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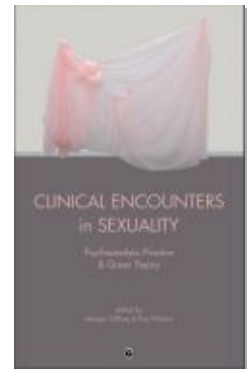
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Perversion and the Problem of Fluidity and Fixity

Lisa Downing

It is a commonplace to state that the problem of sexuality is central to the endeavors of both psychoanalysis and queer theory. Whereas for psychoanalysis, traditionally at least, sexuality has an etiological status as the nexus of f/phantasies underlying an analysand's symptoms and behaviors, for queer theorists, especially following Michel Foucault, sexuality is a constructed epistemological category that functions to normalize the behaviors and bodies of social subjects. In the former, it is a source of truth to be tapped; in the latter it is a pervasive and power-laden lie to be exposed. Whereas psychoanalysis relies on a developmental model of sexuality (Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein and so on) or a structural one (for example, Jacques Lacan), "queer" takes the theory of performativity as its explicatory model to account for the ways in which subjects learn to "do" their genders and sexualities. Moreover, the category of "perversion" has central import for theorizations of sexuality within both psychoanalysis and queer theory. For clinical psychoanalysts, perversion is sexuality gone awry; the failure of the subject to attain adult genitality. For queer theorists, on the other hand, perversion may be construed as a defiant performance of excess that shows up the constructedness and arbitrariness of the category of the "normal," and it is centrally implicated in queer's rejection of

the meaning of identity in favor of the politics of practice. In what follows, however, I will focus on a pair of concepts that are central to both psychoanalytic and queer thinking on sexuality and its perverse forms — namely *fixity* and *fluidity* — in order to trouble certain orthodoxies within both bodies of thought. In this way, I will neither pathologize queer in the name of psychoanalysis, nor accuse psychoanalysis of reactionary politics in the name of queer. Rather I shall highlight — and challenge — a logic that is surprisingly shared by both systems.

In particular, this will involve examining how the theory of performativity has been used to privilege the status of the idea of fluidity in queer studies. I shall critique this as a deficiency within the body of thought, after Brad Epps (2001) who has pointed out, in an essay that uses a concept borrowed from psychoanalysis to critique “queer,” that fluidity can be thought of as the “fetish” of queer theory. Privileging the ideal of fluidity leads to a concomitant stigmatization of the idea of fixity, establishing an unhelpful binary (fluidity or fixity) in a body of thought that usually attempts to deconstruct such dualities. The maintenance of this binary also perpetuates some of the most damning and pathologizing ideas that run through the history of knowledge about sexuality, featuring prominently in the very authority disciplines that queer exists to call into question — for example, sexology, some forms of psychoanalysis, and psychiatry. I argue that this imposes on queer thought a programmatic tyranny that runs counter to the epistemological and political aims of queer theory — in Michael Warner’s (1993) words, to “oppose [...] the *idea* of normal behaviour” (xxvii). I want not only to show how this undesirable programmatic agenda works, but also to try to suggest some ways of overcoming this, of thinking outside of the paradigms that are becoming established.

Performativity

It may be productive to begin by thinking about the concept of performativity and its specific meanings for, and function within, queer theory. The term “performativity” is associated

primarily with the work of English philosopher of language, J.L. Austin, whose *How to Do Things with Words* (published 1975, based on lectures given in the 1950s) influentially argued that some acts of language, called “speech acts,” do not simply describe things but rather *do* things. They are performatives. Examples Austin gives are: “I pronounce you man and wife” and “I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*,” These acts of speech alter something in the world — after the pronouncement, the couple is legally married, the ship officially named — so long as the context is “appropriate” and the person doing the speaking is imbued with legitimacy. Austin writes: “in these examples it seems clear that to utter the sentence, in, of course, the appropriate circumstances, is not to describe [...] it is to *do* it” (8).

The work of deconstructionist feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler has adapted, via Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, the idea of a “performative” in Austin’s sense, to describe the workings of both speech about sexuality and gender, and the workings of gender and sexuality themselves. In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), she looks at the function of hate speech as a type of performative, constituting subjects as injured parties. Terms such as “slut,” “cripple,” “queer” and so on, hurled as injurious insults, bear the “hey, you!” function of Althusserian interpellation — they construct specific types of social subjects from a position of oppressive authority. However, as a thinker interested in the flexibility of the power of resistance, Butler explores the capacity within political discourse for recuperative uses of hate speech — for what she calls “resignification.” The most obvious example of such resignification is “queer,” a homophobic slur turned radical political slogan during the 1980s AIDS crisis by groups such as ACT UP and Queer Nation. More recently, along the same lines, the academy has seen the adoption of the term “crip” by disability studies scholars such as Robert McRuer. For Butler, resignification rather than repression or censorship are the most politically expedient responses to acts of hate speech.

Excitable Speech comes relatively late in Butler’s corpus. It is for *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*,

first published in 1990, and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993) that she is perhaps best known, particularly in queer theory circles. In these two books, and in her essays and lectures on gender and sex, Butler has argued that, like performative language, the gestures and roles of gender we perform daily are what constitute us as gendered subjects. Rather than *reflecting* a feminine or masculine essence, behavior that is encoded as masculine or feminine *creates* what Derrida would call a trace, the inscription into the social world of something that appears to have already been there, waiting to be represented. Gender is a series of *citations* that reinforce the impression of the natural pre-existence of a binary order of sex. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler writes: "the presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex" (10). In good postmodernist mode, she seeks to dismantle this mimetic fallacy. If gender performances are imitations, then they are imitations for which there is no original referent; citations that accrue meaning — and shore up their "truth" value — via the simple means of their being repeated *ad infinitum*. What they are definitely *not* for Butler are neutral, natural or inevitable extensions of biological or genetic facts about a person's gender, sex and sexuality. They do not convey our subject positions, but rather construct them. Carefully dissociating performance from performativity (a distinction that is often elided in postmodern criticism), Butler opines in an interview from 1993: "It is important to distinguish performance from performativity: the former presumes a subject, but the latter contests the very notion of the subject" (Osborne and Segal 1994, 36). In performativity then, the subject *appears* as the effect of the performance rather than the subject being a fixed agent who — consciously or otherwise — performs a given act. Or, as Butler (1990) puts it in *Gender Trouble*, "gender is always a doing, but not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (33). To put it another way, then, gender is certainly not ontology; but nor do we only "do" it. Rather, it "does" us.

Crucially for Butler — and lending political weight to the assertion that gender is performative, since gender and for

that matter sexuality are a series of performances that habitually *do us* — we can turn around and do them back. When we understand that gender is a matter of doing rather than *being*, we can also *transform* the meaning of gender, by performing it self-consciously, playfully and with self-awareness — rather than unconsciously and in ways that shore up the idea that gender emanates naturally from an essentially sexed subject. This conscious gender performativity is termed “drag.”¹ However, the capacity of self-conscious gender performativity to transform meaning must not be understood via the idea of straightforward “choice” in the neo-liberal sense. Butler explains: “One of the interpretations that has been made of *Gender Trouble* is that there is no sex, there is only gender, and gender is performative. People then go on to think that if gender is performative it must be radically free [...]. It is important to understand performativity — which is distinct from performance — through the more limited notion of resignification (subversive repetition)” (Osborne and Segal 1993, 32). This adoption of performativity theory for queer allows both for an analysis of the normalizing effects of regimes of knowledge about sex and gender and for a limited strategy of resistance. Using a model of power relations borrowed primarily from Foucault, in which power is a force field of relations surrounding us, and in which we are always implicated, rather than a uni-directional operation of oppressive force from the top downwards, Butler demonstrates that gender performativity — literalized in her idea of “drag” — has

1 “Drag” in Butler’s sense is any putting on of the gestures, clothing and accessories attributed to one or the other gender by a person of either — or any — sex. Thus, it constitutes the performance of femininity by a biological, cisgendered woman as well as what would traditionally be thought of as “cross-dressing.” Re-defining drag in this way entails a rejection of the notion that particular forms of gendered presentation correctly or inevitably “belong to” biologically binary sexed bodies. Understood in this light, drag also suggests the possibility for parodic repetitions of gender as the self-conscious subversion of gender norms. See Butler 1999, 174–80.

an inbuilt mechanism of *resistance* to normative meanings, by means of a parodic resignification.²

Although Butler has stated that she sees herself primarily as a feminist and a gender theorist, rather than as a queer theorist, her work has been constitutive within that field of thinking in the 1990s. One of Butler's key contributions to queer theory is to shift the focus from sexuality (so prominent in the analyses of Foucault and in many post-Foucauldian theorists) onto gender. She makes the claim, echoed by other feminist queer theorists, such as Marie-Hélène Bourcier in France, that Foucault's work—and much queer theory—sidelines questions of gender in its focus on the constructed nature of sexuality.³ Butler states: "insofar as some people in queer theory want to claim that the analysis of sexuality can be radically separated from the analysis of gender, I'm very much opposed to them" (32). While considering this an important point, I want to consider how Butler's oft-discussed theory of gender performativity might intersect with the project of deconstructing both sexual identity categories and diagnoses of sexual abnormality, and how this move helps us get to grips with the role played by ideas of fluidity and

2 In *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault (1990) writes of power: "In short, it is a question of orienting ourselves to a conception of power which replaces the privilege of the law with the viewpoint of the objective, the privilege of prohibition with the viewpoint of tactical efficacy, the privilege of sovereignty with the analysis of a multiple and mobile field of force relations, wherein far-reaching, but never completely stable, effects of domination are produced" (102). For more on Foucault's notion of power, see Downing 2008, esp. 86–117.

3 Bourcier (2006) writes: "Foucault isn't interested in undoing gender—or gender-fucking. That is to say in a political and parodic game with the signs of masculinity aiming to critique the sexual and social roles attributed to the masculine and the feminine. This avoidance of gender is, moreover, one of the problematic limits of Foucault's thought. Everything happens as if, for him, there were only one gender—homoerotic masculinity" (my translation). ["Foucault ne s'intéresse pas à la dé-genrification—ou *gender fucking*—c'est-à-dire à un jeu parodique et politique avec les signes de la masculinité, valant pour critique des rôles sexuels et sociaux impartis au masculin et au féminin. Cet évitement des genres est d'ailleurs l'une des limites problématiques de la pensée de Foucault. Tout se passe comme si, pour lui, il n'y avait qu'un genre, le masculin homoérotique ..."] (80–1).

fixity in relation to “perversion” and queer. Butler wishes primarily to destabilize notions that the ways we perform gender reveal the truth of our sexual identity and/or orientation. (One thinks of historically ingrained clichés such as the lesbian who is inevitably butch in appearance or the effeminate man whose mannerisms reveal the secret of his homosexuality). Rather, for Butler (1993): “there are no direct expressive or causal links between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality. None of these terms captures or determines the rest” (315). This idea of a series of interrelating, resignifying performative lines running between gender and sexuality deliberately highlights elements of play, fluidity and interchangeability at work in sexual behavior and sexual orientation. Butler’s use of performativity, then, as we have seen, relies on an implicit logic of fluidity — but not of choice — as its central tool of resistance.

As Brad Epps (2001) argues in his psychoanalytically-informed essay, “The Fetish of Fluidity,” to which I referred in the introductory section above, “Queer theory tends to place great stock in movement, especially when it is movement against, beyond, or away from rules and regulations, norms and conventions, borders and limits.” He goes on to state that it “presents movement, fluid movement, as the liberational undoing of regulatory disciplinarity.” In short, “It makes fluidity a fetish” (413). While Butler — after Foucault — has cautioned against the association of fluidity with a too-simple idea of free will, and while both are, in fact, famously suspicious of the discourse of liberation that Epps rather unfairly ascribes to them, Butler nevertheless reinforces the idea that it is via a movement away from expected chains of signification towards motile ambiguity, that queer theory offers an alternative to normalization. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) echoes this idea of queer as perpetually and essentially in movement: “Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive — recurrent, eddying, *troublant*. The word ‘queer’ itself means ‘across’ — it comes from the Indo-European root — *terkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*” (xii; cited in Epps 2001, 425). Brad Epps’s argument against the “fetish of fluidity”

in queer is that it ushers in a “degaying and delesbianising agenda” (417). The movement against identity in queer — its strategic non-identitarian agenda — does indeed risk (more than risk; it *courts*) this de-specification of sexual identity labels. And this has to be understood as a deliberate response to, and rejection of, the “*specification of individuals*” that Foucault (1990) describes in 1976 as an effect of the technologies of *scientia sexualis* that began to name the “inverts” and “perverts” in the mid-nineteenth century (42–43; italics in original).

A parallel concern to Epps’s cry against the “degaying” of queer comes from feminist writer, Biddy Martin (1997). She worries about “defining queerness as mobile and fluid in relation to what then gets construed as stagnant and ensnaring, and as associated with a maternal, anachronistic, and putatively puritanical feminism” (110). Epps and Martin isolate as a problem of queer theory the very anti-identitarian energies which feed it. Indeed, queer texts often express concern that as soon as an identification is taken up, that identification stagnates into recognizable meaning. This idea is found in work of proto-queer thinker *par excellence*, Foucault. In an interview conducted in 1982, which first appeared in 1984, for example, Foucault opined: “[T]he relationships we have to have with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather, they must be relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation. To be the same is really boring. We must not exclude identity if people find their pleasure through this identity, but we must not think of this identity as an ethical universal rule” (2000, 166). In “Friendship as a Way of Life” (2000), he writes along the same lines: “another thing to distrust is the tendency to relate the question of homosexuality to the problem of ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What is the secret of my desire?’” (135). For Foucault, then, operating before the establishment of queer (if such a deliberately unstable body of thought as queer can be said to have been established), the temptation to see one’s sexual desire as the path to the secret of the truth of identity is a lie of modernity; one of the grand narratives of post-enlightenment scientific thinking about the subject. Seeing identity as a truth about the self was a trap, as it fixed one’s sense of self in

pre-existing — and often unsympathetic, pathologizing or derogatory meanings.

My own concern with the rejection of fixity in queer theory has much less to do with Epps's and Martin's worries about the potential loss of an identity label to rally around (whether gay, lesbian, bi, feminist, or whatever else it may be) that is entailed by a deconstructive, anti-identitarian epistemology. For, as Butler contends convincingly, there is no reason why one cannot provisionally rally around an identity that is threatened or attacked, even while questioning the universality or singularity of the meaning of that label. She writes in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (1991): "This is not to say that I will not appear at political occasions under the sign of lesbian, but that I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies" (308). Rather, my worry about queer's rejection of fixity and embrace of fluidity directly concerns the question of what this means for the status of non-normative erotic practices or — to put it in Foucault's (1990) language — "bodies and pleasures," which he proposes as the utopian alternative to the psychoanalytic logic of "sex-desire" (157). Queer theory has always had an ambivalent relationship with what — in a different discourse — would be called the perversions or paraphilias, and it is in respect to these that the fetishization of fluidity and the scapegoating of fixity risk being most damning. In some ways, non-normative bodily practices (what I do), rather than identities (how I define myself in terms of gender or sexuality) and orientations (whom I desire; my sexual object choice), are the very stuff of queer, the launchpad for its non-normalizing energetic trajectories that confound conservative discourses about sexuality as reproductive, productive, life-affirming, functional, and socially useful for maintaining the status quo.⁴ Foucault

4 Such critiques of the (re)productive, utilitarian connotations of "sexuality" are found especially in those queer texts associated with the "anti-social" turn in queer theory. Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), which presents, using a Lacanian theoretical framework, an indictment of the ideology of "reproductive futurity" has been particularly influential in this regard. More recently, Tim Dean's *Unlimited Intimacy*

chose largely not to talk about being a homosexual but rather to talk about the bodily practices and new forms of erotic relationality that he espied in subcultural communities, such as the San Francisco SM scene and which he harnessed as “the rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality” (157). Other writers, however, such as Elizabeth Grosz (1994), have worried about the extent to which “perversions” should be included under the term “queer” since, she argues, it would be wrong to see — for example — heterosexual “sadists” benefiting from the same depathologizing energies as lesbians and gay men — the “properly” oppressed (in a rather un-queer gesture of hierarchy-of-oppression-building).⁵

Tim Dean’s *Beyond Sexuality* (2000), which attempts not only to write queer psychoanalytic theory, but to substantiate the claim that psychoanalysis *is* a queer theory, tries to move away from such binaristic — and covertly identitarian — ways of thinking about forms of desire that we see in Grosz. Here it is argued that within Lacanian theory, desire — that errant, dissident, anarchic force — is always perverse rather than identitarian. He stresses how, for Lacan, diversity is all: “there is no privileged sexual activity or erotic narrative to which we should all aspire, no viable sexual norm for everybody, because desire’s origins are multiple and its ambition no more specific than satisfaction” (196). The aim of Dean’s work is to conceptualize an impersonal account of desire by marrying Lacan’s insistence

(2009) considers “barebacking” subcultures and their practices of voluntary HIV transmission as an alternative model of queer kinship, “breeding” bugs rather than children.

- 5 Grosz (1994) writes: “‘Queer’ is capable of accommodating and will no doubt provide a political rationale and coverage in the near future for many of the most blatant and extreme forms of heterosexual and patriarchal power games. They too are, in a certain sense, queer, persecuted, ostracized. Heterosexual sadists, pederasts, fetishists, pornographers, pimps, voyeurs, suffer from social sanctions: in a certain sense they too can be regarded as oppressed. But to claim an oppression of the order of lesbian and gay, women’s or racial oppression is to ignore the very real complicity and phallic rewards of what might be called ‘deviant sexualities’ within patriarchal and heterocentric power relations” (154).

that in the unconscious there is no gender and no “proper” object of desire, with the Foucauldian ambition to “shift beyond sexuality as the primary register in which we make sense of ourselves” (88).

It is this enlarged sense of queer that Tamsin Spargo (1990) celebrates — in contradistinction to the worries expressed by Grosz — when she writes:

[A]s Foucault’s history had shown, [...] object choice had not always constituted the basis for an identity and, as many dissenting voices suggested, it was not inevitably the crucial factor in everyone’s perception of their sexuality. This model effectively made bisexuals seem to have a less secure or developed identity (rather as essentialist models of gender make transsexuals incomplete subjects), and excluded groups that defined their sexuality through activities and pleasures rather than gender preferences, such as sadomasochists. (33–34)

Perverse bodily practices, then, seem to be close to the heart of queer’s concerns, yet — as I shall explain — they are one of the subjects it treats most problematically, often unwittingly imitating rather than countering the language and terms in which perversion has been historically conceptualized in the discourses of sexology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis.

Perversion

Sexologists of the late-nineteenth century, most famously Richard von Krafft-Ebing whose *Psychopathia sexualis* of 1886 is commonly seen as the bible of sexology, first posed the perversions — conditions of being responsive to non-normative stimuli or unusual sexual practices — as a social problem. Perverse sexuality was seen as the symptom of a morally corrupt state, in keeping with the sexually, ethnically, and nationalistically normative dominant discourse of the period: the threat of

degeneration.⁶ In the first of the “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” Freud (1905) “worked hard to de-couple perversion from degeneration by introducing a developmental and unconscious model of sexuality.”⁷ He argued that perversion was one outcome of a failed Oedipal resolution, not the symptom of inherited degeneracy or a corrupt environment. What is more, with his model of infantile sexuality, primary bisexuality, and polymorphous perversity, Freud argued that all of us, at some time in our lives have desired perversely, enabling queer theorist Jonathan Dollimore (1991) to quip that, for Freud, “one does not become a pervert, but remains one” (176).

It is in this *remaining* that the trouble lurks from the point of view of the present argument. Freudian theory describes two models of perversion. First, it describes the free-floating, multivalent, polymorphous pleasure of infancy (that is lost forever after the trauma of Oedipus and the un-innocent “forgetting” of the latency period). Secondly, it describes adult perversion, defined according to the mechanism of what is, for Freud, the archetypical perversion of fetishism: namely, a mechanism of fixation. Freud comments that if we take as “perverse” any act that is not heterosexual intercourse — such as kissing, caressing and so on, then hardly anyone shall fail to avoid making an addition to their sexual life that may be called perverse. However, an adult is only to be clinically diagnosed as a pervert if their non-normative sexual practice is carried out to the exclusion of all others. In the first of his “Three Essays” he writes: “if [...] a perversion has the characteristic of exclusiveness and fixation — then we shall usually be justified in regarding it as a path-

6 For more on Krafft-Ebing’s sexological method, see Oosterhuis 2000. For more on Degeneration theory, and its application to theories of sexed and racial bodies, see Pick 1989. For more on nineteenth-century sexology’s foundational contribution to “perversion theory,” see Bristow 1997, 1–61; Hekma 1991; Nobus 2006, 3–18.

7 Even arch detractor of psychoanalytic method, Foucault (1990), acknowledged that Freud, unlike the sexologists he came after, “rigorously opposed the political and institutional effects of the perversion-heredity-degeneration system” (119).

ological symptom” (161). The irony of the logic will not be lost on us: the quality of fixity is both the definition of the desired norm (the “healthy” adult pursues only heterosexual genital intercourse rather than bisexual plural polymorphous pleasures) and yet it is also the definition of aberration (if the adult were to practice several perverse acts alongside genital intercourse — if he were to be more *fluidly* perverted — he would, for Freud, escape pathologization). Let us bear in mind that fixity, then, appears to be the aim of *both* the normalizing social order that would fix adult sexuality in genitality *and* the single-minded pervert, whom we might call the most creative of Freud’s cast of characters by dint of his writing a more alluring alternative to the dull Oedipal “truth” of sexual difference.⁸ It is by bearing this in mind that we begin to understand how the latter can have been collapsed onto the former, such that fixity appears as always already conservative and normative.

Most psychoanalytic thinkers and clinicians, following Freud’s own description and understanding of perversion in 1905, draw a distinction between perverse elements of behavior or fantasy that may occur in any subject alongside more “normal” or socially acceptable sexual behaviors on the one hand, and a perverse *structure*, implying a sclerotic rigidity of psychological organization on the other. Authors of canonical studies of perversion, Robert Stoller and M. Masud R. Khan, writing in the 1970s, and Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel in the 1980s, have argued, respectively, that elements of hatred, aggression and intimacy-inhibiting alienation underlie the fixated perverse structure, leading the “pervert” to find difficulty in many aspects of social life and relationship-formation, not only those directly associated with their sexual life. The “being” of “being a pervert”

8 The idea that perversion is close to creativity and may be the foundation of political utopia is discussed in some works of psychoanalytically-informed theory, such as Whitebook 1995. Published clinical work, on the other hand, tends to be much less laudatory of perversion’s creative potential. One study, Chasseguet-Smirgel 1985 takes account of this idea, but still pathologizes perversion and perverts. For more on these two strands of psychoanalytic work on perversion, see Downing 2006, 149–63.

in psychoanalytic ontology — or at least diagnostics — signifies beyond what is done by that person in bed and describes a typology of character, as much as of behavior. For Robert Stoller (1986), for example, the pervert is a deceptive, deluded figure, split against himself in his attempt to keep believing in the perverse script which he has written as a result of having “connived, pandered and dissimulated” (95). In classic psychoanalytic theory, moreover, the pervert is inevitably male, given that perversion in its archetypal form of fetishism can only be attained by a very particular male response to the Oedipus complex.⁹ It is against this mapping of both sexed and character-based essence onto practice that queer theory after Foucault has insisted on the importance of dissociating *what I do* from *who I am*. Right up to the present day, then, persistent practitioners of non-normative bodily practices are pathologized by psychoanalysts as suffering from broader mental disorders particularly, or uniquely, where they present as fixated upon those practices. Generalizations about personality are adduced from facts of sexual behavior.

In contemporary Anglo-American sexology and psychiatry, the term “perversion” has been replaced by “paraphilia” (literally: that which lies alongside love) after a suggestion made by Wilhelm Stekel in 1909, with the rationale that the latter term is less judgmental than “perversion,” whose roots lie in religious moral discourse and which signifies a turning away from the “right” path. Moreover, the assumption that a paraphiliac will be of the male sex is not a given in the logic of this nosology. However, the notion that fixity defines perversion — or paraphilia — and determines what is unhealthy about it persists in the psychiatric model. The previous edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR)*, asserts that “fantasies, behaviours, or objects are paraphiliac only when they [...] are obliga-

9 Some psychoanalysts and psychoanalytically influenced cultural critics have challenged and nuanced the Freudian notion that the fetishist in particular and the pervert in general is always already male. See, for example, Kaplan 1991; Apter 1991.

tory” (*DSM-IV-TR*, 525), while the most recent edition, the *DSM 5*, published in 2013, which introduces a distinction between “paraphilias” which may be “discerned” in clinical practice and “paraphilic disorders” which are to be “diagnosed” as mental disorders, describes paraphilias as a “persistent sexual interest other than sexual interest in genital stimulation or preparatory fondling with phenotypically normal, consenting adult human partners” (*DSM 5th ed.*, 285).¹⁰ Thus, the notion that variety makes sexual behavior and identity acceptable is consistent in mental health discourse from the early-twentieth- to the twenty-first centuries. Worryingly, however, it is also — implicitly — a tenet of queer theory (even if psychoanalysis and psychiatry require that the “variety” include heterosexual penetration, while queer theory obviously does not).

For example, queer theorist Moe Meyer (1994) defines queer as an “ontological challenge” to concepts of sexual subjectivity that are “unique, abiding and continuous,” favoring instead sexualities that are “performative, improvisational, discontinuous” (2–3). This rhetorical privileging of discontinuity suggests that, for Meyer, those who are fixated in their practices are in thrall to a bourgeois and reactionary ideology of selfhood, to ontological staleness. Even in Tim Dean’s (2000) ambitious work which valorizes perversion as the very stuff of dissident desire, the language of fixity and exclusivity borrowed from medicine disturbingly haunts the rhetoric: “the process of normalization itself is what is pathological, since normalization ‘fixes’ desire and generates the exclusiveness of sexual orientation as its symptom” (237). It is the polymorphousness of infantile perversion persisting in the unformed, unconscious model of desire — not the adult’s fixated narrative of perversion — that is valorized by Dean here as being sexually radical. Thus, this bold attempt to write against the psychoanalytic orthodoxy (by pathologizing

10 For a discussion of the ways in which the move from “paraphilia” to “paraphilic disorders” is not quite so radical a depathologization of non-normative sexuality as the American Psychiatric Association (APA) has claimed, see Downing 2015.

the social imperative to reach hetero-genitality rather than by pathologizing perversion) risks taking the *structure* of fixity or “exclusiveness,” rather than the *political content* of the imperative of compulsive heterosexuality, as the target of its attack.

In a similar vein, Butler ascribes to any exclusive sexual practice the status of normativity: “It’s not just the norm of heterosexuality that is tenuous. It’s all sexual norms. [...] If you say ‘I can only desire x,’ what you have immediately done in rendering desire exclusively, is created a whole set of positions which are unthinkable from the standpoint of your identity” (Osborne and Segal 1994, 34). According to Butler, self-subversion is essential for avoiding this identitarian trap, and it can be achieved by “occupying a position that you have just announced to be unthinkable” (34). Butler goes on:

I think that crafting a sexual position, or reciting a sexual position, always involves becoming haunted by what’s excluded. And the more rigid the position, the greater the ghost, and the more threatening in some way. I don’t know if that’s a Foucauldian point. It’s probably a psychoanalytical point, but that’s not finally important to me. (34)

This logic — proposed by one of the most influential voices in “queer” — is indeed a Freudian point. It is the logic of pure Freudian pathological perversion. The archetypal pervert, the fetishist, is haunted by the loss of his belief in mother’s phallus that he displaces onto his fetish object or act, and thereby gets to keep in another form: the high-heeled shoe; the shine on the nose and so on. Queer theory repeats wholesale here the psychoanalytic rhetoric which holds that the fixated perverse structure is inferior to more “discontinuous” forms of sexuality. As a theoretical prescription about how our desire should work, how we are supposed to conduct our bodily practices, and how we should construe the idea of “fixated singularity” philosophically — as always-already normalizing — this is itself a strikingly normative directive.

Moreover, it becomes a discourse in which the ghost of what it disavows — normalization — returns surreptitiously in the prescription to desire appropriately plurally, fluidly and openly. The embalmed object of fixity haunts the queer position behind the shiny fetish of fluidity that it promotes. It is extremely problematic that queer should ape epistemologically the model of disavowal (based on a logical rigidity) that it scapegoats in its rejection of the figure of fixity. For this suggests a residual fear of, and belief in, an origin, rather than a defiant demonstration of the lack of origin beneath our performativity. If “queer” and “crip” are recuperable labels, how strange that being “fixated”; a “pervert” a “‘proper’ pervert” — enjoying the same bodily practice time and again, however queer that practise may be in its anti-heteronormative energies — should be seen to lie so entirely beyond the pale. Queer theory would do well to harness its celebrated energies of motility and resignification in the service of re-inscribing fixated desire differently. This would be a more creative agenda than the construction, and reification through the repetition of discourse, of an unhelpful binary, which risks appearing as an archaic and originary truth: fixity is always a problem; fluidity is its “cure” (whether the antidote is political or clinical).

Instead of constructing its own type of exemplary plural subject, performing the right number of appropriately dissident and different sexual practices, in the correctly plural and queer relationship configuration, then, queer theory might do better to concentrate on challenging the meaning of such paradigms. It would be in keeping with Warner’s description of queer as opposing “the *idea* of normal,” with which I began, if queer theory were carefully to avoid the tyranny of all prescriptions and norms. This would include an avoidance of imputing normativity to the repetition of the same in the sphere of sexuality, where the same is a perverse practice enjoyed, not in the service of shoring up an identity, but simply in the service of enjoyment — useless, excessive enjoyment that is not recuper-

able for its utilitarian value or its meaning.¹¹ Radical theories of sexuality, then, might avoid echoing canonical psychoanalytic perspectives by giving up the commonplace assertion that fixity is somehow pathological or inferior to plurality — that fixity “means” anything very specific *at all* — and work to legitimize both plurality and singularity, not in a dialectical configuration, but as infinitely equal and different.

I hope to have shown that, while polemically valid and rhetorically empowering in places, the queer strategy of valorizing fluidity through its association with the transformative powers of performativity nevertheless falls into serious logical and ideological traps when applied to the problems and pleasures of perversion. I would go further and opine that a queer theory that does not embrace the energies of the “perverse” is missing a trick in failing to celebrate the “twistedness,” the “athwart-ness” of which perverts have long been accused and which, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has reminded us, are etymologically enshrined in the very notion of “queer” itself. Finally, I would suggest that psychoanalysts ask themselves whether historically ingrained orthodoxies about the meanings of fixated behavior are really

11 The notion that sexuality has a “function” (reproduction) is an inheritance of biological (as well, arguably, of theological) discourses that influenced nineteenth-century sexological and medical accounts of perversion. The idea that the human sex instinct is identical with an instinct for reproduction can be found in the work of Pierre Cabanis (1757–1808) and Paul Moreau de Tours (1844–1908), as well as in Krafft-Ebing’s famous *Psychopathia sexualis*. See Nobus 2006, 6; Davidson 2001). The understanding of sexual desire as identical with the desire for reproduction is a logic that underpins the history of modern scientific thinking about sexuality. Queer’s attempts to render sexuality as doing something other than serving a utilitarian biological and social aim are in direct response to such discourses. Foucault and Lacan, as Tim Dean has shown in *Beyond Sexuality* (2000), both characterize desire as useless, as refusing to serve the aims of the social imperative. Another important twentieth-century philosophical name in this debate is Georges Bataille, whose notion of sexuality as a limit-experience — as allied to death and dissolution rather than life, selfhood and continuity — has been underused by critics of utilitarian ideas of sex since Foucault’s essay of 1963. This is regrettable as he is, in many ways, a natural ally to queer agendas. See Bataille 1962; Foucault 2000.

capable of accounting for the multiplicity of types of fixation that clinical practice yields, and — even more urgently — what investments are really at stake in making a symptom out of a pleasure.

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