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Is Gender Studies Singular?

Stories of Queer/Feminist Difference and Displacement

In response to the ‘Mariage pour Tous’ movements for state recognition of lesbian and gay couples in France throughout 2013 and 2014, there was a profound religious and heterosexual backlash that sat somewhat at odds with the international fantasy of French tolerance for freedom of sexual expression.¹ At this point in time, those of us living in Europe or the US are becoming increasingly used to seeing homosexual rights held up as a marker of democratic difference to police immigration and demonise Islam as most profoundly homophobic and patriarchal (Butler, “Sexual Politics”; Puar, “Mapping US Homonormativities”).² Yet in an interest twist, homosexual rights were being marked out in this French context not as a marker of democratic freedom and progress, but as profoundly un-French, and a specifically American import signalling the ills of globalisation in contrast to national pride (Fassin, “La Démocratie Sexuelle”; Fassin, Le Sexe Politique). Indeed, this placing of homosexuality outside “Frenchness” was a move shared by members not only of the far right Front Nationale and Christian and Muslim religious groups, but also by members of a more liberal coalition.³ The catalyst, the argument went, was the importing of “gender theory” – “la-théorie-du-genre” (singular) – which suggests that gender roles are constructed rather than natural complements that make up the body politic, a view leading inevitably to homosexualisation of the state and to a challenge to national pride and identity (Scott, Only Paradoxes to Offer; Fassin, “National Identities”). Gender theory, this perverse coalition argued, was being taught not just in universities, but also in primary schools,

where innocent French children were having their natural difference upset by boys being forced to play with dolls and girls with trains, thus signalling the end of democratic Frenchness. Stories of the pernicious character of “*la théorie-du-genre*” flooded the papers in the UK as well as in France, as detractors insisted that ‘theorising’ gender would result in anarchy, and calling on concerned parents to take their children out of school on a national day of action.⁴ In contrast, the French people were called on to celebrate the natural and complementary gender difference seen to lie at the heart of the democratic French state.⁵

One might point to the irony of this staging by conservative forces of the links between gender, sexuality, and nation, while the Left and feminism has been trying for eons to make these same links visible, with considerably less public success. The right-wing cultural and political coalition knows indeed that when we challenge the biological base of gender, we do erode the potency of the symbolic heterosexual couple that lies at the heart of French democratic refusal of “difference,” as Joan Scott has elucidated in *The Politics of the Veil*. Although that “difference” is framed primarily in racial terms (with its refusal being state mandated to the extent that racial statistics are not kept in France), its ambivalent recognition and repression relies on sexual difference as fully naturalised.⁶ “Becoming French” as part of necessary assimilation necessitates not only relinquishing cultural, religious, and racial otherness, but also recognising the gendered complementarity that underwrites (heterosexual) “*parité*” (Scott, *Parité!*). To challenge that “non-difference,” to make it visible, is thus to raise other spectres of difference in French politics and identity as never entirely eradicated, and indeed Frenchness as never really achievable for those

who cannot be assimilated into that white, secular-Christian couple emblem. In framing “gender as a social construction” as intolerable for the French nation, the reliance of French sexual exceptionalism and its veneer of tolerance are revealed as wholly conditional on the privileging of the male, heterosexual gaze. And in further framing this “incursion” into peaceful French sexual difference as an immigration problem, such disruption is positioned as a problem of globalisation and homogenisation. That this border transgression is from the US rather than North Africa, that more usual *bête noire* for French fantasies of the pure nation, is of course ideal: it marks the resistance to “la-théorie-du-genre” as articulated from the position of the underdog rather than that of the racist or xenophobe. In this sense, we might say that the figures of “the veiled woman”, “the married gay or lesbian” or the “non-gender-readable child” constitute parallel interruptions to the unstated white, heteronormative order of French civil society and public space.

The response to this extraordinary set of representations and events from feminists and those on the Left has been to point out that there is no single theory of gender, and to orient us towards multiplicity and away from singularity (Butler, Fassin and Scott). Critics such as Eric Fassin have argued in similar vein that these fantasies of a single theory of gender (one that demolishes French democracy and culture), strengthen the position of heterosexual women in particular as guardians of national identity, providing a useful alliance between anti-globalisation and anti-feminist sentiments without having to draw too explicitly on an increasingly controversial racialised anti-immigrant discourse (Fassin, Le Sexe Politique). This call to multiplicity in the face of resurgent singularity makes complete sense, for both political and theoretical reasons.

Further, it is a way of pointing to the actually very long tradition of theorising gender, sex, and sexuality in France, one which is so strong that the very Anglophone scholars who are constructed as the “queer threat to French exceptionalism” might themselves be understood to have first borrowed from a diverse French feminist history in order to underpin their own epistemic and political challenges to sexed and gendered nationalism.⁷

This pluralising response to right-wing invocations of singular, fixed gender and sexuality as part of nationalist projects historically and contemporarily is not a move only in France, of course, but one shared across national and international sites of institutionalisation. At the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), my own institution, our core course has been named “Gender Theories in the Modern World,” for similar reasons: to pluralise terms that might otherwise conflate sex and gender within a colonial or nationalist history.⁸ This simple “s” suggests at once that there are multiple theories and histories to the field of “Gender Studies” (also plural) and marks quite clearly the difference between a singular assumption of “gender” that will always default to a naturalised, complementary model. It gives me great pleasure of course to know that I might be able to resist the European spread of the right with this same “s” and that I might be able to continue teaching this foundation course sure in the knowledge that I am resisting the reproduction of heterosexual and racist framings of gendered complementarity... Alternatively, that pluralisation is demonstrated by multiplying the terms themselves rather than the theory, adding to a list of objects that makes plain the limits to singular thinking and orientations, and the dangers of exclusion that attend the singularity of both object and politics. Thus we move from “Women’s Studies”

historically, to “Gender Studies”, and even to “Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies” (as at Yale). While some pluralisation is implied already in the term “studies”, an issue of approach rather than object that I return to later in this essay, these displacements or additions primarily indicate a multiplication of sites and objects of study that resist the restriction of feminist or queer politics to singular objects. So in the case of a move from “women” to “gender” what is often being marked is the opening up of the field to include men and masculinity, queer or transgender (as subjects and objects), an indication that we have learned from the determinist, or even essentialist, histories of our own modes of inquiry.⁹ Such temporal and spatial pluralisations seek to make feminism less easy to co-opt as a political and institutional project, and mark it as always already running counter to the take-up of gender equality by neo-liberal or neo-conservative states and actors. Where “gender” belongs to “feminism” then, it must be plural in order not to be “singular” in precisely this French mode. The hope comes to reside in the object itself then, and its ability to carry both external plurality, and the plurality of our own desire.

It does of course make sense to pluralise and multiply as a way of highlighting the problems of the singular (in the world and in our own institutional practices), but we also need to tune our ears to the alarm bells whose tones echo through that history of this politicised field. I want to suggest, in fact, that in moving too quickly to pluralisation we risk ceding the terrain of “gender,” preferring to participate in a fantasy of escape that cleanses us of the amenability of this concept to the violence of nationalist projects, rather than to explore the complex terrain of “gender” that we inhabit. In so doing, the take-up of gender in ways we do not appreciate can be more easily framed as

straightforward co-optation, though of course this raises the question of who the “we” is in such a fantasy of separation in the first place.¹⁰ In wanting to be heroines of plural, multiple, international feminisms (not bad aims in themselves) the danger is that we accept the conservative framing of singular “gender” as precisely heterosexual, the property of women, essentialist and racist. In accepting that gender does not already signify multiplicity, I am concerned that alternative objects and perspectives are too readily positioned as doing entirely different work, as superseding (at best banal, at worst heteronormative, essentialist) gender with promises of freedom from conservatism. As Robyn Wiegman has pertinently noted in Object Lessons, this admirable desire to escape conservative alignments that coalesce in the object in the name of a false democracy with violence at its heart over invests in optimistic progress narratives and in the capacity of some objects to resonate as more plural than others. For Wiegman, institutional feminism (in the academy) chases after the right object (whether “women”, “gender” or “sexuality”), the one that will be plural and thus rescue feminism from its vexed relationship to the state or to the nation.

In what follows, I explore the mobilisation of queer theory (note we do not need to pluralise this, its multiplicity is presumed) as that which displaces gender theory in a bid for ensured transgression; and I propose rethinking “gender” as a scene of multiplicity as a more accountable institutional and political mode.¹¹

Histories

At a conference at Sussex University in 2013 titled “(Im)possibly Queer International Feminisms”, I found myself feeling increasingly boxed in by the preumptions attending the relationship between feminist and queer scholarship and politics. The conference was intended to be a forum for queer and feminist theorists to “update” and engage International Relations theory. Despite the conference title, I increasingly noticed a move in which International Relations as a discipline was being updated through its citation of and engagement with queer theory and practice over and above feminism, which was instead considered to be more aligned with mainstream International Relations Theory. This move was enabled by suturing feminism to its mobilisation within an aggressive foreign policy in Europe and the US, through the familiar argument that “gender equality” is part of what is being exported in a range of violent interventions in the Middle East. Of course, and as I have been arguing so far in this essay, such take-ups are indeed part of the history of how “gender” is taken up as a political alibi. But what was of particular interest to me at the conference was that this seemed to be the primary mode of citation of gender and feminism. Meanwhile, and hardly surprisingly, most of the conference attendees (particularly the younger ones) were keen as a result to align themselves with the queer critique over the feminist co-optation, in order to mark their difference from the mainstream and from violence. Since queer theory was framed as displacing (critically and temporally) feminist approaches to politics, to align oneself firmly with queer theory over feminism also marked the people doing so as fully contemporary themselves, as part of the present and future rather than a necessarily co-opted feminist past. Predictably enough, I found myself following the pluralisation route by raising the question of multiple feminisms past and

present as a counter to this tendency, but was also increasingly uncomfortable with the ways that this dynamic positioned me as a kind of “feminist mother” rather than the exciting and transgressive queer subject that I would of course prefer to be read as. In citing the multiplicity of feminism I allowed myself the pleasure of the fantasy described above: that I could remain counter-hegemonic and edgy if only feminisms were properly understood. But here the contest was not between those feminisms and the conservative forces that harness “gender” in ways I want to resist, but between a fully co-opted feminism and a transgressive queer theory and politics. My response was to try for a third mode (plural feminisms) despite its confirmation of its object “gender” as indeed irrecoverable in singular mode.

This teleology, in which queer displaces feminism and is positioned as more theoretically and political sophisticated, and thus less amenable to co-optation, is of course hardly new. Indeed, one might say that the inaugural queer moment emerges precisely out of a consideration and ongoing tension of the relationship between “gender” and “sexuality” as objects of analysis and of queer and feminist projects as both different and interlinked. In her foundational piece “Thinking Sex,” Gayle Rubin makes her case for separating out these key terms, with the aim of rescuing a history of sexuality from a history of gender as structural oppression of women, and allowing a distinct history of marginal sexualities free reign. Rubin’s concern here is less to demonise feminism and gender as its object but to try and open up a history of sexuality that challenges the moral panic that attends it. For Rubin, it is not possible to have a history of marginal and demonized sexuality if we subsume sexuality within gender, or lesbianism within feminism: the former cannot be entirely contained in the latter

in each case.¹² But in the process we might say that feminist “gender” becomes over-associated with oppression in the process. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick similarly takes up Rubin’s call as an institutional question of “proper objects” of queer and feminist studies, proposed as sexuality and gender respectively, and in so doing she might be said to have performatively constructed these as different fields. While queer authors have always been generously critical of the pitting of the one against the other, Sedgwick and Rubin’s understandable and important desires to inaugurate a field attentive to sexuality’s difference from gender and to move away from a perceived feminist collapsing of the two, has had a number of unfortunate effects.

Thus we might say that because of the history of emphasis, or even emphasis on history, this “separate” study of sexuality was always bound to attach to lesbian, gay (or bisexual) identities, even as these were being deconstructed, because sexuality as an object was only becoming visible in the moment of its severance from gender. Sexuality, for Rubin and Sedgwick, was proposed as not gender, not only gender, or not gender in its heteronormative modes; in the process, I want to argue that “gender” itself became fatally sutured to that heteronormativity. In this separation, then, feminism’s (now) proper object “gender” was rather too easily re-heterosexualised, first as not providing enough of an account of that other sexual history (as Carole Vance suggested in her landmark book Pleasure and Danger in 1984), and second as denoting the most structurally reproductive and normative aspects of sexuality, precisely those that an emergent queer theory was keen to distance itself from. Thus where sexuality rather than gender has remained attached to a uniquely feminist project this has primarily been as a way of emphasizing its material miseries:

sexual violence, trafficking, reproductive labour and kinship. Where “sexuality” as an object is claimed as having a history other than that of the worst excesses of violence against women or male dominance, it is more easily sutured to queer theory, which has done its best to divest itself of these constraining modes. One institutional implication of this inaugural separation has been that courses on “sexuality” (particularly in the context of a “Gender and Sexuality Studies” curriculum) are often actually LGBT or Queer Studies courses, since this is what the object has come to signify. It remains rare (though of course not unknown) for there to be “sexuality” courses that combine LGBT issues and queer theory and politics with sessions on abortion, romance, sexual freedom or sexualisation of culture, reproductive technology, or tourism. A notable exception to this is often the inclusion of sessions on “sex work/prostitution” but this is of course partly because the debate on this issue is itself split between one that focuses on structural and fundamental oppression and one that focuses on “choice” and alternative histories of labour and expression.¹³ A further implication is that “lesbian feminism” so easily becomes a curious relic in such a supercessionist history, with lesbians forced to choose between allegiance to a “heterosexualised” feminism with its structural modes of power, or a queer play that may not resonant particularly well with the experiences of being lesbian male-focused LGBT or queer social world.¹⁴

In Anglo-American frames this damning attachment of feminism to its proper object was further reinforced through the characterisation of the mis-named “French feminism” as providing a whitewashed object – sexual difference – in contrast to a plural postcolonial subject aware of the multiple intersectional historical and contemporary forces that forge her. Gayatri Spivak’s “French

Feminism in an International Frame” in particular secured a perception of sexual difference as irredeemably essentialist in sexual and racial terms, as hopelessly reductive and naturalising, and importantly as “Eurocentric.” Despite an earlier framing by US theorist Toril Moi of sexual difference theory as postmodern feminist theory, such representations of sexual difference as accounts of the (unmarked) feminine resignification of phallogentrism persist. And despite Christine Delphy’s deft intervention into the argument to challenge the characterization of “sexual difference” as specifically “French” and to highlight the variety of feminist theory written in France, the long history of French materialist feminism (which Delphy herself inaugurated) is consistently ignored (Delphy “The Invention of French Feminism”).¹⁵ Finally, Ranjana Khanna has suggested that “sexual difference” itself needs to be rethought and reclaimed from these renderings of it as essentialist or even racist. Khanna argues that sexual difference theorists, and in particular Cixous, have in fact been consistently attentive to the character of French nationalism (particularly in relation to Algeria), challenging rather than reproducing the image of womanhood that underwrites the body politic as white and heterosexual. It is only in a transnational encounter with sexual difference that reads from an Anglophone and particularly US position, Khanna writes, that sexual difference can be marked as free of consideration of race and politics. For the purposes of my argument here, this erroneous critique of sexual difference as racist in particular and as heterosexist in general (supporting oppositional gendered positions), has only shored up queer theory’s attachment to sexuality as a potentially more fluid object than sex or gender. And indeed, the earlier postcolonial critique has meant that “sexual difference” remained a no-go area

for Anglophone scholars of a queer, postcolonial sensibility for some decades. Consider, even now, that where there are materialist “returns” to the body among Anglophone scholars they tend to go via Gilles Deleuze, Elizabeth Grosz or Bruno Latour, not via Luce Irigaray or Helene Cixous, whose work remains steeped in institutional and political anxiety.¹⁶

At no point have these categorical oppositions been uncontested, of course. The now classic text Feminism Meets Queer Theory from 1997 (from the 1994 issue of Differences) troubled our assumptions about these relationships even as queer theorists were making their institutional mark. Thus, Butler, in her essay “Against Proper Objects,” famously critiques the idea of proper objects at all, trying to open up the relationship among terms as unstable rather than fixed,¹⁷ while Bidy Martin anticipates the problematic positioning of queer as transgression in terms of its implications for a sense of “the ordinary life” so important to queer people as a mode of survival. And in her landmark piece on “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation” from 1988, Teresa de Lauretis positions gender as a vibrant “scene” of animation and fantasy central to sexual desire, refusing to endorse “gender” as someone else’s heteronormative object, and claiming its centrality to a queer imagination in all its slippery glory (see also de Lauretis, The Practice of Love). De Lauretis has much to teach us still, I think – about the openness of “gender” as a site of investigation (filled with misrecognition, displacement, and possessive intent, as well as pleasure and resignification), and too about ways of opening up race and class identifications and re-routings as part of these same desiring scenes. For de Lauretis, “race” cannot and should not be evacuated from scenes of desire, however uncomfortable its presence may make us, a point I return to below. Again, the

history of citation practices shores up these political and intellectual histories: de Lauretis and Newton have seen much less citation than Butler, Sedgwick or Rubin in the queer canon both sides of the Atlantic.

Fast forward twenty years and this debate about feminist/queer relationships, about their proper objects and subjects, is still ongoing, in some similar and some different ways that reflect patterns of institutionalisation, location, and politics over this period of time. In work such as Janet Halley's Split Decisions, for example, feminist criticism is positioned as caught in the gender and sexual oppositions it wants to contest, while queer theory emerges to take up a more imaginative and freeing mantle. And as I began with, at conferences in the last few years, I have found myself querying the implicit or explicit positioning of queerness on the side of everything that is transformative or creative, while poor old feminism is consigned to the reproduction of dull – and already fully known – critique. In the sexual division of theoretical labour, queer theorists and not feminist theorists still appear to be having all the fun. One of the keys in the contemporary staging of this relationship remains the question of race and identity, but one very important difference to the staging of this relationship in this present is that both feminism and sexuality studies have now had their objects roundly critiqued.

As discussed above, we might see anxiety around “gender” from a queer perspective as taking two main forms. The first, following Rubin and Sedgwick, is the unease with gender's ties to naturalised “sex” and heteronormative or reproductive frames (Butler, Gender Trouble). The second, following theorists such as Lisa Duggan, is its co-optation by the nationalist, militarist or global corporate interests of late capitalism. The desire to liberate on the basis of

gender equality in particular has for so long been part of colonial and contemporary acts of aggression and so linked to the fantasy of the racialised non-free other that to even mention this feels vaguely redundant. The association of “women” or “gender purity” with nation and national interests so central to suffrage campaigns historically and postcolonial nation building the world over is echoed in “gender’s” take-up as an alibi for interventionist violence, and in its profoundly bureaucratic modes of “mainstreaming”. There are several fundamental ironies that attend these moves: take, for example, the demand for Turkey to demonstrate appropriate gender equality measures in order to join the EU, while the UK’s gender equality index score has become steadily worse over the last decade (it has the highest percentage of women in full-time employment in Europe, but wages are the most deflated). Or consider the World Bank’s focus on “empowering women” in India (Wilson) or Mexico (Molyneux) to take loans for small businesses because they are more likely to pay them back (gendered behaviour being perversely linked to gender transformations) while the same organisation insists on low wages in ways we know have a disproportionately negative effect on women and children. Such paradoxes are the very stuff of gender of course, and the ability to continue to believe in “gender equality” despite its history of contrary use is perhaps another sign of its extraordinary power as an open scene of fantasy attachments (to return to de Lauretis). These continuities between colonial pasts and colonial presents are not left un-contested of course. They are critiqued roundly as forms of the worst kinds of co-optation, cynical alibis that deflect attention from the vigour of capitalism in Duggan’s framing, or as colonial feminisms that inaugurate precisely the need for a pluralisation indeed.

Duggan is important, because it is she who links the take up of gender equality with that of sexuality in the field of nationalism and international agendas. While sexuality scholars might have sought to disidentify from feminism's purported object we might say that they are now confronted with sexual identity as reducible to its mainstreamed rights modes in familiar vein. Thus, as many theorists of homonormativity and later homonationalism have pointed out (Puar, "Mapping US Homonormativities"; Haritaworn; Bracke), gay and lesbian subjects who are white, happily coupled, or monogamous, and happily consumerist and nationalist (Hennessy), have come to occupy the position of a "national treasure" which acts at home, at the border, and elsewhere to ensure that contemporary citizenship can be represented as tolerant and democratic. As Jasbir Puar has pertinently noted with respect to the post 9/11 US political and cultural context, white secular homosexuality stands as a marker of difference within an imagined "clash of civilisations" in particular, where Islam is always homophobic (as well as uniquely patriarchal), and American identity is always sexually tolerant and in favour of gender equality. In a European context, as is familiar at this point from Butler's analysis of the citizenship tests in the Netherlands (versions of which can also be found in Germany, the UK and Norway), not only must a would-be citizen show clear signs of recognition of the legal status of same sex couples and the rights of women to bear their breasts in public, they must also demonstrate appropriate affect to show that they find displays of same-sex affection and women's breasts lovely or better still neutral, but certainly not disgusting or sinful (Butler, "Sexual Politics").¹⁸ Homosexual equality is not used as the primary alibi basis war – yet – though instances of extreme homophobic violence are cited as markers of

profound difference (e.g. in Afghanistan, Iraq or most recently Syria, as well as Uganda most typically) from the tolerance of countries that actually continue to demonstrate ambivalence towards homosexuality.

In this framework, queer studies and queer scholars can only retain their marginal transgressive potential (as compared to feminism) to the extent that they embrace the transnational critique of neo-liberal capitalist and militarist interests. They are required – as feminists long have been with respect to “gender” – to divorce themselves from “sexuality” and LGB standpoints in order to be visibly anti-authoritarian and anti-nationalist. Queer studies used to be able to do this by moving away from “gender” as an object (as co-opted, as heterosexual, even as whitewashed, but also as importantly feminist) in ways I have been suggesting throughout this essay. It now has to do this in relation to its own bourgeois and co-opted object, and it has done so with considerable fervency. Called upon to decide between gay rights agendas and Muslim rights to recognition (or non-incarceration and freedom from torture) queer theorists have sided against identity and for transnational solidarity in ways mirror feminist theorists. But as Fatima El-Tayeb, Jin Haritaworn and Eric Fassin (“National Identities”) have all argued, to be asked to choose between gay rights or Muslim rights is in fact no choice at all.¹⁹ But there are also consequences to this fervent certainty of the right side to be on that bear on the questions of proper objects, pluralisation, and the ground of transgressive critique. A queer critique of homonationalism in particular will appear on occasion to forget that heteronormativity is quite alive and well in most contexts of citizenship, policing the border as it long has, privileging opposite-sex couples with impunity; but one could be forgiven for thinking that gay and lesbian subjects were dominant

across Europe unless queering their own national attachments such is the force of this theoretical and political movement (see Brown for a trenchant critique of this tendency). Further too the sprinting away from the proper object of sexuality as fast as one can - for dear, transgressive and critical life, one might say - produces its own crisis, since one can only displace sexuality as an object so far.²⁰

Ironically enough perhaps, it seems that “sexuality” has become the same kind of poisoned chalice for queer studies as “gender” has been for feminism. Despite Rubin and Sedgwick’s best efforts to keep the two objects separate, they may have come to do similar work in the end. For queer theorists, the price of inhabiting a transgressive anti-capitalist position in the present is the disavowal of the object that brought the field into being. “Sexuality” has to be displaced as the “bad object” that someone else carries or is sutured to, causing a splitting at the heart of the queer project, just as it does at the heart of the feminist project. So too the circularity of political critique in this evacuation effort bears some further scrutiny, since neither feminists nor (renamed) gay and lesbian scholars necessarily accept the gift of the singular that has been assigned to them. First we are given our object (even if we refuse it – “gender” is yours, “sexuality” yours, “race” yours, and the vexed etcetera). Then the object turns out to represent rather than dismantle the power relations that contain and constraint that object, and the subjects and fields so associated become similarly tarnished: old fashioned, outmoded, or dangerous and even violent. And well they may be. We must leave them behind in a progressive move towards multiplicity and away from singularity, away from power and towards freedom, away from co-optation and towards transcendence. But something else happens here too, even

if we think it might be an idea to move away from objects that are about to blow. And this is that there is an over-association of power with the objects themselves – and the people who do not want to relinquish them – rather than with the discursive and material power relations that give those objects meaning. Strangely, we make of the object a peculiar fetish at precisely the moment we turn away from it.

Interventions

There are several ways that scholars have attempted to intervene into these dilemmas to challenge the over-association of these objects with normativity and others with transgression in and of themselves. One approach is a theoretical one that challenges the assumed linear flow from one object to another, or from singularity to multiplicity as an inexorable historical movement. Wiegman's work on this issue is particularly helpful, in my view, as she seeks to suture the terms "queer" and "feminist" precisely in order to resist the displacement of the latter by the former (Wiegman, "The Times We're In"). For Wiegman, if we insist on representing the terms "queer feminist" as overlapping and mutually constitutive ones, we can reimagine queer history as sharing space with feminist history, or even being indistinguishable from it at points. This tactic also positions "queer" as qualifying "feminist" rather than coming after or moving on from it. Wiegman's main strategy here is to privilege "queer feminist" entanglement over the displacement, and as part of that project she reframes Sedgwick's affective interventions in particular not as "coming after" debates about "gender" and "sexuality" as proper objects but as running parallel to them in mutually constitutive ways.²¹ In my own work too, I have employed similar

tactics to Wiegman, positioning Butler as a queer inheritor of a feminist tradition that she nevertheless remains within. If Butler is understood as embracing Monique Wittig's sexual materialism as much as she does Foucault's critique of identity categories, for example, the critical tradition that only sees her in opposition to feminism is disrupted. To play with Wiegman here, we might say that Butler is the feminist inaugurator of an emerging queer studies field; "feminist" could thus also be repositioned as the qualifier of the new, rather than the drag on its enthusiasm.

What I under-estimated at the time of writing, however, was the significance of international citation patterns and geopolitical location as a fundamental part of how the supercessionist relationship between feminism and the more sophisticated theories that displace it is represented. As my earlier discussion of a postcolonial representation of "sexual difference" theory suggests, the ability to position this body of theory as irredeemably Eurocentric is partially dependent on writing location. Consigning "sexual difference" to an essentialist and racist past that a more attentive postcolonial body of scholarship can escape from also depends on the spatial separation of continents and the designation of that theory as "French", as we have seen. In this frame, "queer studies" can only be European in its male antecedents (Foucault rather than Wittig) since its female or feminist ones are too fleshy a reminder of the difficulty of separating "sex" from "gender" in the first place. Close attention to what Spivak elsewhere refers to as "The Politics of Translation" might enable a more located set of interventions into the progress and loss narratives that underpin the teleology of "queer"/"feminist" separation, and look their broader citation as part of the maintenance of geo-political ordering, not only that of

institutionalised fields of inquiry. Such an approach also requires thinking carefully about how postcolonial scholars are crucial both to challenging the co-optation of “gender” and “sexuality” by forces outside of feminist and queer studies, and to their pitting against one another in teleological vein. And to return to the contemporary problem of “sexual equality” as part of how Western democracies imagine themselves at the forefront of history, a transnational approach is essential in pointing to this hubris and its pernicious racist effects; yet it also recasts “sexuality” itself as a tarnished object that queer scholars are loath to attach to (despite the impossibility for full disentangling themselves from it).

As I began the paper by pointing out, the question of “la-théorie-du-genre” relies in the French case on the fantasy of “gender theory” as a US import. This is of course a politically motivated and strongly homophobic move, but it points to an interesting area of resistance that does not require a defensive pluralisation in response. We might, for example, want to point to the various geo-political locations and histories of “gender” as an object of study in the first place. One approach has been to highlight the emergence of much US gender theory through the encounter with European theory in the first place, shifting the presumption of “import” to one of “export”, as we have seen. But so too “gender” has an international institutional life that points to competing understandings of the term that are political as well as geographical or linguistic. We encounter this complexity each year in the international context of LSE, where students’ different locations and languages mean that “gender” never means only one thing, and indeed often means something incommensurable rather than “additive”. Indeed, in many linguistic traditions it signifies in ways

that do not resonate with the Anglo-American traditions that suture it to “sex”, but rather to “nation” (through its roots in “genus”) as Donna Haraway has argued.²² It may indicate a policy bent in Scandinavia or for South Asian students used to gender mainstreaming, and a preference for “gender” can reference a conservative history of de-politicisation and erasure of the feminist peace movement in Croatia. In Portugal the significance of “gender studies” cannot be understood outside of the state’s desire for full European participation and its funding ensures that the field remain resolutely temporary and funded from outside national borders (Pereira), while the same designation can signal an openness to queer and transgender inclusion in the US or the UK. Such layering of what gender means, let alone whether and how one can study it, is perhaps a slightly different mode of pluralisation, one that is focused on complicating the “space” of gender rather than trying to move away from it in a teleology of displacement. Students and faculty have thus to negotiate these differences of meaning and political histories each year, and consistently fail (of course) to reconcile such opposed meanings effectively. These negotiations might be said to make visible the geo-politics of the terrain of “gender” instead of ceding it, as students and faculty struggle to make sense of these various located histories.²³

This understanding of “gender” as a space of negotiation and competing meanings at the institutional level finds resonance with a more psychoanalytic understanding of gender as a scene of complexity and negotiation. To return to de Lauretis, for her gender is never a static position hermetically sealed category. It is instead a dense site of fantasy, pleasure, and horror that is always already plural. It is a site of memory and displacement, pleasure and attachment, and our participation in “gender as a scene” produces us as sexualised and raced as well

as gendered subjects within a confusing yet compelling erotic economy. I am particularly interested in de Lauretis here, because of the ways in which, in her discussion of the film She Must Be Seeing Things, she also centres “race” as part of the desiring scene of “gender” (de Lauretis, “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation”). In the film, the butch racialised (Brazilian) subject and the white femme (American) subject play with and occupy these differences as sources of related pleasure and difficulty. To think of “race” and difference as part of the erotic scene of gender is a risky move of course: it is to engage a history of fetishisation of “the other” and risk eroticising racialised power in ways that reproduce rather than challenge racism. Indeed, one critique of de Lauretis might be that she seems to engage in a flattening parallelism that sees all power relations as somehow mimetic (rather than having specific, if overlaid) histories. And yet, I think de Lauretis’ risk is an important one, since her incorporation of racialised difference in the erotic play between protagonists in See Must Be Seeing Things seeks to theorise gender and sexual “scenes” of desire and disidentification as always already racialised.²⁴ For Ian Barnard, in his influential article “Queer Race,” de Lauretis is unique in her early invitation to consider “race” as part of the erotics of queer gender play, and he is cautiously enthusiastic about her attempts to theorise this as part of rather than antithetical to desire. De Lauretis’ surfacing of the vexed tension between “race” and “gender”, her placing of this tension at the centre of her scenes of troubled gendered play and queer desire as her protagonists argue and make up, begs the question both of the extent of the racialised nature of erotic encounter (with all its history) and at the same time suggests ways of treating difference across

different modes of power. Her gendered scenes, then, propose open and constrained play in which no question of difference can only signify in one way.²⁵

Continuing to think of “gender” as a malleable site of negotiation in both institutional and psychoanalytic terms, one might also foreground ways in which feminist epistemology has always insisted that researching gender is a process that performatively brings to life both the subject and the object of the research process and perhaps the field itself. For Lorraine Code, the task of “Taking Subjectivity into Account” is central to the feminist epistemology, both in terms of challenging the idea of objectivity in the research field, and in respect of the position of the knower who always has an influence on what can be known (Code 23-57). We might say that feminist epistemology has always foregrounded “gender” as a dynamic and shifting, but always located, object and subject, as Haraway reminds us in “Situated Knowledges.” Berger’s work on US and French queer and feminist encounters extends this tradition as she reminds us that gender is always relational, that it is actively engaged and transformed through the encounter between subject and object in ways that exceed and even challenge understandings of gender in terms of a heteronormative complementarity (Berger, The Queer Turn). For Berger the relational character of both “gender” and of the field of “queer feminist studies”, locates the critic in terms of attachments to that object they are never quite separate or alien from, but also never identical to (Berger, “Petite Histoire Paradoxale”). It is Berger, in my view, who is particularly helpful in bringing together the institutional, transnational and psychic dimensions of “gender” as a site of complex negotiation, investment and dynamism without which there would be no “gender studies.”

Might these different visions of gender as a scene we already participate in, and that others also do but never in quite the same way, allow us to repoliticise “gender” as a conflicted psychic and geo-political space that always risks reproducing its fusion with “sex” or “nation”, but which cannot be reduced to this risk? Such an understanding of gender as an unfinished, conflicted site of engagement is echoed by the discussion between Judith Butler, Éric Fassin and Joan Scott in their roundtable for Représentations, in which they propose gender as a way of asking questions of relationships and the world, rather than as a closed concept with singular (or even multiple, but final) meaning. Perhaps then, and in line with Berger’s intervention in The Queer Turn we might think of “gender” as a scene of call and response, a dense site of exchange of power and privilege, and of pleasure and possibility, rather than purely as a marker of distinct and naturalising oppositions that must be pluralised or abandoned. In a sense, one might ask why “gender” is particularly helpful as a concept that can carry the weight of this work. Indeed, as indicated earlier, Khanna makes a similar move to mine in her desire to re-animate “sexual difference” as a site of complex intersectionality that already has race and colonialism in mind. So perhaps this would be a better site for thinking the real and phantasmatic history of sex, race and space in ways I have been proposing throughout this article? But in thinking through why it is that I prefer to stick with exploring the multiplicity of “gender” rather than “sexual difference”, I have concluded that this best reflects my interest here in re-politicising that “inaugural” separation of sexuality and gender as proper objects of engagement for queer and feminist studies respectively. In other words, although “sexual difference” is clearly key for the transnational encounter between US and “French” feminisms and the

momentum of the field, it is “gender” that is positioned as the lost object of feminism in the ascendancy of queer studies as a unique site of transgression.

But perhaps I am too hasty in wanting to keep these sites separate. In closing, might we think again about the similarities of feminist modes of engaging the body, desire, and relationality promised by feminist theories of gender as structural oppression, sexual difference theory in its most expansive rewritings of “woman-as-nature”, or the Marxist-lesbian provocation of Wittig’s that “a lesbian is not a woman” that I have suggested interrupts a queer/feminist teleology. Here my interest is in returning to the lesbian figure I mentioned earlier; the one who falls outside of the competition between “queer” and “feminist” perspectives. She is associated with feminism in her guise as “lesbian feminist” and thus part of the anachronism that must be moved away from; yet she is also associated with queer transgression in her need for an/other history than one in which “gender” can only signify pain and not pleasure. To end this essay with Monique Wittig, it is her citation as primary antecedent to Butler that has enabled me to reimagine a history of queer studies as a feminist one. But it is perhaps more accurate to say that it allows me to reimagine the history of a queer/feminist relationship from the position of the ambivalent lesbian character that haunts the narrative (Hesford). Taking Wittig seriously challenges our “proper objects” in another way too. On the one hand, Wittig clearly participates in (or perhaps inaugurates) the queer tradition of proposing “sexuality” as different to “gender”. She famously insisted that a lesbian is not a woman, pointing directly to both the problem of heteronormative gender roles, and to the inability to contain lesbian subjectivity within its confines. Wittig would surely agree then that sexuality needs a different history and analysis that

feminism has not been attentive to. On the other hand, Wittig attaches firmly to her object, retaining “lesbian” as a category both to challenge “woman”, but simultaneously relying on it. Wittig’s “lesbian as not woman” keeps us entangled rather than split, one might say, in her refusal to abandon the paradox of complicity.

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Endnotes

¹ Joan Scott describes this fantasy of French tolerance in her ground-breaking book *Only Paradoxes to Offer*. For Scott the fantasy relies on gender complementarity within a heterosexual democratic imaginary.

² Indeed, the UK government did just this in the recent push for military intervention in Syria following the terrorist attacks in Paris, citing the particular barbarity of ISIS throwing gay men off buildings as well as systematically raping women. I return to this issue of Western governments claiming gender and sexual equality as uniquely theirs to export and protect, despite ongoing homosexual inequality and pitifully low rates of prosecution of men for rape in both the UK and the US, for example. "David Cameron Puts Case for Syrian Airstrikes" <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/nov/26/david-cameron-publishes-case-for-syria-airstrikes>

³ See: "French Parliament Allows Marriage Despite Protests" <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-gaymarriage-idUSBRE93K08B20130423>

⁴ See “French Parents Boycott Schools over ‘Gender Theory’ Scare”

<http://www.france24.com/en/20140129-france-sex-education-gender-discrimination-protest-school>; “French Government Foists ‘Gender Theory’ on Schools” <http://www.christian.org.uk/news/french-government-foists-gender-theory-on-schools/>; “French Parents in Panic over Warning of Lessons that ‘Boys Can be Girls’”

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/10602928/French-parents-in-panic-over-warning-of-lessons-that-boys-can-be-girls.html>; and

“Can Boys Wear Skirts?”

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/can-boys-wear-skirts-france-divided-by-gender-stereotyping-experiment-in-primary-schools-9574297.html>

⁵ In her critique of the Politics of the Veil, Scott is more direct still in her identification of the heteronormative underpinnings of the French national imaginary. For Scott, the challenge of “the veiled woman” is not her religious attachment, but her refusal to participate in the fantasy of French “democratic heterosexuality” in which women are available to the male gaze as part of what makes up civil society.

⁶ Christine Delphy’s recent work is instructive in this respect. In the context of increased right-wing anti-immigration feeling in France, she writes persuasively of the importance for feminists of not separating out sexism and racism (Delphy, “Antisexisme ou Antiracisme?”). And in her 2008 book Classer, Dominer: Qui Sont Les Autres (translated by Verso in 2015), Delphy insists on an integrated,

materialist feminist position that mobilises a particularly socialist intersectional approach.

⁷ Consider, for example, Judith Butler's debt to Monique Wittig and Luce Irigaray as the ground from which she departs in Gender Trouble; or Toril Moi's engagement with Simone de Beauvoir and Helene Cixous in Sexual/Textual Politics.

⁸ There is of course a rather profound irony in pluralizing "gender theories" only to retain "the modern world" as both singular and knowable. My thanks to Alyosxa Tudor for their critical insights on this point.

⁹ Importantly, however, these supposedly pluralising shifts have been contested, with the shift to "gender" from "women" being seen by many feminist commentators as a de-politicisation in line with institutional expectations of "inclusion" rather than the politicisation of knowledge (Stromquist; Threadgold). Renate Klein takes the strongest position on this last issue, renaming Gender Studies "hetero-relations studies" (Klein 81).

¹⁰ I developed an argument about amenability of feminist narratives in preference to co-optation in my book Why Stories Matter, and extend that here as a way of thinking about "gender" itself.

¹¹ Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson have recently co-edited a special issue on the problem of anti-normativity in queer theory. The demand for "queer" always to signal or enact a challenge to or subversion of the dominant or "hetero-norms" is both politically and theoretical restrictive in their view. The burden of transgression is indeed a hard one to bear for queer theory, as it continues to

mark the opposite of co-optation *avant la lettre*, a burden that becomes harder and harder to carry, as I outline in the next section.

¹² Rubin's foundational work is an engagement with the work of feminist theorists such as Adrienne Rich, for whom feminism and lesbianism must be thought together, and for whom structural gender oppression is inextricably intertwined with sexual oppression.

¹³ Interestingly, these "object" splits also become disciplinary splits, which queer theory belonging more firmly to the Humanities, and feminism to the Social Sciences. So firmly entrenched is a view of this history as "fact", that Heather Love can make a plea for queer scholars to develop a fuller engagement with empirical methods as though "sexuality" itself had not been studied outside of a Humanities approach.

¹⁴ See Elizabeth Freeman's evocative article on the 'generational' presumptions of a queer 'exit' from a lesbian feminist past that resonates with my argument here.

¹⁵ In a recent special issue of South Atlantic Quarterly on 1970s feminisms, Lisa Disch seeks to rectify this omission in her essay "Christine Delphy's Constructivist Materialism." The issue also reprints a piece of Delphy's earlier work, reintroducing it to a US audience.

¹⁶ Of course, Elizabeth Grosz is a notable exception herself, engaging with Irigaray in considerable depth, though interestingly not with her European feminist contemporaries, such as Rosi Braidotti, who make similar arguments about the importance of "vitalism" (Braidotti, Metamorphoses).

¹⁷ As Anne Berger importantly notes in her brilliant new book on French-US feminist and queer intellectual circuits, Esther Newton – with her understanding of gender as theatrical in its queer sites, as that which moves us – is probably better understood as Butler’s interlocutor than Rubin in many ways. For Berger, too, in her commentary in the celebration DVD to mark the forty years of feminist scholarship at Paris 8, shifts in how we name the ‘proper object’ of the interdisciplinary field we call home should be thought of as complementary rather than as a sequence of displacements. <http://www2.univ-paris8.fr/ef/spip.php?article270> for the uploaded documentary “Les Quarante Vies du Centre D’Etudes Féminine et D’Etudes de Genre.”

¹⁸ There are of course countries of origin not on the list (such that their citizens do not need to demonstrate such recognition or affect, and these include Western countries without same-sex rights or traditions of topless sunbathing, such as the US), and if you have plenty of money you can also be exempt.

¹⁹ Both Al-Tayeb and Haritaworn have explored in detail the presumed contradictions of being “queer” and “Muslim” in Europe in the context of homonationalist right-wing consolidation, and the consequences of this for those seeking to live lives in which these are inseparable terms.

²⁰ It is not accidental of course that most queer theorists (though not all) do in fact identify as queer, nor that the vast majority of queer work is in fact concerned with same-sex practices or with debunking heteronormative logics. There have been valiant attempts (Halley and Parker; Floyd) to entirely detach queer critique from its attachments to “sexuality” as both subject and object. But the queer focus will always tend back to sexual practice and subjectivity, and

circle around desire and its perversions. Indeed, without this movement, it might be hard to see what is distinct about queer theory (as compared to deconstruction in general).

²¹ Sam McBean makes a similar move in her book on Feminism's Queer Temporalities, in which she thinks again about the limits of an approach that marks feminism as less expansive than queer theory and practice, preferring to consider the ways they are sutured and scrambled.

²² See Braidotti's work on the range of different meanings and uses of "sex" and "gender" within a European geo-political landscape (Braidotti, "The Uses and Abuses of the Sex/Gender Distinction"). The now defunct journal, *The Making of European Women's Studies* – part of the Athena project on mapping the field in Europe – has published a range of interventions in similar vein (see e.g. Bahovec; Jegerstedt).

²³ My own article on "The Life and Times of Academic Feminism" maps some of these institutional as well as geo-political conflicts over the meanings of "gender" and "women", although it pays scant attention to the question of "sexuality" and "queer studies".

²⁴ Jose Munoz's work on the importance of "dis-identification" for a history of queer of color survival and desire, a mode of attachment that refuses full absorption into the dominant, extends de Lauretis in interesting ways (though Munoz only briefly cites her work).

²⁵ As Wiegman also highlights in Object Lessons, the question of "race" as so intimately linked to and sometimes standing in for social justice more generally (within feminism) means that direct engagement with an erotics of racialised

difference that forms part and parcel of how racism works is forever displaced and even disavowed. Wiegman's work here is important both for her critique of the problematics of "intersectional" forgetting of black feminist standpoint, and for her take-up of Sharon Holland's proposition that there is an erotic life to racism that needs to be told.