the demonisation of others*. The more universal the ideals of “nature” and “norm” become, the more marginalised the deviants will be.

Thus, I believe that *ANT already has a great, queer potential*. However, very few theorists have explicitly focused on this aspect, and mainstream ANT (e.g. Latour) is decidedly normative by default. We need to move from the body-that-is-not to bodies-that-are. Any such move needs to recognise the material specificity of these bodies in the world.

### **Queering object agency: enter the fetish, exit the fetish**

Obviously, some artefacts have been instrumental in affording some queer people some opportunities to realise our identities. In itself, this does not make them obviously queer artefacts, however. A solid pair of shoes might enable you to go dancing, but hopefully, your

choice in shoes is not decisive for your chances for the night. Indeed, normal queers (!) might not care too much about all this: as long as you can get to the scene, it might not matter how.

As queer theorists and activists Gayle Rubin (1993, 13f) and Berlaut & Warner (2003, 178) observe, any sex that involves tools may be queer simply for that. Some queer communities are quite obviously artificial: something like Leather or Fetish, or BDSM (bondage, submission and sadomasochism), relies a lot more on visible artefacts. Those *cultures* could not exist without their relevant *materials*. In a very real sense, these are queer *material cultures*, constituted as much by their material artefacts as by their sexual cultures. Things get even more pronounced elsewhere: GenderQueer writer C. Jacob Hale has described how his FTM (female to male) community of Leatherdyke Boys and their Daddies rely on artefacts for their very gender identity (Hale 2003, 66, cf. Link 2002, throughout). Like so many other men, these appear to be somewhat phallogentric in their sexuality, the chief (in)difference being that these men are not quite satisfied with what nature provides. The case described by Hale illustrates my central point with remarkable clarity: the men in question have sex. Clearly, this is “real” sex, involving real orgasm and so on. Yet, some of the sexual organs involved are, not unreal, but certainly unnatural. A Man who satisfies his Boy with a strap-on is really having sex in the same way that a marathon runner in shoes is really running, or a tree cut down with an axe really falls. Neither action would be the same without the relevant tools, so the sexual actant is not simply “a woman”, “a dildo”, “testosterone” or “a fantasy” but rather “a Man”, made up, temporarily, of these parts. These, in effect, are Men whose masculinity is not exclusively located in their bodies. They are not terribly different from those other men who pick fights or eat anabolic steroids or spend a fair part of their lives in gyms to maintain their masculinity.

This situation is not limited to sex, or to FTMs, or to men. Simply being a socially recognisable man or woman usually requires a person to be able to look and/or act in some specific way, to be a *successful* gendered agent even more so. Some of these relevant agencies are embodied (strength, grace, the ability to hold your drink), but others are more obviously material (access to a car or a set of leathers or formal dress or a tool-chest), and most rely on some combination of knowledge, bodily skill and the right tools.

Outside of specifically sexual acts, most recognizable, relevant material culture is *queered* rather than simply queer. That is, the individual objects are produced within a mainstream culture first, then creatively reused in queer ways. Nothing illustrates this better than clothing, the single aspect of queer material culture to have a voluminous biography (Murphy 2000, 143ff; Stockton 2006 throughout). I return to this below, but for now let me merely point out that the queerness of, say, a butch Lesbian depends as much on her being a woman as on her wearing “men’s clothes”. The same clothes would not be as queer on a man. Likewise, even the infamous coded handkerchiefs, earrings and so on of classical gay culture were queer only by association: *any* earring could be used to signify gay identity *if worn right* and no earring would signify anything if not worn. “It is not the objects in themselves... but the way they are placed”.

A werewolf is not just any old wolf, but a wolf who spends part-time in human shape (or vice versa). A wheel-chair used is not immobile, but *immobilised* under specific conditions, as when encountering stairs. Thus, normality and deviance are always already socially constructed in a material world. They are not ideal semiotic categories but lived practices. *The culture of normality and deviance is always already a material culture.*

### **Class is a queer issue, double marking and the politics of exclusion**

In this section, I want to make a political point: All the above means that queer subcultures have a material history and a contemporary material reality. This may in fact situate such sub-cultures in the larger framework of culture and economy, and in turn help foreground the powerful socialist tradition of critical theory that underlies some queer theory. I submit that an increased awareness of materiality may help restoring the radical political relevancy of queer theory through a return to economy.

As others have pointed out, the history of queer cultures is an economic history. Thriving sexual communities do not come into being by magic, but through economies that afford people options such as economic independence and geographical mobility (d’Emilio 1997, Rubin 2000, Berlaut & Warner 2003, Cohen 2005, 34f, cf. Halberstam 2003, Nero 2005). Any strong

community relies on some control over resources, legitimate or otherwise, economic or otherwise: as Gramsci argued, the most wretched tend to be subaltern, rather than revolutionary, and the revolutionaries tend to recruit for the elite of the disadvantaged groups. Queer resistance to the mainstream relies on our ability to control such resources.

A discussion of the economy of queer subcultures allows another aspect to be highlighted, that of double marking. Here, I rely on a model described by Donna Haraway, and based partly on work by bell hooks, Audre Lorde and the women of colour feminists. Haraway identifies the three main axes of oppression and resistance in modern society as sex/sexuality/gender, “race” and class (Haraway 1991, 139; cf. Moore 1988, 80, Connell 1995, 26f & 76ff, Cohen 2005). In some places, we might add age, religion and so on, and for Europe, “ethnicity” may be more accurate than “race”. While class is structured by economy and sexual identities by anatomy, they are also structuring *for* these aspects (see Connell 1995, 50). Hence, class is a total performance, rather than a matter of economy alone, just as race/ethnicity cannot be reduced to skin-colour, and sex/sexuality/gender cannot be reduced to anatomy (see e.g. Connell 1995, 116, Butler 1990, 137; but see Johnson 2005, 134 for another view). Of course, this model should not be mistaken for the reality it tries to describe: for all that sex, sexuality and gender are somewhat co-dependent, they are not identical, and neither the experience of discrimination, nor the strategies of resistance available are quite the same. The model raises three important points:

First, double marking is a strategy for creating subalternativity: by claiming that a double marked subject cannot logically exist and so speak, hegemonic elites and their recognised oppositions also ensure that no-one will *legitimately* speak from such a position. In effect, if the only recognised workers’ spokesmen are white heterosexual males (Marx and too many others), the only recognised feminists and queer spokespeople are white bourgeois (Wollstonecraft, Radclyffe Hall, Krafft-Eberding) and the only recognised spokespeople of colour are bourgeois heterosexual males (Martin Luther King, Senghor), this ensures the implicit legitimacy of white, heterosexual, bourgeois males as “normal” (ideal) people. The reactionaries and the recognised opposition share an interest in rendering any dissenting opposition silent. Subalterns are not

silent, we<sup>4</sup> are silenced. Despite the fact that Black Lesbians, queer first nation people, working class gay men, and so many others do in fact exist, double marking mean that we cannot be recognised as existing: to be recognised as speaking for Black people, you have to pass straight (and preferably male), to speak for a Gay community, you have to pass white and/or bourgeois (again cf. Johnson 2005, 134), and so on. I suggest that any count that fails to explicitly address these double-marked identities implicitly support such hegemonic notions.

Again, Chauncey's fine study may form an instructive example: the gay men he describes have profession and ethnicity: they are Irish and Jewish and Black, labourers, soldiers and barbers. Yet, none of them are described as *either* able-bodied or disabled. Were there no disabled people in Gay New York before 1940? Why do they not appear? Where they excluded by stairs and social discipline, or by the author's lack of interest?

Second, oppression on different axes may be similar, but not identical. Notably, the strategies of passing or flaming as are rarely very different for racial minorities from how they are for white queers (cf. Sedgwick 1993; Montgomery 2002, 245). Fergusson (2005, 53) stresses the complicity of the white, Gay community in the US in the exclusion of Black people from the elite, even as Cohen (2005, 28) emphasises Black heteronormativity. However, as Lorde famously argued, we are all up against the same norms: if we are all second-class citizens, we are so in relation to the same privileged group of first class citizens (white, straight, bourgeois and often male; cf. Lorde 1982, 226). We do share an interest in challenging the hegemony and in the possibilities of resistance.

Third, all identities are construed through multiple variables. No-one is *just* queer. Rather, we are defined on all three axes simultaneously, so that the experience of being coloured, poor and queer may be quite different from that of being white, rich and queer. This also means that deviation from the norm exists in multiple forms, and that any sexuality that differs in terms of class or ethnicity may be as queer as one defined exclusively by object-choice. In as far as ethnic groups or classes construe their sexual identities differently from the hegemonic norm,

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<sup>4</sup> As my editor pointed out, this is the only place I dare speak as "we" rather than as "I". That is not due to grammatical inattention. I will not arrogate to myself any claim to speak for the reader, or for anyone other than myself. However, on this one issue, I shall claim to speak in solidarity with the rest of "us". This once, then, I shall use the collective first person, and speak as one of "us". However, I do not, and do not claim to, speak for all of us. So, "We, who?" – "We, the subaltern, we, the double-marked, we, who have to claim all our identities in the conditional, because we deviate even from minority norms".

those identities are queer, even if they are not homosexual (e.g. the aggressively heterosexual promiscuity ascribed to West Africans in British folklore). This is not to say that we should ignore sexuality, of course. However, nor should we limit ourselves to the study of sexuality in isolation. I take it as a central queer theory point that sexuality does not exist in isolation, but intersects with everything we do. The personal is political. Not incidentally, Chauncey suggests that the supervisors of the free *mikvahs*, the Jewish public ritual baths, and of the cheaper public baths were stricter in enforcing sexual “morality” than were attendants at other, more expensive baths (Chauncey 1994, 208f). The specific, embodied experience of a night at the baths, then, was not the same for everyone, and indeed the purity of the Jewish community was upheld through a simultaneous exclusion of unbelievers and of (recognisable) queer people. The same baths that afforded the possibility of encounters stripped of material artefacts also reproduced structures dependent on income, property and ethnicity.

“Queer” then, is positional, rather than inherent in any practice. It is not what people do, but the social meaning of these actions that define them as queer (or not). It is not the objects themselves, but the way they are placed, that holds political potential. Specific identities are always also lived through a specific economic reality, and the artifactual affordances available to people in different economic positions may be quite different. Specifically, quite different sexual communities might exist at different economic levels.

These claims might be illustrated with reference to the Skin (skinhead) community. Most Skins are white (race, ethnicity), young, and proletarian, indeed often unemployed (class). However, Skin identity is not created exclusively through these framing factors. Not every unemployed, white male joins. Rather, the identity relies on a number of material signs, including the shaved heads and often white t-shirts, boots, tattoos, donkey jackets etc. Thus, the Skin community owes some of its coherence to the electric shaver and the economics of hair-cuts. The functional aesthetic that made Skin an acceptable look for many young, economically disadvantaged men (and some women) rely on the material reality of mass-produced shavers. Not incidentally, Skin is also a sexual subculture, or rather, there are also sexual subcultures that use Skin as their emblem. The material artefacts allowed the creation of a specific subculture that combines

certain political, sexual and cultural preferences into a recognisable whole. Without this material basis, the homogeneity of the groups could not be upheld, and the imagined community not maintained. Skin, *as an identity*, did not exist before the technological and economic developments that made cheap uniform haircuts a class-badge, even though the pioneers of the culture presumably did. Groups and communities only come into existence once they are recognised as such. This is even more true for the sexual subculture: although brownshirts did exist before Skins, they did not evoke the same (auto)erotic responses. Skin as a sexual identity depends on a reflective recognition that this look could be attractive, and in turn upon the recognition that this look exists. Before the shaver, Skins did not look like this. Before they looked like this, they did not provoke the same attraction. In a fetishist sense, shaved heads *feel* different, and produce different sensual experiences. The *material* experience would not be the same under other circumstances. Thus also the perceived paradox of gay Skin culture: quite beside the semiotics of right wing extremism, Skin is also a look, and even an attractive one, to some people.

To put it crudely, a sexual subculture consists of people who recognise a shared interest in some collective sexual practice. No matter how interested they might be as individuals, unless they can also find each other, nothing much will happen. The possibility of creating a different look (Skin, Leather) also allowed different groups to define themselves. In a very similar way, (Castro) Clone identities depended at least in part on the existence of mass produced, standardised textiles. The industrial revolution made it far easier to look just like any other man, while the anonymity of urban living made it possible for such men to aspire to be perfect strangers. The Clone aesthetic of purely physical, casual sex depended on these signifiers<sup>5</sup>.

Of course, such shared identities are not innocent of power. Not every member has an equal say in what some subculture can or should entail. The (wo)man on the street has the limited option of opting into or out of such a subculture, but not of creating an alternative, *recognised* identity from scratch. Some may not even have that much choice. For gay male groups, specifically, porn, erotica and erotic art seems to be one privileged medium for creating

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<sup>5</sup> Tom of Finland, born Touko Laaksonen, was a pioneer of homoerotic art, producing a large number of characteristic pencil drawings of muscular men in uniform and in various states of undress; originally part of a more or less underground culture, these drawings are now almost ubiquitous in modern Gay mainstream culture. Those interested might Google his name for examples of his work.

and codifying new identities (cf. also Alberti 2006, 137, based on Butler). The Bears might illustrate this: the formal Bear culture seems to go back to *BEAR magazine* from the mid-1980s, and photographer Chris Nelson's "The Bear cult", published in 1989 (Lucie-Smith 1997, 21). Obviously, the men featured in these media existed before they were photographed, but publication allowed similar men elsewhere to articulate their identity and to identify as "Bears", rather than to be socially invisible as fat and hairy. Bear, *as a recognized identity*, owes something to this articulation, although the people already existed. Since then, the formal material culture of the Bear community has mushroomed to include a flag, paw-print tattoos, and some styles of clothing and jewellery shared by other subcultures. These include plaid shirts, Navajo turquoise and silver. In fact, they look a lot like field archaeologists (see also Wright, ed. 1997 & 2001). Are these natural Bears or wereBears or both? Does anyone care?

Incidentally, Tom of Finland and his whole fascist heritage played a similar role in the genesis of Clone and Military identities (see also Sontag 1975). So did *Drummer* for Leather<sup>6</sup>.

If subcultures are materialised, then they are also economic. Material aspects do not percolate out of nothing. They are made by someone, and very likely bought by someone else. This is to say that Skin, Leather and other subcultures are more economically accessible for some people than others. If early Leather culture focused on the utilitarian biking leathers, as Gayle Rubin suggests and Kenneth Anger's "Scorpio Rising" seems to confirm, then some people could enter the culture at a minimal outlay. Rubin (2000, 66f) suggests that "In the late 1940s... pretty much any masculine, working class attire was acceptable". Some men could walk in from the street and fit into Leather, even as some people are "natural Bears" today, before stumbling into any organised culture (one of the standard claims is that "I always knew what 'Bear' meant", or "People have always been calling me 'Bear'"). On the other hand, today at least parts of the Leather scene seem to have developed much more towards fetishism and heavy expenses, approaching the baroque excess Brian Bouldrey observes for latex:

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<sup>6</sup> The clone look is sometimes exemplified with reference to Freddie Mercury: 1950s Americana, white t-shirts, blue jeans, leather jackets, heavy moustaches, built bodies. The Castro Clones were so named because they were ubiquitous in San Francisco's Castro, then the centre of American West Coast gay culture, and all looked alike. I understand that this particular community is more or less gone now, devastated by AIDS and driven away by increased costs of living.

“This stuff is not cheap. No wonder so many guys are talking about real estate and decorating: by day they’re executives and lawyers... The expense of latex is only surpassed by its delicate quality... these days the uniform that has succumbed to fashion is thing that requires hard work to maintain, rather than accommodating hard work.” (Bouldrey 2004, 94 & 99).

These material cultures are class cultures, and their history is (also) class history. Indeed, Rubin’s history of the San Francisco Leather community seems to echo that of San Francisco more generally, with bourgeoisisation driving out creative pioneers and replacing them with high salaried consumers.

None of this is to say that queer subcultures are simply created by technological or economic changes. They are not. Indeed, some of the queer adoptions of such material signs were significantly delayed – thus clones appeared in the 1970’s, although the standard elements of the uniform had been around since before 1900, and the shaver is a lot older than Skin (which does, however, owe much to 1980’s urban unemployment). However, while material culture does not determine sexual identity, it does afford and structure possible identities, not least economically. Leather may have started out as a working class alternative to bourgeois gay culture (Rubin 2000, 67), at a time where motorbikes and leathers alike were more central to proletarian life, and less connected with expensive leisure, than today. In much the same way, bodies changed, from the worker’s physical strength to the muscularity of the idle rich. Unskilled labour today is often boring and repetitive, rather than physically hard, and while workers may leave exhausted, and more or less poisoned by chemicals, such work neither builds nor rewards heavy physiques. At the same time, physical ideals have changed, with less valorisation of the overall bulk of a mover or brewery worker, and more focus on the tight, precise definition of an athlete. Consequently, economics play a significant role in allowing some people access to certain queer cultures and in keeping others out (for discussion, see Ricketts 2005, 230f, Dyer 2003, Baudrillard 2005, throughout; Forrest 1994 seems more confused than enlightening). The whole beauty industry is based around promising the rich have better access to the social signifiers of attractiveness. In some cases, the industry even delivers. Conversely, at least for some people, attractiveness can itself be a ticket to wealth.

*Thus, if queer is an aspect of material culture it is also inherently an issue of class, economy and power.*

### **Ethics; Werewolves vs. Virtuvian man**

The self neither transcends nor ends with the body. This is an ethical claim. By including objects in our theories we may begin to de-naturalise the body. Indeed, by re-constructing actants in all their monstrous glory, we may argue that all human bodies, always (or at least for 2,000,000 years we have been using tools) have been “unnatural”. There is nothing particularly natural about gender-reassignment surgery, safe sex or fetishism, but then there is nothing particularly natural about writing, monogamy or good health in winter, either. We need to untangle the “natural” from the normal and the ideal: ideally, all citizens are able to move independently. In fact, this is not so, but some manifestly *unnatural* technologies may allow some citizens a more ideal mobility. Likewise, heterosexual promiscuity may be “normal” (common), and “natural” (natural human reproduction seems to rely on it), but normal heterosexuality today seems to involve all manner of *unnatural* manipulations of fertility: having children if and when you want, with whom you want, without unwanted pregnancies and infertile unions is manifestly unnatural, however *normal and ideal* this may be today. Likewise, there is nothing either common or natural about celibacy or chastity, however idealised it may be in some circles. As Butler has pointed out, if all sexuality is culturally constructed (and real) then hoping for liberation through some return to “natural” sexuality is foolish and dangerous (Butler 1990, 30). Nor is this limited to sex: Wally Braid describes how she found a lump in her breast, and concluded that

“A prophylactic mastectomy would decrease my breast cancer risk by 90%, according to my cancer surgeon. It’s a no-brainer, particularly for a boy who has longed for the flatness of her yesteryear, Take ‘em off” (Braid 2002, 261).

In the event this turned out to be very difficult indeed. Women, it seems, are supposed to have breasts, even if these are artificial. A woman who chooses to live without is, well, queer. She

would look downright *abnormal*, whereas, presumably, a woman with a few pints of (unnatural) silicone adding “normal” mass to her chest would be more acceptable to these aesthetics – more ideal and thus more “normal”.

We would, all of us, benefit from a greater tolerance for artificial bodies - post-operational cancer patients, people with disabilities, transmen, marathon runners. There are worse things to be than honest monsters, and more noble goals than artificially fitting everyone to some uniform ideal of normal beauty. The curse of the werewolf is that of forced passing, the man disappearing when the wolf appears, and vice versa. The werewolf, like the working class queer or the breastless woman is an impossible creature. The wheelchair-user, now mobile, now handicapped, is another. Modernity has solved this problem by blaming, then erasing the subalterns: if proletarian, we cannot “really” be queer, if queer, not “really” proletarian, if unable to get up the stairs, not really mobile. I suggest that an inversion: we are real, and if the stairs or the categories do not work, they should be redesigned.

If we can reconstruct these monstrous actants of the queer past, then we may truly understand how "men [and women, and everyone else] make themselves", and so, how we may remake ourselves in the future. As long as we allow others to pretend that their natureculture is genetic and/or Gods' will, we will never have the freedom to become all we can be.

Likewise, there are ethical aspects to the discussion of class. There is one strong discursive tradition for casting queers as victims, what Black queer theorist Cathy Cohen (2005, 25) describes as “the single oppression framework”: legally and culturally, many queer sexualities have been either persecuted or at least rendered invisible and subaltern. Yet, not all queer sexualities are equal in this regard. Specifically, white bourgeois urban queers have traditionally done rather better for themselves than anyone else. At least in gay culture, there has traditionally been some claim that there are no coloured or working-class gay men. At present, this claim is being made with particular force in Europe, where many on both sides are eager to rule out any possibility of queer Muslims. If queer theory has any ethical merit, this derives from its strong roots in radical feminism, ethnic liberation and left-wing activism. If queer theory has any ethical merit, it derives from solidarity with other subaltern groups. Since we are already misfits and

unacceptable deviants audacious enough to speak despite this, we might as well revel in our monstrosity: we cannot accept any attempt at silencing any groups through “logical arguments” disproving its existence, if there are in fact real people out there who belong to that group. Specifically, the promise of monsters is that if some combination exists, it must be real no matter how illogical it might appear.

*Thus, denaturalizing the agent will allow us to problematise any and all claims to normality and render the ongoing cultural enforcement of norms visible. In turn, this will foreground the trace of those who are made impossible by hegemonic logic and rearticulate the question of “Who pays? Can we pay them back?” (Lee & Stenner 1999).*

### **Some practical suggestions on how to improve on current knowledge**

As Freud probably never said, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. The ambiguity and the irreducible specificity of the material object also allow some re-negotiation of identity categories: certainly, many traditional identities were partly created in defiance of prevalent stereotypes. Thus, by adopting the signs of, say, a Femme or a Leatherman, a person might both be recognisably queer and recognisably distinct from facile stereotypes - a Lesbian, but not a *mannish* Lesbian, a gay man, but not an *effete* gay man.

Such ambiguity means that any observer needs to maintain a keen eye for the duality of material culture: what it *is* inherently and what it *means* by association. Inherent attributes (colour, weight) can be observed at any time, as long as the original artifact remains. Associated attributes can only be documented in context. It is perfectly possible to return later and check the weight or colour of a leather jacket, far harder to find out afterwards whether the owner was Lesbian and/or disabled (cf. also Gosden 1999, 127 & 137ff; Gosden & Knowles 2001, 1ff, Kopytoff 1986, 65ff; for those interested, there is an extensive bibliography on artefact studies elsewhere; the *Journal of Material Culture* is a good place to start).

I submit that we need to study queer culture *as* material culture. That is, whenever you are out doing your usual observing as researchers, take some time to register the material culture

as well. Don't settle for the lyrics of the songs and the psychology of choosing between the men's and the women's toilet, but register some information also on how much floor space is available, how different implants favour high or low cleavages, and whether the drag queens made it all the way cross town in those heels or whether they carry a pair of flat shoes in their handbags. Document what the Leather set wears on hot summer nights, and how nickel-allergies influence choices in handcuffs. Give us *bodies*, *places* and *materials* as well as meanings. More importantly, give us bodies with organs, places with access, materials with weight and value.

By foregrounding *how* people manage and afford to live their queer lives we may also make our analyses a resource for others who want to appropriate aspects of such practice. For the participant reader, subcultures are not just semiotic systems or identities but also real, lived practices. Moreover, as I hinted at above, in the long term such an approach may serve to queer *all* agents: if we can foreground how agency is always construed socially and materially, and never limited to the "natural" body, then we can also foreground how all agency is "unnatural", even that of self-identified "straight" or "normal" people.

Moreover, materiality is inherently involved in economy, and vice versa. Both are further connected to embodiment. A material turn will allow us to foreground those traditional left discussions of justice and equality that we have all but lost beneath the queer semiotics. Then, we may start treating our resources, not as an archive of the past but as a tool-box for building a better, wheel-chair accessible present.

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