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Feminism's Queer Theory

This article argues that, in contradistinction to its widely promoted ethical openness to its future, queer theory has been less scrupulous about its messy, flexible and multiple relations to its pasts, the critical and activist traditions from which it emerged and that continue to develop alongside in mutually informing ways. In particular, it assesses queer theory's tangled, productive and ongoing relations with feminist theory. Returning to the controversial analytic separation of gender and sexuality that has been prominently theorized as key to distinguishing between feminist and queer theoretical projects, the article traces the influence of Gayle Rubin's 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality' through feminist and queer scholarship in order to demonstrate that, however different their projects, feminist theory and queer theory together have a stake in both desiring and articulating the complexities of the traffic between gender and sexuality.

Key Words: *anti-identitarian, Judith Butler, essentialism, lesbian/gay studies, Gayle Rubin, women's studies*

What is queer theory? (Judith Butler, 1994b: 32)

What was queer theory? (Jonathan Goldberg, 2007)

In 1990 when Teresa de Lauretis organized a conference under the newly coined rubric of 'queer theory', she promoted the term for its capacity to trouble what she diagnosed as the built-in complacencies of lesbian and gay studies. For de Lauretis, queer theory offered a way of thinking about lesbian and gay sexualities beyond the narrow rubrics of either deviance or preference, 'as forms of resistance to cultural homogenization, counteracting dominant discourses with other constructions of the subject in culture' (1991: iii). Since the increasing institutionalization of lesbian and gay studies risked sedimenting certain conceptual paradigms and methodological practices by privileging some kinds of talk while prohibiting others, de Lauretis intended queer theory as a corrective to what she saw as the universalizing protocols of lesbian and gay studies that neglected to

position homosexuality 'in relation to gender and race, with their attendant differences of class or ethnic culture, generational, geographical, and socio-political location' (1991: iii-iv). Writing in the same journal three years later, however, de Lauretis had already given up on queer theory as a critical term capable of addressing the intersectionalities of race, gender and sexuality. Despite her earlier ambitions for its disruptive potential, she now considered it had 'quickly become a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry' (1994: 297). As this thumbnail sketch indicates, the life-cycles of what we have come to know as queer theory have been weirdly accelerated and disordered, the term first surfacing as a provocation rather than a position, necessitating a number of attempts to account retrospectively for its intellectual history (Hall, 2003; Jagose, 1996; Morland and Willox, 2005; Sullivan, 2003; Turner, 2000).

Tracing the critical trajectory of queer theory, it becomes apparent that attempts to describe and define it – already a paradoxical ambition for a concept that prominently insists on the radical unknowability of its future formations – occur simultaneously alongside harsher assessments of its limitations or expiry. For every theorist who claims (or hopes) that queer theory 'describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance' (Halperin, 1995: 62), there is another who argues that queer theory has not delivered on its potential, that queer theoretical practice tends to reproduce the exclusionary normalizing effects it is nominally intended to counter (Johnson, 2005; Prosser, 1998). Yet while there is no shortage of people claiming that queer theory is finished, washed-up and over (for a particularly complacent account, see Bawer 1996), it is less commonly noted that a sense of queer theory's finitude has animated from the start attempts to specify quite what queer theory is or does. These anxious notings of the waning of queer theoretical vitality at the moment of its inauguration might usefully be seen as an instantiation of what has recently been theorized as queer temporality, a mode of inhabiting time that is attentive to the recursive eddies and back-to-the-future loops that often pass undetected or uncherished beneath the official narrations of the linear sequence that is taken to structure normative life (Freeman, 2007).

Regularly announced by its critics, queer theory's death has been even more frequently anticipated in work that identifies with queer theory as a rubric and attempts, often passionately, to convey some sense of its emergent critical coordinates. In her foreword to *Tendencies*, for example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick takes the 1992 New York City Gay Pride parade with its numerous performances of cross-gender identification as a spectacular instantiation of 'the moment of Queer' (Sedgwick, 1993: xii). Recalling the sheer number of women and men in t-shirts proclaiming 'Faggot' and 'Dyke' respectively, Sedgwick reads the parade as crystallizing a certain transitive energy also in hyper-evidence in other activist and pedagogic contexts. It is the prospect of a mass counter-public mobilized around the cross-relational promise of queer, however, that gives Sedgwick pause. 'In the short shelf-life American marketplace of images,' she muses, 'maybe the queer moment, if it's here today, will for that very reason be gone tomorrow' (1993: xii).

Even though she intends her work as 'a counterclaim against that obsolescence' (1993: xii), Sedgwick's is not an idiosyncratic assessment. When Judith Halberstam suggests 'Queer may soon lose all affectivity as a word, a marker, or a threat,' before parenthetically adding '(it may already have done so)' (1997: 256) she joins with other prominent defenders and explicators of queer theory who similarly note that, almost before it is clear what it describes exactly, the widespread take-up of queer might mean that queer theory's time is up.

Although he also suspects that the queer moment might have passed, David Halperin leavens his speculation about its use-by date by insisting on the importance of queer's responsive flexibility, its non-territorial relation to the traditional, identity-based grounds of political projects:

Queer politics may, by now, have outlived its political usefulness, but if its efficacy and its productive political life can indeed still be renewed and extended, the first step in this procedure will be to try and preserve the function of queer identity as an empty placeholder for an identity that is still in progress and has as yet to be fully realized, to conceptualize queer identity as an identity in the state of becoming rather than as the referent for an actually existing form of life. (1995: 112–13)

Here, as elsewhere, there is a curious dialectic between the open-endedness of queer, its resistance to any definitional specificity, and the spectre of its own diminishing critical and political value. Perhaps even more than other critical keywords, queer theory has had from the start an explicit stake in its own indefinability, its refusal to specify its project intrinsically connected to the sense that its political efficacy depends on its ability to remain open to its own potentiality, to its unknowable manifold futures; as Philip Brian Harper argues, 'it is precisely the indeterminate character of queer critique that predicates its analytic force' (Harper, 2000: 645). Much of the critical optimism generated in its wake – like much of the critical pessimism – derives from such claims about queer theory's strategically open-ended relational character.

Yet if the one thing that everyone can agree on is that queer theory is not any one thing, there is a case to be made that, in contradistinction to its widely promoted ethical openness to its future, queer theory has been less scrupulous about its messy, flexible and multiple relations to its pasts, the critical and activist traditions from which it emerged and that continue to develop alongside – posing new questions, reorienting themselves in relation to new objects, grafting themselves to new methodologies – in mutually informing ways. To ask then, as Jonathan Goldberg has recently, 'What was queer theory?' is not to join the ranks of those skeptics who, almost since its rise to academic prominence in the early 1990s, have been eager to announce queer theory's extinction but rather to acknowledge that grasping the 'future possibility in the present might mean that our sense of the past needs to be rethought' (Goldberg, 2007: 502). As part of the rethinking that Goldberg enjoins, the rest of this article assesses queer theory's tangled, productive and ongoing relations with feminist theory. Rather than par-

ticipate in the temporal disciplining of feminist from queer thought that stages them as the before and after of some narrative of critical advancement, thinking feminist and queer theory together can productively occasion a turn away from linear historical time with its implicit prioritization of the present and its reliance on heteronormative tropes of lineage, succession and generation.

The refusal of normative identity categories, so often taken as queer theory's signature gesture, is not unique to that project. Before there was queer theory – that is, before queer theory became the most recognizable name for anti-identitarian, anti-normative critique – feminist scholarship had already initiated a radically anti-foundationalist interrogation of the category of women. Initially, in its 1980s iterations, this feminist work was organized as a critique of essentialism, of the notion that there was an isolable specificity to the business of being a woman (for example, Fuss: 1989; Spelman, 1988). These considerations as to what properly constituted the subject of feminism flourished into debates about affiliative or coalitional politics; the fractal relations between different categories of social identity and the doubled force of political representation, at once an instrument of resistance and governmentality. The critique of 'women', therefore, was not only motivated by the important acknowledgment that the inauguration of that category as feminism's primary analytic overvalued gender at the expense of other critically significant axes of identity, such as race, sexual orientation and class, but also informed by an understanding of the contingency and regulatory function of normative taxonomies of social recognition. Although in being frequently characterized as a 1980s concern these debates are often relegated to the historical past, contemporary feminist theory continues to negotiate the grounds of its own representational project, with one scholar suggesting that 'the essential problem and *idée fixe* of feminist theory remains, to date, the problem of epistemic identification – locating or dislocating the subject, fixing or deconstructing the category "women", discerning or dismantling the meaning of the feminist "we", and theorizing or displacing "identities"' (Dietz, 2003: 414). The critical tendency to corral feminism's sustained inquiries into the grounds of its own political and intellectual projects to the past by representing them in terms of the 1980s essentialism debates often works as a strategy to typecast feminist theory itself as old-fashioned and passé, temporally quarantined from new-school queer theory, which with its refusal of identity deftly sidesteps this epistemological morass. Careful consideration of the anti-foundationalist impulse in feminist theory, however, suggests the partiality of this succession narrative and promotes an alternate relation in which feminism is both an historical source of inspiration for queer thought and its present-tense interlocutor.

In '*Am I That Name?': Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*, Denise Riley surveys the historical formation of 'women' in order to demonstrate that the category does not name 'a founding sexed condition' so much as a series of negotiations with other historically specific designations such as 'men', 'society' and 'body' (1988: 98). What it means at any moment to be a woman then is

'embedded in a vast web of description covering public policies, rhetorics, feminisms, forms of sexualization or contempt,' itself strung across 'larger and slower subsidings of gendered categories, which in part will include the sedimented forms of previous characterizations, which once would have undergone their own rapid fluctuations' (1988: 6). Given that the defining characteristics and attributes of women have been variously specified since at least the 1790s in order to secure the grounds of different political interests, Riley counter-intuitively insists that women cannot self-evidently be the subject of contemporary feminism.

Feminism for Riley is therefore less an advocacy movement for women, understood as such on the basis of their natural properties or dispositions, than a project whose suspicion of its founding category is a crucial part of its critical undertaking. If 'women' is not the proper ground for feminism, nevertheless it is fitting that feminism be the place where that category is strategically refused, negotiated and redefined since, in terms of Riley's argument, it follows 'that 'women' is indeed an unstable category, that this instability has a historical foundation and that feminism is the site of the systematic fighting-out of that instability – which need not worry us' (1988: 5). The apparent nonchalance of Riley's final phrase is intended to counter the considerable feminist anxiety about the political effectiveness of querying the coherence of its foundational category. For Riley, feminism is neither constrained nor delegitimated by acknowledging the historical instability of the category of women. 'An active skepticism about the integrity of the sacred category "women"', writes Riley, 'would be no merely philosophical doubt to be stifled in the name of an effective political action in the world. On the contrary, it would be a condition *for* action' (1988: 113). Far from allowing that there is, on the one hand, a practical, grounded and effective feminist politics that addresses itself to real-world concerns and, on the other, an ideas-driven feminist theory committed to a genealogy of poststructuralist thinking, Riley argues that an acknowledgment of the indeterminacy and impossibility of 'women' is in feminism's interests, insisting that feminism's capacity to remain politically useful depends on its ability to interrogate its foundational category and the collective identity that category naturalizes.

The notion that there is no self-evident relation between feminism and 'women' was and remains contentious. Certainly, many feminists have expressed reservations about the efficacy for feminism of arguments about the partiality, fictiveness or incoherence of the category women. 'If gender is simply a social construct, the need and even the possibility of a feminist politics becomes immediately problematic', writes Linda Alcoff. 'What can we demand in the name of women if "women" do not exist and demands in their name simply reinforce the myth that they do?' (1988: 420). Tania Modleski (1991) similarly worries that pointing up the instability of feminism's grounding category spells the end of feminism's effectiveness as a social force: 'The once exhilarating proposition that there is no "essential" female nature has been elaborated to the point where it is now used to scare "women" away from making *any* generalizations about or political claims on behalf of a group called "women"' (1991: 15). She further

suggests that the willingness to suspend or question the category women is only available or attractive to those women advantaged by their class and race affiliations (1991: 22) and is itself a ruse of privilege, something about which Susan Bordo also speculates when she asks 'could feminist gender-skepticism . . . now be operating in the service of the reproduction of white, male knowledge/power?' (1990: 151).

These debates around the subject of feminism galvanized some feminists to argue in different ways for a strategic occupancy of 'women', however, often through an ontological reconceptualization of the category itself. Iris Marion Young (1994), for instance, takes her distance from feminism's customary founding category when she argues that gender is not a self-evident basis for identity formation, either individual or collective, suggesting instead that 'women' might be usefully thought as a series. Young's reframing of 'women' draws on Jean Paul Sartre's distinction between a group, which is a self-identifying collective bound to a shared project by relations of mutual recognition, and a series, which is an impersonal constellation of persons brought together temporarily by the routinized happenstance of the material world and the social practices through which that world is articulated. Young argues that women are not serialized as women on the basis of shared qualities, experience or values. For Young, 'woman' is a serial collective defined neither by any common identity nor by a common set of attributes that all the individuals in the series share, but, rather, it names a set of structural constraints and relations to practico-inert objects that condition action and its meaning' (1994: 737). This strategy enables Young not only to acknowledge the limitations of presuming any essential nature common to women, but also to maintain a workable notion of women as a collective defined as such by systemic practices of oppression without which she fears feminism's radical political project must falter.

Intervening in what she sees as the deadlock between the essentialist understanding of women brokered by cultural feminism and the nominalist account of women favored by poststructuralism, Alcoff similarly advocates a positional definition in which what 'women' can mean is a consequence of the interrelationship between historically available but shifting contexts – 'a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and ideologies, and so on' (1988: 433) – and women's interpretation and negotiation of those contexts. Thinking about 'women' as a historically emergent position that constrains and enables certain behaviors or knowledges allows Alcoff to maintain 'gender as a position from which to act politically' (1988: 433) but equally it commits her to a thoroughly anti-foundational sense of what gender, and hence 'women', might potentially be in some future time: 'Our concept of women as a category, then, needs to remain open to future radical alteration, else we will preempt the possible forms eventual stages of the feminist transformation can take' (1988: 435). Alcoff's keenness to stick with 'women' as the necessary ground for political engagement does not preclude the possibility that what 'women' might come to signify will be unimag-

inable from the position she currently occupies. Although in many ways Alcoff's argument is consistent with what became known as strategic essentialism, which advocated the maintenance of 'women' on the grounds of political efficacy rather than descriptive accuracy, her suggestion that the category of women should be preserved in order to better enable its future unknowable forms is retrospectively recognizable as analogous to claims frequently made for 'queer' with its resistance to definition and its availability as a site of unimaginable becomings.

Judith Butler is prominently associated with this non-proprietary rendering of queer. 'If the term "queer" is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings', she writes, 'it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes' (1993: 19). Her anti-essentialist understanding of queer is informed by her earlier influential deliberations on performativity, a term she uses to bring to attention the way in which normative reiterations bring into being the identity categories they seem only to express. Taking feminist critiques of the category of women as her starting point, Butler develops Michel Foucault's understanding of the productivity of power in order to argue that, since power brings into being the subjects it only claims to govern and regulate, the category *women* is not the grounds of feminism's project of political representation but its discursive effect:

The identity of the feminist subject ought not to be the foundation of feminist politics, if the formation of the subject takes place within a field of power regularly buried through the assertion of that foundation. Perhaps, paradoxically, 'representation' will be shown to make sense for feminism only when the subject of 'women' is nowhere presumed. (1990: 6)

For Butler, therefore, the task is less to extend feminism's representational reach beyond the white, middle-class, heterosexual women that historically have overdetermined feminism's normative claims to equality than to understand that any presumption, however strategic, of a prior identity in whose name feminism intervenes necessarily generates processes of exclusion and misrepresentation that are contrary to feminist aims and values.

Butler brings this argument to bear most trenchantly on received understandings of the relation between sex and gender. Where in traditional feminist models gender is understood as the cultural interpretation of the biological ground of sex, Butler argues instead that the apparently self-evident and pre-cultural nature of sex is better apprehended as itself gender's effect: 'gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established' (1990: 7). This counter-intuitive reordering of the temporal logics of the sex/gender system clears a space for Butler to theorize gender not as the source of women's commonality, nor even their oppression, but as an apparatus of power that feminism is itself implicated

in to the extent that it fails to remark on its covert regulatory operation. Furthermore, to the extent that Butler's provisional advocacy of queer as a term whose political effectiveness depends on its sensitivity and responsiveness to the regulatory effects of nomination develops directly out of her prior interest in the performative temporalities of 'women', her work in many ways exemplifies the permeable and coeval character of feminist and queer inquiry.

Thinking of feminist theory and queer theory as braided together in ongoing relations requires a return to the controversial analytic separation of gender and sexuality that has been prominently theorized as key to distinguishing between feminist and queer theoretical projects. One way of clarifying what is conceptually at stake here is to trace through feminist and queer scholarship the critical afterlife of Gayle Rubin's influential essay 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality'. First published in 1984, Rubin's essay famously closes with a challenge to 'the assumption that feminism is or should be the privileged site of a theory of sexuality' (1993: 32). In making this claim, Rubin revises her own earlier and equally influential argument that gender and sexuality are 'modalities of the same underlying social process', both expressions of a structuralist kinship system that over-determines the channels of political and social power (1993: 32). In 'Thinking Sex', however, Rubin traces processes of erotic stratification that cannot be reduced to or primarily explained in terms of kinship as a social structure but might be discerned in what she elsewhere describes as 'the outlines of another system that had different dynamics, a different topography, and different lines of force' (1994: 85). In order to get at the structuring logics of this other system, Rubin argues that it is necessary to develop a model of social power capable of articulating the full extent of the regulation of sexual expression. 'Sex is a vector of oppression', writes Rubin. 'The system of sexual oppression cuts across other modes of social inequality, sorting out individuals and groups according to its own intrinsic dynamics. It is not reducible to, or understandable in terms of, class, race, ethnicity, or gender' (1993: 22). Since many of the erotic preferences that are central to Rubin's discussion of 'sexual injustice' – sadomasochism, cross-generational sex, fetishism and so on – are not primarily defined in term of gender, she argues that feminism ought not be the default discourse for thinking about 'the political dimensions of erotic life' (1993: 11, 35).

Although Rubin mostly couches her argument in terms of a universal feminism, it is worth remembering that the historical context for her intervention is strongly shaped by what are often described as the feminist sex wars in which 'feminism' stood for oppositional rather than coherent perspectives. As a radical, pro-sex feminist who promotes sexual liberalization for its capacity to secure erotic agency and autonomy for a democratized range of sexual subjects, Rubin critiques both the conservative feminist advocacy of sexual legislation as a way of protecting women's erotic interests and the liberal moderate feminist position that imagines a compromise solution might be found in the middle ground

between these two. As Rubin later reflects, her essay 'assumed a largely feminist readership. It was delivered at a feminist conference, aimed at a feminist audience, and written within the context of feminist discussion' (1994: 91). For all its insistence that sexuality cannot be fully apprehended through the rubric of gender, Rubin's is a resolutely feminist intervention. Acknowledging the keen investments different schools of feminism have had in thinking sex, Rubin argues that the progressive theorization of sex her essay calls for must include feminist analyses of the workings of gender. 'The feminist movement', she writes, 'will always be a source of interesting thought about sex' (1993: 32). Nonetheless, the primary intervention of 'Thinking Sex' is to insist on making visible those contexts in which gender-based analyses cannot account for the maintenance and reproduction of sexual inequity and oppression.

Rubin's essay has been widely acknowledged as key to the emergence of lesbian/gay and, more recently, queer studies. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), often cited as one of the inaugural works of lesbian and gay studies, draws on Rubin's work to suggest that, since sexuality and gender are not reducible to each other, neither are lesbian and gay studies and feminist studies. 'This book will hypothesize, with Rubin', writes Sedgwick in her agenda-setting introduction, 'that the question of gender and the question of sexuality, inextricable from one another though they are in that each can be expressed only in terms of the other, are nonetheless not the same question' (1990: 30). Here Sedgwick distinguishes between gender and sexuality while insisting on the impossibility and undesirability of disentangling them entirely; they are separate 'no more than minimally, but nonetheless usefully' (1990: 30). Where Butler's emphasis on the regulatory production of naturalized gender is bent on drawing attention to the cultural boost this gives heterosexuality – 'the 'unity' of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality' (1990: 31) – Sedgwick argues that because gender is customarily thought as a binarized relation between terms whose so-called opposition ensures the allure of 'the diacritical frontier between different genders' (1990: 31), heterosexuality might inevitably be privileged by critical models whose first allegiance is to gender.

One of the consequences – no less significant for being unintended – of this suggestion that gender or a critical attention to it might be necessarily indentured to heteronormative conceptual models is the association of gender with fixed, ideologically conservative positions against which sexuality can seem strategically flexible and mobile. Biddy Martin (1996) strenuously refuses this implication, influentially arguing that queer theory's advocacy of performativity, anti-normativity and cross-gendered identification too often takes feminism as its straight guy, representing it as committed to stable and restrictive understandings of gender – and particularly femininity – that must be overcome in the name of political resistance or transgression. Accordingly she resists the neat logic whereby 'anti-foundationalist celebrations of queerness rely on their own projections of fixity, constraint, or subjection onto a fixed ground, often onto feminism or the

female body, in relation to which queer sexualities become figural, performative, playful, and fun' (1996: 71–2). In two related essays, Martin argues for the conceptual benefits of Rubin's analytic separation of gender from sexuality and the queer antinormativity to which it gives rise while also insisting on the weakness of any account that does not adequately acknowledge both feminism's own complex histories of engagement with gender, which – as we have seen – include the interrogation and even the refusal of 'women' as feminism's foundational category, and the intricacies of gendered identifications, many of which get articulated through identities and practices more readily thought sexual.

Notwithstanding Martin's incisive critique, Sedgwick's careful account, like that of Rubin's on which it draws, is neither unfeminist nor anti-feminist. Not only does she insist that, however distinct, the analytic axes of gender and sexuality cannot be wholly prized apart but she also emphasizes that, far from superseding feminism's gender-based analysis, a nascent gay studies stands to learn at least two lessons from feminist studies' more developed knowledge paradigms: namely, that relations of social domination and subordination are complex and require correspondingly fine-grained intersectional analyses, and that the hierarchical logics of categories of social stratification commonly exceed their own explicit specification to order and structure other, seemingly unrelated, taxonomic systems. As part of her commitment to ensuring that she not be read as making 'an argument for any epistemological or ontological privileging of an axis of sexuality over an axis of gender' (Sedgwick, 1990: 34), Sedgwick concludes this discussion by pointing out the necessary limitations of a lesbian and gay approach to the 'larger project of conceiving a theory of sexuality as a whole,' again drawing on Rubin's essay to emphasize the many ways in which gender of object-choice fails to capture how sexuality is organized and experienced.

Sedgwick's caution that lesbian and gay studies could no more persuasively author a comprehensive theory of sexuality than could feminism might seem initially to have been disregarded by the editors of the substantial and authoritative *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (1993), which canonizes Rubin's 'Thinking Sex' as its first entry. In their brief introduction, Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin sketch out the methodological grounds of an emergent lesbian and gay studies through analogous reference to the longer established project of women's studies: 'Lesbian/gay studies does for *sex* and *sexuality* approximately what women's studies does for *gender*' (1993: xv). This pithy claim has been subject to a lengthy critique by Butler, who, in 'Against Proper Objects' (1994a), finds fault with the analogy between women's studies and lesbian/gay studies on several grounds. First, she argues that it authorizes the project of lesbian and gay studies via a reductive account of that of women's studies, such that 'the kind of sex that one *is* and the kind of sex that one *does* belong to two separate kinds of analysis: feminist and lesbian/gay, respectively' (1994: 4). In so far as she reads the analogy as positing gender as the proper scholarly object of women's studies while annexing sexuality for lesbian/gay studies, Butler argues that it necessarily marginalizes and obscures feminism's

tradition of radical sexual theorizing. Second, Butler argues that, in taking gender and sexuality as the governing rubrics that distinguish between women's and lesbian/gay studies, the analogy is unable to accommodate other axes of social differentiation – 'such as "race" and "class"' (1993: 6) – that have significantly structured the political projects of both. Third, Butler argues that the separation of gender from sexuality as the grounds of two different fields of critical inquiry is inattentive to the degree to which the normative reproduction of gender supports and enables the regulation of sexuality.

In light of Butler's critique, however, it is important to note that in the context of their introduction, Abelow et al. offer their analogy between lesbian/gay and women's studies not to adjudicate decisively between the two fields but rather to draw a comparison between them on the grounds of their corresponding anti-foundationalist tendencies. After all, the analogous turn to women's studies occurs as part of a larger argument intended to demonstrate that lesbian/gay studies is not simply about or relevant to lesbians and gay men: 'Lesbian/gay studies, in short, cannot be defined exclusively by its subject, its practitioners, its methods, or its themes. An analogy with women's studies may help to clarify this point' (1993: xv). Just as women's studies – the example given is specifically women's history – seeks less to inaugurate *women* as a new object of study than to transform existing knowledge formations by establishing 'the centrality of *gender* as a fundamental category of historical analysis and understanding' (1993: xv), so too lesbian/gay studies seeks to establish sexuality as an analytic rubric of broad relevance and importance for a diverse range of disciplinary fields and interests. 'What women's studies does for gender', therefore, is not to lay authoritative and sole claim to it but to demonstrate the degree to which other critical traditions – including lesbian/gay studies presumably – are diminished by being inattentive to its workings. Moreover, Abelow et al. take some care to qualify their claim by noting that they do not advocate that 'sexuality and gender must be strictly partitioned' (1993: xv) and that the question of the proper degree of their separation is currently 'a matter of lively debate and ongoing negotiation' (1993: xvi). When Abelow et al. orient their ambitions for lesbian/gay studies in analogous relation to women's studies, they do not, therefore, proprietarily claim sexuality for lesbian/gay studies, still less install gender as women's studies' only scholarly license. Rather, the key operational force of their analogy is to point up the ways that lesbian/gay studies, like women's studies, might eschew an identitarian constituency in order to insist on the pertinence of what has previously been imagined as its key term for the wider scholarly map.

Acknowledging the feminist credentials of the editors of *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Butler justifies her lengthy consideration of their formulation of the relationship between women's and lesbian/gay studies on the grounds that it is a productive exemplification of a more widespread critical tendency. 'Within queer studies generally', she writes, 'a methodological distinction has been offered which would distinguish theories of sexuality from theories of gender and, further, allocate the theoretical investigation of sexuality to queer studies, and the

analysis of gender to feminism' (1994a: 1). In Butler's account, her sustained critique of Abelow et al.'s analogy is pursued in order to bring to critical visibility a problematic that is housed, in its broadest iteration, not in lesbian/gay studies proper but 'within queer studies more generally'. This conflation in Butler's essay of lesbian/gay and queer studies is significant for not being consistently held. For if initially it seems that lesbian/gay studies can stand in for or instantiate a broader queer studies phenomenon, Butler's more sustained argument is that lesbian/gay studies, by dint of its narrow interest in same-sex erotics, cannot lay even the same claim as queer studies potentially does to the wider field of sexuality. Twice, in service of this latter argument, Butler describes the inclusion of Rubin's essay in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* as an 'appropriation' (1994a: 8, 10). Noting Rubin's focus on a rich array of sexually marginalized practices and populations, Butler argues that 'the expansive and coalitional sense of "sexual minorities" cannot be rendered interchangeable with "lesbian and gay" and it remains an open question whether "queer" can achieve these same goals of inclusiveness' (1994a: 11).

In limiting lesbian/gay studies in this way – in arguing that it would be 'fallacious' (1994: 10) or 'improbable' (1994: 11) to expect that lesbian and gay studies could address sexuality in its broadest sense – Butler reads against not just the spirit but also the letter of Abelow et al.'s anti-assimilationist argument. For far from staking out a quasi-disciplinary territory defined by the sharp-edged clarity of its scholarly objects, Abelow et al. insist from the start that 'lesbian/gay studies is not limited to the study of lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men' (1993: xv). Just as the mid-1980s feminist sex wars are the necessary context for understanding the stakes of Rubin's analytic separation of gender and sexuality, so here Abelow et al.'s analogical account of women's and lesbian/gay studies needs to be understood in relation to the early 1990s institutionalization of a lesbian and gay studies in the process of being transformed by queer activism and theory. Attracted to the rubric of 'queer studies' but wanting 'to acknowledge the force of current usage', Abelow et al. admit some ambivalence about the prominence of 'lesbian and gay studies' for their anthology and the field it attempts to represent (1993: xvii). 'The forms of study whose institutionalization we seek to further have tended, so far at least, to go by the names of "lesbian" and "gay"', they write. 'The field designated by them has become a site for inquiry into many kinds of sexual non-conformity, including, for instance, bisexuality, transsexualism, and sadomasochism' (1993: xvii). Far more than it is Abelow et al.'s, it is Butler's disciplining move to constrain lesbian/gay studies to the study of lesbian and gay subjects and to characterize the field as inaugurated by the exclusive claim to sexuality as its proper object.

Although her reading of Abelow et al.'s introduction as exemplary of a queer critical tendency to define itself against the ostensibly gender-bound concerns of feminism relies on the very strategy she cautions against, Butler finishes her essay with the following admonition: 'Perhaps the time has arrived to encourage the kinds of conversations that resist the urge to stake territorial claims through the

reduction or caricature of the positions from which they are differentiated' (1994a: 21). In figuring ideal relations between feminist, lesbian/gay and queer theories via the register of conversation, Butler suggests that, rather than authorizing themselves by crudely demarcating their political projects from one and other, feminist, lesbian/gay and queer studies might productively negotiate their differences in real-time exchanges, trafficking with each other to produce better, more nuanced accounts of power's operation. For Butler, such conversations take place not in spite of but because of the differences of the interlocutors, their proximate yet unshared projects enabled by the 'rifted grounds' (1994a: 21) they inhabit.

For very similar reasons, Janet Halley (2006) has recently advocated an entirely different, almost oppositional, strategy, which operates under the rubric of queer while suspending that of feminism. Tracing a 20-year genealogy of progressive theoretical work on sexuality in the USA, Halley assesses the respective models of power developed in feminist, lesbian/gay and queer traditions of thought. Like Butler, Halley cherishes the differences between these theoretical traditions, arguing that 'the splits between the theories are part of their value' (2006: 3). In order to retain and benefit from the disagreements and inconsistencies of these theories – their irreducibility to each other's operational vocabularies and conceptual frameworks; their contradictory accounts of the world forcing some difficult questions about what counts as political agency or efficacy – Halley advocates 'a politics of theoretic incommensurability' (2006: 3). Although in her reading of Butler's 'Against Proper Objects' (2006: 252–8) Halley represents Butler as struggling to bring to heel renegade lesbian/gay and queer analyses by domesticating them within feminist frameworks, in my reading, Halley's advocacy of incommensurability resonates strongly with Butler's elaboration of the 'rifted grounds' of feminist, lesbian/gay and queer thought as 'a series of constituting differentiations' (1994a: 21), the full acknowledgment of which prevents any one discourse congealing authoritatively. Where Butler promotes the instability of the field formation constituted through feminist, lesbian/gay and queer inquiry as the necessary conditions for dialogue, however, Halley suggests to the contrary that the contradictions between different theorizations of sexuality call for a halt in conversation, an interruption she specifically and most prominently codes as 'Taking a Break from Feminism' (2006: 34).

Like others before her but to different ends, Halley's argument crucially relies on Rubin's 'Thinking Sex'. Installing Rubin's essay as the inaugural theoretical call to take a break from feminism, Halley argues that left-wing theorizing about sexuality would benefit from taking such a break because of the prevailing assumption that progressive thinking about sexuality must necessarily be feminist. Accordingly, she contextualizes her insistent call to take a break from feminism by suggesting that 'no one theory, no one political engagement, is nearly as valuable as the invitation to critique that is issued by the simultaneous incommensurate presence of many theories' (2006: 9). In Halley's argument, it is not feminism itself but its alleged dominance in sexuality studies that motivates her call to take a break from the terms whereby it has too long constrained the

coordinates of sexual theorizing. But what is the feminism from which Halley advocates taking a break? How is feminism to be defined so that it is possible to know conclusively when one no longer operates within its ambit? Halley recognizes the high stakes of her definition of feminism and the ethical burden that falls to her to 'understand feminism as capaciously as possible' (2006: 17). It is therefore something of a surprise to learn that, having charged herself with the task of coming up with the most generously roomy account of feminism, Halley offers instead a three-part definition whereby feminism must distinguish between forms of masculinity and femininity; must define femininity in a subordinated relation to masculinity and must seek an end to such subordination.

Pared back to such clean lines, this 'minimalist definition' (2006: 17) is frequently rendered by Halley via the quasi-algebraic formula: 'm/f, $m > f$ and carrying a brief for f' (2006: 23). Anything that fails to conform to the rubric of 'm/f, $m > f$ and carrying a brief for f' is, in Halley's account, disqualified from feminism. A consequential outcome of such a definition is that it attributes to feminism itself a problem that is more properly an effect of its own narrow bandwidth of recognition. The conceptual strain such tautological reasoning introduces into Halley's account is evident in her ruling that the failure of her definition of feminism always to capture 'the "hybrid" feminisms – socialist, anti-racist, and postcolonial feminisms' (2006: 20) – but presumably also sex-positive, transgender and queer feminisms – does not register the inadequacy of her formulation but functions as evidence of their having already taken a break both from feminism and hence the rightness of her own strategy. Responding to an earlier essay-length version of Halley's argument, Robyn Wiegman (2004) similarly refuses the self-licensing logic of Halley's promotion of a queer over a feminist perspective. 'What happens if we wrestle feminism from such definitional singularity?' asks Wiegman, proposing instead to 'take feminism . . . *all the way down* to its non-self-replicating, epistemically disjunctive, anti-foundationalist theoretic core. After all, why should queer theory get all the theoretic thrill?' (2004: 94).

With this forceful reminder that feminism is neither self-identical nor sanitarily quarantined from the messy undoings of normative sexuality Halley more readily associates with queer theorizing, Wiegman returns us to the anti-foundationalist drive in feminist theory that I earlier sourced to Riley's work. This is not a feminist tradition that Halley engages, yet early in her book she connects her project of taking a break from feminism to Riley's 'Am I That Name?' (1988). Keen to emphasize that her call to take a break from feminism is not the same as a call for the end of feminism, Halley points out that, in the interests of multiplying the possible critical perspectives available for thinking sexuality, it might be desirable to have intermittent relations to feminism, to suspend allegiance to its governing terms in order to reframe its diagnosis of the political situation: 'Any one person can "flicker" in and out of feminism – the term is Denise Riley's; she was writing about how one flickers in and out even of being a woman – without feminism's being destroyed or even rendered theoretically inaccessible' (Halley,

2006: 8). Although Halley only touches down lightly on Riley, recontextualizing no more than a single borrowed word to license her own argument, this moment is worth sticking with long enough to tease out what it almost intimates about the complicated histories of feminist engagement with the terms of its own institutionalization that Halley's 'minimalist' definition of feminism disavows.

In arguing for the possibility, the desirability even, of not being feminist at every moment, Halley means to bracket feminism's customary terms – m and f, in Halley's narrow definition – in order to open up the theorizing of sexuality to other analytic frameworks that could 'see other arrangements of m and f and other kinds of power' or 'might even try to see sexuality in terms that don't refer to male and female at all' (2006: 8). Although the flickering relation to feminism that Halley espouses merely contests feminism's universal relevance for thinking about sex and power rather than writes it off altogether as a conceptual model, Halley's narrowly prescriptive understanding of feminism is unable to recognize as feminist a whole tradition of feminist work – itself unprogrammable and divergent – that interrogates its relations to its normative groundings in gender. Since Halley authorizes this step in her argument via a glancing reference to that feminist tradition, a return to Riley's '*Am I That Name?*' can usefully suggest the scale of what is at stake in Halley's quarantining of feminist and queer inquiries and political engagements. In paraphrasing Riley's argument as being 'about how one flickers in and out even of being a woman', Halley implies both that the discontinuous relation to feminism she advocates is connected to the irregular occupancy of the category 'women' noted by Riley and that the former is less strenuous a process than the latter. Yet a closer reading of Riley's work indicates that feminism is enabled rather than suspended by the epistemological incoherencies of the category of women.

Riley's claim that 'gendered self-consciousness has, mercifully, a flickering nature' (1988: 96) comes in the final chapter of her book where she defends the implications of her interrogation of 'women' against those who might read it as evidence of the limitations or demise of feminism's capacities for political intervention. In order to demonstrate to the contrary that feminism is enabled by a recognition of the inconstancy of 'women', Riley returns to the key question of the historical and political indeterminacy of the category of 'women' – what she calls in her opening chapter 'the peculiar temporality of "women"' (1988: 8) – by taking up as a 'fairly straightforward version of . . . this temporality' (1988: 96) the instance of an individual's intermittent awareness of her gendered condition. Canvassing a range of scenarios from random street sexual harassments to the experience of childbirth, Riley argues that:

even the apparently simplest, most innocent ways in which one becomes temporarily a woman *are not* darting returns to a category in a natural and harmless state, but are something else: adoptions of, or precipitations into, a designation there in advance, a characterisation of 'woman'. (1988: 97)

If Halley references Riley in order to suggest, given the possibility of flickering 'in and out even of being a woman', how much more easily achieved is a temporary or intermittent occupancy of feminism, she does so by overlooking the fact that, for Riley, an acknowledgment of the temporal peculiarity of 'women' – understood phenomenologically, historically and politically – is the grounds for a feminism that refuses to be bound to the normative characterization of its founding category: 'That "women" is indeterminate and impossible is no cause for lament. It is what makes feminism; which has hardly been an indiscriminate embrace anyway of the fragilities and peculiarities of the category' (1988: 113–14). Contrary to Halley's implicit logic, Riley's project suggests rather that feminism turns up its analytic wattage with the flickering of gender. When feminism is understood to exceed the gender-naturalizing formulation of 'm/f, m > f and carrying a brief for f', it is far less self-evident that it needs to be suspended in order to allow a queer theoretic to have its run.

Speaking of the opacity and self-referential nature of what she calls the 'big keyword[s] of contemporary cultural theory', Meaghan Morris notes that 'such words now rarely refer to actions, events, processes, or problems that people can solve, but are dense little bibliographic balls. They are condensed invocations of an archive of debates' (Morris, 2000: 17). Hardened off as theoretical keywords, the critical stance that 'feminist' and 'queer' is each most commonly asked to instantiate pits them against each other in a rigor mortis of opposition. The scholarly scrummage over Rubin's 'Thinking Sex', however, affords one opportunity for acknowledging the difficulty, even the impossibility, of distinguishing decisively between feminist and queer critical traditions. Similarly, situating the queer investment in performativity in relation to '*a feminist genealogy of the category of woman*' (Butler, 1990: 5) recognizes the partial overlaps and shared ventures of queer and feminist projects. Feminist theory, no less than queer theory, is a broad and heterogeneous project of social critique that works itself out across provisional, contingent and non-unitary grounds, unconstrained by any predefined field of inquiry and unanchored to the perspective of any specifiable demographic population. The rapid emergence of 'queer' as a critical and activist term in the 1990s and concomitantly the accelerated ascendancy of queer theory within the academy do not attest to the waning of feminist theory's relevance. Rather, the possibilities for queer feminist thought in the 21st century speak to a specific set of historic circumstances – a bunch of different pressures and influences that cannot be neatly narrated in terms of cause/effect relations – that have enabled a significant anti-identitarian and anti-assimilationist turn in western thinking about classes of social regulation and political recognition. However different their projects – the flashpoints of their inauguration; their historical relation to institutionalization; their critical failures and their potentialities – feminist theory and queer theory together have a stake in both desiring and articulating the complexities of the traffic between gender and sexuality.

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