

Sex Positive:

Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression

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Abstract

From the feminist 'sex wars' of the 1980s to the queer theory and politics of the 1990s, debates about the politics of sexuality have been at the forefront of contemporary theoretical, social, and political demands. This article seeks to intervene in these debates by challenging the terms through which they have been defined. Investigating the importance of 'sex positivity' and transgression as conceptual features of feminist and queer discourses, this essay calls for a new focus on the political and material effects of pro-sexuality.

Keywords

pro-sexuality; transgression; sex wars; queer theory; identity politics; sexual revolution; capitalism; postmodernism; subjectivity; agency; power; discourse; style

I do not believe that we can fuck our way to freedom.

(Pat Califia, *Macho Sluts*)

Introduction

This paper offers a critique of those contemporary pro-sex and queer theories that encourage us, as feminists and sexual minorities, to fuck our way to freedom. I will consider the historical and material conditions that produced the questions pro-sex discourses have asked, the effects of asking these questions, and the politics of their silences. In this project, I question the usefulness of discourses that glorify 'destabilizing' sexual practices, those which are seen to 'trouble' – to borrow Judith Butler's formulation – the categories of sex and sexuality. Let me emphasize from the outset that I am not arguing *against* the practices of butch/femme, drag, S/M or any other form of ritualized, sexual or gender play; instead, I am insisting that we must interrogate the claims that we are making about such cultural practices. This critique, then, is not 'anti-sex' but rather refuses to be either 'for' or 'against' sex and particular sexual styles.

My analysis begins by focusing upon the politics of the pro-sexuality movement as they have been articulated in the feminist sex wars and in the discourses of queer theory. In feminism's sex wars of the 1980s, pro-sex feminists argued, persuasively I think, that radical feminism's representation of women as disempowered actors fails to see women as sexual subjects in their own right. This argument has been widely circulated and is elaborated in well-known 'sex positive' and/or anti-censorship feminist collections such as *Caught Looking*, *Powers of Desire*, and *Pleasure and Danger* (Snitow *et al.*, 1983; F.A.C.T., 1992; Vance, 1992). Although feminists comprise a large segment of the pro-sexuality movement, some pro-sex activists, including transgender, gay, bisexual, and S/M radicals, do not align themselves with feminism at all. I want to emphasize that my essay does not provide an overview of the pro-sexuality movement. Rather than attempt to offer a broad history of pro-sexuality, I explore the specific connections between 1980s pro-sex feminism and the new queer theory and politics that emerged in the 1990s. While I distinguish between these two movements historically, politically, and as modes of social critique, I seek primarily to theorize their continuities; that is, I am conceptualizing pro-sex feminism and queer theory as two faces of 'sex positivity' in order to investigate the politics that emerge from various kinds of pro-sex arguments.

The central task of this project, then, is to examine the political and material effects of the pro-sexuality movement's effort to construct a radical sexual politics. In the first part of this essay, I seek to account for the current imbrication of the sexual and the political. More precisely, I trace pro-sex theory and practice to the ideology of the 'sexual revolution' and the consumerist social logic of contemporary capitalism. My analysis then explores the relationship of pro-sexuality to the identitarian ethos that has defined the new social movements since the 1950s and 1960s. A vision of politics that asserts the interlocking of public and private spheres, the politics of identity conceptualizes individual and/or collective identity not only as a basis for political organization but also as a site of political activism itself. As I argue, pro-sex's promotion of transgressive sexual practices as utopian political strategies can be traced to a foundational tenet of identity politics: the personal is political. With this link between the pro-sexuality movement and identity politics in mind, the second part of this essay considers Butler's work as an example of contemporary performative theories of sex and sexuality that celebrate the politics of genderfuck. I am interested most of all in theorizing the silences in pro-sex and queer theories. What are the questions that these discourses cannot ask and why can't they ask them?

Identity, liberation, and the politics of pro-sex

The question of 1980s lesbian feminism, ‘Is S/M feminist?’ became, in the queer 1990s, ‘Is S/M subversive or genderfuck?’. There are, of course, crucial differences between these two questions. Whereas the first question addresses a collectivity, the second focuses on individual practices. Furthermore, what is at stake in the first question – the relationship of a particular sexual practice to the teachings and politics of feminism – is replaced in the second question by the issue of the ‘resistance’ the practice produces. Nevertheless, for both categories of social critics, the discussion is essentially about what kind of sex *counts* as progressive. In other words, the political assumptions behind the two questions are identical. By ranking sexual practices in terms of their subversiveness, pro-sex activists repeat the logic of radical feminism with one distinction: they valorize the transgression of ‘female sexuality’ instead of its consolidation and expression.¹

Certainly, pro-sex feminism is much closer to the ideologies of radical feminism than its proponents acknowledge. As O’Sullivan argues about the ‘unexpected connections’ between lesbian feminists and leather dykes: ‘anti-sm dykes and the object of their anger, sm dykes, have more in common than they might want to admit’ (1999: 99). Although the quest for a politically correct ‘feminist sexuality’ (that is, a sexuality purified of male sexual violence and aggression) is replaced by the quest for a politically incorrect sexuality that transgresses movement standards, in both cases certain sexual practices are valorized for their liberatory or destabilizing potential. Building upon the theory and activism of pro-sex feminism, queer theories that have argued for a ‘genderfuck’ sexuality implicitly suggest that genderfuck is the ‘feminist sexuality’ that lesbian feminists were looking for all along. As Sawicki has argued, both radical and pro-sex feminisms put forward an ahistorical theory of sexuality and sexual desire (1991: 34–6). It might seem intuitively that the pro-sex position tends to encourage us to stake our political project on the liberatory value of sex *per se*, whereas the radical feminist position reads ‘sexual freedom’ as freedom from oppressive sexual relations. Actually, both camps have a liberatory view of sexuality that is grounded in an ahistorical and individualistic concept of freedom as ‘freedom from repressive norms’ (Sawicki, 1991: 36). While radical feminists see ‘female sexuality’ as repressed by ‘the patriarchy,’ the pro-sexuality movement sees repression as produced by heterosexism and ‘sex negativity’ – cultural operations often seen as institutionalized in feminism itself. Creet, for example, asserts that the lesbian S/M community has often railed against ‘Mother Feminism,’ whose sexual prescriptiveness is equated with the heterosexism and ‘anti-sex’ attitudes of dominant institutions (1991: 145). In this respect, as Lewis argues, ‘lesbian SM sets up feminism as its other’ (1994: 89).

However, as I have been arguing, this opposition is a distortion to the extent that it fails to recognize the similar forms that, for example, 'pro' and 'anti' S/M arguments take; to put it another way, in this difference there is also identity. Ultimately, both pro-sex and radical feminists reproduce the ideology of personal emancipation within contemporary capitalist society by making the liberation of sex a fundamental feminist goal. Finally, the attention to the social dimension of sex, one of feminism's key insights, is eclipsed by a political program that advocates the self-transformation of sexual relations – relations seemingly separated from their locations in political and economic systems.

Despite the similarities between the political effects of both camps' theory and activism, pro-sex's tendency toward libertarianism invests this movement with an unique relationship to questions of sexual freedom. It is well-known that the pro-sexuality movement emerged as a response to radical and anti-porn feminists, such as Dworkin and MacKinnon, who advocate the use of censorship and other forms of state repression in order to contain sexual violence against women. These radical feminists tend to deny the possibility of individual or collective resistance through sexuality, even as they prescribe the parameters for a properly 'feminist' sexuality. Reacting against radical feminism's proscriptive approach toward sexuality, pro-sex feminists have continued to make sex *the* issue, but they have done so by arguing for the centrality of sexual freedom in women's struggles against oppression. Unfortunately, this effort to prioritize sexual freedom often means that, for the pro-sexuality movement, women's liberation is essentially a project of personal sexual liberation. Refusing to conceptualize sexual relations only in terms of social regulation, pro-sex feminists such as Echols, Rubin, and Vance reject sexual repression, favor freedom of sexual expression, and claim that dominant configurations of power do not prevent women from exercising agency. Indeed, pro-sex feminism's endeavor to cultivate sexuality as a site of political resistance is perhaps its most influential contribution to contemporary queer theory and politics.

To be sure, the pro-sex argument that the production of sexuality within power relations does not preclude agency for women, but in fact can enable it, has become the theoretical foundation for 1990s discourses – like Butler's – that valorize 'destabilizing' sexual practices. Consider this important passage from Butler's *Gender Trouble*:

The pro-sexuality movement within feminist theory and practice has effectively argued that sexuality is always constructed within the terms of discourse and power, where power is partially understood in terms of heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions. The emergence of a sexuality constructed (not determined) in these terms within lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual contexts is, therefore,

not a sign of a masculine identification in some reductive sense. It is not the failed project of criticizing phallogocentrism or heterosexual hegemony If sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is ‘before,’ ‘outside,’ or ‘beyond’ power is a cultural impossibility and a politically impracticable dream, one that postpones the concrete and contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself. This critical task presumes, of course, that to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination. It offers the possibility of a repetition of the law which is not its consolidation, but its displacement.

(Butler, 1990b: 30)

Butler argues for a model of localized resistance from *within* the terms of power. Like the 1980s pro-sex feminists with whom she allies herself, she seeks to negotiate sexuality from inside power relations and deliberately resists constructing sex as a prediscursive utopia beyond the law. In this respect, Butler and other descendants of the pro-sexuality movement cannot be charged with the naive libertarianism that holds up an emancipatory ideal of sexual pleasure as freedom. And yet, Butler’s claim that there are forms of repetition which do not consolidate but instead displace and reconfigure ‘heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions’ relies upon her specific readings of sexual styles that transgress the matrix of power. After the passage quoted previously, for example, she goes on to assert that butch and femme sexualities in lesbian culture do not replicate heterosexual constructs but in fact ‘denaturalize’ them, effectively subverting the power regime of heterosexuality itself (1990b: 31). I will explore this topic in more detail below; at this point in my argument, however, I want to emphasize the status of transgression in Butler’s work and that of her ‘pro-sex’ predecessors.

To take up this project, it is worth recalling Foucault’s enormous influence on theorists of sex and sexuality. Butler quite rightly points to the tension in Foucault’s work between his ‘official’ claim that ‘sexuality and power are coextensive’ and his utopian references in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1990) and *Herculine Barbin* (1980) to a proliferation of bodily pleasures that transgresses the limits of power (Butler, 1990b: 96–7). Indeed, Foucault forcefully critiques the theory and practice of emancipatory sexual politics, while nonetheless celebrating a reorganization of ‘bodies and pleasures’ that, in his view, characterizes ‘moments’ of transgression, such as those that take place within the S/M scene (Foucault, 1989: 387–8; Simons, 1995: 99–101). This struggle between opposites in Foucault points to an antagonism of interests at the center of his social critique. In her analysis of this antagonism, Fraser argues for separating Foucault’s work into an ‘immanentist’ strand (‘humanism’s own immanent counterdiscourse’) and a ‘transgressive’ strand, which, as Fraser asserts,

‘aspires rather to ‘transgress’ or transcend humanism and replace it with something new’ (1989: 57). If Fraser seeks to separate these two aspects of Foucault’s social theory, it is precisely because they are fundamentally inconsistent. In other words, one cannot really reconcile the claim that ‘sex is an instrument of domination *tout court*’ (Fraser, 1989: 60) with the claim that the regime of sexuality can be resisted through a counterfocus on bodies and pleasures, which somehow successfully transgress disciplinary power. As I have been suggesting, this contradiction is constitutive of Foucault’s project, which seeks to locate a de-repressive theory of sexuality alongside a transgressive aesthetics. It is not, therefore, surprising that this contradiction has been inherited by some of Foucault’s most influential followers (such as Butler and Rubin), many of whom are widely recognized as the pre-eminent voices of pro-sex feminism and its contemporary successor, queer theory.

In both its feminist and queer incarnations, pro-sex theorists and practitioners contradict their own logic by idealizing the subversive potential of transgressive practices that dislocate and displace the dominant. As Ferguson asserts about pro-sex feminism, the pro-sexuality paradigm is based upon the following claim: ‘Sexual freedom requires oppositional practices, that is, transgressing socially respectable categories of sexuality and refusing to draw the line on what counts as politically correct sexuality’ (1984: 109). This refusal ‘to draw the line’ actually remains within the schema of sexual hierarchy and value that sex radicals set out to critique in the first place: pro-sex theory leaves intact the notion that some sexualities are more liberatory than others, and the most liberatory ones of all should serve as the foundation for a politics of resistance. With this in mind, I will argue that pro-sex theory has set up transgressive sexual practices as utopian political strategies and, in the process, has inadvertently endorsed the emancipatory sexual politics that its Foucauldian supporters meant to overthrow.

Although many pro-sex theorists have objected to the ranking of sexual practices enacted by radical feminists – arguing instead that no sex act can be labeled as either inherently liberating or essentially oppressive (Sawicki, 1991: 43; Echols, 1992: 66) – the pro-sexuality movement suggests that transgressive sexual identities and practices offer a privileged position from which to construct a truly radical sexual politics. Rubin makes this point explicitly in her groundbreaking essay, ‘Thinking sex.’ Sixteen years after its initial publication in 1984, Rubin’s work remains a milestone in feminism for its impassioned and insightful defense of sexual minorities in the face of an oppressive system of sexual stratification and erotic persecution, which includes but is not limited to state repression through sex law. Widely seen as a foundational text of gay and lesbian studies and queer

theory, Rubin's essay applauds pro-sex feminists for their rejection of the reactionary sexual puritanism of radical feminism and for their strong affiliation with sexual nonconformity and oppositional desires, practices, and fantasies:

The women's movement may have produced some of the most retrogressive sexual thinking this side of the Vatican. But it has also produced an exciting, innovative, and articulate defense of sexual pleasure and erotic justice. This 'pro-sex' feminism has been spearheaded by lesbians whose sexuality does not conform to movement standards of purity (primarily lesbian sadomasochists and butch/femme dykes), by unapologetic heterosexuals, and by women who adhere to classic radical feminism rather than to the revisionist celebrations of femininity which have become so common.

(Rubin, 1992: 302–3)

Although she duly notes the contributions of 'unapologetic heterosexuals' and 'women who adhere to classical radical feminism,' Rubin is most interested in pro-sex feminism because of its commitment to erotic diversity and its valorization of those transgressive practices and identities that are on the 'outer limits' of institutional and ideological systems that stratify sexuality (1992: 281). As her essay makes clear, she is interested in these principles precisely because her project locates pro-sex feminism within the larger framework of a radical sexual politics of erotic dissidence. As a result, sexually dissident lesbians, such as S/M dykes, become for Rubin privileged bearers of the pro-sex ethos. Although she never explicitly claims that such transgressive sexualities will liberate us, she subtly promotes the idea that marginalized practices can form the basis for a genuinely radical, vanguard politics because they disrupt naturalized norms (in this case, 'movement standards of purity').

This thematics of transgression returns us to the issue of Foucault's impact on theorists like Rubin. Valverde points to the tension in 'Thinking sex' between Rubin's Foucauldianism and her affiliation with liberal sexology. At the root of this contradiction lies Rubin's notion of 'sex negativity,' a sexological term which is, Valverde argues, explicitly incompatible with Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis. However, as already suggested here, I believe Rubin's competing allegiances actually reproduce a contradiction in Foucault's own work. Like Foucault, Rubin wrestles with the contradiction between her avowed adherence to a de-repressive view of sexuality and her tendency to associate resistance with the disruptive forces of transgression. Focusing on the liberation of sexual pleasure as the organizing principle for political activism, Rubin's work moves toward a 'pluralistic sexual ethics' – an ethics of sex positivity and erotic diversity that risks replacing social liberation with personal liberation (1992: 283).

Using Rubin's work as a case in point, it becomes apparent that the problem with the pro-sexuality position is *not* that it revalues disparaged sexual identities and styles, but that it stops there. In other words, while queerness, for example, is revalued, the political and economic conditions that are responsible for its devaluation remain unchallenged. It is within the context of these unarticulated challenges that we must begin to historicize the politics and theory of pro-sex. In particular, the pro-sexuality movement's attempt to offer a defense of the subversive potential of sex and to recuperate a theory of transgression for politics needs to be traced to the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s.

We have heard perhaps too much that the women's and gay liberation movements contributed to a dramatic reshaping of sexuality in the 1960s (D'Emilio and Freedman, 1989: 325). It is also worth remembering that such movements, as Weeks points out, 'grew explicitly *in opposition* to the dominant tendencies of the decade' (1985: 20). Indeed, the 'swinging sixties' and its ethos of sexual ecstasy can be traced to the hegemony of 'sexual revolution' that emerged in the 1950s in conjunction with a new material logic engendered by the culture of commodity production. As US historians D'Emilio and Freedman point out, 'the first major challenge to the marriage-oriented ethic of sexual liberalism came neither from political nor cultural radicals but rather from entrepreneurs who extended the logic of consumer capitalism to the realm of sex' (1989: 302). In a word, *Playboy*. For *Playboy* founder Hugh Hefner and other proponents of sexual freedom, the 'liberation' of sexuality meant that sex was liberated to become 'a commodity, an ideology, and a form of "leisure"' (Zaretsky, 1976: 123). By the 1960s, the movement for sexual liberation had made strange bedfellows of the 'playboys' and 'cosmo' girls of the singles culture – who eagerly embraced the commodification of sex that characterized the new consumerism of the era – and the hippie counterculture, which promoted sexual freedom as a form of rebellion against this very same materialistic and consumerist culture (D'Emilio and Freedman, 1989: 306). Despite these contradictions in the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, I want to stress that even seemingly opposed quests for sexual freedom took identical forms: they displaced the political onto the sexual by framing the pursuit of sexual pleasure in the vocabulary of revolutionary social change. In so doing, they became the forerunners of the contemporary 'sex positive' movement, which locates political resistance in the transgression of sexual limits.

Why is this connection between pro-sex and the logic of sexual liberation mystified by postmodernist and poststructuralist descendants of pro-sexuality like Butler? Clearly, most pro-sex discourses have been fairly explicit about their relationship to liberatory sexual politics. As the

influential pro-sex anthology *Pleasure and Danger* reveals, the pro-sexuality movement's emphasis on sexual pleasure sought to '[join] sexual liberation with women's liberation' (Echols, 1992: 66). Furthermore, many of the most prominent activists in the pro-sexuality movement – S/M or leather queers in particular – have thought of themselves as 'continuing the unfinished sexual revolution of the 1960s' (Tucker, 1991: 12). These direct admissions of pro-sex theorists' libertarianism expose for us the more complicated liberatory impulses at work in the discourses of Rubin and Butler.

Like Rubin and Butler, many promoters of transgressive or 'destabilizing' sexual practices lose sight of their own recapitulation of sexual liberationist rhetoric. Claiming that the transgressive desires and practices they advocate are not 'inherently' subversive, these queer theorists exploit the authority of theory as a safeguard, which then enables them to celebrate the play of difference and desire that constitutes the butch/femme, S/M, or fetish scene. Reich offers an example of this argument in 'Genderfuck: the law of the dildo' when she asserts that 'genderfuck structures meaning in a symbol-performance matrix that crosses through sex and gender and destabilizes the boundaries of our recognition of sex, gender, and sexual practice' (1992: 113); and that 'genderfuck, as a mimetic, subversive performance, simultaneously traverses the phallic economy and exceeds it' (1992: 125). Like Butler's famous 'subversive repetition' and Dollimore's influential 'transgressive reinscription,' Reich's work participates in an important trend to valorize a politics of performance that inverts regulatory regimes while deflecting claims to authenticity. Proponents of such 'subversive reinscriptions' celebrate, as Dollimore puts it:

a mode of transgression which finds expression through the inversion and perversion of just those pre-existing categories and structures which its humanist counterpart seeks to transcend, to be liberated from; a mode of transgression which seeks not an escape from existing structures but rather a subversive reinscription within them, and in the process their dislocation or displacement.

(Dollimore, 1991: 285)

The theoretical refusal of the familiar story of sexual liberation does not undermine the material effects of this discourse's valorization of transgression. By holding up sexually dissident acts as valuable political strategies, these pro-sex and queer theories promote a 'politics of ecstasy' that Singer describes as the *sine qua non* of the sexual revolution (1993: 115).

The valorization of this kind of 'politics of ecstasy' has prevented the pro-sexuality movement from engaging with critiques that have been leveled against it by anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and materialist feminists. Theorists including hooks and Goldsby have suggested that the radical sexual practices celebrated by Butler and Bright in fact reflect the power and

privilege of institutionalized racial and class differences. In her important critique of Jennie Livingston's film *Paris Is Burning*, hooks reads Harlem's black and latino drag balls as celebrations of whiteness, implicating both the filmmaker and the drag queens in a perpetuation of 'class and race longing that privileges the "femininity" of the ruling-class white woman' (1992: 148). In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler responds to hooks's critique by seeking to address the thematics of racial identification and investment. But the specific problems of ambivalent identification pictured in Livingston's film are ultimately subsumed to a more general concern with ambivalence as a characteristic of all identification. As Tyler has persuasively argued about camp, however, what counts as subversive depends upon who performs the act in question, as well as the conditions of reception in a society dominated by a 'white and bourgeois imaginary' (1991: 58). As thinkers and activists engaged in struggles for human freedom, including sexual freedom, we need to ask ourselves: how do sexually dissident styles reproduce relations of domination? Before promoting such cultural practices as forms of political resistance, we must consider how these practices operate in a system of racist and capitalist social relations.

Using the pro-sexuality movement's recent valorizations of butch/femme as an example, I want to stress the importance of assessing transgressive sexualities in relation to dominant social, political, and economic formations. As such historians and theorists of lesbian culture as Davis & Kennedy (1993), Feinberg (1993, 1996), Hollibaugh & Moraga (1992) and Nestle (1987, 1992) have demonstrated, butch/femme is a sexual style that developed within working-class and variously raced communities in the 1930–50s. As these writers have suggested, butch/femme must be understood in the context of various struggles for social change undertaken by working-class people, people of color, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. Despite this insight, feminist and queer theorists like Case and Butler efface the histories and contexts of gay lives by glorifying butch/femme roles as performative, surface identities, uncomplicated by race or class and detached from specific communities and interests.² Though she rightly criticizes the feminist movement for its rejection of working-class butch/femme culture, Case herself elides the experience and struggles of butches and femmes. In her well-known work on the feminist theater company Split Britches, Case asserts:

butch-femme seduction is always located in semiosis. . . . The point is not to conflict reality with another reality, but to abandon the notion of reality through roles and their seductive atmosphere and lightly manipulate appearances. Surely, this is the atmosphere of camp, permeating the *mise en scène* with 'pure' artifice. In other words, a strategy of appearances replaces a claim to truth.

Thus, butch-femme roles . . . are played in signs themselves and not in ontologies. . . . The female body, the male gaze, and the structures of realism are only sex toys for the butch-femme couple.

(Case, 1993: 304–5)

Here, Case presents Split Britches' 'ironized' theatrical performance as the apotheosis of what it means to 'be' a butch or femme lesbian. As a result, her account of butch-femme seduction retreats from materiality and into an aestheticized 'hypersimulation' of butch and femme desires (1993: 304). Following Baudrillard's postmodernist theory of seduction as a 'simulation' that undermines the principle of reality, Case embraces a purely discursive construction of reality (Baudrillard, 1988: 156). Reducing lived experience to the signs and symbols of representation, Case removes butch/femme practices from social reality so thoroughly that they become linguistic and discursive objects in semiotic play.

By suggesting that performance and style can dispense with political realities, Case and Butler may have provided the theoretical foundation for recent popular celebrations of stylish, yuppie butch/femme lesbians, in which passing and class privilege masquerade as politics. Tellingly, these valorizations of the 'new lesbian chic' in both the straight and gay press clearly distinguish 'the new butch/femme' from the unpretty, politicized, working-class butches and femmes of the 1950s.³ In fact, this disparaging representation of 1950s butch/femme culture as confrontational and resistant may say more about our contemporary retreat from political activity than anything else; as Davis and Kennedy have argued, the 'culture of resistance' fostered by the lesbian bar scene of the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s did not necessarily lead to collective struggle for social change. In fact, Davis and Kennedy contrast a butch/femme 'culture of resistance' of the 1940s and 1950s with the organized movement for gay and lesbian liberation that, in many respects, superseded it in the late 1960s and 1970s (1993: 183–90). Their designation of butch/femme as 'prepolitical' with respect to gay liberation seems to me to assume that a gay politics of identity is the only or best form of political activity for queer people, an assumption I want to challenge. We cannot afford to idealize the past, but neither can we afford to overlook the material risks that butches and femmes took in forging a community as they lived – and sought to transform – their own history. As the contemporary co-optation of the struggles of 'gender outlaws' suggests, we have emptied the political and economic content of our analysis only to legitimate a commodification of lesbian culture for both gay and straight consumers.⁴

Though some promoters of 'the new lesbian chic' do question the political effects of 'lifestyle lesbianism,' these writers tend to marginalize or gloss over such concerns in order to celebrate a substitution of style for politics.

Consider this typical passage from Blackman and Perry's 'Skirting the issue':

Today's lesbian 'self' is a thoroughly urban creature who interprets fashion as something to be worn and discarded. Nothing is sacred for very long. Constantly changing, she dabbles in fashion, constructing one self after another, expressing her desires in a continual process of experimentation. How do we assess that fluidity politically?

(Blackman and Perry, 1990: 77)

Unfortunately, Blackman and Perry never answer their own question about the political implications of a postmodernist valorization of fragmentation and spectacle; instead, they imply that the racist and homophobic policies of Thatcherite Britain make 'self-expression through fashion' the only form of viable political action (1990: 77–8). This disengagement with politics simply celebrates a commodification of sex and gender, without seeking to challenge institutionalized power. Activists working for the liberation of people of color, women, and sexual minorities must assess the political costs of excluding material contextualization from our analyses. By privatizing the sexual in our own theory and politics, we have reduced sexuality to a matter of style, and redefined political resistance in terms of lifestyle, fashion, and personal transformation.⁵

Why does the pro-sexuality movement need to make claims about the way transgressive identities and sexualities – divorced from institutionalized power relations – function as political practices that work toward social change? What political agenda is advanced by these strategies? If, as Rubin states, the feminist pro-sexuality movement has been led in part by sex radicals – butch/femme and S/M lesbians in particular – it should not be surprising that much of the activism and writing of pro-sex tends to be representative of communities that organize politically around identity categories. From SAMOIS' *Coming to Power* (1987) to Califia's *Public Sex* (1994), this work advocates sex as a site of feminist and/or lesbian praxis and celebrates the liberatory value of marginalized sexual practices and identities for women and queers. I would contend that the promotion of a politics grounded in transgressive sexual styles is a necessary *effect* of the logic of identity politics, and, as such, must be understood in terms of the central role identity politics has played in social and political movements in the second half of the twentieth century.

In the US, the new social movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s – such as: the civil rights movement, black nationalism, and the women's and gay liberation movements – championed a new definition of politics centered on collective and individual identity. In doing so, they broadened the scope of 'the political' to include not only the institutions of the public

sphere (state apparatuses, economic markets, and the arenas of public discourse), but also everyday, individual and social life, including the intimate sphere of personal life. While these social movements effectively exposed the interpenetration of the political and the personal, they also reconceptualized political struggle in terms of the affirmation or reclamation of one's collective identity. As Kauffman puts it:

Identity politics express the principle that identity – be it individual or collective – should be central to both the vision and practice of radical politics. It implies not only organizing around shared identity, as for example classic nationalist movements have done. Identity politics also express the belief that identity itself – its elaboration, expression, or affirmation – is and should be a fundamental focus of political work.

(Kauffman, 1990: 67)

Perhaps because the focus on identity itself tends to abstract it from social processes, these social movements laid the groundwork for a new, more purified brand of identity politics to emerge in the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s – a movement away from identity politics' previous integration of the collective and the individual and toward an even greater focus on identity itself (Kauffman, 1990: 75–6). In short, what was once 'the personal is political' has become 'the political need only be personal.' By creating a climate in which self-transformation is equated with social transformation, the new identity politics has valorized a politics of lifestyle, a personal politics that is centered upon who we are – how we dress or get off – that fails to engage with institutionalized systems of domination.

The theory and activism of the pro-sexuality movement has been shaped by this identitarian logic, which is invested in politicizing self-exploration, lifestyle, and consumption as radical acts. Given the currency of performative theories of sexuality and gender in feminist and gay/lesbian studies, some might argue that the valorizing of transgressive sexual practices by queer theorists like Butler, Case, and Dollimore is precisely *not* invested in this kind of identitarian logic. Butler, for example, explicitly frames her work in terms of a critique of identity, arguing for a performative production of identity that seeks to deconstruct – and displace the importance of – dominant identity categories. I do not want to contest this. What I am suggesting is that this brand of queer theory reinscribes itself in the logic of identity through the very mechanisms by which it claims to challenge it.

Despite their anti-essentialist critiques of mainstream gay politics of identity, pro-sex and queer theories that valorize transgression make self-exploration and the fashioning of individual identity central to political struggle. This focus on self-transformation, divorced from the collective

transformation of institutionalized structures of power, reproduces the pitfalls of the liberal gay rights movement that politicizes 'lifestyle' – for example, 'buying pink' – as a strategy for social change. Since this new queer and genderfuck theory premises itself upon a deconstruction of identity categories, it is in the contradictory position of critiquing identity categories as a foundation for politics while placing the practices associated with them at the center of its own politics: now, the destabilizing of identity – instead of identity's elaboration – in cultural practices is seen as a political challenge to systems of domination.

Resistance in the land of gender trouble

According to Bergman, 'the person who has done the most to revise the academic standing of camp and to suggest its politically subversive potential is Judith Butler' (1993: 11). Bergman, of course, is referring to Butler's examination of how the cultural practices of drag and butch/femme parody the concept of a 'natural sex' or true gender identity. In her influential *Gender Trouble* (1990b), Butler argues that these practices expose both the heterosexual 'original' and its gay 'imitation' as cultural constructs, phantasmatic in that neither can attain the status of an authentic gender reality. In so doing, she reveals gender as an 'act' inscribed upon subjects by sustained repetitions that are performative, not expressive: 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (1990b: 33). On the one hand, Butler uses this theory of gender as performative in order to argue that the compulsory repetitions that govern gender are a form of social regulation. On the other hand, her desire to theorize agency for subjects from within such regulatory practices leads her to collapse performativity into style, a move which allows her to valorize particular 'sexual stylizations' as practices that subvert sexist and heterosexist norms. I want to explore this tension between regulation and resistance in order to put pressure on Butler's notions of identity, agency, and power.

How do practices like drag and butch/femme function as subversive repetitions within the cultural norms of sex and gender? For Butler, agency is not located in a pre- or extradiscursive space, but rather within the gaps of dominant sex/gender ideology: gaps that may be exploited for the project of social transformation. Arguing that cultural construction does not preclude agency, she sees a practice like drag as resistant insofar as it works to denaturalize: to reveal the fictive status of coherent identities and to subvert: to repeat and displace normative cultural configurations. Significantly, Butler never delineates what constitutes a 'displacing' of

dominant conventions. When pressed by interviewer Liz Kotz, she states that ‘*subversiveness is not something that can be gauged or calculated. In fact, what I mean by subversion are those effects that are incalculable*’ (Butler, 1992: 84, emphasis added). In order to understand this striking anti-empiricism, we must take stock of the way in which Butler’s theory of subversion is grounded in discourse.

If, as in Butler’s formulation, identity is an *effect* of discursive practices, subversive ‘disorderings’ of gender coherence mark the exhaustion of identity itself; identity is unable to signify once and for all because it inevitably generates ‘effects that are incalculable,’ an undecidability that exceeds signification. Theorizing subversion as the site of proliferating, indeterminate meaning that is always and already at the core of identity, Butler locates agency in representation and therefore can only theorize social transformation as a process of ‘resignification’ that somehow reconstructs the real. Referring to Foucault’s theory of power as it is elaborated in *The History of Sexuality, I*, she asserts: ‘the juridical law, the regulative law, seeks to confine, limit, or prohibit some set of acts, practices, subjects, but in the process of articulating and elaborating that prohibition, the law provides *the discursive occasion* for a resistance, resignation, and potential self-subversion of that law’ (1993: 109). These ‘discursive occasions’ for resistance exist because, for Butler, relations of power have both regulating and deregulating effects and thus they are always able to ‘generate their own resistances’ (Ebert, 1996: 216). Of course, at the heart of Butler’s project is an attempt to reformulate the very concepts I have just been invoking: identity, power, agency, discourse, and material reality. Butler wants to unsettle these categories by, for example, refusing to theorize ‘sex’ as outside or prior to discourse and power; instead, she illuminates ‘the power/discourse regime’ or regulatory norms through which ‘sex’ is itself ‘materialized’ (1993: 10, 35). Butler’s model may at first appear to allow for a promising rethinking of the relationship between the material and the discursive. The trajectory of her argument, however, short circuits this possibility, since she effectively collapses the distinction between discourse and materiality by privileging a ‘formative’ discursive practice which makes the material its ‘effect’ (1993: 2). Although discursive interventions certainly have material effects in the production of the real, how exactly the process of resignification works toward political and social change needs to be explained.⁶ I would contend that the valorization of ‘resignification’ as a political strategy is complicit with political and economic systems that mystify the relationship between signs and things, and actually works to obscure the kind of agency shaping social relations.

Interestingly enough, Butler herself addresses this problem when she asks, ‘What relations of domination and exploitation are inadvertently sustained

when representation becomes the sole focus of politics?’ (1990b: 6). This is a question Butler’s work cannot answer because of her investment in poststructuralist and postmodernist theories of the subject which evade coming to terms with their own linguistic idealism.⁷ Butler’s representational politics, I want to insist, are flawed by her failure to consider the historical and material conditions that have participated in the production of her conception of resignification as resistance. By not linking her specifically linguistic notion of a fluid, performative subject to the context of capitalism, she cannot acknowledge the relationship of her theory to new, flexible organizational forms of production and consumption. Harvey analyses the shift to ‘flexible accumulation’ that has occurred since the early 1970s, contrasting the rigidity, rationalization, and functionalism of postwar Fordism with the development of flexibility in labor markets, manufacturing and production, and mass consumption. Pointing to flexible accumulation’s reduction in the ‘turnover time’ or lifespan of produced goods, Harvey writes that:

flexible accumulation has been accompanied on the consumption side . . . by a much greater attention to quick-changing fashions and the mobilization of all the artifices of need inducement and cultural transformation that this implies. The relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism has given way to all the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms.

(Harvey, 1990: 156)

Harvey argues that the new culture of accelerated consumption reflects an increased emphasis on change and fashion that is key to the profitability of flexible production systems. If postmodernism is, as Hennessy asserts, the ‘cultural commonsense of post-industrial capitalism,’ then we must begin to assess ‘to what extent . . . the affirmation of pleasure in queer politics participate[s] in the consolidation of postmodern hegemony’ (1996: 232–3). As Harvey’s model suggests, the celebration of a politics of style by postmodernist social theorists like Butler accepts and accommodates the increasingly fluid logic of commodification, and so may unintentionally work to maintain exploitative social relations. Indeed, Butler’s theory of ‘subversive reinscription’ fetishizes the fragmentation and masking of a postmodernist aesthetic that is itself implicated in the aestheticization of politics and the consumerist strategies of contemporary capitalism.

Like other poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists who have not confronted their relationship to a social totality, Butler valorizes a fluidity that is produced by the global mobility of multinational capitalism. As Chomsky argues, the new global economy has not only orchestrated the continued exploitation and conquest of the ‘third world,’ but also the

development of ‘third world’ conditions at home. In the 1980s and 1990s, the US, as elsewhere, has been characterized by an increased disparity between the rich and the poor. An unrelenting war against women, people of color, working people, the unemployed, and the ‘undeserving’ poor has resulted in significantly higher poverty rates. Since the mid-1980s, hunger has grown by 50%, and now affects approximately 30 million Americans (Chomsky, 1993: 280–1). Given these enormous social costs, I believe it is our responsibility as social theorists to demystify a ‘fluidity’ that has been produced at the expense of so many people in the US and throughout the world. When we settle for merely celebrating prevailing social conditions, we miss an opportunity to work on developing authentic forms of political resistance.

Keeping this argument in mind, I want to return to Butler’s work in order to explore the problem of a politics of representation. As I have been suggesting, Butler’s notion of resignification as agency has become *the* persistent problem in her theory – a problem that her work since *Gender Trouble* has made even more clear. In her more recent work, Butler has declared that ‘drag is not unproblematically subversive’ (1993: 231), thus attempting to stress the ‘complexity’ of performing gender norms and also to distance herself from those ‘bad readers’ who saw her theory as legitimating transgressive cultural and sexual practices as uncomplicated forms of recreational resistance. In fact, I will be suggesting that this kind of legitimation is precisely what Butler’s work confers. By asserting that drag is ‘not unproblematically subversive,’ Butler claims to be attending to both the constraining and enabling effects of performativity. However, this move moderates her theory of performativity without actually complicating it, leaving intact her fundamental emphasis on transformation through resignification. Butler’s gesture towards ‘complexity’ is nevertheless the basis for her insistent disavowal of the popular slippage between gender performance and style. Rather than acknowledge her relationship to the popularized version of her work,⁸ she dismisses such interpretations as ‘bad readings’ and refuses to be held accountable for what she has elsewhere called ‘the deforming of [her] words’ (1993: 242):

Well, there is a bad reading, which unfortunately is the most popular one. The bad reading goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender, stylize it, and then that evening I can change it again and be something radically other, so that what you get is something like the commodification of gender, and the understanding of taking on a gender as a kind of consumerism.

(Butler, 1992: 83)

It is worth noting that in the above remarks, Butler’s ‘bad reader’ speaks

in the first-person ('I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender'), whereas Butler dissolves the category of the 'self' into the normative processes of gender construction. Butler's work, then, focuses on the abstract performative rather than a concrete performance or the actor who does the performing. Seeking to contest the metaphysics of substance that sees an identity behind its cultural expressions, she repeatedly refers to drag, cross-dressing, and butch/femme as 'cultural practices' no longer attached to the subjects who enact them. As Butler triumphantly announces, 'there need not be a "doer behind the deed"' (1990b: 142).

Is this move toward desubjectification the only way to formulate agency and structure together, as Butler would have us believe? It is worth remembering that 'men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please' (Marx, 1963: 15). Underscoring the social dimension of subjectivity, Marxism and the tradition of radical philosophy conceptualize subjects as emerging with and through social relations: relations that render agents simultaneously self-determining and decentered, both the subjects and objects of social and historical processes. Nevertheless, Butler implies that the only way to oppose individualism and voluntarism while theorizing agency in terms of 'the power regimes' that 'constitute' the subject is to do away with the subject itself. Of course, Butler contends that the displacement of the subject is an effect of the discursive operations of power in modern culture. As she asserts in *Bodies that Matter*: 'Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the "I" neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves' (1993: 7). At the center of this Foucauldian critique of the subject is a deconstruction of the concepts of causality, effect, and intention. But this new project returns us to some familiar problems. In their contributions to *Feminist Contentions* (1995), social theorists Benhabib and Frazer have questioned the ramifications of Butler's erasure of subjectivity for feminist theory and practice. In response, Butler has insisted that she is deconstructing the subject and 'interrogating its construction,' rather than simply negating or dismissing it (1995: 42). However, Butler's notion of the subject as an 'effect' of 'the power/discourse regime' mystifies the distinction between subjects and the processes through which they are, in her terms, 'subjected' and 'subjectivated.' Finally, her model provides a 'rethinking' of agency that actually disappears the subject into the field of power itself.

This theoretical framework accounts for Butler's focus on the political resistance generated by 'cultural practices' rather than 'subjects.' Arguing against feminisms that saw practices like drag and butch/femme as either misogynist or heterosexist, Butler's work argues for the political use-value of these sex and gender practices as they are performed in gay and lesbian

communities. Nevertheless, Butler's reaction to the popularization of her ideas expresses an academic distancing from a material reality in which 'subversive bodily acts' are lived experiences. The terms of Butler's discourse produce this disengagement from the category of experience, which is simply not operative in her work. Furthermore, given the social and economic basis for its postmodernist displacement of the subject, Butler's discourse – to borrow Huyssen's formulation – 'merely duplicates on the level of aesthetics and theory what capitalism as a system of exchange relations produces tendentially in everyday life: the denial of subjectivity in the very process of its construction' (1986: 213). Implicated in these systems of domination, Butler's disavowal of subjectivity denies rather than challenges institutionalized power. As I have argued, Butler can only conceptualize resistance as a subversive play of signification. Therefore, her theory of resignification as agency requires her to textualize transgressive practices. In this model, it would seem that any attention to praxis – not just the facile version she parodies as 'bad reading' – would be construed as voluntarism.

But Butler herself recognizes the risks involved in her textualization of sexually transgressive practices: celebrating the free play of resignification, a stylizing of gender, brings her work dangerously close to the so-called 'bad readers' who conceptualize gender as fashion and celebrate a politics of style. It is for this reason that, in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler retreats from her earlier, unqualified valorization of proliferation and indeterminacy, thereby implicitly pointing to the limitations of that position. Arguing for the interrelationship between sexuality and gender, queer theory and feminism, Butler asserts:

The goal of this analysis, then, cannot be pure subversion, as if an undermining were enough to establish and direct political struggle. Rather than denaturalization or proliferation, it seems that the question for thinking discourse and power in terms of the future has several paths to follow: how to think power as resignification together with power as the convergence or interarticulation of relations of regulation, domination, constitution?

(Butler, 1993: 240)

Trapped in the terms of her own discourse, Butler cannot answer this question. Butler's difficulty is that she wants both to reject the voluntarist gender-as-drag reading and to valorize 'subversive repetitions' that use aesthetic play to stylize sex and gender, thereby commodifying the sign of difference itself.

Butler's effort to take up the question that functions as the point of departure for *Bodies that Matter* – 'What about the materiality of the body, Judy?' – is an admission of the limitations of her theory to engage with material conditions of existence, which are not reducible to the process of

signification (1993: ix). In a telling footnote, Butler refers us to Althusser's caveat regarding the modalities of materiality: 'Of course, the material existence of the ideology in an apparatus and its practices does not have the same modality as the material existence of a paving-stone or a rifle.' (quoted in Butler, 1993: 252, footnote 13). Although Butler would thus seem to concede that materiality cannot be 'summarily collapsed into an identity with language,' she nevertheless adheres to a linguistic and discursive idealism that sees materiality in terms of its signification, thus rewriting the relationship between representation and the real (1993: 68). As *Bodies that Matter* makes explicit, Butler undertakes to reconceptualize materiality as 'a process of materialization' and an 'effect' of power (1993: 2, 9). Thus, she reproduces her theory of subjects as 'instituted effects of prior actions' (1995: 43), declaring: "Materiality" designates a certain effect of power or, rather, *is* power in its formative or constituting effects' (1993: 34). Since Butler follows Foucault in adopting a conception of power as discursive, her theory of materiality and materializations ultimately becomes indistinguishable from the domain of the discursive, now reworked as the site through which materiality is 'contingently constituted' as 'the dissimulated effect of power' (Butler, 1993: 251, footnote 12). In other words, where Althusser distinguishes between modalities of materiality, Butler, however, dispenses with those distinctions. In the end, this allows her to reassert the primacy of discourse. Butler claims that: 'Always already implicated in each other, always already exceeding one another, language and materiality are never fully identical nor fully different' (1993: 69). What she presents here as a deconstruction of classical notions of matter, language, and causality deliberately seeks to displace the point at which materiality exceeds language (Ebert, 1996: 212). As a result, this formulation, which claims to theorize the difference between language and materiality, in the end reaffirms their sameness or identity. With this in mind, I believe that Butler's theory needs to be evaluated in terms of the kind of politics it suggests and proscribes.

It is my contention that Butler's work is both reflective and constitutive of a political climate that has emerged in conjunction with the aesthetics of postmodernism. In this regard, Butler's discourse participates in a contemporary trend that valorizes the subversive value of representation and fantasy. Declaring her affinity with the politics of ACT UP [AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power] and Queer Nation, Butler celebrates 'the convergence of theatrical work with theatrical activism': an 'acting out' that is at once a politicization of theatricality and a 'theatricalization of political rage' (1993: 233). Halberstam advocates this brand of politics in her recent work on the political strategies of 'imagined violence':

groups like Queer Nation and ACT UP regularly create havoc with their

particular brand of postmodern terror tactics. ACT UP demonstrations, furthermore, regularly marshal renegade art forms to produce protest as an aesthetic object. . . . Protest in the age of AIDS, in other words, is not separate from representation; and ‘die-ins,’ ‘kiss-ins,’ posters, slogans, graphics, and queer propaganda create a new form of political response that is sensitive to and exploitive of the blurred boundaries between representations and realities.

(Halberstam, 1993: 190)

Like queer theorists Berlant and Freeman, Halberstam valorizes the ‘die-ins’ and ‘kiss-ins,’ graphics and posters, of ACT UP and Queer Nation without even assessing the political effectiveness of their production of protest as an aesthetic object.⁹ As queer and AIDS activists, we must consider the limitations of a site-specific activism that is expressed in symbolic and aesthetic terms, a focus on performance and display that avoids confronting political and economic processes as they function globally and are manifested locally.

It is not my intention to trivialize the work of organizations, such as ACT UP, that have made vital contributions to AIDS education and awareness, and have tirelessly advocated for people living with HIV and AIDS. I also believe that both Butler and Halberstam are right to suggest that spectacle can operate as an effective form of resistance. However, the history of ‘bread and circuses’ alone should remind us that spectacle also serves as a means of social control. As Marx suggests, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, the state will necessarily promote the aestheticization and theatricalization of politics in order to build a sense of community beyond the circulation of capital.¹⁰ Especially in today’s mass-mediated culture of image and information, spectacle must be understood as the epitome of the dominant culture; it serves, according to Debord, ‘as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system’ (1994: 13). Cultural activism, then, is limited by the very degree to which the production of protest as an aesthetic object refunctions and yet preserves the aestheticization and commodification of politics that proliferates in modern culture.

Not surprisingly, theorists like Butler and Halberstam, who valorize the subversive value of representation and aesthetic expression, tend also to promote fantasy as a potent political strategy. For these poststructuralist and postmodernist critics, fantasy counts as political intervention because, in the textualized, postmodern world, the real is itself phantasmatic. Butler’s defense of the artist Robert Mapplethorpe in her 1990 article, ‘The force of fantasy’ (1990a), offers a prototypically idealist celebration of the political use-value of fantasy. Elaborating upon this position, Butler tells interviewer Liz Kotz that:

what fantasy can do, in its various rehearsals of the scenes of social power, is

to expose the tenuousness, moments of inversion, and the emotional valence – anxiety, fear, desire – that get occluded in the description of ‘structures.’ How to think the problem of the ways in which fantasy orchestrates and shatters relations of power seems crucial to me.

(Butler, 1992: 86–7)

As Butler’s claims suggest, those pro-sex feminists who advocate the value of fantasy in reconstituting the real put forward a theory of fantasy that is actually similar to that of anti-porn feminists; both camps blur the boundaries between representation and reality.

Taking pro-sex discourse about S/M as an exemplary case, we can see that the valorization of radical sexual practices as politically subversive often depends upon collapsing the distinction between fantasy and reality. In concrete terms, is female domination (F/D) a theatrical conversion of gender relations that empowers women? This is precisely what McClintock suggests in *Social Text*’s special issue on sex workers (1993), a politically engaged contribution to pro-sex feminist theory. Minimizing the material conditions which inevitably structure any performance of S/M, paid or unpaid, McClintock claims that ‘S/M performs social power as *scripted*, and hence as permanently subject to change’ (1993: 89). Despite her celebration of S/M’s power reversals, even McClintock concedes that F/D may ‘[enclose] female power in a fantasy land’ and so lead to the reconstitution of male domination once the scene is over (1993: 102).¹¹ As Stabile argues in her persuasive critique of McClintock’s project, ‘minority’ populations must question whether the enactment of fantasies can alter material social, political, and economic realities:

in reference to the man who pays to be spanked, diapered, breastfed, or forced to ‘crawl around the floor doing the vacuum with a cucumber up his bum’. . . , we need to ask what material changes are effected once the investment banker has removed the cucumber from his ass and returned to his office?

(Stabile, 1995: 167)

Stabile’s analysis points to the contradiction at the heart of pro-sexuality politics: whether enacted in the private theater of the scene or on stage at a fetish club, gay or leather bar, transgressive sexual practices and styles tend to promote an individualistic concept of agency, neglecting to engage with the political and economic contexts that most sex radicals recognize as oppressive.

The advocacy for transgressive sexual practices as political strategies reflects an utopian longing in contemporary politics and theory, an idealization of sex that contradicts queer theory’s effort to construct an anti-essentialist politics. Indeed, I would argue that the eagerness of theorists like Butler to celebrate a politics of sexual semiotics has been the downfall

of this theory's political usefulness. We must move beyond the fetishizing of sexuality as style and style as politics. In order to do so, feminist and queer theorists and activists must pay attention to the ways in which we may be reproducing cultural ideologies that privatize the sexual and eschewing a politics of collective, social change for a highly localized politics of personal transformation. We cannot proclaim any cultural practices, sexual or otherwise, as resistant without examining how these practices function within the racist, imperialist, and capitalist social formations that structure contemporary society. Most of all, we must work to produce social theory that enables a multi-issue and anti-identity politics in which the question of whether or not certain sexual practices subvert the dominant will, finally, cease to matter.

Notes

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- 1 Ferguson contrasts radical and libertarian feminisms in 'Sex war: the debate between radical and libertarian feminists.' I have adopted Ferguson's model, but use the term 'pro-sex' to identify the movement Ferguson labels 'libertarian.' See also Echols' 'The taming of the id,' in which Echols critiques those feminisms that have abandoned their 'radical roots' in favor of conservative 'celebrations of femaleness.' Echols prefers the term 'cultural feminism' for the theory and politics of what I call 'radical feminism.'
- 2 I also have in mind a much quoted and discussed passage on butch-femme desire in Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990b: 123). Since I will examine Butler's work in detail in the next section of this essay, I will confine my remarks here to Case's article, 'Toward a butch-femme aesthetic.'
- 3 For a discussion of lesbianism as radical chic in the mainstream media, see Kasindorf's 'Lesbian chic.' For a political critique of this article, see Schwartz (1993). For examples of the promotion of a politics of style, signs, and symbols in the lesbian and queer community, see Blackman and Perry; Stein; and Whisman.
- 4 Berlant and Freeman's influential work on Queer Nation revels in this commodification of queer sexualities, celebrating consumerism as a strategy for social change. For a critique of Berlant and Freeman, and an important discussion of the suppression of class analysis by queer politics and theory, see Hennessy's 'Queer visibility in commodity culture.'

- 5 Hennessy critiques postmodern lesbian and gay theory that represents sexuality as style in *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* (1993: 91).
- 6 See Skillen's useful discussion of discourse phenomenism, and the problem of confusing ideology and its effects, in 'Discourse fever: post-Marxist modes of production.'
- 7 For a discussion of Butler's representational politics within the context of post-modernist social theory see Stabile, 'Feminism without guarantees: the misalliances and missed alliances of postmodernist social theory.' Hennessy offers an excellent analysis of Butler's politics of resignification and its relationship to the retreat from historical materialism in queer theory. See Hennessy's 'Queer visibility in commodity culture.'
- 8 For an example of the popularization of Butler's theory see Powers, 'Queer in the streets, straight in the sheets.'
- 9 On the conjunction between art and protest in ACT UP, see Crimp; Crimp and Rolston; and Saalfeld and Navarro. For a defense of ACT UP's media politics, see Aronowitz. On the limitations of cultural activist art as a substitute for political activism, see Field's *Over the Rainbow: Money, Class and Homophobia* (1995: 121–32, 173).
- 10 Harvey discusses Marx's opposition to the aestheticization of politics in *The Condition of Postmodernism* (1990: 108–9). For an elaboration of Marx's attempt to divorce theater from history in the context of links between sexual and economic formations, see Parker's 'Unthinking sex.'
- 11 Butler herself offers a similar critique of the ways in which 'phallic divestiture' may actually function as a strategy of self-aggrandizement. See Butler, 'The body you want' (1992: 88).

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