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Sex and Sociality: Comparative Ethnographies of Sexual Objectification

Laura Rival, Don Slater and Daniel Miller

This paper is intended as a critique of recent theorisations of sexuality and desire, which have led performative theorists to contend that gender is an effect of discourse, and sex an effect of gender. It results from informal discussions between the three authors on the mechanisms through which sexuality gets objectified in modernity. The ideas of influential Western thinkers (in particular Georges Bataille) are confronted with field data on sexuality – as lived and imagined – that the authors have been gathering in Amazonian societies, Trinidad, and on the internet. Ethnographic data and Western theories about the nature of eroticism are used to argue that the utopian definition of sexuality as sexual desire and will to identity is too divorced from the mundane, love, domesticity and reproduction in a broad sense and based on a too limited sphere of social experience. Consequently, to apply this definition to how and why humans engage in sexual activity leads to erroneous generalisations. For when encountered ethnographically, sexuality consists of practices deeply embedded in relational contexts. The paper concludes with the proposition that debates about the possibilities of human sexuality and of its political intervention will make no significant progress unless we stop repeating that “sexuality is socially constructed”, and start looking at the ways in which it is lived as part of everyday social life.

Theorising human sexuality has become a central task for social theorists engaged in the elaboration of new theories of personhood, identity and embodiment. New thinking about human sexuality has grown in a wide and diverse range of contemporary political and intellectual fields: radical feminism, gay, lesbian or queer theorising, social history and anthropology. It is almost always social

constructionist. Social constructionists follow Michel Foucault's historical approach to human sexuality. Their goal is to establish that human sexuality, far from being a natural phenomenon to be explained through fixed and inherent drives –and other biological givens – is (1) fundamentally constructed and contingent; (2) shaped by the hierarchical ordering of dominant social norms, as well as by the ideological and oppressive discourses of modern science; but also (3) reinvented by fully individuated subjects constituted through their sexual desires, who can resist the power of such discursive constructions, build new sexual communities, forge liberating subcultures, and define value systems that respect diversity and choice.

The radical social constructionist denial that there is anything given or natural in sexual organs and human sexuality corresponds to the goal of radical sexual politics: the full realisation of all human potentialities, complete autonomy, and total liberation from norms and restrictions.¹ Such thinking puts sexual identities at the centre of social theory because it claims that sexual identities form the core of all social identities and partly determine social positioning. The claim here is that desire (which is by definition sexual, fluid and uncertain) constitutes the foundational core of self-identity, that self-identity requires continuity, and that the continuity of the person and of her or his inner self is not the inevitable unfolding of some biological truth, but self-made history. We are free, according to this hyper-existentialist manifesto, to choose who to be and how to realise our sexual desires. The individual becomes the artist of his or her life, who “constructs the self as a creative self” (Weeks 1995:45).

Radical social constructionism also challenges the long established feminist distinction between ‘sex’, a natural, biological sexual identity, and ‘gender’, a socially constructed one. It makes sexual embodiment the privileged terrain to test the discursive construction of the real and the material (Butler 1993). Whereas the earlier generation of feminist scholars challenged patriarchal ideologies that reduced women's prime contribution to society to their ‘biological capacity’ for nurturing and reproducing, the new gender theorists are fundamentally concerned with the historical subjectivity of sexed individuals and the embodiment of sexual identity, seen as indeterminate, ambiguous and

¹ Following Laclau (1990:30, quoted in Weeks 1995:40) who proposes that “the constitution of a social identity is an act of power and identity as such is power”, Weeks (1995:36) argues that alternative and oppositional sexual identities “breach boundaries, disrupt order, and call into question the fixity of inherited identities of all kinds, not just the sexual.”

multiple (Morris 1996). For Judith Butler (1990, 1993), who argues that sexual identity is lived as a highly regulated performance, one is not female; one can only 'do' female. 'Female,' a regulatory fiction, is never limited or constrained by an anatomical body, for whereas an individual's identity is fundamentally dependent on her or his sexual identity, this identity cannot easily be found in the body, because bodies are not naturally given. As Henrietta Moore (1994:6) puts it, "there are different ways of being gendered because there are different ways of living one's sexuality." The individual subject as an effect of her or his sexual desire (a desire understood to be shaped by erotic activity rather than determined by genitality) is what social constructionists interested in human sexuality are trying to conceptualise.

Our purpose in this article is not to challenge the social constructionist approach to human sexuality, but, rather, to cast a critical eye on the concept of sexual pleasure and on the primacy so many authors give to the construction of erotic roles. While this radical deconstruction of performative sexual identities has much to commend it, the notion of sexuality that underpins it is not ethnographically grounded in any particular social world. It therefore appears abstract, over-generalised and possibly reflective of a peculiarly western objectification of sexuality as a thing apart from mundane sociality. As a result, rather than problematising (historicising, contextualising) the category 'sexuality', radical deconstructionists take it for granted and identify it with 'sexual desire' as a seemingly separated domain of erotic experience, love, sex, sexual representation, desire and so forth. Authors such as Butler go so far as to contend that biological reproduction is not a salient question for thinking about gender in our western, end-of-the-millennium context. When remarking, for example, that "most women will spend almost all their lives not pregnant, not giving birth and not suckling their young" (in Segal 1994:27-228), she implies that for a majority of women in industrialised societies, pregnancy and child bearing are not the reality of female bodies, but the effects of biomedical and other ideological and prescriptive scientific discourses that produce sexual difference by eliminating all trace of categorical ambivalence on the body. Anthropologists, however, have shown over and over again that people experience sex as embedded in mundane 'reproduction' (including familialism, material and emotional care of the self, routine work for wherewithal, home-keeping, and, indeed, life-giving as the potential source of parenthood), and that cultures everywhere relate discourses on sex to issues of procreation and fertility (see Gay-y-Blasco 1997 and Busby 1997 for two recent

examples). What needs theorising is, therefore, the relation between the pleasures of the body (sexual pleasure as one among others) and physical reproduction.

Our aim is to problematise sexuality as a domain readily identifiable and clearly objectified by showing that the utopian and transgressive use of sexuality in western thought largely depends on constituting it as a sphere separate from the domain of mundanity, love and sociality. In order to examine the conditions under which sexuality is objectified as a domain for social practice and cultural production, we propose to start with an examination of Bataille's ideas on eroticism. We then explore sexuality as lived and represented by 'sexpics traders' on the internet, the Huaorani and Trinidadians, before drawing from this cross-cultural comparative exercise general conclusions which should open the debate on how to re-orientate the social analysis of human sexuality.

Bataille's Sacred Sex: Transgression, Sacrifice and Origin

Bataille² exemplifies one modernist strategy by which sexuality is constituted as transcendent and transgressive by virtue of its complete separation from nature, biology, function and mundane life, a strategy which also seems to infuse poststructuralist positions that seek to decentre identity as an entirely discursive or performative (cultural) accomplishment.³ At the same time, Bataille's insistence on a dialectic of taboo and transgression allows us to explore the ways in which even transgressive sexualities are involved with a normative sociality. Bataille's philosophy is Manichaeic. Society exists through the positive productivity of labour, order, taboos and morality, political involvement, and social solidarity. But these profane values and moral ideals are not sufficient to make us human; without the sacred (a form of negativity without cause) and eroticism (transgressive excess), we would not be able to make sense of the absurdity and meaninglessness of death, this (too real) impossible. Culture must recognise that social life has two faces, one rational and ordinary, the other

² Our reading of Bataille's writings on eroticism, death and sexuality has concentrated on *L'Expérience Intérieure* (1941), *L'Erotisme* (1957), *Les Larmes d'Eros* (1964), *L'Histoire de l'Erotisme (Oeuvres Complètes VIII)*, Gallimard 1976) and *Les Ecrits de Laure* (1977). It has been guided by the scholarly works of Michèle Richman (1982, 1990), Daniel Hawley (1978), Jean-Claude Renard (1987), and Elizabeth Roudinesco (1986, 1995).

³ See Morris (1996) for an excellent review of the current research literature.

destructive and sacred, and that true materialism is not located in the positive force of matter and reproduction, but, instead, in the creativity of the pure spirit encountered in the abject horror of loss, expenditure and death. To experience the sacred through the convulsions induced by orgasm or by the sight of a dead body constitutes the essence of humanity. Bataille's sexual economy is scatological: work and reason must be disrupted by eroticism, a form of violence that wastes energy and hastens the dissolution of the boundaries of the self. Eroticism, or the death of the subject in orgasm, is a necessary condition for achieving transcendence (the inner experience of self-loss); it is also the only form of true communication. At once immanent and transcendental, erotic sexuality lies beyond biological death, the absurd and monstrous condition of finitude which plagues humanity. In other words, we defy death and reach transcendence not by continuing ourselves through others (that is, by being productive, having children, giving ourselves to society and contributing to the general social good), but by engaging in transgressive, mystical and ecstatic experiences, such as erotic activity and watching corpses or moribunds. Bataille insists that the purpose of debauch is to loose oneself in order to become God-like,⁴ not to feel sensual pleasure, emotional gratification, or physico-psychic release. The channel through which such experience is consummated is the woman's vagina, particularly that of the mother, the most forbidden woman, or that of a prostitute. A woman's vagina is the most obscene, the most taboo, and the most sacred object.⁵ In Bataille's brand of materialism, the body, particularly the sexual organs when used for non-reproductive, wasteful activities, is sacred. The body

⁴ Bataille, who considers eroticism to be first objectified in human history as a religious activity, proposes a religious system which represents a dialectical reversal of Catholicism. The prostitute occupies the place that Mary is not granted. Whereas Mary gives birth to the son of God, the prostitute initiates man into becoming God. For Catholics, the flesh is sinful, weak, abject. In Bataille's creed, the flesh is perishable, grotesque, but sacred, for what is low becomes high .

⁵ Lacan (who married Bataille's wife, and was considered by Bataille's daughter as her true, caring father) was profoundly influenced by Bataille's vision of the vagina as a sacred, repulsive object. Lacan once acquired a painting by Courbet representing a woman's open sex after love-making. The painting was so shocking that his wife asked him to hide it behind another painting by Bataille's closest friend, Masson. This surface/public painting represented Courbet's painting of the vagina in a surrealist, disarticulated fashion. In Lacan's structural analysis of the human psyche (the symbolic, the imaginary and the real), what he calls the real corresponds exactly to this realistic vagina covered by an abstract representation of it. Lacan on the whole defends Freud's interpretation of psychic reality, but he adds a new, irreducible and unspeakable element to unconscious desires and sexual fantasies: the non-symbolic, unimaginable material and external reality of the 'accursed share'. His theory is thus directly inspired by Bataille's notion of erotic expenditure, which itself constitutes the very core of the Bataillan sociology of the sacred. As in Bataille's notion of heterology, the real contains a morbid, dejectory, wasteful part, which cannot be reduced to the psyche's imaginary or symbolic dimensions. Whereas Freud envisaged a subjective reality rooted in fantasy, Lacan conceived a desiring reality entirely excluded from all symbolising processes, and unreachable through subjective thought: a black shadow or ghost escaping all forms of reasoning. The real is what cannot be represented, it is the mystical presence of sex as origin (Roudinesco 1995:211).

is sacred because corruptible and mortal. Orgasm as an ecstatic, initiatic experience gains in mysticism if it is attained near a dead body, for both death and fornication are about non-differentiation and loss of individuation.

There are two aspects of Bataille's notion of eroticism we would like to highlight for the purposes of this paper. The first one relates to the ways in which his reading of Marcel Mauss departs from that of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss and Bataille both interpret the archaic form of exchange represented by gift-giving as a total social fact which cannot be reduced to the rational and utilitarian workings of bourgeois economics. Lévi-Strauss' discussion of Mauss focuses on the Maori *hau* as obligation to reciprocate gifts, from which he abstracts exchange, central to his definition of culture as communication and symbolic order. But the significance of the gift for Bataille lies primarily in the American Pacific Northwest *potlatch* or ceremonial 'wars of wealth'. Archaic exchange, as he sees it, is not about the moral imperative of gift reciprocation; it is, rather, about excess and violence, that is, a totally gratuitous form of expenditure. Both Lévi-Strauss and Bataille interpret sexuality within a general economy which marks the passage from nature to culture. But whereas Lévi-Strauss analyses incest taboo (the rule which obliges men to renounce their sisters and daughters and exchange women in marriage) in terms of reciprocal exchange, Bataille sees the institution of incest taboo as a necessary prerequisite for its violation. For Bataille, who considers reproductive sex natural and animal, and, when performed within the domestic and profane domain of conjugality, a mere positive social expedient, the circulation of women between social groups is not as cultural a mark of our humanity as erotic desire and taboo transgression.⁶

The second aspect of Bataille's thinking on eroticism we would like to stress is that he does not see sexual arousal as being primarily about physical satisfaction. A tortured body and a fornicating one, to his mind, attain exactly the same degree of ecstasy. In Bataille's eroticism, sexuality is placed outside of and in opposition to society. It can thus be seen as a new form of moral absolutism based on

⁶ The gender implications of the nature/culture dichotomy is the same in Lévi-Strauss and in Bataille. For both, women are the supreme gift. For Lévi-Strauss, women are objects of exchange, and men the cultural agents doing the exchange. For Bataille, men transcend their nature and become truly human, not by exchanging, but by profaning the pure gift (women). Women are natural, 'positive' beings who abandon themselves. Because they give themselves in pure abnegation of their subjective identities, they do not suffer the 'little death' (i.e. orgasm) as men do, and do not, therefore, experience transcendence. In both economies and symbolic orders, therefore, women are the intermediaries through which men construct culture against nature, either through reciprocal exchange or through transgression and expenditure.

forbidden longing and transgression which has very little to do with what passes for pornography today – such as it exists in the sex industry for instance. Pornography, rather, is a kind of service by which the needs for pleasure of individual consumers are fulfilled. ‘Soft’ or ‘mainstream’ pornography, in particular, is ultimately a form of sublimated energy based on the complementarity of the work of sex workers and the leisure of clients. It might be that porn sex, then, with its exploitation of the hedonic values promoted by the sexual liberation movement and its anti-taboo demands, is closer to a Reichian, rather than a Bataillan, view of sexuality.⁷

Reich’s introduction to non-western sexuality as cultural critique was via Malinowski. His book *The Function of Orgasm* was inspired by Malinowski’s descriptions of the Trobrianders’ natural approach to sexuality. Far from opposing culture to nature, Reich took the Rousseauian position that western culture and its distorted morality foreclosed the true expression of sexual pleasure. Morality, Reich thought, should not be a matter of rules imposed from the outside (by the state or the church), but the natural response of a healthy individual to the situations of life. The natural state of the human body is to be healthy, satisfied, and radiant with positive energy. In a way, we could say that for him the westerner’s body is more moral than his repressed mind. His critique of western culture was therefore diametrically opposed to that of Bataille. Reich set for himself the task of making sexuality rational and positive in a society which he saw as utterly irrational and oppressive. For this, he focused his attention on the material and gender-neutral expression of sexual pleasure: orgasm, or libido. Libido, in his view, was less a state of mind than an objective substance equated to the life force (the *élan vital*), a wave of energy he hoped to measure quantitatively. He saw orgasm as an essentially involuntary release, the virtual loss of consciousness, and the loss of control over bodily movements. Unrepressed, healthy sex was ecstatic surrender, an essential component of the good life, which in no way depended on changing partners; to the contrary, Reich expected it to be especially achievable between balanced individuals forming long-lasting relationships based on true communication (for if language is deceptive, the body does not lie). Finally, as sexual relationships are inseparable from the social order in which they are embedded, Reich was actively promoting social reforms (including, among others, better housing, the abolition of anti-abortion and anti-homosexual laws, new marriage

⁷ A thorough comparison of their symmetrical ly opposed views on human sexuality is overdue. We do not know whether Bataille and Reich, who were born in the same year (1897), and who both extensively wrote on fascism and human sexuality, were aware of each other’s work.

and divorce laws, free birth control advice and contraceptives, nurseries in the workplace, and sex education) aimed at liberating the sexual energy of all individuals – children, women and men alike. To conclude this point, if both Reich and Bataille were searching for a new moral order, while Reich based his model on the self-regulation of naturally good and measured desires freed from compulsion and external imposition, Bataille defended the idea that sexuality was not to be enjoyed, but experienced as a religious sacrifice, through shame, guilt and transgression. Bataille's conception of sexuality was religious in nature, and based on the heteronomic internalisation of the sacred, which he located beyond morality, rationality and sociality.

However brief the summary of the ideas of these two thinkers, it makes it clear why they have had a major influence on contemporary views on human sexuality and why constructionists would discard Reich as a 'naturaliser' while praising Bataille as the enlightened authority on transgression and the experiences and discourses of transgressors. Our objection to such praise is no less clear: we are doubtful that transgressive behaviours illuminate normative discourses better than non-transgressive behaviours do. Whatever the categories to which they belong, in the Bataillan view transgressors represent marginal social identities whose social subjectivity is marked as being especially sexual. They create their singular individual identities by transgressing the dominant norms they refuse. It is not surprising therefore that their sense of identity, derived from their wish to adopt alternative norms, appears to be constituted in discourse even before it gets lived as embodied experience. As a contrary case, the next section argues that the ostensibly transgressive and extremely objectified or separated sexual domain constituted by the sexpics traders studied by Slater has actually to be understood in relation to normative, mundane, 'functional' and reproductive issues that structure both on-line and off-line contexts of their activities.

On-line regulated transgressions: Trading sexpics on the Internet

Trading sexpics on IRC defines a very specific ethnographic setting: Internet Relay Chat is a system of communication in real time, via the internet, through the exchange of typed lines of text.

Individuals run software on their local computers that links them via ordinary internet connection to networks with as many as 20,000 other people concurrently logged on. They can send lines of text to

any of these people either individually or as participants in channels, public spaces in which a line of text typed by any one person can be seen by all the others. If one can send a typed line of text to any one, one can send any digitised information, hence any kind of representation: still image, sound, video, text. This enables the activity of ‘trading sexpics’: the circulation, exchange, accumulation and consumption of sexually explicit representations. Moreover, the chat, the real-time communication via typed text, can itself become eroticised as representations, flirting, heated and pleasurable sex talk, cybersex, in which the actual encounter between participants becomes, as the typical comment goes, “like being inside a piece of interactive pornography.” Trading and chatting intertwine, and often come to resemble each other, for sexuality seems to have been disembodied, hived off into strategies and skills of representation in a place apart.⁸

Sexpics trading on IRC would seem a likely candidate for representing a world-historical extreme in constituting sexuality as an objectified sphere that is both transgressive and separate from mundane life. Participants clearly see IRC sexpics trading and chatting as a place of sexual transgression and “going beyond”: this includes both looking at things forbidden and previously not experienced, as well as acting out desires in relation to the images or through conversation or fantasy with others. Women informants in particular have regularly told Slater that IRC allows them to explore desires which are too taboo, embarrassing or dangerous for off-line life: mainly bisexuality, exhibitionism, group sex, and promiscuity. Informants often say that IRC’s cardinal attraction is the license simply to float pleasurably through a shamelessly eroticised space. These pleasures and transgressions evidently depend upon a clear separation of sexuality from “real life”: they are without commitment or consequence; the material resources on which they depend (finance, technology, symbolic capital, labour) are obscured from view and experienced as beyond any scarcity. IRC sexuality clearly mirrors the world constructed within mainstream pornography: there are no material cares or dangers (including disease); no enduring commitments; performance is unproblematic; desire is inexhaustible, as is desirability (everyone is desired and included). Bodies neither fail, nor make non-sexual demands. Nothing external challenges the integrity of “the sexual”. It is not merely procreation that is excluded from both pornography and IRC: they edit out a mundanity that comprises everything which

⁸ Increasingly, IRC communication now extends beyond text to ‘streamed’ sound and video (internet phone systems and ‘Cuseeme’ video conferencing) so that people are increasingly embodied on line as well as increasingly themselves presented as representations. It is unclear yet how this might affect the sexpics setting.

makes up the work of reproducing everyday life; there are no families, no paid or unpaid work, no necessary care of the body or self unless these are themselves eroticised. Indeed, both pornography and its circulation on IRC depend on eroticising labour; they are worlds of pure consumption in which the moment of production (taking the picture) is seen as a sexual moment for both the models and the photographer.

The “apartness” of IRC and its sexual domain depends on this ability to absorb everything within this undisturbed sexual moment. For example, references to bodily care on IRC (“I’m off to take a shower”) tend to be eroticised (“she’s wet and steamy now”). The pornographic on IRC has to be captured through transitive verbs: everything is, or can be, eroticised or “pornographed”. “To pornography” the other is to absorb her or him within this place of desire beyond the cares of the world. In this orientation, sexuality is neither an end in itself nor an acid which corrodes an oppressive social order. It is rather a colour that one might paint over the greyness of the mundane. This sense of “pornographing” the other and the world is contained in one of the most common statements made in this setting: although the pictures and cybersex are obsessively, monotonously genital and orgasmic (in the end, everything is organised around people fucking and cuming), virtually everyone declares that cybersex is boring and that they don’t look at the pics very much. What they do like is flirting, talking about sex, trading pics within a pleasurable chat, watching new pics scroll down their screen. In short, what holds people is a sensually coated ambience more than orgasmic stimuli. Interestingly, participants often talk about IRC itself and pornography in very similar terms: they are both places apart which allow the indulgence of amorphous pleasures, utopias without time or space which are also, because they are so pleasurable and because they seem to remove one from mundane space, time and needs, deemed “addictive”. There is a constantly expressed fear, or guilt, about getting lost “out there”.

These experiences of the separateness of sexuality objectified in a utopic place apart from the mundane are quite real to participants and constitutive of their world. However it would be quite wide of the mark to assimilate this to some of the contemporary theoretical agendas that have been projected onto ‘cyberspace’: it is not part of a project of deconstructing sex, gender or sexuality, but rather a way of experiencing pleasures within fairly stable constructions of these. Indeed, it could be argued that much of what I have been observing *aims at* finding a route back to mundane versions of

sexuality and familiarity.

This point can be elaborated on several levels. Firstly, although participants on IRC are intensely aware of the performative nature of their on-line identities and encounters (you are what you type), they have a seemingly unchallengeable core belief in authenticity. Hence, performativity is not taken up as an opportunity to deconstruct notions of identity, but rather constitutes a pervasive series of issues about deception and credulity: it is a basis for disbelieving almost everything, treating most events and people as occasions for purely immediate pleasures, and for devising strategies for “authenticating” the other (for deciding when and on what basis to accept their identity claims). There is a consistent assumption that all performances can be traced back to a real other to which they do or do not correspond (they can be true, deceptive, or “true at some level”, or “just playing”). That which is performed, one’s “sexuality”, is also deemed to be more or less true to a real self: hence IRC can be about exploring what had been “hidden” within one, or repressed. More often, it is treated simply at the level of individual choice: “this is what I feel like”, “this is what I like”. The exploration of desire is not deemed to produce a sexuality, but to gratify or develop an existing one. In this respect, the ideology of IRC on-line sexuality is not deconstructive but libertarian: anything goes, but nothing is particularly challenged. In other words, while privileging sexuality as a place of exploration and transgression, this ideology also uses sexuality as an idiom through which an authentic self finds its own normality, even by way of actions which outsiders might find to be extreme. IRC sexpics trading involves an almost consumerist normality in which individuals choose things in a manner that never gets near challenging the choosing self. This frequently takes an explicitly political form – even an organised form, as in resistance to the American Communications Decency Act – which clearly treats sexuality as the exemplary or foundational instance of modern freedom: uncompelled acts of choice by consenting adult egos. “Extreme” sexuality then acts as an idiom through which to negotiate the most mundane and normative consumerist self.

Secondly, maintaining the sexualised ambience of IRC requires considerable mundane labour of social reproduction: organising and policing channels, socialising newbies, overcoming endless technical problems, extending and adapting the software in order to make the right things happen smoothly (and usually automatically). For many, the technocratic concern with ordering this social world and its contents, maintaining its internal routines, is more important than the sexuality it

contains. However, it is not only that sexpics trading venues are normative orders (neither lawless, nor amorphous, nor unstable), with complex mechanisms for sustaining themselves as such; it is also that their norms are extremely, almost bizarrely, conventional. Two examples may suffice. The first concerns the way conventional notions of sexuality are used to draw social and textual boundaries. There is heavy policing (by ops but also by ordinary participants) against a standard list of pariah sexualities (child porn, bestiality, or rape). This does not involve either a deconstructive sense that our own “normal” sexualities might arise in relation to the exclusions and inclusions we operate, nor a conservative rejection of particular sexualities as evil or wrong. Rather, there is, again, a libertarian sense of ‘to each their own’: “people can do what they like as long as they don’t do it here, and as long as it has nothing to do with me”. This is even clearer in the more major exclusion: male homosexuality is contained in completely separate networks and channels. The scene Slater has been investigating is entirely structured on the premise that men are heterosexual and women are bisexual. While most of the homophobia is implicit rather than open and aggressive, nonetheless, in these IRC venues core sexualities are not questioned or treated as performative. They are socially mapped onto normative boundaries between groups or camps that are not regarded as affecting each other. Moreover, the sexualities which are deemed permissible and are performed clearly mirror mainstream pornography: women’s bisexuality encompasses their complete connectability, their position at the centre of all desires; men insatiably desire, but only women. Both the pornography traded and the sexualities that are enacted may include fairly extreme or ‘hard’ variations within these conventional structures, but these structures are rarely challenged.

A second example of the normativity of IRC transgression moves us beyond sexuality to economy: There is essentially an inexhaustible supply of “free” sexpics on IRC: it is a post-scarcity and post-value world. And, yet, it is completely obsessed with rules of exchange and with exchange ratios. For example, much exchange is carried out by way of “fserver”, a programme which allows one person to open their hard disk drive to another. One can look through the fserver’s directories, choose and pick pics, and set an exchange rate (“send me 1:4”). Exchange values are then programmed into the software; they are also ethically enforced through constant, tedious castigation of “leechers” and “leeching”, i.e. people who take without giving.

The fantasy space of on-line sexuality sits within on-going everydayness, both on-line and off,

defined as “real” by participants. If we have questioned the transgressive character of this reality, we might now also question its apartness, as a sphere of sexual objectifications, from other and specifically ‘off-line’ realities. In fact, the ethnographic sense of the ways participants treat sexpics trading on IRC as a world apart from or connected to “real life” is highly varied.⁹ There are at least three different takes on this that emerge from people’s talk. They may, firstly and most commonly, talk of sexpics activities as pure play: “it is just fun”. It offers the freedom to explore kinds of fun and fantasy which are not accessible off-line (public sex, group sex, bisexuality) but which connect to “real” (i.e. off-line) desires. But play is understood here in a classic way: it is clearly bounded, contained, “real” only within a frame that clearly says “play”. Participants seem quite clear that unless authentically grounded in real off-line bodies and identities then none of this should be taken too seriously. Indeed, taking this on-line world for real is the one consistently articulated notion of pathology. More dangerous than anything fantasised is the fallacy of taking fantasy for reality.

This danger, or temptation, of taking fantasy for reality arises not only from credulity but also from alienation: In this context, “real life” means the world of immediate everydayness: home, family, paid and unpaid work milieus. Participants talk of everyday life as boring, a drudgery of maintaining self and family. And it is frequently characterised as a lonely place, a place where one is aware of one’s separation from others, including one’s partner or family. A large amount of chatting in sexpics venues is about everyday life. Many logged conversations move within minutes from tastes in porn to the problems of single-parenthood, money problems, dead-end jobs. IRC sexuality is explicitly understood as escapist in relation to the alienation and the loneliness. So too is IRC sociality: these are intense, yet uncommitted, encounters in which “the other” seems to be (and in some respects is) “in your head”. It is also understood, though, that this escapism can tend in two different directions towards “realisation”, and these provide the alternative ways of relating sexpics trading on IRC to ‘real life’. On the one hand, one can try to make cyber-relationships (sexual or not) ever more “real”, more embodied (by making them endure, by moving on to voice communication, or real life meetings). This challenge to the everyday is often marked by the boundary-defining question: “Is cyber-sex cheating on your RL partner?”. Moreover, idealised ethics of the everyday are imported to

⁹ Although Slater has not been able to speak to people off-line yet, he can report on the kinds of connections they make in chat and interviews.

govern cyber relationships (they can be cloyingly romantic, jealously monogamous, with clear rules about trust, honesty, spending time together, permissible sexual acts and so on which replicate on-line the structures of off-line domesticity). Rather than treating IRC as escapist, then, participants may want cyber-relationships and cyber-sexuality to *really* embody and actualise the ideals they have imported from their off-line life. On the other hand, sexpics trading and chat may be used to eroticise the everyday and the familial: as an aphrodisiac for real life, a way of getting both stimulation and ideas for the domestic. IRC space sometimes acts as a kind of erotic overlay on the domestic scene, giving it a charge; not to challenge relationships, but to make them a bit more exciting. Following this route, conventional domestic life is compatible with the sexualities enacted on-line, not challenged but rather revived by them. However, whether IRC sexpics trading is seen escapist, ideal or therapeutic in relation to 'real life', each constitutes an intimate connection with the mundane which is clearly reflected on by participants.

The sexpics trading scene we have sketched above is difficult to assimilate to some of the contemporary poststructuralist and cyber agendas that have been projected onto "cyberspace" (for key discussions see Bassett 1997, Dery 1994, Featherstone and Burrows 1995, Haraway 1990, Plant 1995, 1996, 1997, Springer 1996, Stone 1996, Turkel 1995). This scene does not simply lead us backwards from bodies and genders to the discursively constructed sexualities that structure them, but also forwards to the mundane versions of everyday life, domesticity and reproduction in which they are all embedded and on whose conventional normativity they draw. Whereas the 'apartness' of virtual realities and their potentially transformative impact on mundane or naturalised identities play a central part in the intelligentsia's reception of 'cybersex', ethnographic engagement in 'cyberspace' shows that, far from being the domain of 'lawlessness', transgression, danger, and release from social bonds, taboos and the profane, on-line sexuality is experienced by IRC participants as a place that, in offering a total (because physically unbounded) freedom to transgress, allows them to raise all the promises of modernity (to constitute the self, in this instance through the privileged 'laboratory' of sexual desire), but then to contain them within tight normative constraints. These almost Durkheimian moral structures of sociality not only regulate their particular patch of cyberspace but do so according to norms that bring it very close to the mundane and domestic sphere which it, like the transgressive sexuality it contains, putatively escapes and challenges. It seems to us that this "world apart" of

inexhaustible and transgressive sexuality is circumscribed by mundane values of exchange ratios, technique, order and organisation, and that a passion for cataloguing may play a far more significant role in its regulation than does sexual desire. We would like to argue that sexpics traders on IRC tend to use sexuality and sexual materials as another occasion to construct and reproduce a social order where moral interests and the care of reproduction take precedence over erotica. In our view, a proper understanding of such a highly objectified form of sexuality requires its comparison with forms of sexuality that do not appear so divorced from mundane and reproductive sociality. In the next section, we discuss the embeddedness of Huaorani sexuality, and the ways it is transparently constitutive of the social bonds into which it is integrated.

Sensual reproductivity in the Amazon: Huaorani ‘Two-Making’ Sex

On-going common residence in the longhouse is the basis of sociality for the Huaorani of Amazonian Ecuador,¹⁰ who practise sensuality, not as the realization of private fantasies, but as the bodily expression of sharing relations. The overall population is divided into dispersed networks of inter-marrying longhouses separated by vast stretches of unoccupied forest. Traditional longhouses are typically occupied by an older couple (often a man married to one, two, or three sisters), their daughters (with, when married, their husbands and children), and their unmarried sons; they may comprise between ten and thirty-five members. Allied and inter-marrying longhouses form loose regional aggregates. Contact with groups belonging to other aggregates (considered potential enemies) is avoided. Relations between longhouse co-residents are more intimate, caring and close than those between blood kin living in different longhouses. Most marriages are uxorilocal and take place between cross-cousins. Men, who start their married careers in their wives’ housegroups almost as strangers, are gradually incorporated as they father children. Gender and inter-generational differences are played down, and personal autonomy, egalitarianism and longhouse sharing highly valued (Rival 1992, 1996, 1998, forthcoming/a, forthcoming/b).

¹⁰ They live in multi-family dwellings (longhouses) on hilltops away from rivers. They are nomadic, autarkic and highly endogamous hunters-and-gatherers who, by tradition, cultivate manioc and plantain sporadically for the preparation of ceremonial drinks.

Persons and communities are conceptualised as processes that unfold in time through the cumulative experience of living side by side, day after day. By continuously feeding each other, eating the same food and sleeping together, people who live together develop a shared physicality of greater import than that resulting from genealogical bonds. Togetherness is expressed, and continuously re-asserted, through sharing practices. The repeated and undifferentiated *action* of sharing that goes on within the longhouse turns co-residents into a single, indistinct substance, so that people living in the same longhouse gradually become of the same substance, literally ‘of the same flesh’ (*aroboqui baön anobain*). Longhouse members share illnesses, parasites, a common dwelling, and a common territory. Sensual bonding, as diffuse as food sharing, unfolds as one aspect of the pleasure of living in each other’s company. Everyone partakes in everyone else’s care and well-being; the more people spend time together, the more they become alike.

Sensuality in this culture is not centred on genitalia, nor is it the exclusive domain of adult heterosexuality; it should not, therefore, be assimilated to ‘sexual pleasure’. Children seek sensual pleasure as actively as adults do (or perhaps even more), for sensuality, which does not require sexual maturity, is an essential part of belonging to the collectivity. Huaorani culture does not eroticise sensuality, nor does it differentiate genital pleasure from other bodily pleasures. For example, no distinction is made between the pleasure and contentment felt during sexual intercourse, the pleasure and contentment of a three year old caressing the breast of the woman from whom she or he is feeding, the merry feeling of someone stroking gently the body of a caressing companion,¹¹ the gratification caused by the action of delousing someone’s head, or the pleasure of being deloused by someone’s expert hands. It is, of course, extremely difficult for westerners to accept that these intimate relations are not eroticised, and journalists of the British tabloid press would almost certainly report them as being sexual. To them, social relations are all potentially sexual and all based on power differential. Media coverage of ‘deviant’ sexual behaviour in our society reflects (or creates?) the fear that no relation is immune to the quicksilver effect of sexual desire, especially not the most intimate ones. Intimate relations between blood kin are represented

¹¹ The evangelical missionaries who translated part of the Bible into Huaorani had great difficulty in finding the right term for adultery. They finally settled for *nano tohue nono* (literally, “someone who’s having fun”), and resorted to the made-up expression “someone who’s repeatedly having fun” (*èè quète ante nè tohuenga*) to translate ‘prostitute’.

as being no less sexually exploitative than those between strangers, and children as being, not innocent angels, but social agents capable of the same immoral actions as adults. By contrast, sexuality is never used in Huaorani society to create power differentials, or to transgress social norms. When Huaorani people talk about sensuality, they mean “we live well” (*huaponi quehuemonipa*); to them, sensual pleasure, or promiscuous well-being, is simply one of the ways in which the longhouse sharing economy gets materialised (Rival 1996). The need for comfort and physical contact is never construed as sexual, nor the desire for affection taken to be a desire for sex (see also Liedloff 1986:151, 152). It might be that anti-orgasmic sex is particularly valued on aesthetic grounds, or, perhaps more simply, that bodies are socialised to experience diffuse, unfocused pleasures. In any case, low level sexual energy in this cultural context does not appear to be caused by the fear of losing life force or other vital substances through intercourse.

Whereas sensuality, like all forms of bodily pleasures, is amorphous and diffuse, reproductive sexuality, the conscious and focused action of making a child, is goal-oriented. As the Huaorani see it, sexuality is the reproductive activity by which heterosexual pairs (men and women who are not siblings, belong to the same generation, and are of approximately the same chronological age) are “two making” (*mina pa*), or “sleep as one” (*arome mö*; *mö* means both “to sleep” and “to be married”), and, consequently, “multiply through copulation” (*niñcopa*). *Niñe* is the action through which all sexed animals reproduce, from crocodiles, to birds, jaguars, monkeys or dogs. Making love involves two persons in one hammock, and only two, so if a man has several wives, he goes from one hammock to the next, in turn. Repeated intercourse is considered necessary for a woman to get pregnant, and for the foetus to grow. As it is believed that the foetus is made of equal quantities of male semen and womb blood, two or three genitors can contribute semen.¹² That the word *tapey*, which literally means “let’s make another child”, is what women say to men when they want to copulate illustrates the fact that sexual intercourse is overtly geared towards reproduction. Unless used between a woman and her (classificatory) husband(s), the word *tapey*, considered obscene, may be the cause of considerable embarrassment. Having babies is not seen as a by-product of sexual pleasure, but as a reward in itself, for adulthood is about pairing and giving birth

¹² They will be socially recognised as co-fathers, as long as they are classificatory husbands (i.e. husband’s brothers and classificatory brothers) to the child’s mother, and as long as they respect couvade restrictions before and after the birth of the child (Rival, forthcoming/a).

to children.¹³

Finally, it must be noted that Huaorani culture does not represent men and women as classes of people constituted by and through sexual desire, except, perhaps, in myths on lethal sexual attraction between humans and animals. A great number of myths concern women who copulate with animals (anacondas, monkeys, tapirs, and so forth). They invariably become pregnant, and, their insides devoured by the monstrous fetuses they carry, die. The myth of a young woman fatally attracted to a giant earth worm who resides underground beneath the longhouse and next to the hearth is particularly explicit about the awesome pleasure she derives from her repeated sexual encounters with the beast. The only myth about male bestiality relates the story of a man who finds the genitalia of the nutria (Amazon dolphin) identical to, and far more desirable than, those of a human female. He derives so much pleasure from copulating over and over again with the she-dolphin, that he ends up wasting all his blood and semen, drowns, and dies in his animal lover's dwelling at the bottom of the river. On the basis of numerous conversations with informants as well as ethnographic observations, Rival understands these myths to express the a-social nature of excessive sexual desire and unreasonable attraction. They also, albeit more indirectly, suggest that sexuality is really about 'child making' (Rival forthcoming/a).

In ending this section, we would like to stress that our analysis of Huaorani sexuality and sensuality differs substantially from previous interpretations of sexuality in Amazonia, in particular from those offered by North American cultural anthropologists writing in the wake of the US women's liberation movement. These authors discuss sexuality in terms of sexual antagonism and "war between the sexes" (Siskind 1973, Murphy and Murphy 1974, Gregor 1985, Kensinger 1995). They see Amazonia as the land of gang rape *par excellence*, and argue that masculine psychology, structured by anxiety, chronic sexual frustration and high levels of dissatisfaction, is fundamentally similar in both Euroamerican and Amazonian cultural settings. As they see it, Euroamerican and Amazonian men equally view women as alluring, emasculating and arousing primitive fears of dependence and loss of male identity. Gregor (1985:201), for example, remarks that "few Mehikanu

¹³ The few unmarried men I know live with their married sisters, and act as second husbands in terms of division of labour. The single mothers I know live with their mothers and married sisters. Their children have *no father*, for no man has shared substance with them through repeated intercourse, and no man has performed the *couvade* for them. There is 'no good reason' (*ononqui*), it is said, to the birth of these children.

relationships or institutions escape the tensions generated by sexual desire and frustration”, and Kensinger (1995:78) that “Cashinahua men and women agree that although it gives pleasure, sex is a source of danger.” Kensinger (1995:75) adds that Cashinahua men think that women are “stingy with their genitals” and offer sexual services in exchange for gifts, especially of meat (see also Siskind 1973). Gregor finds this functional use of sex absolutely identical to what goes on in North America, where, he says, “courtship and dating reflect the fact that sex is a service that women provide for men in exchange for financial and social commitment” (Gregor 1985:201). Following Murphy and Murphy’s (1974) influential *Women of the Forest*, these authors propose a Freudian interpretation of masculine sexual frustrations, anxieties and defensive reactions as expressed in Amazonian myths, rituals and other cultural practices. This leads them to contrast, not personality types (these are structured by identical psychodynamics), but social arrangements, and to argue that lowland South American institutions make manifest the universal anxieties aroused by the separation from the mother, that similarly structure male individual personalities all around the world. Whereas the ongoing battle of the sexes and the pervasiveness of sexual ideas is blunted in Euroamerican societies (divided by class, education, religion, race, vocation and so forth), it is manifest in Amazonian men’s houses, fertility and initiation rituals, gendered work activities, and sexual ideologies. Lack of hierarchy and power asymmetry actually exacerbates sexual antagonism, which often becomes public, as villages form into two gender groups throwing insults to each other. Men may proclaim their superiority over women by virtue of possessing penes, but women normally ignore these proclamations and in no way see themselves as inferior to men (Kensinger 1995:75).

It is true that in some Amazonian societies cross-gender social interactions are conflictual, and that cosmologies are often male-biased. However, it would be wrong to interpret all complementary oppositions (self/other, kin/affine, victim/killer, virilocal/uxorilocal, and so forth) in sexual terms, as if they were variations on the same universal theme. The fact that hostility between the sexes, confined to highly ritualised contexts, is largely absent from daily interactions should be analysed in the context of mundane activities, rather than in terms of symbolic structures. Moreover, the fact that cosmological systems are saturated with sexual and other bodily images (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971, Roe 1982) should be understood as an expression of the importance of organic life, fertility and

biological reproduction in Amazonian social philosophies.

As we have tried to show here, Huaorani sexuality is embedded in the care of reproduction. Sexuality as an objectified domain referring to the physical relations between the sexes does not exist as such. On the one hand, sensuality, the physical pleasure of harmonious living, is neither caused or expressed in sexual desire, nor restrictive: all longhouse residents, whatever their age, gender, or kin affiliation, behave sensually towards each other. Entirely engulfed in the domestic and its organicity, sensuality is the *art de vivre* of individuals who have chosen to share a common residence. In a society that defines relationships with non-co-residents as dangerous and predatory, sensuality and intimacy form the two sides of the same everyday social reality. Reproductive sexuality, on the other hand, creates physical, spiritual and social bonds between a woman, a man (sometimes two) and a baby, the fruit of their copulation. This bond, considered neither more biological nor less social than the ties formed around eating the same food or sleeping side by side, is both the expression of individual growth and development (sexually mature youth are expected to pair with cross-sex, cross-cousin partners, and produce children), and the manifestation of intra- and inter-longhouse marriage politics. Social reproduction depends on the formation of strong and long lasting heterosexual pairs. Married couples with adult offspring form the core of residence units, and solid alliances between longhouses invariably develop around strong brother-sister ties. Sociality, the good life, and the creation of intimate communities through everyday sharing equally depend on gender complementarity in reproduction, seen as the natural development of the human potential asserted against the inhumanity of predation and violent death. Killing and warfare, overtly aimed at breaking up housegroups, are in some ways considered the inevitable outcome of the tragic position of men in this society. Men do not exert violence against women,¹⁴ but against their condition of incorporated husbands and fathers. Their aggression, caused by a form of homicidal fury (*p'ii*), a typically male emotion, is not expressed sexually. Killing may start as a morally motivated act of legitimate vengeance, but it easily degenerates into the desire to kill for the sake of killing. Killers are driven to the solitary and asocial position of pure individuals who are not afraid of “living alone with the trees” (Rival forthcoming/b).

¹⁴ Rape and domestic violence are entirely absent from social relations. The only form of physical violence consists in spearing ‘enemies’ during a killing raid. It is most often exercised by men against men.

Sexed bodies in Trinidad: Erotica and health

If the Amazonian case demonstrates the possibility of a minimally objectified sexuality and the trade in sex-pics appears, at first, to illustrate the maximal objectification of sexuality in the sense of being abstracted out as thing in and of itself, then Trinidad presents an important third possibility for the comparative objectification of sexuality. Because of its continuous presence in dialogue, sexuality in Trinidad often appears as the maximally objectified perspective which seems to dominate most social relations. But in contrast to the case of sexpics, the ubiquity of sexuality in Trinidad is a sign of its importance as an idiom. So far from being abstracted as an autonomous medium of relationships, it becomes the linchpin which seems to hold together a huge field of practices and aspects of identity.

Research in recent years has continued to demolish the foundations of the crass stereotypes about race and sexuality that were once prevalent in the region, thus rendering the task of addressing sexuality directly easier. Even Fanon's (1986) most subtle and critical analysis of West Indian sexuality could be thought of as continuing the tradition of generalising 'black' sexuality in terms which, in other discourses, have been used to characterise people as essentially animalistic or primitivist. In contemporary Trinidad, however, the discourse of sexuality plays a central role in a multitude of social and cultural dimensions, for all the island's diverse populations, including groups who identify themselves as South Asian, Chinese and Middle Eastern, and who would be more commonly stereotyped as having anything but such a relationship with sexuality.

The research we are concerned with is quite diverse in as much as it includes highly detailed ethnographic accounts of the interaction between factory floor workers (Yelvington 1995 and 1996), the study of the use of health care centres by teenage mothers (McCartney unpublished), the role of sexuality with respect to general issues of modernity (Miller 1994) and the more specific arena of Carnival (Miller 1991). What emerges from this work is firstly that sexuality is a highly overt and constantly foregrounded mode of social relations. This is true of the sexual act itself, where there is a constant discourse around sex as comparative performance with attention to amounts of sex, types of sex, and sexual ability. A woman will stake her claim that few men could engage with her without risking a heart attack, and a man will be constantly concerned with the sexual encounters he may

claim to have achieved. But the act of sex is also surrounded by a vast additional discourse that includes many 'sweet talk' rhetorics, as well as comparative insults making use of sexual innuendo. Claims are equally prevalent about who makes babies for whom as the evidence for sex, and there are activities such as dance that become a form of 'virtual sex' in that they provide public spectacles for encounters which are very close to simulated sexual performance.

Earlier studies of sexuality in Trinidad (for example, Freilich 1969) analysed sexuality in connection to the state of gender relations *per se*, and compared it to similar issues of gender and power elsewhere. The fact that male sociality is formed through boasting about and achieving sexual relations with women was particularly stressed. More recent studies, however, have tended to elucidate the more specific and nuanced use of sexuality in Trinidad both in itself and increasingly as a larger idiom which does not relate simply to sexuality and gender as separate aspects of identity or practice but which instead examines how sexuality unites diverse fields and sometimes seems foundational to them all.

These later ethnographic observers then argue for an anthropological encounter with this phenomena which quickly goes beyond the superficiality of sex as an objectified arena directed only at itself as a topic. The importance of sex in Trinidad is clarified when it is seen as being about many other things that might not be related to this domain elsewhere. As Miller's (1991, 1994: 113-125) analysis of dance has shown, sex is above all an idiom. He researched a dance form called 'wining' which is characteristic of the many *fetes* (parties) that are most common in Carnival season but are also found at other times of the year. Wining is also the dominant dance movement within Carnival itself. The form of the dance clearly refers to sexual intercourse itself, and can be observed to operate as a discourse about the nature of sexual relations. Contemporary wining is dominated by women, especially during Carnival. Miller argued that as used in parties wining becomes an idiom through which the wider relationship between genders, which most commonly takes the form of acts of exchange, is developed as a commentary upon gender relations in general, as well as between any two particular individuals. Once established as marking the place occupied by sexual activity within gender relations, wining within contemporary Carnival is transformed by individual women into a largely autonomous dance, which then may be interpreted as the movement by which the larger history of Carnival as an objectification of freedom becomes a more specific experience of freedom

experienced as the repudiation of normative sociality.

Yelvington's (1995, 1996) work on the factory floor extends these concerns with sexuality as idiom. He suggests that flirting and sexual innuendo has become the main form in which power relations (both between the genders and between workers, and between managers and employers) have taken shape, and are exhibited and negotiated in daily practice. As in many other societies, skills developed in innuendo and allusion complement skills and reputations in the physical technologies of sexual practice, both with the same potential of becoming important components of power relations. These relations are as much about the tensions between competition and collaboration amongst peers as they are about living within hierarchised vertical relations evident in the organisation of the work place.

McCartney's (unpublished) work starts with the issue of health and health care. She found that while the state often resorts to a rhetoric that sees teenage pregnancy as a problem and evidence of unhealthy practices with unhealthy consequences, teenage pregnancy is actually prompted by a counter-discourse in which sex and having babies are the single most important forms by which many people recognise the evidence for good health. It is the lack of active sexual relations and a lack of consequential conception that is viewed as a major cause and sign of ill health. So far from the erotic nature of sexuality depending upon a separation from issues of reproduction, the phrase 'making babies' is crucial to any claim made by either males or females with respect to sexual prowess, access and above all sexual health.

From observations that start with issues of sexuality as an expression of health, McCartney then shows how these become the medium by which a person's maturation and development are understood. Sexuality thereby becomes fundamental to the sense of what it is to be a person. This then connects to Miller's observation (1994: 257-290) that the core contradictions of modernity in Trinidad which in turn are projected upon a diverse range of distinctions such as ethnicity, age and class is itself increasingly reliant upon sexuality or its negation as its medium of objectification. As such the place of sexuality is best viewed within a comparative understanding of the potential of sexuality as a mode of human objectification. The degree of importance given to sexuality makes it more, rather than less, subject to clear limitations and moral discourses determining the definition of what is taboo or transgressive. In many respects, Trinidad appears a highly prurient society which clearly excludes

forms of sexuality that are regarded as deviant. And the level of censorship of what in other areas would be seen as relatively mild forms of sexual transgression, is generally high.

Generalisations are obviously much more problematic when talking about Trinidadian society than either the small-scale setting of the Huaorani, or the self-selected group of people studied in Slater's ethnography of sex-pic exchanges on the internet. Miller (1994) provides a much more detailed argument about how such generalisations should be read with respect to the diversity of contemporary Trinidadian experience. There are important sections of the population for whom these statements simply would not hold. He suggests that, although there might be a tendency for this dominance of sexuality and sexual technique to be associated with males, it is no more than a tendency; the clearest examples of this use of sexuality as discourse are actually found amongst women. Although McCartney's, Miller's and Yelvington's research involved a wide range of people asserting a variety of ethnic identities, in all three cases the research was dominated by female rather than male informants.

The case of Trinidad extends our attempt to use anthropology to forge a third path between the essentialism of psychological and of some psychoanalytical perspectives, and the relativism of some of the recent approaches to sexuality as performance. To be a person in Trinidad returns one to the materiality of sexuality, i.e. to the sexual act itself, the discourses of sex, and the basic question as to what sex is good for as a medium. While in some social contexts the key to sexuality is the social relation between those involved, Trinidadians exploring the possibilities of freedom demonstrate the ability to separate sex out from any concomitant social relation between sexual partners. A degree of engagement in wining or sex itself does not necessarily betoken the emergence of a social relation between those engaged. And if babies become signs of the health of their biological progenitors, neither of them may act as actual parents. The kin connections can move directly to the father's female relatives, while virtually missing out the father himself (see also Smith 1988 for a comparison with Jamaica).

The case of Trinidad demonstrates how difficult it is to generalise about the implications of sexuality as a highly objectified medium. Objectification does not here imply separation out from the wider context of sociality or discourses which comment upon sexuality. Rather, the relatively abstracted form of sex and sex discourses mean that this contextualisation may be very different from that which

might be expected if we assume that we know what the consequences of having sex or making babies would be in some particular region.

Conclusion: Human sexuality, potentialities and objectifications

Our reason for picking these three ethnographic cases is that if each of them written in isolation could be disregarded as exotic or aberrant, placed together, we wish to argue, they suggest that sexuality and gender relations more generally are too pliable an arena of social practice to be limited to issues such as sexual desire as a motif of liberation or the parameters of gender conceptualisation. It is not the ethnography but the theoretical speculation on the utopian potentialities of sexuality that needs to be rescinded in favour of such encounters with the comparative normativity of sexuality within society. There also seems to be a wider sphere of sociality at stake here, and this is the case whether the objectification of sexuality is minimal as amongst the Huaorani or maximal as in the trade of sexpics on the internet. Sexpics traders on IRC still connect transgressive sexuality with mundane sociality, including the care of reproduction, even if the connection is not as direct and as immediate as it is amongst the Huaorani.

While the poststructuralist appropriation of Bataille celebrates the liberation represented by the transgressive, a study of sexuality in social formations returns to the Durkheimian roots of Bataille's work, emphasising transgression as a mechanism for creating and maintaining moral orders. It also returns us to the influence of Mauss on the study of comparative objectification. Some of the ethnographic material is compatible with Bataille's understanding of the moral foundation of sexuality. For example, the interpretation of wining as a medium for a quasi-transcendental release from the world in Trinidad (Miller 1991) or the use of sexpics to transcend the conventional limitations of the concept of the self. Both of these suggest that wider segments of society, and not just a social theorist, may follow the logics of abstracted eroticism as part of an exploration of the potentialities of modernity. On the other hand, these three case-studies firmly refute that any construction of the erotic is fundamentally dependent upon its separation from what Bataille regarded as 'functionalist' sexuality represented in particular by the connection between sexuality and reproduction. This assumption, part of a more general anti-functionalism central to Bataille's thinking,

not only constituted one of the basic tenets of his work, but it has also continued to have a considerable influence on contemporary theories of sexuality and gender.

Our starting point was a study of the Huaorani which comes to serve as an example of just how far the element of separation – which we might have assumed to be intrinsic – can in fact be denied within ordinary human practices. Amongst the Huaorani, sexuality as a domain is entirely subservient to the concerns over reproductive sociality. Both sex and sensuality are directed to the making of other people than oneself. In a society where personal autonomy is a paramount value, individuals do not become subjects through loss or through the narcissistic satisfaction of erotic desires. Any potential for abstracted objectification is denied in its diffusion within the larger social formation. It would be easy enough to bracket the Huaorani as outside of such debates – as an ‘exotic’ Amazonian example typical only of anthropological relativism. This is why it is juxtaposed here with two other case-studies. For the relevant section of the Trinidadian population we find the opposite situation, where sexuality *per se* is objectified to an extraordinary degree. Yet, far from depending upon a separation from reproduction, ‘making babies’ is the most important sign of erotic achievement. The evidence that they have made babies is what gives people adult status, a status which is fundamentally based on erotic power. More, sex and pregnancy are seen to be as essential to bodily health as food and sleep. The exchange of sexpics on the internet may at first appear a clear case of such separation, but the point of encountering this practice through the laborious methodology of ethnography is to explore the wider context of this practice. It thereby becomes evident that those involved formulate and reflect upon the nature of their on-line sexual activities within the context of fairly conventional notions of domestic relations: for example, assumed norms of nuclear families, sexual fidelity/monogamy, and strict separation of adult sexuality from children. These norms often also structure or contain the range of fantasy and representation that is exchanged. Here too the body and its pleasures should be interpreted in the context of social relations of production and reproduction.

What is true for the specific case of reproduction is also more generally the case for the contextualisation of sexuality within normative and moral orders which define the nature of sociality in each case. Amongst the Huaorani an unobjectified sexuality remains within the diffused culture of sociality. In Trinidad what the state condemns as unhealthy is understood by most of the population as a primary sign of good health. Visitors are shocked by public cross-sexual rubbing of genitals, but

those who engage in such behaviour are equally shocked by visitors kissing in public. Even within the trade in sexpics on the internet, an arena that would usually be designated as transgressive, those who trade do so within normative conventions partly established within this practice and considerably overlapping with very conventional notions that underpin everyday moral orders.

In conclusion, too much of the discussion of sexuality and gender today continues to be merely an adjunct of academics attempting to work through the potential logical implications of modernity, where sexuality and increasingly gender is assumed to be a proving ground for liberationist potentialities. Within such debates it is only too easy to imagine how our examples might be employed, the Huaorani encased within primitivist discourses about Amazonian Indians, and the internet trade celebrated as the vanguard of technicist definitions of virtual futures. What we have tried to do here is to return both to the comparative study of mundane sexuality as normative social practice, which in no way diminishes the insights to be gained from addressing the extraordinary ability of human social groups to explore the range of differential objectifications that we isolate as sexual practice. We have shown that both eroticism and reproduction form integral parts of human sexuality, defined in terms of moralities and socialities in which sexual behaviour is always found to be embedded. By doing so, we have looked at forms and mechanisms of sexual objectification, without separating relational aspects from the performative construction of gender.

This paper began with a discussion of the dominance of social constructionist perspectives on gender. As will now be evident, we are not trying to demolish the foundational conceptualisation of gender as socially constructed; what we have done is to challenge the consequences and implications of this observation. What we challenge is the degree to which a philosophical discussion of the logical implications of social constructionism becomes conflated with our attempt to understand the practice of gender. Merely recognising the 'what could be' distorts our understanding because it pushes us towards an emphasis upon the extreme potentiality of aspects of gender such as sexuality as performance. By returning to the comparative examination of gender and sexuality in specific cultural contexts we return to the central task of empathetic understanding of what most people do. What our case-studies show is that it would be quite wrong to assume that the mundane is somehow less interesting or instructive. In many ways the three cases are all equally astonishing for teaching us the diversity of what can be experienced as mundane. This also encourages us to return to those elements

of gender such as reproduction, ethics, health and non-eroticised sensuality which may have been neglected in philosophical speculation upon the modernist logics of gender and sexuality.

It seems to us that Huaorani, Trinidadian and Cyber views on human sexuality cannot be subsumed under the postmodern representation of sexuality as founded in desire and constructed in discourse. The Amazonian case demonstrates the possibility of a sexuality which never becomes an abstracted thing in and of itself, and is entirely subservient to social reproduction. In Trinidad, by contrast, both men and women demonstrate their success at performing highly eroticised and self-gratifying sexuality by making babies, but in no way as a means to achieve long-lasting relationships conducive to co-parenthood. Both men and women believe that not having sex is extremely unhealthy (celibacy causes headaches, back troubles, and, eventually, madness), and that having sex without producing babies is equally unhealthy. Given that all sex in Trinidad is highly eroticised, the effect is to make reproduction subservient to the erotic, which is why young girls will strive to have babies despite all the efforts of their mothers to dissuade and prevent them from becoming pregnant. As for the internet traders and chatters, domestic life and pornographic activities, which are apparently constituted as two entirely separate forms of objectification, can only exist in relation to each other. Slater's ethnography shows that the objectification of sexuality on-line appears to be fuelled at least as often by the urge to order sexuality (and IRC relationships and practices themselves) along ethical lines as it is by the desire to gratify it transgressively. Cultural norms regulate both relational domains, as well as their articulation. As we see it, the potentiality for human sexuality must be understood from the viewpoint of a particular creative actor, culture, which, in the end, can be regarded as the normativity of a given population. All sexuality falls under a normative regime of some sort.

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