CURRENT ROILOCATIONS WITH QUESTIONS OF DESIRE have been the subject of recent research, particularly in the fields of psychology and sociology. The exploration of sexual identities and orientations has been enriched by interdisciplinary approaches, which have contributed to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of desire.

Over the past two decades, the concepts of gender and sexuality have been redefined, leading to a broader acceptance of diverse identities. The historical and cultural contexts that shape these identities are now more openly acknowledged, challenging the traditional binary systems of gender and sexuality.

The rise of intersectionality in research has further highlighted the complexity of identity formation. Factors such as race, class, and orientation intersect to create unique experiences for individuals, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and nuanced approach to the study of sexual identities.

The evolution of queer theory has also played a significant role in redefining the narratives of desire and identity. This theoretical framework has encouraged a more critical examination of power dynamics and social structures, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of marginalized groups.

In conclusion, the study of desire and identity is an ongoing process, continuously influenced by new research findings and theoretical developments. The interdisciplinary approach and the recognition of intersectionality are essential in advancing our understanding of sexual identities and orientations.
it. This does not mean that biology is irrelevant. Nor does it mean that individuals are blank pieces of paper on which society writes its preferred meanings. Take, for example, homosexuality. To say that lesbian and gay identities have a history, have not always existed and may not always exist, does not mean that they are not important. Nor should it necessarily be taken to imply that homosexual feelings are not deeply rooted. I personally have no special knowledge on that question, and I suspend judgement on it (though I remain sceptical, I have to confess, about recent "discoveries" of a "gay brain" or the "gay gene"). It is in any case irrelevant to the argument. The real problem does not lie in whether homosexuality is inborn or learned. It lies instead in the question: what are the meanings this particular culture gives to homossexual behavior, however it may be caused, and what are the effects of those meanings on the ways in which individuals organize their sexual lives. That is a historical question. It is also a question which is highly political: it forces us to analyze the power relations which determine why one set of meanings, rather than another, are hegemonic; and it poses the further question of how those meanings can be changed, and changed to what.

The crucial factor is not the truth or mythic nature of identities, but identities' effectiveness and political relevance. And that puts squarely on the agenda the question of values. What the historical approach has achieved is to make us more aware of the complexity of forces that shape the social, and to sensitise us to the power relations which organise the meanings we live by. Ideology works precisely by making us believe that what is socially created, and therefore subject to change, is really natural, and therefore immutable. But why should we believe that all social phenomena, sexuality is the least changeable? On the contrary, it is probably the most sensitive to social influence, a conductor of the subtexts of changes in social morality and power relations.

If that is the case, then we have to believe that our values motivate us. Sexuality, as Foucault put it, is not a fatality. It is a possibility for creative life (Foucault 1984). And in creating that life, we need not even be able to affirm and validate our values.

But this brings us to another set of issues and debates, around what, for want of a better term, we still call "postmodernity." There are striking parallels between recent debates on sexuality and the wider debates about the nature of the postmodern. Postmodernity is clearly a relational term defined by something that came before (or, at least, is now passing) "modernity." The term carries with it that sense of an ending which has been a crucial element in recent sexual writings.

However we characterize the present age, there can be no doubt of its sense of radical change and uncertainty. And most relevant to the present discussion is one of the most discussed elements of the postmodernity debates: the challenge to the "grand narratives" that characterized high modernity. The "Enlightenment project" of the triumph of reason, progress and humanity, the sense that science and history were leading us inexorably to a more glorious future, has been subjected to searching deconstruction, and its roots have been shown to be murky. Reason has been reduced to a rationalization of power, progress has been seen as the tool of white, Western expansionism, and humanity as the cloak for a male-dominated culture which treats women as Other. Inevitably, this deconstruction has had its echoes in the discourses of sexual progressivism. A number of feminists have seen the science of sex as little more than a tattered cover for the reaffirmation of male power, imposing a male-oriented "sexual liberation" on women. Foucault has famously challenged our illusions concerning the very notion of sexual "liberation," and by many others sexual liberalism has been denounced as little more than a new gulf for the incessant process of sexual regulation and control.

With such challenges this has gone the original bases for the enlightened hopes of the pioneers of sexual reform at the end of the nineteenth century. In his Presidential address to the 1929 Congress of the World League for Sexual Reform, the pioneering sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld declared that: "A sexual impulse based on science is the only sound system of ethics." He proclaimed on the portals of his Institute for Sexual Science the words, "Through Science to Justice" (see Weeks 1986:111). Part of that hope died as the Institute burned under the Nazi torch. Much of the rest faded in the succeeding decades as the sexual scientists squabbled over their inheritance, and disagreed over everything from the nature of sexual difference to female sexual needs, homosexuality and the social consequences of disease.

Behind this challenge to sexual reform was the more subtle undermining of the sexual tradition which had been defined in the nineteenth century, in sexology, medico-moral practice, legal enactments and personal life. A single narrative was challenged, to be replaced by a number of new narratives, many by those hitherto disqualified by the would-be science of sex. If the hallmark of the nineteenth century pioneers of sex reform and science was a belief in the efficacy of science and the revelation of the laws of nature, the characteristic note of modern sexual activism is self-activity, self-making, the questioning of received truths, the contestation of laws which elevate some and exclude others. Scientific sexology has been challenged by a grassroots sexology; reform from above by community organization from below; and a single narrative of sexual enlightenment by a host of separate histories, from women, lesbians and gays, racial minorities and others. So where does that leave the relationship between desire and identity? Locked into, I suggest, a series of paradoxes.
committed to sexual change: if we assert them too firmly are they facing identifications and values that are really necessarily always in flux; if we deny their validity too completely, are we disempowering ourselves from the best means of mobilizing for radical change?

Let’s look a little more closely at some of the paradoxes embodied in identity.

Paradox 1: Sexual identity assumes flxity and uniformity while confirming the reality of infinity, diversity and difference.

We like to say who we are by telling of our sex: “I am gay/straight”; “I am male/female.” It places us securely in recognized discourses, embodying assumptions, beliefs, practices and codes of behavior. Yet the truth is rather more complex. “Possibility and many-sideness,” Rosenblum has argued, “are built into the very idea of identity formation” (Rosenblum 1987:149). This is especially true of sexual identities. Academically, theoretically, we increasingly recognize both the diverse desires, needs and passions of individuals and the diversity of (often conflicting) social obligations and belonging, pulling us in a variety of directions. Yet we fear the uncertainty, the abyss, the unknown, the threat of dissolution that not having a fixed identity entails. So we try to fix identities, by asserting what we are now is what we have really, truly always been, if only we had known.

But consider the realities. We all know life-long heterosexuals who suddenly come out as lesbian or gay. We know self-identified gays who equally suddenly opt for a heterosexual lifestyle. Which is more true to the essential person? In her book on cross-dressing, Vested Interests, Marjorie Garber tells us of the spokesperson for the International Foundation for Gender Education, one Yvonne Cook. Yvonne is a biological male who cross-dresses, and identifies as a woman, a lesbian. She dates a biological woman who cross-dresses as a man (see Garber 1992). Which label corresponds to the real her—or him? Here sexual identities seem endlessly fluid, taken up and used rather than realized, a glittering performance or complicated game rather than a truth claim, unless we allow the argument that all truth claims are simply games about truth.

Since the nineteenth century, the placing of individuals into clearly demarcated sexual categories, and hence identities, has gone hand in hand with the presentation of plentiful evidence detailing the fluidity and uncertainty of desire. The binary divisions we take for granted, between men and women, heterosexual and homosexual, normal and perverse, provide barriers against, in the words of Epstein and Straub, “the uncontrollable elasticity and terrifying lack of boundaries within or between bodies” (see Epstein and Straub 1992). They simplify the complexity of desires, they order the
Potential multiplicity of our identifications. But those barriers are fragile, inadequate blocks to the flux of contemporary life. The repressed always returns, sometimes in distorted and damaging ways (such as the homophobia of the "repressed homosexual"), sometimes, and hopefully these days more often than in the past, in liberating and creative ways, in the elective communities where oppositional sexual identities, at least, are forged and confirmed. Then identities can become genuinely enabling. Yet, I would argue, they are still only ever provisional. We can put on a good performance with them. But we should never believe they are final, or embody some unique truth about ourselves. "Unfixity," write Laclau and Mouffe, "has become the condition of every social identity"—and especially, I would add, of every sexual identity (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985:85).

Paradox 2: Identities are deeply personal but tell us about multiple social belongings. All cultures seem to depend on their members having a secure sense of self, and a placing in the order of things. But there is no reason to think that the modern individual is a reflex product of his or her "instincts." "The unity of a human life," suggests Alasdair MacIntyre, "is the unity of a narrative quest" (MacIntyre 1985:219). Self-identity, at the heart of which is sexual identity, is not something that is given as a result of the continuities of an individual's life or of the fixity and force of his or her desires. It is something that has to be worked on, invented and reinvented in accord with the changing rhythms, demands, opportunities and closures of a complex world. The modern self, as Giddens argues, is a reflexive project, made and remade by the person in terms of his or her biographical experiences (see Giddens 1991:52–3). It is not an all or nothing phenomenon; the real question we need to ask is: am I more or less the same person today as I was ten years ago? (see MacIntyre 1984:139). The answer cannot be given a priori; it depends on the effectiveness of the biographical narratives we construct for ourselves in a turbulent world: on our ability to keep a particular narrative going.

We apparently need a sense of the essential self to provide a grounding for our actions, to ward off existential fear and anxiety and to provide a springboard for action. So we write into our personal narratives the elements which confirm what we say we are. And here our bodily feelings and presence become central. In a world of apparently constant flux, where the fixed points keep moving or dissolving, we hold onto what seems most tangible, the truth of our bodily needs and desires, or, in the age of AIDS, our vulnerabilities. It is not surprising that the making and re-making of the body then becomes so basic to our assertion of identities. We worry about its health and the forces that can undermine it (smoking in relative private becomes more tabooed than having sex in public; our cholesterol levels more important than our protein intake); we run and work-out to ward off its infirmity and temporality (even as we collapse from exhaustion, sore feet, or painful muscles); we adorn it in clothes that affirm our sense of individuality (but which also provide a badge of our belonging to one sub-group or another; or our enslavement to the whims of the market place); we assert the imperatives of its desires and potentiality for pleasure (though they as often wrack us with their contradictory messages as confirm a single bodily truth.) For the body is seen as the final court of judgement on what we are or can become. Why else are we so worried about sexual desires, whether homosexual or heterosexual, are inborn or acquired? For what other reason are we so concerned whether gendered behavior corresponds with physical attributes? Only because everything else is so uncertain do we need the judgement that our bodies apparently dictate.

Of course, the fact of different bodies matters; on the physiological differences of biological men and women have been built an empire of division. But the body is a tickle master or mistress: its needs change; it falls prey to want or plenty, to sickness and physical decay; its sources of pleasures can be transformed, whether through chance, training, physical alteration, mental control—or, increasingly, the demands of a new regime of "safer-sex." Even the apparently most decisive of differences between biological men and women, reproductive capacity, is now subject to major medical intervention and potential manipulation. The body is no more immune to the power of culture, and to transforming possibilities, than our mental attitudes or social identifications. The body, as Giddens suggests, "in late modernity becomes increasingly socialised and drawn into the reflexive organization of social life." Giddens 1991:198. So we use the body as the focus of our sense of biographical continuity, while implicitly acknowledging our social belongings and cultural baggage.

The sexual persona, like the whole personality, is, in Connell's phrase, a social practice when seen from the perspective of the life history (see Connell 1987:220), but the sources of that personal history are inevitably cultural. The socio-sexual identities we adopt, inhabit and adapt work insofar as they order and give meaning to individual needs and desires, but they are not emanations of those needs and desires. Indeed, they have no necessary connection at all to the contingencies of the body. The sources of the narratives that keep us going, that make sense of our individual peculiarities, are deeply historical, dependent on social bonds that provide the map for personal meaning and cultural identification. And those bonds are multiple: we come from different nations, classes, statuses, religions, racial and ethnic groupings, different genders and generations and geographical areas, each of which contains a store of experience, a residue of a personal history, which
we try to integrate into our personal biographies, in order to shape our individual identity. Sexual identity involves a perpetual invention and reinvention, but on ground fought over by many histories.

**Paradigm 3: Sexual identities are simultaneously historical and contingent.**

There is now plentiful historical evidence to sustain the statement that whilst heterosexual and homosexual (and many other sexual) practices may always have existed, clearly demarcated categories and identities of "the heterosexual" or "the homosexual" are of very recent provenance.

The idea that sexual identities are not simple expressions of bodily truth but are historical phenomena—and therefore constantly changing—is itself a relatively recent one, pioneered largely by feminist and lesbian and gay scholars. Its origins were, then, largely political, demonstrating the historicity and potential ephemeralism of the categories we take for granted as natural and inevitable, even as their power was acknowledged. Behind this position is a clear assumption that, as Laclau puts it, "the constitution of a social identity is an act of power and that identity as such is power" (Laclau 1990:30). Sexual identities embody power relations, rooted in many histories.

We still know more about the constitution of Western homosexual identities over the past two hundred years than about any other form of sexual identity, particularly the overarching categorization of heterosexuality and homosexual identities. Nor is this surprising, for the dominant or hegemonic form of any social position becomes the given, the taken for granted, part of the air we breathe, from which everything else becomes a deviation at best or a perversion at worst. As such everything else tends to escape thorough investigation—through this is now changing. We are increasingly accustomed to seeing sexuality as a spectrum along which lie many potential sexual desires and many different identities. But that easy pluralism obscures the fact that historically, sexual identities have been organized into violent hierarchies, where some positions are marked as superior (more natural, healthier, more true to the body than others). The shaping of a distinctive categorization of "the homosexual" over the past century or so has been an act of power, whose effect, intended or not, has been to reinforce the normality of heterosexuality. As Eve Sedgwick has put it:

>"The importance—its importance—of the category "homosexual" . . . comes not necessarily from its regulatory relation to a nature or already constituted minority of homosexual people or desires, but from its potential for giving whoever wields it a structuring definitional leverage. . . . (Sedgwick 1985:86)"

The emergence since the eighteenth century, she subsequently argues, of an institutionalized homophobia and homosexual panic, brutally separates men from men, but, more crucially, serves to confirm and consolidate male (heterosexual) power not only over other men but over women, for:

>"the domination offered by the strategy is not only over a minority population, but over the bonds that structure all social form. (Sedgwick 1985:87)"

In other words, the apparently neutral description of men as either homosexual or heterosexual since the nineteenth century conceals the intricate play of power, of domination and subordination, which minimizes the homosexual experience, and consolidates male power in a new, effective pattern. In the same fashion, it has been argued, the categorization, in psychology, sexology and a variety of other social practices, of some women as homosexual and others as very definitely not, breaks the continuum of all women, and hence serves further to consolidate the sexual power of men.

The fact that such arguments are still not only controversial in themselves but contested even as a starting point for debate is a testimony to the power of the categories that have become sedimented in our consciousness over the past century, and to our cultural preference for neat divisions of people and identities: you are either this or that. But the process of trying to divide people into heterosexual or homosexual groups has been a complex one, and one that is, in Eve Sedgwick's phrase, still "radically incomplete" (Sedgwick 1990:159). There are two related points that must be made here.

The first is that the discursive construction of categories of sexual subjects is a constant process, and involves a struggle over definitions on a sexual-political terrain that is ever-shifting. The agents of sexual regulation, whether states, churches or other institutions such as those of medicine or psychology, are involved in an effort of definition that is never-ending, and the reason for this is quite simply because sexual identities, including, perhaps especially, heterosexual ones, are profoundly unstable. Take two recent sexual-political events in, respectively, Britain and the United States. The notorious "Clause 28" of the British Local Government Act passed in 1988 banned the "promotion of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" by local authorities. Whatever the political context in which it took place, its only rationale could have been an assumption that without such an act, the influence of an activist lesbian and gay movement could radically overflow the boundaries between heterosexual and homosexual, to the detriment of the former (Weeks 1991). In the Bowers v. Hardwick decision by the USA Supreme Court in 1986, which denied the right to privacy to homosexuals, the court:

>not only set the Constitution's imprimatur on punishment of "homosexual sodomy" but equated that act with "homosexuality" and indeed with "homosexuals"—a group now not only defined but known by its sodomitical essence (Halley 1992:336)"
Here, the legal decision went in a different direction from the British case, taking a radical step towards taking for granted an immutable homosexual essence, defined by particular sexual practices. But in both cases, despite the contrary arguments, the clear aim and intention was to delimit the rights and claims of the lesbian and gay minority—in the interests of sustaining a heterosexual value system that was seen as simultaneously natural and inevitable, and fragile and undermined by the homosexual experience.

The second point is that these categorizations and imposed definitions cannot and do not exhaust the actual lived experience of sexuality or the proliferation of oppositional identities. In the case of homosexuality, there is plentiful evidence that cultures of opposition, pleasure and self-identification were emerging prior to, and then against, the oppressive categorizations that emerged in the law, medicine, sexology and so forth in the course of the nineteenth century. It is a characteristic of what Dollimore has called the "perverse dynamic" (Dollimore 1991:160) that a political and sexual ordering is always internally disordered by the very perversion it produces, and sets up against itself. The power to define may have set the limits on what could be said, done or spoken, but those apparently fixed by the definitions nevertheless produced their own resistances and identities. More recently, the emergence of a distinctive identity-politics around sexuality has articulated a growing recognition that the power to define oneself combines a multiplicity of powers and hierarchies, not only around gender and sexuality, but also around race and ethnicity, class and status, which in turn has produced new frontiers in sexual politics, and new forms of resistance. Sexual identities are enmeshed in relations of domination and subordination, where many histories intertwine.

Yet if histories (rather than history) and various forms of power relations (rather than a single Power) provide the context for sexual identities, our assumption of them is not determined by the past but by the contingencies, chances and opportunities of the historic present. As I have already suggested, there is no necessary relationship between a particular organization of desire and a social identity. Many people who practice various forms of homosexual activity fail to recognize themselves in labels such as homosexual, lesbian and gay, queer, or whatever the available identity is at any particular time, even in the West, where such descriptions and self-descriptions are hegemonic. In other parts of the world, homosexual practices, where they are not banned totally, are integrated into various patterns of relations, without giving rise to Western-style identities, though other forms of identity do, of course exist. This has become particularly crucial in the age of AIDS.

It has sometimes been said that HIV and AIDS, in their spread across the world, tell the truth about identity, revealing in infection what is concealed in social life. But it is more accurate to say that HIV reveals the truth about often-concealed sexual activities. The assumption that evidence of certain practices reveals the prevalence of identities is not only a fallacy, but a dangerous one, when it comes to health and safer-sex education, because it assumes that people will recognize themselves in social identities that are peculiar to very specific parts of the world. (The development in AIDS work of a well-intentioned label of "men who have sex with men," is an attempt to recognize that existing labels do not exhaust homosexual activity, but compounds the problem by offering a social position that no one recognizes themselves in. Most men who have sex with other men, who refuse a gay self-description, probably see themselves as heterosexual.)

Available identities are taken up for a variety of reasons: because they make sense of individual experiences, because they give access to communities of meaning and support, because they are politically chosen. These identities can, however, equally be refused, precisely because they do not make sense to an individual, or because they have no cultural purchase.

Paradox 4: Sexual identities are fictions—but necessary fictions.

Sexual identities are historical inventions, which change in complex histories. They are imagined in contingent circumstances. They can be taken up and abandoned. To put it polemically, they are fictions. This is not, of course, how they are seen or experienced, or what we wish to believe. Worse, in the age of uncertainty which we are currently struggling through, to say this often seems a betrayal of what we need most desperately to hold on to; through an arid intellectualism which leaves minorities without hope, and the vulnerable defenseless. As HIV disease visibly and remorselessly spread in the male gay communities of the West from the early 1980s, it was the existence of strong lesbian and gay identities and communities which provided the essential context for combatting the virus, in providing social networks for support and campaigning, in developing a grammar for safer sex, in developing a language of resistance and survival. The homophobia which AIDS encouraged and, to some, justified, demanded, and in fact greatly strengthened, lesbian and gay identities; without them, it often seemed in the embattled 1980s, there was nothing.

But to say that something is a historical fiction is not to denigrate it. On the contrary, it is simply to recognize that we cannot escape our histories, and that we need means to challenge their apparently iron laws and inescapabilities by imagining alternatives. Oppositional sexual identities, in particular, provide such means and alternatives, fictions that provide sources of comfort and support, a sense of belonging, a focus for opposition, a strategy for
processes through which change can happen. As Foucault put it, specifically referring to gay identities, but with a wider echo:

There ought to be an inventiveness special to a situation like ours...We must think that what exists is far from filling all possible spaces. To make a truly unavoidable challenge to the question: what can we make work, what new game can we invent? (see Lorringer 1989:209)

That, of course, means that sexual identities are more than troubling on a personal level; they also cause trouble on a social level. I agree with Judith Butler's summing up of the paradox of identity:

I'm permanently troubled by identity categories, consider them to be invariable stumble-blocks, and understand them, even promote them, as sites of necessary trouble. (see Butler 1991:14)

I want now to look at some of the trouble that sexual identities must necessarily cause, and the possible inventions that can take us into uncharted territory.

**Aontomy and Sexual Citizenship**

"What to do? How to act? Who to be?": such questions, Giddens suggests, are focal for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity, and they presuppose choice where the possibilities are varied and diverse (Giddens 1991:70). "Choice" is a term that comes naturally to the postmodern person. And choice of lifestyles is central to radical sexual politics; choice to realize our sexual desire, choice in the pattern of sexual relationships, choice in our general ways of life. Increasingly the sexual world is made up of different ways of life, some exhibiting more or less equally, others in often violent conflict, a kaleidoscope of many colored forms of living, each expressing and sustaining different personal and cultural identities. Diversity appears to be the only truth about postmodern sexuality.

Sexual diversity provides the space for what John Stuart Mill in the last century called "experiments in living," and with such experiments come the possibility of expanding further the range of choice and the potentialities of different ways of living (Mill 1975:79). For a radical sexual ethos those practices can only be, in Foucault's term, "practices of freedom" (Foucault 1988:3). But what do such practices involve? Freedom for what?

To construct the self as a creative self, to allow the individual to become the artist of his or her life, in sexual as in other aspects of social existence: these provide the goals of a radical sexual politics. Such a position does not take for granted that these possibilities already exist. Instead it suggests the values by which we can critique the normative and restrictive systems that
do exist, and the possibilities that can be realized if the barriers were to be removed. Sexual autonomy is not a description of what exists; it is an aspiration which we can progressively move towards, if never fully achieve. A sexual community, then, has the potential to go beyond the limits of what is; it provides an agenda for other ways of being. Community stands for some notion of solidarity, a solidarity which empowers and enables, and makes individual and social action possible. The sexual movements of recent years have both encouraged and built on a sense of community, a space where hitherto excluded sexual activity and identities have been affirmed and sustained. Such a validation of community has been at the center of the response to HIV and AIDS by the group most affected in the west, gay men. It has made possible a social and cultural response whose aim, in Richard Goldstein's words, is "to promote survival, demand attention, and defeat stigma" (Goldstein 1991:37). As Watney has argued, it is also a sense of belonging to some kind of community "that will always determine the development of a resilient sense of self-esteem which is demonstrably the sine qua non of 'safer sex education" (Watney 1991:13). The absence of a sense of community around sexual issues amongst other groups affected by the epidemic has been a critical factor in limiting the development of a culture of safer sex and personal responsibility. (And it is worth noting that it is only in the wake of the AIDS crisis that the term "heterosexual community" has come into use; a term defined more by its absence of meaning than by its resonant social presence.)

"Sexual dissidence," to use Jonathan Dollimore's phrase, is ultimately dependent upon the growth of that sense of common purpose and solidarity represented by the term community. With the development of a sexual movement with a sense of its own history and social role, the idea of community becomes a critical norm through which alternatives are opened up. It makes possible, in the first place, acts of transgressive subversion. Transgression, the breaching of boundaries, the pushing of experience to the limits, the challenge to the Law, whatever it is, is a crucial moment in any radical sexual project. As an individual act it speaks of a self obscured by an ignoble sexual order. For many, this act of defiance is the expression of a buried truth. It would be difficult, argues Dollimore, "to overestimate the importance in modern Western culture of transgression in the name of an essential sense which is the origin and abiter of the 'true,' the real (and/or natural)..." (Dollimore 1991:39). But even when the social origins of identities and the complexities of desire are recognized, the living out of individual acts of defiance can challenge the status quo. As Garber says, one
of the most important aspects of cross-dressing "is the way in which it offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of 'female' and 'male'..." (Garber 1992:10). In the same way, the appearance of self-affirming groups of militant lesbians or gay men in the 1970s disrupted expectations of the natural order of heterosexuality.

The difficulty with transgression, however, is that the limits are always flexible and changing. At one time, it seemed transgressive to be open about one's homosexuality. Today, in many circles, people are more shocked to hear that a self-declared lesbian or gay man is having a heterosexual affair. In an age when Madonna's recycling of well-worn sadomasochistic iconography sells millions of copies through mainstream publishers, it is difficult to believe that any individual act in itself will shock. What matters more are the critical elements and the alternatives spelled out in the transgressive transactions, the new niches of possibility that appear, and these depend on the changing social geography of sexuality.

As Teresa de Lauretis argues, homosexuality today:

is no longer to be seen simply as marginal with regard to a dominant, stable form of sexuality...it is no longer to be seen as merely transgressive or deviant via a proper natural sexuality...according to the older patholog nal model, or as just another optional "lifestyle," according to the model of North American pluralism. Instead, male and female homosexualities...may be recontextualized as sexual and cultural forms in their own right, albeit emergent ones and thus still loosely defined, undercoded, or discursively dependent on more established forms. (de Lauretis 1991:iii)

But though the alternative sexual and cultural forms may be notoriously fuzzy, and highly contested within and without, they increasingly have the function of deconstructing the power and transgressive dynamic is still at play, though now not simply as an individual act of subversion but as a collective activity. Witness as evidence of this the appearance in the early 1990s within the lesbian and gay communities of North America and elsewhere of the idea of a new "queer politics":

A new generation of activists is here. They have come out into communities devastated by the HIV epidemic and into political consciousness through the struggle around AIDS. But AIDS is not their main focus...The new generation calls itself queer, not lesbian, gay and bisexual—awkward, narrow and perhaps compromised word. Queer is meant to be confrontational—opposed to gay assimilationists and straight oppressors while inclusive of people who have been marginalized by anyone in power. (Berube and Escobar 1991:12)

Just as the widespread adoption of the term "gay" in the late 1960s betokened a rejection of the cautious, adaptive and what appeared to the new activists as the apologetic style of the old homophile movement, so

the new queer politics signals a break with the minorizing and integrationist strategies of the lesbian and gay politics of the 1970s and 1980s—ironically at the very moment when that politics was successfully breaking into the mainstream:

The queers are constructing a new culture by combining elements that usually don't go together. They may be the first wave of activists to embrace the retrofuture/classic contemporary styles of postmodernism. They are building their own identity from old and new elements—borrowing styles and tactics from popular culture, communities of color, hippies, AIDS activists, the antinuclear movement, MTV, feminism and early gay liberationists. Their new culture is slick, quick, anarchic, transgressive, ironic. They are deadly serious but they wanna have fun. (Berube and Escobar 1991:14)

Like their forebears in the radical sexual politics of the 1970s, there is a dual movement at work: the construction of a new identity, with all the characteristic paradox of asserting similarity and difference, and a challenge to rigid categorizations. Sex is not the only difference that can be asserted, whatever their previous sexual identities, preferences, or activities.

Queer politics has all the defects of a countercultural style: although it seeks to deconstruct old rigidities, it creates new boundaries; although it is relatively transgressive, it enacts its transgression through a counter-stereotype of the man and woman image, a woman that simply equates itself with female, with gay and nonstraight, with the effete and effeminate, with the effeminate and effete. (Scribner 1991:14)

Queer culture and politics herald a lesbian and gay sexuality that is SEXUAL, SEXY and SUBVERSIVE—not only of heterosexual notions of being, but of former lesbian and gay orthodoxies...Queer promises a refusal to assimilate into invisibility. It provides a way of asserting desires that shatter gender identities and sexualities... (Scribner 1992:59-60)

This is a mode of politics that is simultaneously deconstructive (contesting what is as arbitrary and restrictive), and reconstructive (asserting the validity of desires and ways of being that have been ignored or denied). But as we know only too well different ways of life frequently come into conflict with one another. How can we live with difference, with choice, without threatening to obliterate the pluralism on which difference and choice are based?
Histories of Desire

This is the key question of sexual politics (as indeed of other forms of politics) today. The establishment of a norm (as opposed to a reluctant acceptance) of pluralism and diversity demands further normative guidelines or principles. This requires that respect for "otherness" is brought within the bounds of validity, and becomes a norm itself. Desire is multi-faceted, contradictory, subversive: its inevitable social organization requires that we are engaged in a continuous conversation about both its possibilities and limits.

Framing Preferences, Framing Differences

Inventing Amsterdam as a Gay Capital

Mattias Dayyes

Sexual conduct of all kinds, no matter how studied, has to be understood as local phenomena (Gagnon 1990)

Apparently my mother's grand theory of homosexual desire was that dirty men and innocent boys meet at twilight time in twilight zones. She wanted me to stay away at night from the park that was "melting in the dark" behind our building, ignorant of men's meetings under a starry ceiling of spot-lights in the toilets of a prestigious department-store. A gentleman welcomed me to this unpromised land of pleasures with his personal theory "that there you get to see first what you get to see last in other circumstances." Lately on the gay radio, in a program on weekend, I happened to hear him theorizing that "desire makes everything else circumstantial."

Everything cut space maybe. Urban space facilitates the civic culture of desire among men more than any other environment known in Western culture. The urbanization of desire is a crucial element in the formation of gay life. In this paper I will focus on the role of urban space in gay culture. In the first section, I will develop a social theory of the use of space for the expression and regulation of desire. In the second part, I will describe the image and meaning of Amsterdam as a gay capital.

I

The mysteries and mechanisms of sexual desire have constantly been sources for social theories which, in turn, serve as sources for the formation and transformation of desire in society. The multiplication and fragmentation of theories is considerable. In early modern Europe (1450-1850) the basic elements of sexual theories was kept within the dotted lines of two partly incongruent value-systems, Christianity and Enlightenment. Abundant evidence delineates a flow of deterministic and restrictive views against the unnatural differentiation of desire. Its leading versions cut down