

# Queer Theory

Queer and Now

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Judith/Jack Halberstam

The Queer Art of Failure

Examples

# Queer

= strange, uncommon, peculiar -> connotation: deviation from a norm

Diversity of sexual practices and identities: gay, lesbian, transsexuality/transgender, bondage S/M but also autoeroticism and 'fat' sexuality -> beyond identity

Adjective, noun and verb -> qualification, identity, something you do 'to queer something'

Queer Theory (Teresa de Lauretis, 1990/conference)

Intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1989)

# The 'closet' and 'coming out'

Common idea until the 1980s

- Homosexuality as sin or disease: unnatural and illegal
- Hidden existence “in the closet”

Counter reaction: emancipation and activism “Out of the closet, into the streets” (Lou Reed)

- “Outing”
- Resisting discrimination
- Equality (legal): homosexual and ‘deviant’ sexual practices out of criminal law

Epistemology of the Closet (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick)

# Different genealogies (lines of descent)

- Lesbian, Gay & Bisexual activism and studies -> LGBTIQ+
- Second Wave Feminism -> Lesbian feminism (Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Monique Wittig)
- Gender theory -> Trans theory/activism

-> against binaries (influence of poststructuralism and postmodernism (Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida))

-> against (hetero)normativity

# 1. A Short History of Gay Emancipation



# The sixties and the liberation of the desire

## Sexual revolution and invention of 'the pill'

- Sex becomes disconnected from reproduction
- Growing tolerance for different sexual experiences
- Flourishing semi-legal gay subcultures in big cities (New York, San Francisco, Berlin, Paris)
- Relation to the arts -> Andy Warhol's superstars, Velvet Underground, but also roots in underground

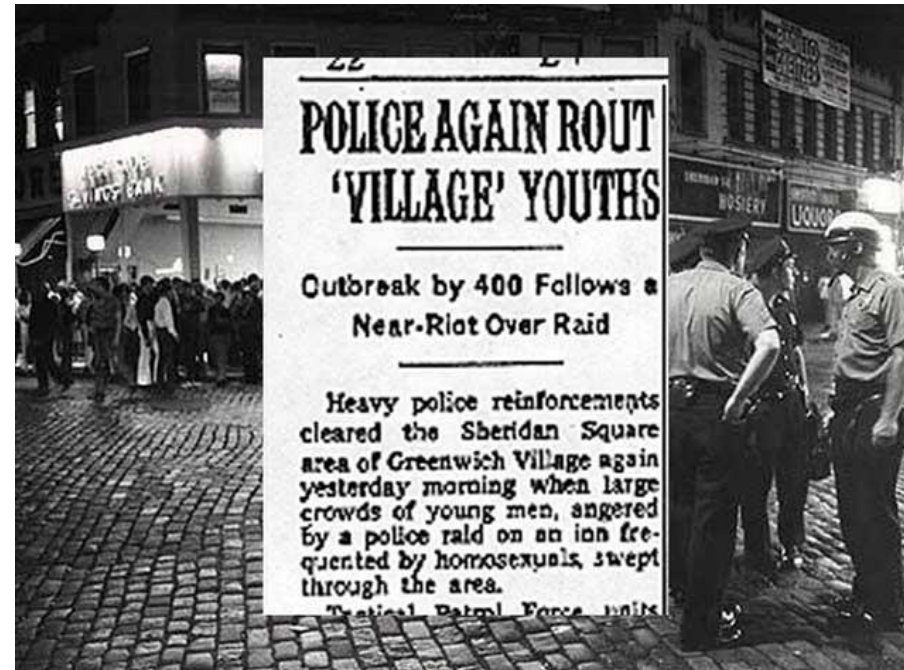




# Stonewall Riots in New York (1969)

**Stonewall Inn** = gay bar in New York

- 1969: Riots in response to police raid: the first time that the gay community fights back (crucial role of colored trans people)
- Foundational moment of identity and community formation



Marsha P. Johnson, one of the vanguard drag queens of the riots



# Gay pride

= remembrance

-> camp and extravagance

- Started in Australia (Sydney Mardi Gras Parade) but became global phenomenon
- Commercialization
- Reaction: 'Gay Shame'



# The Aids crisis (1980-1990s)

Political, medical and social problem

Trauma for emerging homosexual community -> importance of negative feelings: shame, mourning, melancholia

Renewed conservatism and stigmatization

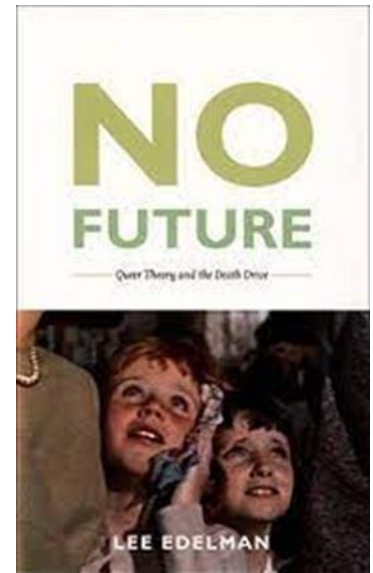
Solidarity: ACT UP and Aids activism (e.g., Ashes Action)

How to Survive a Plague:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E\\_qDvutZLqU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_qDvutZLqU)

120 battements par minute:

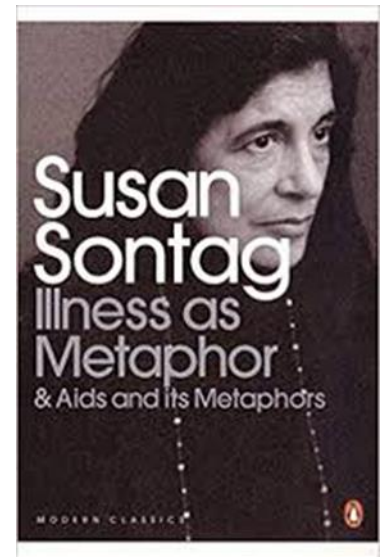
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4Jgg4uUVqI&ab\\_channel=BandesAnnoncesCin%C3%A9ma](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4Jgg4uUVqI&ab_channel=BandesAnnoncesCin%C3%A9ma)







David Wojnarowicz



# After AIDS: tension between assimilation and resistance

Political demands of gay marriage, inheritance and adoption in the wake of AIDS

Recognition of 'family' structures

Sites of cultural conflict -> still strong reactions, also in the 'liberal' west (France)

Mixed feelings within queer community



# Artists and Aids

Importance of gay culture to general artistic climate in NY and Paris in 1980s

- Shock that wiped out some of the most important thinkers and artists of the era (including Michel Foucault, Rock Hudson, Derek Jarman...)
- Important literary authors: Paul Monette, Peter Hujar, Hervé Guibert, David Wojnarowicz

Message/injunction for future: do not forget!

- Problem of mortality for a young generation of artists (fashion, dance, performance, literature, drama...)
- Renewed interest in illness, dying and loss in literature and art, including in feminism

# (Breast) cancer

Effect of (breast) cancer on identity

Female/femininity

Cancer as taboo versus feminist activism : Susan Sontag (*Illness as Metaphor*), Audre Lorde, Kathy Acker, Eve Sedgwick and, more recently, Susan Gubar



# Homosexuality in literary and cultural studies

Analysis of representations and stereotypes of sexuality

New forms of aesthetics and genres:

- Camp (The Rocky Horror Picture Show)
- Coming of age, coming out
- Manifestoes
- Counterculture/"low" forms



# From Margin to Mainstream?

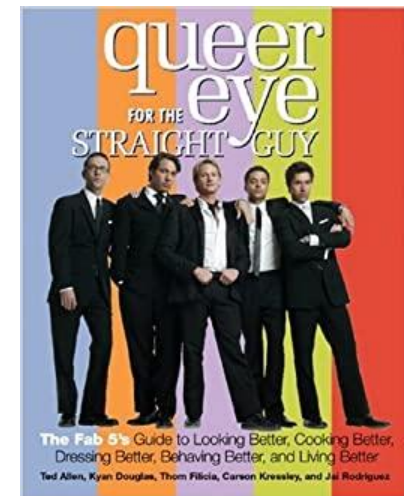
Influence of queer culture on mainstream culture

“Gay best friend” in chick-lit and chick-flicks

- Funny stereotype -> narrative function= to reinforce underlying heteronormativity
- Final goal of romance = happy marriage -> cruel optimism (Lauren Berlant)

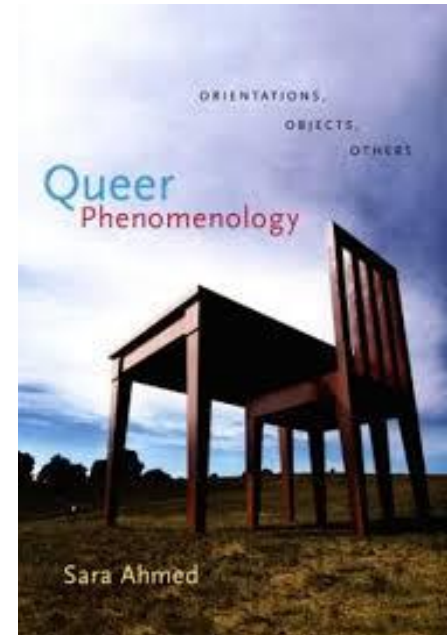
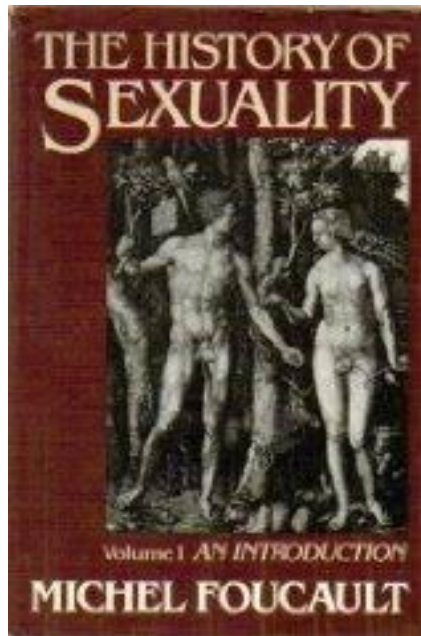
Popular culture as ultimately confirming the status quo (capitalist culture)

Stigmatisation remains a complex cultural problem (gaybashing)





## 2. From Gay to Queer (Theory)



# From gay to queer

Comparable to feminism to gender -> a move from an essentialist identity position to post-identity

Undoing strict categories and identities

- Very theoretical project: identity politics, activism and theory
- Inspiration = Michel Foucault
- Sexuality = not natural but produced in normative discourses

# Foucault and the 'repression hypothesis'

In the late-18th, 19th century the status of sexual practices changes

- Since Antiquity: a wide number of sexual practices have been available in all cultures
- In the West: 19<sup>th</sup> century -> repression of sexuality (Victorian era, bourgeoisie)

**But:** this repression versus explosion of discourse

# Knowledge = power -> produces subjectivities

Emerging scientific disciplines like psychiatry, psychoanalysis, sexology aim to control sexuality through classification

Classification produces new subjects:

- *the hysterical woman*: sexualization and medicalization of women's bodies for reproductive purposes
- *the masturbating child*: panic around children's sexuality and mechanisms to control it
- *The Malthusian couple*: focus on economic importance of family and reproductive heterosexual couple
- *The perverse adult*: normal versus perverse pleasures which can be named and treated



Charcot and the medicalization of hysteria

# Heteronormativity

Norm = white heterosexual sexuality from a masculine perspective

Homosexuality is defined as deviation from a norm and marker of identity (><Antiquity)

- Late 19<sup>th</sup> century invention (sexual inversion, Havelock Ellis)
- Freud (psychoanalysis): sexuality is linked to identity (+ originary bisexuality)
- Unconscious desire for transgression/deviation of the norm
- Result: intensification of homophobia as expression of a deep-rooted fear

Disciplining and normalisation

- Transgressions must be corrected and controlled
- Tolerance on condition of adaptation -> treatments and persecution in 1950s (and resistance)



# New regimes of power

Sovereign/judicial power: state (king) -> repressive power

Disciplinary power: dispersed from below that pervades everything -> institutions (schools, clinics) -> productive power: produces docile bodies

Bio-power: involving the measurement, discipline and management of bodies -> links to capitalism and colonialism

# Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

1950-2009

Paradoxical figure: one of founders of queer theory but married

Professor of English literature at Duke and CUNY

- Brilliant reader of 18-19th century literature and brilliant stylist: both clear and nuanced
- Scandal: sexuality at forefront of literary research



# Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

## 1

The phrase itself is already evidence. Roger Kimball in *Tenured Radicals*—a treatise on educational “corruption” that must have gone to press before the offending paper was so much as written—cites the title “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl” from a Modern Language Association convention program quite as if he were Perry Mason, the six words a smoking gun:<sup>1</sup> the warm gun that, for the journalists who have adopted the phrase as an index of depravity in academe, is happiness—offering the squibby pop (fulmination? prurience? funniness?) that lets absolutely anyone, in the righteously exciting vicinity of the masturbating girl, feel a very pundit.<sup>2</sup>

The project sketched out in this paper has evoked, not only the foreclosing and disavowing responses mentioned in its first paragraph, but encouragement and fellowship as well. Some instances for which I am especially grateful: Michael Moon and Paula Bennett collaborated excitingly with me on the “Muse of Masturbation” proposal and panel. Nancy Berman and Ed Cohen made kind comments on my preliminary lecture. Richard

# Major works

- *Between Men. English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985)
- *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990)
- *Tendencies* (1991)
- *A Dialogue on Love* (1999)
- *Touching Feeling : Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003)

# Homosociality (Between Men)

Relations between men maintain power relations in culture

- Army, church, politics and sports are typical male domains
- They are held together by unspoken, strong emotional ties
- 'Male bonding'
- Not necessarily sexual but strong physical component

Physical presence in male culture is strongly coded and regulated in order to subvert threat of homosexuality

Relations between men are based on the idealisation but also exclusion of female and (non-white masculine) subjects



# Queer and Now

Opening essay of *Tendencies* (1993)

- What is queer?
- What is queer *today*?

Early nineties

- Heydays of aids crisis and activism
- Backlash against queer theory (political correctness)
- Problems for queer teenagers: suicide rates (still today)

<https://itgetsbetter.org/>

# Sedgwick and literature

## Importance of literature at the heart of queer theory

- Attention to rhetoric and language: performativity (Butler)
- Formalism
- Perverse reading of the canon -> 18th and 19th century
- Two strategies of reading: **paranoid** (rigid, emphasis on exposure, negative affect) and **reparative** (looking for signs of hope, even in trauma, try to realize a different future)



# Urgency

literature and culture have different meaning for queer subjects  
(readers and producers)

- Rawness, anger
- Affect
- Entitlement of straight-identified students versus specific group/community

# Queer

Strategy = to disengage, to disarticulate

- Sexual identity: components + assumptions -> complicated issue
- “Heteronormativity”
- Intersectionality (avant la lettre)

“queer”: “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically.” (p.8)

Queer and first person: ““queer” seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person’s undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation.” (p. 9)

# Queer theory and Affect

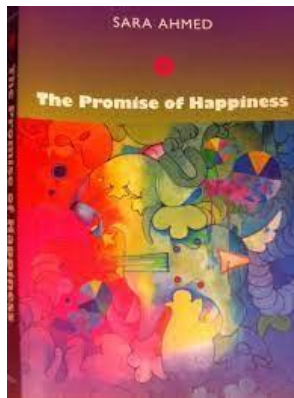
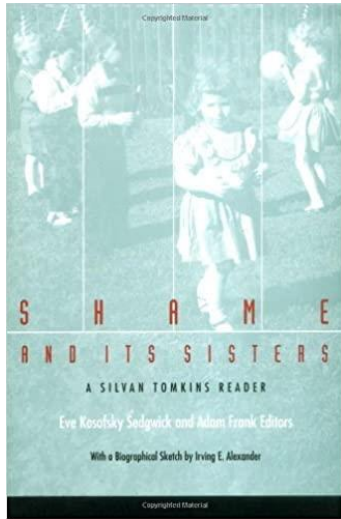
Borrows from all these traditions

Special interest in negative affects: shame (Sedgwick), failure (Halberstam), negativity (Lee Edelman)

- Debunking of extreme focus on positivity in American society (often in relation to commercialism): success, happiness (Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Halberstam)

-> Comes with a sense of **entitlement** associated with heteronormativity and capitalism

-> strong binary oppositions (see Trump: winners and losers)



JUDITH HALBERSTAM



# Shame and identity

Sedgwick is one of the first theorists of affect theory, especially on the notion of **shame**

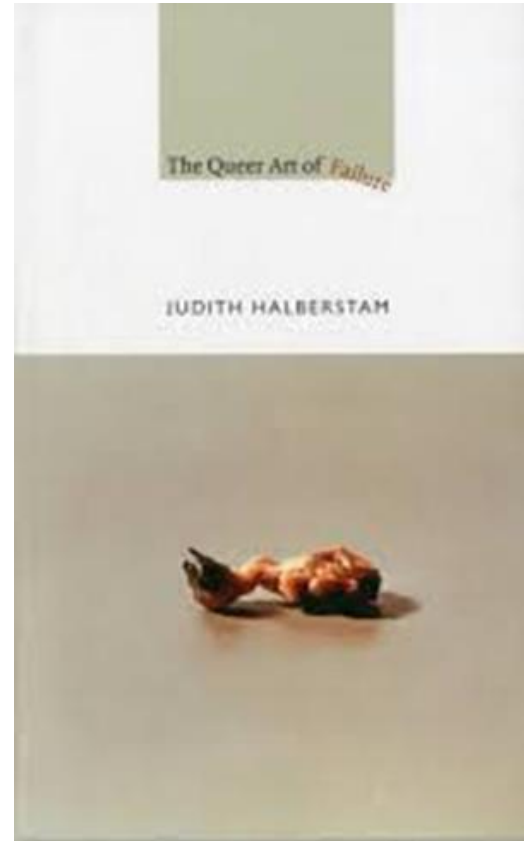
Silvan Tompkins (*Shame and its Sisters. A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (1995, Sedgwick & Adam Frank))

Important part of queer identity -> how can it be viewed positively or productively?

Shame = at the same time individual and social -> you are ashamed in front of someone else

“But in the identification, shame, too, makes identity. In fact, shame and identity remain in very dynamic relation to one another, at once deconstituting and foundational, because shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating.” (*Touching Feeling*, p. 36)

### 3. Broadening the Queer Project



A fluid designation for identities that are shaped and reshaped across differences and that interrogate and disrupt dominant hierarchical understandings of not only sex, gender and sexuality, but also class and race (and disability). (Robert McRuer)

The preference for 'queer' represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization: it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration of simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal. (Michael Warner)

Queer(ing) is the refusal of the law in the form of the parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command, a repetition of the law into hyperbole, a rearticulation of the law against the authority of the one who delivers it. (Judith Butler)



→ Key notions: fluidity, intersectionality, transgression

Queer is not fitting in a fixed and normative category; queer is failing to categorize and looking for alternatives to live with, identify with...

Failing as a style

# Jack (Judith) Halberstam (1961)

American studies and Ethnicity, Gender Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California

<http://www.jackhalberstam.com/>

- *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995)
- *Female Masculinity* (1998)
- *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005)
- *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (2012)
- *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011)
- *Trans\*: a Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (2018)
- *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020)

# The Queer Art of Failure

Critique of logic of success and failure using “**low theory**” -> in-between spaces: between high and low culture, high and low theory

Importance of **negativity**:

- failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing as productive strategies
- Failure as a style or way of life -> reconnect with childhood

Against toxic positivity of contemporary life -> positivity & personal responsibility

- Feminism: success = measured by male (or white, middle-class female) standards
- Gender failure = being relieved of these pressures



# Undisciplined

Serious and rigorous -> disciplinary correctness

- Approved ways of knowing versus flight of fancy
- Rogue scientists -> open up new questions and methods
- Rethink project of thinking and learning

Discipline (Foucault) = technique of modern power -> normalization, routines, convention, tradition, regularity

University guards boundaries of disciplines -> at the crossroads of

- Economic aims
- A new kind of public sphere

# The Undercommons

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney: critique of academic intellectual -> ally of professional education

Subversive intellectual: outcast thinkers who refuse the demands of rigor, excellence and productivity

-> not step away but steal from the university

Undercommons= unprofessional force of fugitive knowers who strive for the abolition of society as the founding of a new society

To see like a state = accept the order of things and internalize them

- Orderliness
- Legibility

Versus complex and messy forms of organic profusion

In the process of producing reality, many other realities, fields of knowledge, and ways of beings have been discarded and (...) “disqualified”. (10)

Look for visionary examples of paths not taken

Eg. James C. Scott *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*.

-> catalogue of discarded local knowledges

# Other forms of knowledge

European anarchist thought: practical forms of knowledge -> mutuality, collectivity, plasticity, diversity, adaptability

Illegibility as a way of escaping the political manipulation to which university disciplines are subject

Antidisciplinarity: unbounded speculation, inspiration and unpredictability -> against code of normalization (Foucault)

- Local knowledge, subjugated knowledges -> knowledge from below
- How to engage in and teach interdisciplinary knowledge?
- How to 'untrain' ourselves?



# Resist mastery

Against all-encompassing and global theories

-> failure (refusal of mastery) and stupidity (limits of certain forms of knowledge)

Ethnographies starting from unknowing the other eg Saba Mahmood

# Privilege the naïve or nonsensical (stupidity)

Nonsensical of nonconceptual over sense-making structures grounded in common form of ethics

Sedgwick: ignorance as a form of knowledge -> being unteachable

Eg. *Entre les Murs* (The Class) film about banlieues in Paris

Jacques Rancière *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*: leading to learn rather teaching to follow

Paulo Freire *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: teaching and freedom -> violent and negative forms of anticolonial knowing

# Suspect memorialization

Erasure over memory -> memorializing = tidying up the past, disciplining

- Ritual of power: select what is important and create continuous narrative
- Resist heroic narratives -> new forms of memory (haunting, lost genealogies)

# Low Theory

Stuart Hall: theory is not an end in itself but a detour *en route* to something else.

Gramsci = not insufficiently theorized but designed to operate as lower levels of historical concreteness

Aiming low to hit a broader target

- Accessibility
- Below the radar, refuse to conform
- Against orthodoxy -> Marxism without guarantees, open Marxism



# Counterhegemony

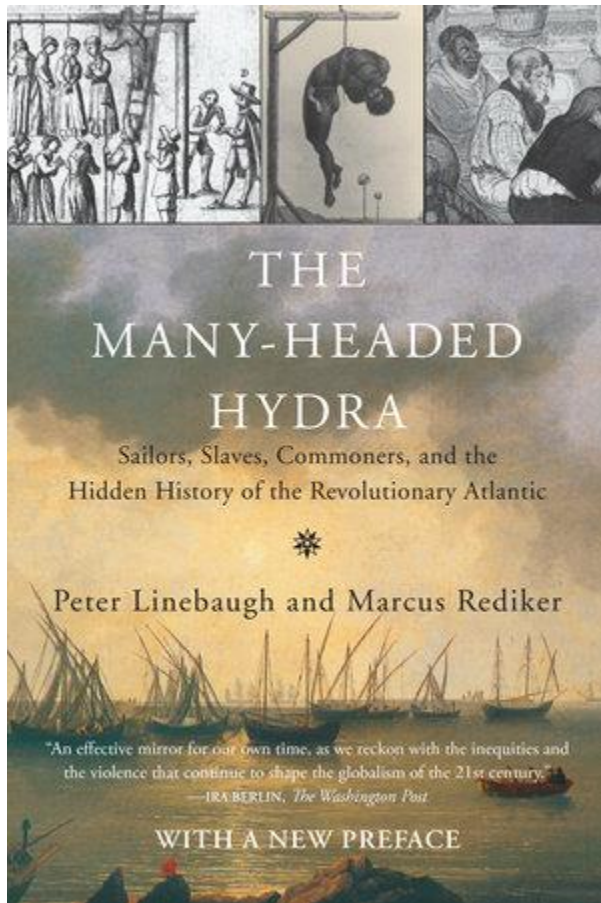
= Production and circulation of another, competing set of ideas which could join in an active struggle to change society

**Hegemony** = multilayered system by which dominant groups achieve power not through coercion but through the production of an interlocking system of ideas which persuades people of the rightness of any set of contradictory ideas and perspectives -> **common sense**

**Organic intellectual** works with others to sort out contradictions of system whereas traditional intellectuals participate in the construction of hegemony

-> everyone participates in intellectual activity

# Pirate culture



Linebough and Rediker: *Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*

- History of opposition to capitalism in the 17 and 18 century
  - Pirates, dispossessed commoners, urban insurrections versus colonial and national violence
- > power of cooperation, Capital is only part of the story

# Lessons for the present

Alternative political formations -> contests social relations as given and allows access to traditions of political access that are not dominant, but that offer models of contestation, rupture and discontinuity

-> archive of failure

Halberstam wants to look for low theory and counterknowledge in the realm of popular culture and in relation to queer lives, gender and sexuality

- Animation and CGI eg. Monsters inc.
- Early Disney cartoons

-> disruptive narrative arcs, magical worlds of revolution and transformation, counterintuitive groupings of children, animals and dolls that rise up against adults and unprincipled machines

-> much less possible in adult films

# Failure as a way of life

Possibility and looking for alternatives in subcultures, countercultures and popular culture

Negativity

All in all, this is a book about alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, but nor are they mired in nihilistic critical dead ends. It is a book about failing well, failing often, and learning, in the words of Samuel Beckett, how to fail better.



# Exercise

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=941PHEJHCwU>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVQ4UUWgs2Y>

Please look at the following two clips and think about them in the context of failure, but also of queering: what is queer about this and how can you discuss it?