

# A Queer Revolution: Reconceptualizing the Debate Over Linguistic Reclamation

Robin Brontsema  
*University of Colorado at Boulder*

The debate over linguistic reclamation, the appropriation of a pejorative epithet by its target(s), is generally conceived of as a simple binary of support and opposition. I offer an alternative conceptualization that shows both the complex contrasts and commonalities within the debate. Specifically, I identify three perspectives: (1) that the term is *inseparable* from its pejoration and therefore its reclamation is *opposed*; (2) that it is *separable* from its pejoration and therefore its reclamation is *supported*; and (3) that it is *inseparable* from its pejoration and therefore its reclamation is *supported*. Additionally, by examining different goals within and across reclamations, I demonstrate the difficulty of assigning a fixed outcome of success or failure. Although the term *queer* serves as the primary case study, the terms *black*, *nigger*, *cunt*, and *dyke* supplement and expand the discussion from a specific study of *queer* to linguistic reclamation in general.

## 1. Introduction

Hate speech intended to disable its target simultaneously enables its very resistance; its injurious power is the same fuel that feeds the fire of its counter-appropriation. Laying claim to the forbidden, the word as weapon is taken up and taken back by those it seeks to shackle—a self-emancipation that defies hegemonic linguistic ownership and the (ab)use of power. Linguistic reclamation, also known as linguistic resignification or reappropriation, refers to the appropriation of a pejorative epithet by its target(s). The linguist Melinda Yuen-Ching Chen offers the following definition: “The term ‘reclaiming’ refers to an array of theoretical and conventional interpretations of both linguistic and non-linguistic collective acts in which a derogatory sign or signifier is consciously employed by the ‘original’ target of the derogation, often in a positive or oppositional sense” (1998:130).

At the heart of linguistic reclamation is the right of self-definition, of forging and naming one’s own existence. Because this self-definition is formed not in one’s own terms but those of another, because it necessarily depends upon the word’s pejoration for its revolutionary resignification, it is never without contestation or controversy. While the controversy over reclamation is generally reduced to a simple binary of support and opposition, I present an alternative conceptualization that accurately represents both the complex contrasts and commonalities within the debate. Additionally, by examining different goals within and across reclamations, I demonstrate the difficulty of assigning a fixed outcome of success or failure.

Although *queer* is the primary case study, the terms *black*, *nigger*, *cunt*, and *dyke* supplement and expand the discussion from a specific study of *queer* to linguistic reclamation in general.

## 2. Origins of *Queer*

### 2.1. Non-sexual senses

The Second Edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Simpson and Weiner 1989; henceforth *OED*) identifies *queer*'s origin as the Middle High German *twer*, signifying 'cross' or 'oblique,' and provides several definitions, including the following<sup>1</sup>:

Adjective: 1a. Strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric, in appearance or character. Also, of questionable character, suspicious, dubious.  
 1b. Of a person (usually a man): homosexual. Hence, of things: pertaining to homosexuals or homosexuality. (United States origin)  
 Noun: A (usually male) homosexual. Also in combinations, as *queer-bashing*, the attacking of homosexuals; hence *queer-basher*. (Simpson and Weiner 1989: 1014)

*Queer*'s original significations did not denote non-normative sexualities, but rather a general non-normativity separable from sexuality. Only later in its history would sexuality become the overriding denotation. *Queer*, then, initially could refer to strange objects, places, experiences, persons, etc. without sexual connotations, as in the following literary examples taken from the *OED*:

- 1) "The emperor is in that quer case, that he is not able to bid battle" (Yonge's *Diary* of 1621)
- 2) "I have heard of many queer Pranks among my Bedfordshire Neighbours" (Richardson's *Pamela* of 1742)
- 3) "It was a queer fancy...but he was a queer subject altogether" (Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge* of 1840) (Simpson and Weiner 1989: 1014)

### 2.2. Sexual senses

*Queer* eventually did become associated almost exclusively with non-normative sexuality, an association which has persisted to the present. In contrast to its contemporary usage among queer theorists and self-identified queers (yet similar to its usage in the mass media), by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, *queer* as sexually non-normative was restricted almost exclusively to male homosexual practices, as in the following example from the U.S. Children's Bureau's *Practical Value of Scientific Study of Juvenile Delinquents* of 1922: "A young man, easily ascertainable to be unusually fine in other characteristics, is probably 'queer' in sex tendency" (Simpson and Weiner 1989: 1014).

As George Chauncey demonstrates in an examination of terms of self-reference of male homosexuals in New York prior to the Second World War, *queer* co-existed with *fairy* in the 1910s and 1920s to refer to "homosexuals" (1994: 15-16). Far from being synonyms, however, they carried extremely different in-group connotations. Differing from queers in their deviant gender status, *fairies* referred to effeminate, flamboyant males sexually involved with other men. Queers, in contrast, were more masculine men

---

1. For greater clarity, I have condensed the definitions and changed the original formatting.

who were sexually involved with other men and who generally shunned, even detested, the woman-like behavior of fairies. “The men who identified themselves as part of a distinct category of men primarily on the basis of their homosexual interest rather than their womanlike gender status usually called themselves *queer*” (Chauncey 1994: 16). Furthermore, the *fairy-queer* distinction was not based solely on gender, but on class as well: most queers were men from the middle class who potentially risked more in their professional lives were they to display the femininity typical of fairies (Chauncey 1994: 106).

Because the effeminate fairies’ gender deviance was highly marked and visible, they served as the stereotypical representation of *all* homosexual men, although there were probably more masculine homosexuals passing as their heterosexual counterparts. Heterosexuals used *queer* and *fairy* interchangeably and without distinction, thereby homogenizing all men who engaged in sexual activity with other men, regardless of their degree of femininity/masculinity or self-identification (Chauncey 1994: 15). Homosexuals’ well-defined system of gender classification and the significant differences between *queer* and *fairy* were left unrecognized, lost in a classification divided solely along lines of the sex of the partner chosen. Queers and fairies were forcibly fused into the same category, one which, because of the latter’s higher degree of visibility, equated homosexuality with femininity.

### 3. Shifting in-group terms

#### 3.1. From *queer* to *gay*

Despite queers’ distance from the femininity associated with fairies, most eventually adopted the term *gay*, the original territory of the same effeminate men from whom they wished to distance themselves. According to Chauncey, “Originally referring simply to things pleasurable, by the seventeenth century *gay* had come to refer more specifically to a life of *immoral* pleasures and dissipation...a meaning that the ‘faggots’ could easily have drawn on to refer to the homosexual life” (1994: 17). This homosexual reference began with the fairies in the 1920s, employing *gay* as a code word to be used and understood by homosexuals. A safe word, *gay* originally denoted lighthearted pleasantness, yet was given a double meaning when used by homosexuals. Only those familiar with this specific use of *gay* would understand it, and therefore, there initially was very little risk in using it with men whose sexuality was unknown. Although *gay* was first used by fairies, queers eventually adopted it since, as a code word, it was understood by all homosexual men: “[*Gay*’s] use by the ‘flaming faggots’ (or ‘fairies’)...led to its adoption as a code word by ‘queers’ who rejected the effeminacy and overtness of the fairy but nonetheless identified themselves as homosexual” (Chauncey 1994: 18). However, many queers continued to associate the term with the overt flamboyancy of the fairies—precisely what distanced the two—and therefore rejected the term in spite of its growing popularity among both homosexuals and heterosexuals.

According to Chauncey, by the Second World War *gay* eventually did replace *queer*, the latter viewed (especially by younger homosexuals) as derogatory, a pejorative label forced upon them that defined their homosexual interest as deviant, abnormal, and perverse (1994: 19). Because of the changing connotations of *gay*, these younger men

who embraced the term did not associate it with effeminacy or flamboyance as did the queers. *Gay* grouped all men sexually involved with other men into the same homogenous group; as such, *gay*, like the out-group usage of *queer* only a few decades earlier, ignored important differences among those men, coercively forging a common identity based solely upon their sexual object choice and completely disregarding the significance of gender in their self-classification.

### 3.2. Reclamation of *Queer*

Although *gay* did overtake *queer* as the primary label of self-identification among (mainly male) homosexuals, *queer* experienced a rebirth in the early 1990s due to several factors: the limitations of *gay* and *lesbian* as universal categories and homosexuality itself as their foundation; the AIDS crisis and its behavior-based prevention education and identity-transcendent activism; and Queer Nation's coalitional politics of difference and its impact on the reconceptualization of sexual identity.

The first instance of *queer's* public reclamation came from Queer Nation, an offspring of the AIDS activist group AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP). Queer Nation was originally formed in 1990 in New York as a discussion group by several ACT-UP activists discontent with homophobia in AIDS activism and the invisibility of gays and lesbians within the movement (Fraser 1996: 32). The group, originally comprised of members of ACT-UP, soon moved from discussion to the confrontational, direct, and action-oriented activism modeled after ACT-UP.

This new coalition chose "Queer Nation" as its name because of its confrontational nature and marked distance from *gay* and *lesbian*. For a coalition committed to fighting homophobia and "queerbashing" through confrontation, *queer*, "the most popular vernacular term of abuse for homosexuals," was certainly an appropriate—perhaps perfect—choice (Dynes 1990: 1091). Rather than being a sign of internalized homophobia, *queer* highlights homophobia in order to fight it: "[*Queer*] is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world" (Kaplan 1992: 36). To take up *queer* is at once to recognize and revolt against homophobia.

*Queer* also served to mark distance from the alleged exclusionary and assimilationist *gay* and *lesbian*. An essentializing category of identity will necessarily exclude, and those excluded will in turn contest the categories as universal. The *queer* of Queer Nation emphasized the inclusiveness that the more traditional *gay* and *lesbian* were seen to lack, advancing beyond their restrictive limits of gender and sexuality to include anything outside of the guarded realm of normalcy, any disruption of the male/female and heterosexual/homosexual binaries. Instead of solely relying upon sexual object choice as the basis of sexual identity, *queer* allowed—and welcomed—a multiplicity of sexualities and genders. Difference was not a challenge, but an invitation.

Queers also publicly rejected the assimilationist tactics of gays and lesbians. Refusing to forge their existence within the heterosexual-homosexual polarity, queers chose to wage their war outside of the system. The goal was not to win heterosexual support or approval; therefore, their battle did not model a civil rights movement, struggling for equal rights for an oppressed minority (Duggan 1992: 16). Queers associated *gay* and *lesbian* with an unquestioning acceptance of the status quo and an essentializing understanding of sexuality and gender. *Queer*, in contrast, was associated with a radical, confrontational challenge to the status quo, and a constructionist

understanding of sexuality and gender. *Queer* was by no means intended to be a synonym for *gay* and *lesbian*. Although they may share a common denotation (but not necessarily), the connotation was different; they were never meant to be interchangeable equals.

The differences between *queer* and *gay* / *lesbian* mirror the history of *black* and *Negro*. During the Black Power movement beginning in the late 1960s, it was argued by Black activists that a *Negro* was passive, docile, acquiescent—s/he did not challenge racism or fight against the status quo; a *Black* person, however, was active, fierce, challenging—s/he rebelled against racism and the status quo (Bennett 1967: 47). These significant distinctions, however, were later lost, just as *queer* (as will be discussed) largely became synonymous with *gay*.

#### 4. Reconceptualizing the Debate

The reclamation of *queer* has been largely fragmented, limitedly accepted, and highly contested. *Queer* has been popularly both opposed *and* supported because of its pejoration. Although this debate is commonly perceived as a simple reduction to two opposing sides—those who support the reclamation of *queer* and those who oppose it—the debate is actually more complex and in order to understand the reclamation of *queer* and linguistic reclamation in general, an alternative conceptualization is not only useful, but necessary.

The traditional representation of the debate over reclaiming a pejorative word is usually a simple binary of support or opposition, as shown in Figure 1. A more appropriate representation capturing the diversity of the debate, however, is illustrated in Figure 2. Each of the three perspectives will in turn be discussed, both their characteristics and limitations.

Figure 1  
Traditional Representation of the Debate  
over Linguistic Reclamation

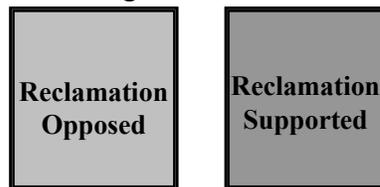
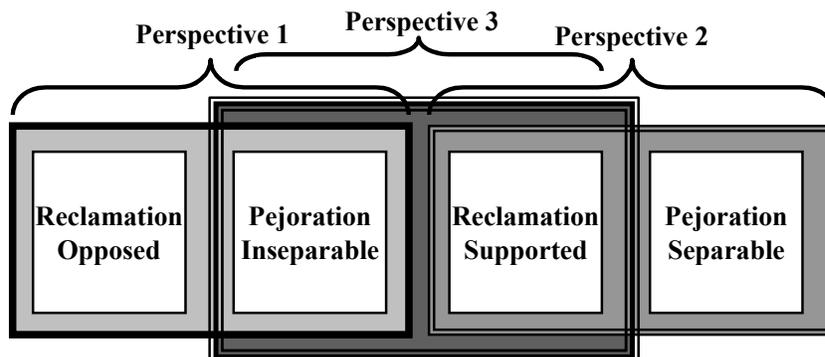


Figure 2  
Reconceptualization of the Debate  
over Linguistic Reclamation



#### 4.1. Perspective One—Pejoration Inseparable: Reclamation Opposed

The first perspective is that *queer* is inseparable from its pejoration and therefore should *not* be used. According to this viewpoint, using *queer* (or any pejorative epithet) can only be self-degrading and disrespectful, a repetition of the intolerance and hate that the word somehow encapsulates and carries with it. The pejoration cannot be removed from the word; indeed, the word and its pejorative meaning are indistinguishable. The hate, the pain, the violence is locked in that word forever, and therefore the word itself must be locked away in the attic of a collective linguistic memory. Bringing out the word would necessarily bring out the pain.

Because the word is rendered inseparable from its injurious power, many who oppose its reclamation are those who have directly suffered from its infliction and still bear the scars that can never completely heal: “We still lick the psychic and physical wounds inflicted by the word ‘Queer’” (Sillanpoa 1994: 57). This naturally results in an age-based division between supporters and opponents of the word’s reclamation, with those of an older generation who have experienced it as abusive and violent opposing its in-group circulation, which is often viewed in terms of the younger generation’s arrogance and disrespect. Pain marks the boundary of an uncloseable gap between generations.

According to this first perspective, because pejoration is external, coming from without and not from within—that is, the term is used as hate speech by the out-group (heterosexuals) against the in-group—it can never be reclaimed as one’s own. Linguistic ownership is permanent: the stronghold is unwavering, a frozen grip that will never loosen. *Queer* is and will always be an outsider’s weapon that forcefully establishes bounds of legitimacy; attempting to take back this weapon is not only futile but self-defeating. The master’s house cannot be destroyed using the master’s tools (Lourde 1984: 113). This particular viewpoint is clearly not limited to the reclamation of *queer*, but can be found in any debate over reclamation in general. A personal online journal discussing the author’s opposition to the reclamation of *cunt*, for example, expresses this common viewpoint: “You end up joining that same force of oppression you’re trying (question mark) to work against....Self love...isn’t going to be found by *their* words” (Carmel 2003). Most noteworthy is the author’s consideration of linguistic ownership as fixed, unable to be transferred, transformed, nullified. If ownership is fixed, then it naturally follows that reclamation is at best naively optimistic, at worst inevitably impossible.

As permanent property of those who use the word as hate speech, the use of *queer* among homosexuals can only reinforce a homophobic society’s common stereotypes and fears. The so-called reclamation is not a revolution—it is a repetition. There is a prevalent anxiety that the in-group use of *queer* “only serves to fuel existing prejudice and may even lead to an increase in discrimination and violence” (Watney qtd. in Jagose 1996: 106). Lying under this anxiety is the assumption that the out-group would conflate the two distinct uses of *queer* into one, rendering both equally anti-gay. That the out-group would fail to recognize the distinct, new use of *queer* among homosexuals is taken for granted.

#### 4.1.1. Problems with this View

Those who would claim that queer “has always been, is now and will always be an insulting, homophobic epithet” (Saunders qtd. in Thomas 1995: 76) fail to recognize the nature of language, the constant change of words—their births, deaths, resurrections, metamorphoses. New words will be created, old ones will die, old words will take on new meanings, new words will take on old meanings: language is dynamic and ever-changing. Change is the only constant.

The first perspective not only freezes meaning in time, but linguistic ownership as well: meaning and control over its production are misunderstood to be fixed and stable. Words, however, are not exclusively owned or used. One usage does not disallow others; one group’s pejorative use of a word does not prevent another group—indeed, its targets—from using it in new contexts and with differing intentions. Perhaps the only way to mitigate the injurious power of the word is for its very target to take it up as its own.

That linguistic ownership is unfixed and unstable can be illustrated with *nigger* (or *nigga*). *Nigger* derives from the Portuguese *negro*, translated as *black*, to refer to African slaves and was later adopted by the British and Americans. Geneva Smitherman states that “‘negro’ and ‘nigger’ were used interchangeably and without any apparent distinction....It was not until the twentieth century that whites began to semantically distinguish ‘negro’ and ‘nigger,’ with the latter term becoming a racial epithet” (1977: 36). Those who cannot conceive of *nigger* as anything but a racial epithet subscribe to an out-group interpretation that fails to recognize the complexity and diversity of *nigger*’s in-group usage. Far from being restricted solely as a derogation that maintains racial subordination, Smitherman identifies seven contemporary, in-group uses of *nigga* (as opposed to *nigger*, often associated with outgroup usage)<sup>2</sup>:

- 1) close friend, backup
- 2) someone who is culturally Black
- 3) synonym for Blacks or African-Americans
- 4) African American women’s term for the Black man as lover/partner/significant other
- 5) rebellious, fearless, unconventional, in-yo-face Black man
- 6) derogatory, similar to pejorative use by out-group
- 7) *any* cool, down person who is deeply rooted in hip hop culture (2000: 210-11)

The diversity of *nigga*’s uses and significations is testament to the fluidity and temporality of linguistic ownership. Those who sought to shackle a people with a word witnessed its emancipation, its removal from an original subordination to a freedom to take on a multiplicity of meaning, “not in subjection to racial subordination but in defiance of it” (Kennedy 2002: 47).

---

2. I have condensed this list and changed the original formatting.

#### 4.2. Perspective Two—Pejoration Separable: Reclamation Supported

In contrast to the first perspective, that *queer* cannot be separated from its pejoration and therefore should not be used, this second perspective is that it can indeed be separated and for that reason should be used. According to this perspective, *queer* can be made neutral or even positive. The goal is for it to lose its stigma so that it can no longer offend or injure. The only way of conquering pain, then, is to work with it—not to ignore or hide from it: “We have to take the q-word back in order for it not to cause pain” (Andrew qtd. in Thomas 1995: 79). Expropriation is a necessary response. The following expresses a similar viewpoint. “Several people in the gay community on a quest to end *the hate attached to the word* took control of the word; they decided to embrace the word. By doing so, they quelled yet another weapon from the homophobic’s arsenal of hate...Learn to love the word and the tools of hate are quashed” (Garner qtd. in Thomas 1995: 79).

Although this goal of *queer*’s reclamation is the depletion of its injurious power, the majority of those who support its reclamation are those who have no direct experience with *queer* as a term of abuse; again, pain marks the generational division. Many, especially youth, who self-identify as *queer* never had the term used against them as a homophobic epithet and therefore can easily use it with pride—there are no traumatic memories embedded in the word, no associations that with its enunciation recall tragedy, fear, hate, and rage.

As this second perspective asserts the separability of the epithet from its pejoration, there exist two differing goals of its reclamation: neutralization and value reversal. To neutralize hate speech is to render it ineffective, to nullify its force, to remove its biting sting. A word neutralized is a word deadened, incapable of inspiring shame, or pride. If neutralization is the goal, then the reclamation must necessarily die once its driving fire has turned to ash. The most successful reclamation, then, is that which extinguishes itself. The power of the word to injure is ironically the fuel of the movement that seeks to remove that very power. Reclamation feeds on the negative energy of the word; therefore, once this negativity is neutralized, the word reclaimed must necessarily lose that driving, revolutionary force. To become acceptable, it must become less potent. Paradoxically, a successful reclamation reaches its death at the same time it reaches its goal. Slowly, quietly, almost unnoticeably, it dies, all but forgotten.

In contrast to neutralization, value reversal is the transformation of a negative value into a positive one. To reverse a word’s value is to completely turn it around 180 degrees to its opposite, to steal it from its injurious trajectory to send it on the opposite path—to reverse value is to exchange opposites. Value reversal is largely assumed to be *the* goal of linguistic reclamation. Certainly, it is a—even if not the only—goal of many movements to reclaim a word. This value reversal, for example, is at the heart of the contemporary feminist movement to reclaim *cunt*. Today *cunt* could be considered the most abusive, misogynist epithet used against women, derogatively signifying not only female genitalia but women in general. Although it is now known as a term of abuse, however, *cunt* originally had neutral or positive connotations; in fact, many goddess’ names share this root (Hunt). The *OED* provides several examples of *cunt*:

- 1) "Gropecuntelane" (a London street name in Ekwall’s *Street Names of City of London* of 1230)

- 2) “For ilka hair upon her c—t, Was worth a royal ransom” (Burns' *Merry Muses* of 1800)
- 3) “What’s the cunt want to come down ‘ere bugging us about for, ‘aven’t we done enough bloody work in th’ week?” Manning's *Middle Parts of Fortune* of 1929) (Simpson and Weiner 1989: 130)

Over time, *cunt* clearly acquired extremely negative connotations, becoming an unrivaled misogynist epithet.

Feminists have called for a collective reclamation of *cunt*, as does Igna Muscio in *Cunt: a Declaration of Independence*, in which she clearly articulates her goal as value reversal: “When viewed as a *positive* force in the language of women...the *negative* power of ‘cunt’ falls in upon itself” (2002: xxvi) (italics added). For Muscio and many others, to reclaim *cunt* is to reverse its value, to replace its negative connotative value with a positive one. This value reversal channels the power that the word already contains, tapping this source of energy in order to create its very opposite. It is nothing less than a revolutionary reversal of opposites.

In addition to its goals of neutralization or value reversal, this second perspective differs from the first in its understanding of linguistic ownership. Unlike the first perspective that regards ownership as fixed and permanent, this perspective stresses its transferability, the taking-back in order to make it one’s own. That the origin of *queer*’s pejoration is external does not doom it to slavery, assigning it a tragic and unalterable fate. It is this defeating faith in fate against which reclamation rebels. The destiny of a word can be steered off its track, turned around, and sent on a new path in a different—perhaps opposite—direction. Muscio demonstrates her faith in the transferability of ownership, demanding that *cunt* be seized, rescued from its misogyny: “I posit that we’re free to seize a word that was kidnapped and co-opted in a pain-filled, distant past, with a ransom that cost our grandmothers’ freedom, children, traditions, pride and land” (2002: 9). If a word could be kidnapped, it could also be taken back.

#### 4.2.1. Problems with this View

Because the pejorative power of the word fuels the very movement to deplete this power, those who would assert that the word could be separated from this pejoration fail to recognize its complexity. A reclaimed word partly depends on the pejoration that drove its reclamation; indeed, this very pejoration allowed for its metamorphosis, its rebirth into something new and different from its original derogation, but never completely separate from it.

Perhaps the strongest criticism of this view is that its supporters are in a continuous state of reactionary response. If *x* is used against a group and is reclaimed, what about *y*? and what about *z*? If the word that wounds must be appropriated in order for its injurious trajectory to come to an end, then it follows that all such words must be reclaimed so that they no longer carry power. Other pejorative terms will always co-exist with the term being reclaimed. As long as there is homophobia (sexism, racism, etc.), language will always express it. Similarly, homophobia cannot be depleted with the reclamation of *queer*: it is symptomatic of a social disease that cannot be cured with one single change.

Unlike the reclaimed *queer*, a self-created term of identification steps out of this state of response, as is the case of *African American*. Although Jesse Jackson is usually

credited for *African American*, he only brought to public attention what had been coined in 1988 by Dr. Ramona H. Edelin, then president of the National Urban Coalition (Smitherman 1991: 115). Most American Slave Descendants (ASD) (Baugh 1991: 133) who use *African American* over *black* prefer the former's explicit identification with Africa, a dual heritage not expressed by the latter (Smitherman 1991: 125). Furthermore, many ASD feel that *black* as a color label is inadequate: unlike 'whites,' who may further identify as European-Americans or Irish-Americans, for example, *black* fuses color, ethnicity, and nationality into one. *African American* received phenomenal national public attention when Jackson made a public call for its adoption in 1988: "Just as we were called colored, but were not that, and then Negro, but not that, to be called Black is just as baseless. Every ethnic group in this country has reference to some cultural base. African Americans have hit that level of maturity" (qtd. in Baugh 1991: 133). Fifteen years after Jackson's call, *African American* has certainly become the most acceptable racial designation for ASD and can be heard and seen throughout academia, government, the media, and also on the streets. *African American* has become the most politically correct term, safe and inoffensive. Its lack of offensiveness is due in large part to the fact that ASD themselves created the term: the signified created its signification. Its origin is *internal*; there is no pejoration, no hate to overcome, to twist, to rework into something new. Hate was never at its heart; therefore, it must not rely upon racism and hate in order to fuel its revolution—it transcends it. Instead of being trapped in a continuous cycle of reaction, it acts upon itself for itself, choosing not to step into that trap at all.

#### 4.3. Perspective Three—Pejoration Inseparable: Reclamation Supported

Sharing the assertion of the first perspective that *queer* is inseparable from its pejoration, proponents of the third perspective base their *support* of the reclamation upon this very inseparability, in stark contrast to the first's opposition. This perspective shows a third identifiable goal of reclamation (in addition to neutralization and value reversal): stigma exploitation. According to this perspective, *queer* should be reclaimed by its original targets and purposefully *retain* its stigma—a confrontational, revolutionary call. Instead of erasing the stigma, it seeks to highlight it: "[the] reclaiming of pejorative terms... does not conspire to *remove* the derogation, or even to undo it, but recast it into a *sign* of a stigma, rather than a tool of a stigma" (Chen 1998: 138). Instead of being a self-defeating, homophobic statement of one's abnormality or 'queerness,' *queer* boldly questions the very construct of sexual abnormality (and thus normality). As Butler argues, "Within the very signification that is 'queer,' we read a resignifying practice in which the desanctioning power of the name 'queer' is reversed to sanction a contestation of the terms of sexual legitimacy" (1993: 232). To declare oneself *queer* is to question the social construction and regulation of sexual normalcy. In contrast to the first perspective, that more or less equates the in-group and out-group usages of *queer*, this perspective regards them as very much distinct. Indeed, in-group usage radically differs from out-group usage by questioning the very assumptions of normality upon which its pejoration is based. In this sense, then, *queer* absolutely needs its stigma in order to confront the construction of its abnormality. To remove its pejoration is to bring the revolution to its end.

There are those optimistic supporters of *queer*'s pejorative power who believe that not only should *queer* retain its stigma, but that it must necessarily do so, that it is

impossible for it to lose this power. This “immunity to domestication” (Jagose 1996: 106) is optimistically believed to protect *queer* from neutralization, a mainstreaming that would dilute its potency to the point of undetectability. *Queer* will forever retain its stigma because it consciously *chooses* it, fighting against those who seek to catch and freeze it, fixing it to an unalterable fate. Intent is the omnipotent force that guides *queer* away from a fatal fixedness and ensures the success of its battle against death.

#### 4.3.1. Problems with this View

The optimism of this perspective unfortunately puts too much faith in will and intent: they alone cannot control the fate of a word. Ironically, reclamation is testament to the inherent frailty of intent: just as those who used *queer* pejoratively could not know that the word would be taken up and twisted by its very targets, optimistic supporters of *queer* deny that the word could be used in ways they never intended. Ironically, those with blind faith in the reclamation of *queer* fail to learn its lesson, the essence of any reclamation: that intent can—and indeed, sometimes must—be betrayed. Consciously choosing *queer*'s stigma does not guarantee its permanence; the future of a reclaimed word cannot be determined in advance.

The history of *black* shows that revolutionary intent does not pre-determine the future of a word, that intent can be betrayed even when a word is said to be “reclaimed.” Although most associate the birth of *black* with Stokeley Carmichael and the Black Power Movement of the late 1960s, it was actually employed as a term of self-reference, along with the more common *African*, at least a century before the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 (Bennett 1967: 48). *Colored* and *negro* (and eventually the capitalized *Negro*), however, became the most popular terms of self-reference and it was not until 1966 that the activist Carmichael made a national call for “Black Power,” demanding that *Black* (note capitalization) replace *Negro* (Smitherman 1991: 121). As previously mentioned, *Negro* was considered to be a “slave-oriented epithet which was imposed on Americans of African descent by slavemasters,” connoting docility, passivity, and meek acceptance of the status quo that did nothing to challenge it (Bennett 1967: 54). In contrast, *black* was for “black brothers and sisters who are emancipating themselves” (Bennett 1967: 47). *Black* was a confrontational “repudiation of whiteness and the rejection of assimilation” that sought to revalue that which was so intensely despised: blackness (Smitherman 1991: 121). This revolutionary revaluation was intended for blacks by blacks, yet “when whites became familiarized with the term, they perceived that this was an unobjectionable way to talk to blacks about blacks, and with this perception the nuances of the black inversion were unrecognized....when whites use...black, they just substitute...Negro” (Holt 1972: 158). The original energy of *black* was betrayed and subsequently died as it was not used with the same vital radicalism. Instead of forcing racists to confront their hatred and speak it out loud, their racism was simply given a new mask to wear. Once *black* was mainstreamed, it was also doomed—perhaps a necessary outcome of a dubiously successful reclamation.

The issue of *queer*'s (in)separability from its pejoration clearly marks dividing lines in the debate over reclamation. Can a word, as the second perspective suggests, completely shed its history of abuse? Can it experience a transformational metamorphosis so that it no longer resembles that which it once was? Can a medicine be concocted from its poison? Can its fate be forcefully determined? Or, as the first and

third perspectives suggest, does the word forever carry hate within it? Is it subservient to its own history? Must it re-enact the drama of its genesis as hate speech? Can it never remove its shackles and declare its own emancipation?

Because the energy of hate speech is the very fuel of its re-appropriation, a word reclaimed may be seen as necessarily both inseparable and separable from its pejoration. Its use as hate speech not only influences its reclamation, but is its cause, its origin, its driving fire. Even if a word could be completely reclaimed, its former abuses and injuries are necessarily connected to its present usage; indeed, it was only *because* of that former pejorative meaning that its new positive or neutral meaning could be created and understood. Furthermore, a word's fate can never be determined in advance; a requisite uncertainty weakens faith in the omnipotence of reclamation. Ironically, a so-called successful reclamation proves that ownership is not fixed and that fate is not pre-determined, demonstrating its success as it simultaneously confirms its own temporality.

## 5. Several Uses of *Queer* Coexisting

Far from being limited solely to positive in-group use and negative out-group use, several uses of *queer* co-exist; whether competing with each other or living together harmoniously, they show not the success of *queer*'s reclamation, but the myriad of possibilities it has created.

### 5.1. Self-identified Queers

Self-identified queers familiar with queer theory do not employ the term, as commonly believed, as a simple replacement for *gay* or *lesbian*. Rather, it serves as a conscious contestation of those very terms: by highlighting the bounds of legitimacy, *queer* simultaneously contests them. Furthermore, queerness is not based, in stark contrast to *gay* and *lesbian*, on sexual object choice, and as such, is not limited to or by same-sex desire. Its inherent inclusiveness allows among its ranks not only queer gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered, but also queer straights, sadomasochists, fetishists, etc.—any non-normative sexuality or sexual practice could theoretically claim queerness.

This use of *queer* by those who self-identify as such has not extended to the out-group, often using it as a synonym of *gay* and *lesbian* or simply *gay* in its gender-exclusive sense. Although it has been revalued by those who claim it as an identity (or a kind of anti-identity) label, the larger society has generally failed to recognize its nuances. In this sense, it mirrors the history of *black*, intended as a radical revaluation by the in-group yet nevertheless regarded by the out-group as merely a less-offensive synonym of *Negro*. The histories of both *black* and *queer* show that intent is not sufficient: it may be misunderstood, ignored, or betrayed.

### 5.2. Non-queer Gays and Lesbians

Those who do identify as *gay* or *lesbian* but *not* as *queer* use it as a convenient catch-all term that efficiently encompasses the wordy “gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered.” Synonymous with *gay* and *lesbian*, and occasionally *bisexual*, and even more rarely *transgendered*, this use betrays the radical intent of self-identified queers and queer theorists, and can be found throughout traditional gay and lesbian studies,

anthologies, conferences, events, etc. Tragically yet perhaps predictably, *queer* is equated with the very terms against which it rebels.

While often employed as an efficient substitute in the LGBT community, the success of *queer*'s alleged inclusiveness is questionable. In theory, spanning over *LGBT*, it is meant to include men, women, and transgendered; male homosexuals, female homosexuals, and bisexuals. In practice, however, *queer* often refers to gay men and lesbians, disregarding bisexuals as well as transgendered. Although it may not be as sexually inclusive as it claims to be, its use in the LGBT community does show it as largely gender-inclusive—an inclusiveness, however, that is ignored by the media and much of the public.

### 5.3. Popular Television

Television can be accredited with the widespread proliferation of yet another use of *queer*—a trendy, hip replacement of *gay*, yet faithfully continuing its gender-exclusive tradition. Despite the claim that *queer* is gender-neutral, its use in popular television clearly associates it with *male* homosexuality. The television program *Queer as Folk* focuses primarily on the lives of gay men, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* has five pairs of “queer” eyes—all belonging to gay men. There is nothing necessarily queer about these gay men: same-sex desire does not exclusively indicate queerness, nor does queerness exclusively indicate homosexuality. However, as employed today in television, gay men are still those signified by *queer*, albeit with much less offense and much more playful trendiness.

Although popular television has certainly made *queer* more acceptable, it has done so in ways that have betrayed its usage by self-identified queers, queer theorists, and gays and lesbians. Because it is used as a hip synonym of *gay*, it loses the radicalism with which self-identified queers and queer theorists use the term—they never intended it as a simple replacement for an out-dated term. In addition, because it is used to refer mainly to gay men and not women, it loses the gender inclusiveness with which many self-identified gays and lesbians use the term. Popular television has succeeded in making *queer* more acceptable, but who has been excepted as a result?

### 5.4. Hate Speech

The resurgence of *queer*—by those who self-identify as such, by non-queer gays and lesbians, and by popular television—has not only *not* eliminated pejorative use of the term, but may actually have raised it from the dead of a linguistic memory, bringing back to life its injurious power. Throughout its “reclamation,” *queer* has continued to be used pejoratively. However, it had also lost linguistic currency, especially among those of a younger generation. The gender-specific *fag* and *dyke* replaced *queer* as the most popular homophobic epithet, and some of a younger generation had little or no familiarity with *queer*. It was lost (or hidden) from collective linguistic memory—it no longer had any currency and therefore neither offended nor rebelled: its power was reduced to none. The resurgence of *queer* beginning in the early 1990s, then, brought it back to linguistic life and restored its relevance. This made possible not only its reclamation, but also its re-pejoration. Whereas for some time it was lost from cultural memory, or at least no longer at the forefront of consciousness, it is contemporarily used once again as hate

speech. Ironically, the very movement to reclaim *queer* could actually have restored its injurious power for some, bringing back to life what was dead and forgotten.

The re-pejoration of *queer*, however, is not a guarantee of its efficacy: hate speech can only succeed as such if the target chooses to be its victim. If the target chooses, however, to take up the word as its own, hate speech must fail—the intent to injure does not guarantee that it can nor will. It is necessarily on shaky ground, uncertain of its own efficacy. One cannot forcefully be named that which has been self-chosen; the name then cannot pierce and puncture, but can only be sent back, dull and deadened. Ironically, the success of hate speech is determined by the very person made to be deprived of power: the target can choose to take in the word, or to take it back.

The co-existence of several uses of *queer* testifies not to its failure, nor its success, but to the power of reclamation to bring to *queer* a range of new possibilities, and a future unknown. *Queer's* reclamation has unleashed it from its history of derogation, freeing it to explore new possibilities in a future that cannot be predetermined nor predicted. It is unknown if its pejorative use will cease as different homophobic epithets replace it; it is unknown if its use in popular television will supersede all others; it is unknown if it will continue to be employed as an umbrella term in the LGBT community; *queer's* destination is unknown, as it should be.

## 6. Conclusion: Successes and Failures

To assign to reclamation one of two outcomes—success or failure—is to drastically reduce its complexity to an impossibly simple choice between two extremes, when it can rarely fully occupy either. This indeterminacy can be explained in terms of reclamation itself as a process, the ambiguous appearance of success or failure, and the different goals both across and within reclamations.

Linguistic reclamation is always a process without a clearly marked end. There is no specific final destination that can be found where all pejorative use of a word has ceded to positive use, where success and failure can be captured, measured, weighed. Language is constantly changing and meaning is constantly (re)constructed—its nature is not static. To restrict reclamation, then, to one delineative end is to betray something essential of language itself, and is therefore necessarily inaccurate and incomplete.

Furthermore, the appearance of success or failure may be highly ambiguous and misleading. This ambiguity is perhaps best illustrated with *dyke*: although *dyke* continues to be used pejoratively, it is often used positively, with pride, by the in-group. Indeed, because of its very pejoration, *dyke* claims a political fierceness and anti-assimilationism that *lesbian* lacks, the latter seen to appeal to male, heterosexual, white, middle-class taste. Again, although they may share a common denotation, the connotations are extremely different. Has *dyke* failed as a reclaimed word since the out-group continues to use it as hate speech? Or does its in-group use alone testify to its success?

The appearance of success or failure is additionally ambiguous and untrustworthy because a once pejorative word now mainstreamed is not necessarily a word reclaimed. As discussed, *black* was popularly and publicly used in a way that was never willed or intended by those who sought a reevaluation of blackness. Is its common and inoffensive use, then, sign of its success? Likewise, is the proliferation of *queer* as a synonym for the gender-exclusive *gay* proof that its reclamation has succeeded?

In order to classify a reclamation as a success or a failure, the relationship between goal and outcome must be considered. If a reclamation has succeeded, there would be a match between goal and outcome; in contrast, if it has failed, there would be a mis-match, an incongruency between the two. If to measure the success of a reclamation is to examine the connection between goal and outcome, then it cannot be assumed that there is one common, unifying goal of any and all reclamations—goals differ across and within reclamations and from perspective to perspective. The three perspectives shown in the reconceptualization of the debate over linguistic reclamation (Figure 2) deem not only what is desirable to achieve, but also what is possible. To assert, as do those sharing the first perspective, that a word will always have the power to injure is to declare the futility of reclamation. The goal of the opposition to reclamation, then, is censorship, whether of those who use the word to wound or those who use it to heal. If, however, this same power to injure is viewed as the power to transform, as in the second perspective, then reclamation can conquer hate speech by making it ineffective or by reversing its value. Those sharing the third perspective believe in this transformational energy of hate speech; however, they also believe that a word's history of injury is inescapable. Therefore, reclamation can conquer hate speech not by erasing its stigma but by exploiting it, by using that same power to achieve different ends.

As discussed, there are at least three identifiable goals of reclamation, which can be classified as the following:

- 1) Value Reversal
- 2) Neutralization
- 3) Stigma Exploitation

Because goals differ across and within reclamations, determining success is highly problematic. If the goal is value reversal, would the word's mainstream use as a simple, synonymous substitute for an outdated term be proof of its unshaken success? If neutralization is the goal, would effective political rallying under a pejorative epithet mark its success? Likewise, if stigma exploitation is the goal, would its politically-correct, inoffensive usage render it successful?

In addition, goals differ in terms of in-group and out-group usage. It may be desired that the reclamation extend to and include the out-group, those who were not and are not targets of the word as hate speech. In contrast, it may be that only in-group reclamation is desired—taking back and staking claim, marking with signs of trespass who has the right granted and who has the right denied. This is often regarded as the case with *nigger*, that, while it may be acceptable for ASD to use it freely, it is off-limits to whites, whose usage of *nigger* cannot be the same, given its history and the general history of racial oppression and racial relations in the United States. The filmmaker Spike Lee articulated this view when criticizing fellow filmmaker Quentin Tarantino's use of *nigger*. When it was mentioned that Lee himself often uses *nigger* in his films, he replied that he had "'more of a right to use [the N-word]" (qtd. in Kennedy 2002: 131).

To measure success, then, in-group and out-group usage must also be considered. If the goal is solely in-group usage, would its out-group adoption and following testify to its success—or failure? Likewise, if the goal is in-group as well as out-group usage, would it still be considered successful if the usages radically differed, if out-group usage

betrayed the very intent of the reclamation? Indeed, for a reclamation to extend to those who never suffered from the word as wound, must it necessarily lose its vital radicalism? Is it an inevitable outcome? Must a reclamation aimed to eliminate or reverse an epithet's homophobia, misogyny, racism, etc. unavoidably suffer a tragic misinterpretation and further resignification in a homophobic, misogynist, racist society? The sociolinguists Susan Ehrlich and Ruth King assert that

linguistic meanings are, to a large extent, determined by the dominant culture's social values and attitudes – i.e., they are socially constructed and constituted; hence terms initially introduced to be nonsexist, nonracist, or even feminist may...lose their intended meanings in the mouths and ears of a sexist, racist speech community and culture. (1994: 60)

The success of a movement, then, to remove, reverse, or rework an epithet's derogation for both the in-group and out-group is at least partially dependent upon that against which it fights; its fate is not fully dependent upon nor determined by those who demand a revolutionary resignification.

While linguistic reclamation may not produce clear victories, it does prove that the right of self-definition is a worthy cause for revolution. To appropriate the power of naming and reclaim the derogatory name that one never chose nor willed is to rebel against the speech of hate intended to injure. Linguistic reclamation is a courageous self-emancipation that boldly moves from a tragic, painful past into a future full of uncertainty, full of doubt—and full of possibility.

## References

- BAUGH, JOHN. 1991. 'The Politicization of Changing Terms of Self-Reference Among American Slave Descendants'. *American Speech* 66(2): 133-146.
- BENNETT, LERONE, JR. 1967, November. 'What's in a Name?'. *Ebony*: 46-54.
- BUTLER, JUDITH. 1993. *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"*, New York: Routledge.
- CARMEL. 2003, September 8. 'Carmel's Journal'  
<[http://www.livejournal.com/~i\\_am\\_carmel/2003/04/16](http://www.livejournal.com/~i_am_carmel/2003/04/16)>.
- CHAUNCEY, GEORGE. 1994. *Gay New York: Gender, urban culture, and the makings of the gay male world, 1890-1940*, New York: Basic Books.
- CHEN, MELINDA YUEN-CHING. 1998. "'I am an Animal!': Lexical Reappropriation, Performativity, and *Queer*'. *Engendering Communication: Proceedings from the Fifth Berkeley Women and Language Conference*: 128-140.
- DUGGAN, LISA. 1992. 'Making it Perfectly Queer'. *Socialist Review* 22(1): 11-31.
- DYNES, WAYNE. 1990. 'Queer'. *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, New York: Garland.
- EHRlich, SUSAN AND RUTH KING. 1994. 'Feminist Meanings and the (De)Politicization of the Lexicon'. *Language in Society* 23: 59-76.
- FRASER, MICHAEL. 1996. 'Identity and Representation as Challenges to Social Movement Theory: A Case Study of Queer Nation'. *Mainstream and margins: Cultural politics in the 90s*, Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- HOLT, GRACE SIMS. 1972. "'Inversion" in Black Communication'. *Rappin' and Stylin' Out: Communication in Urban Black America*: 152-159.
- HUNT, MATTHEW. 2003, September 14. *Cunt: A cultural history*.  
<<http://www.matthewhunt.com/cunt.html>>
- JAGOSE, ANNAMARIE. 1996. *Queer theory: An introduction*, New York: New York UP.
- KAPLAN, ESTHER. 1992, August 14. 'A Queer Manifesto'. *Village Voice*: 36.
- KENNEDY, RANDALL. 2002. *Nigger: The strange career of a troublesome word*, New York: Pantheon.
- LOURDE, AUDRE. 1984. *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*, New York: Crossing.
- MUSCIO, INGA. 2002. *Cunt: A declaration of independence*, New York: Seal.
- SILLANPOA, WALLY. 1994. 'Please, Don't Call Us "Queer"'. *Radical Teacher* 45: 56-57.
- SIMPSON, J.A. AND E.S.C. WEINER. 1989. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition. Oxford: Clarendon
- SMITHERMAN, GENEVA. 1977. *Talkin and testifyin: The language of black america*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- SMITHERMAN, GENEVA. 1991. 'What is Africa to Me?: Language, Ideology and African American'. *American Speech* 66(2): 115-132.
- SMITHERMAN, GENEVA. 2000. *Black talk: Words and phrases from the hood to the amen corner*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- THOMAS, DAVID. 1995. 'The 'Q' Word'. *Socialist Review* 25(1): 69-93.