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# STRATEGIES FOR SEXUAL SUBVERSION: INFORMING THE FUTURE OF SEXUALITIES RESEARCH AND ACTIVISM

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## **Abstract**

*In this paper, I review, analyze, and evaluate the myriad ways early canonical and more recent high-profile scholarship in the field of sexualities envision a liberatory sexual politics and the most fruitful modes of achieving it. Due to theorists' diverging interpretations of the causes and forms of sexual oppression as well as their differing visions of liberated sexuality, I find that prescriptions for dismantling the "ethnosexual regime" (Nagel 2000) vary widely. The strategies suggested by scholars can be categorized into: 1) radical lesbian-feminist separatism, 2) identity politics, 3) the redeployment of gender, which encompasses trans and intersex bodies, gender play (e.g., butch-femme, drag, and shifting constructions of masculinity), and non-binary identities, 4) micro-level individual and interpersonal solutions, 5) changes in educational institutions, and 6) sexualities research itself. I conclude by making suggestions for sociologists who seek to further theorize and effect the subversion of normative systems of sexuality.*

## **Introduction**

Implicit in much sexualities research is the belief that another world is possible, one free from sexual regulation, oppression, persecution, and violence. While nearly all scholars of sexualities identify problems in the contemporary social organization of sexuality, they differ in their estimations of the causes and solutions to these issues. This paper is a qualitative meta-analytic review of the ways early canonical and more recent high-profile scholarship in

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the field of sexualities link sexuality to power. I find that prescriptions for dismantling the “ethnosexual regime” (Nagel 2000) vary widely based on scholars’ ideologies of gender oppression, agency, power, and race. I conclude by making suggestions for sociologists who seek to further theorize and effect the subversion of normative systems of sexuality.

### **Theorizing Sexualities, Race and Power**

Social scientists and lay people alike have conceptualized power as a repressive force, exercised through authority and coercion (Weber 1978; Green 2013; Foucault 1990). In theorizing sexuality and power, radical feminist theorists have advanced a theory of repressive power which defines all sexuality as oppressive to women, for the benefit of men (Dworkin 1997; Jeffreys 1996; MacKinnon 2001). In these formulations, there is no form of sexuality through which women can exercise agency or achieve empowerment. Sex, especially though not limited to heterosexual intercourse (Dworkin 1997), is a creation by men, for men. Not only are violence and sexuality inextricably intertwined for radical feminist theorists, sex *is* violence against women—more specifically, rape—since women cannot meaningfully consent to sexuality among equals under a system of patriarchy in which women and men are inherently unequal (MacKinnon 2001). According to radical feminists, gender is a function of sexuality, such that “women” as a group are defined by their subordinated position in an oppressive system of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980). Radical feminists have been criticized by “sex-positive” feminists (even some who are known as radical feminists, like Gayle Rubin), feminists of color and queer theorists for relying on essentialist and universalizing understandings of “women” as a category (Butler 1990, 1993; Rubin 1984; Liddiard 2014), without taking into account either women’s capacity for sexual agency and pleasure (Rubin 1984) or how women’s experiences of sexuality are informed by their positions along other axes of inequality, including race (Collins 2004; Crenshaw 1991; Moore 2011; García 2009), disability (Liddiard 2014; Kim 2011), sexuality (Rubin 1984; Stein 1997; Faderman 1991), nationality (Espiritú 2001; Hoang 2011; Gonzalez-Lopez 2003), and class (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Rubin (1984) rejects radical feminist theories of sexuality on the

basis of their ideological closeness with more nominally conservative theories of sexuality which seek only to repress women's sexuality. While Rubin acknowledges that western sexuality is characterized by a "hierarchical system of sexual value" (1984), wherein certain acts, identities, and desires are repressed and punished, she argues that sexuality *per se* is not the problem. Rather, sexual *oppression* must be eliminated in order for a liberated sexuality to flourish. Based on her criticisms of radical feminist theorists, Rubin concludes that feminism is an inadequate analytical foundation for developing a "radical theory of sex" (1984).

Foucault (1990) problematizes Rubin's (1984) analytical distinction between sexuality and oppression, arguing that sexuality itself *is* a form of power, which works by making certain expressions of sexuality intelligible (e.g., identities based on gendered object choice) and thus foreclosing other, unintelligible possibilities for somatic pleasure. Rather than understanding power as a repressive force, Foucault (1990) develops the concept of productive power—that is, power creates possibilities rather than constraining them from some preexisting, infinite variety of possibilities. Further, power has no inherent form apart from its mechanisms; it is constantly being deployed through discourses and actions of individuals and its form is a function of the economy of these discourses. Because sexuality itself is constituted by and through power mechanisms, Foucault's theory of sexuality precludes the elimination of sexual oppression or circumscription absent an elimination of sexuality *per se*.

Heavily informed by Foucault's poststructural philosophy, Butler (1990) expands upon Foucault's arguments about intelligibility to theorize that culture and language constitute a "matrix of intelligibility" wherein "power relations can be understood...as constraining and constituting the very possibilities of volition." Echoing Foucault's (1990) theory of power as productive, Butler (1990) argues that the acting subject who would resist sexual oppression is in fact created and enabled by the very matrix of intelligibility which both produces and forecloses subjective and sexual possibilities. Butler (1993) indicts language and grammar themselves in the difficulty of thinking about how subjects are created, because the grammar of many western languages presupposes an agent or subject in every action. It is precisely this understanding of agency as voluntaristic, as a self-

conscious act performed against power by a reflective “I,” that Butler deconstructs. In its place, Butler proposes the idea that “a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names,” and thus moves beyond the simplistic vision of agency as voluntarism (1993). Butler recognizes that performatives become sedimented and impose constraints on choice - for instance, constraints on sexuality include “the radical unthinkability of desiring otherwise, the radical unendurability of desiring otherwise,” but the unimaginability of alternatives does not mean sexuality is an immutable ontological reality (1993). Rather, these constraints *produce* the possibility of performative sexuality. Thus, whereas (radical) feminist theorists understand power as a repressive force that acts to constrain sexual expression, queer theorists argue that power is performative and productive, constantly being reiterated through actions that produce the very conditions under which expressions of sexuality are possible and imaginable.

Queer theorists argue that the “matrix of intelligibility” (Butler 1990) works in part through normativity, whereby all expressions of sexuality are constructed, valued, and understood in relation to what is considered “normal” in a given societal context (Butler 1990; Butler 1993; Sedgwick 1993a, 1993b; Namaste 1994). The concept of normativity goes beyond the notions of deviance found in gay and lesbian studies to problematize and denaturalize the “normal” instead of simply normalizing the “deviant” (Namaste 1994; Seidman 1996). While Sedgwick (1993a) argues the binary underpinning all others is the homosexual/heterosexual binary, Collins (2004) discusses a “master binary” of normal/deviant. On this point, Collins is more convincing: queer theory’s focus on sexuality at the expense of other axes of inequality (Warner 1993) has limited its incorporation of race as a constitutive element of sexuality and vice versa. By positing normal/deviant as the master binary which underlies all others, Collins (2004) effectively “intersectionalizes” queer theory’s emphasis on normativity.

Developments in queer theory and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) linking race, gender, and sexuality have enabled scholars to conduct rich analyses of the ways constructions of race, gender, and sexuality are intertwined through discourses of normativity and “the normal” (Ward 2008). hooks (1992), Somerville (2000), and Collins (2004) argue that the tropes found in contemporary discourses of

black female sexuality - the black “booty,” the jezebel, the un-rapable black woman, among others—originate in the discourses of black female sexuality under slavery in the United States. These sexualized “controlling images” of black women are always constructed in relation to the normal white woman (Collins 1990; Collins 2004). Moreover, Somerville (2000) shows that the “crisis of homo/heterosexual definition,” which emerged in the United States in the late nineteenth century, was and is inextricably linked to conflicts over racial definition, particularly over the boundary between “black” and “white.” hooks (1992) discusses more recent forms of white fascination with black women’s bodies, arguing that “although contemporary thinking about black female bodies does not attempt to read the body as a sign of ‘natural’ racial inferiority, the fascination with black ‘butts’ continues.” In the age of the “new racism,” discourses of black racial inferiority now tend to rest upon arguments of *cultural*, rather than biological, pathology (Collins 2004). Collins presents a spectacularly tight intersectional analysis of how white medical professionals and lay people construct pathological black sexuality as a lynchpin of black racial difference (2004). Collins’s (2004) explication of the new racism coupled with hooks’s (1992) analysis of the black “booty” show how nineteenth-century medical discourses of black female sexuality (Somerville 2000) have been transformed and redeployed in new ways to reinforce inequalities at the intersections of race and gender through the present day. hooks’s (1992) and Collins’s (2004) analyses of the lived experiences of today’s black women prove that the discourses of the “new racism” (Collins 20024) have emerged out of those of the nineteenth century; for this reason, Somerville’s (2000) work has important implications for the ways scholars and activists combat normative race, gender, and sexuality today.

For instance, the cultural belief that black women cannot “really” be raped originates in the slavery-era controlling image of the black female slave as sexually voracious (Collins 2004); this image contributes to a social climate in which black women are more likely than white women to be raped by men (Crenshaw 1991), less likely to report it to a hostile police bureaucracy (Collins 1990, Collins 2004), and unlikely to see their rapists brought to justice in the criminal justice system (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 1990; Collins 2004). Furthermore, in a society characterized by white supremacy

and racial injustice, black women (e.g. Anita Hill) are often encouraged to be silent about sexual abuses committed by black men; because black women live at the nexus of racial and sexual oppression, they must weigh public racial solidarity against personal experiences of sexual victimization (Collins 1990; Collins 2004; Crenshaw 1991). It is precisely these confluences of inequalities based on race, gender, and sexuality (among others) which create such impossible subject positions within the matrix of normativity and intelligibility (Butler 1990).

Nagel (2000) calls this system of normative race, gender, and sexuality the “ethnosexual regime.” According to Nagel, one major way ethnicity and sexuality are related is through normative heterosexuality, based on appropriate roles for (masculine) men and (feminine) women. She shows how the regulatory power of normativity rests on the convergence of intersecting discourses about race, gender, and sexuality. Nagel reports that while “queer theorists have shown themselves to be quite adept at deconstructing gender binaries, heterosexuality, and opposite-sex desire[, they] are less successful when it comes to providing systematic accounting of the ways these core social categories and regimes emerge as stable structures.” When it comes to race, humanities scholars and philosophers such as hooks (1992) and Somerville (2000) provide compelling arguments for the ways race and sexuality are co-constructed through their relationships to normative ideals. Sociologists and intersectional theorists (Collins 2004; Crenshaw 1991) excel at showing how these systems of sexual and racial normativity result in inequalities “on the ground” - that is, how discourses reflect and shape the lived experiences of actual people living today.

Indeed, the incorporation of race into theory and research on sexualities has certainly been slow-moving and often analytically clunky. Some otherwise brilliant pieces pay only lip service to considerations of race or altogether ignore it. To their credit, both Faderman (1991) and Butler (1993) acknowledge the importance of race in constructions of sexuality and sexual politics. Faderman (1991) discusses the transformations in lesbian life during the 20th century, citing the popularity of butch-femme relationships in two historical periods: the 1950s and the 1980s. While Faderman does recognize that lesbians’ different experiences of race affect their

sexual subjectivities, she theorizes the working-class butch-femme relationships of color during the 1950s as convenient imitations of heterosexuality, as “paths of least resistance” when throwing off gender norms would have been too difficult. Later in the book, she argues that the resurgence of butch-femme identities and relationships in the 1980s, following the popular (white) lesbian androgyny of the 1970s, was a “conscious attempt to create sexual polarities in order to enhance erotic relationships between women and break away from the limiting orthodoxies of lesbian-feminism and middle-class lesbianism” (Faderman 1991). In this way, Faderman implicitly constructs a classed and raced hierarchy in which working-class butches and femmes of color are cultural dupes who uncritically imitate heterosexuals, while white middle-class butches and femmes are self-conscious creators of empowering, specifically lesbian erotic identities. By failing to explore how working-class butches and femmes of color might construct and experience their own identities as subversive to normative white heterosexuality, Faderman relies on stereotypes of working-class people of color as less intelligent and agentic than white, middle-class people (1991).

Butler (1993) offers *Bodies that Matter* as an update of and expansion to her arguments in *Gender Trouble* (1990). While Butler (1993) promises to incorporate race more heavily into the later book, race as a consideration is intermittently included and underdeveloped. Butler argues that the heterosexual imperative is not only based on a taboo against homosexuality, but is also constituted “through a complex set of racial injunctions which operate through the taboo on miscegenation,” a theme which Somerville (2000, above) takes up in much greater detail. What is particularly problematic in Butler (1993) is Butler’s lack of engagement with theorists of intersectionality, even during an extended discussion of identity politics in which she implores scholars and activists “to map out the interrelationships that connect, without simplistically uniting, a varietal of dynamic and relational positionalities within the political field.” Butler does not cite Crenshaw’s work and thus gives the impression that mapping the interrelationships between various positionalities is a new idea. Furthermore, in an otherwise nuanced discussion of possibilities for subverting systems of inequality, Butler (1993) uncritically and summarily dismisses the

reclamation of the term “nigga/er” as potentially radical and/or liberatory, moving immediately onto another reclaimed epithet—“queer”—as the more radical and subversive term. This is a shocking and inexcusable lack of engagement with a potentially rich analysis of how and why racially and sexually marginalized groups reclaim and redeploy such words for the purposes of empowerment, liberation, and resistance. Although Nagel (2000) attempts to bridge terminological and bibliographical boundaries between disciplines concerned with race, gender, and sexuality, it seems that many scholars, including Butler (1993), remain firmly entrenched in their respective disciplinary camps.

All of the aforementioned theoretical perspectives have commonalities with one another, despite their sometimes-divergent understandings of sexuality, power, and race. First, each of them links sexuality with power, a significant development in a field which has often conceived of both race and sexuality as properties of individuals. Second, each of them recognizes that forms of inequality are borne through sexuality. Third, each of these perspectives understands that failure to comply with hegemonic or normative ideals of racialized heterosexuality may result in punishments or consequences, whether through violence (Dworkin 1997; MacKinnon 2001; Jeffreys 1996; Crenshaw 1991; Somerville 2000; Collins 2004), the legal system (Sedgwick 1993b; Rubin 1984), pain at the level of individual consciousness (hooks 1992; Collins 1990; Collins 2004) or the circumscription of alternative ways of understanding the self (Foucault 1990; Butler 1990; Butler 1993). Finally, all of the above theorists either hint at or explicitly envision the possibility of a future without oppression or regulation of the self. Where sexualities scholars differ is in what their respective visions of a liberated sexuality entail and how they suggest we should get there.

### **What Does Liberation Look Like?**

While many sexualities scholars decry sexual oppression and repression, few explicitly define what a sexuality freed from power relations would look like. Rubin (1975) envisions “an androgynous and genderless (though not sexless) society, in which one’s sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love.” Rubin’s theoretical foundation in structural

anthropology leads her not to question the ontology of sex and sexuality as presocial; a poststructural critique of her vision would ask whether “making love” would even exist in a society without gender, as sexuality is constituted through discourse, predicated upon understandings of men’s and women’s sexuality in relational terms, and conceptualized based on gendered object choice (Butler 1990; Foucault 1990).

Perhaps the difficulty in imagining a liberatory sexuality arises from sexuality’s inextricability from power relations (Foucault 1990). For Foucault, the question of a liberated sexuality is a non-starter, as sexuality itself *is* power. Because this sexuality was created by and is constituted through power relations, there is no liberatory form of sexuality or sexual identity; the only possible route to liberation is the destruction of sexuality itself and the rise of a somatic economy of “bodies and pleasures” (1990). Foucault’s vision is not without criticisms: Foucault’s intellectual heir Judith Butler (1990) critiques Foucault’s vision of bodies and pleasures on the grounds that it is an “unacknowledged emancipatory ideal” that is not so different from psychoanalytic theories of presocial, infantile polymorphous perversity (Freud 1905). Because of Butler’s insistence that subjects and ideas are only intelligible and thinkable through language, she opposes any efforts to reclaim a mythical prediscursive, presocial sexuality. She speaks back to Rubin (1975) and Foucault (1990) when she claims, “The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its ‘natural’ past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities” (1990). Butler’s vision of liberation is a queer cultural expansion of Foucault’s asocial somatic utopia; because Butler recognizes that somatic pleasures are mediated by, and indeed only understood as pleasurable because of, cultural schemas of intelligibility (1993), she argues the future of bodily experiences cannot be predicted using today’s conceptual tools and language.

Patricia Hill Collins’s (2004) vision of a liberated sexuality is explicitly based in antiracism, an element that is conspicuously missing from other theorists’ visions for the future of sexuality. Collins (2004) argues that contemporary black sexual politics are borne of, and tend to reproduce, racial inequality; according to Collins, black social problems of misogyny and homophobia/heterosexism arise from a system of racist mass

incarceration that leads black men to need to prove their manhood (Collins 2004). In addition to calling for the elimination of racist police and criminal justice practices which facilitate this crisis of black masculinity, Collins lays out some elements of a liberated black sexuality: black women's consciousness would be free of the sexualized and racist controlling images that many black women internalize, black individuals would have autonomy and agency over their bodies and relationships, and "an ethic of honesty and personal accountability [would characterize] all relationships that involve sexual contact" (2004). Collins's conceptualization of a liberated sexuality as beneficial for the individual can be linked to D'Emilio's (1992b) compelling—if brief—one-liner regarding liberatory possibilities for "sexual expression as a form of play, positive and life-enhancing" (1992b). While Collins situates her vision in the black feminist emphasis on the empowerment of personal consciousness (Collins 1990), D'Emilio's (1992b) definition of sexual liberation is more consistent with a (white) queer politics of play and parody as tools for liberation (Butler 1990).

### **How Do We Get There? Strategies for Subversion**

Due to theorists' diverging interpretations of the causes and forms of sexual oppression as well as their differing visions of liberated sexuality, it is unsurprising that debates rage within the field of sexualities regarding the most promising strategies for subverting the ethnosexual regime (Nagel 2000). These strategies can be categorized into: 1) radical lesbian-feminist separatism, 2) identity politics, 3) the redeployment of gender, which encompasses trans and intersex bodies, gender play (e.g., butch-femme, drag, and shifting constructions of masculinity), and non-binary identities, 4) micro-level individual and interpersonal solutions, 5) changes in educational institutions, and 6) sexualities research itself.

#### ***Radical Lesbian-Feminist Separatism***

Because radical feminists believe gender is a function of heterosexuality, such that women as a group are constituted by their position within a system of heteropatriarchal oppression, they argue that ridding society of the "straightjacket of gender" (Rubin 1975) will prevent heterosexuality and, consequently, patriarchy from maintaining themselves (McKinnon 2001, Jeffreys 1996). Under

patriarchy, no form of sexuality between men and women can be truly consensual (Rich 1980); thus, according to radical feminist theorists, virtually all sex is rape (Dworkin 1997, MacKinnon 2001). Importantly, there is no room for women's sexual pleasure or agency in radical feminist theories of sexuality (Rubin 1984); even when women claim to enjoy intercourse with men, Dworkin (1997) indicts women for participating in the terms of their own oppression. Because radical feminist theories of sexuality leave no room for women's empowerment, the only strategy for sexual liberation that logically follows from a radical feminist foundation is lesbian-feminist separatism, wherein women completely extricate themselves from relationships with men (Rich 1980, Dworkin 1997). As history has borne out, lesbian-feminist separatism is an untenable solution to sexual oppression, as it ignores the concerns of women of color who do not want to abandon men of color with whom they share experiences of racial oppression (Collins 1990), makes little provision for the male children of lesbian-separatists, and ultimately has little, if any, effect on society's structures of inequality.

### ***To Identify or Not to Identify***

Identity politics, or the political struggle for civil rights on the basis of membership in a minority category, has long been a source of contention within social movements, including the antiracist movement (Crenshaw 1991), the feminist movement (Vance 1989), and the queer movement (D'Emilio 1992a). Scholars link these tensions to theories of social construction (Crenshaw 1991; Vance 1989; Butler 1990), which tend to "simultaneously [hold] two somewhat contradictory goals. One goal is to attack the gender [or race, or sexual] system and its primacy in organizing social life, but the second goal is to defend women [or people of color, or queers] as a group" (Vance 1989). To be clear, racism, sexism, and heterosexism are not parallel axes of oppression and do not operate in all the same ways (Warner 1993); however, Vance (and I) make a cautious analogy here between them because of the role debates about identity politics have made in each of these movements for liberation.

Disabilities scholar Barbara Waxman Fiduccia (2000) contends that people with disabilities must identify themselves as a sexual

minority and fight for legal sexual rights on the basis of that identity. However, other scholars of disability argue that analyses such as Fiduccia's elide differences between forced desexualization and asexual identity (Kim 2011) and ignore the intersections of disability and gender, because of which advocating for the sexual rights of disabled people may further oppress women with disabilities (Liddiard 2014). Indeed, nearly all theorists in the field of sexualities either argue against identity politics as a political tool (Klesse 2014; Ghaziani 2011) or seek to theorize ways to employ identity politics strategically without falling prey to its most likely dangers (Altman 2001; Bernstein 1997; Crenshaw 1991; Crimp 1993; Butler 1990; Butler 1993; Seidman 1996; Sedgwick 1993a; Stout 2014; Warner 1993; Weeks 1998).

Quite straightforward critiques of identity politics come from queer scholars Klesse (2014) and Ghaziani (2011). Klesse (2014) interviews polyamorous people to uncover the meanings these individuals give to the term "polyamorous." He discovers that while some people view polyamory simply as a convenient label for their current relationship status, others view it as a core identity or sexual orientation, which renders "polyamory intelligible within dominant political and legal frameworks of sexual diversity" (2014). Klesse identifies four "severe risks" of advocating for the legal rights of polyamorous people using an identity politics framework based on sexual orientation. Doing so would 1) undermine the disruptive political potential of the category polyamory, 2) achieve only selective protection under the law, 3) obstruct the ability of poly movements to pursue broader alliances, and 4) foster a politics of recognition at the expense of a more transformative political agenda (2014). While Klesse's arguments against a polyamorous identity politics are compelling, it is frustrating that he offers no alternative political strategies.

Ironically, one of the risks Klesse identifies about polyamorous identity politics - its tendency to obstruct the ability of movements to form coalitions—at first appears to run counter to Ghaziani's (2011) analysis of gay identity politics. Ghaziani argues that whereas older models of gay identity politics were based on an "us-versus-them" mentality, in the "post-gay" era, this form has changed to reflect an "us-and-them" model of identity politics (2011). The shift from "versus" to "and" reflects the documented desire of gay

activists to build coalitions with the dominant group, as opposed to constructing gay culture against the dominant culture (Coleman-Fountain 2014). However, this seeming contradiction between Klesse (2014) and Ghaziani (2011) is rectified if one allows that Klesse (2014) most likely meant that polyamorous people should build coalitions with other stigmatized groups *against* the dominant culture, rather than build coalitions with it. Indeed, Ghaziani (2011) views contemporary gay identity as less politicized and more privatized, and based in the desire for inclusion into mainstream culture, which is one of the primary risks of identity politics named by Klesse (2014).

To be sure, a common theme in arguments against identity politics is its tendency to assimilate oppressed groups into, rather than challenge, systems of inequality (Bernstein 1997; Butler 1990, 1993; Seidman 1996; Warner 1993; Weeks 1998). At a more basic level, queer theorists' treatments of identity politics tend to emphasize the instability and incoherence of identities as such. According to a queer perspective, then, it logically follows that a politics based on such an unstable foundation would have limited value (Butler 1990, 1993; Seidman 1996). Based on her view that there is no prediscursive subject, Butler (1990) argues that feminist identity politics preclude the feminist goal of women's emancipation because the feminist subject—the "woman"—is created by the very discursive and legal system from which it seeks emancipation. Later, Butler (1993) amends her original discussion of the category "women" to argue that identities (what she calls "subject-positions") can be politically useful in contestations for legal rights, but are full of risk and incoherence. Butler novelly proposes that the very weakness of the category of women—its inability to be descriptive—"is the very condition of its political efficacy. In this sense, what is lamented as disunity and factionalization...[is actually] the open and democratizing potential of the category." In this way, Butler acknowledges the incoherence of the category but suggests that the strategic deployment of the category is what will enable both the securing of rights within the legal system that exists today as well as the category's ultimate contestation as new political opportunities arise. Indeed, to refuse completely to deploy identity would be to refuse power, which Butler argues is impossible; thus, in Butler's view, "the normative focus for gay and lesbian practice

ought to be on the...redeployment of power rather than on the impossible fantasy of its full-scale transcendence.”

Most scholars of identity politics seem resistant to throwing the baby out with the bathwater, and instead argue for a thoughtful and strategic—as opposed to universalizing and uncritical—deployment of identity as a political tool (Altman 2001; Bernstein 1997; Butler 1990, 1993; Crenshaw 1991; Crimp 1993; Seidman 1996; Stout 2014; Warner 1993). Some scholars who study race and nationality argue that the queer project of complete categorical deconstruction is a privileged way of viewing identity, possibly based in a “desire for sameness” that may reflect the concerns of white, able-bodied queer people who would otherwise be able to claim the privilege of being normal (Coleman-Fountain 2014). Both Altman (2001) and Stout (2014) are sympathetic to queer critiques of American identity politics, but they warn against the tendency to project queer deconstructive political projects onto political struggles in non-US nations and cultures. Because these struggles reflect the particular configurations of identity and inequality of the cultures in which they are located, Stout (2014) implores scholars in the Global North to “recognize and respect different strategies for gay advocacy...even when such approaches run counter to our own philosophies.”

It is likely that divergent perspectives on the validity of categorical deconstruction and identity politics arise from differences in the forms various types of identities take; for instance, racial identity is a “supra-individual” identity (Brubaker 2015) usually formed early in life as a reflection of the racial identity of one’s family members, whereas queer identity is usually formed later and may or may not reflect the identities of one’s family or community. Among other differences, these variations in identity development likely have ramifications for how scholars and lay people conceptualize the value of retaining or rejecting those identities. When it comes to axes of inequality in the United States, from which many queer theorists hail, Crenshaw (1991) asserts that “the dimension of racial domination that has been most vexing to African Americans has not been the social categorization as such but the myriad ways in which those of us so defined have been systematically subordinated.” This perspective that is at odds with a (white) queer understanding of categorization itself as the problem.

Certainly, many people of color do not desire to abandon racial identities which provide them with feelings of family, community, resilience, and empowerment (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 1990, 2004). Crenshaw famously offers intersectionality as a “mediator between assertions of multiple identity and the necessity of group politics for social change” (1991). By understanding identity as an unstable and always-shifting reflection of one’s subject positions along multiple axes of privilege and disadvantage, activists and scholars may deploy identity as a political tool when necessary without uncritically assuming the coherence or homogeneity of any identity category.

Bernstein (1997) and Crimp (1993) theorize the strategic deployment of identity politics to determine how to avoid its potential pitfalls (the reification of constructed categories, its inattention to the intersections of multiple identities, and its tendency to advocate for assimilation into, rather than the deconstruction of, normative mainstream cultures) while taking advantage of its efficacies as a political tool in the struggle for legal rights under the state as it currently exists. Bernstein (1997) theorizes identity deployment as dramaturgical (Goffman 1959); as such, strategically deployed identities do not have to, and indeed cannot, reflect actors’ private understandings of those identities. She identifies three types of identity deployment: identity for empowerment, identity as a goal (whether destigmatizing or deconstructing), and identity as strategy. There are two types of identity deployment for strategic purposes: first, identity for critique, which confronts the values, categories, and practices of the dominant culture, and second, identity for education, which challenges the dominant culture’s perception of the minority to gain legitimacy. Bernstein argues that “identity for education” tends to be a conservative strategy which avoids challenging or controversializing the dominant culture. Crimp’s (1993) understanding of identities as *relational* complements Bernstein’s (1997) arguments about the dramaturgical deployment of identity. According to Crimp, “identification is, of course, identification with an other, which means that identity is never identical to itself” (1993). Furthermore, Crimp rejects the truism that “gay people were gay and they made a politics of it”; rather, Crimp argues, the real story is that the politics made the people gay. That is, identity politics enabled the flourishing of a gay—as opposed to homosexual or

homophile—culture. By focusing on the relational aspects of identity, Crimp argues, queer activists will be more able to form coalitions with one another and with other groups in the struggle against normativity. Thus, Bernstein (1997) and Crimp (1993) provide scholars and activists with a template for how to understand the risks and potentialities of different deployments of identity politics; by avoiding those deployments most likely to reify the dominant culture as normal and unproblematic, activists can engage in thoughtful identity politics with the goal of subverting systems of power and oppression.

Ultimately, most queer scholars do not summarily reject identity politics; rather, they acknowledge the political efficacy of identity politics as a necessary evil within the current political system in which we all live. What is ironic in these queer discussions of identity politics, however, is the lack of attention to “queer” as an identity. While a queer politics is indeed based upon the deconstruction of sexual categories, queerness has taken on its own culture and criteria for membership, much like other identity categories. Warner (1993) criticizes queer politics for its whiteness, maleness, and emphasis on middle-class values, consumption and experiences. This leads me to cautiously posit that queer politics is itself a *de facto* identity politics. Further theorizing is needed into how thoroughly queer (apart from gay and lesbian) activism and politics has itself incorporated normative understandings of identity, group membership, and political struggle.

### ***The Redeployment of Power: Abject Bodies, Gender Play, & Non-Binary Identities***

Butler (1990) argues that “power can be neither withdrawn nor refused, but only redeployed.” In keeping with her theory of power as omnipresent, constituted through discourse and every performative act, Butler (1990) is hopeful that “abject bodies” (1990), butch-femme relationships, and drag performances might also be used in the service of subverting normative gender and sexuality. Because normative bodies are defined in opposition to abject bodies, implied by Butler (1990) to be trans and/or intersex, abject bodies haunt and threaten to destabilize the regime of normative embodiment. For Butler, such bodies are “an enabling disruption, the occasion for a radical rearticulation of the symbolic

horizon in which bodies come to matter at all.” It seems that Butler is arguing that the very acknowledgement of the existence of such bodies would do much toward dismantling normative gender. Fausto-Sterling (2000) similarly posits that “if we choose, over a period of time, to let mixed-gender bodies and altered patterns of gender-related behavior become visible, we will have, willy-nilly, chosen to change the rules of cultural intelligibility.”

However, Kessler’s (1990) analysis of doctors’ treatment of intersex infants and Roen’s (2002) discussion of transgender “passing” shed some doubt that the mere existence or visibility of abject bodies will disrupt the gender regime. Kessler (1990) reports that physicians and parents erroneously cling to the belief that “gender consists of two exclusive types” and that this belief “is maintained and perpetuated by the medical community in the face of incontrovertible physical evidence that this is not mandated by biology.” Roen (2002) argues that because of the risk of violence transgender individuals face, “passing” as cisgender is often required for survival. Against a queer political hierarchy where transgenderism (as opposed to transsexualism) is seen as trendier and more radical, Roen argues for a more generous understanding of passing among trans people. Kessler (1990) and Roen (2002) indicate that within a highly regulatory system of gender, those whose bodies and/or genders are unintelligible or non-normative often have gender imputed onto them or risk violence for publicly flouting the binary gender system. Thus, Butler’s (1990, 1993) and Fausto-Sterling’s (2000) optimism about the disruptive potential of abject bodies may be overstated, and in addition, may place too heavy a burden on intersex and trans people to be the standard bearers of dismantling the gender regime.

In addition to the transformative power of trans and intersex bodies, Butler argues that the non-normative gendering of cisgender bodies - such as in butch-femme lesbian relationships - also has the power to denaturalize cultural understandings of sex and gender and expose “the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original” (Butler 1990). In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler is mostly uncritical of drag and butch-femme, offering gender parody as the most promising avenue for the future of queer politics.

Given radical feminists’ rejection of the liberatory potential inherent in trans subjectivities, it is unsurprising that radical feminist

Sheila Jeffreys (1996) criticizes Butler's (1990, 1993) hopefulness about butch-femme identities. Jeffreys links butch-femme sexuality to the reinforcement of men's masculine domination, domestic violence, and rape. Furthermore, she indicts postmodern feminist and queer theorists for promoting the reclamation and redeployment of formerly oppressive genders, identities, and practices, arguing that "this is a comforting ploy which allows persons who wish to see themselves as progressive to continue to gain excitement from practices of dominance and submission without experiencing any political discomfort" (Jeffreys 1996). This quote is a stinging insult directed at her theoretical opponents, but it reveals itself as more like the expression of a personal vendetta than a substantive criticism of the politics of parody and redeployment. Indeed, Jeffreys's (1996) analysis is unconvincing on an analytical level, as it fails to recognize and neutralize its own essentialism and conservatism.

Nagel (2000) briefly casts some doubt on Butler's arguments about the subversive potential of drag when she notes "the entrenched power of phallic-centered heteronormativity to stay on top (so to speak) and reproduce itself...it is a resilient system capable of absorbing and appropriating challenges on its edges in order to strengthen itself." In response to Nagel's critique and others, Butler (1993) qualifies her arguments about gender parody: drag is ambivalent, a useful technique for subversion but not subversive in and of itself. Applied uncritically, drag performances can replicate misogyny, racism, and homophobia. Additionally, Butler acknowledges that even though drag and butch-femme render the constructed status of heterosexuality and gender visible, "there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion" (1993). Thus, Butler recognizes that even the denaturalization of heterosexuality can work to bolster heterosexuality, and uses examples from popular movies like *Mrs. Doubtfire* to prove this point. However, one angle that Butler (1993) does not consider is that viewers of drag performances may not see denaturalization; where Butler sees subversion, parody, and denaturalization, viewers invested in normative conceptions of gender and sexuality may see failed imitation. Richardson (1996) argues that the dominant heterosexual society will not interpret gender parody as denaturalization but as failed heterosexuality. While Richardson links her arguments to Jeffreys's (1996)

problematic discussions of drag and butch-femme gender transgression as oppressive and uncritical imitations of heterosexuality, I do criticize Butler on this point. I find Butler's (1990, 1993) arguments for the liberatory potential of drag compelling, in that any effort to decouple gender from bodies can serve to denaturalize the binary sex/gender system. However, it seems that Butler has not considered the vital importance of how drag performances are received and interpreted. The viewer may impute meanings onto drag or butch-femme relationships which renaturalize and serve to shore up normative gender and sexuality. Thus, a more extended discussion is needed on precisely *how* to ensure that drag and butch-femme, which she characterizes as ambivalent, subvert rather than reinforces the normal.

Gender play is not always linked to explicit butch-femme identities or drag performances; Pascoe (2007) and Bridges (2014) document the ways the meanings of masculinity are shifting. In her ethnography of adolescent masculinity in high school, Pascoe (2007) argues that while male femininity is regarded as alternatively humorous and dangerous, female masculinity is revered; often this female masculinity is linked to a lesbian identity, but not always. Masculinity among high school girls often includes elements of discursively refashioning female bodies as male ones—girls referred to their chests as “muscles” instead of breasts, to their genitals as “jocks” instead of vaginas,” and hurled gendered insults such as “They can suck my cock!” These discursive practices both denaturalize the link between sexed bodies and gender performances and renaturalize the relationship between masculinity and male bodies (Pascoe 2007). Bridges (2014) argues that “hybrid masculinities”—“gender projects that incorporate ‘bits and pieces’ (Demetriou 2001) of marginalized and subordinated masculinities and, at times, femininities” similarly have the potential to either challenge or reinforce inequalities. By theorizing the concept of “sexual aesthetics” as “cultural and stylistic distinctions used to delineate boundaries between gay and straight cultures and individuals,” Bridges illustrates how heterosexual men who identify aspects of themselves as “gay” retain heterosexual privileges by reinforcing the “otherness” of gay men (2014). Pascoe (2007) and Bridges (2014) utilize empirical data to test Butler's (1990, 1993) claims about the radical possibilities of gender parody and play.

Both authors conclude that in the absence of a politicized understanding of how gender and sexuality are linked to systems of inequality, seemingly progressive practices of gender play do not necessarily disrupt normative systems of gender and sexuality (Pascoe 2007, Bridges 2014).

Because normative sexuality rests so thoroughly on understandings of sexuality as either homo- or heterosexual identity, expressions of sexuality that disrupt this binary have the potential to dismantle normative schemas of gender and sexuality (Namaste 1994, Klesse 2014). Klesse (2014) and Scherrer (2008) document the identity work of polyamorous and asexual individuals, respectively. Klesse contends that polyamory, which is experienced by some individuals as a sexual orientation, has the potential to disrupt normative sexuality. Scherrer (2008) argues that because sexuality is considered a normal and important part of selfhood, “individuals who do not experience sexual attraction, and who embrace an asexual identity, are in a unique position to inform the social construction of sexuality.” What is particularly interesting about polyamorous and asexual sexual orientations is that they are not based (only) on gendered object choice, which has been the dominant way of understanding sexual orientation since the nineteenth century (Foucault 1990). However, as Klesse (2014) warns, the adoption of any sexual preference as a “sexual orientation” has the power to reify essentialist understandings of sexuality as a pre-social condition, which may render the dismantling of normative sexuality more difficult (Sedgwick 1993b). In order to move the disruptive potential of non-binary sexual identities beyond the individual to a more structural level, D’Emilio (1992b) advocates for the creation of programs that enable people to live outside the nuclear family, a normative structure based on regulatory ideals of heterosexual monogamy; he anticipates that “as we create structures beyond the nuclear family that provide a sense of belonging, the family will wane in significance.”

### ***Micro-Level Individual and Interpersonal Solutions***

While most sociologists and queer theorists focus on changes at the cultural and structural level, some are optimistic about the radical possibilities of individual and interpersonal change. These scholars emphasize the value of changes in personal consciousness as a first

step in creating broader societal change (Collins 1990, 2004; hooks 1992; Kimmel 2009). Explaining the purpose of his recent book *Guyland*, masculinities scholar Michael Kimmel writes that he hopes to map the terrain of “Guyland”—which represents “both a stage of life, a liminal undefined time span between adolescence and adulthood...and a place, or rather, a bunch of places where guys gather to be guys together”—to enable men to navigate the social world in ways that do not reproduce inequalities (2009). The solution Kimmel proposes is to change the ways guys understand the meaning of being a “real man.” According to Kimmel, “being a man means doing the right thing, standing up to immorality and injustice when you see it, and expressing compassion, not contempt, for those who are less fortunate. In other words, it’s about being courageous.” While these personality traits are certainly laudable goals, a weakness in Kimmel’s argument is that he relies on the trope of the “real man.” By drawing on masculine cachet associated with agency, largesse, and courage, Kimmel effectively reifies the oppositional binary between men and women. As Namaste (1994) and Sedgwick (1993a) point out, the boundary between two halves of a binary is never neutral, but rather every binary is based on a relationship of unequal value, of domination and subordination. Thus, Kimmel’s (2009) goal of challenging gender normativity may be precluded by his own analysis. A more generous reading of Kimmel’s argument could follow from Butler’s (1990, 1993) insistence that power can never be refused, only redeployed; one might argue that Kimmel is advocating for a strategic redeployment of masculine gender. However, as Bridges (2014) shows, “playing” with privileged positions in the matrix of gender and sexual normativity often allows privileged people to retain the benefits associated with their gender and sexuality without challenging the overall gender or sexual order. Furthermore, because Kimmel’s definition of a “real man” is so thoroughly congruent with hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995), dismantling the gender order by invoking the trope of manliness is highly unlikely.

Black feminist theorists offer a more compelling analysis of the transformative potential of individual consciousness (Collins 1990, 2004; hooks 1992). As opposed to the relatively privileged, mostly white men Kimmel (2009) interviews, whose identities are informed by few if any truly “controlling images” (Collins 1990), black

feminists argue that black women's identities are often formed through the tension of both internalizing and rejecting racist and sexualized controlling images about black women (Collins 1990, 2004; hooks 1992). Collins (1990) argues that if black women can help each other create empowering self-definitions, these "self-defined standpoints can stimulate resistance" against oppression. According to Collins, through linking personal experiences with patterns of discrimination and oppression, black women will be able to strategize against power as autonomous agents of change.

While some theorists warn against placing the "responsibility on the sufferer to relieve one's suffering" (Grzanka and Mann 2014), in a social context of routine disparagement, one of the most accessible forms of resistance to racism and (hetero)sexism for black women has been their own internal consciousness (Collins 1990). Whereas to argue that class-privileged white men should empower their individual consciousnesses to help them dismantle the gender order seems overly optimistic, black feminist theorists (1992) present compelling arguments for the transformative power of rebuilding the self-definitions of marginalized people. hooks's (1992) and Collins's (1990, 2004) analyses of the power of black feminist consciousness, juxtaposed with Kimmel's (2009) problematic reification of the trope of the interpersonally benevolent "real man," illustrate that no micro-level subversive strategy will be appropriate in all contexts. Thus, scholars must attend to the ways various strategies may be employed by a variety of people in the service of subverting the ethnosexual regime.

### ***Changes in Educational Institutions***

Scholars identify sex education (Bhana and Anderson 2013; Fields 2005; García 2009; Rogers 2009) and institutional structures of schools and universities (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Pascoe 2007) as sites with potential for dismantling the ethnosexual regime (Nagel 2000). Based on interviews with South African teenage women, Bhana and Anderson (2013) conclude that these young women are "sexual strategizers" who resist femininities through which gender inequalities in sexuality are reproduced while simultaneously reproducing hegemonic masculinity in sexual relationships by purposefully consuming drugs and alcohol prior to encounters with boys. The authors suggest sex education programs

in girls' schools 1) conceptualize the girls as constrained sexual agents rather than as passive victims and 2) focus not only on sexual risk but also the risks of drugs and alcohol (Bhana and Anderson 2013). García (2009) and Fields (2005) also identify a "risk" discourse in sex education for young Latina and African American girls, respectively. The researchers argue that sex education for these young women should avoid racist discourses of girls of color as non-normatively heterosexual and boys and men of color as potentially abusive (Fields 2005; García 2009). In an autoethnography of her experience as the mother of an adolescent girl with a moderate learning disability, Rogers (2009) discusses the difficulty of ensuring her daughter's sexual relationships are not abusive or coercive while respecting her daughter's autonomy. Rogers (2009) recounts an episode in which a teacher removed her daughter from a sex education class without informing Rogers; she argues in favor of sex education for developmentally disabled adolescents, noting that "whilst a moral panic about surveillance and regulation of learning-disabled youth may not be appropriate, some support and education is necessary in thinking through and living through these sexual and intimate journeys." What all of these scholars have in common is a belief that access to information about sexuality is not enough to ensure adolescent girls develop autonomy and agency in sexual relationships; in order to help these young women disrupt patterns of inequality in sexuality, their education must consider their multiple subject positions at various axes of inequality including gender, race, and disability (Bhana and Anderson 2013; Fields 2005; García 2009; Rogers 2009).

Sex education classrooms are not the only educational sites in which normative gender and sexuality are reproduced and contested (Pascoe 2007). Rather, institutions of learning must recognize that the way they are structured can either contribute to or challenge gender, sexual, and class inequalities (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Pascoe 2007). Pascoe (2007) emphasizes the importance of legislation aimed at protecting queer and non-normatively gendered students from harassment—crucially, educational administrators must be aware of these laws and enforce them institutionally. Furthermore, schools should "modify both the social organization of the school and the curriculum content so that they are less homophobic and gender

normative”; examples include deemphasizing heterosexuality and normative gender in school rituals, providing support for queer-affirmative organizations like Gay-Straight Alliances, enforcing a gender-neutral dress code, and offering counseling for queer and gender non-conforming teens (Pascoe 2007). These institutional-level changes would demonstrate to both queer and non-queer students alike that schools are places where homophobia and heterosexism are unwelcome.

Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) argue that declining federal funding for colleges and universities has led schools to raise their tuition, thus increasing institutional pressure to recruit affluent students whose families can foot the bill. This means universities facilitate a “college culture [that] reflects the beliefs of the more privileged classes,” including a “self-development imperative” that leads more privileged women to think they should focus on themselves, be independent, and avoid serious relationships that compete with schoolwork and social life (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). This self-development imperative facilitates a normative sexual culture revolving around “hooking up”; whereas hooking up is common among more privileged women students, less privileged women view hooking up as “immature” and contrary to working-class cultural and sexual values (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). The institutional structures of universities encourage the hook-up culture of privileged students through the development of “easy majors” and support for the Greek system of fraternities and sororities, effectively rendering the institution hostile to less privileged students, who 1) need to earn meaningful degrees that will help them find jobs without the benefit of social capital and 2) cannot afford to participate in Greek life (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Both Pascoe (2007) and Hamilton and Armstrong (2013) argue that schools and universities can and should make changes at the institutional level—not simply in sex education programs—to avoid reproducing normative schemas of gender and sexuality.

### ***Sexualities Research***

Finally, sexualities research itself is a strategy for subverting the ethnosexual regime. Certainly, most scholars of sexualities identify pressing problems in the social organization of sexuality and either support or are involved in movements to eliminate those problems.

Nonetheless, research is not inherently subversive: Lorber (1996) and Namaste (1994) warn that much sociological research uncritically assumes and reifies categories of analysis such as sex, gender, and sexuality as ontological. Furthermore, sexualities research also has the capacity to reinscribe social inequalities (Moore 2011; Rubin 1984; Sedgwick 1993b). Feminist research which does not take race into account may perpetuate misunderstandings of women of color, leading to their continued marginalization in feminism and society (Moore 2011). Radical feminist analyses of sexuality which leave no room for women's agency may ironically further the conservative goal of repressing women's sexuality (Rubin 1984). Ostensibly queer-affirming investigations into whether (homo)sexuality is inborn or socially constructed may rest upon the unacknowledged wish that gay people not exist (Sedgwick 1993b). Thus, sexualities scholars must attend to the power of research to both challenge and reinscribe inequalities, as well as be open to criticisms of their work (Butler 1993; Fausto-Sterling 2000).

Setting aside the speculative *potential* for sexualities research to dismantle the ethnosexual regime, it is unclear how much of an effect sexualities research has actually had on the broader social organization of sexuality. Research that tends to have the most influence on policy and cultural debates is that which focuses on sexual risks (e.g., diseases, teen pregnancies) and frequencies (e.g., Armstrong et al.'s (2012) discussion of the "orgasm gap," Kinsey's reports on the rates of same-sex desires and encounters in the 1950s) (Pascoe 2014). Postmodern queer and feminist theory have had much less success in circulating beyond the academy, in no small part due to its inaccessible, esoteric vocabulary (Altman 2001; Collins 1990, 2004). Thus, it is clear that sociologists and other scholars of sexuality must find ways to engage in public scholarship if we have any hope of dismantling normative gender, race, and sexuality. Blogging has been suggested as one promising avenue (Bridges 2015), and I suggest teaching as another form of activism that may help subvert the ethnosexual regime. Through a commitment to being good teachers as well as esteemed researchers and theorists, sociologists of sexualities can help ensure that our ideas move beyond the academy into the minds of students who will

go on to occupy various sectors of society. This is a subversive strategy for which I have much hope.

### **Future Directions for Subversion**

Nagel (2000) hopes to encourage scholars of various disciplines, from ethnic studies to queer studies to sociology, to engage in interdisciplinary scholarship with the goal of dismantling the ethnosexual regime. The strengths of both queer and sociological approaches to racial and sexual inequalities are complementary. Where queer theory lacks empirical explanatory power, sociology provides data. Where sociology lacks an attentiveness to the construction and instability of categories of analyses and inequality, queer theory helps scholars question these analytic assumptions. Intersectionality provides an exciting arena in which sociologists may remain dedicated to one of sociology's central projects—documenting persistent, durable patterns of inequality—while also incorporating the spirit of queer theory, which seeks to interrogate the very categories upon which those inequalities depend. The complementary strengths and weaknesses of these approaches prove the necessity and merit of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of sexualities, race, and power.

In the future, scholars should more explicitly theorize what a liberated sexuality or economy of somatic pleasures would look like; a more defined vision would enable clearer strategies for subversion. Furthermore, sociologists of sexualities should attempt to theorize sexualities as encompassing more features than gendered object choice. As Sedgwick (1993a) writes:

Although current understandings of sexuality hinge on gender of object choice, this is not a reason to understand sexuality as emanating from gender. The definitional narrowing-down of sexuality to a homo/hetero binary should not be used analytically to conflate sexuality with gender; this narrowing-down itself is what should be analyzed as a historically specific process. Relatedly, sexual theory cannot be collapsed into gay and lesbian theory or anti-homophobic theory because sexuality

per se totally overflows the bounds of that portion of sexuality based on gendered object choice.

By following Sedgwick's (1993a) advice, scholars of sexuality can avoid reifying dominant cultural understandings of sexualities and thus move beyond them.

Likewise, other biases within sexualities theory need to be examined: one of the primary unacknowledged assumptions in contemporary postmodern queer and feminist theory is the premise that gender play and gender transgression necessarily indicate a "mismatch" or "swap" between sexed bodies and gender performances, i.e., female masculinity, male femininity, butch-femme relationships, drag performances. Almost nonexistent are discussions of purposeful femininity as a possible form of gender transgression. Many feminine-presenting women (cis, trans, and nonbinary), some of whom are queer, may construct their gender performances as gender play, costumes, or drag performances that denaturalize the link between femininity, the male gaze, and men's sexuality. This omission in the literature reflects unacknowledged sexist understandings of femininity as natural, passive, and complicit with men's power. Empirical research is needed to determine the subversive potential of purposeful femininities; this research should also explore whether purposeful masculinity (Kimmel 2009) is a possible avenue for dismantling gender normativity, though I speculate that purposeful masculinity, with its closer ties to men's dominance, may be less likely than purposeful femininity to subvert normative gender and sexuality. To be sure, researchers must also attend to femininity's relationships to power, as many white (queer) women may enact femininities that position them closer to white standards of beauty and white men's power, whether this is these women's intention or not (Collins 1990).

At the most basic level, in order to theorize strategies for subverting the ethnosexual regime, one must believe that such subversion is even possible. For instance, Foucault provides no practical pathway to his utopian ideal of bodily pleasure; in his writings, he appears resigned to a world in which the "regulatory ideal" of sexuality is permanently inescapable (1990). Indeed, "it is hard to base policy recommendations on poststructuralist theory and analysis, which often seems far removed from the 'nitty-gritty' of

lived experience” (Pascoe 2007). Foucault’s theoretical heir Judith Butler is impatient with what she calls Foucault’s “slave morality” (1990). One of Butler’s strengths lies in her ability to refuse poststructuralist philosophy’s more fatalistic and abstract tendencies to suggest ways individual actors, who are constructed and enabled by the very power relations they seek to oppose, can redeploy power, if not get outside of it. At the end of *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler movingly suggests turning power against itself “to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a ‘pure’ opposition, a ‘transcendence’ of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure.” In this way, all strategies for subversion should be recognized as contextual, provisional, and ambivalent, though no less worthwhile for their contingencies.

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