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From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace (Or, Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Fag?)

Suzanna Danuta Walters

Queer defined (NOT!)

ALREADY, IN THIS OPENING, I am treading on thin ice: how to define that which exclaims—with postmodern cool—its absolute undefinability? We may be here (and we may be queer and not going shopping), but we are certainly not transparent or easily available to anyone outside the realm of homo cognoscenti. Yet definitions, even of the tentative sort, are important if we are to push forward this new discourse and debate meaningfully its parameters.

Queer is, in true postmodern fashion, a rather amorphous term and still emergent enough as to be vague and ill defined. Perhaps it makes sense to open, then, with my laundry list of the queer contemporary, a list admittedly more aware of the female manifestations of this “queerness” and in no particular order:

Eve Sedgwick
Judith Butler
Madonna

Teresa de Lauretis
Queer Nation
lipstick lesbians

ball culture
kiss-ins
lesbian strippers

I would like to thank David Bergman and Amy Robinson for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. Both have contributed meaningfully to the development of this piece. Erstwhile comrade Ara Wilson gave detailed and substantive criticism, improving this essay in numerous ways. In addition, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers at *Signs*. Their thoughtful and thorough (if at times rather contentious!) readings forced me to engage in this process of revision with equal thoroughness.

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conferences at Santa Cruz, Rutgers, Iowa, etc.	drag	butch/femme
“in your face activism”	piercing	Michelangelo
Camille Paglia	Ru Paul	Signorile
go-go girls	tattoos	Sue-Ellen Case
men in skirts	passing	dildos
Riot Grrrls	queer zines	S/M
Foucault	outing	backrooms (for lesbians)
<i>On Our Backs</i>	cross-dressing	Sandra Bernhard
Susie Bright	male lesbians	camp
	Annie Sprinkle	bisexuality
	lesbians who sleep with men	genderfuck

* * *

These signifiers (and others, of course) constitute what many have called the “new queer sensibility.” There is no doubt that a new tide of gay visibility is sweeping the country—from *Time* magazine cover stories on the new chic lesbians, to k.d. lang’s *Vanity Fair* dress up with supermodel Cindy Crawford, to gays in the military, drag queens on *Donahue*, outing, and our little hypothalamuses and aberrant genes. As usual in our media-saturated/structured culture, these (largely hetero) glam pieces intersect with unique developments, both intellectual and political, within various gay communities. So these shifting signifiers of “queer” are never simply our own products, located solely in some sub-cultural netherworld (if they ever were—remember disco?), but instead they move uneasily in and out of the “mainstream” as it recodes and cannibalizes these new images, icons, activisms.

It is not only “queer” theory and politics that are typified by shifting icons and activisms; feminism and feminist theory are themselves the subject of much critical revision and rethinking, particularly in light of both structural shifts (changes in family life, increasing numbers of women in the workforce) and ideological developments (renewed media attacks on feminism, the backlash phenomenon, the rise of right-wing Christian antifeminism and “family values”). In addition, the development of queer theory and politics (related but not identical phenomena) emerges in the context of changing definitions of feminist theory and politics. From challenges by women of color, working-class feminists, lesbians, and others, feminism has been undergoing profound changes. These changes are marked by increasingly frequent criticisms of feminist theory’s refusal to reckon with the ways in which “other” differences (such as race or class) mark themselves on the body and insert themselves into constructions of oppositional identity. In other words, queer developments take place

within a changing field of theory and practice; feminism (and gender theory and politics generally) is no longer the young upstart but, rather, has achieved a certain "stature" that now has produced a deeper and more thoroughgoing level of critical analysis and revision.

Keeping this in mind, I want to examine the relationship between new queer developments and feminism and feminist theory, with a specific focus on the displacements of radical and lesbian feminism by a queer theory that often posits itself as the antidote to a "retrograde" feminist theorizing. Let me begin by laying my cards on the table: I am wary of this phenomenon.¹ These new developments are not wholly propitious for the (shared, I hope) goals of ending homophobia, confronting compulsory heterosexuality, liberating sexuality. Nevertheless (and I would hope this goes without saying, but I will say it anyway), this critique should be taken as an immanent one, from someone who lives within the gay and lesbian movement and who believes the new queer politics and theory to be largely well intentioned, however misguided and theoretically suspect.²

While my criticisms stand, I am also aware of the real strengths and possibilities embodied in the new queer designations. The full exploration of sexual desire in all its complexity is of course an important move, particularly as a neglected aspect of progressive discourse. And the queer challenge to the notion of sexual identity as monolithic, obvious, and dichotomous is a healthy corrective to our vexing inability to see beyond the limitations of the homo/hetero opposition. In addition, the openness of the term *queer* seems to many to provide the possibility of theorizing "beyond the hyphen," beyond the additive models (race, class, gender,

¹ Let me note here, too, that I am most assuredly not alone in my critique of "queer." Indeed, feminists have already initiated a substantial body of work that takes issue with the construction of "queer theory" as the "replacement" for feminist and lesbian and gay studies. Often, but not always, these critiques of "queer" dovetail with critiques of post-modernism, as will be brought out in the course of this article. See particularly Modleski 1991; and Bordo 1990. Biddy Martin's work (1993, 1994) has been particularly helpful. Wilson's 1992 critique of bisexuality and de Lauretis's 1991 thoughtful introduction to the *differences* issue on queer theory have also added to the growing discourse.

² I should note here that queer theory and queer politics are not, of course, identical. The movements of theory and the movements of political action never follow one from the other, nor does one simply express the other in different form. Nevertheless, the two are, as are most theories and practices, intimately connected, albeit often in an implicit manner. For example, the new queer politics is marked by a wide embrace of all nonnormative sexualities (witness the naming of recent marches "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered") and much of the theoretical enterprise that goes under the name "queer theory" is also concerned with widening the net beyond what is typically thought of as "gay and lesbian" studies. While I do not mean to conflate the two, I *am* interested in discussing the connections between them and the implications for a radical politics given these newer developments. Moreover, this article works to address a general trend, a direction, a set of discourses, rather than the totality of an individual theorist's oeuvre. I thus see this as a piece of political cultural criticism as much as specific theory critique, to analyze "that certain something in the air," in which the theorists figure as inspiration, expression, arbiters, and legitimation.

sexual orientation = oppressed identity) that have so often seemed to set up new hierarchies or retreated instead into an empty recitation of “difference.” Indeed, race critiques have consistently insisted on challenging binary models of identity in the development of concepts of positionality and intersectionality. Queer discourse is clearly not “the enemy,”³ but neither is it unambiguously the new hope for a theory and/or politics to lead us into the next century. But enough of those provisos, let us continue with definitions.

There are many, often conflicting, ways of using this term *queer*. It can, of course, be used in the old-fashioned way, as nasty epithet. This raises a not insignificant question around the value of “reclaiming” the negative language that has been used to oppress us. I cannot help wondering if I would ever march with a group calling itself “Kike Nation.” Perhaps the analogy does not hold, but “reclaiming” (or “resignifying”) is never a simple and straightforward matter, and the use of the term *queer* needs to reckon with the arguments (made, for example, by older civil rights activists over the current trendiness among African-American youth of the term *nigger*) against recirculating a language constructed in hate and bigotry. Indeed, even Judith Butler, one of the theorists most associated with the new queer theory, questions the “reappropriation” of the term *queer*, wondering if the term can “overcome its constitutive history of injury” (1993a, 223).

That aside, the term *queer* can be used, loosely, as a synonym for (trendy) gay and lesbian studies and even for gay/lesbian identity. So *queer* can, on many occasions, be a rather undeliberate way of referencing *gay* or *lesbian*. But this is not the usage I will be examining, as it is merely a replacement term for *homosexual* or *gay* or *lesbian*.

Rather, more important for us here, *queer* is used as a signifier of a new kind of “in your face” confrontational gay/lesbian politics (Queer Nation, etc.), particularly a politics around AIDS that brings together gay men and lesbians in a direct and powerful attempt to change policies. So *queer* in this usage would signify a politics and theory with a difference, typically a generational difference but also a (asserted) difference of style, of strategy, of tactics, of ideology. As Rosemary Hennessy puts it, “By embracing the category used to shame and cast out sexual deviants, queer theory defiantly refuses the terms of the dominant discourse. Touting queerness is a gesture of rebellion against the pressure to be invisible or apologetically abnormal. It is an in-your-face rejection of the proper response to heteronormativity, a version of acting up” (1993, 967).

Queer discourse is often understood as nonreformist, in opposition to

³ Indeed, one of my chief concerns here is the danger of “queer” being used to construct an enemy of feminism.

the “mainstream” gay/lesbian movement, or, as Michael Warner argues, “no longer content to carve out a buffer zone for a minoritized and protected subculture [that] has begun to challenge the pervasive and often invisible heteronormativity of modern societies” (1991, 3). So, in this reading, *queer* is really radically gay, moving “against both assimilationist politics and separatist identity definitions” (Sedgwick 1993, 28).

Warner also argues for the difference of queer people vis-à-vis other social groups, other identities (race, gender): “It is partly to avoid this reduction of the issues that so many people in the last two or three years have shifted their self-identification from ‘gay’ to ‘queer.’ The preference for ‘queer’ represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” (1991, 16). This is a common theme of queer theory, the move against the idea of gays and lesbians as an interest group, an oppressed minority, and toward a more universalizing (and dispersed) conception of queer as anti- or nonnormal. While I applaud the radicalism here—and the explicit admonition against a desire for mere “toleration”—I fear that this definition of queer, as much as it wants to leap the bounds of binarism, finds itself defined against what it is not, “normal.” Jeff Nunokawa wonders whether “queer means the opposite of not queer, just as homosexual meant the opposite of heterosexual. Queer is supposedly the agent for destabilizing that kind of binarism—but *when*, and for *whom*, and what exactly do we mean? Do we mean something more than a kind of academic effort?” (1992, 28; emphasis in original). I will come back to this concern later.

Many have embraced the term *queer* as a concept that traverses gender as it steers away from it as definitional: *queer* as a term of sexuality, not a term of gender identity. Warner here states clearly both the universalizing move of *queer* and its insistence on a separation of sexuality from gender:

The insistence on “queer”—a term defined against “normal” and generated precisely in the context of terror—has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence. Its brilliance as a naming strategy lies in combining resistance on the broad social terrain of the normal with more specific resistance on the terrains of phobia and queer-bashing, on one hand, or of pleasure on the other. “Queer” therefore also suggests the difficulty in defining the population whose interests are at stake in queer politics. And as a partial replacement for “lesbian and gay” it attempts partially to separate questions of sexuality from those of gender. (1991, 16)

For queer *theory*, in particular, this has been a central tenet, exemplified in the work of Eve Sedgwick and, in a different and more cautious way, Butler (Butler 1990, 1993b; Sedgwick 1989, 1990, 1991). Queer theory in this sense positions itself as challenge to the “obvious categories (man, woman, latina, jew, butch, femme), oppositions (man vs. woman, heterosexual vs. homosexual), or equations (gender = sex) upon which conventional notions of sexuality and identity rely” (Hennessy 1993, 964). As Sedgwick writes:

Part of what is interesting about queer . . . is that it suggests possibilities for organizing around a fracturing of identity. . . . What I hear when I hear the word *queer* is . . . the calling into question of certain assumptions: that once you know somebody’s chromosomal sex, you are supposed to know a whole list of other things about them—including their gender, their self-perceived gender, the gender people perceive them to be, the gender of the people they are attracted to, whether they define themselves as heterosexual or homosexual, their fantasy life—which is supposed to be the same thing but a little more intense—whom they identify with and learn from, what their communities are. What I hear in queer is the question: What things in that list don’t line up monolithically? (1993, 27)

Here, Sedgwick articulates a definition of queer that locates its power in a particularly postmodern (and deliberately nonessentialist) context of fractured identities and incommensurableness. Queer, for her and for many others, tears apart the seemingly obvious relationships between sex and gender, sexual desire and object choice, sexual practices and political identities, and renders subjectivities infinitely indeterminant. We might say that this presents a paradox as queers in this reading (say, Sedgwick) are not defined by their sexual choice but, rather, by what? Some vague identification with perversion? Some feeling of nonnormalcy? A political affiliation? A desire to listen to/be/watch Ru Paul?

The term can also be used in a more generic sense: queer as perverse difference (everything that is not vanilla heterosexuality or vanilla homosexuality). Queer in this sense is a sort of postmodern sexual pluralism or a radical constructionist challenge to identity politics. As Alexander Doty argues in his book on queer culture, “Queerness . . . is a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight” (1993, xv). Doty’s purpose, like so many promoters of queerness, is “to question the cultural demarcation between the queer and the straight . . . by pointing out the queerness of and in straights and straight cultures, as well as that of individuals and groups who have been

told they inhabit the boundaries between the binaries of gender and sexuality: transsexuals, bisexuals, transvestites, and other binary outlaws” (1993, xv–xvi).

Like the separation of sexuality and gender, the criticism of identity politics (and the dualisms that identity politics are seen to impose) seems to be at the heart of queer theory, particularly in its more postmodern manifestations. In this vein, there is the work that labels itself explicitly as “queer theory” or is labeled so by the arbiters of cultural trends. This is generally academic writing, typically within departments of English and literature, but it is not always rooted in the academy. It can sometimes be found in the new (and fleeting) spaces of gay journalism and gay film-making.

Nevertheless, queer theory, like most theoretical enterprises, is by no means a monolithic and unified field of ideas and practices. The writers I discuss in this article do not, of course, all hold the same beliefs or adhere to the same political traditions and commitments. Indeed, many have engaged in substantive critiques of each other. For example, Warner (1992) has been quite critical of what he sees as Butler’s undertheorization of the political ramifications of a postidentity queerness. There is no intention here to lump theorists together. Nevertheless, while theorists such as Sedgwick, Butler, Warner, and Gayle Rubin not only emerge from different intellectual traditions but position themselves in quite deliberately different social spaces (and I should note here particularly Rubin’s [1993] admirable attention to social and historical specificity), I would argue that they all, to a certain extent, share a problematic perspective on feminism and the women’s movement and have engaged, in different ways of course, with gay male identity as the site of privileged subjectivity. By speaking of a variety of theorists, I do not mean to imply their sameness, only that, in certain matters (and not in others, many of which I point out), they share certain specific positions, ideas, argument, tendencies.

One such shared formulation is offered by Diana Fuss in the opening of her edited book on gay and lesbian theory (1991b). She argues that “many of the current efforts in lesbian and gay theory . . . have begun the difficult but urgent textual work necessary to call into question the stability and ineradicability of the hetero/homo hierarchy, suggesting that new (and old) sexual possibilities are no longer thinkable in terms of a simple inside/outside dialectic” (1991a, 1). This seems crucial to the new queer thinking—a rejection (following poststructuralism) of the rigid binarisms of a dualist model of sexual desire and an argument for the plurality and irreducibility (irreducible to gender, to the body, to social construction) of sexual desire and sexual play. The model of “inside/out,” while central to “helping us to understand the complicated workings of semiosis” (Fuss 1991a, 1), also confines us and becomes part of the policing apparatus of

hegemonic sexuality: “Where exactly, in this borderline sexual economy, does the one identity leave off and the other begin? And what gets left out of the inside/outside, heterosexual/homosexual opposition, an opposition which could at least plausibly be said to secure its seemingly inviolable dialectical structure only by assimilating and internalizing other sexualities (bisexuality, transvestism, transsexualism . . .) to its own rigid polar logic?” (2).

Of most concern to me here are these last definitions, the ways in which the term *queer* is thought to signify a new kind of politics as well as a new kind of theorizing, a theorizing marked by the very openness that allows so many definitional possibilities. Now, many would argue that this indeterminacy—this inability to ascertain a precise definition and framework for the term *queer*—is precisely what gives it its power: *queer* is many things to many people, irreducible, undefinable, enigmatic, winking at us as it flouts convention: the perfect postmodern trope, a term for the times, the epitome of knowing ambiguity. Good-bye simulacra, adios panopticon, arrivederci lack, adieu jouissance: hello *queer*! But what is lost in this fun deconstruction of the cohesion of identity? If queer becomes the new reigning subjectivity for hip activists and intellectuals alike, what kinds of politics and theories then become “transcended,” moved through and over in the construction of the queer hegemony? It is precisely my concern over the implicit and explicit marginalization and demonization of feminism and lesbian-feminism embedded in this “transcendence” that provoked this article.

Homo politicus, homo academicus

The growth of queer theory and queer politics must be placed in a social and political context. The most important pieces of this are, of course, the AIDS crisis, the rise of postmodern/poststructural theory, the politics of academia, the sex debates,⁴ and recent critiques of feminism. I want to go through each of these briefly to contextualize both the development of the term *queer* and my own criticisms of it as well.

As many writers have noted, the AIDS crisis not only prompted a renewed and reinvigorated gay and lesbian movement but radically opened up (or re-created) new ways of doing politics. Although this was surely not the first time gay men and women had worked together, AIDS activism

⁴ Briefly, the term *sex debates* is shorthand for a reinvigorated discussion of sexuality, power, pornography, and fantasy that was, to a large extent, sparked by the events surrounding the 1982 Barnard Conference “The Scholar and the Feminist.” At this conference, “sex radical” feminists came into often angry confrontation with antipornography activists who attempted to censor the speech of conference participants. Thus began a long and complicated series of debates about feminism and sexuality that has produced both acrimony and meaningful scholarship. See particularly Vance 1984.

brought us together in a time of crisis both from the disease itself and from the increasing attacks on gay and lesbian life from the religious Right and the Republican administrations. It encouraged a rethinking of gay politics in the light of this crisis but also in the light of the way in which gay men and women have learned more about each other and their various communities. So, we would want to recognize the specificity of queer politics as emerging with the crisis of AIDS and the development of groups such as ACT-UP and Queer Nation: "Many of these new gay militants reject the liberal value of privacy and the appeal to tolerance which dominate the agendas of more mainstream gay organizations. Instead, they emphasize publicity and self-assertion; confrontation and direct action top their list of tactical options; the rhetoric of difference replaces the more assimilationist liberal emphasis on similarity with other groups" (Duggan 1992, 15). In addition, *queer* has developed as a way to broaden the definitions, so that the movement can be more inclusive (e.g., bisexual, transgendered, etc.): "Queer culture . . . in its openness and its non-specificity, potentially suggests the truly polymorphous nature of our difference, of difference within the gay and lesbian community. The minute you say 'queer' you are necessarily calling into question exactly what you mean when you say it. There is always an implicit question about what constitutes 'queerness' that attends the minute you say the word. So, it seems to me that queer includes within it a necessarily expansive impulse that allows us to think about potential differences within that rubric" (Harper, White, and Cerullo 1993, 30).

This has prompted no small amount of debate, as one might imagine. On what basis are these different "identities" (practices?) joined together under the heading *queer*? Are queer politics simply a politics of the non-normative, as this writer seems to suggest? "An emergent lesbian politics acknowledged the relative autonomy of gender and sexuality, sexism and heterosexism. It suggested that lesbians shared with gay men a sense of 'queerness,' a nonnormative sexuality which transcends the binary distinction homosexual/heterosexual to include all who feel disenfranchised by dominant sexual norms—lesbians and gay men, as well as bisexuals and transsexuals" (Stein 1992, 50). Given this logic, could not the category *queer* include pedophiles, incest perpetrators, hetero S/Mers, dissatisfied straights, and so forth?⁵ In other words, if all that we share is a nonnormative sexuality and a disenfranchisement, then why not be totally inclusive? This reduces queer politics to a banal (and potentially

⁵ I do not mean to be facetious here; indeed, the very public debates over the "place" of organizations like NAMBLA (North American Man-Boy Love Association) in the gay and lesbian movement illustrates the very pressing political concerns raised by a simple politics of nonnormativity. It is no accident that some of the strongest voices against NAMBLA's inclusion in marches, organizations, and so forth have been lesbian-feminist.

dangerous) politics of simple opposition, potentially affiliating groups, identities, and practices that are explicitly and implicitly in opposition to each other. To link politically and theoretically around a “difference” from normative heterosexuality imposes a (false) unity around disparate practices and communities. Politically, of course, these different groups/practices do not necessarily share a progressive political agenda on sexuality; nonnormativity is hardly a banner around which to rally. However, for many writers and activists alike (inspired, perhaps, by Michel Foucault’s work) regulation itself is the problem; the creation of norms is the fundamental act of repression. With this logic, any unifying of the nonnormative raises the political stakes around regulation and thus opens the door to liberatory moves.

If, as bisexual writer Elisabeth Däumer writes, these new moves liberate “the queer in all of us” (1992, 92), then what happens to any conception of oppositional identity? Does this move of inclusivity (and the challenge to notions of authentic identity that it entails) run the risk of setting up another (albeit grander) opposition? And does it end up in a sort of meaningless pluralism motivated only by a vague sense of dissent, as Lisa Duggan suggests: “The notion of a ‘queer community’ . . . is often used to construct a collectivity no longer defined solely by the gender of its members’ sexual partners. This new community is unified only by a shared dissent from the dominant organization of sex and gender” (1992, 20).

The eighties and early nineties have also witnessed the rise of postmodernism and poststructuralism in social theory: the demise of the “grand narratives,” a new suspicion of “identity politics” as constructing a potential hegemony around the identity “gay” or “lesbian” as if that necessarily supposed a unified and coherent subjectivity: gay person. Identity is critiqued here as supposing a unity, squeezing out difference, perpetuating binarisms and dichotomous formations, and bordering on (if not instantiating) essentialism. So postmodern theory challenges the idea of gay identity as expressing “true”—not constructed—gay sexuality.

Many feminists have produced trenchant critiques of postmodernism,⁶ and even more find themselves (ourselves) in an admittedly ambiguous relation to the challenges offered by postmodern theorizing. While this is not the place to delve into *that* whole debate, suffice it to say that many feminists have been wary of the quick dismissal of “the subject” and political agency just when it seemed that women were getting around to acquiring some. The critique of identity so central to postmodern theorizing seems to many to place feminist activism in a political straitjacket, unable to move (because moving requires reliance on identity concepts

⁶ See particularly Hartsock 1983; Bordo 1990; Nicholson 1990; and Modleski 1991.

that are themselves suspect), yet needing desperately to organize women precisely around those newly suspect categories.

Postmodern theory, in addition, has been marked by its fetish of the margins. If postmodern theory finds resistance in the interstices of the body politic, in the marginal spaces, then queer theory takes up on that, dispersing resistance away from the locatable and specific body of the lesbian or the gay man and onto this more amorphous site of the "queer body" (which may or may not be gay). Postmodern theory often tends toward a fetish of inconsistency, contradictions, and the ever-present "difference." This can degenerate into an assertion of the hipness or sexiness of contradiction. But progressives have long argued that *some* contradictions are not only *not* sexy but are actually reactionary and that there is indeed a relationship between how one lives one's life and the politics one espouses, so that living in a segregated neighborhood or replicating the sexual division of labor in the home would not be "sexy" contradictions for avowed antiracists and feminists but would instead be suspect to challenge. So this emphasis on the delight in inconsistency for its own sake seems to me foolhardy at best.

Queer theory in the academy is curiously placed. Clearly, most queer theory takes place in the context of women's studies and/or lesbian and gay studies, even as it attempts to move outside those parameters. And most queer theorists, I have no doubt, themselves embrace (albeit uneasily) the identity "gay." Nevertheless, there is a disturbing trend in which queer theory has become disassociated from gay identity. Indeed, this disassociation is often celebrated as the necessary adjunct to the disassociation of gender and sexuality. One of the interesting aspects of this phenomenon of queer theory in the academy is that you do not have to be gay to do it, in fact it is much better if you are not.⁷ *Queer* (as opposed to *gay* or *lesbian*) lets you off the identity hook the way that gender studies has vis-à-vis women's studies, while cashing in on the trendiness of postmodernism. What are the implications of a queer theory disassociated from a gay and lesbian identity? This is not easy to answer, and I do not want to be claiming a sort of essentialist (god forbid!) idea that insists one must *be* something in order to teach it.⁸ Clearly, nongay scholars *must*

⁷ I say this only half-jokingly. Although clearly most queer theorists *are* gay, there does seem to be a proliferation of the "Sedgwick" phenomenon in which married, heterosexual college professors throw off their married heterosexuality (but stay married and heterosexual) and claim "queerness." Although Sedgwick is certainly the most notorious, she is not the sole representative of this trend.

⁸ This is a very touchy issue and one, I must admit, I am very torn over. For, on the one hand, an essentialist position (one must be something to teach it, and that "being" represents the truth of the experience) is unacceptable on any number of levels. On the other hand, if we believe that knowledge is always situated—that we always speak and think from somewhere—then to say it does not matter at all is equally unacceptable. Indeed, we do not argue for a more diverse faculty just to be more representative in our

teach gay “subjects,” as male professors must teach about women and whites must teach about people of color. But the thorny issues of authenticity, experience, and co-optation are not resolved by an assertion that no identity is real. Are we really to evacuate the centrality of experience for the vacuousness of positionality (positionality as indicating the always provisional and temporal nature of political location and action)? While compelling and suggestive, I fear that the concept of positionality tends toward a voluntarism that ignores the multiple, felt, structural determinations on people’s everyday existence. If you are “gay loving” (as Sedgwick often refers to it), is that synonymous with being gay? Does that difference not matter any more? Are gay and lesbian studies simply to become another academic commodity that anyone can buy in on, given the proper allegiances and fashion statements?

The straight white married man at my university who says he “does” queer theory in his English classes is in a *structurally* different place than I am. Does this perhaps have some relevance? Should he not speak to this in some way? It is not to say that I (as a lesbian) can speak the “truth” of lesbian life more than he can; it is to say that this difference needs to be acknowledged and reckoned with in the course of academic life. This means not only being explicit about the different risks implied in our positions but also acknowledging the different ways we know and present this knowledge and the effects that may have on our students. I know it is hopelessly retro to speak of structure these days, to insist that material conditions actually do impose real, felt, and experienced limits on our lives in radically different ways. My straight colleague may or may not be well intentioned. But, while this does matter, it is not at all clear that his good intentions alter his power to speak and my relative powerlessness.

I suspect that these concerns about the politics of experience get lost in the radical disassociation of identity from embodied practices. This is not to say that oppression is the mark of truth or authenticity but that, given the hierarchies of power in academia, we cannot afford to lose sight of “from where we speak.” The deconstruction of identity politics (the recognition that identity categories can be regulatory regimes) may have some merit, but it can also, in the world of academia as well in other social spaces, become the vehicle for co-optation: the radical queer theorist as married heterosexual. It becomes a convenient way to avoid those questions of privilege. What are the implications involved in claiming “queerness” when one is not gay or lesbian? And, would we tolerate this passing (indeed, it is even being celebrated!) in another context, say the context of race or ethnicity? If it is clearly co-optive and colonizing for

faculty statistics; we also do so because we feel diversity is not simply an intellectual acquisition but is embodied as well.

the white person to claim blackness if she or he “feels” black (or even feels aligned politically with the struggles against racism), then why is it so strangely legitimate for a heterosexual to claim queerness because she or he feels a disaffection from traditional definitions of heterosexuality? The white academic says she is *working on* antiracism and on issues of race and ethnicity; the straight (most often white) academic says she (or he, more often) *is* queer. There is a huge jump being made from studying/teaching gay and lesbian work to pronouncing oneself queer. That jump is, I believe, both intellectually and politically dangerous. Straight faculty can and must analyze and teach about the logics of compulsory heterosexuality, but they must explicitly recognize that, for example, they are more likely to be taken seriously and deemed legitimate because of that very system they are critiquing. In addition, they must acknowledge that the “will to know” is different; “knowing” lesbian and gay studies can never be simply or only an academic commodity for the gay or lesbian faculty member or student. It is not just a trope.

Queer theory, particularly in its more academic manifestations, is often posed as a response to a certain kind of feminist and lesbian theorizing that is now deemed hopelessly retro, boring, realist, modernist, about shoring up identity rather than its deconstruction. I will discuss this further below, but there has been a kind of reigning dogma in progressive and postmodern academic circles these days that constructs an “old-time” feminism in order to point out how the sex debates, postmodernism, and queer theory have nicely superseded this outmoded, reformist, prudish, banal feminism of old. Is it possible that queer theory’s unspoken Other is feminism, or even lesbianism, or lesbian-feminism?

Queer theory’s relation to the politics and theorizing of racialized identities is no less fraught than its relation to feminism and feminist identities. It seems to me—in the little that has been published explicitly addressing this relationship (and this itself is a problem, because although there is a growing body of critique from white feminists, I have found little specifically addressing questions of race and queerness *per se*)—that lesbian and gay writers of color are expressing both optimism with the new queer designations as well as trepidation. The optimism is located in the queer dethroning of gender and the (possible) opening up of queerness to articulations of “otherness” beyond the gender divide. In other words, if queer can be seen to challenge successfully gender hegemony, then it can make both theoretical and political space for more substantive notions of multiplicity and intersectionality. However, queer can “de-race” the homosexual of color in much the same way “old-time” gay studies often has, effectively erasing the specificity of “raced” gay existence under a queer rubric in which whiteness is not problematized. Sagri Dhairyam, in “Racing the Lesbian, Dodging White Critics,” critiques the implicit

whiteness of queerness while still attempting to instantiate the category “queer women of color.” “‘Queer theory’ comes increasingly to be reckoned with as critical discourse, but concomitantly writes a queer whiteness over raced queerness; it domesticates race in its elaboration of sexual difference” (1994, 26). Gloria Anzaldúa makes a somewhat different point; she feels more affinity with *queer* as a term of more working-class and “deviant” etymology than what she sees as the historically white and middle-class origins of the designations *lesbian* and *gay*. Cherrie Moraga and Amber Hollibaugh have made a similar argument in their use of the phrase *queer lesbian*, stressing their embrace of the term for its difference from middle-class lesbian feminist identities (1983). Yet Anzaldúa also accuses white academics of co-opting the term *queer* and using it to construct “a false unifying umbrella which all ‘queers’ of all races, ethnicities and classes are shoved under” (1991, 250).

In addition, I would also suspect that the inattention to material social relations (commodification, the fluctuations of international capital, shifting forms of familial life, rise in antigay activism, regressive social legislation, increasing disenfranchisement of people of color, etc.) and the academicism of much of queer writing would be problems for a lesbian/gay praxis that is both class and race conscious. Marlon Riggs hinted at this when he deconstructed his own situation as “black queer diva”: “Le Butch-Girl wonders, for instance, if her/his permission to say gender-fuck is contingent upon knowing and articulating Fanon, Foucault, Gates, Gilroy, hooks, Hall, West, and the rest as well” (1992, 102). To what extent does queerness embrace Ru Paul and *The Crying Game*’s Jaye Davidson as queer icons but effectively ignore the specific realities of lesbians and gays of color?

The case of the disappearing lesbian (or, where the boys are)

My main critique of the new popularity of “queer” (theory and, less so, politics) is that it often (and once again) erases lesbian specificity and the enormous difference that gender makes, evacuates the importance of feminism, and rewrites the history of lesbian feminism and feminism generally. Now this is not to say that strongly identified lesbians have not embraced queer theory and politics, or that those who do so are somehow acting in bad faith or are “antifeminist.” Indeed, what makes queer theory so exciting in part is the way in which so many different kinds of theorists have been attracted to its promise. Many lesbians (including myself) have been attracted to queer theory out of frustration with a feminism that, they believe, either subsumes lesbianism under the generic category woman or poses gender as the transcendent category of difference, thus making cross-gender gay alliances problematic. To a certain extent, I, too,

share this excitement and embrace the queer move that can complicate an often too-easy feminist take on sexual identity that links lesbianism (in the worst-case scenario) to an almost primordial and timeless mother-bond or a hazy woman-identification. At the same time, however, I fear that many lesbians' engagement with queer theory is informed itself by a rudimentary and circumscribed (revisionist) history of feminism and gender-based theory that paints an unfair picture of feminism as rigid, homophobic, and sexless. As Biddy Martin notes, "The work of complicating our theories has too often proceeded, however, by way of polemical and ultimately reductionist accounts of the varieties of feminist approaches to just one feminism, guilty of the humanist trap of making a self-same, universal category of "women"—defined as other than men—the subject of feminism. At its worst, feminism has been seen as more punitively policing than mainstream culture" (1994, 105).

The story, alluded to above, goes something like this: once upon a time there was this group of really boring ugly women who never had sex, walked a lot in the woods, read bad poetry about goddesses, wore flannel shirts, and hated men (even their gay brothers). They called themselves lesbians. Then, thankfully, along came these guys named Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan dressed in girls' clothes riding some very large white horses. They told these silly women that they were politically correct, rigid, frigid, sex-hating prudes who just did not GET IT—it was all a game anyway, all about words and images, all about mimicry and imitation, all a cacophony of signs leading back to nowhere. To have a politics around gender was silly, they were told, because gender was just a performance anyway, a costume one put on and, in drag performance, wore backward. And everyone knew boys were better at dress up.

So, queerness is theorized as somehow beyond gender, a vision of a sort of transcendent polymorphous perversity deconstructing as it slips from one desiring/desired object to the other. But this forgets the very real and felt experience of gender that women, particularly, live with quite explicitly. Indeed, one could argue that this is really the dividing line around different notions of queer; to what extent do theorists argue *queer* as a term beyond (or through) gender? "Where de Lauretis retains the categories 'gay' and 'lesbian' and some notion of gender division as parts of her discussion of what 'queerness' is (or might be), Judith Butler and Sue-Ellen Case have argued that queerness is something that is ultimately beyond gender—it is an attitude, a way of responding, that begins in a place not concerned with, or limited by, notions of a binary opposition of male and female or the homo versus hetero paradigm usually articulated as an extension of this gender binarism" (Doty 1993, xv). But, again, this seems to assume that feminists (or gays and lesbians) have somehow created these binarisms.

Unlike the terms *gay* and *lesbian*, *queer* is not gender specific, and this of course has been one of its selling points, as it purports to speak to the diversity of the gay and lesbian community and to dethrone gender as the significant marker of sexual identity and sexual expression. Phillip Brian Harper, in a piece adapted from a talk at the second OUTWrite Conference in 1992, argues that it is precisely this attention to the diversity of gay and lesbian culture that marks off *queer* from *lesbian* and *gay*: “What I mean is that the dichotomous formulation of gay and lesbian, that we’ve been taught since the 1970s to use in politically correct contexts, is useful and has been a very effective educational tool, but has at the same time suggested in its dichotomy that there’s only one relevant type of difference within our culture, i.e., gender difference” (Harper, White, and Cerullo 1993, 29–30).

The point that gender is not the only significant marker of difference is an important one and one that deserves development and reiteration.⁹ This point, of course, has been forcefully made in regard to both race and class. But in a culture in which male is the default gender, in which *homosexual* (a term that also does not specify gender) is all too often imaged as male, and *gay* as both, to see queer as somehow gender *neutral* is ludicrous and willfully naive. Feminism has taught us that the idea of gender neutrality is not only fictitious but a move of gender domination. I applaud queer theory’s expansion of the concept of difference but am concerned that, too often, gender is not *complicated* but merely ignored, dismissed, or “transcended.” In contradistinction, I would argue that the critique of gender theory from the perspective of women of color has done precisely what the queer critique of gender is only partially and incompletely able to do. In other words, gender in black feminist writing is not “transcended” or somehow deemed an “enemy” concept. Rather, the concept of gender—and feminist theory more generally—is complicated, expanded, deepened both to challenge its “privileged” status and to render it susceptible to theories of intersectionality and multiplicity. The queer critique of the feminist mantra of the separation of sex and gender (sex being the biological “raw material” and gender the socially constructed edifice that creates masculinity and femininity) is helpful in com-

⁹ I would note, however, in disagreement with Harper, that the simple construction of a “dichotomy” does not, in my mind, necessarily mean that those who use that dichotomy are negating other identities and meanings. For example, the fact that this article critiques queer theory primarily around its erasure of lesbian specificity and demonization of feminism does not mean that other critiques of queer are not important and valid (say, a critique of queer around its erasure of color in the universalizing move of nationhood). Because I am primarily speaking of the queer occlusion of feminism and gender does not imply that I am myself “privileging” gender as the most important marker of difference; it simply implies that this is the core subject of this particular (limited) article. In discussing other differences throughout this article, particularly around race and ethnicity, I try to make this point more forcefully.

plicating what has become a somewhat rote recitation of social constructionist argument, an argument that too often leaves the body and its various constructions unexamined. But in the light of recently resurgent theories of biological determinism (see particularly the firestorm of controversy generated by the determinist tract *The Bell Curve* by Herrnstein and Murray [1994]), the insistence on a righteous social constructionism (women are made, not born; we are not simply an expression of our biological makeup, etc.) might be important strategically and politically. Too often in these queer challenges to this dichotomy, sex becomes the grand force of excess that can offer more possibilities for liberatory culture, and gender the constraint on that which would (naturally?) flow freely and polymorphously if left to its own devices. Bidy Martin has made the argument that, for Sedgwick and others, race and gender often assume a fixity, a stability, a ground, whereas sexuality (typically thematized as male) becomes the “means of crossing” and the figure of mobility. In the process of making the female body the “drag” on the (male) play of sexuality, “the female body appears to become its own trap, and the operations of misogyny disappear from view” (Martin 1994, 104, 109–10).

But it is also not clear to me that this vision of a genderless nonnormativity is a worthwhile goal. Is a degendered idea of sexual identity/sexual desire what we strive for? Is this just a postmodern version of a liberal pluralist “if it feels good, do it” ethos? Also, the images/signifiers for this transcendence (of gender) are suspiciously male (why can’t a woman be more like a fag?). If the phallus has been replaced by the dildo as the prime signifier of sexual transgression, of queerness, how far have we really come, so to speak?

Queer discourse sets up a universal (male) subject, or at least a universal gay male subject, as its implicit referent. (It is interesting to note in this regard that the 1993 summer special “Queer Issue” of the *Village Voice* was called “Faith Hope & Sodomy.”) We cannot deny the centrality of gay maleness to this reconstruction of queer as radical practice. For example, Sue-Ellen Case discusses her engagement with the word *queer* by saying that “I became queer through my readerly identification with a male homosexual author” (1991, 1). This is not to say that it is not perfectly fine to “identify” with gay men, but what this passage illustrates is a trend toward a giddy merger with gay men that is left relatively unproblematized. No one goes further with this identification than Sedgwick. I am reluctant to focus on her in this way, yet she herself has so foregrounded her own personal predilections that she seems rather fair game.¹⁰ In a piece called “A Poem Is Being Written,” Sedgwick bemoans

¹⁰ David Bergman has written trenchant critiques of Sedgwick and her oeuvre (1991, 1993).

her “failure . . . to make the obvious swerve that would have connected my homosexual desire and identification with my need and love, as a woman, of women” (1993, 209). Indeed, she goes on to note that her “identification as a gay person is a firmly male one, identification ‘as’ a gay man” (209). In many ways, this does not even have the naive honesty of the fag-hag who simply grooves on the panache of gay men. Sedgwick, the postmodern intellectual subject, must not only identify or sympathize or politically ally, she must *be*. And lesbianism here, in this “tortured” self-study, simply becomes the unfortunate absence, not really the stuff of identities and identifications, merely the detritus of the grand narratives of male homosociality and homosexuality.

Although lesbians are occasionally mentioned (usually when speaking of S/M), gay men most assuredly have become the model for lesbian radical sex (e.g., the celebration of pornography, the “reappropriation” of the phallus in the fascination with the dildo, the “daddy” fantasies, and reverence for public sex of Pat Califia, etc.).¹¹ This has entailed a denigration of lesbian attempts to rethink sexuality within a feminist framework. Granted (and we do not need to go through this one more time), lesbian sexuality has suffered from both a discursive neglect and an idealization on the part of lesbians themselves. The image of hand-holding, eye-gazing, woodsy eroticism, however, is not wholly the creation of lesbians but part of the devaluation and stereotyping of all women’s sexuality by male-dominant culture. Even in that haven of supposedly uptight, separatist nonsex (Northampton, Massachusetts, in the late 1970s and early 1980s), I seem to remember we were all doing the nasty fairly well, and, for all the talk of the “lesbian sex police,”¹² no girl ever banged down my door and stymied my sexual expression. The straight gaybashers, however, did. We should never forget this difference as we glibly use words like *police*.

Indeed, Vera Whisman criticizes those feminists who “policed” other lesbians with charges of male identification and says that “such charges of male-identification were rooted not only in anti-sex attitudes . . . but also in essentialist understandings of womanhood” (1993, 55). Do we

¹¹ See particularly Creet 1991; Reich 1992; Hall 1993; and Roy 1993.

¹² I recognize, of course, that oppositional cultures (including lesbian culture) do tyrannize their own members. Indeed, the brutal history of the Soviet Union and the sad and dogmatic hierarchies of the American Left provide vivid examples of this process. To some extent, I think it feels even more brutish when the “clamping down” comes from within one’s own ranks, e.g., from other lesbians. However, in recognizing this and arguing against it, we should not construct a monolithic new “other” who can now serve as a historical reminder of the tedious past we have since transcended. And we need to make careful distinctions about this “policing,” based on questions of intentionality, power, structural location, etc. It seems to me that the “policing” of lesbians by the homophobic state that, say, takes away our children is not of the same type or order as the “policing” that comes from lesbians themselves around issues of sexuality, sexual practices, style, etc.

really want to relinquish a critique of male identification? After all, the feminist insight that a central impediment to women's liberation (yes, liberation) is an identification with and dependence on males and male approval, desire, status, and so on is so obvious as to be banal. Charges of male identification may have been spuriously made at times, but the *analysis* of male identification is central and important.

The construction of an old, bad, exclusive, policing lesbian feminism is necessary for the "bad girl" (dildo in tow) to emerge as the knight in leather armor, ready to make the world safe for sexual democracy, as Terralee Bensinger argues: "Any threat to the 'unity' of the ideal feminist community (as well as to the more 'general' lesbian community) is branded 'outlaw' activity and purged from the networks of inclusion. In this case, pro-sex lesbian pornographers function as the expurgated excess against which the illusion of community unity is maintained (in reified form). Lesbian feminism has a history of exclusion as much as anything else" (1992, 71).

In her history of this exclusion, Bensinger cites the political event known as the "lavender menace" (the action to challenge the purge of lesbians in the National Organization for Women) to "indicate how it stunted the historical 'writing' of lesbian sexual identity and subsequent practice for years. The result of this group's strategic maneuver was a discursive/historical repression of the specificities of lesbian sexuality which was subsumed under the reified sign of Woman" (1992, 73). Gee, and I thought homophobia and antifeminism were the problem!

In an article on the "decentering of lesbian feminism," Stein traces the history of the lesbian movement, from its early attempts to shift away from the medical models of sexual deviance to the construction of the "woman-identified woman" and the development of a lesbian subculture and "women's culture" in general. She takes us to the period of rupture—the 1980s—where "a series of structural and ideological shifts conspired to decenter the lesbian-feminist model of identity. First, the predominantly white and middle-class women who comprised the base of the movement aged, underwent various life-cycle changes, and settled into careers and families of various stripes—often even heterosexual ones. Second, a growing revolt emerged from within: women of color, working-class women, and sexual minorities, three separate but overlapping groups, asserted their claims on lesbian identity politics" (Stein 1992, 47).

But, in an otherwise astute and fair chronology, Stein engages in the kind of reductionist reading that has marred other similar narratives. In discussing the challenges of the "sex debates" and the AIDS crisis as re-introducing sexuality and desire into lesbian discourse and identity, she

engages in a simplistic substitution: “As the withered body of the person with AIDS replaced the once-pervasive image of the all-powerful male oppressor, the sense of male threat which underlay lesbian-feminist politics diminished further” (Stein 1992, 49). But, of course, “male threat” (or even patriarchy) has hardly withered, although it has certainly changed. Curiously absent from this history is the rise of the religious Right, which brought with it an unprecedented backlash against feminism, women’s rights, and poor people—along with its attacks on gays and lesbians. It is not that the image of the AIDS sufferer (and we will leave aside *that* iconography for the moment) has replaced the image of male oppressor; indeed, the images (and policies) of Reagan, Bush, Quayle, Helms, Robertson, Falwell, Terry (and now the new terror—Newt Gingrich), and others are vivid and imposing.

Even further, not only are those repressed and repressive lesbians responsible for putting a major damper on our nascent sexuality, but feminism itself is responsible for that horror of all horrors: THE BINARY. Bensinger indicts “the binaries generated within feminist movement: feminism/patriarchy, inside/outside, and porn/erotica” (1992, 88). Certain strands of feminism might indeed have perpetuated some of these oppositions (and is feminism *not* opposed to patriarchy?), but, alas, they long predate second-wave feminism. Seventies feminism here becomes the ogre that haunts queer kids of today. “By the seventies feminism had sanitized lesbianism. Lesbophobia forced lesbians to cling to feminism in an attempt to retain respectability. However, in the eighties, discussions of sadomasochism permanently altered the relationship of many lesbians to feminism” (Morgan 1993, 39). I would have hoped most politically astute lesbians (and gay men, for that matter) were/are feminists; this should be a theory we embrace (not “cling to”) and, of course, transform and challenge in that embrace.

Many queer activists and theorists seem to believe the media fiction that feminism is either (a) dead because we lost or (b) dead because we won: “1988. So feminism is dead, or it has changed, or it is still meaningful to some of us but its political currency in the world is weak, its radical heart excised, its plodding middle-class moderation now an acceptable way of life. Feminism has been absorbed by the same generation that so proudly claims to reject it, and instead of women’s liberation I hear, ‘Long live the Queer nation!’” (Maggenti 1993, 250). As Whisman notes, “Today’s ‘bad girls’ rebel as much against their feminist predecessors as against male power” (1993, 48). In her review of the *differences* issue on queer theory, Hennessy challenges those writers who set up feminism as the enemy, “substitut[ing] feminism (the Symbolic Mother) for patriarchy as the most notable oppressive force that lesbian sexual politics and

eroticism must contend with. For feminists this should seem a very disturbing perspective shift, especially when feminism, among young people in particular, is more than ever a bad word" (1993, 969).

This is not to deny the importance of the "sex debates" and the new discussions around lesbian sexuality that, I agree, are long overdue. The open and volatile discussion of sexuality permanently altered feminist praxis and allowed for a complex debate around the politics of passion and desire that recognized that the simplistic rendering of women's sexuality was in need of major revision. And this is not to say that some lesbians, and some feminists, do not "judge" and indeed condemn sexual practices that they have deemed antithetical to the project of constructing a postpatriarchal world. This censuring is to be heartily contested, as it has from numerous writers and activists. But I simply suggest that we apply our own theories consistently: the narrative of "sexless uptight dykes of the 1970s" is, after all, a narrative, and as we have been so adept at deconstructing narrative for the relations of power that inhere in the telling of history, we should be equally able to "read" this story with, well, a grain of salt at the very least.

Now gay male sex and *its* histories become the very model of radical chic: the backroom replaces the consciousness-raising session as site of transformation. Feminist critiques of objectification, concern with abuse of women, and desire to construct nonpatriarchal forms of intimacy become belittled and denigrated as so much prudery and "political correctness," creating an ahistorical narrative that furthers the separation of feminism from queer politics and theory.

In an article on her adventures in the new lesbian backrooms of the Village, Donna Minkowitz sees sexual *and* political liberation in the construction of spaces for anonymous sex, never once questioning the male model or her own location. She clearly envies the gay men of the pre-AIDS days and bemoans her own teenage fate: "I have a girlfriend, not a transgressive erotic world where I can do it with five strangers in an evening, or suck off girl upon girl in the darkness of the meat district" (1992, 34). But why is this practice deemed transgressive (and, consequently, a "girlfriend" deemed dreadfully banal and prudish)? The model of liberatory sex being constructed here is one where "sex . . . is separate from the world outside—it doesn't violate vows of monogamy or enter the partners into a 'relationship'" (34). This may or may not be a liberatory practice (or it may just be fun), but its transgressiveness is not self-evidently radical unless one sees transgression itself as the supreme act of radical identity making. I fear, here, we have a real failure of imagination. Are lesbians unable to construct, envision, imagine, enact radical sexualities without relying so fundamentally on male paradigms? Must we look to

the boys in the backroom as our Sapphic saviors? Why are “gay male sluts” (as Minkowitz puts it) the model?

And why this (theoretical) obsession with the question of whether to call oneself a lesbian? In an article for the gay and lesbian anthology *Inside/Out*, Butler (1991) spends several pages pondering this puzzle, an analogous puzzle to that posed recently by feminists about whether there really are “women” and whether our use of that category reinscribes its ability to construct us in power relations. Sure, to a certain extent, all categories are, as Butler and others have put it, “regulatory regimes,” but so what? How can resisting these regimes be anything other than an intellectual exercise, a game that can be reduced to that old canard “don’t categorize me” (as liberals and college students would put it)? Is this just an empty gesture or, rather, a gesture full with self-importance, postmodern hubris, rebellious nose thumbing? It is not to say there isn’t much truth to the claim that homosexual identity, like all categorical identities, is a “fiction” to a certain extent, is a collection of regulations and positions that can, perhaps, constrain as much as enable, impose as much as liberate, police as much as free. But I think that, in fact, the queer framework remains within the binarism it so desperately wants to explode, in that the assumption is that gay identities necessarily—in a structural sense—act like all other identities.¹³ All categories have rules, to be sure, but not all follow the same rules. The historical conditions of growing up “gay” or “lesbian” in a homophobic culture may, in fact, produce categories of identity that are more fluid, more flexible than the categories of other identities, such as heterosexuality. Why must we assume that all identities form around the same structural binarisms and with the same inherent rigidities? Is *that* not essentialist?

And does this difference not make a difference in how we “think” identity? When Butler says that she is “not at ease with ‘lesbian theories, gay theories,’” referring to the title of the anthology, because “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression” (1991, 13–14), does she not want to stress the difference between these two moments—the moment of oppression and the moment of liberation? Are those different uses of identity categories just the surface that belies the “deep meaning” of identity as “really” about “oppressive structures”? Or can we see these different uses and meanings of identity as radically different, not just

¹³ It is also interesting to note that these critics of identity shy away from the obvious analogies of racial and ethnic identity.

somehow superficially different? Indeed, does it not actually sound a bit strange to speak of heterosexual identity (or WASP identity, etc.) and should that not indicate something about the differences in these two us-ages/meanings? This is not simply to argue that we need to adopt the terms *woman* or *lesbian* as a sort of “strategic essentialism” as has been argued elsewhere, but rather to say let us think this concept *lesbian* through the historical developments of lesbian desires, bodies, passions, struggles, politics.

Butler goes on in the article to question not only identity as a lesbian but the process of “coming out,” as it further implicates the “subject” in the subjection of being named and known: “Is the ‘subject’ who is ‘out’ free of its subjection and finally in the clear? Or could it be that the subjection that subjectivates the gay or lesbian subject in some ways continues to oppress, or oppresses most insidiously, once ‘outness’ is claimed?” (1991, 15). She further asks, “Can sexuality even remain sexuality once it submits to a criterion of transparency and disclosure?” (15). Hmm, that old devil moon is back again. Sexuality, she must be, how you say, an enigma, hidden, dark, unconscious for her to be . . . fun. Shhh, don’t talk, don’t know, don’t even think you know, don’t claim, don’t reveal: desire needs dark curtains of mystery to be pleasurable.

Shane Phelan, writing in the *Signs* special issue on lesbianism, joins others in critiquing the prominence of the “coming out” process for lesbian identity, asserting that the language of “coming out” implies “a process of discovery or admission rather than one of construction or choice” (1993, 773), thus producing an essentialist notion of a “real” lesbian identity that exists beneath the layers of denial or hiding. But I am not sure coming out is as unitary and simple a process as these theorists make it out to be. Granted, for many it can be that sort of a revelatory move, revealing that which was “really there” but hidden all along. But for others, coming out is, first, not a moment but rather a contradictory and complex process that involves (perhaps) self-revelation, construction, political strategy, choice, and so forth. Second, it seems ludicrous to pretend that internalized homophobia and the realities of heterosexism and heterosexual privilege are not operative in and around these “coming out” processes. Phelan and others seem to write as if we “come out” in a social and political vacuum. Phelan cites Barbara Ponse and Mark Blasius as arguing for a conception of coming out as a sort of “becoming,” learning the ways of being gay or lesbian (Phelan 1993, 774). But, again, I do not see these as mutually exclusive. Of course “coming out” implies a becoming, a construction of the self as gay, now not “hidden” within the fiction of heterosexuality. But this “becoming” is, for so many, also merged with a profound sense of “revealing” a “truth” that one had

previously “hidden.” That truth might indeed be a fiction (in that no identity is ever presocial, inhering in some untouched part of the soul or psyche or body), but it is a fiction that many live through and in quite deeply.

Steven Seidman also writes that he now feels more uneasy with the act of coming out and makes a similar leap that associates “coming out” with a necessarily regulatory process:

To the extent that the positive effects of coming out have turned on announcing a respectable homosexuality, this politics has the negative effect of pathologizing all those desires, behaviors, and lives that deviate from a normalized homosexuality—or heterosexuality. Such a relentless politics of identity—“homos are really no different from straights”—reinforces an equally relentless normalization of conventional sexual and gender codes. In other words, coming out is effective only if the homo made public is announced to be like the straight in every way but sexual orientation. Thus all the ways that homos may be queer—for example, those who like to cross-dress, role play, have multiple sex partners, or engage in commercial, rough, or public sex—are pathologized by the strategy of coming out as a respectable homo. (1994, 170)

This constructs a totalizing narrative of coming out that defies logic. Why does Seidman assume that all who come out do so as “respectable homos”? Surely, that is part of the discourse but obviously not the whole of it. What about the very act of “coming out” *necessarily* implies the pathologizing of certain practices? It certainly can (as can everything), but I see no necessary relation unless one views any declaration of identity (however prefaced by caveats) as an immediate smoke signal to the forces of domination that all is clear. And what of our responsibility to others? If one less young person feels alone and vulnerable, one less colleague isolated and marginalized, is that not something—at the very least—to consider?

But queer theory gets its most Felliniesque when it starts mulling over the (exciting!) possibilities of the “male lesbian.” Indeed, Jacquelyn Zita devotes an entire article to this subject. Zita proposes the male lesbian as radical gender bender, “challenging the naturalness of ‘maleness’ and ‘heterosexuality’ by the bizarre-ness of his self-intending sex and gender attributions” (1992, 125). Once again, men in the front lines in the fight for equality and justice. Just like Tootsie!

I cross-dress, therefore I am

I worry about the centrality of drag and camp to queer signification.¹⁴ As Carol-Anne Tyler notes, gay camp is no longer just fun in an unfun world, gay campers “have become draped crusaders for the social constructionist cause, catching gender in the act—as an act—so as to demonstrate that there is no natural, essential, biological basis to gender identity or sexual orientation” (1991, 32). From “Chicks with Dicks” to Ru Paul to butch/femme bravado, crossing has become the metaphor of choice and the privileged sign of the new queer sensibility. As much as lesbians may now be “playing” with these signifiers (and given the reality that there are women who cross-dress, etc.), these are, after all, historically primarily male activities, particularly in the mode of public performance. In addition, “playing gender” for male drag queens or cross-dressers cannot, in a world marked by the power of gender within patriarchy, be the same for women. As much as we might intellectually want to talk about a more fluid and shifting continuum of both gender and sexual desire (and the separation of the two) we cannot afford to slip into a theory of gender as simply play and performance, a theory that, albeit attired in postmodern garb, appears too much like the old “sex roles” framework or even an Erving Goffman-type “presentation of self” paradigm. As the editors of the special issue of *Radical America* (“Becoming a Spectacle: Lesbian and Gay Politics & Culture in the Nineties”) ask, “What are we to make of the pervasive interest in ‘cross-dressing’? Has ‘cross-dressing’ replaced ‘coming out’—does ‘performing yourself’ catch some of the desire for mobility, the fear of being pinned down, found out, left out, or fixed, that ‘coming out’ (discovering, revealing, expressing your ‘true self’) cannot?” (*Radical America* 1993, 9).

The concept of “performance” has dominated recent feminist theory as well as gay/lesbian/queer theory. Butler is obviously key here, as her work has come to signify a radical move in both theoretical arenas, and the notions of gender play and performance that she elaborates have found themselves the starting points for any number of new works in

¹⁴ I will forgo here any substantive discussion of the long and complicated history of drag and camp (themselves not synonymous, of course) within the lesbian and gay movement. Clearly, the simplistic reading of drag (particularly female impersonation) as only misogynist parody has been rightly subjected to serious critique (which is not to say that this reading did not have some merit). But while drag is not unproblematically misogynistic, neither is it unproblematically the privileged sign of gender-bending radicalism or sexual transgression. Carole-Anne Tyler’s article on the politics of gay drag offers up a compelling critique of the claims of radicalism. Specifically, she wonders how one is to make a distinction between gender-bending camp and misogynist masquerade when all identities are fictions, and when a “white, bourgeois, and masculine fetishistic imaginary” reigns (1991, 62).

feminist theory and queer theory. I want to be careful not to simplify her complex and compelling contributions to these discussions. I think she is much more careful about theorizing “performance” than many others who have constructed a less nuanced analysis. Indeed, in *Bodies That Matter*, Butler sets out to clarify what she sees as a misconstrual of her stance on performativity, particularly when it comes to the question of drag. Just as she is explicit that the performance of gender is never a simple voluntary act (like choosing the clothes one puts on in the morning) and is always already constituted by the rules and histories of gender, she reiterates that ambiguity of drag, arguing carefully that “drag is not unproblematically subversive . . . [and] there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion” (1993a, 231). Yet, provisos (as in “performance is never simply voluntaristic action”) do little when the performances remain removed from a social and cultural context that either enables or disenables their radical enactment.

Clearly, cross-dressing, passing, and assorted tropes of postmodern delight are sexier, more fun, more inventive than previous discourses of identity and politics. Indeed, I think the performance motif the perfect trope for our funky times, producing a sense of enticing activity amid the depressing ruins of late capitalism. It obviously speaks to the pastiche-like world of images and signs that have come to signify what it means to live in the postmodern (see Madonna and Michael Jackson if you doubt this), yet this hand can, and has, been overplayed. In particular, this trope becomes vacuous when it is decontextualized, bandied about as the new hope for a confused world. Theories of gender as play and performance need to be intimately and systematically connected with the *power* of gender (really, the power of *male* power) to constrain, control, violate, and configure. Too often, mere lip service is given to the specific historical, social, and political configurations that make certain conditions possible and others constrained, as Hennessy here notes in her critique of Butler (and others) for the lack of attention to the material context of “gender performance”: “What does it mean to say that what can be seen as parodic and what gender parody makes visible depends on a context in which subversive confusions can be fostered? What exactly is meant by ‘context’ here?” (Hennessy 1994, 40). Without substantive engagement with complex sociopolitical realities, those performance tropes appear as entertaining but ultimately depoliticized academic exercises.

There is great insight and merit in understanding gender and sexual identity as processes, acquisitions, enactments, creations, processes (and Butler is right to credit Simone de Beauvoir with this profound insight), and Butler and others have done us a great service in elaborating the

dissimulating possibilities of simulation. But this insight gets lost if it is not theorized with a deep understanding of the limitations and constraints within which we “perform” gender. And without some elaborated social and cultural context, this theory of performance is deeply ahistorical and, therefore, ironically (because postmodernism fashions itself as particularism par excellence) universalistic, avoiding a discussion of the contexts (race, class, ethnicity, etc.) that make particular “performances” more or less likely to be possible in the first place. It is not enough to assert that all performance of gender takes place within complex and specific regimes of power and domination; those regimes must be explicitly part of the analytic structure of the performance trope, rather than asides to be tossed around and then ignored.¹⁵

I worry, too, about the romanticization of the margins and of the outlaw that this emphasis on “gender bending” often accompanies. Rearranging the signs of gender too often becomes a substitute for challenging gender inequity. Wearing a dildo will not stop me from being raped as a woman or being harassed as a lesbian. And while donning the accoutrements of masculinity might make me feel more powerful, it will not, short of “passing,” keep me out of the ghettos of female employment. This deconstruction of signs—this exploration of the fictitious and constructed nature of gender encoding and gender itself—must be a part of any radical gay politics, but if it *becomes* radical gay politics, we are in trouble. Phelan thoughtfully points out the dangers of a limited, deconstructive *politics*: “Voters in Colorado, or homophobes with baseball bats, will not be persuaded by discussion of gender ambiguity; I suspect it will exacerbate their anxiety. Telling them that I am not ‘really’ a lesbian is different from saying it to readers of *Signs*; what the *Signs* audience can understand as deconstruction becomes simply a return to the closet in others’ eyes” (1993, 782). So, I have a concern here about queer political activism (and theory) degenerating into a self-styled rebel stance. It can again become a simple inversion (we’re here, we’re queer, get used to it), a reveling in our otherness, embracing it, claiming a “dirty” identity. Ironically, the rebel queer has also been touted by mainstream media: “Meanwhile, deviant sexualities are in cultural fashion. From the unexpected response to *The Crying Game* to the popularity of Dame Edna and Ru Paul (‘Queen for a Day’), from the seemingly endless parade of cross-dressers, transgenderists, and drag queens on daytime television to the spate of films about to emerge from Hollywood . . . it appears the culture is slanting queerly” (Doty 1993, 8). Nevertheless, the recent public fascination with

¹⁵ Again, I would note here that Butler’s most recent work seems to address, rather successfully, many of my concerns. Nevertheless, I still am concerned that much of the discussion around drag, performance, crossing, etc., remains deeply decontextualized or that the context seems to be solely a textual and representational one.

queerness in no way implies an antihomophobic move; indeed, it is often quite the opposite.¹⁶

Reading these tales of modern queer life reveals the obsessive focus on the self, the relentless narcissism and individualism of narratives of queer theory: “I pack a dildo, therefore I am.” It is sort of like, let us make a theory from our own sexual practices (e.g., “I’m a cross-dressing femme who likes to use a dildo while watching gay male porn videos with my fuck buddy who sometimes likes to do it with gay men. Hmm, what kind of a theory can I make from that?”). But, in my reading, the notion of the “personal is political” did not mean let us construct a theory from individual personal experiences. Rather, there was some notion of collective experience, shared experience. So that, in the early consciousness-raising sessions, developing theories out of, say, the inconsistency of male leftists not doing any housework or child care grew, not only out of an individual’s experience with “her man,” but out of a real sense that this was a significant social problem and social reality. Now, it might be that drag, cross-dressing, S/M, and other assorted practices might have a collective basis, but that is certainly not how it is being addressed in most literature. Indeed, I am astounded at the extent to which the distinction between the social and the individual is constantly elided, resulting all too often in either a naive social-psychological view of the world or a narcissistic obsession with oneself *as* the world.

Now, I would be the last to decry experience, to want to rope it off, out of the reach of theory. Indeed, one of the strongest and most lasting aspects of feminist theorizing has been an adamant refusal to isolate personal narratives out of the reach of theory making. But I fear that much of this work is taking “the personal is political” in an unintended direction: my life, my personal story *is* theory: I am the world. In addition, I think these are personal stories *designed* to be outrageous, to articulate the author as inheritor of the mantle of Sadean dissidence.

Susie Bright, self-styled maven of sexy hipness and hip sexiness, has been a central figure in this new queer sensibility.¹⁷ From her tenure as editor of the sex magazine *On Our Backs* to her sex shows and advice columns to her new status as queer mom of the year, she has been lionized by the purveyors of radical chic and postmodern wackiness. In a grand (and simplistic) reversal, Bright champions porn as the final frontier of liberated sexuality. While the porn and sex debates within feminism, for

¹⁶ I am currently working on a book that addresses precisely these questions: “The Gay 90s: Media, Politics, and the Paradox of Visibility.”

¹⁷ I am by no means conflating the work of someone like Bright with theorists such as Butler, Sedgwick, or Rubin. Indeed, however much I disagree with them, these theorists are complicated and surely sophisticated in their various analyses of gender, sexuality, and the anatomy of desire. Bright, while often entertaining, is certainly not in the same category.

all their divisiveness and tendency to hyperbolize, did open up significant theoretical and political discussion for feminists, this new (uncritical) embrace of porn seems somewhat empty. Porn was once reviled, now it is celebrated; dildos were once tarred with the brush of hetero imitation, now they are lauded as the grooviest addition to sexual pleasure since the clitoris was “found.” Strippers, hookers, and other sex workers were once pitied for the abuse they received at the hands of the patriarchy, now they are applauded as the heroines for a sex radical future. Butch/femme was once “understood” as the debased detritus of the force of the closet, now it is the very epitome of radical sexual politics. Once there was a vision of mutual, tender, nonhierarchical sex as the model of liberation, now the model of liberation is premised on power and conflict, theorized as “essential” to sexual desire. This reversal, this pendulum-like movement, is both counterproductive and reductive, setting up a new hierarchy of the sexual sophisticate versus the old-fashioned prude. Is pornography now to be unproblematically celebrated? Is the prostitute the heroine? Is using a dildo and doing butch/femme where it’s at (and only at)? This move “pits renegade sex ‘radicals’ against their bad ‘feminist’ mothers and, in the process, simplifies the complexity of lesbian history, which was never quite as sexless as they make it out to be” (Stein 1993, 19).

Sue-Ellen Case has attempted to elevate the butch/femme couple to the position of privileged subjectivity and political agency;¹⁸ indeed, butch/femme is even seen as the culturally correct mode of being, “the lesbian who relates to her cultural roots by identifying with traditional butch-femme role-playing” (1993, 295). Case, too, reinscribes the narrative of exclusionary feminist hetero police who try to tamper with the bangee realness of butch/femme bravado.

Case develops her theory of the privileged subjectivity of the butch/femme couple through the theory of femininity as masquerade, first propounded by psychoanalyst Joan Riviere in 1929 and later developed by Mary Russo, Mary Ann Doane, and Butler. The premise of masquerade is strictly Freudian, as the process of masquerade involves the possession of the father’s penis (thus his castration) and the concomitant construction of the mask of womanliness to avoid retribution and avert anxiety (Case 1993, 300). Case argues that “this kind of masquerade is consciously played out in butch-femme roles, particularly as they were constituted in the 1940s and 1950s. If one reads them from within Riviere’s

¹⁸ Case is by no means the only representative of theories of butch/femme. Indeed, many others (such as Joan Nestle) have written about butch/femme in more historical terms, attempting to place butch/femme in the context of repression as well as to locate the liberatory moments. Case is used here as emblematic of a sort of queer/postmodern reading of butch/femme that, I believe, is both theoretically troubling and politically limited.

theory, the butch is the lesbian woman who proudly displays the possession of the penis, while the femme takes on the compensatory masquerade of womanliness" (300). This, of course, leads to irony and camp. But are we then to assume irony and camp as necessarily radical? And radical for whom? And what happens to this theory if we pull out the Freudian rug, if the floating signifiers of "penis" and "castration" disappear or are at least rendered limp? This also leans toward the worst sort of postmodern delight in self-referentiality. In other words, there exists underneath Case's argument a theory of postmodern signs that seems to say that the very act of revealing the constructedness of something (gender, sex, advertisements, films, music videos) is an act of deconstructing its power to exert regulatory control and dominative power. But, certainly, we know this not to be the case when it comes to popular culture. Advertisements are no less seductive in their ability to sell products and produce ideologies when they turn away from realism and heap on that "wink-wink" irony and self-mocking, self-revealing attitude. Even if we buy the argument that butch/femme "plays" with the codes of both sex and gender, then why must that necessarily lead to a challenging revision of those codes? And has it, historically speaking? And for whom? And if Case privileges butch/femme as the new radical subject/couple for the next millennium, then is everything else out of the running? Is a new hierarchy being set up?

So, our identities, then, are wholly encompassed by particular sexual acts, appetites, tastes, positions, postures. And those acts themselves are conceived as separate from the genders of the actors who do them, paving the way for a construction of the queer person as someone who performs certain kinds of sexual practices or has certain sorts of desires, regardless of the gender of themselves or their various partners. What we have here is then a new sort of sexual essentialism. Now no longer "known" by some self-defined unitary identity that encompasses sexual acts but perhaps moves beyond and through them, we are now known only by what we do sexually (and not at all by whom we do it with). Again, personal transgression or predilection has metamorphosed into political and theoretical action. Sexual hobbies do not a theory make.

From queer to where? Murmurs of dissent

Fortunately, many feminists and lesbians are beginning to challenge the new politics of "gender play" and express concern both with a new commodification of gay life and an evacuation of substantive political concern with changing actual social relations of power and domination. I would note, too, that much of this criticism is coming from within "queer studies" itself and that this process of self-criticism bodes well for the

future. Many writers express ambivalence about the trashing of lesbian feminism and recognize that “those things that are real dangers—random, vicious violence against women and gay men and people of color, the decimation of a generation from AIDS and complacency, the slow, sure destruction of the air and water and land, the misery of urban poverty, and the latest wars—weren’t created by lesbian feminists. Increasingly, I wonder whether we take each other on because we’ve lost faith in our ability to fight the big fights” (Whisman 1993, 55). Whisman also speaks of the alliance between gay women and men: “Some may play around with men, but lesbian queers see themselves as more like gay men than straight women. New lesbians make their chief political and cultural alliances with gay men, arguing that lesbians and gay men are two sides of the same coin” (56). I think this alliance has important political and intellectual potential and must continue to grow and expand. But all too often, this alliance is forged at the expense of a deepening of feminist commitment.

Whisman also takes people like Bright to task for constructing lesbian culture as “sexually repressed” while posing “male sexuality [as] unrepressed, authentic, the norm. . . . It’s simplistic to think that some ‘authentic,’ ‘unrepressed’ lesbian sexuality would look like male sexuality—even of the gay male variety. The females of the emergent Queer nation seem to have forgotten that we’re not just fighting for access to what the boys have” (Whisman 1993, 56–57). Again, the alliance must grow but needs to move away from the tendency to assume gay male sexuality and iconography as the pinnacle of radical transgression and lesbianism and lesbian feminism as a tired, PC remnant of days long gone.

Many are wary of the easy dismissal of feminism, as if “gender” was now a done deal and we needed to move on to a new discourse of sexuality: “It would be premature to dismiss the insights of feminism—of a gender-based perspective—in favor of a queer discourse which sets up universal, that is, male, subjects as its implicit referent. Lesbians and gay men have every reason to be suspicious of ‘queerness’ and its promise of an instant identity” (Kader and Piontek 1992, 9). The universalizing move of “queerness” also has the potential to make a similar argument about race, thus evacuating the specificities of racialized identities in favor of a queer universalism that claims multiracial status without ever seriously developing a race-based critique of heteronormativity.

In a piece on the changing dimension of lesbian identity, Alisa Solomon warns against the superficiality of much of the young lesbian persona:

Young dykes who lipstick up claim power by asserting traditional female coquettishness and withholding it from the traditional male beholder. In the giddy process of unleashing their libidos from the

reigning, constraining hegemony of their lesbian predecessors, though, they fail to recognize a double bind: their appropriation of sluttish femininity is occurring at the moment when the dominant culture is rollicking with a heady antifeminism. Butch-femme dykes of the past dressed as an emblem of identity, but style-nomads—who wear lipstick tonight and Doc Martens tomorrow—are lost in the surfaces, and their ironic androgyny masks deracination. (1993, 213–14)

She raises the possibility that the new queer radicalism is not so much a move of empowerment as it is a sign of despair and tired generational rebellion, the jaded groans of women beset by backlash and anxious to find sexual space beyond what is typically available.

Into this sexual stew steps what writer Ann Powers calls the “Queer Straight, that testy lovechild of identity politics and shifting sexual norms. . . . At first, it may have seemed like a splash made by Madonna and Sandra’s double dip—but the Queer Straight thing has begun to permeate the culture” (1993, 24). Powers describes the phenomenon as it works its way through popular culture (*The Crying Game*) and hip nightlife (drag) to find a strange home in academia: “Nattily attired academic climbers led panel discussion on homosociality in the beatnik scene and the films of John Wayne, affecting camp attitudes even as they stole kisses from their girlfriends in the hall. . . . Straight marchers at domestic-partner rallies dared to chant, ‘We’re here! We’re queer! Get used to it!’” (24).

Powers, while sympathetic to the “queer straight” (true to form, she is one), calls into question the political ramifications of this mode of passing:

Any of these Queer Straights would probably be horrified to think their behavior might translate as a tease. They mean to practice what theorists call ‘gender performativity’—the act of defining your sexuality through manner and style. Postmodernism’s logic of surfaces has turned the closet inside out, making the projection of a queer attitude enough to claim a place in homosexual culture. Yet Queer Straights don’t practice the fundamental acts of intimacy that ground homosexual identity. They are neither bisexual [n]or experimenting. They’re not ambiguously defined companions of gay men, as were the fag-hags of yore. Queer Straights don’t just hang around; what they do is pass. . . . In addition, the notion of passing has connotations for queers—and people of color—that hardly suggests liberation. . . . Then there’s passing racially in the opposite direction. Posing as a “White Negro” became fashionable in the 1950s,

when bohemians thought they'd conquered racism by identifying African Americans as more virile and expressive in their noble savagery. The current wave of lesbian and gay chic mirrors this reverse racism, as it ascribes tempting attributes such as hot sexuality, tragic courage, and devastating wit to homosexuals. (24)

As Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson note, "Queer theorists have never satisfactorily answered the question, What makes straight heterosexuality 'queer'?" (1994, 455). Are straight queers marked by their willed critique of heterosexuality or by their choice of sexual practices (S/M instead of vanilla, fetish fantasies, etc.) or by their allegiance to gay politics? In this vague assertion of straight queerness, heterosexuality seems rather benign and absent.

Many others are wary of the term *queer* itself, as feminist, lesbian performance artist Holly Hughes expresses:

I'm ambivalent about the term *queer*. I think it's useful in certain ways—it has the cringe factor, it's confrontational. And there is something about the experience of being an outsider that's embedded in the word. When you throw it back in people's faces, it can produce a certain sense of empowerment. It also has limitations. In some ways, it reminds me of the word *gay*. I worked really hard to get *lesbian* into usage, and so did a lot of other people who came before me. Lumping us together erases the differences, the inequalities between us. At certain times it can be useful; at others it can really be throwing a rug over our diversities. . . . I feel like I see the word *queer* used a lot to erase my identity as a lesbian. . . . That 'fuck you' queer identity is more easily accessible for men than for lesbians, because of sexism and just the overwhelming reality of sexual violence. Lesbians can't stop being women and dealing with that reality. (1992, 29)

Hughes (and others) points out the possibility that queer will, in its eagerness to universalize, actually serve to ignore or erase the embodied power of gender even as it claims to move beyond it. I think she expresses quite accurately the ambivalence many lesbians and gay men feel toward the term—an embrace of its confrontational stance, a joy in its refusal of assimilationist liberalism, while at the same time a discomfort with its too-easy gloss over gender and the implications of sexism and sexual violence.

Queer may hold out some possibilities for a politics and a theory that challenge the fixity and clarity of identity, that speak to the fractured (non)self of postmodern subjectivity. In addition, the queer encouragement of new alliances between gay men and lesbians can offer both new knowledges and the development of innovative political formations. And

we should embrace its recognition that much slips out of the rigid distinctions of hetero/homo, man/woman and that our theoretical and political engagements need to reckon creatively with the excess that dares not speak its name. The queer attempt to understand that sexuality and sexual desire is not reducible to gender and also not simply explicable by reference to it is important. But while sexuality is not reducible to gender, it is also not possible to “think” without it. For even the lionized drag queen, gender exerts a powerful force, one (perhaps) to be challenged or deconstructed.

Indeed, this reexamination of the relationship between gender and sexuality has seemed to founder on two fronts. On the one hand, it can reassert (as in Sedgwick’s case) a notion of a seamless continuum—rather like Adrienne Rich’s (1980) lesbian continuum, which was criticized for effectively desexualizing (or, in Sedgwick’s case, disappearing) lesbian *sexual* identity. In this case, we aren’t what we do in bed; we are what we define ourselves as not. Queer here is a sort of rebellious and radical voluntarism. On the other hand, it can reassert the old understanding of gay identity as marked wholly by sexual practice, thus making the lesbian or gay man defined solely by our sexual practices. In this case, (à la Bright) we are what we do in bed; sexual acts are determinative of identity. We are back to the old antinomies, garbed perhaps in more (post)modern clothes but unable to try on radically new ones. And repeated claims of multiplicity and play do not, in my mind, constitute serious and rigorous theoretical and/or political alternatives to the (re)established antinomies.

The inclusive, universalizing move of queer theory and politics appears laudatory, but it can all too easily degenerate into a “we are the world” pluralism that refuses to see the lines of power as they mark themselves on the lives of gendered, raced, ethnic subjects. The inclusive move (queer as anything/everything not irredeemably heterosexual) seems at first glance like a model of coalition politics, but all too often is more like a melting pot, where substantive structural and experiential differences are erased in the battle against the het (really, the *normative* het) enemy. And what of other enemies? And other allies? Is it possible that race, for example, gets erased (or rather commodified to the point of invisibility) when whites appropriate working-class (or poor) African-American drag queens as cutting-edge metaphors?¹⁹ What happens, then, to a sustained and systematic analysis of the workings of a racist economy?

Indeed, Butler expresses just such an instrumentalist and voluntarist notion of identity when she claims, approvingly, that “‘queer’ was supposed to be one in which it didn’t matter what you did, or how you did it, or how you felt about what you did; if you were willing to affiliate, that was politically viable” (Kotz 1992, 83). If what you think, how you

¹⁹ See particularly Reid-Pharr 1993.

act, and what you feel do not matter, then what does? Only if you show up at the demo and claim solidarity? Or feel peeved at dominant heterosexuality (even though you take privilege from it)? Have we learned nothing about process and the transformative nature of true coalition building? Barbara Smith criticizes the contemporary movement for its lack of political radicalism and its refusal to deal systematically and substantively with issues of race and class: "When the word 'radical' is used at all, it means confrontational, 'in your face' tactics, not strategic organizing aimed at the roots of oppression. Unlike the early lesbian and gay movement, which had both ideological and practical links to the left, black activism and feminism, today's 'queer' politics seem to operate in an historical and ideological vacuum. 'Queer' activists focus on 'queer' issues, and racism, sexual oppression and economic exploitation do not qualify, despite the fact that the majority of 'queers' are people of color, female or working class" (1993, 13). In other words, queer here can become a new, all-embracing designation that falls into many of the traps it purportedly sets out to avoid in positing "queerness" as some sort of post-modern *uber*-identity. What is to keep queer from instantiating the same old exclusions of race and class? Why are so many of the purveyors of queerness white, male (or gay male identified), and economically privileged? The real and substantive issues of inclusion and coalitional politics cannot be addressed simply by a new rhetoric that names itself all embracing and expansive. As Zita writes, "To construct a new field of queer studies without addressing misogyny, gender, male supremacy, race, and class as these are differently experienced by a wide diversity of female and male queers, is to seal the happy marriage of gay and lesbian studies with a Hallmark card and a Falwellian blessing" (1994, 271).

The "answer," such as it is, is surely not to dismiss queer theory altogether, as I think I have made clear throughout the course of this article. But the part of "queer" that hinges on a separation from feminism (both theory and politics) seems to me misguided at best. A more profitable direction might be the constant and creative renegotiation of the relationship between feminism and queer theory and politics, with the "goal" not being a severance but rather more meaningful and substantive ties. In these days of Christina Hoff Sommers and Katie Roiphe, Camille Paglia and Naomi Wolf, I think it needs reiterating that there can be no radical theory and surely no radical politics without feminism, however much that feminism might be rendered plural and reconfigured. This is nowhere more true than in recent right-wing rhetoric regarding "the family" and the scary discourse of family values. Here, a nuanced and subtle understanding of the ways in which both patriarchy and heterosexism construct the discourse and produce the politics would be fruitful. For example, in analyzing the attacks on lesbian and gay parents (brought home most depressingly by the recent defeat of Sharon Bottoms's attempt to keep her

son),²⁰ we might develop frameworks of knowledge that explicitly address the mutual “concatenation” of both gender discourses and sexuality discourses. Yes, Bottoms lost her son because she is *queer*, but one cannot understand her “queerness” without reference to ideologies of appropriate motherhood and familial formations that are always deeply gendered as well. Bottoms’s “working classness” is also not assimilable under a generic category of *queer* and must be reckoned with in any attempt to read this event. Indeed, I would prefer queer theorists spend a bit more time on the mundane figure of the working-class lesbian mother and the horrifying spectacle of the removal of her child than on the endless rhapsodies for drag and dildos. A feminist queer theory might focus more on the material realities of lives lived under patriarchal, capitalist, racist regimes, not as background or aside, but as the very stuff of a political and politicized analysis. Thus, the situation of, say, Bottoms would be analyzed around somewhat different questions. It is not that we would not ask about her “performance of gender” or her seemingly butch/femme engagement with her partner, April Wade. But the feminist queer scholar might investigate the social and historical context in which this awful decision emerged—a context of antigay activism and simultaneous gay visibility, of attacks on single mothers (which is the only way she is understood, given our dominant conceptions of family) and lesbian baby booms, of family values and right-wing populism. Bottoms could then be read not as simply a “queer” subject but, rather, as a particular white, working-class lesbian in a very conservative state whose relation to any “queer nation” is tenuous at best.

Or the relation between queer and feminism can also proceed on queer’s own turf. If queer theory insists on the separation of sex and gender (the study of sexuality as distinct from the study of gender), then I would be interested in studies that affirmatively and persuasively demonstrate this new analytic strategy. In studying any particular configuration of sexualities, is it possible to be fully outside of an analysis of gender? The regimes of sexuality and gender are not identical, either historically or theoretically, but I remain skeptical of their premature separation. A substantive demonstration of this new queer analytic would be helpful.

With all the righteous rage and empowering spectacle of queer performative politics, it is important to remember that “genderfuck” and kiss-ins are necessary but not sufficient aspects of a progressive politics and theory. As a cultural theorist and educator, and longtime activist, I

²⁰ The Sharon Bottoms case is familiar to many as the case in which a Virginia lesbian was sued for custody of her young son by her own mother, even when the biological father had no objection to Sharon’s custody of the child. Bottoms and her partner lost custody, then regained it, only to lose again in the final appeal to the Virginia Supreme Court. The child is now living with his grandmother, and his mother is allowed limited visitation (although never with her partner).

am more than aware of the power of the semiotic and of the absolute necessity to engage on the level of the image, particularly in a culture that is so thoroughly infused with representation. And, god knows, progressive politics has long suffered from a failure of imagination; the new queer politics adds much needed panache and wit to the seemingly interminable struggles for basic equity. Yet this is not enough, or, rather, it must always be coupled with a recognition that playing with gender may engage in destabilizing it somewhat but will not, in itself, stop the power of gender—a power that still sends too many women to the hospital, shelter, rape crisis center, despair. We must ask how images, representations, performance, gender scripts relate to “broader” structures, contexts, economies, histories.²¹ Sexism, homophobia, racism activate themselves in multiple realms, but too often queer theory operates as if our oppression is solely a matter of sexuality and its representation and regulation. As I have argued elsewhere, we cannot afford to lose sight of the materiality of oppression and its operation in structural and institutional spaces.²² Hennessy’s recent piece, “Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture” (1994), is an exemplary attempt to hold on to the insights of queer while forcing an examination of the class-based discourses that construct the new queer visibilities. Hennessy forcefully demands that queer theorists pay more attention to the processes of commodification and avoid valorizing a politics of the outrageous at the expense of attending to the realities of structured social relations, relations not reducible to the discursive or cultural, although certainly not determinative of them either.

Destabilizing gender (or rendering its artifice apparent) is not the same as overthrowing it; indeed, in a culture in which drag queens can become the hottest fashion, commodification of resistance is an omnipresent threat. Moreover, a queer theory that posits feminism (or lesbian theory) as the transcended enemy is a queer that will really be a drag.

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²¹ In this regard, the work of writers such as Kath Weston (1993), John D’Emilio (1983), Jonathan Ned Katz (1995), Martha Vicinus (1992), Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis (1993), Esther Newton, and Joan Nestle are important correctives to the often ahistorical and decontextualized readings of such putatively queer practices as butch/femme. Weston’s alternative, ethnographic account of a lesbian “Prom Nite” exposes the limits of a performance theory that eschews historical specification (1993).

²² See Walters 1995.

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