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# Communication, Sexuality, Defamiliarization

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As reviewer for several journals in media, communication, and cultural studies, I am getting crotchety, as a handful of editors will confirm. I read an abundance of submissions on sexuality and popular culture whose primary and secondary sources, modes of interpretation and analysis, narrative arc, and conclusions I am able to predict from the first three or four lines of an abstract. This is not a matter of the abstract's economy or the care taken to replicate an analysis still under development, but of the emergence of a familiar argument across topics, an argument whose hallmarks go something like this: Sexual representation is limiting, not subverting; existing power arrangements across gender, race, and class are favored, even when agents are energized to dissent and protest; hetero and now homonormativity are abundant; commerce has a chilling effect.[1]

Such conclusions are not wrong, but they are not as illuminating as they once were. Conclusions about cultural and sexual containment are foregone, displacing rather than exploring primary material. Such conclusions can't probe a reader's intellectual foundations or a writer's, nor can they sustain a sense of discovery and thus a field of inquiry. They do have an upside, however: Like expressive conventions in any communicative mode, they suggest that something has taken root. I welcome the rooting of sexuality studies in communication, but I want the blossoming, too—that fragrant expression of things revealed or thought anew, twists, alternate branches and pathways, fresh recognition of the practical limits of familiar categories and politics. It is time for a little empirical and methodological defamiliarization in communication and cultural studies of sexuality, for making sexuality strange again in communication scholarship. In the spirit of that wish, some notes and provocations follow about sexual definition, queer politics, ethnography, sexual practice in the field, and the place of social and sexual change in enabling scholarly vision and clarity. The idea that grounds each provocation is sexual practice in social, cultural, and communicative life—the source of variation alongside convention and of challenges to familiar academic judgments and categories.

## What Is Sex, Anyway?

I take this question from political theorist and transgender rights scholar Paisley Currah, who, in recent talks and in his forthcoming book,[2] stopped using the category "sex" as though we all agree on its

[1] A form of critique, which, borrowing from Foucault, I call the "commercial repressive hypothesis" (Henderson, 2013, especially chap. 5).
[2] Paisley Currah, *The United States of Gender* (n.d.).

meaning, instead preferring a more concrete term "legal sex" and later "legal gender"—an institutionally anchored and authorized expression that combines embodiment, narrative, regulation, documents, modes of inspection, and presumptions of sex continuity across a lifetime (despite abundant evidence to the contrary). Separated from institutional convention, it is not easy to say with certainty what sex or gender is. Currah and Mulqueen (2011) state, "Ultimately, the only thing we know for sure about what sex means, or what gender means, is what state actors, backed by the force of law, say those words mean" (p. 577, fn. 1).

Most organizations and agencies pose the question of sex and gender as self-evident, and most people unselfconsciously line up body parts, narratives, documents, and identities in ways that feel transparent and uncomplicated. Some of us do find it complicated, but still we act like we do not. We fill in boxes on forms and hand over driver's licenses and passports whose designation *F*, say, appears not to contradict the relationship between body and gender identity expression. We are "bureaucratically legible"[3] and free to go, all the while understanding that this is not a simple truth but an institutional order whose beneficiaries currently include us. Most transgender people, in contrast, are neither quite so legible nor so readily free to go. Some, for example, find themselves aggressively patted down, sequestered, held, and harassed in U.S. airports when whole-body x-ray technology reveals three-dimensional traces that do not conform to documents and self-presentation, a nonconformity, which, by securitized standards, leads to a threatening conclusion: This is not a secure flight (Currah & Mulqueen, 2011). Airport security is just one of the endless official contexts that naturalize a conventional alignment of gender tokens (Caplan, 2001), attributions, trustworthiness, and safe passage. (Schooling, incarceration, marriage, border crossing, public toilets, medical treatments of all kinds, and most legal processes are among the others.) This, in turn, means that short of the considerable effort it takes to deflect or counter-manage attention in such screenings, public life remains vulnerable for those considered out of alignment, regardless of their capacity elsewhere to live gender nonconformity deeply.

Currah's preference for the terms "legal sex" and "legal gender" over "sex" and "gender" as target categories recognizes definitional variability on the one hand, and his and others' challenge to institutional reduction and authority on the other. In Currah's (2010) creative shorthand, "sex is as sex .does." Sex is a distilled attribution practice which, again and again, needs to be shaken up to recognize people beyond habitual distinctions and to track the institutional lines of force that fuel and fix those attributions.

The same is true for sexuality. If we see sexuality as a distilled practice of attribution—a communicative act—that needs shaking up in the name of recognition, what might we find? An opening, perhaps, in the ways bodies, contact, fantasies, and desires are connected. An example comes from Jennifer Terry. In her essay "Loving Objects" (2010), Terry has written warmly about a newly named sexual orientation, *objectum-sexuality* (or *OS*), that is rooted in the very alive and relational desire for objects—buildings, monuments, machines, vehicles, pipelines, musical instruments—shared by people thus oriented. Objectum sexuals cultivate often enduring relationships with objects large and small,

[3] "Bureaucratic illegibility" is a clarifying term that Gayle Rubin (2011, p. 363, fn. 81) attributes to Susan Stryker.

mobile (trains), stationary (Hammond organs), or permanently installed (bridges, walls). People work alongside their love objects, visit them, enjoy physical contact with them through a range of sensual experiences, discover and disclose feelings in communicating with them, and develop a highly-attuned sense of their structure, surfaces, materials, weathered states, sounds, and functions, among other qualities. For some (who would not describe themselves as objectum sexuals), OS is an obsession to be cured. Not all OS persons would reject the tag of obsession, but most would reject the idea of needing a cure.

In her essay (2010), Terry critiques popular media depictions of objectum sexuals as broken people, asking why such attachments are typically sensationalized as pathology when similar attachments—among everyday consumers, say, who must have their named brands or who polish their cars within an inch of their lives, or among scientists with deep and fascinated attachments to their objects of study—are imagined instead as passionate connoisseurs and committed specialists. The Objectum-Sexuality Internationale website[4] defines *orientation* as a "complex mental state involving beliefs and feelings and values and dispositions to act in certain ways," and then continues, "This includes objects as we see it." The political rights of objects may not appear to be at stake (though a short step into the worlds of art, anthropology, or reliquaries troubles absolute distinctions there, too), but the political rights of OS persons to cultivate their intimacies, not hurt anyone, and otherwise be left alone are.

With the OS example, I am not seeking simply to redefine the outer limits in contrast to an expanded charmed circle of sexual acceptability—one that now includes, for example, married, middle-class queers.[5] Terry's presentation of "Loving Objects" at Rethinking Sexuality, a 2009 conference recognizing Gayle Rubin's field-making contributions to the multidisciplinary study of sexuality, did use Rubin's "charmed circle/outer limits" scheme as an invitation to reshape the imaginary of a sexuality studies that takes for granted a primary distinction between queer and heteronormative—the distinction that drives the reiterated critique in media and cultural studies that I complained about previously. Where, in such an expanded but still limited range, would OS fit? I appreciate Terry's expansion, but was also struck by my own response. For the life of me, I could easily imagine the pleasures and could not imagine harm in OS, save the anguish that an uncomprehending parent, sibling, or human partner may suffer, or the concealment an OS person may feel compelled to protect, or the risk and reprisal of disclosure (job loss and child custody ineligibility come to mind). The intimate, sensual, and relational love of an object is neither to be confused with nor distanced from the love of a class of objects such as a collector might express. But, as a sexual orientation, it computes. It also invites distinctive communication questions about expression, meaning, and attachment in making a relational life. As a communication scholar, I want to know how sexual communication with objects—and other gestures clinically identified as "paraphilias"—is organized and expressed by OS-identified persons. The idea that things have a social life is not new,[6] but the communicative capacities resulting from intimate contact with things is understudied,

[4] See http://objectum-sexuality.org

[5] Readers will recognize the "outer limits/charmed circle" distinction as Rubin's, in "Thinking Sex" (1984/2011).

[6] See, for example, Appadurai (as editor, 1986).

not least as a form of sexual expression outside the queer/homonormative split.[7] How might an expanded idea about sexual practice and orientation prefigure or even drive an enhanced recognition of human communicative capacity and an enriched sense of accountability in communication scholarship? Though OS may not be broadly recognized—yet—sexuality studies does prime its students and scholars for curiosity and slowness to judge, a resource for unlocking the generic argument I have so often observed as reviewer.

## Queer Politics/Queers Doing Politics

At the same panel discussion where I first heard Currah distinguish between "sex/gender" and "legal sex/legal gender," I also heard sociologist Margaret Cerullo distinguish between queer politics and queers doing politics.[8] As a long-time activist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, (and as an academic sociologist at Hampshire College), Cerullo had observed that, even at the meetings she attended of people organizing to oppose the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the room was full of queers. Some identified themselves that way and Cerullo recognized others from decades of queer community action in the Boston area. "What's going on?" she asked, in a gesture that swiftly rearticulated the meaning of queer politics, despite knowing that it is a common feature of social formation that activists show up in activist contexts across articulated political goals. Beyond the poles of radicalism versus reform or queer distinction versus liberal inclusion—oppositions that suggest what queer politics should be—queers doing politics of all kinds changes the ground. From antiforeclosure sit-ins to protesting ICE raids[9] and organizing legal defense funds for undocumented migrants, queers take their large or small place in a range of struggles that may affect them directly—sometimes disproportionately—or that may, at other times, simply affect people. Queer persons take part in political activity at whatever level not only because they are queer or for queer reasons, but because most of us live simultaneously in multiple worlds, moving among them, making different commitments at different times for reasons of personal and political identification and alignment. Not everyone is an activist, but everybody moves, taking their multiple social stations with us as we go.

Israeli queers opposed to the occupation of Palestine, for example, questioned the terms of a national day of mourning for two homosexual teenagers killed by an armed gunman in the Tel Aviv branch of the Israeli GLBT Association, HaAguda, in August of 2009. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited the murder scene "and promised to fight homophobia" (Hochberg, 2010). President Shimon Peres "condemned the killing and assured the audience (at the memorial service) that 'Israel will never accept such violence and will not rest until the murderer is brought to justice'" (ibid.). On the one hand, national recognition in contrast to official indifference is a relief. On the other, recognition of the crime of queer murder in terms of national mourning requires compartmentalization—at least—in a nation committed to state-sanctioned violence in the occupied territories. As Gil Hochberg (ibid.) wrote in his introduction to a special issue of *GLQ* on "Queer Politics and the Question of Palestine/Israel,"

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[7] My colleague Donal Carbaugh, on the other hand, is currently undertaking a comparative study of human-car communication, funded by the research arm of a transnational automobile manufacturer that is interested in refining the cultural responsiveness of voice-based digital installations in cars.

[8] "LGBT Life Over the Past 25 Years: Politics," University of Massachusetts Amherst, December 1, 2010.

[9] Immigration and Customs Enforcement

> Impressive as the governmental response to the event was, one must not overlook how the tragic deaths of the two young homosexuals, one lesbian and one gay, was immediately hijacked to promote a hyperpatriotic agenda. It solidified the image of Israel as a modern, liberal, progressive, democratic, and all-inclusive state, a "Thou-Shall-Not-Kill Nation," as declared by President Peres, who further announced that 'the bullets that earlier this week hit the GLBT community have hit us all. As humans. As Jews. As Israelis." (p. 494)

Compartmentalization and patriotism in the official mourning of violent death are not exclusively Israeli preoccupations: Nations go to war, nations occupy, and some of those same nations recognize hateful murder. But Hochberg's and his colleagues' analysis in *GLQ* is historically and politically more specific than that, asking what in the contemporary moment makes antihomophobia campaigns a resource for Israeli nationalism[10] and how queer insight might pry apart the troubling lamination of patriotism and antihomophobia. The point of such an inquiry is not that queers are never satisfied; it is that "homophobia, like other forms of violence, does not develop in isolation but must be understood as the outcome of a broader sociopolitical reality fueled by violence, hate, and fear" (Hochberg, 2010). Queers doing politics in combination with queer politics—sometimes directly addressing the terms of queerness, other times decentering and cross-referencing them to clarify other political projects, like decolonization—recognizes that broader sociopolitical reality. It also redefines political stakes and empirical contexts for queer studies in communication.

Another example that combines queer politics and queers doing politics comes from the community activist organization Queers for Economic Justice (QEJ) in New York City, whose mission statement reads, in part, as follows:

> Queers for Economic Justice is a progressive non-profit organization committed to promoting economic justice in a context of sexual and gender liberation. Our goal is to challenge and change the systems that create poverty and economic injustice in our communities, and to promote an economic system that embraces sexual and gender diversity.[11]

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[10] Two answers are: (a) international tourism and its deployment of human rights discourses in the name of economic development and attracting "creative elites" as visitors (including gays and those who defend gay rights); and (b) the international emergence of a voting bloc of young people for whom gay rights are appealing and fundamental. (In the United States, political strategists claim this is also true of immigrant rights, especially in the wake of Obama's re-election and the activist campaign work by many young citizens born in the United States to undocumented parents.) In an unconstrained world, I expect that Netanyahu and Peres would prefer the safety of young Israeli homosexuals, but it takes explanation outside the rhetoric of gay support to address the contradiction between state-mourned and state-sanctioned death in the formation and projection of liberal Israeli nationalism.

[11] See http://q4ej.org/about/mission

I write about queer class culture and the possibility of queer class solidarity and admire QEJ. In the context of aggressive upward distribution of income and wealth since the early post-World War II period and of the steady purr of the engines of institutional distinction that separate much academic analysis from populations, taking QEJ's perspectives is more opening and urgent than is simply critiquing the perspectives of other national LBGT rights organizations, some of whose political successes have come at the expense of poor queers and others outside the charmed circle of sexual and gender value. Empirically speaking, where are the sexual lives and politics of QEJ constituents and activists in scholarly and popular imagination? What does sexual inquiry look like if a scholar starts at the crossroads of sex and class and works outward, rather than identifying class as a dependent or independent variable or relegating class matters in sexuality studies to the intellectual periphery?

## Ethnography

In *Out in the Country* (2009), Mary Gray offers a deep case of the race, class, and rural situatedness of queer youth: their living, relating, organizing, and media use. Contrary to popular attributions of "everything changing" for "isolated" queer youth through online participation, Gray shows that queer youth in rural contexts use new media in ways that are deeply embedded in social and cultural circuits that also include old media and old-school sociability amid friendship networks and adult advocacy. Gray is cautious about bright distinctions between old media and new, even for young users who grew up as members of an online generation. Online profiles and personals do accomplish particular communicative goals in rural youth identity development, and young people are subject to the expectations of new media participation whether or not they have the means to own the hardware or pay for access. Still, "on-line and off-line media use constitute one another" (p. 142) in a cross-platform practice that values realness, self-discovery, and community documentation. Recognizing multiple social coordinates and forms of media use repositions sexual identity inquiry and favors a broadly ethnographic research approach, as Gray's study beautifully illustrates. Not all studies of youth media use will have the resources for sustained ethnographic attachment, but ethnographic writing exposes layers, intersections, and interdependencies that become new points of departure for scholarship, participatory action, and community development. Everyone, in other words, stands to gain from reading ethnography, whether or not they write it.

## Sex, Eroticism, and Fieldwork

In the late 1980s, I heard anthropologist Walter L. Williams, author of the groundbreaking book *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (1986), contribute to a scholarly conversation as a member of SOLGA, the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists, at the American Anthropological Association meetings in Philadelphia.[12] During the conversation, a number of anthropologists and other social scientists discussed the place of sexual disclosure, including the sexual participation of field researchers in field communities. Some in the room were open about their sexual

[12] SOLGA was the new acronym for what had formerly been ARGOH, the Anthropology Research Group on Homosexuality, and is now the AQA, the Association for Queer Anthropology of the American Anthropological Association.

relationships in the field, including Williams, who acknowledged that his relationships with *berdaches* (or "two-spirit" people) enabled his access and understanding.[13]

Most of those in the room at the SOLGA conversation were queer identified or aligned, academically experienced, and politically astute (with at least one exception: me). As part of my methodological training, I had long been engaged in discussions of field practice and the delicate boundaries of social relationships in the field, but sex per se had never come up, save a few gossipy or near-mythical accounts of gone-native sexual indiscretion among heterosexual men—nothing that would have informed a closer, warmer recognition of the exchange of intimacy and solidarity between queer anthropologists and sexually-identified field groups. As a dissertation fieldworker in my mid-20s working with graduate student filmmakers, most of them in their mid-20s or early 30s and almost all of them heterosexual, I had a brief sexual relationship with a friend from the field just as my research was coming to a close (and as my primary relationship at the time was also ending). In retrospect, it was clear that that friendship and the brief sexual relationship took shape amid my own sexual transformation and solidarity: I had never before been involved with a woman, and both the topic of my friend's filmmaking and the close quarters of film production framed our attraction. In the SOLGA meeting, I was an unknown graduate student just out of the field and could keep my profound self-consciousness and disequilibrium to myself while witnessing, with interest, the knowing conversation around me. It appeared commonly understood that sex happens in field sites; equally common knowledge was that the disclosure of such gestures was subject to a double standard that distinguished between heterosexual (usually male) and homosexual speakers. With the AIDS/HIV crisis twisting public discussion, gay fieldworkers had reason to expect censure as a group.[14]

In the 1980s, most, if not all, scholars in North American gay studies were themselves gay identified, and much of their research took place (as historians, anthropologists, sociologists, or communication scholars) in sexual communities in which they had become members before becoming scholars. The question of consensual sexual conduct in the field was thus a matter of exclusion, identification with non-dominant populations, life-cycle timing, and the boundary conditions in play when we do fieldwork in our own backyards.[15]

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[13] Williams published this sexual acknowledgement in *The Spirit and the Flesh*. Also, "two-spirit" is an idiom referring to people in North American indigenous groups who take up one of a number of gender roles. It has replaced the earlier idiom *berdache*, which is now considered dated and sometimes offensive. However, the word does appear in Williams' published work, which is why I refer to it here.

[14] In their 1995 collection *Taboo: Sex, Identity, and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*, editors Don Kulick and Margaret Willson acknowledge in their preface that their call for papers drew an abundance of interest and submission from gay, lesbian, and heterosexual women authors, but only suspicion, hostility, and calls to justify the proposed collection from heterosexual male colleagues. In her delicate chapter "My Best Informant's Dress"—half methodological treatise, half memoir, written in 1992—Esther Newton described "women and gays" a little differently than Kulick and Willson did. "Less credible by definition," says Newton, "[we] are suspended between our urgent sense of difference and our justifiable fear of revealing it" (1992, pp. 244/2000).

[15] A practice one senior anthropologist I know calls "yardwork."

I cannot settle these questions, as they draw on ethical terms that are not easily formalized.[16] In what circumstances are professional and ethical field relationships consistent with the possibility of sexual involvement? Not with the underage populations that Mary Gray studied or with others formally unable to consent. Not, possibly, across unequal distributions of economic, social, and cultural power, though that standard troubles the possibilities of research as well as sex, despite the fact that such differences are routinely combined in the colonial and contemporary history of anthropology and in sexual relationships outside the field. The sex-in-the-field question, however, exposes a set of "relations of production" (Newton, 2000, p. 245) in field research marked by bodies and intimacies, whether one studies sexual subcultures, or people with illness, or stripping. It also exposes broad questions of affect and erotic feeling in the absence of sex, experiences that animate all high-contact social research and which frame findings and analyses, whether or not such feelings are easily acknowledged in field writing.[17]

Two of the fondest examples I know of writing that addresses the erotic dimension in fieldwork come from anthropologists Esther Newton (1992/2000) and Gayle Rubin (1991/2011). In her love letter of a field account about Kay, an elderly summer resident and local icon in Cherry Grove, Fire Island, Newton warmly remembers and avows the draw and flirtation that grounded their relationship. Through beachy summer days, errands offered and run, and evening visits, Kay and Newton would talk now and again about the prospect of having sex, but Kay resolved that her ailments and discomforts would get in the way, a conclusion that was no doubt true but that might also have protected the lightness between them. Kay and Newton's time together was thus spent in that electric space of open but unconsummated attraction. Newton was in her early middle age but still some 40 years younger than Kay, charmed, eager to learn, to please, to help, and to sustain a relationship that, Newton knew, would open the Cherry Grove community to her as few others could. A photograph in Newton's essay, taken in the 1950s, shows Kay to be stylish, femme, and welcoming. Newton's butchness (and Kay's recognition) was a sweet context for their encounter, a sociable pleasure and precious repertoire of phrases, feelings, gestures, glances, clothing, and proximities that animated their friendship and Newton's story of Cherry Grove. It is impossible, Newton argues, to take seriously the claim common in fieldwork training that fieldworkers are their primary research instruments while shying away from the attractions, attachments, and even the revulsions that make us sentient and observant, that make us people able to take in and narrate the presence and practice of others.

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[16] The American Anthropological Association's Professional Code of Ethics, for example, includes no specific prohibition of sexual relations in the field, though there is the expectation that anthropologists will "maintain respectful and ethical professional relationships." Retrieved May 13, 2013 from http://www.aaanet.org/profdev/ethics

[17] Kulick and Willson (1995) mark the 1967 posthumous publication of Bronislaw Malinowski's *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* as the provocation to recognize field sexual practice, given its limited account of Malinowski's sexual disposition among Trobriand Islanders (limited, in fact, by his wife's editorial censorship just prior to publication). The conversation, however, didn't last long, as anthropologists "stood with their backs nervously turned, huffing about the ethics of publishing the *Diary* and quibbling amongst themselves about whether Malinowski's licentiousness and colonialist mentality were really relevant to an understanding of his anthropology" (Kulick, 1995, p. 1).

"The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole" is Gayle Rubin's (1991/2011) essay about a key institution in San Francisco's gay male leather club and party circuit of the 1970s, one of the era's Great Parties, which began in 1975 in the back of Steve McEachern's Victorian basement as a gift to his lover. Like any anthropological account of an urban scene, Rubin pays close attention to its relevant precursors elsewhere (in New York and Chicago), its social organization, practices, networks, primary agents, values, and sustaining acts of communication within and about its sexual world. Like Kay in Cherry Grove, MacEachern was a mover and shaker in San Francisco's leather world until his death following a heart attack in 1981. Thereafter, the equipment, supplies, musical compilations, and artwork that had been essential material culture to the Catacombs were sold, in many instances to long-time partiers who recognized the depth of loss in the Catacombs' closing. The objects and occasions would be reconfigured by new partners as the short-lived Catacombs II in 1981 and again as the more enduring (but not eternal) Shotwell, later in 1981.

Rubin tells the story of the Catacombs as Mecca for men's fist-fucking parties, a sexual practice that conjures assault and pain among nonaficionados but something else for Rubin and her readers, regardless of their sexual practices. People do all kinds of things with their bodies that others revile, and part of Rubin's accomplishment in "The Catacombs" is conventionally anthropological: She writes from the perspective of those whose scene interests her. We do not learn explicitly whether Rubin is insider or outsider to the practices she describes, but we do know that she understands and reveres them as a source of pleasure and social solidarity. The Catacombs served a mindful community of practice that knew the risks—of disclosure, potentially of injury—and, like other practitioners, had a very evolved set of standards, expectations, and controls to entry that were designed to protect themselves and others in the community who came together to seduce "one of the jumpiest and tightest muscles in the body" (1991, p. 230/2011).

As I reread Rubin's essay in *Deviations*,[18] I was besotted, again, with Rubin's voice, trying to figure out what in her writing makes it so particular and yet so legible to many, so respectful and open, yet so accountable to the descriptive and analytic standards of her field. I brought my own jumpy muscles to my reading and thus recognized that, with this story, Rubin would be communicating with insiders and outsiders to the world she described, and she cares about both. She cared deeply about a social universe that protected its own without harm to others and suffered the ravages, first, of AIDS—and the particular brand of AIDs-induced (or abetted) homophobia that made any minority sexual taste patently dangerous regardless of the actual risk[19]—and then of urban development and property valuation that banished all but the wealthiest community members. She cared about her readers enough to bring them into this world with a sense of wonder, reverence, and even grace. There is something quasi-religious in Rubin's

[18] *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012) is a new collection of classic and revised work that Rubin wrote from 1975–2004, with a moving new introduction that traces her intellectual formation. It is an extraordinary *oeuvre* and archive.

[19] As Rubin notes, fist-fucking presents a low risk of HIV transmission that could be mitigated by using long surgical gloves. In the context of sex panic, however, actual risk is not what gets rhetorically amplified, so much as risk to sexual propriety and dominant control.

rendering, a sense of faith and good will. At the Catacombs, people could find their pleasures together and extend their sexual solidarities beyond the party occasions. Rubin writes (in 1991):

> Although the Catacombs is gone, it has left a considerable legacy. In addition to its now widely imitated "recipes for a successful sex party," a set of Catacombs attitudes has taken root in a larger community. The Catacombs expressed a very deep love for the physical body. A place that could facilitate so much anal pleasure could make any part of the body feel happy. For the most part, our society treats the pursuit of physical pleasure as something akin to taking out the garbage. At the Catacombs, the body and its capacities for sensory experience were valued, celebrated, and loved. I learned some precious lessons there, and feel very lucky to have had the privilege of sharing in that experience. Even though its focus was on the male body, the Catacombs gave me a great appreciation for my own, female body. (p. 239)

I reread Rubin's essay as a now-bashful (and menopausal) sexual practitioner, not the boundary pusher I fancy myself having been at one time. Still, "The Catacombs" reminded me of that peculiar relation one acquires to sensation and pain as a practitioner of yoga (something that I also do less of these days, but which permanently changed and expanded my physical boundaries), and to the pleasures of provision, of offering sustenance to others.

The lesson in Rubin's piece comes from her undefensive and open account of a world that often, and again, needed to defend itself and protect its boundaries. The essay is also born of a time and group now largely lost, and thus I read in retrospect knowing and mourning a future that, in 1975, had not yet come, though the scale of loss was well understood in 1991. The erotic energies and writerly tenderness that converge in "The Catacombs" represent another model of physical, sexual, and emotional avowal in the field. It is impossible to imagine Gayle Rubin's foundational contributions to so many versions of sexuality studies without them.

Gray's tenderness and ethnographic complexity, alongside Newton's and Rubin's affective and erotic recognition in field relations, are reminders of the knowledge-producing power of field attachments. None of the authors displaces curiosity about field communities with self-regard or self-narration, though all represent their empirical knowledge as dependent, in part, on affective, erotic, or sexual experiences and relationships in the field. The terms of their accounts and their accountability might reinfuse a communication scholarship about sexuality that is reparative and revealing, rather than aiming, first, to expose dominant ideologies in commercial culture—an analytic gesture now strangely easy to come by.

**Sexual Drift, Queer Double Agency**

*I used to be Snow White, but I drifted.*

~ Mae West as Tira in *I'm No Angel* (1933)

I'm no angel, either, but my own version of drift is different than Tira's version.[20] When I was 27 and putatively heterosexual, I fell in love with a butch (and then another) and never looked back, until I was 47 and fell in love with a non-trans guy to whom I remain attached. It is not that unusual a story of sexual drift or shift, but it comes with perspectives worth remixing in sexuality studies. Lest anyone think there is no longer any meaningful social, cultural, or valuative difference between queerness and apparent heterosexuality—at least not in the liberal and culturally diverse precincts of urban and academic life—I am here to protest. I do not consider myself straight, but I am in a heterosexual relationship (think of it as interfaith). I carry skin privilege as a white woman, gender privilege as non-trans female, class privilege as a highly educated, employed and tenured professional, and official privilege as Canadian citizen and green card holder living in the United States. I do not have to fear racists (at least not directly), creditors, or national borders. Still, the experience of bureaucratic legibility in a visibly heterosexual relationship and of social welcome and restored clarity among extended family members has shifted my footing in the world to a position of security that is strangely vertiginous. This is not a complaint; I have had remarkable autonomy, by historical standards, to live as I choose in states of relative well-being, despite patent inequities rooted in sexual orientation, stretches of intimate and institutional hostility, and the dysthymic conditions of everyday life that come with both. But any time we change stations on the social field and our old place isn't so visible, we become double (or triple, or quadruple) agents. Employed academics from working class backgrounds know the experience well.

The point here is to keep sexual drift in the quiver of sexuality studies, not in the hopes of catching straight folks in moments of unselfconscious homophobia but, more urgently, to catch the world in its redolent state of heteronormativity. I have never felt so welcome in social life as I do in the context of middle-aged, heterosexual attachment. That is partly the solidarity of the relationship itself, for which I'm grateful, but it is also the abundance of that thing beyond official recognition that the world withholds from those outside a given charmed circle. (There are privileged queers, in other words, but that is not to be confused with queer social and cultural privilege, style envy notwithstanding.) To be single or unattached in any orientation, for another example, even if it is how you want to be, can cost a person a piece of welcome; to be queer and single is more expensive still, especially where (a) one would prefer to be attached, (b) the opportunities are limited, and (c) the negative attributions are personalized. (What's wrong with her? What's wrong with me?) Sexual double agency is, in other words, a potential tool for registering the effects of mis/recognition and for sliding the beads on the cultural abacus with greater precision and accountability and with less judgment. As transgender scholarship has demonstrated so richly, studying boundary crossing and stories of transition is a fundamental resource in sex research.

[20] I recently misquoted West as having said "I used to be pure as the driven snow, but I drifted" (Henderson, 2013, p. xi): same point, shaggier locution (in a context where locution is everything).

Some boundary crossings, moreover, can be described as drift, but not all. Others are sudden, or wrenching, or developmental, or highly regulated.[21] The question then becomes: What kinds of resources and deprivations mediate the character of the change and why? Age and its effects changed Kay's body enough for her to resolve not to have sex with Esther Newton, and history and hostility changed the San Francisco leather scene forever. Sexual lifecycles or careers, like mine, marked by shifts in orientation, are slower, intimate and deeply social, and the accretion of change makes the place arrived at different than if you'd been there all along. My sister is married to a non-trans man without ever having been involved with women. That's a different version of heterosexuality in the present than I would claim, even as I now reap the privileges of social welcoming. Sexual change tells us a lot about push and pull, social accommodation and exclusion, circumstance and meaning. Accounting for sexual change and for sexuality within changing conditions of broad kinds—economic, technological, geopolitical—is a potent strategy of defamiliarization.

## Conclusion: Sexual Practice, Intellectual Thriving

Alongside the impatience I expressed at the start of this essay about generic arguments in sexuality studies, I recognize a dramatically evolving field whose multidisciplinary conversation is what has taught me to critique the genre argument in the first place. Queer and sexuality studies in communication is transnational, post-colonial, intersectional, multivocal, mixed method, aesthetic, restorative, and brightly critical. It remains a nascent and vibrant framework for knowledge production, and it is in the spirit of that vibrancy that I seek defamiliarization through some of the newest and some of the classic work in the interdisciplinary field. The work that draws me returns again and again to the question of sexual practice in context (including the practice of definition) and offers methodological approaches that capture sexual practice—the things people do, think, and create—in communication and social research.[22] Sexuality studies has sustained me, has offered a place of intellectual opening and affirmation, has given me, as a scholar, what culture broadly and in the best sense can provide its constituents: a repertoire of symbols, gestures, questions, meaning systems, and institutional resources for the creative formation of new knowledge and new alliances. At its best, it is a source of academic challenge and a creative form of doubt, of change, renewal, and thriving whose insight and exploratory impulses extend beyond its topics to the field and practice of communication itself.

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[21] See, for example, Joanne Meyerowitz' (2002) *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* for a standard-bearing account of the personal, institutional, activist, and discursive history of gender reassignment in the United States.

[22] See Chevrette (2013) for an account of the reproduction of old sexual categories—and proposals for revision and opening—in interpersonal and family communication research, a subspecialty whose encounter with queer studies is more recent than the convergence of queer and media studies.

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