In Defense of Identity Politics:

A Queer Reclamation of a Radical Concept

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Comparative Literature)
in the University of Michigan
2015

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For

Matthieu Dupas

&

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Parce que c'était eux, parce que c'était nous.

sorts (that is, a queer one). My intellectual debt to Gayle Rubin does not need to be stressed; so many ideas of this dissertation came from conversations I had with her that I cannot remember all of them, much less list them here. I shall simply thank her for generously giving me access to her extensive archives which contributed in particular to the third chapter. While I claim ownership of all mistakes, inaccuracies, and imprecisions in the following pages, if this work has any qualities, all four committee members are responsible for most of them. Each in her own way has taught me that there is such a thing as feminist, gay, lesbian, and queer mentoring, and if there is one lesson I want to remember, that's the one.

As I near the moment when I will be singing "So long, Michigan," I also want to thank the professors whose classes I took here and who have helped shape my thinking: Vassilis Lambropoulos, Victor Roman Mendoza, Esther Newton, Yopie Prins and, last but by no means least, Elizabeth Wingrove. Moving from one generation to the next, I also want to thank the undergraduate students who took my classes and helped me work my way through many of the texts I analyze in this dissertation.

Special thanks are due to the Rackham Graduate School and to the Department of Comparative Literature for, after admitting me to work on sex and politics in Roman Antiquity, giving me the option to shift my project in dramatic ways and work on sex and politics in the late 20th century; to the Women's Studies department and the Institute for

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INTRODUCTION:

THE TROUBLE WITH IDENTITY POLITICS

> "There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and 'psychic hermaphrodism' made possible a strong advance of social controls in this area of 'perversity'; but it also made possible the formation of a 'reverse' discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturality' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified."
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> Michel Foucault, 1976

> "Academic theory need not be simply a handmaiden, but it can learn from activism."
>
> Michael Warner, 1992

> "We need identity politics now."
>
> Tobin Siebers, 2013

There is and has always been a lot of contention about what queer theory is, what it was when it started, what it has become since, and what it should look like. Yet despite all the disagreements, there is one thing that virtually everyone agrees queer theory is not and never was: queer theory stands in contradistinction, if not in opposition, to identity politics. Identity politics was what second-wave feminists and gay and lesbian liberationists engaged in; it was a type of politics both naïve and narrow. Queer theory is up to something a lot more radical: its theoretical and political project is categorically non-identitarian (and at times anti-identitarian). Unlike earlier feminists and gay and lesbian activists who took such identity categories as "woman," "gay," or

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"lesbian" for granted and, by organizing politically around them, further entrenched them, queer theory seeks to challenge them, to destabilize them, to deconstruct them.

Queer activists' initial non-identitarian stance was prompted, and made possible, by a number of factors. Chief among them was the AIDS crisis, which, after the gay/lesbian splits of the mid-1970s, re-created a context that brought gays and lesbians together, the latter often coming to the help of their gay male friends (that is, when they were not infected themselves). The AIDS crisis also prompted activists to redraw their organizations across boundaries of identity by following the way that the epidemic itself hit various disenfranchised and stigmatized minorities (including gay men, IV drug users, Haitians and other ethnic groups, prisoners). The legacy of the feminist race and sex debates also played an important role in the rise of queer activism: many felt it was necessary to reject the hegemonic "woman" or "gay" or "lesbian" subject," as they had been promoted by important trends of late 1970s and early 1980s mainstream movements, in order to claim a greater diversity of gender styles and sexual practices. Another crucial factor was the emergence of what came to be called neoliberal politics: the major upward redistribution of wealth that was (and remains) underway in the USA combined with the rise of the religious Right and Republican attacks on feminist and gay and lesbian movements and cultural diversity in general. In that context, the modes of political organizing inherited from 1970s feminism and gay and lesbian liberation often seemed too narrow and hardly fit to counter the broad alliances of various, and often contradictory, forces successfully brought together by the Right in order to implement its new agenda.

Within that broad political context, the emergence of poststructuralism in academia provided theorists with the means to articulate theoretically a non-identitarian stance. Instead of a politics based on identity, they promoted one based on differences. With it, they sought to oppose the essentialism of mainstream feminist and gay and lesbian activism as well as that of difference feminism, then an important form of academic feminism. Second-wave feminism and gay and lesbian liberation were also thought to assume, naively, a common experience universally shared by women, or by gays and lesbians, across boundaries of class, race, nationality, religion, and other axes of difference. Queer theorists' non-identitarian stance sought to address the homogenizing and disciplinary tendencies considered intrinsic to identity politics. Finally, their non-identitarian stance was meant to support the building of broad radical coalitions among all socially marginalized groups, coalitions that identity politics, because it focused on the specificity of gender, sexuality, or race, was seen as inhibiting.

This dissertation takes an admittedly unfashionable position. Its central claim is that the conventional critique of identity politics is, in fact, false. It argues that in making their case for non-identitarian politics, queer theorists often exaggerated their own originality and misrepresented the identity politics of their feminist and gay and lesbian predecessors. There is no question that certain forms of feminist (and gay and lesbian) politics, particularly in the late-1970s and 1980s, presented forms of identity politics that were essentialist, homogenizing, and non-conducive to coalitions. But queer theory treated these features as intrinsic to identity politics; I argue instead that their combination with identity politics was contingent. The problems that queer theory sought to address with its non-identitarian stance were hardly new to feminist and to gay and lesbian politics. And contrary to widespread notions, those problems had

not been ignored by earlier forms of feminist and gay and lesbian activism and theorizing. But earlier activists had often sought to confront them not through a rejection of, but within the context of, and through, identity politics. Such challenges had been undertaken by 1970s and early 1980s activists in the women's liberation movements, particularly early radical feminists, early gay and lesbian liberationists, feminists of color, lesbian sadomasochists and other sexual radicals. This dissertation seeks to recover those radical uses of identity politics.

What makes this re-assessment of identity politics urgent is the current transformation of the political context. In this sense, our contemporary situation is similar to the one that prompted the articulation of non-identitarian politics some thirty years ago, though it now conduces to a reversal of the previous tendency. Whereas the non-identitarian stance might have been a useful tool to address the political challenges of the mid- to late-1980s, the notion that we are all now somehow "beyond identity politics" has become in the last decade a popular conservative refrain. It has had very real consequences, and it has been used to oppose the demands for equal rights and social justice made by various disenfranchised minorities, for example race-based affirmative action. In that context, the queer doctrines that we are "post-identity," "post-feminist," or "post-gay" have turned into a dead end, one that leaves us unable to address the new challenges posed to us by our contemporary adversaries. Against the notion that we must reject 1970s feminisms and gay and lesbian liberation because of those movements' commitment to identity politics and their resulting supposed essentialism or failure to acknowledge and deal with racial or class differences, this dissertation seeks to revisit those traditions in order to illuminate the radical potential of identity politics.

My argument, then, makes a number of original claims. First, queer theory was not as radically innovative in its critique of identity as it has claimed to be. Second, queer theory's founding myth, the just-so story it has been telling both itself and others about its origins, is incorrect: queer theory did not arise as a necessary and long-overdue response to a previously naïve, always uncritical belief in identity, a belief that fatally informed earlier social movements for women's liberation and gay and lesbian liberation. Third, those earlier movements sometimes undertook a critique of naïve understandings of identity that was as radical as later queer-theoretical critiques, and in fact the latter critiques emerged organically from the former. Fourth, queer theory therefore represents (in some respects) a continuation of as well as (in other respects) a rupture with the theory and politics of earlier social movements. Fifth, acknowledging social differences does not require rejecting identity politics: contrary to a doctrine that has been promoted by "queer of color critique," 1970s and early 1980s feminists of color, notably Black lesbians, far from anticipating the queer rejection of identities, in fact invented identity politics in the famous 1977 statement of the Black lesbian Combahee River Collective. Sixth, the descriptions of 1970s and early 1980s feminists of color as anticipating queer theory's rejection of identity politics have obscured from view their real contribution to radical politics: the insight that dealing with differences requires not a rejection of identities, but a multiplication of identity standpoints. Seventh, identity politics itself, as it was often defined by those earlier movements, remains a radical program; it does not, by its very nature, suffer from the defects that queer theory has seen in it. Eighth, queer theory itself is guilty of a naïve misreading of identity politics, as it was formulated by earlier theorists and activists. Finally, queer theory's misreading of identity politics has led to a number of impasses within queer theory, both political and theoretical, and has produced a series of new problems. Queer theory, in short, has a lot to learn,

politically and theoretically, from the history of identity politics that it has had the effect of occluding—when it has not worked actively to misrepresent that history.

SECTION I: QUEER AS A COMPLEMENT TO IDENTITY

That the question of identity politics was central to early queer theory is underscored by the numerous foundational texts that engaged with it in the late 1980s and early 1990s.[1] To list just a handful of examples: identity politics is at the heart of the first chapter of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990); she returned to the topic in *Bodies That Matter* (1993a) and in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997); Shane Phelan (1989) devoted a whole book to lesbianism and identity politics; Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman (1995) published an entire collection about *Social Postmodernism. Beyond Identity Politics*; in *Essentially Speaking* (1989) Diana Fuss devoted a chapter to "The Question of Identity Politics"; Wendy Brown's 1993 essay "Wounded Attachments" provided thought-provoking denunciations of identity politics and the resentment that, in her account, lies at its foundation.

While queer theory has consistently been suspicious of identity politics or wary of what it saw as its shortcomings, over time the content of the queer critique of identity politics has changed. I propose to distinguish between two tendencies that approximately correspond to two historical phases. A first tendency, which dominates the period roughly from the late 1980s through the

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[1] For the sake of brevity, I use "queer theory" here to refer both to texts understood at the time of their writing as contributions to queer theory and to texts, such as Butler's *Gender Trouble* or Fuss's *Essentially Speaking,* which, while written before the phrase "queer theory" was coined, were soon after their publication seen as founding a field that did not exist at the time of their writing.

late 1990s, sees identity politics as useful but insufficient to radical politics. A second tendency, which has become hegemonic in the first decade of the twenty-first century, offers a hardened critique of identity politics, now defined as antithetical to radical politics and as complicit, in particular, with capitalism, liberalism, or neoliberalism.

Central to the first tendency was the notion that we could not do away with identity politics, but that we also had to transcend it. To be sure, "queer" represented an "aggressive impulse of generalization": rejecting "a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation" (Warner 1993: xxvi) intrinsic (supposedly) to identity politics, "queer" aimed at bring[ing] the very hetero/homo distinction "to the point of collapse" (Fuss 1991: 1). However, those early queer writings did "not wish to minimize or to deny [identity politics'] obvious utility as an organizational and political tool" (Fuss: 1989: 97-98). As Warner (1993: xxvi) warns us, "the universalizing utopianism of queer theory" does not "entirely replace more minority-based versions of lesbian and gay theory — nor could it, since normal sexuality and the machinery of enforcing it do not bear down equally on everyone, as we are constantly reminded by pervasive forms of terror, coercion, violence and devastation."

Judith Butler (1993a: 227) similarly asserted that we should use identity categories at the same time as we question them: "As much as identity terms *must be used*," she wrote (my emphasis), they "must become subject to a critique of the exclusionary operations of their own production." In particular, as she notes, if the term "queer" is "never fully owned, but always only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes," then "it will doubtless have to be yielded in favor of terms that do that political work

more effectively": "it is necessary to assert political demands through recourse to identity categories" (228). Butler restated a similar position in her 1999 introduction to *Gender Trouble* (1990) when, after reminding us that "the mobilization of identity categories for the purposes of politicization always remain [*sic*] threatened by the prospect of identity becoming an instrument of the power one opposes," she crucially added: "That is no reason not to use, and be used, by identity" (xxvii-xxviii). For Butler (1993a: 229), in short: "The political deconstruction of 'queer' ought not to paralyze the use of such terms" as "women," "queer," "gay," and "lesbian."[2]

SECTION II: QUEER AGAINST IDENTITY

Next to the argument that identity politics was insufficient or that it carried risks, there developed a critique that identity politics was, worse than that, antithetical to leftist politics. That trend emerged roughly at the same time, but while it was marginal at first, it became hegemonic in the first decade of the 21st century. Wendy Brown's 1993 "Wounded Attachments" was one of its earliest and most influential incarnations and it can serve as a point of reference here. Brown's analysis "links the new identity claims to a certain legitimation of capitalism" and suggests that "identity politics concerned with race, sexuality, and gender will appear not as a supplement to class politics, not as an expansion of Left categories of oppression and emancipation, not as an enriching complexification of progressive formulations of power and persons — *all of which they also are* — but as tethered to a formulation of justice which, ironically, reinscribes a bourgeois ideal as its measure." Brown's fundamental claim is therefore that "identity politics is

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[2] See also Butler 1993b.

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partly dependent on the demise of a *critique* of bourgeois economic and cultural values" (Brown 1993: 394, emphases in the original).

To be sure, Brown did not invent the opposition between identity politics and class-based politics.[3] She recalls that "many on the European and North-American Left have argued that identity politics emerges from the demise of class politics" (1993: 394). Indeed, her notion that identity politics is linked to a legitimation of capitalism is strongly reminiscent of Todd Gitlin's assertion, that very same year, in "The Rise of Identity Politics," that "the thickening of identity politics is inseparable from a fragmentation of commonality politics" (1993: 174).

What Brown did, however, was to introduce into queer discourses an opposition between the struggle against capitalism and the struggles against racism, sexism, heterosexism (etc.). That opposition originated in the "old" (Marxist) Left and informed important segments of the "New" Left (both of them mostly male, mostly straight, mostly white); it is still with us today.[4] Much of feminist and gay and lesbian radical politics had been built with the aim of contesting that opposition, but with Brown the opposition got re-introduced into queer politics and theory in the name of radicalism. By appealing to it, Brown gave a queer cachet to the very opposition between class politics and the politics of race, gender, and sexuality that, until then, had been considered illegitimate by anti-racist activists, feminists, gays, and lesbians, who had argued that its primary effect was to represent racism, sexism, and heterosexism as secondary and derivative. To be sure, Brown was careful to avoid "adjudicating the precise relationship between the

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[3] For a powerful critique of that opposition that shows that class-based movements were always also identity movements, see Calhoun 1993.

[4] See for example Walter Benn Michael's 2006 book *The Trouble With Diversity* and its telling subtitle *How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*.

breakup of class politics and the proliferation of other sites of identification" (1993: 394). But Gitlin himself did not argue that the rise of identity politics had caused the break up of anti-capitalist struggles. On the contrary, he argued that "chronologically the break up of commonality politics predates the thickening of identity politics" (1993a: 174). In the general economy of Brown's essay, moreover, her caution reads more like an attempt to preempt the reader's impulse to link her to the old Left (and the "old" New Left) than like a real organizing principle of her thought. What is more important for my purposes is that she actually shares with Gitlin an opposition between identity politics and class politics. In addition, although that opposition is more explicit in Gitlin's essay than in Brown's, the two theorists also share a tendency to rank the two types of political struggles, prioritizing class struggles over struggles around race, gender, and sexuality.

In Brown's essay, that hierarchy is implicit in the double standard to which identity politics and class politics are subjected. While noting that identity politics relies on a legitimation of capitalism, Brown does not make the parallel observation that anti-capitalist politics also often relies on a legitimation of racism, sexism, or homophobia. She also asserts that identity politics reinscribes bourgeois values. This may be true, but it is crucial to add that it does so to the same extent that class politics does as well. Indeed, a contestation of capitalism as an economic system and a mode of production does by no means necessarily entail a contestation of bourgeois values. After all, throughout socialist history, the revolutionary goal has often been, while contesting capitalism, not to contest the bourgeois lifestyle but to give the working-class access to it. As the old French leftist slogan went, "with capitalists, we have a Mercedes for the few, and a Citroën 2CV for the many; with socialists, it will be a Mercedes for everybody!" Ironically, it is to the

extent that class politics was also construed as an identity politics — as a movement specifically composed of *workers* and aimed not only at changing the economic structure but also at defending working-class values and cultures — that it was more likely to challenge bourgeois cultural values.

But while planting the seeds for a redefinition of identity politics as opposed to leftist politics, Brown's view remained carefully nuanced. Identity politics was only "partly" dependent on the legitimation of capitalism and it was "also" described as a "supplement," an "expansion," an "enriching complexification" of class-based politics (although Brown did not elaborate on those progressive aspects of identity politics). In the intervening years, those nuances have been lost, and identity politics has been all but entirely recast as regressive, reactionary, and complicit with capitalism, liberalism or neoliberalism. An argument that identity politics was insufficient or risky, or that it was *also* and *partly* complicit with capitalism, was slowly replaced with a reductive accusation that identity politics was *just* that.

The 2005 issue of *Social Text*, entitled "What's Queer About Queer Theory Now," dramatically exemplifies this shift. In defining a "queer epistemology" premised on the "subjectless critique of queer studies," the editors of the volume, David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and the late José E. Muñoz, seemingly rely on earlier traditions of queer theory. They refer to Michael Warner and Judith Butler in particular. But on closer inspection, their position marks a profound rupture: they have moved from a queer theory defined as *beyond* identity politics to one that is *against* identity politics. Indeed, while Butler and Warner, as we have seen, argued for a combination of gay and lesbian identities and a queer (non-identitarian) positioning, the editors of the *Social Text* issue

called for a "subjectless critique" radically disconnected from those identities to which queer had

been historically attached:

> What might be called the "subjectless" critique of queer studies disallows any positing of a proper subject *of* or object *for* the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political reference. Such an understanding orients queer epistemology, despite the historical necessities of "strategic essentialism" (Gayatri Spivak's famous term), as a continuous deconstruction of the tenets of positivism at the heart of identity politics (2005:3, emphases in the original).

This agenda seems a reiteration of canonical queer views. For example, the notion that "queer

has no fixed political reference" sounds a lot like David Halperin's idea that "There is nothing in

particular to which [queer] necessarily refers" (1995: 62, sentence italicized in the original). But,

on closer analysis, it is clear that the editors are in fact performing a series of displacements with

major consequences. While writing that "queer identity need not be grounded in any positive

truth or in any stable reality" and that queer "demarcates… a positionality that is not restricted to

lesbians and gay men," Halperin elaborated his view by crucially adding that queer is "available

to anyone who is or feels marginalized *because of her or his sexual practices*" (Halperin 1995:

62, my emphasis).[5] Similarly, Butler, while implying that queer has no proper subject, defined it

as a "rallying point for younger lesbians and gay men and, in yet other contexts, for lesbian

interventions and, in yet other contexts, for bisexuals and straights for whom the term expresses

an affiliation with anti-homophobic politics" (Butler 1993a: 230). In 1997, Cathy Cohen also

famously questioned "the dichotomy of straight versus everything else" at the heart of much of

queer discourse at the time: she challenged "a monolithic understanding of heterosexuality"

(1997: 452) and she called for a truly leftist queer politics that includes heterosexual individuals

such as "punks, bulldaggers and welfare queens" whose "perceived *nonnormative sexual*

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[5] The editors' unreserved embrace of non-identitarian politics ignores the risk, foregrounded in many earlier works of queer theory, that "queer" might lead to a de-specification of sexual identity and therefore could turn into a "ready-made instrument of homophobic disavowal" (Halperin 1995: 65). For example, Leo Bersani wrote in *Homos* that "these suspicions of identity are necessary… [but] not necessarily liberating" (Bersani 1995: 4) and that they should, as a result, "be both welcomed and resisted" (Bersani 1995: 2).

behavior and family structures" (1997: 456, my emphasis) were attacked in the welfare debates. In other words, while all those authors questioned too narrow definitions of queerness, their non-identitarian stance tied queerness (however loosely defined) to gender and sexuality: for them, queer subjects were those subjects whose non-normative identities and practices of sex and gender positioned them in opposition to what Cohen called "heteronormativity." Butler, Cohen, Halperin, and Warner were all (albeit in different ways) arguing against rigid boundaries built around categories of sexual orientation or gender identities. Eng *et al.*'s notion of a "subjectless" queer theory, by contrast, posits the very different notion that there should be no boundaries at all. Butler, Cohen, Halperin, and Warner posited a definition of queer extending far beyond gender and sexual deviants, but still fundamentally centered around them. Eng *et al*. propose a definition of queer from which gender and sexual deviants have been entirely de-centered.

Similarly, the editors of the *Social Text* issue seem to reiterate Butler's famous argument "against proper objects"[6] (Butler 1994). But Butler was arguing against too narrow a definition of the object of queer theory; in particular, she was opposing the assignment of sex to gay and lesbian studies and of gender to feminism; her argument was that we should not define too narrowly the scope of each field as if they had no overlap. This was consistent with the fundamental hypothesis of her 1990 *Gender Trouble* which, by positing the "heterosexual matrix" at the core of the construction of gender, effectively tried to think sexuality and gender as fundamentally inseparable. But Eng *et al.*'s claim is radically different: it is the (historically and theoretically dubious) notion that queer has no more affinity with gender and sexuality than

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[6] Butler's 1994 article singled out the 1993 *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* for what she saw as the editors' indifference to gender and their problematic adjudication of gender to women's studies, and of sex and sexuality to gay and lesbian studies. For an important critique of Butler's reading, see Donald Hall and Annamarie Jagose's introduction to their 2013 *Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, particularly pp. xiv-xvi.

with any other area of social life.[7] In other words, here again, the argument is no longer that the borders of the field should not be rigidly defined, that they are and should be blurry; it is instead that there is, as it were, no field at all. Queer should mobilize "a broad social critique of race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, *as well as sexuality*" (Eng *et. Al.* 2005: 4, my emphasis), as if for queer theory sexuality were just another category of analysis among many others. Queer, on this view, should offer what sociologist Adam Green has aptly described as "a more general deconstruction of social ontology" (1994: 37). It is not simply that sexuality and gender ought to be complicated by class, race, nationality, and other axes of difference; gender and sexuality are now no more central to queer theory than any other analytical category.

The queer project, then, once it has been defined in such terms, becomes not additional, but antithetical, to identity politics. As the editors write: "Such a theoretical project demands that queer epistemologies not only rethink the relationship between intersectionality and normalization from multiple points of view but also, and equally important, consider how gay and lesbian rights are being reconstituted as a type of reactionary (identity) politics of national and global consequence" (Eng *et al.* 2005: 4). Of course I do not dispute the notion that the cause of gay and lesbian rights has sometimes been pursued in ways that do not fit easily in broader progressive politics. What I do want to question, however, is the equation being made by the editors between identity politics and reactionary politics. I want to challenge, in particular, the implication that gays and lesbians, or at least gay and lesbian organizations, that prioritize one axis of oppression are not allies, not even potential future allies, but primary enemies of queer

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[7] In effect, the claim that queer has no privileged object is contradicted by the fact that the editors as well as many authors in the volume do privilege white gays and lesbians and other sexual deviants for critique throughout the volume: they are singled out for critique in ways that other minorities are not. The inconsistency of that singling out with the claim that queer has no privileged affinity with gender and sexuality is never noticed and the reasons for it are never given.

politics. The focus on one axis of oppression, once viewed as necessary but insufficient, is now irremediably reactionary. Identity politics is no longer seen as a necessary mode of political organizing to be completed by "an aggressive impulse of generalization" (to reuse Warner's expression cited above), but as irrevocably flawed. Identity politics, once a necessary first step for a queer politics, is now its reactionary opposite. Furthermore, as I will suggest in the concluding chapter, the uses of identity politics for reactionary politics should incite us not to the improbable enterprise of withdrawing from identities altogether (as though anti-identitarian politics was a safe place that could not be re-used, and has not already been re-used, for conservative or reactionary politics) but, on the contrary, to produce counter-hegemonic articulations of identities to progressive goals.

While the introduction to that issue of *Social Text* does not explain what exactly the relation between reactionary politics and identity politics is, one of the editors, Judith Halberstam, has an article in the volume that illuminates the connection as she sees it. In it, Halberstam takes to task "white gay men discussing issues of interest to other white gay men," and criticizes "this kind of narrow interest in the self" which "can only be termed *identity politics*" (2005: 220; emphasis in the original). In the same essay, while criticizing "the deeply invested identity politics of white gay men that have obscured more radical agendas," Halberstam asserts that "The future of queer studies (…) depends absolutely on moving away from white gay male identity politics and learning from the radical critiques offered by a younger generation of queer scholars who draw their intellectual inspiration from feminism and ethnic studies rather than white queer studies" (2005: 220).

Halberstam reveals here two distinctive features of the newer critique of identity politics. First, in order to be persuasive, her claim requires that "identity politics" not be defined. Identity politics has become what Susan Bickford perceptively described as early as 1997 as "the anti-hero with a thousand faces" (Bickford 1997: 112). Ironically, in her *In a Queer Time and Place*, published that very same year, Halberstam agreed, insisting quite accurately (but without developing the point further) that "Many important theoretical projects have been dismissed as identity politics because writers remain fuzzy about the meaning of this term and in many ways, identity politics has become the new 'essentialism,' a marker, in other words, of some combination of naiveté and narrowness that supposedly blocks more expansive and sophisticated projects" (2005b: 20). Second, identity politics is now associated with white gay men while ethnic studies and feminism are purged of all association with identities or identity politics: the evidence for their lack of implication in identity politics is not given, which makes it difficult to assess. In fact, the merest glance at writings by White feminists and by feminists of color reveals it to be false.

The most original aspect of Halberstam's critique is its pragmatics: the fact that it is deployed by a queer scholar against (some) gay men. The content of the critique (that white gay men should stop studying white gay men), by contrast, is entirely familiar. As noted by Tobin Siebers in a response to attacks against disability studies, the allegation that "it is wrong to study what you are… is familiar after more than thirty years of attack against black studies and women's studies" (1998: 36). In other words, what is striking about Halberstam's claim is its appropriation, in the name of queer non-identitarian radicalism and against White gay men, of a critique that was once a hallmark of sexist, homophobic, and racist discourses.[8]

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[8] In a recent essay (discussed in Chapter 1), Halberstam (2014) similarly recycles against White feminists a downright sexist rhetoric when she reduces all of the movement's writings to "weepy white lady feminism."

No more original is Halberstam's reduction of identity politics, a form of political mobilization, to a vague psychiatric diagnosis of narcissism (a "narrow interest in the self") — a reduction that ranks Halberstam's text among those which Siebers characterizes as reproducing "the tired psychological scenario of injured identity" in order to attack minority groups (Siebers 2015 [typescript]: 23). As Siebers has amply discussed in subsequent years (2006; 2008; 2013; 2015), this equation of identity politics with "pathological narcissism" (Siebers 2015 [typescript]: 7), which he criticizes in the works of Wendy Brown and Judith Butler, suggests that disability is "the secret paradigm for condemning identity politics" (2015 [typescript]: 14); that those critiques rely on a notion that "minority identity is pathologically addictive" (2015 [typescript]: 16); that central to this discourse is a stigmatization of mental disease. This critique, in Siebers's words, shows that "there is little difference between the academic right and left as far as the use of disability to pathologize identity is concerned" (2015 [typescript]: 4). Indeed, this rhetorical strategy is central to Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* and to Allen Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*. On the Right, Bloom uses it to discredit black studies and women's studies. Halberstam does not attack studies on Blacks or women — imagine where that would put her! But leveling that critique against white gay men seems to be a politically respectable queer practice.

The rejection of identity politics and the call for a "subjectless" critique raises considerable problems, both theoretical and political, and in the name of radicalism, it edges dangerously close toward idealism. If queer is the name of a political project and not just an academic occupation, then we have to answer the question asked as early as 1993 by Steven Seidman:

"Who is the agent or the subject of the politics of subversion?" (1993: 132).[9] So long as queer theorists relied on identity-based movements conceived as allies whose work they tried to complete with a move "beyond identity politics"—so long, in other words, as "their cultural positioning, indeed their subversive politics, presuppose[d] these very identifications and social anchorings" (Seidman 1993: 133)— the question had an easy answer: queer politics did not have to construct an agent since it was mostly relying on one that had been constructed elsewhere, primarily in feminism (White feminism as well as women of color feminism) and in the gay and lesbian movements and other sexual liberation movements (gay and lesbian liberation as well as other groups organized around non-normative sexualities, such as butch-femme lesbians, sadomasochists, and sex-workers).

But once identity politics has been entirely dismissed (even as a temporary and imperfect tool, for example a tool for mobilizing constituencies), and once it has been irrevocably recast as reactionary — once, in other words, queer theory has become "subjectless"—then it becomes hard to ignore Seidman's warning that the "very refusal to anchor experience in identifications ends up, ironically, denying differences by either submerging them in an undifferentiated oppositional mass or by blocking the development of individual and social differences through the disciplining compulsory imperative to remain undifferentiated" (Seidman 1993: 133). Doesn't the rejection of identity politics leave us with a radical task of immeasurably huge proportions but no one to perform it? Doesn't this critique carry the risk of blocking the creation of the very tools it needs to advance its political project? Does it not enclose itself in a situation where it can only call for coalitions and bitterly lament their absence, but has no way of building

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[9] See also his 1995 "Deconstructing Queer Theory," in which Seidman critiques the "under-theorization of the social" in deconstructionist writers Fuss and Eve Sedgwick and asks: "What social forces are producing this political and discursive pressuring on the center?" (1995: 133).

them and redressing the problems it identifies? In other words (and without even raising the question of what a "subjectless critique" could possibly look like), of what political use can a "subjectless critique" possibly be?

SECTION III: REVISITING IDENTITY POLITICS

In order to find a way out of those traps, I do not argue that we should return to the early version of queer theory that shares (although not to the same degree) the later version's overall suspicion of identity politics. Instead, I suggest that we take a critical look at the important continuities between the earlier and later versions of the queer critique of identity politics as I have briefly outlined them. First, whether it treats queer as a complement to or as a replacement for identity politics, queer scholarship takes it for granted that a truly radical politics requires the deployment of a non-identitarian or anti-identitarian term such as "queer," and cannot be achieved through identity politics. Second, queer theorists have consistently addressed the question of identity politics at a normative level: they offer abstract evaluations of identity politics, but do not provide historical analyses and empirical observations of identity politics in order to determine whether identity politics actually always relies on, and reproduces, essentialist understandings of identity; whether identity politics always conduces to homogenizing views and, so, must be rejected in order to deal with differences; and whether identity politics indeed inhibits coalitions.[10]

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[10] Sociologist Mary Bernstein addresses the question of identity politics at a descriptive level and, unsurprisingly, comes to very different conclusions. In a 1997 article, she distinguishes between a mobilizing of what she calls "identity for critique" ("when individuals deploy their identity to challenge the 'values, practices, and categories' of the dominant culture") and "identity for education" (which "challenges the dominant culture's perception of the

I do not wish to claim that the queer critique of identity politics is entirely groundless. Some feminists, notably difference feminists (against whom much of early queer theory defined itself), were essentialist;[11] some presumed a female experience universally shared by all women and were reluctant to deal with differences among women; some were separatists and uninterested in creating coalitions with other groups. However, a close historical look at social movements and political discourses, notably feminist and gay and lesbian, shows that the defects thought by queer theorists to be intrinsic to identity politics are in fact contingent and that identity politics can be used in an opposite way, a way congruent with a radical project not unlike the queer political project.

How did we lose sight of the radical usages of identity politics that earlier social movements had pioneered? Our forgetfulness was made possible by two related phenomena. First, there was the

minority or is used strategically to gain legitimacy by playing on uncontroversial themes") (1997: 537). Pushing her analysis further, in a forthcoming article, "LGBT Identity and the Displacement of Sexual Liberation in New York City: 1969-1986" (2015), she analyzes the process that led New York City gay activists to stop "challeng[ing] the traditional sex/gender system through criticizing dominant cultural beliefs by emphasizing difference" and to focus instead on "obtain[ing] clearly defined political rights and protection" (2015 [typescript]: 12). "Identity for critique" corresponds to broader and less exclusionary definitions of identity. But Bernstein shows that "There was nothing about the movement per se that dictated the deployment of critical identities" and that "it was in interactions with the state that critical identities were formed and deployed" (2015 [typescript]: 3). Later on, in their deployments of gay identity, activists came to narrow down their gay identity and distance themselves from drag queens, boy-lovers, and sadomasochists — in other words, they abandoned the goals of sexual liberation and cultural critique. But as she shows, these choices were a response to "the changing likelihood of success and increased political access" (2015 [typescript]: 5). In short, according to Bernstein, "The construction of identity through these processes of strategic negotiation and internal struggles is dynamic and strategic, rather than the result of activists' understanding of their identities as somehow fixed or essential" (2015 [typescript]: 1).

[11] By "difference feminists," I mean those feminists who, either through cultural radicalism (in the United States of America) or through Lacanian psychoanalysis (in France), called for a neo-femininity and viewed gender difference as (1) fundamentally rooted in bodily differences and (2) something to be preserved. Among them, I include Nancy Chodorow (1978), Mary Daly (1978), Audre Lorde (1984 [2007]), Adrienne Rich (1980), and Carol Gilligan (1982) as well as French writer Luce Irigaray. As I will show in Chapter 1, some feminists (like Shulamith Firestone), while viewing gender difference as rooted in bodily capacities (notably childbearing), thought that modern technological developments afforded us the possibility to render this difference between men and women irrelevant, and they therefore called for the destruction of gender categories. Those feminists cannot be defined as "difference feminists." Neither can those feminists like Andrea Dworkin who, though often ranked among so-called "cultural feminists," were deeply opposed to biological definitions of women and men (Dworkin 1977).

erasure of second-wave feminism, the women's liberation movements, and notably early 1970s radical feminism as well as the erasure of gay and lesbian liberation: queer theorists often, and erroneously, dismissed those traditions as unsophisticated, naïve, and essentialist—with the result that the founding documents of those movements are hardly ever read any more in queer studies. In tending to view all of 1970s feminism as essentialist (or in describing as proto-queer, and thus as exceptional, those earlier feminists who were not essentialist, which is merely the other side of the coin), queer theorists effectively conflated difference feminism with radical feminism and with all of second-wave feminism, and they erased early radical feminism from history altogether.[12] Second, as a direct result of that erasure, there ensued a decontextualized reading of the writings of women of color feminists (as well as of sexual radicals, lesbian sadomasochists, anti-anti-porn activists, and a handful of writers, such as Monique Wittig or Guy Hocquenghem, whom queer theorists rescued from the general wreck of radical feminism and gay and lesbian liberation). This led to viewing feminists of color as anticipating queer theory rather than as contributing to and deepening radical feminism and gay and lesbian liberation. Even more troubling, with the emergence of "queer of color critique," an academic current that carried a welcome reclamation of women of color feminism, 1970s feminists of color in general, and Black feminists in particular, were grossly misrepresented as anticipating queer critiques of identity politics, when the historical and textual evidence proves that, far from critiquing identity politics, they in fact invented it.

If these queer critiques assume that identity politics is always necessarily essentialist, I rely on the work of political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to propose instead a

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[12] This tendency was facilitated by the fact that difference feminists claimed the name "radical feminism" for themselves (as I discuss at greater length in Chapter 1).

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constructivist understanding of identity, one that is radical for effacing the distinction between class politics and identity politics (as I will discuss in greater detail in the concluding chapter). First, as has long been known by critical race theorists, feminist theorists, and gay and lesbian theorists, just because identities are historically and politically constructed and not predetermined does not mean that they are mere fictions; that they have no very real social or political consequences; or that they do not constitute strong and systemic organizing principles of the social world in which we live. In Laclau and Mouffe's terms, the risk here is a "one-sided emphasis given to the moment of dispersion — so one-sided that we are left with only a heterogeneous set of sexual differences constructed through practices which have no relation to one another" (1985: 117). Against this tendency, and speaking specifically in reference to feminist politics, Laclau and Mouffe argue that "while it is absolutely correct to question the idea of an original sexual division represented a posteriori in social practices, it is also necessary to recognize that overdetermination among the diverse sexual differences produces a systematic effect of sexual *division*" (1985: 117; emphasis in the original). For them, "it is therefore possible to criticize the idea of an original antagonism between men and women, constitutive of the sexual division, without denying that in the various forms of construction of 'femininity', there is a common element which has strong overdetermining effects in terms of the sexual division" (1985: 118).

Second, these overdetermining effects make it legitimate, justified, and indeed necessary to organize politically around those non-essential (social) identities. Mouffe warns us against the "misunderstanding of the anti-essentialist position that is frequent in feminist writings and that consists in believing that the critique of an essential identity must necessarily lead to the

rejection of any concept of identity whatsoever" (1992: 381). For her, the fact that no social identity is "fully and permanently acquired… does not mean… that we can not retain notions like 'working class,' 'men,' 'women,' 'blacks,' or other signifiers referring to collective subjects" (1992: 373). Third, there is no necessary opposition between organizing politically around constructed identities and working toward, not simply deconstructing or denaturalizing those identities, but indeed destroying them. After all, as Steven Epstein pointedly notes (1987: 19), "How do you protest a socially imposed categorization except by organizing around the category?"

My dissertation proceeds in four steps. In the first chapter, "Is All Identity Politics Essentialist? Against Queer Exceptionalism, Reclaiming Radical Feminism," I deny that identity politics is intrinsically opposed to anti-essentialism and that an anti-essentialist position, as a result, necessarily requires rejecting identity politics. I show that, contrary to a belief widely shared in contemporary queer theory, anti-essentialist definitions of gender and sexual orientation can neither be exclusively attributed to queer, non-identitarian, or anti-identitarian politics nor credited solely to poststructuralism or so-called French Theory. Revisiting the work of early radical feminists, gay and lesbian liberationists, and French radical and materialist feminists, I show that those writers and activists—basing their theories on structuralist, materialist, and Marxist-inflected analyses—articulated radically anti-essentialist definitions of gender and sexual categories long before there was such a thing as queer theory. However, because their work was rooted in materialism, they also made strong cases for the necessity of organizing around identity categories (conceived as socially imposed) in order to destroy them.

In the second chapter, "Women of Color Feminism and the Multiplication, Not the Disavowal, of Identity Political Standpoints," I oppose a view that has by now become hegemonic in contemporary queer theory and in "queer of color critique": that 1970s and early 1980s feminists of color were averse to identity politics. I argue that this description is based on an utter disrespect for historical and textual, as well as political, evidence. While it aims at positioning women of color as queer theorists *avant la lettre*, it has had the effect of obscuring the fact that women of color feminists, and particularly Black lesbians, far from repudiating identity politics, actually invented it. It also obscures the tools those activists crafted precisely to address, through identity politics, multiple and interlocking oppressions. I argue that the crucial lesson to be drawn from these writers is *not* a proto-queer, deconstructionist notion that recognizing differences among women requires abandoning identity politics but, rather, a feminist, constructivist argument that a politics of difference requires multiplying identity standpoints.

If we are to understand the possibilities that identity politics affords for radical politics, we need to move beyond merely theoretical analyses. In the third chapter, "Politicizing Sexual Identities: The Example of Sadomasochism," I analyze the historical formation of an SM political identity in the United States of America. Relying on Laclau and Mouffe, I analyze this transformation as a process of "articulation." In other words, the SM political identity cannot be viewed as a passive reflection or expression of a pre-existing identity; it is, instead, a political and discursive re-elaboration *and transformation* of medical and social categories. I show how this process was deeply contingent on the work performed earlier by Black liberation, women's liberation, and gay and lesbian liberation. The possibility of analogizing their situation to that of those other

groups allowed SM practitioners to politicize SM as well as to re-elaborate the articulation of sex and politics that had been performed by feminists and by gays and lesbians.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, "In Defense of Equivalence," capitalizing on the findings of the earlier chapters, I question the hostility of many contemporary feminist and queer theorists to drawing any analogy among different oppressions. Such hostility, I contend, fails to recognize the productivity of what Laclau and Mouffe call "equivalences" among struggles. Analogy turns out to be a crucial tool for radical democratic politics: it allows activists to capitalize on the precedents set by other groups who politicized their identities and to construct bridges across social movements.

CHAPTER I:

IS ALL IDENTITY POLITICS ESSENTIALIST?

AGAINST QUEER EXCEPTIONALISM, RECLAIMING RADICAL FEMINISM

If what is expressed by the term *natural* is the pure materiality of the implicated objects, then there is nothing less natural than the groups in question, which precisely are constituted *by* a precise type of relationship: the relationship of power, a relationship which makes them into things (both destined to be things and mechanically oriented to be such), but which *makes* them, since they *only* exist as things within this relationship. This is the social relations [*sic*] in which they are involved (slavery, marriage, migrant labor) and which makes them such at every moment. Outside of these relations, they don't exist; *they cannot even be imagined*. They are not givens of nature, but naturalized givens of social relationships.

<div style="text-align: right">

Colette Guillaumin, 1977
(emphases in the original)

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The story… goes something like this: once upon a time, there was this group of really boring ugly women who never had sex, walked a lot in the woods, read bad poetry about goddesses, wore flannel shirts, and hated men (even their gay brothers). They called themselves lesbians. Then, thankfully, along came these guys named Foucault, Derrida and Lacan dressed in girls' clothes, riding some very large white horses. They told these silly women that they were politically correct, rigid, frigid, sex-hating prudes who just did not GET IT — it was all a game anyway, all about words and images, all about mimicry and imitation, all a cacophony of signs leading back to nowhere. To have a politics around gender was silly, they were told, because gender was just a performance

anyway, a costume one put on and, in drag performance, wore backward. And everyone knew boys were better at dressing up.

<div align="right">Suzanna Danuta Walters, 1996</div>

In *Essentially Speaking*, opening her chapter entitled "Lesbian and Gay Theory: The Question of Identity Politics," Diana Fuss (1989: 97) writes:

> Few other issues have been as divisive and as simultaneously energizing in gay and lesbian theory as the question of whether "gay identity" is empirical fact or political fiction. Amongst political organizers in the gay movement, the notion of a gay essence is relied upon to mobilize and legitimate gay activism; "gay pride," "gay culture," "gay sensibility" are all summoned as cornerstones of the gay community, indices of the emergence of a long-repressed collective identity. Recent gay theory, on the other hand, has increasingly rejected any such adherence to a natural, essential, or universal gay identity and emphasized instead "the making of the modern homosexual" — that is, the way in which the homosexual subject is produced not naturally but discursively, across a multiplicity of discourses. The discourse theory of Michel Foucault has had perhaps the most profound and perceptible impact on the emerging field(s) of gay and lesbian theory; Foucault's efforts to de-essentialize sexuality and to historicize homosexuality as a modern "invention" have set the stage for the current disputes amongst gay theorists and activists over the meaning and applicability of such categories as "gay," "lesbian," and "homosexual" in a poststructuralist climate which renders all such assertions of identity problematic.

In summarizing the debates happening in the late 1980s among gay and lesbian activists and theorists, Fuss ties the question of identity politics to the question of essentialism. She presents gay activists, on the one hand, as committed to identity politics and, therefore, as relying on a conception of homosexuality as an "empirical fact" and a "gay essence"; their invocations of "gay pride," "gay culture," and "gay identity" imply an essentialist belief in an eternal, a-historical "long-repressed collective identity." Opposing those activists, on the other hand, are gay theorists who reject the belief in a "natural,

essential, or universal gay identity." Taking their bearings from labeling theory, symbolic interactionism, and social construction (*The Making of the Modern Homosexual* is a collection of essays edited in 1981 by British sociologist Kenneth Plummer) and, prominently, from the works of Michel Foucault and poststructuralism, they seek instead to "de-essentialize sexuality and historicize homosexuality as a modern 'invention.'"

In presenting the issue in this manner in a text considered one of the foundational works of queer theory, Fuss powerfully contributed to a false but tenacious myth among queer theorists, one that was destined to have a long history. This myth posits a categorical divide between gay and lesbian activists on the one hand and queer theorists on the other, each camp offering a radically different theory and politics with very little common ground. Gay, lesbian, or (one might add) feminist proponents of identity politics, who build a politics and a movement on the claims of a gay, lesbian, or female identity, or on pride and coming out, are described as ascribing ontological fixity and stability to identity categories. They take their identity not just as a basis for organizing but as an ontological foundation. Whether for strategic purposes or out of genuine belief, they essentialize the identities around which they organize: they construe them as empirical, natural, biological, transhistorical entities. Queer theorists, by contrast, and poststructuralists alike view those identity categories, not as natural, eternal or biological facts or essences, but as disciplinary fictions: "the heterosexual/homosexual binarism is itself a homophobic production, just as the man/woman binarism is itself a sexist production" (Halperin 1995: 44). Those categories are viewed as not simply represented, but also produced, by

juridical power and regulatory practices; "woman," for example, is described as a "normative ideal" rather than a "descriptive feature of experience" (Butler 1990: 23).

For queer theorists, then, when advocates of identity politics deploy identity categories for political purposes, they make the capital mistake of taking them for granted, leaving them uncontested, accepting and further entrenching them, whereas those identities ought instead to be denaturalized and questioned—for political no less than for metaphysical reasons. By building its politics on the basis of identity categories, identity politics, it is assumed, precludes any inquiry into what Butler (1990: 3) described as "the juridical formation of language and politics" that represent "women" or "gays" as the subject of feminism or gay and lesbian politics. "The evidence of experience," it is thought, "reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems" and "precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation (homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, black/white as fixed immutable identities)" (Scott 1991: 778). Thus, as Butler argues (1990: 8), "The identity of the feminist subject ought not to be the foundation of feminist politics, if the formation of the subject takes place within a field of power regularly buried through the assertion of that foundation." Rather than organize around those disciplinary categories, queer theory asserts, we ought to question the "wide field of normalization" (Warner 1993: xxvi) that produced them in the first place. Such radical work, it is assumed, precluded by the political use of identity categories, can only be achieved through the deployment of "queer" as "an empty placeholder" (Halperin 1995: 112). By its very flexibility, "queer" renders possible a politics that is precluded by identity politics: one that does not "assume

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in advance what the content of 'women' will be," and that allows for multiple convergences without figuring in advance the form of "an emerging and unpredictable assemblage of positions" (Butler 1990: 19-20).

I do not dispute the anti-essentialist position of postmodern and queer scholars. The de-naturalizing of identities, either through the paradigms of ontological deconstruction (associated with the work of Jacques Derrida and his followers) or through inquiries into the social and historical construction of disciplinary categories (most often associated, as Fuss notes, with the work of Michel Foucault and those influenced by him), is useful and praiseworthy, both for politics and for theory. What I do argue, however, is that queer theorists' anti-essentialism, far from being a radical innovation made possible by, or requiring, the repudiation of, identity politics, was in fact a continuation, a deepening and expanding of long traditions of earlier feminist and gay and lesbian theorizing. In other words, I argue that anti-essentialism was started in identity political movements. Thus, what I oppose is the queer exceptionalism that results from the descriptions of queer anti-essentialism as a radical innovation and breakthrough in a world of generalized and uninterrogated essentialism.

This queer exceptionalism functions on two levels. On a political level, it argues that queer, non-identitarian or anti-identitarian politics inaugurated a critique of identity categories—categories that earlier, identity political movements supposedly took for granted. On a theoretical level, queer exceptionalism is the notion that poststructuralism and the intellectual paradigms from which queer theorists drew their inspirations

liberated us from a naïve essentialism that earlier intellectual paradigms had left unchallenged or uninterrogated. This has, in the words of David Halperin, "the undesirable and misleading effect of portraying all previous work in lesbian and gay studies as under-theorized, as laboring under the delusion of identity politics" (2003: 341). In other words, this view has the result of presenting queer politics and queer theory as more exceptional, innovative, revolutionary than they truly were. It does justice neither to earlier feminist and gay and lesbian movements nor to the intellectual traditions that preceded poststructuralism. And, most important for the purpose of the argument of this dissertation, it has the unfortunate result of suggesting that identity politics necessarily relies on essentialism and, therefore, that anti-essentialism requires the rejection of identity politics.

The myth of queer exceptionalism, I argue, produces a narrative that misrepresents the feminist and gay and lesbian movements that preceded queer politics, as well as the intellectual traditions that preceded poststructuralism. Rather than constituting a sudden, epochal or miraculous discovery of the late 1980s, a conceptual shift that could be attributed solely to the influence of poststructuralist thinkers or to what, in North-America, came to be called "French Theory," anti-essentialism was in fact the outcome of a long and slow germination in radical movements and in the political theorizing that accompanied them. Queer politics and queer theory did not mark a break from those traditions. They resulted from them. Specifically, in this chapter, I argue (1) that the anti-essentialist views of queer politics were a reactivation of the anti-essentialism of early 1970s radical feminists and gay and lesbian liberationists; (2) that the anti-essentialism

we have come to associate with queer theory and poststructuralism was first articulated by radical feminists rooted in structuralist, materialist, and Marxist theories. In other words, I argue that anti-essentialism, far from being antagonistic to identity politics, is in fact rooted in it.

I am well aware of how shocking or paradoxical this claim appears to be. To portray the social movements of the early 1970s as examples of anti-essentialism is to violate the basic tenets of current dogma. On the one hand, queer theorists have recently reclaimed gay and lesbian liberation movements for their revolutionary ideals and have held them up as a counterexample to the assimilationist politics of later gay and lesbian movements, though they view them as unfortunately tainted with essentialism. On the other hand, queer theorists repudiate most of second-wave feminism, especially radical feminism, which they consider entirely essentialist (with the sole exceptions of late 1970s and early 1980s women of color feminism, anti-anti-porn feminism, and so-called "pro-sex" feminism). In this case, I argue, it is crucial to distinguish between early 1970s radical feminism and late 1970s and early 1980s radical feminism. Queer theory has emerged in the context of the dominance of the later, essentialist brand of radical feminism and, in opposing it, queer theory has repudiated radical feminism as a whole without acknowledging its own debt to earlier radical feminism. It is imperative, for the purpose of the argument I am making here, to distinguish early radical feminism from later radical feminism: the latter certainly combined essentialism with identity politics, but the former, while committed to identity politics, was not essentialist.

This chapter proceeds in three steps. In the first section, I underscore the differences between, on the one hand, early radical feminism and gay and lesbian liberation and, on the other hand, late 1970s and early 1980s versions of those same movements. Relying for this purpose on the work of gay and lesbian as well as feminist historians, I seek to reposition those early movements as important sources of inspiration for contemporary queer theory.[13] In the second section, I revisit those early movements in order to delineate the contours of their essentialism or anti-essentialism. In reconsidering their politics, I seek to show that anti-essentialism was a slow and long achievement begun in the radical movements of the early 1970s and that queer theory was its outcome. In the third section, I focus specifically on 1970s French feminists.

I use the phrase "French feminists" in contradistinction to the North American category "French Feminism." "French Feminism" refers to such writers as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray: those authors, though very influential in North American academic feminism, have been mislabeled. They were certainly French but, in the French context, they were hardly feminists at all (except perhaps for Irigaray)—not according to their own avowal, anyway—and in any case they were not part of any women's movement (Delphy 1995; Moses 1996; 1998). I put "French Feminism" in quotation marks to distance myself from this misleading notion. By French feminists, on the contrary, I refer to those theorists who were also feminist activists in France, primarily anthropologist Nicole-Claude Mathieu, sociologists Colette Guillaumin and Christine

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[13] In this respect, my argument is in close dialogue with recent feminist scholarship that has set out to rethink the links between radical feminism and queer theory and politics. See, in particular, Annamarie Jagose, "Feminism's Queer Theory" (2009); Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2010), and Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation* (2013).

Delphy, and writer and theorist Monique Wittig. I show that these authors, over the course of the 1970s, came to some of the most radical anti-essentialist formulations of the social construction of gender categories, long anticipating queer theory. At the same time, they made a very strong case for the value of identity politics. Their work has been paid very little attention in the U.S. Yet French materialist feminists articulated anti-essentialist views that not only pre-dated but positively heralded the insights that queer theory would later develop and elaborate. I show that French radical feminists articulated their anti-essentialism on the basis of structuralist, materialist, and Marxist analyses. In other words, I deny that anti-essentialism derives solely from poststructuralist thinkers, queer theory, or its precursor, so-called "French Theory" (Cusset 2003). Queer theory did fruitfully expand those insights, translating them into the language of deconstruction and introducing them into the academic disciplines of the Humanities. In the process of doing so, however, queer theory mystified and occulted its own history.

SECTION I: RADICAL FEMINISM OR RADICAL FEMINISMS?

Queer theorists had good reasons to link identity politics and essentialism: they were unquestionably linked in many late 1970s and early 1980s feminist and gay and lesbian movements, and those were the interlocutors and foils of early queer theorists. However, a strange phenomenon has characterized our recollection of 1970s feminist and gay and lesbian activism. On the one hand, it has been acknowledged that Gay Liberation, in its early days, was animated by a broad revolutionary agenda that later got turned into a

more assimilationist, single-issue type of politics: this has allowed for a certain reclamation of our gay past. For example, in *Cruising Utopia* the late José Muñoz contrasts the aspiration to "a new society" by Third World Gay Revolution, a group that spun out of Gay Liberation, with "the anemic political agenda that dominates contemporary LGBT politics in North America today" (2009: 19).

On the other hand, queer as well as poststructuralist feminists have not bothered to make similar distinctions when it comes to second-wave feminism, and particularly to radical feminism. Annamarie Jagose, who offers one of the most thoughtful genealogies of queer theory in her 1996 *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, includes chapters on the homophile movement, gay liberation, and lesbian-feminism, but she omits radical feminism entirely. When, in 2009, she offered an extremely valuable reflection on the origins of queer theory in feminism, she rightly noted that anti-essentialism, "so often taken as queer theory's signature gesture," in fact predated queer theory. Specifically, she argued that "feminist scholarship had already initiated a radically anti-foundationalist interrogation of the category of women." However, only citing Diane Fuss's 1989 *Essentially Speaking* and Elizabeth Spelman's 1988 *Inessential Woman*, she situated in the very late 1980s the initial articulations of this anti-essentialist feminism, which she described as a critique of "the notion that there was an isolable specificity to the business of being a woman" (2009: 160). Implicit in Jagose's remark is the notion that anti-essentialism may have originated in feminism, not in queer theory, but that all 1970s feminism, including radical feminism, was essentialist. Radical feminism, one is led to assume, does not belong to our vast queer past. As insightfully noted by Victoria Hesford, the treatment of women's

liberation and radical feminism by Elizabeth Freeman in her "Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations," an article that seeks to remind queers of our feminist past, is symptomatic. Freeman's reading of Elizabeth Subrin's movie *Shulie* (a documentary about Shulamith Firestone, founding member of Redstockings and the New York Radical Feminists) tellingly focuses on the period preceding the women's liberation moment, thereby eliding once again "the event of women's liberation" (Hesford 2013: 231).

Several queer scholars have noted the shift that occurred in gay activism over the course of the 1970s. In order to describe different types of gay and lesbian activism, in 1987, Steven Epstein offered a model articulating categories of sameness/difference and choice/constraint. This allowed him to differentiate among various historical types of gay activism. According to Epstein, early gay liberation argued that "all people were bisexual and hence fundamentally similar" (sameness) and it "stressed the role of volition" in sexuality (choice) (Epstein 1987: 142). Gay liberation stands in sharp contrast to late 1970s and early 1980s mainstream activists: the latter, who used an ethnic/civil rights model, "possess a strong sense of group difference and a notion of sexual identity as a fixed orientation"; their difference/constraint position situates them as the exact opposite of gay liberation.[14] Epstein's model had the advantage of highlighting the shift that occurred in gay activism over the course of the 1970s. Steven Seidman, one of the most astute analysts of gay liberation ideologies, also noted that "between the early 1970s and

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[14] Homophile movements belong to the category "sameness/constraint": sameness is visible in the notion that "we are just like everyone else except for what we do in bed"; constraint in that homosexuality was presented as an innate condition. For movements based on a difference/choice model, Epstein mentions lesbian-feminism; one may add to that category such nationalist homosexual movements as the Radical Faeries or, indeed, Queer Nation, which argued that "we are entirely different except for what we do in bed" and which celebrated sex between lesbians and gay men as a political choice.

the mid-1980s, there transpired a shift in lesbian and gay male culture" (Seidman 1993: 116). Gay liberation, "a movement of human sexual liberation" and a "gender revolution" (1993: 113), "came to an end by the mid-1970s" (1993: 117). It was followed by movements based on an "ethnic/essentialist model of identity and community that achieved dominance in the lesbian and gay cultures of the 1970s" (1993: 106). Both gays and lesbians underwent this "movement away from a liberationist framework toward an ethnic/ethnic minority model, with an emphasis on cultural difference, community building, and identity-based interest group politics." At that point occurred the gay/lesbian split: "whereas gay men represented themselves as an ethnic group oriented toward assimilation, lesbian-feminists presented themselves as the vanguard of a gender-separatist politic" (1993: 117).[15]

The trajectory of radical feminism is strikingly similar. This has been well documented by feminist historians, theorists, and activists. As early as 1975, Brooke Williams, a New York radical feminist, vehemently objected to the new trend and proposed to differentiate it from "radical feminism" by calling it "cultural feminism" (Williams 1975). In 1984, Ti-Grace Atkinson, an early radical feminist often described as a key influence on lesbian feminism and therefore on cultural feminism,[16] actually criticized cultural feminism and lesbian separatism in the strongest terms in an article published in French under the title "Le Nationalisme féminin": highlighting a continuum from "cultural nationalism" (*i.e.* cultural feminism) to "territorial nationalism" (*i.e.* lesbian separatism), she described both as "neo-fascist, neo-colonialist and indeed neo-imperialist *because* separatism is really

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[15] See also Mary Bernstein 1997; 2002; 2003; 2015.
[16] On the frequent conflation of cultural feminism and lesbian feminism, see Taylor & Rupp 1993.

nationalism" (1984: 39; emphasis in original). In "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism," also published in 1984, Ellen Willis, one of the earliest and most influential figures in early radical feminism in New York City, also stressed the opposition between the movement she had been a part of and the newer feminist ideology which, following Williams, she too called "cultural feminism."

In her 1989 *Daring To Be Bad*, historian Alice Echols provided a long and detailed history of radical feminism (particularly in New York City) from 1967 to 1975. In it, she highlighted a shift within feminism, which she situated around 1973, when the dominance of radical feminism in the women's liberation movement started to be challenged. Echols notes that the strain of feminism that challenged radical feminism was often referred to as "female cultural nationalism" by its opponents (Echols 1989: 243). Following Williams (1975) and Willis (1984), Echols also called it "cultural feminism." She dedicated the last chapter of her book to "The Ascendance of Cultural Feminism" (243-286), thereby highlighting the fact that cultural feminism sealed the doom of radical feminism (this occurred around the same time as the end of gay liberation, according to Seidman's dating). Although Echols acknowledged that "there were prefigurings of cultural feminism within radical feminism, especially by 1970," her use, following Williams, Atkinson, and Ellis, of two different labels (and the restriction of the rubric "radical feminism" to the early movement) emphasized the historical and ideological rupture marked by the emergence of "cultural feminism."

While the distinction made by gay historians and scholars between gay liberation and later gay rights or gay pride movements has allowed (to some, admittedly limited, extent) for a queer reclamation of the legacy of Gay Liberation, in queer theory as well as in large sections of feminism, by contrast, second-wave feminism in general and radical feminism in particular have remained what Victoria Hesford (2013: 234) describes as "that which cannot be remembered." Hesford notes that "the multiplicity of women's liberation [has been] transformed into a story that is taken for granted and largely unquestioned in the present" (Hesford 2013: 210). With a few exceptions (one of the most important being, as I have already said, Annamarie Jagose who, despite erasing radical feminism from her genealogy of queer theory, has relentlessly called queers to revisit our feminist past[17]), women's liberation has been all but entirely denigrated as naïve, essentialist, man-hating, White, racist, and middle-class.[18] For example, in a recent blogpost, on July 5, 2014, queer theorist Jack Halberstam remembered "coming out in the 1970s and 1980s into a world of cultural feminism and lesbian separatism" which she scathingly dismisses as "weepy white lady feminism." Excepting only women of color feminism from her sweeping condemnation (in other words, not excepting radical feminism from it), she goes on to explain that it took the 1990s "to reveal a multi-racial, poststructuralist, intersectional feminism of much longer provenance" (but that provenance she fails to name).[19] Thus, the bottom line is clear. Until Queer Theory finally arrived and opened our eyes in the 1990s, we were blind. Except for feminists of

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[17] See in particular Jagose 2009.

[18] For a strong critique of this description of early women's liberation, see historian Sara Evans's "Clearing Away the Myths to See the Revolution," keynote address, Boston University conference on "A Revolutionary Moment: Women's Liberation in the Late 1960s and Early 1970s" (March 28, 2014); for a video of the address, see http://www.bu.edu/wgs/2014/05/30/opening-plenary (accessed on March 13, 2015). See also Roth 2004.

[19] The article can be accessed at http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/07/05/you-are-triggering-me-the-neo-liberal-rhetoric-of-harm-danger-and-trauma/

color (and, perhaps, anti-anti-porn feminists), second-wave feminism was hopelessly narrow-minded and unsophisticated. Queers, move along, there is nothing for you here.

Halberstam is hardly alone in dismissing radical feminism. In *Social Postmodernism. Beyond Identity Politics*, a 1993 feminist and queer anthology co-edited with Steven Seidman, Linda Nicholson offers a history of her commitment to socialist-feminism. She explains, "As someone who had a deep emotional connection to a father who died when I was just entering adolescence and as one who has always been strongly connected to an older brother, the alternative beckoning theory of radical feminism was never completely attractive" (1993: 6). Thus, consciously or not, Nicholson reproduces a sexist stereotype that reduces radical feminism to a hatred for men. One might imagine from such accounts that radical feminists were never married, that they abandoned their sons, and that once they entered the movement they never spoke again to their male friends. Most important, one comes away from such an account thinking that radical feminism did not merely overlap with, but was in fact the same thing as, lesbian separatism (itself viewed as monolithic).

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe exemplify the extent to which such reductions of radical feminism to man-hating are widespread. Distinguishing among Marxist feminism ("for which the fundamental enemy is capitalism"), a feminism of difference ("which seeks to revalorize 'femininity'"), and radical feminism, they describe the latter as that "which attacks men as such" (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 168). This description, like Nicholson's, raises many problems. First, the description is insensitive to history: it

invokes later versions of radical feminism and treats them as representative of radical feminism from its very beginnings. Second, it unduly generalizes: Laclau and Mouffe describe the extreme postures of some radical feminists (lesbian separatists in particular) as representative of the whole of radical feminism. Third, this admittedly schematic account considerably flattens out subtle distinctions: it ignores the fact that many radical feminists, far from seeking to eliminate those human beings born with a penis, were determined to get rid of a system that privileged them (for which they had a name: patriarchy), just as socialists do not in general seek to eliminate all bourgeois individuals but to end the system in which the bourgeoisie dominates (for which they have a name: capitalism).

But radical feminists are not solely dismissed as man-hating: their theory and politics are also simplified or misrepresented. Consider the characterization of radical feminism by socialist-feminist and philosopher Nancy Fraser in her otherwise remarkable "Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History" (2013 [2009]). Discussing the "tense relation" of second-wave feminism to other emancipatory movements, Fraser characteristically defines "radical feminists" as those women who, "rejecting the primacy of class," wanted to "install gender in that same position of categorial privilege" (2013 [2009]: 214) and who therefore considered all other oppressions secondary to gender oppression. This definition allows Fraser to dismiss radical feminism by opposing it to "good" feminisms: socialist-feminism, Black feminism, and anti-imperialist feminism (which, one is led to suppose, all posited that there is more than one oppression, unlike any version of radical feminism). Thus, Fraser, who identifies herself as a socialist-feminist, describes those

good feminisms (including socialist-feminism) as "opposing the primacy of class" but refusing the privileging of gender. One leaves her account thinking that no socialist-feminist ever tried to subsume patriarchy under capitalism!

Fraser's description is simplistic at best: it exaggerates the contrast between radical feminists and other leftist feminists and it shows a generosity toward the latter that the former would equally deserve. The notion that radical feminists wanted to promote gender as *the* primary oppression to which all others are secondary has the effect of representing all radical feminists as extremists; this in turn allows the speaker to dismiss them and present other feminists as more balanced. The reality is more complex. There were undoubtedly radical feminists who thought that gender was *the* primary oppression, just as (in spite of what Fraser would have us believe) there were socialist-feminists who wanted to promote class as *the* primary oppression, or women of color who thought that race was *the* primary oppression. The tendency to look for the root oppression is characteristic of late 1960s and 1970s radical movements in general and is in no way specific to radical feminists. So why do we deny to radical feminists the mitigating factors we find for other movements?

Moreover, and more important, Fraser's description does not apply to all radical feminists: just as there were socialist-feminists who were willing to believe that capitalism was not *the* only oppression that matters, or women of color who thought that racism was *one* oppression among others, so were there also radical feminists who thought that gender oppression was but *one* oppression among many. To put it succinctly,

all radical feminists thought that gender oppression was *a* primary oppression (meaning that it was not derived from capitalism, but had its own roots and logic), but not all of them thought that it was *the* primary oppression (in the sense that all other oppressions derive from patriarchy and that destroying patriarchy would be enough to destroy capitalism, racism, and so on). Consider, for example, Ellen Willis, member of New York Radical Women, co-founder of Redstockings, who, writing about her early convictions, indicated that she "believed that male supremacy was a structure of domination at least as basic as class or race… But I rejected the idea of the primacy of women's oppression" (1992 [1984]: 142).[20] Willis, as I will show below, was hardly untypical in this respect.

Equally problematic is Fraser's description of radical feminists as those activists who did not have "to confront sexism within the Left" since "they could simply turn separatist and exit the Left" (Fraser 2013 [2009]: 215). In *Tidal Wave*, in a paragraph in which, ironically, the only feminist cited is Ellen Willis, Sara Evans also describes as radical feminists "those who were clearest about breaking completely with what they called the 'male-dominated left'" (2003: 29). Now there is no question that, for some, radical feminism meant (to quote from Robin Morgan's famous 1970 "Goodbye to All That") "Goodbye to the male-dominated peace movement," "Goodbye to the 'straight' male-dominated Left," "Goodbye to the Hip Culture and the so-called Sexual Revolution," etc.

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[20] On the first page of *Daring To Be Bad*, Alice Echols makes a similar, unfortunate, mistake when she argues that radical feminists thought "that gender rather than class was the primary contradiction" (Echols 1989: 3). Radical feminists thought that gender was *a* primary contradiction, meaning that it had its own roots (hence the adjective "radical" to describe their feminism). Some, particularly after 1973, reversed the notion held by some socialist-feminists that capitalism was the source of all oppressions (and therefore of sexism) and argued, in the words of Charlotte Bunch (1975: 118), that "sexism is the root of all other oppressions" (and therefore of capitalism, racism, homophobia, and so on). But others, such as Willis in this passage, thought of different systems of oppression (capitalism, sexism, racism, etc.) as relatively autonomous and distinct and did not assume that one was the source of all the others.

(1970: 53). For them, radical feminism meant the end of "one revolution under *man* with liberty and justice for all." But the assumption that all radical feminists wanted (in the words of Barbara Burris's 1971 "Fourth World Manifesto") "no longer [to] be a part of the male Left" (325) concedes too quickly to that view a dominance over radical feminism that it simply did not have in 1970.

What about Anne Koedt—active member of various radical feminist organizations in New York City, co-editor of *Notes From the Second Year* in 1970, editor of *Notes From the Third Year* in 1971, author of the famous "Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," co-editor of the anthology *Radical Feminism* in 1973 (all of which is to belabor the point that she was not exactly a marginal or isolated figure in radical feminism)—who, in 1968, gave a speech entitled "Women and the Radical Movement," in which she declared: "In our role as radical women we are confronted with the problem of assuring a female revolution *within the general revolution*" (1973 [1968]: 319; my emphasis)? What about Jo Freeman, author of the famous "Bitch Manifesto," who, under her nom de plume Joreen, wrote in "What In the Hell Is Women's Liberation Anyway":

> As women radicals we are involved with politically [*sic*] issues because we realize that *we cannot be free until all people are free*. But as radical women we are not interested in forming a women's auxiliary to the Movement. Our interest is in thoroughly *integrating that movement* particularly its leadership and policymaking positions. To this end we feel it is necessary to create women's groups *to organize other women into the Movement* and to organize ourselves to take power (emphasis added).[21]

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[21] Alice Echols contrasts these two texts and argues that "While Freeman tried to avoid the question 'Which movement takes precedence?' SDS activist Anne Koedt… asked women to fight 'the 'primary struggle,' by which she meant male supremacy" (1989: 60). It is important to stress, however, the contextual value of Koedt's statement, and be clear on what Koedt meant exactly by "primary struggle." She called for women's groups "to go to the root of the problem, rather than to become engaged in solving secondary problems arising out of that condition. Thus, for example, rather than storming the Pentagon as women, or protesting the Democratic convention as women, we must begin to expose and eliminate the *causes* of our oppression as women." Her point is that someone has to put the women's question on the agenda and that

In short, Ellen Willis, Anne Koedt, and Joreen (among many others) offered versions of a radical feminism that is absolutely willing to acknowledge the existence of many other oppressions than male supremacy (and is trying to figure out ways to link theoretically and politically those different struggles); a radical feminism that is profoundly anchored in the Left (and trying to force the Left to integrate women's liberation into its preoccupations and analyses); a radical feminism that does not conform to the stereotypical and simplified view of radical feminism that has circulated in recent feminist and queer scholarship.

There are many reasons why, in spite of this important feminist legacy, radical feminism, unlike Gay Liberation, has seemed unredeemable. For one thing, late 1970s activists, those whom Williams, Willis, and Echols label "cultural feminists," in fact persisted in calling themselves radical feminists. This, combined with the enduring contempt of the Left, including socialist-feminists, for radical feminism,[22] has made it more difficult to distinguish radical feminists from later cultural feminists and, thus, for leftist feminists to reclaim the label "radical feminism," which ended up being effectively conceded to "cultural feminists." In confusing early radical feminism with what later went by the

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so long as that is not done, women will continue to fight oppressions that are secondary—not secondary *per se*, but secondary in that they are not the causes of their oppression "as women." In other words, Koedt is not neglecting the importance of other political struggles, but in a context where Movement women focused primarily on other political questions at the expense of gender oppression, she is calling women to work and force the Movement to add the women's question to the Left's agenda. She is hardly asking them to exit the Left. In other words, the contrast between Koedt and Freeman does not seem to me as sharp as Echols presents it.

[22] See Ellen Willis: "We were laughed at, patronized, called frigid, emotionally disturbed man-haters and — worst of all on the left! — apolitical." Cited in Willis 2003: 29.

name of radical feminism, we have lost sight of the specificities of early radical feminism.

The history of the label "cultural feminism" is highly instructive. It was initially coined by a socialist-feminist, Elizabeth Diggs, in 1972. She used it to refer to, and to critique, (early) radical feminists. Later, it was taken up by (early) radical feminists to refer, on the contrary, to those who departed from (early) radical feminism. Because socialist-feminists always considered radical feminism as a movement focused on the "merely cultural" at the expense of what truly matters (i.e., capitalism), "when radical feminism began to give way to cultural feminism, socialist-feminists simply did not notice" the shift (Echols 1989: 7).

But the label "cultural feminism" used to describe the later movement raises other important problems that might partly explain why it has been so easy to ignore the differences between early radical feminists and "cultural feminists." First, the label "cultural feminism" deprives later activists of the label "radical feminism" (restricted now to the early movement), in spite of the fact that so-called "cultural feminists" were either old "radical feminists," who did not cease to call themselves "radical feminists," or younger feminists who took the term "radical feminists" for themselves. In both cases, far from viewing themselves as breaking from early radical feminism, they viewed themselves as its contemporary incarnation. In fact, "cultural feminism" has almost always functioned as a derogatory designation and its use, by everyone from Williams to Echols, for those who supposedly split off from radical feminism was unquestionably

polemical.[23] Second, while it usefully highlights an important shift, the label "cultural feminism" tends to conflate and homogenize different trends with important disparities among them: activists who wanted to establish a women's counterculture and feminist spaces; separatist feminists and lesbians; feminists who thought that gender categories were biologically grounded; feminists who thought that males and females formed two different species; anti-porn feminists; and feminists who promoted the superiority of a women's culture. That is why some of the later anti-porn feminists (for example, Andrea Dworkin) have at times been perceived as "cultural feminists" in spite of their relentlessly anti-essentialist position.[24] That is also why Ti-Grace Atkinson, in spite of her virulent critiques of cultural feminism (which she called "nationalisme feminin") and her relentless opposition to the re-valorization of femininity, has at times been implicitly ranked among cultural feminists because she is considered one of the foremothers of lesbian feminism.[25] But for all its shortcomings, "cultural feminism" is also useful in that it crucially highlights the differences between early radical feminists and late radical feminists (the so-called "cultural feminists.")

In any case, my goal here is not to adjudicate labels but to recover a history of political ideas. Whether we decide to call 1980s feminists "radical feminists," "cultural feminists," or something else, labels should not be used to homogenize and simplify the different

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[23] For an exception, see Taylor & Rupp 1993.

[24] See Dworkin 1978 where she describes a 1977 panel on "Lesbianism as a Personal Politic" and, opposing some of the audience members, takes a resolutely anti-essentialist stance against the notion that gender differences are biologically grounded: "In considering male intellectual and scientific argumentation in conjunction with male history, one is forced to conclude that men as a class are moral cretins. The vital question is: are we to accept *their* world view of a moral polarity that is biologically fixed, genetically or hormonally or genitally (or whatever organ or secretion or molecular particle they scapegoat next) absolute; or does our own historical experience of social deprivation and injustice teach us that to be free in a just world we will have to destroy the power, the dignity, the efficacy of this one idea above all others?"

[25] See for example Epstein 1993: 112.

strains of a vibrant, creative, and diverse movement that evolved over time. If we decide to call later radical feminists "cultural feminists," we should then reclaim earlier "radical feminism," as we have (somewhat) reclaimed Gay Liberation, as an important part of the queer heritage. If we decide to designate them as "radical feminists," then we should not let that label obscure from view the important differences between them and their predecessors in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

SECTION II: ANTI-ESSENTIALISM AND ITS ROOTS IN IDENTITY POLITICS

Whether we have reclaimed the legacy of early 1970s movements (as in the case of Gay Liberation) or entirely repudiated it (as in the case of radical feminism), we have been convinced that those movements, because they were committed to identity politics, were grounded in essentialism—that is, in an essentialist model of identity. This has allowed queer theorists to present their anti-essentialism as a radical innovation over feminist and gay and lesbian thinking. It has also enabled them to assume that the rejection of identity politics was necessary for the creation of a non-essentialist politics. In this section, I revisit Gay Liberation and radical feminism and I argue that the conventional view of those movements as essentialist is, in fact, false. Instead of anti-essentialism being a sudden discovery made sometime in the late 1980s and early 1990s by non-identitarian activists and theorists, I argue that queer politics' anti-essentialist stance was the outcome of a long and slow germination that started in the identity politics of radical feminism and gay liberation.

Although gay and lesbian liberationists were indeed committed (unlike queer theorists) to identity politics, they did not view homosexuality and heterosexuality as natural categories any more than queer theorists do. By and large, they did not believe that their sexual preference was the expression of a deeply-rooted, profound, biological, eternal, or essential nature. Unlike so-called essentialist historians of homosexuality who wrote in the late 1970s,[26] gay and lesbian liberationists (as rightly noted by Steven Seidman 1993: 113) "rejected the essentialist premise of a transhistorical homosexual subject." They relied on strategies of coming out, and they believed in gay and lesbian pride or gay culture, but they nevertheless asserted that homosexuality had nothing to do with nature, since, in the words of gay liberationist Carl Wittman, author of the famous 1969 "Gay Manifesto," "nature leaves undefined the object of sexual desire. The gender of that object is imposed socially" (1970: 331). As Allen Young put it in *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, one of the earliest and most influential collections of gay and lesbian liberation writing, "The artificial categories 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' have been laid on us by a sexist society" (29). The group Radicalesbians also believed that "lesbianism, like male homosexuality, is a category of behavior possible only in a sexist society characterized by rigid sex roles and animated by male supremacy" (Radicalesbians 1970: 17).

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[26] John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, perhaps the most influential historical study of homosexuality that adopted an "essentialist" stance (viewing homosexuals as a transhistorical minority), came out in 1980. For a critique of this stance from a social-constructionist perspective, see Halperin 1990.

Gay and lesbian liberation's non-essentialist etiology of the categories of homo- and heterosexuality led it in turn to assign a non-essentialist goal to its identity politics. Very much like queer theory's non-identitarian politics, it aimed, not at the celebration but at the destruction of the category and the categorization of homosexuality and heterosexuality. In the words of Dennis Altman, writing in 1971, its purpose was to "make the homo/hetero distinction irrelevant" (Altman 1971: 229) and "reach the point" where man/womankind can "dispense with the categories of homo- and heterosexuality" (Altman 1971: 238). As the Radicalesbians put it in their famous 1970 tract, "The Woman Identified Woman," "In a society in which men do not oppress women, and sexual expression is allowed to follow feelings, the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality would disappear" (1970: 241). The destruction of identity categories was so central to gay and lesbian liberation that in a 1973 interview, Dennis Altman, who had titled the last chapter of his 1971 book, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, "The End of the Homosexual," noted: "I rather regret that the title of the last chapter… is not the title of the book" (Altman 1979 [1973]: 23).

Thus, the identity politics of gay and lesbian liberation aimed at liberating not homosexuals or homosexuality so much as what French gay liberationist Guy Hocquenghem called in 1972 "homosexual desire," which could then spread throughout the body politic so as to abolish the boundary between homosexuality and heterosexuality. "We have a separate movement of gay people," Allen Young wrote, "because we are fighting for survival, and because that is the only way we can establish an identity and advance our struggle." But that struggle was premised on the idea (as

Young put it) that "in a free society everyone will be gay" (1970: 29). On that view, homosexuality was not an eternal essence but a strategic, political position from which a radical critique of social hierarchies could be articulated. As Michel Foucault was to remark, in a 1981 interview entitled "De l'amitié comme mode de vie," "Homosexuality is a historic opportunity to open up new relational and affective potentialities, not in virtue of qualities intrinsic to the homosexual, but because the position of the homosexual 'off-center,' somehow, together with the diagonal lines which the homosexual can draw through the social fabric, makes it possible to bring to light these potentialities."[27] Gay and lesbian liberationists, very much like Marcuse, viewed "the social function of the homosexual" as (in the words of Paul Robinson) "analogous to that of the critical philosopher" (cited in Altman 1971: 77). In her 1970 "Gay Is Good," Martha Shelley wrote: "the social function of a homosexual is to make you uneasy" (1970: 34). In other words, "homosexual" in gay-liberationist discourse is not all that different from "queer" in David Halperin's Foucauldian terminology: "not a positivity, but a positionality" (Halperin 1995: 62).[28] Far from being invested in their sexual difference, gay and lesbian liberationists sought to destabilize that difference. Martha Shelley again: "We will never go straight until you go gay… You will never be rid of us, because we reproduce ourselves out of your bodies — and out of your minds. *We are one with you*" (1970: 34, my emphasis). There was a "we" that was the subject of gay and lesbian politics, but no

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[27] « L'homosexualité est une occasion historique de rouvrir des virtualités relationnelles et affectives, non pas tellement par les qualités intrinsèques de l'homosexuel, mais parce que la position de celui-ci «en biais», en quelque sorte, les lignes diagonales qu'il peut tracer dans le tissu social, permettent de faire apparaître ces virtualités. » Cited in Halperin 1995: 67 (I am using Halperin's translation).

[28] Halperin writes that "Foucault himself would seem to have anticipated and embraced a queer conception of both homosexual identity and gay politics" (1995: 67). I entirely agree with this characterization of Foucault. But though ACT UP and early queer activists who were theoretically savvy may have looked to Foucault, Foucault was hardly exceptional in his proto-queer outlook. In particular, early gay and lesbian liberationists had articulated similar views of gay and lesbian politics

belief in essential difference: the ultimate goal of that "we" was to dissolve and overcome the alienation of identity categories.

Gay and lesbian liberation's belief in an undifferentiated human being certainly relied on a humanist ideology akin to a certain form of essentialism. Steven Seidman notes, "Although Altman rejects the essentialist premise of a transhistorical subject, he does not avoid an ontology of human sexuality" which "assumes the essentially polymorphous and bisexual needs of the human being. In this primeval condition, the self takes pleasure from all the parts of his/her body and from both genders" (1993: 113). Thus, while Altman and other liberationists were not essentialist in the sense that they did not believe that homosexuality and heterosexuality were transhistorical and natural categories, they were essentialist in another sense: they espoused a fundamental humanism that transcends social differences and relies on a unified view of human nature. On that humanistic view, we are alienated in the sense that our nature has been perverted by the social world: the revolutionary struggle aims at recovering our "primeval condition." That naturalist understanding of sexuality is one that queer theorists reject.

It needs to be stressed that this naturalist essentialism (a humanism that posits a human nature, shared by all human beings, and views them as shaped and deformed, but not constituted, by power), is entirely different from, and even contradictory to, the essentialism typically denounced by critiques of identity politics (a belief in the naturalness of categories, such as gay and straight, that divide human beings). Indeed, the first view is essentialist in that it posits a homogenous human being; the second, on the

contrary, essentializes differences among human beings. As I have shown, gay liberationists were not essentialist in the second sense. I would agree with Seidman that they were indeed essentialist in the sense that their views rely on humanist frameworks that posit an undifferentiated and uniform sexuality. Thus, the Freudo-Marxism used by many gay and lesbian liberationists to formulate their political agenda led them to adopt an ideal, not of heterosexuality or homosexuality, but of universal bisexuality. That ideal animates virtually all of gay and lesbian liberation. For example, in transparent allusions to the works of Freud which he read through the lenses of Herbert Marcuse and (to a lesser extent) Norman O'Brown, Altman uses such phrases as "the inherent bisexuality of all humans" (1979 [1972]: 17); he affirms the value of "polymorphous perversity, or to put it simply, the ability to take sensual pleasure and enjoyment from each others' bodies" (19). Carl Wittman similarly writes: "Bisexuality is good; it is the capacity to love people of either sex." But Wittman is also aware of the fact that "bisexuality" could be used as a "ready-made instrument of homophobic disavowal" and as a way of "de-gaying gayness" (as Halperin notes about "queer" [1995 65]); in order to counter that risk, he adds, "We'll be gay until everyone has forgotten that it's an issue. Then we'll begin to be complete" (1969: 331). The equation of completeness and liberation with bisexuality is a feature of many liberationist texts.

It is important, however, not to reify those views and thereby reintroduce a clear-cut separation between the supposedly rigid and uniform ideal of bisexuality held by gay liberationists and the more flexible framework of queer theory, more respectful of individual differences. Queer theorists do not posit a uniform ideal as the horizon of

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queer politics. But later elaborations of gay liberation show that the liberationist framework was not as rigid as we might think. As early as 1973, for example, Altman was already trying to devise ways out of the ideal of sexual uniformity. When asked in an interview of that year about the "end of the homosexual" invoked in the last chapter of his book, Altman answered (1979 [1973]: 23), "I think that there's a lot of confusion about this and I get attacked from both sides. What I would argue is that people must come to terms with their *potential* for both homosexual and heterosexual behavior. *I don't think this necessarily means that everybody is in fact going to behave bisexually.* Ultimately I would see it vanishing as an important distinction, but *this won't mean that there won't be men who most of the time have sex with other men and the reverse situation*" (my emphases). Two years after the publication of his account of gay liberation, the ideal of universal bisexuality, inherited from Freud through the mediation of Marcuse, was now a mere "potential." While the negative phrasing and the qualifying adverbs ("I don't think this necessarily means," "this won't mean") suggest that this reformulation remained tentative in 1973, it is nevertheless clear that Altman was backing away from a uniform ideal of one sexuality to be had by all, and looking for ways to accommodate sexual differences in his theoretical framework. Altman was moving from questions about the inherent value of homosexuality, heterosexuality, and bisexuality, to questions about the meanings attributed to the gender of one's sexual partner, meanings he wanted to render obsolete: "I see this vanishing as an important distinction."

While queer theorists have acknowledged that gay and lesbian liberationists were not entirely essentialist, the question of essentialism has been a lot more difficult to address in the case of feminism. This is largely due to the fact that when queer theory emerged, gay and lesbian studies were dominated by social constructionists, whereas difference feminism — which indeed, far from questioning or wanting to abolish the categories on which it was premised, tended to see femininity as rooted in biological and bodily specificities — played a much bigger role in academic feminism. As Butler writes in hindsight, in *Gender Trouble* she "was most concerned to criticize a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory" (1999: viii) and she sought "to oppose what [she] took to be the heterosexism at the core of sexual difference fundamentalism" (1999: ix). In her analysis of identity politics, Linda Nicholson also singled out two difference feminists in order to criticize what she termed their "biological foundationalism": Robin Morgan and Janice Raymond (Nicholson 1995: 50-53).

But because we did not distinguish between those late 1970s/early 1980s incarnations of radical feminism, on the one hand, and their early 1970s predecessors, on the other, we have assumed that radical feminists of the early 1970s were also essentialist. Linda Nicholson provides a telling example. In the passage cited above, she characteristically generalizes Raymond's and Morgan's positions to the whole of second-wave feminism and, moreover, singles out radical feminism in particular: "The type of 'biological foundationalism' exemplified in their writings is not at all unique to these two writers but represents, I believe, a major tendency within second-wave theory, particularly in that tendency known as radical feminism" (Nicholson 1995: 53). Nicholson's claim is in fact

quite astounding: not only does this allegation generalize a position of late 1970s and early 1980s cultural feminism to the majority of a diverse movement started a decade earlier, but it also impugns the very brand of feminism that produced the most radical anti-essentialist positions in all of second-wave feminism—namely, the radical feminism of the late 1960s and early 1970s—and misrepresents it as promoting the biological foundationalism it opposed.

It is not until around 1973 or 1974 that the celebration of a kind of femininity rooted in biology started becoming widespread in radical feminism. Eventually it became the dominant view among those who called themselves radical feminists. The publication in 1974 of "Mother Right" by former Weather Underground activist Jane Alpert can serve as a point of reference here. It cannot be overstated that when she sent her "letter from the underground" Alpert was breaking with what had thus far been the fundamental tenets of feminism in general, and radical feminism in particular. Moreover, she was perfectly aware that she was breaking with the dominant view within the movement. She took to task Shulamith Firestone, a leading radical feminist from New York, author in 1970 of *The Dialectic of Sex*, for her denunciation of "biology as reactionary."[29] "For centuries," Alpert wrote, "feminists have asserted that the essential difference between men and women does not lie in biology but rather in the roles that patriarchal societies (men) have required each sex to play." This argument, she went on, "contradicts our felt experience of the biological difference between the sexes as one of immense significance." From there she claimed that "the unique consciousness or sensibility of women, the particular

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[29] As I will show below, while Firestone believed that gender differences were rooted in biology, she defined radical feminism as a movement dedicated to abolishing those gender categories.

attributes that set feminist art apart, and a compelling line of research now being pursued by feminist anthropologists all point to the idea that *female biology is the basis of women's powers.* Biology is hence the source and not the enemy of feminist revolution" (emphasis in the original).

This view of femininity as rooted in biology and conducing to a different capacity for feminine art, morality, or spirituality, would, in the following years, be adopted and further elaborated in various forms by many feminist writers: Nancy Chodorow (1978), Mary Daly (1978), Audre Lorde (1984 [2007]), Adrienne Rich (1980), and Carol Gilligan (1982), to name just a few. But it is crucial to note that this was not the view of most early radical feminists. Many of them, in fact, opposed Alpert quite explicitly.[30] Indeed, by contrast with difference feminism, earlier radical feminism was not grounded in the idea that women were naturally different from men (which is why Alpert needed to champion that point), let alone that femininity should be celebrated. Inheriting from Simone de Beauvoir the phenomenological and existentialist prioritizing of the social over nature, they viewed femininity as something from which they had to free themselves.[31] In the exact same way that Gay Liberation sought to "make the homo/hetero distinction irrelevant" (Altman 1971: 229), radical feminism was, in Alice Echols's terms, "a political movement dedicated to eliminating the sex-class system," and radical feminists "were typically social constructionists who wanted to render gender irrelevant." This distinguishes radical feminism from "cultural feminism": the latter was

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[30] See Echols 1989: 252-62.

[31] For Beauvoir's critique of essentialist feminism, see Margaret A. Simons, "Two Interviews with Simone de Beauvoir," *Hypatia*, vol. 3, no. 3 (Winter 1989), reprinted in Fraser (ed.) 1992.

"a countercultural movement aimed at reversing the cultural valuation of the male and the devaluation of the female" (Echols 1989: 6).

Far from seeking to celebrate femininity, early radical feminists, just like queer theorists, viewed "woman" as a category to be destroyed. As New York radical feminist Shulamith Firestone put it in *The Dialectic of Sex*, "just as the end goal of socialist revolution was not only the elimination of the economic class *privilege* but of the economic class *distinction* itself, so the end goal of feminist revolution must be… not just the elimination of male *privilege*, but of the sex *distinction* itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally" (1970: 11-12; emphases in the original). For Ti-Grace Atkinson, similarly, "the sex roles — both male and female — must be destroyed" (Atkinson 1974: 55). The Feminists, the organization Atkinson founded, is often derided for its extreme identity politics — notably, for the membership quota that stipulated that "no more than one-third of our membership" could be married or living with a man (1973 [1970]: 374). But that suspicion against women living with men had nothing whatever to do with a belief in the intrinsic difference of women or with a determination to perpetuate that difference. On the contrary, the same programmatic statement asserted that "Both the male role and the female role must be annihilated" (369). Instead of femininity, what was considered "healthy" was often the exploration of "the positive aspects of both 'masculine' and 'feminine' behavior beyond roles" (Koedt 1971: 250). The likely goal was what Gayle Rubin praised in her 1975 article "The Traffic in Women" as a "genderless society" (2011 [1975]: 61) and what Kate Millett had called in 1968 a "Unisex" society, i.e. "the end of separatist character-structure,

temperament and behavior, so that each individual may develop an entire — rather than a partial, limited, and conformist — personality" (1968: 366).

While all of radical feminism aimed to destroy gender, it is true that some versions of early radical feminism relied on what Nicholson calls "biological foundationalism" and grounded "woman" in biology. Shulamith Firestone, for all her insistence that biology was reactionary, famously postulated that "biology itself — procreation — is at the origin of the dualism" (1970: 8). She argued that "unlike economic class, sex class sprang from a biological reality: men and women were created different, and not equally privileged." She posited the eternal nature of sexual division in past societies: "the biological family that we have described has existed everywhere throughout time" (1970: 9). And using comparisons with animals that anticipated some of the later arguments about women's natural ability for care, she opposed arguments that prioritized culture over nature in gender difference: "These biological contingencies of the human family cannot be covered over with anthropological sophistries. Anyone observing animals mating, reproducing and caring for their young will have a hard time accepting the 'cultural relativity' line" (1970: 9).

But it is important to note that even for Firestone, this "biological foundationalism" did not lead to a celebration of femininity or to an essentialist definition of women as a different species. As she argued: "To grant that the sexual imbalance is biologically based is not to lose our case. We are no longer animals" (1970: 11). In an argument that parallels Marcuse's notion that the liberation of man from a perennial shortage of

resources by technological advancements would allow libido to expand and overcome the

division between the reality principle and the pleasure principle, Firestone saw

technology as freeing women from the necessities of reproduction and she envisioned the

near advent of a time when technology would make it possible to overcome a division

seen as biological:

> The reproduction of the species by one sex for the benefit of both would
> be replaced by (at least the option of) artificial reproduction: children
> would be born to both sexes equally, or independently of either, however
> one chooses to look at it; the dependence of the child on the mother (and
> vice versa) would give way to a greatly shortened dependence on a small
> group of others in general, and any remaining inferiority to adults in
> physical strength would be compensated for culturally. The division of
> labor would be ended by the elimination of labor altogether (cybernation).
> The tyranny of the biological family would be broken (1970: 12).

Thus, Firestone's biological foundationalism is only an essentialism to the extent that it

views sexual difference as generated by nature. But her goal remains to liberate us from

nature and thus to liberate women from feminine roles. She views the progress in

technology as leading to what Rubin would later call (2011 [1975]: 58) a "revolution in

kinship" that would result, in Firestone's terms, in "artificial reproduction," the

"elimination of labor," and the end of "the tyranny of the biological family."

However, while Firestone's account of the origin of "the sexual imbalance" between men

and women certainly exemplifies the "biological foundationalism" denounced by

Nicholson, Nicholson's generalization of this feature of Firestone's thought to the whole

of radical feminism is unwarranted. For one thing, let us note that Firestone herself

presents her argument as a critique of Simone de Beauvoir. In spite of her profound

respect for *The Second Sex* (first published in French in 1949, first translated into English

in 1953), which she describes as "the most comprehensive and far-reaching" feminist theory, indeed as "the definitive analysis," Firestone takes issue with Beauvoir's "rigidly existentialist interpretation of feminism" and concludes: "Perhaps she has overshot the mark" in postulating that the gender division was radically social, not biological (1970: 7). This shows that Firestone herself realizes that her biological foundationalism is contested within feminism.

In her groundbreaking *Sexual Politics*, initially published in 1968, Kate Millett, far from naively endorsing views that ground sexual difference in biology, questions them and in fact comes close to a radically non-essentialist position. Though seeming to concede that "the heavier musculature of the male, a secondary sexual characteristic, is biological in origin," she crucially adds that it "is also culturally encouraged through breeding, diet and exercise," thereby denying that biology is sufficient to explain those differences (1968: 27). Moreover, while she does not yet take a firm radically anti-essentialist stance, she does question the validity of those theories ("patriarchal religion, popular attitude, and to some degree, science as well") which take the "psycho-social distinctions to rest upon biological differences between the sexes" (1968: 26-27). She suggests that sexual differences are so thoroughly socialized that it is impossible to prove their biological origin: "not only is there insufficient evidence for the thesis that the present social distinctions of patriarchy (status, role, temperament) are physical in origin, but we are hardly in a position to assess the existing differentiations, since distinctions which we know to be culturally induced at present so outweigh them" (1968: 29). Reducing the role of biology, she asserts the importance of ideology: "Male supremacy, like other political

creeds, does not finally reside in physical strength but in the acceptance of a value system which is not biological" (1968: 27). Without entirely denying that biology plays a role, she also gestures toward a sex/gender distinction: "the temperamental distinctions created in patriarchy ('masculine' and 'feminine') do not appear to originate in human nature, those of role and status still less" (1968: 26-27). For her, as a result, sex, far from being a biological entity, is "a status category with political implications" (1968: 24).

It is in the writings of Ti-Grace Atkinson and The Feminists that we come closest to the most radical formulations of a non-essentialist view of women this side of the Atlantic. Atkinson founded The Feminists after she left the National Organization for Women (NOW) for various reasons — including her support for Valerie Solanas, the author of the *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* who had attempted to murder Andy Warhol, as well as her desire for a feminist organization from which men would be excluded. I have already alluded to the rule that The Feminists would not accept, among its members, more than a third of women living with men. It is therefore ironic that, in spite of what some might view as a very rigid form of identity politics, Atkinson and The Feminists articulated perhaps the most radically anti-essentialist view of gender differences in the early 1970s — which just goes to show that essentialism, despite widespread assumptions, has nothing to do with the question of identity politics.

For example, the Feminists asserted in their statement that "The class separation between men and women is a political division" (The Feminists 1970: 369). "The male-female division," far from being a natural phenomenon, is the "primary development" of "the

pathology of oppression" (1979: 370). In her 1969 article "Radical Feminism," Ti-Grace Atkinson defined "women" as a "political class" and she entirely and explicitly denied its naturalness: "'political' classes are *artificial*." While Firestone, on the one hand, and Alpert and later essentialist feminists, on the other, saw in child-bearing capacities the source of female difference (though they understood the logic of the connection in radically different ways, as we have seen), Atkinson denied that this natural capacity could be the source of a female identity: she asserts that political classes are "individuals grouped together by other individuals." She reconfigures childbearing as an instance in which those who have power "define certain persons *with* certain capacities *by* those capacities, changing the contingent to the necessary" (Atkinson 1974 [1969]: 53; emphases in the original). The Feminists' manifesto similarly argues that "in the female role women are defined by their child-bearing capacity which is interpreted as their function" (The Feminists 1970: 375).

Thus, overgeneralized denunciations of the alleged essentialism of radical feminism obscure the multiple and diverse positions of radical feminists as well as the fact that radical feminists had important discussions and debates among themselves about the origins of female subordination and gender difference, not a single, common, settled position. I would also suggest that at least some of the biologically-grounded definitions I have quoted are best viewed not as intrinsic defects of identity politics or failures of radical feminism but rather as early approximations of a social constructionist perspective at a time when it was starting to be articulated for categories of sexual orientation but still seemed profoundly counterintuitive for categories of gender. In effect, radical feminism

showcases a much more refined interrogation of biological foundationalism than we could find in any other type of feminism in those years (liberal feminism, socialist feminism, women of color feminism)—not because radical feminists were exceptionally sophisticated or advanced but because, in taking gender hierarchy as their primary focus, radical feminists were led to interrogate it more thoroughly than those other feminists who were best at illuminating the connections of patriarchy to other systems of domination (such as class and race). It is therefore ironic but also unjust that it is these activists who have been repudiated for their supposed essentialism, when in fact they, more than any other faction, articulated the non-foundationalist formulations on which queer theory would be built twenty years later.

SECTION III: FRENCH RADICAL AND MATERIALIST FEMINISTS: THE INVENTION OF ANTI-ESSENTIALISM

While early 1970s radical feminists in the U.S. started to open up space between social constructions of femininity and masculinity on the one hand (what we have since called "gender") and biological differences of female and male on the other (what is often called "sex"), and while they challenged essentialist definitions of women, it is true that, by and large, in the 1970s, they left the biological foundation of gender under-theorized. They questioned, as I have shown, the character of biology as a foundation for gender, and at times they resisted the view that gender differences were biologically grounded: they claimed that they were so thoroughly socialized as to make it impossible to assess the

relative role of biology in their construction. Unlike poststructuralist and queer theorists in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they did not (with the exceptions of Atkinson and The Feminists) entirely get rid of a notion that at the foundation of the social construction of gender was a biological difference.

But their French counterparts did. In the last section of this chapter, I turn to 1970s French feminists and show that French radical and materialist feminists came to radically anti-essentialist definitions of gender. They categorically denied the role of nature as a foundation in the construction of gender and articulated what Lisa Disch has described as "constructivist materialism."[32] They did so, not through the analytical frameworks that came to be known in North America as "French Theory," but through Marxist and materialist analyses. These activists combined their radically anti-essentialist claims with a firm belief that women formed a distinct class, that they *all* shared a *common* condition, and that it was therefore the task of feminists to organize for the destruction of their class. In short, they succeeded in showing that one can thoroughly deny the naturalness of a social category, aim at its destruction, and yet (or because of that) organize around it.

a) The Scam of "French Feminism"

Several feminist scholars have noted that the North American category of "French Feminism" is a strange historical object. "French Feminism" has been used to refer to a

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[32] In her forthcoming essay, Disch sets out to use French materialist feminists, especially Delphy, in order to counter the tendency of contemporary materialist feminists to oppose constructivism (understood as the linguistic and cultural turns of the 1970s) to attention to materiality. Against this simplistic opposition, Disch relies on an understanding of constructivism à la Laclau and Mouffe and she shows that "the French materialist feminists arrived at their constructivism *by way of* their materialism" (2016 [typescript]: 6).

"Holy Trinity" (Delphy 1995: 168) of French female writers: Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray, a trio that Delphy (in the French version of her text) also humorously refers to as "les 'Trois Grâces'" of French Feminism (1998b: 348).[33] In an article published in *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* and *Australian Feminist Studies* in 1996, and then reprinted in *Feminist Studies* in 1998, US-American feminist scholar Claire Moses reminds us that "French Feminism" was an object "made in America" and she traces the history of that invention.[34] When *Signs*, in its very first issue in 1975, published the first translation of Kristeva into English, the author was presented as figuring "among the most provocative and respected French intellectuals" (vi-vii); she was not described as a feminist, let alone as representative of French feminism. When, a year later, *Signs* published a translation of Cixous, she was presented as a "French writer, scholar, and initiator of a doctorate in women's studies at the University of Paris" (*Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, Summer 1976: v), suggesting that she had some connection to the academic study of women, and to the emerging field of "Women's Studies," but not to feminism *per se* (at least if by feminism we mean a political movement, not just an academic area of study). Indeed, the approaches of those writers seemed at odds with feminism. As noted by Elaine Marks in her 1978 article entitled "Women and Literature in France" (*Signs*, vol. 3, no. 4: 832), "Usually, on this side of the Atlantic, there is dismissal [of those writers] (too intellectualist and elitist to be feminist)." In the same issue, however, Carolyn Burke wrote a "Report from Paris" which started with a discussion of the feminist movement, but then went on to consider those French female writers. In 1980, Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron edited *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, in

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[33] In the earlier English version, the phrase used here is "the 'Holy Three.'"
[34] The remainder of this paragraph is considerably indebted to Moses 1998: 251-257.

which, for the first time, Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray were presented as "feminists." The anthology did include other writers (Simone de Beauvoir, Catherine Clément, Christine Delphy, Monique Wittig), but it was primarily devoted to Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray. Thus, "French Feminism" was born and it was primarily centered on those three writers who, only five years before, no one considered feminist in the U.S. (and even less so in France). When, in 1992, Nancy Fraser edited *Revaluing French Feminism*, they were considered, not only as French feminists, but as representative of French feminism. The collection contained two interviews with Beauvoir and one final essay, by Fraser herself, critical of French discourse theories, but the rest of the volume was almost entirely devoted to critical studies of Irigaray and Kristeva. The index contained two entries on Wittig and one on Delphy; Colette Guillaumin was listed in one bibliography; there was not a word about Nicole-Claude Mathieu.

The invention of "French Feminism" was of utmost consequence. By this sleight of hand, certain writers who were undeniably female and unquestionably French were made into feminists, despite the fact that they were hardly feminist at all and were indeed often explicitly anti-feminist: in 1995, Delphy noted that Cixous and Kristeva "are completely outside feminist debate in France — and, not being considered feminist theorists, can hardly be considered '*major* feminist theorists'" (1995: 168). Simone de Beauvoir had made a similar observation more than ten years earlier.[35] Meanwhile, those who were

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[35] In Robin Morgan's edited volume *Sisterhood Is* Global, Beauvoir writes: "The French women's movement… is in constant danger, because of the existence of such groups as Psych. et Po. which pass themselves off as *the* women's movement and exert considerable influence, thanks to the unfortunately all-too-warm reception the general public has given their ideology — a convenient neo-femininity developed by such women writers as Hélène Cixous, Annie Leclerc, and Luce Irigaray, most of whom are not feminists, and some of whom are blatantly *anti*-feminist. Unfortunately this is also the aspect of the French women's movement best known in the United States" (1984: 234-235; quoted by Moses 1998: 258).

actually feminists — in the sense that they called themselves feminists, were in dialogue with US-American feminists, and were involved in the French women's movement — were slowly but surely eliminated from "French Feminism." This intellectual expropriation paralleled another, legal and political, dispossession. Since its early days, the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF) had been animated by the ideals of the New Left (what in France was called "gauchisme"): it was a spontaneous movement, not a structured party; it was non-hierarchical and whoever wanted to be part of it just needed to show up; it was not registered as a legal organization. Taking advantage of that legal loophole in October 1979, Antoinette Fouque, the leader of "Politique et Psychanalyse" (often abbreviated as Psych et Po), a minority tendency within the broad movement, copyrighted the name "Mouvement de Libération des Femmes–MLF," which then became (by law) the sole propriety of Psych et Po.[36]

The invention of "French Feminism" similarly robbed French intellectual feminists of a movement they had helped to create. It did not seem to make much definitional difference whether representatives of "French Feminism" called themselves feminist, were indifferent to feminism, or indeed hated it. It seemed irrelevant that they had no connection to the women's movement. Presenting them as representatives of "French Feminism" made it look like feminists in France were radically different from US-American feminists: the French were primarily interested in theories of language rather than, for example, domestic labor, reproductive rights, or other civil rights; it made it look like they were interested in psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction (while

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[36] See Picq 1993. This allowed Fouque to be presented for years as the founder of the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes, an attribution that was at best a falsification of history.

U.S. feminists had long had a strong distrust of Freud), rather than in history, sociology, and anthropology; it made it look like they were interested not in struggles for equality but in defending their difference (however one spelled the word). Most important, the invention of "French Feminism" (which Christine Delphy [2000] described as "an essential move") served to support the essentialist turn of late 1970s and early 1980s feminism in North America: the three writers in that far-away country with considerable intellectual prestige incarnated the proof that there were feminists out there who had understood that essentialism was a safe option for feminism.

I am not interested in "French Feminism." Instead, I am interested in French feminists, particularly French radical feminist theorists. By this I mean (among others) writers *and* activists such as anthropologist Nicole-Claude Mathieu, sociologists Colette Guillaumin and Christine Delphy, and theorist Monique Wittig, all of whom (with the exception of Wittig) have been all but entirely ignored in the United States. Ignoring those anti-essentialist radical feminists has helped give credit to the notion that radical feminists were all essentialist. On the contrary, as I will show, over the course of the 1970s French radical feminists, far from advocating the essentialism of "French Feminism," articulated some of the most radical anti-essentialist formulations of gender categories, insisting on their social construction. In attributing the origins of anti-essentialism to "French Theory," poststructuralism, and Derridean deconstruction, we have effectively, once again, dispossessed those French feminists of their discoveries.[37] Throughout the 1970s,

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[37] Another, similar expropriation was performed by Pierre Bourdieu who, when he published *La Domination masculine* in 1998, not only did not acknowledge the extent to which he was simply repeating what had been said by feminists before him, French and US-American alike, but even grossly misrepresented their work in order to make his own seem more original than it really was. For feminist

French radical and materialist feminists progressively came to constructivist, radically non-essentialist definitions of gender categories through three primary intellectual strategies: analyzing gender through structural paradigms; defining women by analogy with racial categories; defining women by analogy with the proletariat.

a) Nicole-Claude Mathieu and the "sociological definition of sex categories"

Arguing that the invention of "gender" is what rendered possible the denaturalization of sex categories is merely stating the obvious. From the early days of the women's liberation movement, French radical feminists, like their US-American counterparts, had been looking for theoretical ways to escape the stranglehold of sex as an essentialist category and hence as destiny. In order to do so, they relied on the concept of gender, which had a longer history in American psychiatry, but was made popular among feminists by its use in British feminist sociologist Ann Oakley's 1972 *Sex, Gender and Society*. However, even before then, French materialist feminists had been trying to articulate what anthropologist Nicole-Claude Mathieu had called in an important 1971 article *une définition sociologique des catégories de sexe* ("a sociological definition of sex categories"), distinct from biological definitions (Mathieu 2013 [1971]: 19-40).

Although Mathieu did not, in 1971, go so far as to deny explicitly the biological foundation of her sociological definition of the categories of sex, defining women

critiques of this erasure, see Louis 1999; Mathieu 1999. I do not discuss his work here, because it has not been influential in feminism and queer theory in the United States.

sociologically made it theoretically possible to disarticulate sex categories from biology. Mathieu's theoretical move had two major consequences. First, her notion that categories of sex could be defined sociologically allowed them to be linked to other social categories and allowed that linkage to be exploited further: it made it possible to compare and contrast the ways that sex categories and other social categories are conceived. Mathieu adduced as examples the sociological study of class and age. While the social character of class was taken for granted, she noted that "age and sex both have the particularity of being recognized and conceived as real biological categories, while at the same time they are used as sociological variables." But that is where the resemblance between age and sex ended since, she wrote, "most sociological studies of categories of age … located an object *in its social existence*, focusing on the *social* values and behaviors of that object and explaining them by reference to *sociological* factors or situations" (emphases in the original), whereas the study of gender tended to infer behaviors from bodily and biological differences.[38] In other words: "there exists now a sociology of social classes… When it comes to age, . . . there exists a sociology of youth… and a geronto-sociology, but no sociology of adulthood; moreover, those categories *have tended to be increasingly removed from a biological meaning and end up becoming fully sociological concepts*. As for sex, its conceptualization as social sex rather than biological sex seems ambiguous; moreover, an overarching problematization of the social and cultural categorization of the sexes does not exist" (my emphasis).[39] Viewing

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[38] « … la majorité des études sociologiques sur les catégories d'âge… ont choisi un objet *dans son existence sociale*, s'attachent aux valeurs et comportements *sociaux* qui caractérisent cet objet en les expliquant par des facteurs ou des situations *sociologiques* » (Mathieu 2013 [1971] : 21).

[39] « … il existe désormais une sociologie des classes sociales… En ce qui concerne l'âge… existent une sociologie de la jeunesse… et une géronto-sociologie, mais pas de sociologie des adultes ; par ailleurs, ces catégories tendent de plus en plus à s'éloigner du sens biologique pour parvenir au statut de véritable concept sociologique. En ce qui concerne le sexe, il semble que sa conceptualisation en tant que sexe social

sex categories as analogous to categories of class and age gave Mathieu a lever to push against the conflation of the biological and the social in the sociological study of sex categories.

The last segment of the preceding quotation, with its call for "an overarching problematization of the social and cultural categorization of sexes," points to the second major consequence of Mathieu's reconfiguration of sex, one with a radically anti-essentialist potential — although Mathieu did not make that consequence explicit in those early years. In viewing sex and age as social categories, Mathieu was suggesting that they be studied like class categories, which "since Marx have always been studied as organically linked parts of a single total phenomenon and cannot be defined without one another."[40] This point illustrates the extent to which structural and Marxist paradigms played a central role in the denaturalization of gender. Mathieu's approach, and those of other French feminists, privileged "holistic" epistemologies over "additive" ones, as Christine Delphy would later put it (2000: 174-176). That is, Delphy continued, they offered a paradigm of understanding that "considers the whole before it considers the parts. It is the whole, the configuration, that gives meaning to each of the parts. Indeed, it is the whole that gives rise to the parts. In other words, the whole precedes the parts."[41]

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et non biologique demeure ambiguë ; d'autre part, une problématique d'ensemble concernant la catégorisation sociale ou culturelle des sexes n'existe pas… » (Mathieu 2013 [1971] : 29).

[40] « … la problématique des classes sociales n'a pas cessé depuis Marx de les considérer comme des parties organiquement liées d'un même phénomène total, et non définissables l'une sans l'autre… » (Mathieu 2013 [1971] : 23).

[41] Although Delphy's essay was originally published in English, I would like to call attention to the verb she uses in the later French version for "gives rise": "c'est l'ensemble qui *engendre* les parties" (my emphasis). The creative power of the ensemble implied in the verb clearly resonates with her notion, which I will discuss later, that "gender creates sex."

Mathieu further elaborated her approach in a 1973 paper based on a presentation she gave

at a seminar directed by Claude Lévi-Strauss:

> To think sex more or less implicitly in terms of reified categories, closed in on themselves, to refuse to see that they get defined over and over again in a system of social relations, brings one first to grant them general *attributes* (articulateness, inarticulateness) and to describe them in terms of their *content*: models, representations, and symbolism *specific* to each; then to fix those attributes and contents of each as *different*, if not opposed, the reification being grounded in the model of biological *difference*: men and women will *naturally* have different behaviors, ways of thinking, different ways of viewing oneself and the world (emphases in the original).[42]

Mathieu's application of structural paradigms to sex categories implied, if only as a

horizon, the possibility that sex categories had no inherent meanings; that they had no

inherent content; that they could not be viewed as "closed in on themselves." This

highlights what was so crucial about the introduction of a concept of "gender" in feminist

theorizing: it helped shift the focus away from the intrinsic meaning of the two distinct

categories of sex and directed attention instead to the whole system that made them work

in relation to each another. Mathieu used that structural insight to push against

essentialist definitions of women and women as "reified categories." She argued that the

value and meaning of "femininity" and "masculinity" was radically relational. She

insisted that they could not be understood outside of their relation, in terms of which they

get defined "over and over again." In short, Mathieu taught that the social categories of

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[42] "Penser plus ou moins implicitement le sexe en termes de catégories réifiées, closes sur elles-mêmes, refuser de voir qu'elles se définissent à chaque fois dans un système de rapports sociaux, amène d'abord à leur conférer des *attributs* généraux *(articulateness, inarticulateness)*, et à parler en termes de *contenu* : modèles, représentations, symbolisme *propres* à chacune ; ensuite, à fixer ces attributs et ces contenus comme *différents*, voire opposés, pour chacune, la réification se fondant sur le modèle de la *différence* biologique ; les hommes et les femmes auront 'naturellement' des comportements, des raisonnements différents, des visions différentes de soi et du monde » (Mathieu 2013 [1973] : 48).

sex have no essence.[43]

At this stage, the path was open to define gender outside of any biological foundationalism. But that radical conclusion was not immediately and explicitly drawn. That transformation occurred later.

b) Colette Guillaumin and Social Marks

In 1977, sociologist Colette Guillaumin published the French version of what would be translated into English in 1988 as "Race and Nature: The System of Marks. The Idea of a Natural Group and Social Relationships" in the journal *Pluriel*. Guillaumin had been working on social hierarchies of race since the 1960s. In "Race and Nature," Guillaumin, like Mathieu, took issue with the ways that sociological studies of gender accept and build on biological and natural definitions of social groups. She compared the ways that the natural sciences and the social sciences approach questions of racial differences, noting that "the social sciences are fascinated by the natural sciences, in which they hope

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[43] The redefinition of gender in Mathieu's articles bears a strong resemblance to Gayle Rubin's argument in her 1975 article on "The Traffic in Women." See, for example, the following passage: "Marx once asked: 'What is a Negro slave? A man of the black race. The one explanation is as good as the other. A Negro is a Negro. He only becomes a slave in certain relations….' One might paraphrase: what is a domesticated woman? A female of the species. The one explanation is as good as the other. A woman is a woman. She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human Dictaphone in certain relations. Torn from these relationships, she is no more the helpmate of man than gold in itself is money… and so on. What, then, are these relationships by which a female becomes an oppressed woman?" (2011 [1975]: 34). Both scholars were anthropologists and they were both working within the structural paradigms of Marx and Lévi-Strauss. It is no coincidence that Mathieu translated Rubin's article into French in 1998.

to find a methodological model (which at the very least is debatable), but in which also

(and this is the most serious matter) they believe they find an ultimate justification."

> The idea of race. What is this self-evident notion, this "fact of nature"? It is an ordinary historical fact — a social fact. I deliberately say *idea* of race: the belief that this category is a material phenomenon. For it is a heterogeneous intellectual formation, with one foot in the natural sciences and one foot in the social sciences. On the one hand it is an aggregate of somatic and physiological characteristics — in short, race as conceived by the physical anthropologists and the biologists. On the other hand it is an aggregate of social characteristics that express a group — but a social group of a special type, a group *perceived as natural*, a group of people considered as materially specific in their bodies. This naturalness may be regarded by some people as fundamental (a natural group whose nature is expressed in social characteristics). Or it may be regarded as a secondary fact (a social group that "furthermore" is natural). In any case, in the current state of opinion, this naturalness is always present in the approach which the social sciences take, and which the social system has crystallized and expressed under the name of "race" (Guillaumin [1988 (1977)]: 25-26, emphases in the original).

The opening lines of her article left no ambiguity: Guillaumin denied that race was a

"fact of nature," and she described it instead as "an ordinary historical fact — a social

fact." For Guillaumin, racial groups are no more natural than any other groups: they are

social groups. What is distinct about them is that they are "*perceived as natural*."

In the rest of the essay, Guillaumin developed several strategies to prove the non-

naturalness of race. One bears a resemblance to deconstructionist strategies: she invokes

those who do not fit racial categorizations in order to question the validity of the

categorizations. Opposing "the impassioned proclamations of the social system" and its

"fantasized and *legalized* affirmation… that the boundaries between the groups are

beyond the reach of, and anterior to, human beings — thus immutable" (1988 [1977]:

27), she notes that such an argument can only be made "at the price of another category,

which is, if you wish, nonexistent, or out of consideration — the 'coloreds'" (1988 [1977]: 26). She deploys a similar strategy by noting that the view of races as separate categories "rests on the clever finding that whites bear whites and blacks bear blacks… that the masters bear masters and the slaves slaves." She goes on to ask, "The children of slaves are slaves, as we know, while the children of slaves can also be — and often are — the children of the master. What 'natural' group do they belong to?" (1988 [1977]: 28).

A second strategy is reminiscent of the structural move we have seen in Mathieu's works. It consists in denying that races constitute separate groups with inherent, essential qualities.   Guillaumin asserts instead that they are defined in relation to one another: "supposedly 'natural' groups exist by virtue of the fact that they are so interrelated that effectively each of the groups is a function of the other" (1988 [1977]: 28). Moreover, that relationship can be described as fundamentally hierarchical, antagonistic, and ideological: "The idea of the endo-determined nature of groups is precisely *the* form taken by the antagonism between the very social groups which are concerned" (1988 [1977]: 36). The supposed naturalness of some social groups is an ideological construction meant to preclude the recognition of social domination:

> In short, it's a matter of social relations within the same social formation. One doesn't care to assert the naturalness when there is economic, spatial and other independence among groups. Only certain specific relations (of dependence, exploitation) lead to the postulation of the existence of "natural heterogeneous entities." (28)

Denying, as Guillaumin did, the naturalness of nature, and showing instead the social uses of the "idea" of nature, allowed her to study nature as a social object and to historicize it: "the idea of classifying *according to* somatic/morphological criteria is

recent and its date can be fixed: the eighteenth century. From a circumstantial association between economic relations and physical traits was born a new type of mark ('color') which had great success" (1988 [1977]: 32, emphasis in the original). The notion that the association of physical traits and social positions was at first "circumstantial" allowed Guillaumin to introduce a notion of contingency (even though the contingent had turned out to be durable). In future work, some of it published the following year in *Questions Féministes*, Guillaumin studied more thoroughly the "Practice of Power and Idea of Nature": one essay dealt with "The Appropriation of Women" (Guillaumin 1978a) and another dealt with "The Discourse of Nature" (1978b): the latter was published in the issue of *Questions Féministes* entitled "natur-elle-ment," a pun meaning both "naturally" and "the natural is a liar."

While Guillaumin's work was primarily focused on racial formations, it nevertheless provided a language that allowed her, by analogy, to rethink gender. Defining gender by analogy with race allowed her to deny that biology was the foundation of the former, any more than it was the basis of the latter. She described gender differences instead as "the social relationships of sex" (1988 [1977]: 28) and opposed those who view "the sexed division of humanity… as leading to and constituting two heterogeneous groups" (1988 [1977]: 29). She viewed gender groups, just like racial groups, as social groups "*perceived as natural*" (1988 [1977]: 25, emphasized in the original). Replicating the question about the children of masters and slaves, she asked (in a question that reads like a direct critique of those, feminists and non-feminists, who viewed women as constituting a different species from men): "for the time being, men are the children of women (a fact

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which is well known, perhaps too well known). What is less known seems to be that women are the children of men. To what 'natural' group do they belong?" (1988 [1977]: 29).

But it is in her reflections on "the system of marks" ("the conventional and artificial inscription of social practices" [1988 [1977]: 31]) that Guillaumin articulates most forcefully her radical anti-essentialist views. Social marks can be permanent or temporary. Guillaumin mentions as examples of temporary marks the jewels, furs, and bright colors that differentiated the nobility from the bourgeoisie in the feudal period; the clothing marks of the members of the dominant religions in the Middle Ages; military uniforms. She cites as examples of permanent marks the branding of galley slaves, deported prostitutes, and slaves in the 16th and 17th centuries (1988 [1977]: 31-32). Viewing gender as yet another instance of social marking, she notes that it has proven much more durable than most other marks: "It is only in the division between the sexes that the clothing mark persists in a permanent fashion today. For although a person puts on a uniform (professional, military or other) for work — that is, for a specified time and in a limited area — a person is, on the contrary, at every moment when dressed, and in all circumstances, in the uniform of sex" (1988 [1977]: 32).

Viewing gender (and race) as instances of social marking allowed Guillaumin to invert the relation of biology to the social. According to Guillaumin, biology does not serve as a foundation of the social. Instead, Guillaumin puts forward the radical notion that the social does not simply use but indeed creates the biological mark. Guillaumin highlights a

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crucial shift that she situates in the 18th century. In that time, "the taxonomies were transformed into classification systems based on a morphological mark, in which the latter is *presumed to precede* the classification" (1988 [1977]: 32, emphasis in the original). Thus, she viewed race and gender as social markings of a certain type, but social markings nevertheless: social markings that function by being perceived as the origin, rather than the result, of the social position to which they correspond.

"The old mark," Guillaumin argues, "was recognized as *imposed* by social relationships, known as one of their consequences, while the natural mark is not presumed to be a mark but the very *origin* of these relationships" (1988 [1977]: 34, emphases in the original). In other words, the group identity is seen, not simply as used for purposes of social domination, but as constituted by and through the process of social domination. It is, once again, the study of race that provides her with a model:

> It is heart-rending to hear so many well-intentioned people (then as now) question themselves about the reasons that could exist for "reducing the blacks to slavery" (contempt, they think; visibility; who knows what else?). But no "blacks" per se were reduced to slavery; slaves were made — which is very different. All these strange reasons are sought and advanced as if "being black" existed in itself, outside of any social reason to construct such a form, as if the symbolic fact asserted itself and could be a cause. But the idea of "reducing 'the blacks' to slavery" is a modern idea which only came about at a specific historical juncture when the recruitment of slaves (who at the beginning were blacks *and* whites) was focalized. People were enslaved wherever they could be and as need dictated. Then at a certain historical moment, from the end of the seventeenth century on, slaves ceased to be recruited in Europe because their labor power from then on was needed there, with the development of industrialization. Consequently, they were taken only from a specific and relatively limited region of the world… During the period of European/African recruitment, there was not (not yet) a system of marking other than that used for this purpose (branding). So, *a fortiori*, neither was there any reflection about the somatic/physiological "*nature*" of slaves. This reflection, moreover, only appeared after the marking by the somatic

sign itself. The taxonomies preceded the racist theories (1988 [1977]: 33, emphases in the original).

In the words of Monique Wittig, "Colette Guillaumin has shown that before the socioeconomic reality of black slavery, the concept of race did not exist" (1993 [1981]: 104), that it does not exist outside of the social relation that creates it. Her breakthrough, in other words, was to discover that natural groups are social groups like any other. For Guillaumin, there were not a preexisting group of "blacks" that a preexisting group of "whites" came to enslave: rather, it is through the social relation of slavery that they were made Black and White, *i.e.* that their skin color was made to be the ground of their identity. Indeed, for Guillaumin, it is through the social relationship (of domination) that groups presumed natural are actually constituted: "the morphological 'mark' doesn't precede the social relationship, any more than branding or the tattooing of a number does."

Even though race remains the primary focus of her essay, Guillaumin once again extrapolated those insights to gender. In doing so, she articulated through a materialist framework an early and radical deconstruction of gender as a natural category. "To speak of a specificity of races or of sexes, to speak of a natural specificity is to say in a sophistical way that a particular 'nature' is *directly productive* of a social practice and to bypass the *social relationship* that this practice brings into being" (1988 [1977]: 35, emphases in the original). Instead, for Guillaumin, the invention of the "idea of a natural group… of race, of sex" is itself a modality of social domination: it is ideological in the traditional Marxist sense of the term, precisely insofar as it "inverts the reasoning" (1988

[1977]: 35). In doing so, it "precludes recognition of the real relationship by concentrating attention first… on isolated, fragmented traits, presumed to be intrinsic and permanent, which are supposed to be the direct causes of a practice which is itself purely mechanical. It is thus that slavery becomes an attribute of skin color, that nonpayment for domestic work becomes an attribute of the shape of sexual organs" (1988 [1977]: 35). Here we find, enunciated as early as 1977, the same point *mutatis mutandis* that Judith Butler would make in her 1990 *Gender Trouble*—namely, that gender difference generates sexual difference, which it then locates in the body as the natural origin of gender.

c) "*Gender* Precedes Sex": Delphy and Women as a Class

Even before French radical and materialist feminists deconstructed the naturalness of gender through analogies with race, they did it through analogies with labor relationships (which should come as no surprise, since French feminists worked in a country that had a strong Marxist tradition of trade unions and labor struggles). In France, the earliest and most systematic description of patriarchy as a mode of production, and of the exploitation of women as an expropriation of the value of the goods they produced, came in the summer of 1970 when Christine Delphy published her groundbreaking essay, "The Main Enemy. A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression." The essay came out in the journal *Partisans*, whose special issue entitled "Libération des femmes: année zero" was the first important publication of the new Women's Liberation Movement in France. It

was first translated into English in 1974 when it was circulated at the National Women's Liberation Conference in Edinburgh (Delphy 1984: 57) and finally published in 1977.

At the heart of Delphy's essay was the fundamental premise of radical feminism: women form a social class. However, while the notion of class was often mobilized in a somewhat loose sense, meaning a social or political group sharing a common oppression, Delphy used it in a rigorously materialist and Marxist manner. She defined patriarchy as a specific and distinct mode of production: women form a class in the sense that they share a common position in that mode of production. Although Delphy's analysis was profoundly Marxist (in that she analyzed patriarchy as a mode of production), she was critical of Marxists. In particular, she opposed socialist feminists.[44] She denounced the "flagrant contradiction between the principles which adherents of Marxism claim to uphold and the way in which they have applied these principles to the situation of women." This socialist line of analysis, which, she argued, has been "formulated outside the [women's] movement," is a "theoretical failure" in two crucial respects: "a) it doesn't account for the oppression common to all women, and b) it concentrates, not on the oppression of women, but on the consequences of this oppression for the proletariat" (1977 [1970]: 1). Delphy rejected this conventional Marxist account because it presented the oppression of women as "a secondary consequence (and derived from) the class struggle, which is currently defined exclusively as the oppression of the proletariat by capital" (1977 [1970]: 1).

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[44] For a critique of Delphy's radical feminism from a socialist-feminist perspective, see Barrett and McIntosh 1979.

Instead, as a radical feminist, Delphy believed that women's oppression was primary or fundamental. But she did analyze women's oppression as a fundamentally economic oppression—*i.e.* as one whose primary function consists in the appropriation of the goods produced by women. Taking her cues from U.S., Cuban, and French feminist writings, she noted that they "concentrate on the oppression of women in their participation in production (and not only in reproduction)." But while those writings argued that the non-remuneration of women's work was due to the nature of what women produced, Delphy suggested we view activities such as domestic work and child-rearing as "productive activities," and she contended that it was the relations of production between women and men, not the nature of women's work itself, that explained why the latter was not remunerated (1977 [1970]: 3). This led her to a dualistic view of our society:

> *There are two modes of production in our society:*
> 1)   *most goods are produced in the industrial mode;*
> 2)   *domestic services, child-rearing and certain other goods are produced in the family mode.*
> *The first mode of production gives rise to capitalist exploitation.*
> *The second gives rise to familiar, or more precisely, patriarchal exploitation* (1977 [1970]: 13).

Delphy's analysis helps to dispel stubborn misunderstandings of radical feminism. First, it is clear that for radical feminists like Delphy defining patriarchy as a specific, fundamental, or primary oppression did not imply (any more than it did for Willis, cited above, and *pace* Fraser) that patriarchy was the root of all other oppressions. It simply meant that it has its own roots, distinct from the roots of other oppressions. As Delphy wrote many years later, "the oppression of women is specific, not because women are specific, but because it is a unique type of oppression. But is it unique for an oppression to be unique? No, it is rather banal: all oppressions are unique, like individuals.

Singularity is the most widespread thing in the world." That is why she added: "I consider women's oppression to be a specific instance of the general phenomenon of domination — *not more specific than any other, however*" (emphasis in the original).[45] In short: Delphy's description of women's oppression as primary and unique is an attempt to differentiate it from other oppressions, not to put it on the top of a hierarchy of oppressions. Women's oppression is primary and unique just as any other oppression is unique and primary.

Second, it is also clear that for Delphy (as well as, I would argue, for most early radical feminists) distinguishing capitalist oppression from patriarchal oppression was not antithetical to acknowledging what in today's parlance we would call their intersections. Nor did such a distinction inhibit or impede the formation of broad progressive coalitions. On the contrary, in her polemic with socialist-feminists, Delphy argued that it was necessary to analyze women's oppression in its singularity if we are to analyze its relations to capitalist oppression, and then allow for the construction of alliances: "Such an analysis is basic to a study of the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism. It means that we must know what patriarchy is in order to understand to what extent it is theoretically independent of capitalism… Only then is it possible to establish the material basis for the connection between the struggle against patriarchy and the struggle against capitalism" (1977 [1970]: 19). Third, the dualism she expresses here was in fact a nascent

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[45] « … l'oppression des femmes est spécifique non parce que les femmes seraient spécifiques, mais parce que c'est un type d'oppression unique. Mais est-il unique qu'une oppression soit unique ? Non, c'est banal : toutes les oppressions sont uniques. La singularité est ce qu'il y a de mieux partagé au monde… je considère l'oppression des femmes comme un cas particulier du phénomène général de la domination — *pas plus particulier qu'un autre cependant* » (Delphy 2001 : 46).

pluralism: in later years, she integrated racist oppression as a third mode of oppression and left the list open-ended (Delphy 2001).[46]

An exhaustive analysis of Delphy's groundbreaking contribution lies well beyond the scope of this chapter. What I want to show here is how her view of women as forming an economic class analogous to the proletariat gave her, much like Guillaumin's view of gender groups as analogous to racial groups, conceptual tools to articulate a radically anti-essentialist definition of women. Defining women as a class raises the question of the extent to which the class overlaps with the biological category — and how to theorize the difference between the two. In a 1976 "Debate on Capitalism, Patriarchy and the Women's Struggle" with socialist feminist Danièle Léger, Delphy forcefully argued:

> For my part I analyse the situation of women as being a common situation, a class situation. I talk of married women, ie. a social class, and not a biological class. *It may very well be that there are some biological men in this class*: youths, the elderly and children for instance. Women, children, the old, etc. constitute a class if they have the same relations of production, ie. if they earn their living in the same way. Unless one twists or deforms the meaning of the concept of "relations of production" I think *this conclusion is inevitable* (Delphy 1977 [1976] 26, my emphases).

The radical materialist analysis of women, then, had the effect, not (as Nicholson would have us believe) of consecrating biology as a foundation for feminism, but on the contrary of annihilating the founding role of biology. By defining "women" as a class occupying a specific position in a mode of production, Delphy opened up the possibility that biology and bodily organs play no role at all in the category of "woman." She very well saw the consequences of that re-conceptualization: if "woman" is defined in this

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[46] In addition to her feminist activism, Delphy has been heavily involved in lesbian activism; in struggles against racism; she has taken a firm stance against the French laws banning the veil; she has also long been an advocate for children's rights.

manner, then the "conclusion is inevitable" that "some biological men" may belong in that class. In this view, then, biology has been entirely evacuated from the definition of "woman."

This passage of Delphy's interview with Léger is in fact quite extraordinary: the possible inclusion of biological men in the social category of women, envisioned here by Delphy, constitutes, to the best of my knowledge, a unique moment in 1970s radical feminist discourses. It goes to show that radical feminist discourses were a lot more diverse than is usually assumed. Radical feminists were not the dogmatic activists and writers we usually think. They were, to be sure, women committed to a few fundamental premises, and they were also trying to figure out solutions to the problems they encountered. Most important, the anti-essentialist, downright non-biological nature of Delphy's definition of "woman" proves that French radical feminist discourses anticipated some of the claims of queer theory. Radical feminism therefore deserves a prominent place in the genealogy of queer discourses.

In her non-biological definition of the category of "woman," and of women as a class, Delphy achieved a crucial breakthrough. But there remained something unsatisfactory in her account. While she did de-biologize "woman," it was not yet clear, in her 1976 text, how biology relates to that class. For example, although all "women" may not be, in her definition, biological women (since some of them may be biological males), most of them are still biological females; moreover, most, and perhaps all, biological females

seem condemned to be part of that class. That phenomenon remains unexplained. In other words, in 1976, Delphy bracketed the problem of biology more than she solved it.

Delphy went on to address that problem in the next five years. Those years marked a period in which many feminists, on both sides of the Atlantic, took a turn toward biology and essentialism. In that very same period, however, radical feminists like Delphy took, on the contrary, a radically anti-essentialist turn. Delphy in fact pushed her materialist analysis one step further. This allowed her to reintroduce biology into her account—but, far from offering it as a foundation, she presented it instead (like Guillaumin) as an ideological construct (in the Marxist sense that it is a secondary construct that serves to conceal relations of domination). In 1981, four years after Guillaumin, Delphy confirmed the point that nature "is the ideological form of a certain type of social relationships" [*sic*] (Guillaumin 1988 [1977]: 38). Nature, in other words, is a specific mode of domination. In "Patriarchy, Feminism, and Their Intellectuals," Delphy wrote:

> For most people, including many feminists, anatomical sex (and its physical implication) creates, or at least permits, gender — the technical division of labour. This in turn creates, or at least permits, the domination of one group by another. We believe, however, that it is *oppression which creates gender*; that logically the hierarchy of the division of labour is prior to the technical division of labour and created the latter: i.e. created the sexual roles, which we call gender. *Gender in its turn created anatomical sex*, in the sense that the hierarchical division of humanity into two transforms an anatomical difference (which is in itself devoid of social implications) into a relevant distinction for social practice. Social practice, and social practice alone, transforms a physical fact (which is in itself devoid of meaning, like all physical facts) into a category of thought. (Delphy 1984 [1981]: 144, emphases in the original)[47]

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[47] I use the italics of the 1984 English translation published in *Close to Home*. In the original version (*Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, October 1981), the only italics used are for the verb "to create": "le genre à son tour *crée* le sexe anatomique." In the 2001 reprint of the essay in *L'Ennemi principal 2. Penser le genre*, Delphy italicized a much longer portion: "Pour la plupart des gens, y compris des féministes, le sexe anatomique (et ses implications physiques) crée ou au moins permet le genre — la division technique

We might think that there is ambiguity in Delphy's formulation. Indeed, she seems to argue that sexual difference could function as a mark, absent the hierarchal division of labor in patriarchy. Postmodern theorists, by contrast, would probably not allow for the possibility of "a physical fact" acquiring its status as a fact and thereby existing independently of the meaning attached to it. If we read the passage by Delphy in the context of radical feminists and gay and lesbian liberationists, then this critique is right: Delphy, very much like those activists, was willing to acknowledge the existence of anatomical differences, but wanted to make them irrelevant and meaningless.[48] If, however, we read Delphy next to the theory of social marks as developed by Guillaumin, then the ambiguity is perhaps not as salient, since Guillaumin argues (1988 [1977]: 33) that "the morphological 'mark' doesn't precede the social relationship, anymore than branding or the tattooing of a number does."

In any case, what is most significant for my purposes is that this essay, in the words of Lisa Disch, "anticipates central claims of *Gender Trouble* by almost a decade" (2016 [typescript]: 16). Even more explicitly than Guillaumin, Delphy argues that gender difference produces sexual difference as its own supposedly prior cause. Indeed, as noted by Disch, the argument that sex does not precede gender, and that it is rather gender, the

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du travail — qui à son tour crée ou au moins permet la domination d'un groupe sur l'autre. *Nous pensons au contraire que c'est l'oppression qui crée le genre: que la hiérarchie de la division du travail est antérieure, d'un point de vue logique, à la division technique du travail et crée celle-ci: crée les rôles sexuels, ce qu'on appelle le genre; et que le genre à son tour crée le sexe anatomique dans le sens que cette partition hiérarchique de l'humanité en deux transforme en distinction pertinente pour la pratique sociale une différence anatomique en elle-même dépourvue d'implications sociales. Que la pratique sociale et elle seule transforme en catégorie de pensée un fait physique en lui-même dépourvu de sens comme tous les faits physiques.* »

[48] See, for example, Firestone quoted above (1970: 12): "genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally."

social construct, that "created anatomical sex" (which is then just another social construct), is the claim most often associated with Judith Butler and her 1990 book. That book is now considered one of the principal foundations of queer theory. My goal is not to deny the originality of many of Butler's insights: in particular, while Delphy has (very much like Gayle Rubin's 1984 "Thinking Sex") most consistently tried to separate gender and sexuality, Butler's work to define gender as fundamentally produced by the heterosexual matrix is of course extremely valuable. But I do want to suggest that queer theories did not emerge out of a vacuum and that radical feminism was a rich source of them. In this case, before being articulated by Butler, the fundamental anti-essentialist insight that sex is just as socially constructed as gender was articulated by radical feminists. In 1981, as we have seen, Delphy had already inverted the order of precedence between the biological and the social, arguing that gender is at the origin of sex.

Delphy, then, "had begun to 'trouble' gender nearly ten years before the publication of *Gender Trouble*." However, she "did so by means of a social-structural rather than a linguistic-psychoanalytic analysis" (Disch 2016 [typescript]: 3) and this had important consequences. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler questioned the naturalness of sex and the distinction between sex and gender (1999 [1990]: 9-10) as follows: "If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all." In a characteristically deconstructionist manner, Butler seeks to trouble the distinction between sex, a supposedly natural category, and gender, a social construction.

She suggests that sex may itself be always already social and that there may be "no distinction at all" between the social and the natural. Delphy, coming from a materialist perspective, proceeds differently. She inverts the conventional order of determination (the presumption that sex gives rise to gender) but she does not abolish the distinction between sex and gender.[49]

In the 2001 Preface to *L'Ennemi Principal Vol. 2.*, Delphy returns to the reasons for her frustration with the notion that gender was built on sex. "The paradigm 'sex then gender' leads you to ask the question: '*why* gender after sex?'; and the answer is in the question; the only answer possible is: 'gender *because of* sex'" (2001: 28-29, emphases in the original). Like Butler, Delphy was intent on refuting that only possible answer. But while Butler simply sought to destabilize the distinction between sex and gender, Delphy, coming from a materialist perspective, insisted instead on maintaining the distinction but inverting the relation. What Delphy was proposing, as she described it in 2001, was a "total reversal of perspective" (*renversement total de perspective*, 2001: 25). Her conclusion was not that sex was always already gender, but — as she formulated it in 1991 — that "*gender* precedes sex." This means that "sex is but a marker of the social division; it allows us to recognize and identify the dominated from the dominants" (2001 [1991]: 251-2, emphasis in the original).

      d) And yet, identity politics

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[49] For a more detailed discussion and comparison between the two approaches, see Disch's forthcoming essay.

Over the course of the 1970s, then, Mathieu, Delphy, and Guillaumin, among other French radical feminists, came increasingly, explicitly to deny that "women" constituted an essential, natural, and eternal category. In fact, they deconstructed the category, not in the technical Derridean sense of Deconstruction, but in the sense that they illuminated its character as a contingent and social artifact. However, precisely because they were not interested only in language theories of deconstruction, their point was not simply to highlight the ontological emptiness of the categories. They were materialist feminists, which allowed them to view those categories, however artificial, as still providing strong principles of social organization with very real—material—systemic effects. In Guillaumin's words, race or gender may be "imaginary formulations," but they are still "legally sanctioned and materially effective."

Thus, while Deconstructionist work insists on the non-referentiality of language in social categories, materialist work tends to hold that "there is both truth and falsehood in these classifications" (Guillaumin 1988 [1977]: 37). Race and gender may constitute false and inconsistent categories with no ontological reality, but it remains true that "if one encounters a woman, one surely encounters someone who does domestic work gratis…" Just as: "In France, if one encounters a Mediterranean man… there is a very good chance that one will encounter one of those workers with a specific type of contract or even one who risks having none at all" (Guillaumin 1988 [1977]: 37). The social positions shared by the members of a group defined by a common social marking provide a sufficient ground for identity politics; indeed, they require an identity politics.

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In her famous 1981 essay "One Is Not Born A Woman," French materialist and lesbian and radical feminist Monique Wittig offered an example of resistance to this paradox. She crucially distinguished between woman as a myth and women as a class. Wittig called for a materialist feminism that situates her in the same tradition of radical feminists such as Nicole-Claude Mathieu, Colette Guillaumin, and Christine Delphy, among others. She explicitly acknowledged her debt to this tradition.[50] Her materialist feminism is one that "destroys the idea that women are a 'natural group.'" For Wittig, "woman" is not a foundational category and, indeed, "is only a myth": "the division from men of which women have been the object is a political one and shows that we have been ideologically rebuilt into a natural group." In this view, one is not born a woman any more than one is born a proletarian. For Wittig, "what makes a woman is a specific relation to a man." That is why, for her, a lesbian "is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically" (1993 [1981]: 108, emphasis in original).

However, while "woman" is a myth, women are not. Invoking the notion that "women" are a class, Wittig upholds the social reality of "women." This helps account for the systematic effects of overdetermination described by Laclau and Mouffe.[51] Wittig's anti-

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[50] See the Introduction to "The Straight Mind and Other Essays," p. xiv: "By order of publication of their work, Nicole-Claude Mathieu, Christine Delphy, Colette Guillaumin, Paola Tabet, Sande Zeig represent for me the most important influences during the time I wrote these essays." Because this section is primarily concerned with French feminists, I have not analyzed the works of Italian anthropologist Paola Tabet and US-American writer Sande Zeig.

[51] See also Chantal Mouffe's discussion in "Feminism, Citizenship, and Radical Democratic Politics" of what distinguishes her work with Laclau from other poststructuralist theories: "our perspective differs from other nonessentialist views where the aspect of detotalization and de-centering prevails and where the dispersion of subject positions is transformed into an effective separation… For us, the aspect of articulation is crucial. To deny the existence of an a priori necessary link between subject positions does

essentialist move is combined with a constructivist moment where defining women as a class allows her to use "women" as a basis for political organizing. While acknowledging that *woman* the myth cannot provide the ontological foundation for the women's movement, Wittig crucially preserves the integrity of the social agent, grounded in an identity politics, who is to lead the political destruction of the gender system.

> Thus, it is our historical task, *and only ours,* to define oppression in materialist terms, to make it evident that women are a class, which is to say that the category 'woman' as well as the category 'man' are *political and economic categories, not eternal ones.* Our fight aims to suppress men as a class, not through a genocidal, but a political struggle. *Once the class 'men' disappears, 'women' as a class will also disappear* for there are no slaves without masters. Our first task, it seems, is to always *dissociate 'women' (the class within which we fight), and 'woman,' the myth"* (1993 [1981]: 106, my emphases).

Wittig's insistence that it is "our historical task, and only ours" to lead the feminist struggle makes it clear that her perspective relies resolutely on identity politics. For radical feminists such as Wittig, in short, "woman" was like "the homosexual" for Halperin and other queer theorists and activists (whose thought he summarized in the following, canonical formulation): "an identity without an essence" (1995: 61).

Writing this essay in the late 1970s, Wittig was fully aware that the identity politics of the women's movement could be, and indeed had been, used to produce an essentialized identity. In fact, much of her essay is a polemic against feminist essentialism. "Some avenues of the feminist and lesbian movement lead us back to the myth of woman." She

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not mean that there are not constant efforts to establish between them historical, contingent, and variable links" (1992: 372).

opposed that move because it "puts us in a position of fighting within the class 'women' not as the other classes do, for the disappearance of our class, but for the defense of 'woman' and its reenforcement" (1993 [1981]: 105). Wittig opposes biologically-grounded definitions of women: when we claim that "women and men are different species or races," and that "men are biologically inferior to women, male violence is a biological inevitability." When feminists make such a claim, "we naturalize history, we assume that men and women have always existed and will always exist." Far from being content with putting women on top of the gender hierarchy, Wittig contends that "matriarchy is no less heterosexual than patriarchy: it is only the sex of the oppressor that changes" (1993 [1981]: 104). But while aiming to destroy genders (like early radical feminists), rather than inverting their social valuation (like later radical feminists or cultural feminists), Wittig, unlike non-identitarian theorists, does maintain that this political task needs to have one subject: "women," the class. Her identity politics is built on the basis, not of natural essence, but of social position; it radically interrogates the categories that it nevertheless uses; moreover, it sets as its goal to annihilate the very category on which it is built. Butler (1990: xxxii) asks: "To what extent does the effort to locate a common identity as the foundation of a feminist politics preclude a radical inquiry into the political construction and regulation of identity itself?" To that question, with radical feminists such as Mathieu, Guillaumin, Delphy, or Wittig, we can safely answer: to no extent at all.

The theoretical undertaking I have just derived from Wittig has since become the starting point for queer theory. Lee Edelman, for example, writes in the introduction to

Homographesis that "the explicitly (if paradoxically) gay-identified purpose" of his approach is to challenge "the reification of identities, not excluding gay identities, while insisting nonetheless on the political importance of conducting this challenge under the ensign of a criticism that would define itself as gay" (1994: xiv-xv). As a result of this proximity, there has been a tendency, among certain queer theorists, to read Wittig as a proto-queer thinker. Diane Griffin Crowder, for example, has described Wittig as a thinker who was "at least fifteen years ahead of what would become queer theory" and who "like most prophets… has been often ignored in her own 'country,' in this case not France but queer theory" (2002: 490).[52] This erases the fact that before being a proto-queer theorist, Wittig was plainly a radical feminist and a lesbian-feminist. Because radical feminism has been ignored in its own country by people like Crowder, and misrepresented as essentialist, Wittig appears to be a glorious exception. Instead of rescuing only Wittig from the general wreck of 1970s feminism, I argue that we should revisit the whole raft of radical feminism, both French and US-American.

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[52] See also Bourcier & Robichon 2002; de Lauretis in Bourcier & Robichon 2002. Note, however, that in order to read Wittig as proto-queer, one must first extract her from the context in which she worked: 1970s radical feminism and lesbian feminism. As such, rather than an isolated star in the dark sky of the 1970s, Wittig springs from a critical tradition established in that period: her work reflects a number of the debates internal to the women's movement and a number of their ambiguities as well. Rather than proto-queer, Wittig might be termed an elitist lesbian feminist who views lesbians as the vanguard of women's liberation; she thinks that lesbianism is the only way to escape patriarchy and that is why, when she taught at Berkeley, male students were often not allowed in her classes and, after asking who among her students was a female heterosexual, she would tell those students that they were "part of the problem"; her insistence that heterosexual females should be excluded from the women's movement had been the reason for her rupture with Delphy and the journal *Questions Féministes* in 1979 and her departure for the US (Delphy is not heterosexual, but she opposed the notion that heterosexuals could not be feminists). Wittig is at times anti-gay men, whom she views as the supreme incarnation of sexism; she is anti-porn and anti-prostitution. All those (hardly queer) positions are constantly glossed over by later queer theorists who claim Wittig as an inspiration, because those positions do not fit very well with the reading of Wittig as proto-queer.

Of course, I am not arguing that we should simply return to this, or any other, version of 1970s radical theorizing, let alone that we should accept uncritically the entire framework proposed by Wittig. While she is not an essentialist feminist, she does still have a fundamentally humanist view of mankind: she thinks of emancipation in humanist terms, and for her the revolutionary goal is to recover an integrity that predates power's deformation of individuals. In that sense, she is a thinker of "liberation." Against such a view, Foucault, followed by many poststructuralists, has taught us that there is no outside of power, and that power does not just shape and deform individuals, but constitutes them. I am in no way suggesting that we should return to the 1970s humanist project.

What I argue, however, is that without it being necessary to reclaim those humanist aspects of Wittig's framework, we can learn a great deal from the ways she acknowledges the strength of social dynamics — which queer theory's at times exclusive focus on discursive dynamics tends to underestimate — *without essentializing the category "woman."* Wittig offers an eloquent precedent for asserting both that social categories of gender are not pre-determined and have no ontological ground *and* that they are socially powerful; that they are incoherent *and* that they systematically constitute social and political classes. Categories of gender may be fictions but they also structure hierarchically, in a very real manner, the society in which we live; as such, they represent the basis for political organizing, and it is not only legitimate but also necessary to organize around those socially constituted categories.

CHAPTER TWO:

WOMEN OF COLOR FEMINISM AND THE MULTIPLICATION,

NOT THE DISAVOWAL, OF IDENTITY POLITICAL STANDPOINTS

"We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.

This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression."

Combahee River Collective, 1977

"The concept of identity politics has been extremely useful in the development of Third World feminism. It has undoubtedly been most clarifying when individuals do in fact have a combination of non-mainstream identities as a result of their race, class, ethnicity, sex, and sexuality; when these identities make them direct targets of oppression; and when they use their experiences of oppression as a spur for activist political work."

Barbara Smith, 1984

"As Black women we have an identity and therefore a politics that requires faith in the humanness of Blackness and femaleness."

Barbara Smith, unpublished, n.d.
(cited in Moraga 1983, 131-132)

"…we are not doctrinaire… [T]here is no Black feminist philosopher we can read who can tell us what to do at this time. Anything we do is informed by our identity. 'Identity politics' is really a very substantial concept for what we practice. In other words we practice a politics that mesh with our real physical identities."

Barbara Smith, 1978

There is a big secret about identity politics: it was not invented by men, but by feminist women; not by heterosexuals, but by homosexuals; not by the middle class, but by the working class; not by Whites, but by Blacks. It is indeed the Black lesbian activists of the Combahee River Collective, founded in the Boston area in 1974, who invented identity politics.

When I claim that identity politics was invented by Black lesbians, of course I do not mean that no identity politics had ever existed before a Black lesbian feminist political movement emerged in the mid-1970s. But Black lesbians invented "identity politics" in the sense that they coined the phrase and were the first to use it to describe their own politics, in the famous Black Feminist Statement of the Combahee River Collective (written in 1977 for Zillah R. Eisenstein's 1978 edited volume *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*). In other words, the history of the concept of identity politics contradicts the assumption, by now well-established in queer theory, that identity politics is a tool only for the privileged, notably a tool for the White and the middle-class.

It also contradicts the frequent equation of identity politics with single-issue politics; it contradicts a commonplace according to which identity politics conflicts with the struggle against multiple oppressions. The women who invented identity politics did it to make possible the struggle against intersecting oppressions: race, gender, sexuality, and class.

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In the last decade, as queer theory took what might be termed an ethnic and racial turn, it has achieved, most notably through the work undertaken by scholars who elaborated a "queer of color critique," an important and welcome reclamation of the theoretical and political contributions of feminists of color (particularly Black feminists and Chicana feminists) and, to some extent, gays and lesbians of color. While I would argue that the writings of women and gays and lesbians of color were never as fully ignored by earlier queer theorists as has at times been polemically claimed by the newer generation, the questions raised, and the answers offered, by women of color feminism have nevertheless unquestionably become a more central focus in queer theory than ever before.

Repositioning women of color feminism at the heart of queer theory has allowed queer scholars to revisit thoroughly the writings of feminists of color. Demoting to a secondary status texts that had seemed foundational to the first wave of queer theory, the new scholarship has at times promoted women of color feminism to the status of foremothers of the field. For example, queer theorist Manolo Guzmàn (2006: 3), making a case for

"the centrality of the problematic of race in the development of queer theory in the U.S.,"
has argued that "queer theory begins in the pages of" *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited
by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa in 1981 (rather than, say, in Eve Sedgwick's
1985 *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*; Diana Fuss's 1989
Essentially Speaking; Judith Butler's 1990 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the
Subversion of Identity*; or Sedgwick's 1990 *Epistemology of the Closet*.)

In situating the work by feminists of color at the very foundation of queer theory, queer
of color critique has often described that work as a sort of queer theory *avant la lettre*. In
this context, identity politics has often been described as a bad thing, a single-issue
politics typically promoted by White gays, lesbians, and feminists, whereas—it is
implied, if not explicitly stated—what women of color feminism proposes is not identity
politics: at times it is suggested that what feminists of color proposed was an alternative
to identity politics, at times that it was a politics against identity politics. For example, in
"Shame and White Gay Masculinity," Judith Halberstam writes that "The future of queer
studies (…) depends absolutely on moving away from white gay male identity politics
and learning from the radical critiques offered by a younger generation of queer scholars
who draw their intellectual inspiration from feminism and ethnic studies rather than white
queer studies" (2005: 220). Halberstam does not exactly say that feminism and ethnic
studies do not do identity politics, but in contrasting white gay men's identity politics
with feminism and ethnic studies (which, supposedly, lead to "radical critiques"), she
implies that what feminism and ethnic studies do is opposed to, or at least very different
from, identity politics.

More recently (2014), in a scathing dismissal of all of 1980s "weepy white lady feminism," Halberstam has remarked, "Needless to say, for women of color feminisms, the stakes have always been higher and identity politics always played out differently." The reduction, in the name of queer radicalism, of all of 1970s and 1980s White feminism to "weepy white lady feminism" is itself extremely troubling, since such descriptions of feminism were until recently a mark of right-wing sexism. But I leave that aside here (as it speaks for itself) and want to focus instead on the message Halberstam conveys about identity politics. While recognizing the diversity of "women of color feminisms" (a diversity that is apparently denied to White feminism), and ranking women of color feminisms among identity political movements, she nevertheless implies that for all of the former, identity politics "played out differently." Halberstam never explains in what the differences consist, making it difficult to assess her claim, but she says enough to imply a clear-cut boundary between White feminists and Black feminists with respect to their use of identity politics.

In the introduction to *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*, a volume they co-edited in 2011, queer theorists Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson write:

> We assert that much of what we now call "women of color feminism" can be seen as queer of color critique, insofar as these texts consistently situate sexuality as constitutive of race and gender. Further, not coincidentally and not unimportantly, lesbian practice and identity were central to many of the most foundational women of color feminists, including Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, Barbara Smith and the Combahee River Collective. We thus narrate queer of color critique as emerging from women of color feminism rather than deriving from a white Euro-

American gay, lesbian, and queer theory tradition.

Women of color feminism and queer of color critique profoundly question nationalist and identitarian modes of political organization and craft alternative understandings of subjectivity, collectivity and power. In situating women of color feminism and queer of color critique in this way, we read these formations as analytics of power rather than descriptions of identity categories, and we highlight the comparative nature of women of color feminism and queer of color critique that has heretofore been under-examined (2).

Several aspects of this passage are noteworthy. In describing women of color feminism "as queer of color critique," and in describing the latter "as emerging from women of color feminism rather than deriving from a white Euro-American gay, lesbian, and queer theory tradition," Kyungwon Hong and Ferguson arrive at the important claim that women of color feminism, like queer of color critique, "profoundly question[s] nationalist and identitarian modes of political organization and craft[s] alternative understandings of subjectivity, collectivity and power." Here again, women of color feminism is distinguished from identity politics and is said to have produced instead a questioning of "identitarian modes of political organization." The archive used to support such a claim raises important questions. The editors posit a women of color feminism from which heterosexual activists are virtually erased. Under the pretext of an attention to differences, they also, somewhat paradoxically, homogenize lesbians of color and pay no attention to political differences between, say, a butch lesbian and sexual radical such as Moraga and a Black lesbian feminist such as Lorde. Strangely, Gloria Anzaldúa, whose "mestiza" arguably comes closest to a postmodern understanding of identity as a hybrid, is not mentioned among those who question identitarian modes of organization. Even stranger, Combahee and Barbara Smith who, as I will show, having invented identity

politics, can hardly be described as questioning it, are cited.

A few years earlier, in his 2004 *Aberrations in Black: Toward A Queer of Color Critique*, Ferguson had made a similar argument. In a section on Black feminism entitled "'Lesbian' as Negation of Identity Politics," he argued that "women of color feminist negations were very different from the politics of negation that national liberation proffered," because "contrary to national liberation's preservation of national identity, women of color feminism negated both Western nationalism and national liberation by working to theorize the limits of subaltern identity" (2004: 129). Referring to Gladys M. Jiménez-Muñoz's 1995 essay "Joining Our Differences: The Problems of Lesbian Subjectivity Among Women of Color," Ferguson writes:

> Rendered invisible by the political subjects of hegemonic feminism, minority nationalism, and Marxism, women of color feminists attempted to articulate identity formations that would work to negate the nationalist presumptions and protocols of identity. As Gladys M. Jiménez-Munoz [*sic*] observes, women of color feminism intervened into the question of identity by refusing to posit identity as a goal, "a site empty of social contradictions, or unhelpful constructions. Rather, it is the space where these other social contradictions can be addressed and worked through, insofar as it is the space where these contradictions become visible." Jiménez-Munoz [*sic*] remarks further that "[i]t is this place of departure, of creating and reinventing spaces, that is crucial because as lesbians of color oftentimes this meant being located in positions in which one could not take for granted the social solidarity characteristic of racially oppressed/cultural-national families and communities in Europe and North America." In other words, lesbian of color feminism contributed to the theorization of identity by arguing that if identity is posed, it must be constantly contravened to address the variety of social contradictions that nationalism strives to conceal (126-127).

In this account, Ferguson describes women of color feminism as a radical rupture from "hegemonic feminism, minority nationalism, and Marxism." He implies that all those

movements relied on "nationalist presumptions and protocols of identity"; that all those movements, unlike women of color feminism, posited "identity as a goal" and viewed it as a site devoid of social contradictions, and that women of color feminism differed from them in that crucial respect. Implicit in Ferguson's characterizations of feminists of color are three central beliefs: (1) that all social movements other than women of color feminism are committed to identity politics because they deal with one axis of oppression only; (2) that because of their commitment to identity politics, those movements are incapable of thinking differences among their members; and (3) that lesbians of color, because they deal with multiple oppressions, are not exactly against, but at the very least "negate," identity politics. They are impelled to carve out alternatives to it — alternatives that make it possible to acknowledge and deal with differences.

The goal of Ferguson is not very difficult to decipher. It is to claim women of color feminism as proto-queer and to situate queer of color critique as deriving directly from Black feminism, rather than from other intellectual traditions. That is why he argues that "black lesbian feminism inspired a politics of difference that could critique the nationalist underpinnings of identity" (2004: 129) and that it expressed "a politics of negation and difference in which identity was a point of departure" (2004: 130): women of color feminism's politics of difference appears to be an early version of the queer politics of difference and it allows Ferguson to situate 1970s and early 1980s feminists of color as proto-queer.

While I am sympathetic to the impulse to re-evaluate contributions by 1970s and early

1980s feminists of color, I seek to challenge the view that 1970s and early 1980s women of color feminism proposed an alternative to identity politics. I also contest the claim that, to the extent that women of color feminism proposed a politics of difference, it was the same politics as the more recent queer politics of difference. Such accounts of the politics propounded by women of color feminists have contributed to giving credence to the opposing notion that identity politics was not adequate for struggles against multiple oppressions and was therefore a conservative strategy that should be equated with single-issue politics. Those accounts of both identity politics and women of color feminism are untenable. And they obscure from view a central fact — one that spectacularly contradicts the interpretation of women of color feminism that queer of color critique promotes: far from "questioning" identity politics, 1970s and early 1980s feminists of color invented it.

In this chapter, I proceed in three steps. Focusing primarily on Black lesbians, I start with an analysis of the writings of Audre Lorde, often invoked as a foremother of contemporary queer theory because of her insistence on building a politics of difference among women. I argue that in order to read Lorde as proto-queer, one has to distort her by erasing the context of 1970s and early 1980s feminism in which she intervened. Against such readings, I read Lorde alongside other feminist interventions of her time. This allows me to show that far from being a proto-queer anti-identitarian theorist, her politics of differences is in fact an essentialist and cultural feminist identity politics. In queer theory, the misreading of Lorde I oppose has combined with a view of Lorde as representative of a homogenized and homogeneous model of women of color feminism,

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and the result has been to give credence to the untenable notion that women of color feminism as a whole proposed alternatives to identity politics. In the second section, I argue that the excessive focus on a reconstructed Lorde has led to the erasure of the central feature of Black lesbians with regard to identity politics: that feature was not the rejection of identity politics but the invention of it by the activists of the Combahee River Collective. They invented identity politics precisely in order to address multiple intersecting oppressions. In the third section, I show that the crucial lesson we can draw from 1970s and early 1980s feminists of color more broadly is that differences are best addressed, not through a queer rejection of identity, but, on the contrary, through a "multiplication of identity standpoints" (an expression I borrow from queer theorist Steven Seidman). In my conclusion, I argue that in revisiting women of color feminists, it is important to situate those activists in the feminist debates of their time and, therefore, to read them as 1970s and early 1980s feminists rather than as proto-queer theorists.

SECTION I: IS AUDRE LORDE'S POLITICS OF DIFFERENCES AN ANTI-IDENTITY POLITICS?

In 1980, in "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," Lorde criticized the fact that "by and large within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist" (Lorde 1980: 116). As she had famously noted one

year before in "The Master's Tools…," "as women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion." Instead, she wanted to see them as "forces for change" and a "crucial strength" (Lorde 1979: 112). For Lorde, in fact, it was not the acknowledgment of those differences that threatened the movement but, on the contrary, the denial of their existence. As she put it in 1980 (115), "Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation." As Lyndon K. Gill has recently noted, "If Lorde's oeuvre has insisted on nothing else, it has quite forcefully made the claim that difference — internal and external — is unavoidable; it is our relationship to that difference (as a threat to be feared or an asset we might embrace) that determines its effect on us and our effect on each other" (2014: 188).

1. Erasing Lorde's feminism

Queer theorists, and queer of color critique theorists in particular, have often read Lorde's politics of difference as similar to that promoted by queer theorists. This, in turn, has made it possible to describe her as offering an alternative to the identity politics of the feminist and gay and lesbian movements, and therefore to reclaim her as a proto-queer theorist while rejecting second-wave feminism and gay and lesbian movements. For example, Lyndon Gill (to pick only the example nearest to hand) has interpreted Lorde's

emphasis on difference as entailing that "A (Black) queer theory unwilling to relinquish its engagement with feminists-of-color critiques cannot avoid recognizing Lorde — although the recognition comes belatedly — as a queer theorist" (2014: 176). For Rinaldo Walcott, similarly, several of the essays of *Sister Outsider* "can be read as critical queer theory that reaches beyond the stabilizing identities of gay and lesbian" (2007: 36) and "Lorde stands in for a body of knowledge/politics that refuses stabilizing identity as the beginning and the end" (2007: 37). This allows Walcott to suggest that "Lorde can and might be read as a queer theorist whose questions and politics already preceded the issues being raised by queer theorists and scholars today"; furthermore, he wants "to read Lorde as a queer theorist, a queer theorist for whom queer theory's disavowal of feminism and its white gay masculinity means that she is too difficult to digest in terms of its institutional claims and positioning" (2007: 36).

Walcott might "want to" read Lorde as a queer theorist but, I would argue, that is more wishful thinking than plausible interpretation. Indeed, such readings of Lorde rely fundamentally on distortions of her work made possible by a prior move that consists in disconnecting her from broader feminist debates in which she intervened. If, on the contrary, we situate Lorde historically and read her in the context of late 1970s and early 1980s feminist debates, it becomes very clear that her politics of difference has very little, if anything at all, to do with a queer politics of difference. Indeed, while queer politics relies on building a politics of difference across boundaries of race, class, sexual practices, and able-bodiedness, *as well as gender* — and that is why it can be described as non-identitarian — Lorde, by contrast, seeks to build a politics across differences of

race, class, and sexual practices *in order to unite women* — and that is why her politics, far from being an anti-identity politics, is in fact simply a feminist identity politics. In other words, she situates her politics within, not outside or beyond, the women's movement, taken as *the* fundamental center of her politics (rather than, say, the black movement, the gay movement, or movements for sexual liberation more broadly understood), and she seeks to expand the identity politics of the women's movement, not dismiss it. Lorde's politics is therefore profoundly a feminist identity politics and it defines her, not as a queer theorist, but as a second-wave feminist.

But there is more to be said about Lorde's feminism. She belongs to a specific trend of second-wave feminism: namely, late 1970s cultural feminism. Here again, claiming Lorde as anticipating early 21st century queer theory distorts her work inasmuch as it obscures her connections—personal, intellectual and political—to second-wave feminism; it also obscures the ways she positioned herself in late 1970s and early 1980s feminist debates. In particular, it is rarely, if ever, acknowledged that Lorde shares most of the assumptions of late 1970s versions of cultural feminism, essentialist feminism (according to which female difference originates in biological and bodily features), anti-porn feminism, and anti-SM feminism—political tendencies largely repudiated by queer theorists. Erasing Lorde's involvement in those traditions seems to be a necessary condition for claiming Lorde as a queer theorist. Indeed, since queer theory largely emerged out of the radical, constructionist, anti-essentialist, "anti-anti-sex," "anti-anti-porn," and "anti-anti-SM" side of the sex wars, it has to attenuate, if not to erase completely, Lorde's deep commitment to the other side of the sex debates in order to

portray her as a queer theorist.

Walcott deems unimportant the question "whether one agrees with Lorde's analysis of say S/M" (2007: 36). Another strategy, exemplified by Sarah E. Chinn in a 2003 article published in *GLQ* and entitled "Feeling Her Way: Audre Lorde and the Power of Touch," consists in reading Lorde's position on sadomasochism in such a way as to imply that Lorde really means the opposite of what she says. While recognizing the paradox of using Lorde to talk positively about SM, Chinn argues that "the analogy between the writings of Lorde and writings on S/M is not as far-fetched as it might appear" (2003: 183).[53] Trying to reconcile a positive view of sadomasochism with the writings of Lorde, Chinn cites the 1982 interview with Lorde that came out in *Against Sadomasochism. A Radical Feminist Analysis* (Lederer 1982). In her interpretation of this text, Chinn insists almost exclusively on small differences between Lorde and other anti-SM feminists and downplays their fundamental convergences. "Lorde and her interviewer, Susan Leigh Star, often seem to be talking at cross-purposes," Chinn writes. "Star wants Lorde to condemn S/M as unwomanly, unfeminist, and unlesbian, and Lorde wants to talk about the structural inequalities in U.S. culture that shape our imaginations, sexual and otherwise." Lorde is almost recast as an opponent of the anti-SM feminist campaigns: "Lorde… implicitly questioned the motives behind the foregrounding of S/M as a conflict in feminism, when other, for her more pressing, conflicts such as those around race, class, and sexuality fell into the background" (2003: 183).

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[53] For a recent and very important book by a Black queer scholar who, on the contrary, acknowledges and contends with Lorde's anti-SM position, see Musser 2014.

It is highly debatable whether Lorde *implicitly* questions the motives behind the emphasis on SM among anti-SM feminists. But what is beyond discussion is that she *explicitly* singles out SM as a sexual practice directly reflecting social dominance. In this, she resembles other anti-SM feminists of her day more than she resembles more recent queer theorists. For example, she claims that "sadomasochism is an institutionalized celebration of dominant/subordinate relationships. And it *prepares* us either to accept subordination or to enforce dominance" (1982: 68; emphasis in the original). Furthermore, she argues that "dominance and subordination are not bedroom issues. In the same way that rape is not about sex, s/m is not about sex but about how we use power" (1982: 70). Thus, for Lorde, the equivalent of SM is not, say, conventional heterosexuality, but rape. Since that is not a position most queer theory tends to embrace, reclaiming Lorde as a queer theorist requires a major political and theoretical makeover. Once Chinn has done all the necessary work, an unrecognizable Lorde emerges from her account. Chinn conveys the sense that, in spite of the interview, Lorde was unlike anti-SM feminists who viewed SM as a central tool of patriarchy, and she was really like the radical sex feminist activists she denounced. Chinn even (rather implausibly) sees convergences between Audre Lorde and Pat Califia (196). If we were to believe Chinn, we would conclude that Lorde's interview was included in *Against Sadomasochism* by mistake!

In order to read Lorde as a queer theorist, one also has to disconnect her from feminists now considered essentialist. Describing the second half of the 1970s in the wake of the publication of Jane Alpert's "Mother Right," Alice Echols notes that "the ascendency of cultural feminism" was characterized by "the conjoining of feminism and spirituality"

and "the pages of feminist periodicals were filled with articles about matriarchies and goddess-worship" (1989: 284). The writings by Audre Lorde in the late 1970s abundantly display those features and situate her in that tradition. And yet, queer commentators on Lorde often downplay those aspects of her thought.

It is well known that Lorde wrote "An Open Letter to Mary Daly" (reprinted in *Sister Outsider*) in which she responded to Daly's book published that year, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Mentioning this letter, Sarah Chinn (2003: 183) correctly notes Lorde's critique of Daly: "Mary, do you ever really read the work of Black women?" (1978b: 68). Chinn is right to emphasize race as the main point of contention between Lorde and Daly. But by insisting exclusively on that aspect of Lorde's response to Daly, Chinn reduces the controversy to a discussion about racism and neglects the no less important points of convergence between the two writers. Indeed, Chinn fails to note what it is in Daly's work that Lorde does *not* dispute. That is equally important to notice, if we are to understand Lorde's position within late 1970s feminism with any degree of accuracy. Specifically, Lorde does not question whether or not feminists should be in the business of reclaiming the Goddess, Mother Right, or rebuilding a female culture; Lorde attacks Daly, not because Lorde opposes the naturalist, essentialist, or cultural turn of feminism, but because in her cultural turn, Daly "dismiss[ed] our Black foremothers" (1978b: 67). Lorde wants there to be African and Black goddesses. "Why doesn't Mary deal with Afrekete as an example? Why are her goddess images only white, western European, judeo-christian? Where was Afrekete, Yenanje, Oyo, and Mawulisa? Where were the warrior goddesses of the Vodun, the

Dahomeian Amazons and the warrior-women of Dan?" (1978b: 67). In other words, Lorde's is an intervention in cultural feminism — one that seeks to expand the cultural feminist turn in order to include the cultures of Black women, and not to return to the early radical feminist insight that genders ought to be destroyed altogether. Lorde wants to put the question of racism at the heart of feminist politics, which certainly allows for a queer reclamation of Lorde, but she also embraces a cultural feminist view, which puts her at odds with the traditions from which queer theory claims to descend.

2. Queering Lorde's erotic

Reading Lorde outside of broad feminist debates has had important consequences for the ways in which we understand her politics of difference. Specifically, reclamations of Lorde's politics of difference as similar to the more recent queer politics of difference erase the central fact that Lorde, unlike queer theorists, never tries to destabilize the category "woman." Although Lorde does want feminism to embrace differences among women, she does not question the gendered division of mankind. In that, she is unlike queer theorists (who, in that respect, inherit their thinking from early radical feminists more than they do from Lorde).

In order to dramatize this point, I need only revisit one of Lorde's most cited texts, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power." The paper was first given at a feminist conference in 1978 and reprinted in *Sister Outsider* in 1984. In the essay, Lorde draws a sharp

distinction between the erotic and pornography, which she regards as mutually opposed. "The erotic," she writes in the opening lines, "is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (1978a: 53). By contrast, "pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling" (1978a: 54). With pornography, "the erotic has been misnamed by men and used against women" (1978a: 55).

Lorde's essay has been read by queer theorists Aimee Carillo Rowe (2010) and Lyndon K. Gill (2014) in such a way as to imply that Lorde's definition of the erotic was queer and anti-identitarian, rather than feminist. Let us examine Gill's attempt first. Citing works by black queer Caribbean theorist Omise'eke Tinsley and black queer Barbadian American scholar Jafari Allen, Gill (2014: 178) notes that "the erotic must extend beyond a mere euphemism for sex acts" (2014: 179). Citing Jamaican scholar Donna Aza Weir-Soley, he also notes that the erotic "reimagines spirituality and sexuality as 'interdependent modalities,' a synthesis of the sacred and the sexual that, when in proper balance, impels political and personal agency and development" (2014: 181). In his effort to "take Audre Lorde seriously as a theorist" (2014: 172), Gill does not seem to notice 1) that the connecting of sexuality, spirituality, and politics, far from being unique to Lorde, was undertaken by many cultural feminists, many of them white; 2) that Lorde does not invent the distinction between pornography and eroticism, but instead repeats a commonplace of late 1970s feminist anti-porn discourses; and 3) that in opposing a bad,

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androcentric pornography to a good, gynocentric eroticism, she essentially recycles an anti-porn rhetorical trope, leaving it unaltered.[54]

Lorde's "erotic" has also been queered in strange ways. In "L Is For: Longing and Becoming in the *L-Word*'s Racialized Erotic," Aimee Carillo Rowe takes the passage cited above where Lorde argues that "the erotic has been misnamed by men and used against women" (1978a: 55) to imply that "the space of the erotic has been colonized by the heterosexual imaginary." Thus, she can argue that "the erotic — particularly the queer female erotic — becomes a powerful resource in queer world-making" (2010: 90). Although Carillo Rowe is right to emphasize Lorde's focus on the female erotic, she misrepresents Lorde as claiming that the erotic has been colonized by *heterosexuality* (in which case queerness and homosexuality — both male and female — could serve to free the erotic). Lorde's claim is the very different notion that that the erotic has been colonized by *men*. For Lorde, then, liberating the erotic, even the queer female erotic, implies the need to organize as women, both heterosexual and homosexual, in order to free the female erotic. It does *not* imply that we should organize as queers, and certainly not as—or with—queer men. This position situates Lorde not as a proto-queer theorist, but as a late-1970s lesbian and cultural feminist.

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[54] See Rubin 2011 [1993]: 263-264 where Rubin cites several instances of the same rhetoric in 1978 and 1979, *i.e.* at the very same moment that Lorde articulates that distinction. One of the persons Rubin cites is Gloria Steinem, the founder of *Ms*. Magazine, who argues that erotica "is rooted in eros or passionate love, and thus in the idea of positive choice, free will, the yearning for a particular person," whereas in pornography "the subject is not love at all, but domination and violence against women." Rubin also cites a 1979 *Newspage* article opposing erotica and pornography: erotica is defined as personal, emotional, having lightness, being refreshing, rejuvenating, creative, natural, fulfilling, circular, and "just there"; the elements associated with pornography include "defined by penis, for male titillation, having power imbalance, producing violence, suggesting violence, unreal, elements of fear, mindlessness, heavy, contorted bodies, voyeuristic, linear and 'something you buy and sell'" (264).

Gill offers a reading of the essay similar to Carillo Rowe's. Claiming to correct earlier misreadings of Lorde, he in effect betrays the lesbian-feminist letter and spirit of Lorde's texts in order to make them fit his queer, all-inclusive, anti-identitarian agenda. He rightly emphasizes the context in which the paper was given, seemingly regretting that its context is not paid more attention[55]:

> Although the details of the context within which Lorde delivered her paper "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power," seldom find their way even into the most remote endnote in otherwise attentive discussions of the text, these details are crucial if we are to adequately meet any of the challenges the paper seems to pose to its broadest theoretical applicability. Delivered on August 25, 1978, as part of the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, hosted by Mount Holyoke College in Western Massachusetts, Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" was intended for an audience primarily of women historians (exceedingly white and heterosexual), who had organized their own conferences in response to the isolation they had experienced within the exceedingly male American Historical Association. Amid significant protest and rallying around the exclusion of lesbian history from the Berkshire Conference's main agenda, Lorde delivered what has since become her classic treatise on the importance of women scholars —lesbians such as herself among them — resisting a dangerous urge to embrace a pseudo-scientific objectivity sanitized of feeling, emotion, and intuition… I propose that these bits of information do tell us something about why Lorde articulates the erotic as she does in the paper (2014: 184).

I fully agree with Gill that the context in which the paper was given is crucial if we are to understand Lorde's intervention and I accept his description of that context. The interpretative conclusions he draws from his account of that context, however, are rather surprising. Gill continues:

> Remembering that Lorde is delivering a paper at a conference of women historians at a woman's liberal arts college perhaps begins to help us explain what might be *misread* as Lorde confining the erotic to the

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[55] For example, Sharon Holland mistakenly writes (54) that Lorde's essay was "published the same year as Gayle Rubin's groundbreaking 'Thinking Sex,'" *i.e.* 1984. As noted by Gill (177, n. 20), "Before being published in *Sister Outsider* in 1984, 'Uses of the Erotic' first appeared in a pamphlet published by Out and Out Books, a feminist press based in Brooklyn, New York, in October 1978."

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exclusive domain of women — or at least of the female within each of us — as seems evident (without contextual considerations) in the troublesome second sentence of the essay: "The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed and unrecognized feeling'" (2014: 184-185, my emphasis).

Claiming that "I do not want to undermine the ideological and political importance of Lorde foregrounding women in 'Uses of the Erotic,' but I do want to better situate the seemingly singular emphasis on women and the erotic in the text," Gill in fact does just what he claims not to do: he undermines Lorde's feminism, avoids its political import, and de-specifies its ideology by suggesting against all evidence that Lorde understands "female" not to refer to women but, instead, to designate "the female within each of us," including men. Instead of using the context of the 1978 Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women at Mount Holyoke College to situate Lorde's intervention in the debates happening at the time within feminism, notably on the place of lesbians within the women's movement, Gill, in a surprising move to neutralize the "troublesome" aspects of Lorde's view that evidently embarrass him, invokes the occasion of Lorde's speech to argue that she strategically framed her argument as a feminist argument because of the feminist audience to whom she was speaking, when what really she wanted all along was to make… a queer argument! In short, his (welcome) insistence on the context strangely conduces to the claim that, in effect, Lorde was not articulating her 1970s feminist agenda, but rather a less essentialist, or "troublesome," and more up-to-date program for an undifferentiated queer eros. He writes: "we must read Lorde for the audience gathered and not presume that she would reject the proposition that eros as a principle be allowed to retain the *widest possible applicability* — without losing its

necessary attention to the ground of lived experience (*of women, men, trans people, heterosexuals, queers, and people of color, etc.*)" (2014: 185, my emphases). This imputes to Lorde a position that she never claimed and would, in all likelihood, have vehemently rejected. Under the guise of paying attention to context, Gill does the opposite: by a sleight of hand he transforms a 1970s lesbian-feminist intervention into a 21st century queer anti-identitarian argument that refuses to vindicate "a deeply female" experience of eros and that applies instead to men, trans people, heterosexuals… Thankfully, he stops short of adding sadomasochists to the list!

3) Extracting Lorde from Cultural Feminism

To be fair, queer scholars did not invent the tendency of extracting feminists of color from cultural feminism. Echols (1983; 1989), for example, only listed White feminists among cultural feminists. Following in her footsteps in a 1988 essay on "Cultural Feminism Versus Poststructuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," Linda Alcoff, having defined cultural feminists by "their denigration of masculinity rather than male roles or practices, by their valorization of female traits, and by their commitment to preserve rather than diminish gender differences" (1988: 411), singles out Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich as representatives of that tendency. She then goes on to note, "In the absence of a clearly stated position on the ultimate source of gender difference, Echols infers from their emphasis on building a feminist free space and women-centered culture that cultural feminists hold some version of essentialism" (1988: 412). And Alcoff adds:

> Interestingly, I have not included any feminist writings from women of oppressed nationalities and races in the category of cultural feminism, nor does Echols. I have heard it argued that the emphasis on cultural identity by such writers as Cherríe Moraga and Audre Lorde reveals a tendency toward essentialism also. However, in my view their work has consistently rejected essentialist conceptions of gender (1988: 412).

Alcoff goes on to cite one important passage from Moraga that does indeed place her in opposition to an essentialist view of gender, and she argues that "Moraga seems to me light-years ahead of Daly's manichean ontology or Rich's romanticized conception of the female" (1988: 412). Alcoff was right about Moraga, as we shall see. But she does not furnish any evidence for her claim that Lorde shared the same anti-essentialist view. We are left to suppose that Moraga and Lorde, probably because they are both feminists of color, held identical views. Alcoff's argument generalizes from Moraga to unnamed and unnumbered women like her: "The simultaneity of oppressions experienced by women such as Moraga resists essentialist conclusions" because "Reflected in their problematized understanding of masculinity is a richer and likewise problematized concept of woman" (1988: 412).

By an imperceptible sleight of hand, Alcoff has changed the standard for defining feminist essentialism over the course of the discussion. This allows her to exempt all feminists of color from her critique of essentialism. If by essentialism we mean the view that women universally share the same condition, then Alcoff is right: feminists of color "resist the universalizing tendency of cultural feminism and highlight the differences between women, and between men" (1988: 413, n. 19). In that sense, then, neither Lorde nor Moraga is essentialist (but by that definition not even Rich would be radically

essentialist: after all, in her exchanges with Lorde, Rich shows herself extremely interested in differences among women).[56] If, however, by essentialism we mean what is usually meant by feminist essentialism—*i.e.* a belief that the "ultimate source of gender difference" resides in nature and biology, a "valorization of female traits," and a "commitment to preserve rather than diminish gender differences"—then, *pace* Alcoff, Lorde is closer to Daly and Rich than she is to Moraga.

Brenda Carr makes the point forcefully in a critique of Alcoff's article (1993: 136): "I find the dismissal of Rich as one of feminism's bad girls and the recuperation of Lorde as the new good girl on the block to be a strange move when they were close friends who publicly acknowledged the deep affinities between their cultural projects." In fact, reading "Uses of the Erotic" alongside Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," published two years later in 1980, helps us get a very different sense of Lorde's argument from the one offered by Gill.

Reading those two texts together can be justified in a number of ways. Some of them are biographical. Rich and Lorde's close friendship is widely documented (De Veaux 2004): when, in 1974, they were nominated (with Alice Walker) for the National Book Award (an award won by Rich), all three wrote a joint statement (Hall 2004: 3); in 1978 (*i.e.* the same year that "Uses of the Erotic" was published), in an interview with Karla M.

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[56] In his biography of Audre Lorde, Alexis De Veaux thus notes that Rich "was one of the few celebrated white feminists to acknowledge racism within the movement" (2004: 238). See also "An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich" in Lorde 2007 (1979): 81-109 (initially published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 6.4 [Summer 1981]: 713-36), esp. 103, where Lorde talks about the "different choices facing Black and white women in life," and Rich responds: "I wish we could explore this more, about you and me, but also in general. I think it needs to be talked about, written about: the differences in alternatives or choices we are offered as Black and white women. There is a danger of seeing it in an all-or-nothing way. I think it is a very complex thing."

Hammond, Lorde mentioned Rich as one of the few women in her "support group" to whom she showed her work before publishing it (Hall 2004: 33); in Lorde's *Cancer Journals* (1980), "Adrienne" is present at the most important moments of Lorde's experience with cancer in the same period.[57] Other reasons to read those two texts together are contextual: both intervene in the debate on the place of lesbians within the women's movement. And as it turns out, Lorde and Rich share key assumptions.

Rich defines the "lesbian continuum" as follows:

> I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range—through each women's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support, if we can also hear it in such associations as *marriage resistance* and the haggard behavior identified by Mary Daly… we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of *lesbianism* (1980: 239, emphases in the original).

Lorde's "erotic" shares key features with Rich's "lesbian continuum." It is a woman-identified experience. It seeks to counter the heterosexual/lesbian split within feminism and the marginalization of lesbians within feminism (a hot topic at the Fourth Berkshire Conference, as noted by Gill) by positing a female bond shared by all women; in order to do so, like Rich's "lesbian continuum," Lorde's "erotic" de-sexualizes and de-genitalizes female—and, particularly, lesbian—eroticism. In short, if we want to reclaim Lorde, there is no reason not to reclaim Rich at the same time (and that is what Brenda Carr suggests). If (as I am more inclined to do) we situate them in their specific historical

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[57] See also De Veaux 2004: 190-192; 222.

context in order to understand and learn from them, then we have to contend with the fact that, from a queer perspective, they offer similar insights *and* similar problems.

4) Lorde's Feminist and Un-Queer Identity Politics

What kind of political movement did Lorde want? Far from proposing a proto-queer, anti-identity politics, based on an alliance across genders, sexual orientations, races, and bodily morphologies, "Uses of the Erotic" proposes a lesbian feminist identity politics. Indeed, in defining the erotic as a female experience, as is rightly noted by queer theorist Sharon Holland, Lorde "does the work of moving black feminist inquiry away from an understanding of *all* sexual minorities (perverts, prostitutes, pederasts, and sex workers) as having a *collective* stake in dismantling the regulatory regime of sex law. In 'Uses of the Erotic' emphasis is upon bridging the gap between *women*" (2012: 54, emphases in the original). Lorde shares that goal with a number of lesbian feminists, including, once again, Adrienne Rich, whose theoretical and political move, by proposing the "lesbian continuum," was explicitly to situate lesbian experience at the core of women's experience and to argue that lesbians ought to ally themselves with, and were central to, the women's movement: she viewed "the lesbian experience as being, like motherhood, a profoundly *female* experience" (1980: 239, emphasis in the original). In short, Lorde's view is very close to the definition of "political lesbian" as it was used in the feminism of that era in order to promote a definition of lesbianism as a feminist position in which sexual practices were unimportant: like the "political lesbian," Lorde's "erotic" crosses boundaries of sexual orientation (since one can be a political lesbian and yet sleep

exclusively with men), and like the "political lesbian" it excludes those actual lesbians whose sexuality fails to meet the standards of political exemplarity (for example, SM lesbians).

This understanding of Lorde has a political consequence that is hardly compatible with the fundamental tenets of queer theory and that renders problematic the view of Lorde as a proto-queer theorist: Lorde believed that lesbians ought to disassociate themselves from gay men and other sexual minorities, especially pederasts and sex workers. Rich famously opposed those who "equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality because each is stigmatized": for her, doing so "is to erase female reality once again." Instead, like Lorde, she linked the lesbian experience to the female experience, configuring it (like Lorde) not as an experience of sexual heresy, but as one of femaleness; not as an experience legible in terms of sexual practices, but solely in terms of gender. Neither Lorde nor Rich saw, or was bothered by, the fact that their definitions of lesbianism and eroticism meant (to alter Rich) erasing sexuality once again.

In claiming Gayle Rubin's "Thinking Sex" as one of its foundations, queer theory has often (and, in my view, rightly) embraced the view of those feminists whom Lorde was explicitly opposing. It has called for a queer solidarity across genders and sexualities, implying that lesbians ought to ally themselves *both* with women *and* with sexual minorities because they are oppressed *both* as women *and* as sexual dissidents. As Rubin put it in her 1984 essay, "lesbian feminist ideology has mostly analyzed the oppression of lesbians in terms of the oppression of women. However, lesbians are *also* oppressed as

queers and perverts, by the operation of sexual, not gender, stratification" (2011 [1984]: 179, my emphasis). In Rubin's terms, Lorde's position would therefore be, like Rich's, a lesbian feminist position, not a queer one.

The fact that Lorde was profoundly an essentialist feminist committed to a feminist identity politics is apparent in another, equally celebrated, text: "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House." In that paper, given at the Second Sex Conference in New York in 1979 (and reprinted in *Sister Outsider*), Lorde famously attacked the conference organizers for their failure to deal with "the role of difference within the lives of american [*sic*] women: difference of race, sexuality, class and age" (2007 [1979]: 110). Speaking in the name of "those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference — those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older," Lorde memorably made the claim that letting those social hierarchies be reproduced within the women's movement was a capital mistake, "for the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (2007 [1979]: 112).

What is remarkable in this text if we are to take Lorde seriously as a theorist and understand her position with any degree of precision is the distinction Lorde invokes between differences of race, sexuality, class, and age, on the one hand, and gender differences, on the other. Like anti-identitarian queer theorists, Lorde judges it

illegitimate and dangerous to let the movement reproduce differences of race, sexuality, class, and age, because those differences are "the master's tools." But like feminists and unlike queer theorists, she does not seem to have a problem with a movement organized around gender. This suggests, implicitly, that for her, womanhood is *not* a master's tool and it has therefore a different ontological or political status from other differences. To be sure, there is not in Lorde's work a clearly stated position on the ultimate origin of the differences between men and women. However, if Alcoff is right that "it is difficult to render the views of Rich and Daly into a coherent whole without supplying a missing premise that there is an innate female essence" (1988: 412), then the conclusion is inescapable: the same holds true for Lorde.

SECTION II: COMBAHEE, BARBARA SMITH, AND THE INVENTION OF IDENTITY POLITICS

In a book-in-progress, Amber Musser perceptively describes some of the difficulties created by "queer theory and queer of color critique's elevation of the black lesbian feminist poet Audre Lorde as a 'mother' to queer theory."[58] Although Musser is dealing with an entirely different set of problems, her formulation captures some of the problems in which I am interested here. From the perspective of my project, it can be argued that misreading Lorde as opposing identity politics and taking her as a standard for the whole of women of color feminism (to say nothing about the implicit homogenization that results from such a move) have produced the misleading impression that feminists of

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[58] I thank Damon Young for bringing this essay to my attention and I thank Amber Musser for sharing it with me.

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color, like queer theorists, opposed identity politics. That view rests on a fundamental erasure: it occludes Black lesbians' invention of identity politics.

Indeed, describing Black lesbians as questioning identitarian modes of organizing or as negating identity politics denies their originality: it obscures from view the crucial fact that they coined the phrase "identity politics," gave it its first theorizations, and were the first to embrace it explicitly. While 1960s and 1970s Black civil rights movements, the women's liberation movement, and gay and lesbian liberation movements were organized around identities, they did not use the phrase "identity politics." That phrase did not become widely employed until the late 1980s and early 1990s (mostly as a derogatory term). Sociologist Mary Bernstein, who has authored a number of very important studies of identity politics, notably in gay and lesbian movements, writes that the phrase "identity politics" made its first appearance in 1979 in the context of disability politics (Bernstein 2005: 47). That is in fact a mistake.

For it is the famous Black feminist statement of the Combahee River Collective, written in 1977 and originally published in 1978 in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (Eisenstein 1978), that contained the earliest use of the phrase "identity politics" and that expressed the earliest explicit commitment to that mode of political organizing. The statement was later reprinted in a number of edited volumes, including such influential anthologies for women of color feminism as *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981), *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks*

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Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave (Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982), and *Home Girls* (Smith 1983)

In that first use of the phrase, the authors write that their "focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression" (1977: 212). The view that politics should reflect one's own identity and that one should work first to end one's own oppression is now typically criticized by queer theorists as symptomatic of white gay male politics or homonormativity. Halberstam provides a typical instance when she denounces identity politics as "white gay men discussing issues of interest to other white gay men," which she opposes to the "more radical agendas" of feminism and ethnic studies (2005: 220). Yet, *pace* Halberstam, if there is one lesson to be drawn from Black feminism, it is that what the authors of the Combahee statement call a "healthy love for ourselves" (what Halberstam disparagingly reduces to "a narrow interest in the self"), far from being opposed to radical politics, is in fact the beginning of it.

The 1977 statement was primarily written by Black lesbian feminist activist Barbara Smith, arguably the leader of the collective, with her sister Beverly Smith and Demita Frazier. In a series of writings collected in a volume that came out in November 2014, edited by Alethia Jones and Virginia Eubanks under the title *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around. Forty Years of Movement Building With Barbara Smith*, as well as in a number of texts written in the intervening years, Smith returns in great detail to her

activism and to Combahee. Because queer theory has not paid Smith the attention she deserves, I will cite her in some detail here. I will at times contrast Gitlin's assessment of identity politics with the vision offered by Smith. In doing so, I seek to suggest that in their assessment of identity politics, queer theorists, including proponents of queer of color critique, have often uncritically, if inadvertently, recycled the views of representatives of the White straight male left, such as Gitlin, have dressed up those views as queer critique, have at times attributed them to feminists of color, including Black lesbians, and have ignored what those Black lesbians who coined the concept of identity politics in the first place were actually saying about it (even when those queer scholars claimed to derive their views from Black lesbians).

Indeed, a strange paradox has occurred in queer theory. In our eagerness to reclaim women of color feminism, we seem to have accepted the condemnatory definition of identity politics given by such old New Left writers as Gitlin, instead of resurrecting the radical concept forged by Smith and Combahee. The straight Leftist view criticizes identity politics for being divisive of the Left; for being narcissistic; for inhibiting coalitions; and for leading to what might be termed a competitive Olympics of oppression to determine the winning victim and to crown the most oppressed.

I do not wish to imply that these critiques made by the White straight male left, and re-deployed by queer theorists, are entirely groundless. My purpose is to show that many of those accusations against identity politics were in fact made because of certain deplorable uses of identity politics. Smith acknowledges as much. But for Gitlin and queer theorists

alike, those uses define "identity politics in the strict sense" (Gitlin 1993a: 173). Against

this tendency, I want to reclaim the view of identity politics articulated by Smith and her

comrades. For Smith, indeed, those deplorable uses, far from defining identity politics,

represent contingent deformations of the radical kind of identity politics that Black

lesbians invented. Identity politics can be, and has been, used in non-radical ways (just

like non-identitarian and anti-identitarian politics, which are also increasingly used in

reactionary ways). Smith properly reminds us of other, radical uses of identity politics.

Identity politics is often accused of splintering the Left. Indeed, the affirmation of

identity claims is viewed as undermining the construction of commonalities. That critique

is at the heart of the view Gitlin expounds both in his 1993 "The Rise of Identity Politics"

and in his 1995 book *The Twilight of Common Dreams*. Gitlin asserts for example that

"the thickening of identity politics is inseparable from a fragmentation of …

'commonality politics'" (1993a: 172). The same critique also informs Wendy Brown's

critique of identity politics when she opposes "the language of 'I am'" to "the language

of 'I want this for us'" (1995: 74).[59]

Both critiques, however, edge dangerously close to a certain form of idealism. They do so

in two ways. First, the strong opposition both authors make between identity politics and

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[59] Between the 1993 version of her essay, published in *Political Theory*, and its 1995 version, printed in her book *States of Injury*, Brown noticeably introduces minor revisions with important consequences. In the 1993 version, she proposes to replace "the language of 'I am' … with the language of reflexive 'wanting'" (1993: 407). Thus, the opposition she articulates is between a fixed identity and a more flexible desire. In 1995, however, the end of the sentence has become "with the language of 'I want this for us'" (1995: 74), where the introduction of the pronoun "us" adds a layer to the opposition: it is no longer an opposition solely between being and wanting, but one between a type of politics that is self-enclosed and solipsistic as it were ("I am") on the one hand and, on the other, a politics directed toward others ("I want this for us"). This is consistent with her view of identity politics as narcissistic and it is very akin to the opposition we find in Gitlin's writings between identity politics and "commonality politics" (1993a: 173).

commonality politics seems to imply, however implicitly, that the way one articulates a commonality can be detached from the way one constructs one's identity. Second, such an opposition of identity politics and commonality politics seems to posit, if only implicitly, that social groups constitute themselves spontaneously as political groups and that their formulating of their problems arises naturally rather than as a result of political work. Third, and equally important, Gitlin and Brown's view assumes that new groups spontaneously find their place among other progressive groups which (also spontaneously) accept and recognize them as legitimate allies. In other words, in their account of identity politics, both Gitlin and Brown evade the properly political work that allows new groups to raise new questions and hold the Left accountable for the way it treats them.

Smith crucially emphasizes the role of identity politics in enabling Black lesbians to form a political agenda. As she noted in 1978, "we are not doctrinaire… [T]here is no Black feminist philosopher we can read who can tell us what to do at this time. Anything we do is informed by our identity. 'Identity politics' is really a very substantial concept for what we practice. In other words we practice a politics that meshes with our real physical identities" (2014 [1978]: 81). Thus, rather than considering that the Black lesbian feminist agenda is a given, Smith reminds us that it had to be formed through various political tools (such as, one might guess, consciousness-raising). Since that agenda did not happen by itself, it had to be created, and creating it took political work. That political work was accomplished by identity politics.

Similarly, the role of identity politics in enabling Black lesbians to be part of the Left is one of its crucial advantages, an advantage emphasized by Barbara Smith. Rather than viewing identity politics as divisive of the Left, she describes it as perhaps the only method for opening the Left and forcing it to address the problems and questions raised by groups who have previously been left out of it. In other words, instead of naturalizing the Left's tendency to incorporate new questions and new groups, Smith considers that making the Left more comprehensive requires political work — political work that is accomplished by identity politics. For her, rather than being opposed to the construction of a commonality, the formulation of an identity politics is the condition for the creation and expansion of commonalities. For example, identity politics is what allowed Black feminists "to be part of the dialogue":

> From our position in Combahee, building identity politics gave us a platform, an analysis, and a certain sense of confidence that we deserved to be part of the dialogue. If we had not done that, where would women of color be, as far as being able to assert the legitimacy of our concerns and the particularity of our point of view? We empowered ourselves by looking at our situation, making observations about it, drawing conclusions, and saying: "We're here, we deserve to be here, and understand that when we talk, we're talking from all these different experiences."… That made it possible for us to be much more effective political actors than if we had stayed silent and invisible (Jones and Eubanks 2014: 44).

Instead of taking for granted the political agenda of Black lesbians, Smith highlights the crucial fact that identity politics allowed them to construct "an analysis." Instead of taking for granted the acceptance of Black lesbians by the Left, she insists that identity politics gave them "a platform" from which to speak. Instead of taking for granted the empowerment necessary to join leftist coalitions, Smith insists that it is identity politics that gave Black lesbians the "confidence that we deserve to be part of the dialogue."

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There is no question that what Smith says here about women of color could be equally applied to other struggles, including civil rights struggles, women's movements, and gay and lesbian liberations.

To be sure, there are ways of using identity politics that are not so progressive. For Halberstam, identity politics is another name for "a narrow interest in the self" opposed to "more radical agendas" (2005: 220). This passage exposes Halberstam in the act of recycling, surprisingly, Gitlin's definition of identity politics as "a politics rooted more in group self-assertion than in attempts to create broad alliances" (1993b: 16). Such a self-centered model of identity politics is what Smith criticizes as: "I'm an African American, working-class lesbian with a physical disability and those are the only things I'm concerned about. I'm not really interested in finding out about the struggles of Chicano farm workers to organize labor unions, because that doesn't have anything to do with me." That may happen, but for Smith, far from defining identity politics, that position is a "watered-down version" of it (2014: 54).

As Gitlin noted, identity politics can lead to a celebration of identity: "If the identity affirmation of the oppressed begins as a defense against claims of superiority, it can swerve into its own sense of superiority" (1995: 127). It certainly can, but that does not mean that it has to. Moreover, the risk might be necessary to take. For celebrating one's identity is also a crucial emancipatory step for the oppressed. The "healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community" expressed by Combahee, in the face of a racist, misogynist, hierarchical, and homophobic society, that had taught Black lesbians to

despise their gender, race, class, and sexuality, is humanizing (as can be the celebration of blackness, womanhood, or gayness). As Smith put it in a spectacular equation of identity and progressive politics: "We have an identity and therefore a politics that requires faith in the humanness of Blackness and femaleness. We are flying in the face of white male conceptions of what humanness is."[60]

This celebration of one's own identity and humanness is only a problem for Leftist/coalition politics if it "harden[s] into a self-enclosed world" (Gitlin 1993a: 173). Smith is aware that identity politics can be used and, indeed, has been used in that way. And she is critical of that use: "identity politics has been much less effective when primary emphasis has been placed upon exploring and celebrating a suppressed identity within a women's movement context, rather than upon developing practical solutions for confronting oppression in the society itself." For Smith, the crucial point of identity politics is to change not the movement but the world. She opposed a "major misunderstanding within feminism as a whole," according to which "it is politically viable to work on anti-Semitism, racism, or any other system of oppression solely *within* a women's movement context." Instead, she claims forcefully, "Although all the systems of oppression cannot help but manifest themselves inside the women's movement, they do not start or end there." And she adds: "I don't live in the women's movement, I live on the streets of North America" (1984: 84, emphasis in the original).

It has also been noted that identity politics can lead to an Olympics of oppression. In a way, in 1977, Combahee fell into that trap when the authors of the Combahee statement

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[60] Quoted in Moraga 1983: 131.

argued: "If Black women were free, it would mean that everybody else would have to be free," since they occupied the "position at the bottom" and "the very bottom of the American capitalist economy" (Combahee 1977: 240). Smith has reiterated that point when she claimed, more recently, that Combahee was "dealing with all the isms." Evidently, that is an overstatement. Combahee was not dealing "with all the isms" but simply with the "isms" that had been most consistently articulated as political struggles at the time and that were recognized as legitimate: namely, struggles against racism, sexism, heterosexism, and capitalism. Many more systems of social stratification have been more fully politicized since—systems that Combahee activists were for the most part not dealing with: able-bodiedness, transgenderism, drug use, and sexual deviance other than just sexual orientation, just to name a few.

But just because identity politics can lead to a hierarchy of the oppressed, and just because Combahee itself sometimes inadvertently falls into that trap, does not mean that such features are intrinsic to identity politics. Somewhat going against the implications of Combahee's own formulations, in the introduction to *Home Girls*, Smith asserts that "A Black feminist perspective has no use for ranking oppressions" (1983a: xxviii). Following that impulse to avoid ranking, in the 2014 passage just alluded to, she more interestingly points toward a pluralist and non-hierarchical form of identity politics:

> What people did not necessarily understand about identity politics was that it was not to say that "Your problems are not worthy of consideration" or that they are beneath ours. That's not what we were saying at all… it was not exclusionary, and in practice, it really had the potential of liberating everyone, because we were dealing with all of the isms (2014: 44).

While it is true that identity politics can develop "its own methods of silencing" (Gitlin 1993a: 172) and of exclusion, this passage points to another, more interesting, feature of the form of identity politics Smith advocates: not a hierarchical and exclusionary claim that Black lesbians, because they are situated at the intersection of several oppressions, or because they are supposedly at the bottom of American society, are more right or more valuable than others, but instead a pluralist argument that Black lesbians, by virtue of their social position, have something specific to contribute to the conversation:

> We were asserting our validity and our right to exist, to examine our political situation, and to organize to change that situation. We never were asserting that no one else's political status, social status, economic status, or oppression was important. We never thought that. We actually believed that the way you come together is to recognize everyone fully for who they are, respect and understand who they are as we work toward common goals of justice and liberation and freedom (2014: 55).

In other words, identity politics, in Smith's view, does not seek to silence others. It is not a claim that what Black lesbians have to contribute, because they deal with a number of different forms of oppression, is more important or somehow truer than what other groups have to say. Smith's position is not one that idealizes oppression. Instead, it is a claim that "we" have something to contribute to the conversation, that "we" have a distinct and irreplaceable perspective, and that "our" voices need to be heard—not that "our" perspective and "our" voices should erase, or replace, or take precedence over everybody else's. "Our" perspective is certainly unique, but not in the sense that it is superior. It is unique in the sense that it is distinct and specific, and that it deserves being taken into account in the larger conversation happening on the Left.

More recently, identity politics has often been critiqued for its supposed privileging of one axis of oppression over others. It has therefore been understood as opposed to intersectional analyses.[61] As we have seen, central to the queer reading of feminists of color by Ferguson and Kyungwon Hong is a notion that feminists of color questioned identity politics because they were at the junction of several axes of oppression. In this way, identity politics is equated with single-issue politics and, as Guzman argues (2006: 43), "the affirmation of multiple-identifications" leads not to identity politics but to what he describes as its opposite: "multiple-issue politics." In an otherwise extremely important article on the different understandings of intersectionality within feminism (which I cite at greater length below), feminist sociologist Leslie McCall also opposes identity politics to both women of color feminism and intersectionality. She argues that "the multicultural and identity-politics perspective tends to maintain group boundaries uncritically in order to revalue them," and she opposes them to the perspective of feminists of color who engage "in both theoretical and empirical studies of intersectionality using finer intersections of categories" (2005: 1780). In short, when talking about identity politics, McCall seems to have in mind something akin to cultural feminism, something that is averse to recognizing intersecting oppressions.

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[61] For an important exception, see Brown 1997. More recently, see Puar 2007 where, particularly in her conclusion, Puar rightly highlights the profound connections between identity politics and intersectionality. That is why she proposes her concept of "assemblage," which is "more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency." The concept of "assemblage" is proposed as a replacement of the "intersectional model of identity, which presumes that components — race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, religion — are separable analytics and can thus be disassembled." Indeed, in Puar's view, "Intersectionality demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time" (Puar 2007: 212). Obviously, Puar's perspective is opposed to mine, insofar as she seeks to dismiss identity and intersectionality, whereas I seek to reclaim them under certain conditions. Nonetheless, she is absolutely right in pointing to the affinity between identity and intersectionality, and to the incompatibility of her project with intersectional analyses. In short, I find her 2007 conclusion more satisfying than her later attempts to hedge and qualify the opposition of her project to intersectionality, in response to the numerous criticisms her critique of women of color feminism elicited (see in particular Puar 2012).

In fact, for Combahee, the opposite was the case: identity politics was precisely designed, in the terms of Benita Roth, as "a politics that attempts to address simultaneous and overlapping oppressions operating in people's lives" (2004: 124). Indeed, when asked what Combahee meant by identity politics, Smith herself responded:

> We meant to assert that it is legitimate to look at the elements of a combined identity that included affiliation or connection to several marginalized groups in this society. There is meaning in being not solely a person of color, not solely Black, not solely female, not solely lesbian, not solely working class or poor. There is a new constellation of meanings when those identities were combined. *That's* what we were trying to say (Jones and Eubanks 2014: 53, emphasis in the original).

Similarly, it is often implied, as we have also seen in the case of Roderick Ferguson, that "identitarian modes of political organizing" erase individuals with multiple oppressed identities and that Black lesbians, therefore, sought to carve out alternative modes of organizing. This erases the fact that the very existence of Third World feminism is a product, not of alternative modes of organizing, but of identity politics itself: as Smith writes, "it's hard to be invisible, and before we began to assert identity politics and the importance of a Black feminist stance we were, by and large, invisible" (2014: 55). As early as 1984, Smith noted:

> The concept of identity politics has been extremely useful in the development of Third World feminism. It has undoubtedly been most clarifying and catalytic when individuals do in fact have a combination of non-mainstream identities as a result of their race, class, ethnicity, sex, and sexuality; when these identities make them direct targets of oppression; and when they use their experiences of oppression as a spur for activist political work (Smith 1984: 84).

For Smith and Combahee, we do not need to reject identity politics in order to acknowledge and deal with differences. Nor does the struggle against multiple oppressions require abandoning identity politics. They also highlight, against the views of the White straight male Left, the important political work accomplished by identity politics, which consists in opening up the Left to new problems and new groups.

In queer discussions of women of color feminism, Combahee is frequently mentioned as the origin of "intersectionality," a term the members of the collective do not use. By contrast, Combahee's commitment to identity politics is suppressed or ignored (as is the fact that the first deployment of the phrase "identity politics" appears in their writings). In his section on Black lesbians' supposed "negation of identity politics," as we have seen, Ferguson (2004) mentions Combahee but ignores its promotion of identity politics. In their discussion of feminists of color, Ferguson and Kyungwon Hong also mention Combahee, but they say nothing about the collective's explicit embrace of identity politics and, in a rather surprising interpretation, they rank its famous statement among those texts that supposedly "question identitarian modes of political organization" and "craft alternative understandings of subjectivity, collectivity and power" (2011: 2).

As for Barbara Smith, she is frequently cited but rarely discussed. When she is, her commitment to identity politics is played down. Ferguson mentions Barbara Smith's "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," initially published in 1982, and notes:

> Much has been written about the presumed failures of the essay, that it reduces "Black feminist criticism… to an experiential relationship that exists between black women as critics and black women as writers who represent black women's reality." Such critiques appropriately attend to

the identity politics within the piece, but there is a politics of difference at work within Smith's essay as well, a politics that disrupts identity's presumptions of equivalence and verisimilitude. This politics expresses black lesbian feminist practices of negation (2004: 127).

Ferguson presents Smith's politics of difference by way of apology for her presumed failures, which stem from her unfortunate but undeniable identity politics. Yet, Smith herself, when she speaks about "identity politics," is far from apologetic: she forcefully defends the concept she coined with her comrades and illuminates its radical potential. I would argue that Smith does not need to be excused: she simply needs to be read. By foregrounding and emphasizing Smith's politics of difference, and by trying to redefine it in terms of a practice of negation he imputes to Smith but does not derive from her writings, Ferguson effectively conceals what Smith's real contribution to radical thinking was: not a queer politics of difference, but a Black feminist identity politics.

An important exception to this strategy of apology and concealment is sociologist Benita Roth's groundbreaking book *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (2004). Discussing Combahee (2004: 124), she cites Todd Gitlin's definition of identity politics in *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars*:

> First, the discovery of common experience and interests; next, an uprising against a society that had imposed inferior status; finally, an inversion of that status, so that distinct qualities once pointed to as proof of inferiority were transvalued into the basis for positive distinction. It is *only this third stage — where the group searches for and cultivates distinctive customs, qualities, lineages, ways of seeing, or, as they came to be known, "cultures" — that deserves to be called identity politics* (Gitlin 1995: 141, emphasis added by Roth).

What Gitlin describes as identity politics is in fact something on the model of cultural feminism, whose characteristics he extends to identity politics as such and takes to be its defining features. Roth contrasts Gitlin's narrow, misleading, and "condemnatory definition of identity politics" (2004: 203) with Combahee's definition of it. Roth rightly notes that "the members of Combahee, then, meant something very different." Specifically, "members of the Combahee River Collective would only really recognize their identity politics as consisting of points one and two [of Gitlin's definition]… But the more important point to note is that Combahee's vision and activities… were never intended to stop at the borders of their groups, but were intended to be models for transforming the entire world" (2004: 124).

Roth is undoubtedly right in her assessment. But it is crucial to go one step further and challenge Gitlin's overall assessment of "identity politics." Who exactly is guilty of the defects Gitlin sees in identity politics? Mary Daly, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and other cultural feminists may be at times, but this does not mean that the whole of second-wave feminism or gay and lesbian liberation is. In using an identity political strategy while refusing to "stop at the borders of their groups" and in wanting to offer "models for transforming the entire world," Combahee was not unique: many early radical feminists and many gay and lesbian liberationists, White as well as people of color, had had the same strategy (even though they did not use the phrase "identity politics" to name it). We need not construct the Black lesbians of Combahee as uniquely and falsely proto-queer, or as so radically breaking from all other movements as to emerge out of nowhere and

share nothing with them, in order to appreciate the originality and the import of identity politics as they defined it.

SECTION III: MULTIPLYING IDENTITY POLITICAL STANDPOINTS

The description of women of color feminism as having sought alternatives to identity politics has in fact obscured from view the crucial lesson to be derived from 1970s and early 1980s feminists of color. The central tool for radical politics to be derived from women of color feminism is not a queer anti-identitarian strategy, which implies that dealing with differences requires abandoning identity politics, but rather a strategy consisting in a multiplication of identity standpoints. Instead of offering a queer call for a unified movement of undifferentiated individuals, Black lesbians such as Smith argue that we need autonomy (not separatism) *and* alliances; that the two, far from being opposed, are a condition of each other—in other words, that radical politics requires not less, but more, identity politics.

Although I would caution against too simplistic understandings of the early 1970s women's movement, and although I do not think that all those activists were as blind to differences between women as recent queer critiques have at times claimed, it is nevertheless true that the "global sisterhood model of feminist revolution" (Willis 1992 [1984]: 142) espoused by most feminists of the early 1970s tended to presuppose a universal experience for women, one that united them across boundaries of nation, race,

class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other axes of difference. Over the course of the decade, with "the eruption of difference" (Echols 1989: 203-241), "white women… discovered (that is, were forced kicking and screaming to notice) the non-innocence of the category 'woman'" (Haraway, 1993 [1985]: 278). Indeed, feminists were made to realize that their form of identity politics tended to promote White, middle-class, sexually normative values within the women's movement and that "'we' cannot claim innocence from practicing such domination" (Haraway 1993 [1985]: 278).

Late 1970s and early 1980s feminists of color critiqued the kind of feminist identity politics based on a global model of sisterhood and they dramatically complicated earlier feminist understandings of identity. They made four major critiques of the earlier model of feminist identity politics: 1) they asked that feminists deal with differences among women; 2) they emphasized the hybridity of the subject; 3) they asked that feminists understand that women can be oppressed as women but privileged through other aspects of their identities; and 4) they promoted a theory and a politics that required analyses of interlocking axes of oppression. Their critiques implied a complexification, not a rejection, of identity politics.

The first critique was central to Audre Lorde's writings, as I have already shown. It is also exemplified by Gloria Anzaldúa who, talking about a group of feminist writers of which she was a member, remarks critically, "They thought that all women were oppressed in the same way." She highlights how this model of a unitary experience

reproduces White privilege: "we would talk about the white problems and their white experiences" (Anzaldúa 1987: 230).

Anzaldúa's "mestiza consciousness" exemplifies the second critique of unitary conceptions of identity. Against "the theory of the pure Aryan," she presents a theory of the "mixture of races," "a hybrid progeny," "an 'alien' consciousness" (Anzaldúa 1987: 99), "one that includes rather than excludes" (101). Identity, then, is conceived, in Mary Dietz's terms, "not as a set of compartmentalized components (race, sexuality, class, etc.) but as a complex of border crossings and admixtures" (Dietz 2003: 410).

> "Your allegiance is to La Raza, the Chicano movement," say the members of my race. "Your allegiance is to the Third World," say my Black and Asian friends. "Your allegiance is to your gender, to women," say the feminists. Then there's my allegiance to the Gay movement, to the socialist revolution, to the New Age, to magic and the occult.... They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label. (Anzaldúa 1983a, 205)

As Susan Bickford rightly notes, "such calls to singular allegiance overlook the possibilities inherent in the experience of identity as noncategorical, as multiple." For Anzaldúa, indeed, unitary concepts of identity cause a debilitating fragmentation of the subject. "Anzaldua's response to this fragmenting competition is not to accept the implied contradictions, but rather to assert the connections: 'only your labels split me'" (Bickford 1997: 121). Barbara Smith makes a similar point when she notes: "Perhaps the most maddening question anyone can ask me is "Which do you put first: being Black or being a woman, being Black or being gay?" In a move that parallels Anzaldúa's, she attributes those oppositions to the outside world: "All of the aspects of who I am are crucial,

indivisible, and pose no inherent conflict. They only seem to be in opposition in this particular time and place" (1998 [1984]: 125).

Third, feminists of color complicated earlier feminist notions with the argument, in Cherríe Moraga's terms, that "the Radical Feminist must extend her own 'identity' politics to include her 'identity' as oppressor as well" (1983: 128). This insistence on extending identity politics proves that Moraga was not envisioning a rejection of identity politics but its complexification. And fourth, this allowed feminists of color to propose a mode of political analysis that, rather than focusing on only one axis of oppression, anticipated what Kimberle Crenshaw would later call "intersectionality." The Combahee River Collective Black Feminist Statement is probably the earliest — and most brilliant — articulation of that concept. As the Combahee activists put it:

> "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives" (Combahee 1977: 210).

Smith recapitulated that position when she wrote, "The concept of the simultaneity of oppression is still the crux of a Black feminist understanding of political reality and, I believe, one of the most significant ideological contributions of Black feminist thought" (1983a: xxxii).

Refusing a one-dimensional identity and promoting "multidimensional" identities (Bickford 1997: 119), emphasizing the hybridity of identities and calling for integrated

analyses of multiple systems of oppression—those are all one thing. Denouncing and dismissing identity as the basis for political organizing is a quite different thing. The first do represent a critique of an identity politics that seeks to mobilize individuals around one and only one axis of difference, such as gender, or of an identity politics based on sweeping categories and inattentive to differences — for example, an identity politics assimilating all women to a homogeneous category "woman." But a critique is not a rejection. The rejection of identity may seem to follow from the first for contemporary queer theorists, but it did not for 1970s and early 1980s feminists of color.

This had both theoretical and political consequences. When it came to theory, as Bickford notes, feminists of color "insist that political identity cannot be captured simply by a would-be comprehensive listing of our group affiliations, *and* they maintain that our group identities are central to our political identity" (1997: 121; emphasis in the original). Lorde certainly writes in "The Master's Tools" (2007 [1979]: 112) that "community must not mean a shedding of differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist," thereby critiquing homogenizing understandings of community. But she prefaces that comment by another one, equally important, which underscores the importance of community: "Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression." Here, Lorde asserts the importance of a coalition politics based on difference *and* identity.

When it came to politics, most Black feminists (though not all) opposed separatism, but they also argued, unlike anti-identitarian queer theorists, for autonomous organizing

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around identity. As Barbara Smith notes: "Black feminism is not about separatism; it's about autonomy." And she insists: "we don't know what we think until we ask ourselves, don't know what we need until we ask ourselves. We have to sit down and communicate… That's why we need autonomous institutions and why we're building them" (2014: 64). The rejection of identity as a legitimate ground for political organizing, which has now strangely become a badge of queer radicalism, was then the basis for political attacks on Black lesbian activists, primarily by straight male leftists. As Beverly Smith put it in *Home Girls*, in the context of a discussion with a straight Black male, "one thing he… said that I totally disagree with is that interest group politics (defined by ethnic group or gender) are not ultimately productive"; she argued instead that the "net result" of the "broader, supposedly comprehensive movements… was to fuck women over" (Beverly Smith 1983: 175). Bernice Johnson Reagon also noted that "at a certain stage nationalism is crucial to a people if you are to ever impact as a group in your own interest" (1983: 358). Justifying the choice of autonomous organizing, Barbara Smith observed, "Although racist white women may temporarily undermine our efforts or annoy us with their ignorance, they cannot sway us if we are actually autonomous and independent." It is ultimately this autonomous position that "enables us… to determine how and with whom to form coalitions worth making" (1983a: xl-xli).

Now that I have resituated feminists and lesbians of color, notably Black lesbians, in identity political traditions, I am better able to describe the ways they dealt with differences among women within the context of identity politics. In 1995, highlighting

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the differences between the queer vision of identity and that of women color (and of sexual radicals), Steven Seidman remarked:

> The queer politics of difference is, I believe, different in important respects from the assertion of difference that surfaced in the race and sex debates. In the latter case, the assertion of difference often remained tied to a politics of identity; the aim was to validate marginalized subjects and communities. For example, the cultural criticism of people of color *did not deconstruct or contest identity categories* but sought to *multiply identity political standpoints*. Deconstructive queer theorists affirm the surfacing of new subject choices but are critical of its identity political grounding in the name of a more insistent politics of difference (1995: 135, my emphases).

Seidman's purpose is the opposite of mine: his aim is to show why the non-identitarian perspective of queer theory is so innovative, whereas mine is to reclaim identity politics and to demonstrate how it contributed to queer theory's commitment to intersectionality. But that difference aside, Seidman is undoubtedly right in his analysis of political positions. Women of color feminists, when faced with the problem of differences, proposed "to multiply identity political standpoints," precisely because they were rooted in second-wave feminism and did not want to jettison identity, as queer theory has tended to do. Queer theory has been invested in difference, but its insistence on difference, at least in its deconstructive currents, often overlooks sameness. Put differently, deconstructionist queer theory is very good at illuminating the arbitrariness of categories as well as at challenging the consistency and separateness of categories; it may not be very well equipped, however, to analyze and chart the patterns of reproduction of systemic inequalities and the persistent inequalities between social groups. Feminists of color, by contrast, like all second-wave feminists, were centrally concerned with inequalities among different social groups, and that is why they proposed to unite women

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of color on the basis of their identity. In that respect, their assertion of difference did indeed "remain tied to a politics of identity."

This political strategy of multiplying "identity political standpoints" is most visible in Black feminist reflections on "Third World feminism." Barbara Smith writes:

> Often, both Black and white women in the U.S. have equated the term "Third World" with "Afro-American." This collapsing of identities has created falseness in our own understandings and in those of white women, who are unable to make distinctions. Like Black women, Native American, Asian American, and Latina women are involved in autonomous organizing at the same time that we are beginning to find each other. Certainly *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* co-edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, has been a document of and a catalyst for these coalitions. I think that more than any other single work, *This Bridge* has made the vision of Third World feminism real. But with the reality of connection among women of color, we confront again the fact of difference (Smith 1983a: xlii).

Smith describes the formation of Third World feminism, in which Moraga and Anzaldúa's famous 1981 collection played a key role. While appreciative of the coalitions created by the notion of Third World feminism, she warns us against the "collapsing of identities" which "has created falseness in our understandings." This collapsing, while it has made possible "connection among women of color," leads us back to "the fact of difference," this time not between White feminists and feminists of color, but among women of color themselves. As the editors of *This Bridge* put it, "It is critical now that Third World feminists begin to speak directly to the specific issues that separate us. We cannot afford to throw ourselves haphazardly under the rubric of 'Third World Feminism' only to discover later that there are serious differences between us which could collapse our dreams, rather than fuse alliances" (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983

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[1981]: 105).[62] For those activists and writers, having a movement for women of color, one that brings them together across differences of ethnic and racial identity, is not antithetical to having various movements in which they are also separated along those lines of ethnic and racial differences: both are necessary.

SECTION IV: FEMINISTS OF COLOR *ARE* FEMINISTS

To conclude, I would like to return to the quotations from Ferguson (2004) and Ferguson and Kyungwon Hong (2011) with which I opened this chapter in order to caution against several problems in the ways that feminists of color have often been remembered by contemporary queer theorists. First, women of color feminism should not be reified, *i.e.* it should not be viewed as *a* thing, a unified and homogeneous field of activism and scholarship, standing for a fixed set of beliefs (not to say dogmas), rather than a lively and contradictory site of debates, where different authors and activists express differing opinions and try in various ways to come up with answers to a series of problems and questions.

In contemporary work, this reification tends to operate both synchronically and diachronically. Synchronically: little attention (if any at all) is paid to individual differences from one author to another, to political and strategic differences from one activist group to the next, or even to differences among different traditions of feminisms

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[62] The same move could be reproduced indefinitely. See for example Tania Abdulahad 1983 for a discussion among four Black lesbians who try to acknowledge and deal with (particularly class) differences among women in the Black lesbian community.

of color, for example between Chicana feminisms and Black feminisms (not to mention Asian American feminisms, Native American feminisms, and other feminisms). While the phrase "women of color feminism" is useful to shed light on a field of theorizing and activism, it should not be used to homogenize that field unduly. In addition, it should be remembered that "women of color feminism" as a unifying label is a later creation (which, as Smith points out, starts around the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back*), and that it should not be projected back onto earlier forms of feminism by women of color. Kyungwon Hong and Ferguson treat feminists of color as though they all shared the same assumptions and experiences and all offered the same answers. That is all the more surprising since many 1970s and early 1980s feminists of color took the differences among themselves very seriously and thought about them very carefully. Diachronically: rather than being seen as a historically changing and evolving field of activism and theorizing, progressively refining and adjusting its answers to the problems it encounters, or forging new solutions as new problems surface, women of color feminism is also reified by being taken out of time, fixed in some a-temporal essence, and represented as having offered from its early days the always-already present ideas fundamental to contemporary queer of color critique.

Second, "women of color feminism" should not be "seen as queer of color critique." Those two different movements, which emerged in different historical, political, and intellectual contexts, should not be collapsed. Identifying them has had several unfortunate consequences that are exemplified by much of contemporary queer of color critique. First, women of color feminism is reduced to its lesbian incarnations. There is

no question that lesbians of color played a prominent role in women of color feminism, but it is also obvious that feminists of color were not all lesbians. Some of them were heterosexual (just to name two, Frances M. Beal and Akasha Gloria Hull—both important figures—were, to the best of my knowledge, heterosexual, not lesbian) and some were viewed by Black lesbians as downright homophobes (Bell Hooks, for example[63]). Next, describing women of color feminism as queer of color critique completely de-contextualizes women of color feminism. As I will argue in a moment, our understanding of women of color feminism suffers when we conflate it with, and reduce it to, a queer of color critique that emerged thirty years after the Combahee River Collective was formed in 1974, about twenty-five years after Audre Lorde wrote some of her most cited texts ("The Uses of the Erotic" [1978] or "The Master's Tools…" [1979]), and more than two decades after the publication, in 1981, of *This Bridge Called My Back*. It is quite reasonable to describe queer of color critique as having its roots in, being inspired by, and deriving from women of color feminism (among other theoretical and political traditions). But Kyungwon Hong and Ferguson go one step further and they overshoot the mark: in describing women of color feminism "as queer of color critique," their claim is the much more problematic argument that women of color feminism is virtually the same thing as queer of color critique. This turns out to produce some important misunderstandings — as I will discuss below.

A third, related problem for the view that queer of color critique was already present in women of color feminism is not only that such a view annexes women of color feminism, as we have seen, to a much later theoretical and political tradition, but also that it severs

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[63] As I will show in greater detail in the concluding chapter.

women of color feminism from its most immediate context: namely, second-wave feminism (as well as, I would add, civil rights struggles, but it is feminism that is central to my reflections here). In this way, queer theorists' rejection of radical feminism in particular, and of most second-wave feminism in general, which I discussed in the first chapter, combines with the reclamation of women of color feminism to produce a strange result: a women of color feminism radically disconnected from other types of feminism, notably from what contemporary queer theorists refer to (and, I would add, simplify) as "white" feminism. (Recall my remarks about Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich.) It also produces an exclusive emphasis on the differences between women of color feminism and all other varieties of feminism—which implies a women of color feminism so isolated as to be miraculously unaffected by the debates taking place throughout the period in the women's movement at large. We are therefore left with a view of a reified white feminism, on the one hand, and an equally reified women of color feminism, on the other: this does not adequately describe either of them.

Disconnecting women of color feminists from broader feminist debates and annexing them to much later traditions results in what I would call a sort of women of color feminism exceptionalism that misrepresents women of color feminism and white feminism. First, because we ignore, caricature, or repudiate "white" feminism, certain ideas that queer theorists (including queer of color critique theorists) have inherited from, or share with, several 1970s feminist movements (including many "white" feminists) are simplistically attributed to women of color feminists alone. For example, when Ferguson argues, in the passage cited above, that women of color feminism "intervened into the

question of identity by refusing to posit identity as a goal" (2004: 126), he does not notice that this characteristic feature of (some, not all) feminists of color, far from being unique to, or a creation of, those feminists of color, was in fact shared with, and arguably inherited from, early radical feminism and gay and lesbian liberation. As I have shown in the first chapter, destroying the categories of "woman," "gay," or "lesbian" was a central goal of early radical feminism and gay and lesbian liberation. In another passage, commenting on Black lesbian feminist Barbara Smith, Ferguson notes that, for her, "Rather than naming an identity, 'lesbian' actually identifies a set of relations" and is defined "in terms of a set of critiques of heterosexuality and patriarchy" (2004: 127). Here too, he fails to notice that this outlook is not unique to Smith nor to Black lesbians: they share it with a number of early radical feminists and, indeed, many lesbian activists and lesbian-feminists (for example, as I have shown in the first chapter, Martha Shelley and Monique Wittig.) Second, because we want to rescue feminists of color at all costs, when they share with other 1970s feminists certain beliefs that go against the grain of contemporary queer dogma, we feel a need to produce a revisionist history and, against all odds and all evidence, pretend that feminists of color were in agreement with contemporary queers and differed from their contemporary feminist comrades. For example, it is argued that women of color feminists critiqued identity politics. This has the unfortunate result of obscuring where their crucial contributions really lay.

In broad terms, identity politics can be defined as implying an epistemology and a politics. At the epistemological level, it is attuned to standpoint epistemology: it implies that a given social position provides social subjects with a specific and valuable vantage

point on social relations.[64] At the political level, identity politics asserts that it is legitimate for people who share a common oppression to organize politically around their oppressed identity. It asserts, further, that the building of autonomous movements organized around these identity categories is the only way to force others to acknowledge that a given group's subordination is not a personal but a political problem. It asserts, finally, that this autonomous organizing is the only way for the members of this oppressed group to end their oppression. On all three counts, the politics of 1970s and 1980s women of color feminists is without the shadow of a doubt an identity politics.

Epistemologically, the proximity of much of women of color feminism to standpoint theory (Hartsock 1983) should serve as a serious caution against the claim that women of color feminists were critiquing identity politics. To take only one example, the numerous instances in *Sister Outsider* (2007 [1984]) in which Lorde prefaces her comments by articulating her standpoint and naming her identity illustrates her belief that her identity shapes, and indeed legitimizes, her politics: "As a Black lesbian poet" (40); "as a Black lesbian feminist" (112; 120); "As a forty-nine year old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple" (114); "As Black women we have the right and responsibility to define ourselves" and "to recognize each other" (52); "As Black women, we have shared so many similar experiences" (153).

Standpoint theory, as theorized by Hartsock, is grounded in a kind of historical-materialist analysis: it posits that women's experiences provide them with a "privileged

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[64] In that respect, from my perspective, far from being opposed to identity politics, Foucault's treatment of "homosexuality as a position from which one *can* know" and "as a legitimate *condition* of knowledge" (Halperin 1995: 60; emphases in the original) situates him plainly within identity politics.

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vantage point on male supremacy" and "can allow us to understand patriarchal institutions and ideologies as perverse inversions of more humane social relations" (Hartsock 1983: 284). Marxist theory had long held that the vanguard of the working-class (the Party) had *the* privileged vantage point from which to redefine social relations; in the workerist traditions, the working class as a whole was considered to have that privileged vantage point. Second-wave feminism complicated those views with the pluralist argument that women *also* had *a* specific vantage point or, at times, with the non-pluralist belief that the women's movement, rather than the working-class's Party, had in fact *the* privileged standpoint. Activist feminists of color followed in those traditions and showcased the same tendencies: at times they argued that they had a specific standpoint that needed to be expressed and at times they argued that they, not all feminists, had *the* privileged vantage point. Anzaldúa claims, for example, that "the future will belong to the *mestiza*" (1987: 102). The authors of the Combahee statement also wanted to "use our position at the bottom… to make a clear leap into revolutionary action," since (in a passage already quoted) they say that "If Black women were free, it would mean that everybody else would have to be free" (Combahee 1977: 240). What all those views share is a deep reliance on identity to form a politics.

Disconnecting late 1970s women of color feminism from their contemporary feminist comrades in order to depict them as queer *avant la lettre* also results in highly questionable descriptions both of women of color feminism and of queer of color critique. First, as we have seen with Kyungwon Hong and Ferguson, the basic tenets of queer of color critique are presented as inherited directly from women of color feminism

with every other influence virtually erased — in particular, the influence of the "white Euro-American gay, lesbian, and queer theory tradition" of the early 1990s. Such a representation reads more like a fantasy of direct correspondence and racial purity than rigorous intellectual history: it does not do justice to the multiple sources from which queer of color critique draws its central ideas. Second, the tenets of queer of color critique are presented as having been shared by feminists of color who were operating in a very different context, with very different political concerns and intellectual tools, and who sometimes took very different positions: queer of color critique's account of its origins does not do justice to the specificities of women of color feminism. In this conflation, important conceptual and theoretical insights of 1970s and early 1980s feminists of color are lost.

For example, in the description offered by Kyungwon Hong and Ferguson, women of color feminism is described, like queer of color critique, as "consistently situat[ing] sexuality as constitutive of race and gender." In other words, Kyungwon Hong and Ferguson would have us believe, women of color feminism was from the very first day committed to the tenets of contemporary queer of color critique. But if that were true, one might wonder what scholars, including those propounding a queer of color critique, have been doing since the late 1970s? Did those propounding a queer of color critique not have to evolve intellectually in specific ways in order to produce their innovative critique of queer theory and politics in the early years of the 21st century? Ferguson and Kyungwon Hong do not support their claim with any evidence from 1970s and 1980s women of color feminists… and for good reason! Their description can only hold at the price of a

problematic lack of conceptual specificity and rigorous genealogy.

The result of this unclarity is a persistent ambiguity, even contradiction, in the ways that the notion of "intersectionality" is utilized today. As has been noted by Leslie McCall in an extremely important article published in *Signs* in 2005 under the title "The Complexity of Intersectionality," in feminist and queer theory the word "intersectionality" can be, and has been, used to describe two admittedly related but nevertheless different types of scholarly endeavors with very different stances toward categories.[65]

At times, "intersectionality" is used to foreground what Leslie McCall terms "intracategorical complexity." Intracategorical analyses critique homogenized views of categories and they seek to reveal the complexity of lived experience within social groups; they argue, for example, that being a woman does not mean the same thing for all women, and that the experience of womanhood, far from being singular and universal, is inflected by differences of race, class, sexual orientation, or other analytics of power. But for all their critiques of homogenized categories, intracategorical analyses do not assume that we can or should do without categories at all. "Intracategorical complexity" has produced a literature "critical of broad and sweeping acts of categorization rather than… critical of categorization per se" (2005: 1779). Studies in this vein "remain deeply skeptical of the homogenizing generalizations that go with the territory of classification and categorization" but they also "avoid the fully deconstructive rejection of all categorization." Their point is "not to deny the importance… of categories, but to focus

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[65] McCall describes a third model, which she calls "intercategorical complexity": that is the model she advocates. Since that model is not as central to my argument, I will not discuss it here.

on the process by which they are produced, experienced, reproduced, and resisted in everyday life" (2005: 1783). In the words of Jennifer Nash, "intracategorical analyses attend to the danger of categorizations, yet do not necessarily reject the categories themselves" (2008: 5).

The view of Kyungwon Hong and Ferguson that sexuality is constitutive of race and gender points to a very different understanding of "intersectionality" — one that McCall terms "anticategorical complexity." Unlike intracategorical analyses, anticategorical analyses are "based on a methodology that deconstructs analytical categories" (McCall 2005: 1773). Those analyses start with the premise that categories "have no foundation in reality" and, for anticategorical scholars, this renders "suspect both the process of categorization itself and any research that is based on such categorization, because it inevitably leads to demarcation, and demarcation to exclusion, and exclusion to inequality." Anticategorical analyses imply that "categories, including race and gender, are too simplistic to capture the complexity of lived experience" (McCall 2005: 1776), and they have resulted in what Rey Chow has called "categorical miscegenation" (2002: 7): the notion that sex, gender, class, race, etc., are mutually constituted and cannot therefore be separated — not even for the purposes of analysis. Nash rightly notes that "scholars working out of this tradition call attention to the social processes of categorization, and the workings of exclusion and hierarchy that mark boundary-drawing and boundary maintenance" (2008: 5).

It is not my goal, within the limits of this chapter, to offer a detailed genealogy of each

notion. But it is clear that intracategorical complexity "inaugurate[d] the study of intersectionality" (McCall 2005: 1773) and that writings by 1970s and early 1980s feminists of color fall into that version of "intersectionality."[66] "Anticategorical complexity" is a later development, and it seems more indebted to mid- to late-1980s postmodernism and poststructuralism. In conflating their views of intersectionality with that of feminists of color, Ferguson and Kyungwon Hong reiterate a frequent mistake whereby "writings by feminists of color, which were more oriented toward the intracategorical approach, were often assimilated into and then associated with the writings of feminist structuralists, which were more oriented toward the anticategorical approach" (McCall 2005: 1776).

To be sure, 1970s women of color feminists held certain views that might seem to anticipate the position of Ferguson and Kyungwon Hong. What we find in virtually all earlier women of color feminism is, to put it schematically, an opposition to a certain radical feminist argument that all women share the same condition. Against this view, 1970s feminists of color insist that experiences of womanhood are inflected by race (as well as by sexual orientation and class; other categories of difference remain mostly ignored). In other words, being a woman does not mean the same thing for all women. To that notion is added, for example in the famous Combahee River Collective statement, a related notion: "*We … often find it difficult to separate race* from class from sex

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[66] "Intracategorical complexity" is also the meaning Kimberle Crenshaw had in mind when she coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989. See for example her famous description (1989: 385): "Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men. Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double discrimination – the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women – not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women."

oppression *because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously*" (my emphases). In other words, race, class, and sex are "difficult to separate" *in our experience*.

Those two notions might be (among other notions) what resulted, many years later, in the view (expressed here by Kyungwon Hong and Ferguson and now hegemonic in queer theory) that race, gender, and sexual oppression are co-constitutive and that they are inseparable. But there are nevertheless important differences among the following three notions: 1) that women's experiences of womanhood are shaped and mediated by their race and class; 2) that oppressions of race, gender, and class are experienced simultaneously by some women; and 3) that race, gender, and class are co-constituted and that they cannot, as a result, be separated even analytically. Conflating those three different notions under the label "intersectionality" strips early feminists of their intellectual specificities and later theorists of their originality. The two first ideas, rooted in philosophies of experience, belong to 1970s and early 1980s feminist and humanist ideologies, and they are akin to standpoint epistemology. The third notion argues that sex, class, gender, and race are difficult to separate, not in our experience, but by definition. If we think of them nowadays as co-constitutive, that is because we are influenced by more recent social analyses influenced by de-constructionist methods. The third notion enumerated above, then, is almost entirely alien to the more modern views of 1970s and early 1980s feminists: it is distinctly postmodern. In short: there is one version of intersectionality that can be attributed to feminists of color, but the version Kyungwon Hong and Ferguson use can *not* be attributed to them. In collapsing those different

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understandings of "intersectionality," Kyungwon Hong and Ferguson obscure from view the real contributions of feminists of color. Kyungwon Hong and Ferguson's version of intersectionality is antithetical to identity politics. Feminists of color, by contrast, craft a version of intersectionality that is perfectly compatible with, and indeed requires, an identity politics — albeit one that is resolutely open to complexification and multiplication.

In conclusion, let me insist that while sharing with, and largely inheriting from, queer of color critique a belief in the political and theoretical importance of women of color feminism as an important tradition to revisit and remember, I hold that the current understanding of women of color feminism as constituting an alternative to identity politics is entirely groundless. It is only possible to arrive at such a misunderstanding by distorting the historical record and by politically de-contextualizing the work of feminists of color — and, in particular, by isolating them from broader feminist debates. Rather than seeing women of color feminism as breaking away from broader feminism, I suggest that we should read their work as intervening in, inheriting from, contributing to, and at times (but only at times) departing from broader feminism. Let me return, then, one last time to the quotation from Kyungwon and Ferguson with which I opened this chapter: "We … narrate queer of color critique as emerging from women of color feminism rather than deriving from white Euro-American gay, lesbian, and queer theory tradition." While it is not my goal to determine where queer of color critique got its anti-identitarian stance, I can now say with absolute certainty, on the basis of the evidence and the argument I have presented here, that it was not from women of color feminism.

CHAPTER III:
POLITICIZING IDENTITIES: THE EXAMPLE OF SADOMASOCHISM

"Mon problème pourrait s'énoncer ainsi: comment se fait-il qu'à une époque donnée, on puisse dire ceci et que jamais cela n'ait été dit?"

"My problem could be put as follows: how is it that in a particular period one can say a certain thing and that thing was never said before?"

Michel Foucault, 1969

"Before we can address the political and strategic question of whether or not we must abandon a politics of identity we must address the theoretical and historical issues of why and how sexual identities are politicized.

Jeffrey Escoffier, 1985

Let us Eulenspiegelers exult; let us S/M devotees make a joyful noise. For our fascinatingly extreme sadomasochistic scenes are not only celebrations of our own mystique, but also definite *political* acts — assertions of our basic freedom in the face of lingering but mythic garbage-ideas. And our joyful noise will soon be understood as one of the most important and powerful instruments in the "liberation-group orchestra" as it plays the ever-mounting crescendo of the "liberation symphony."

Larry Rosán, 1974
(emphasis in the original)

In this chapter, I analyze the emergence of an identity politics of sadomasochism (SM) and an SM political movement in the 1970s and early 1980s. I focus primarily on four SM organizations: The Eulenspiegel Society (TES), founded in New York City in 1970/1971 (still existing); the Society of Janus, founded in San Francisco in August 1974 (still existing); Samois, a lesbian organization founded in San Francisco in 1978 (which ended in May 1983); and Gay Male SM Activists (GMSMA), a gay male organization started in New York City in 1980/1981 (and which ended its activities in June 2009).

I focus on these four organizations as they arguably established the bases for an SM identity political movement in the 1970s and early 1980s. Other and subsequent SM political organizations drew from their legacy in order to construct their politics: for example, LSM (Lesbian Sex Mafia) founded in New York City in the early 1980s, and the NLA (National Leather Association), the first national organization for SM people, founded in 1986.[67]

While I mostly limit myself to the four organizations mentioned above, my goal is not to offer an extensive history of those organizations and even less one of political SM as a whole.[68] Rather, I use them to trace the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a political movement, however embryonic, centered on SM, and the effects produced by the emergence of such a movement. Through an analysis of different moments in the histories of these four organizations, I seek to highlight key steps in the constitution of SM as a political identity.

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[67] For a history of the NLA, see Stein 2011.
[68] For a short history of political SM, see Mesli and Rubin 2015.

The notion of "constitution" here is critical for my undertaking. Far from starting from the premise that there is always already a politics of sadomasochism, one that lies waiting to be discovered; far from assuming that sadomasochists represent a political group simply because they have been subject to social discrimination and because the sexual practices that define them are stigmatized; and far from assuming that (for those reasons) SM is itself political or participates in a larger politics of sexuality, I view the political identity attached to practitioners of SM as the contingent result of a dynamic process of interaction between SM communities and those around them (whether those surrounding communities were composed of allies, role models, or enemies). Taking my cues from the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, I show that SM political identity is best conceptualized, not as a reflection or expression of a pre-existing identity, but as an "articulation"— *i.e.,* as a "practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice" (1986: 105). SM identity politics should be understood, therefore, as a political and discursive creation that allows for the political elaboration and radicalization of SM.

SECTION I: FORGING SM IDENTITIES

On December 28, 1970, a male New Yorker by the name of Pat Bond (a pseudonym, and not to be confused with the West Coast lesbian activist of the same name) published a

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classified ad in *Screw*, an underground, primarily heterosexually-oriented, porn magazine

(1968-2003)[69]:

> Masochist? Happy? Is it curable? Does psychiatry help? Is a satisfactory life-style possible? There's women's lib., black lib., gay lib., etc. Isn't it time we put something together? Write PO box 2783, Grand Central Station, NY, NY, 10017.

This ad launched in New York City what was to become The Eulenspiegel Society (TES), to this date the oldest surviving SM organization in the US. It launched the building of an SM identity political movement that would later be expanded by other organizations. At first, those organizations were all local: The Society of Janus was and remains to this day a San Francisco-Bay Area organization. Others would target a specific segment of the SM population: while TES and Janus were (and remain) open to the entire SM population (although both have become predominantly heterosexual), Samois was for Bay Area lesbians; GMSMA for New York City gay men; LSM for New York City lesbians. Finally, in 1986, at a national conference in Seattle, the NLA was founded and was the first national SM organization; it was also open to all genders and sexual orientations.

In an interview he gave in 1973, Bond recalled: "I got five answers, all within the boroughs of NYC. Three agreed to come to a meeting at my apartment on the Lower East Side. Two showed up, and the first to come through my door was a young woman, about

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[69] The use of pseudonyms by the founders of SM organizations remained the rule throughout the 1970s. In publishing the ad launching Gay Male S/M Activists (GMSMA) in *Gay Community News* on August 2, 1980, Brian O'Dell was the first founder of such organizations to use his real name and give his real address (see Mesli & Rubin 2015). Similarly, as discussed later in this chapter, organizations such as TES, Janus, and Samois all used cryptic names, and GMSMA was the first organization whose name explicitly referred to SM.

25, from Queens. Terry Kolb [a pseudonym] was a heterosexual 'M' [masochist] with a very assertive personality outside of her sex scene..." From there, the organizers of the now-burgeoning organization ran the ad again in *Screw* and in *EVO* (*East Village Other*, 1965-1972), which brought "a few more people from the NYC area, in their 20's and 30's, straight and gay" (*Pro-Me-Thee-Us*, Special Introductory Issue, 1973: 20).[70]

Identity political movements are often seen as grounded in essentialized identities and as uncritically reflecting them. These normative assessments obscure the important processes of definition and redefinition such movements perform, which in turn transform the group identity. As evidenced by the ad posted by Pat Bond, TES did not start out as an S *and* M movement. While it is remembered as a group whose "basic tenet," in the 1970s, was "S/M Liberation" (as a member of the group put it in *P.*, 4, 1974: 22) or — as Bond put it — as "the only group that has enunciated liberation in terms of S/M per se" (*P.*, 4, 1974: 42), at the time of its foundation it was an organization for masochists only (that is, for the M, as they were commonly called, not for S/M). Eight months later, on August 8, 1971, an organizational meeting adopted a resolution "making the Eulenspiegel Society 'for those of S/M orientation,'" thereby including tops/dominants/sadists (that is, the S, as they were most commonly called) in the organization.[71]

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[70] *Pro-Me-Thee-Us*, the newsletter of TES, was started in 1973. It is hereafter referenced as *P.*
[71] According to the "Rough Notes or Minutes of Open Meeting of Eulenspiegel Society, 8/15/71" (Collection of Gayle Rubin), where that decision, made a week earlier at the organizational meeting, was announced at the open meeting.

The name of the organization came from its initial masochist identity. It was Kolb who came up with it. The name was also, according to Kolb, a sign of "the days of euphemism where the names of 'controversial' causes were deliberately obscure."[72] Although TES was created as a liberationist group and borrowed much of its rhetoric and impetus from late 1960s and early 1970s radical groups, its name situates the organization in the tradition of pre-liberation homophile groups, such as the gay male Mattachine Society (founded in Los Angeles in 1950) or the lesbian Daughters of Bilitis (founded in San Francisco in 1955), which also had names comprehensible only to the few in the know (D'Emilio 1983). Eulenspiegel's name was derived from Till Eulenspiegel, a figure of German folklore, whom Theodor Reik, in his 1941 *Masochism in Modern Man*, described as a symbol of masochism. The founders of the organization were particularly inspired by a passage from Reik's book[73] in which he wrote:

> This rogue used to feel dejected on his wanderings whenever he walked downhill striding easily, but he seemed very cheerful when he had to climb uphill laboriously. His explanation of his behavior was that in going downhill he could not help thinking of the effort and toil involved in climbing the next hill. While engaged in the toil of climbing he anticipated and enjoyed in his imagination the approach of his downhill stroll.
> One feels tempted to see in such a strange behavior a paradox reminiscent of masochism, an expression of worldly wisdom. (…) Willfully and obstinately the masochist opposes his own rhythm to that which rules all our lives. (…) When he [Till Eulenspiegel] is leisurely walking downhill he is downcast. When he toils up the hill he is happy. He gladly submits to discomfort, enjoys it, even transforms it into pleasure.
> This, however, constitutes the very essence of masochism. The masochist and Till Eulenspiegel obey another rhythm, their own. They do not march in step with us. Perhaps that is because they hear another drummer.

That the meaning of the name was cryptic also made it possible for members to retain it after the organization had changed its identity to include the S. It also made it possible to

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[72] See Terry Kolb's website: http://www.kiasherosjourney.com/pain (accessed on September 23, 2014)
[73] See TES's website: http://www.tes.org/main/about.php (accessed on September 23, 2014).

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forget, once the group had become SM, that it had started out as a masochist organization. A 1978 *Pro-Me-Thee-Us* article by Terry Kolb suggests that the masochist identity of the early group was often forgotten by newer members. Indeed, Kolb felt a need to ask them to honor it: "Please remember that TES was founded for masochists and only later became an *S* and M liberation group" (*P.*, 10, 1978, p. 5, emphasis in the original).

Though the S&M character of TES was a later development, from the very first day TES was built on the notion that "we are a pansexual organization and consider this a value" (*P.*, 4, 1974: 42). While in December 1970 both Bond and Kolb were heterosexual masochists, the third person to attend the first meeting was a gay man.[74] When, about a year later, Cynthia Slater and Larry Olsen started trying to form the Society of Janus in the Bay Area,[75] they also wanted to have an organization "open to anyone who has an interest in S&M and/or the related arts"[76]: "men and women; straight, gay, and bisexual; young and old; politically conservative and liberal; those who have practiced S&M for many years, and those whose involvement consists of fantasy" (as put by the 1975 coordinator of Janus, Carl Wittnebert).[77]

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[74] See Interview with Pat Bond and Brother Leo (audiotape), June 14, 2002 (Collection of the Leather Archives and Museum). Bond evokes "this gay guy, I can't remember his name." He remembers that "he cancelled out for the second meeting, saying that we were all seeking different things and he didn't see any point in our pursuing them together." He showed up again at another meeting later "and I never saw him after that." Asked about him by me on September 18, 2014, Terry Kolb did not remember him.

[75] Although Slater and Olsen first attempted to form Janus in 1972, it was not until 1974 that the organization really became a stable entity.

[76] According to the 1974 letter, signed by Olsen and Slater, sent to those who contacted Janus (Collection of Gayle Rubin).

[77] According to the 1975 letter, signed by Wittnebert, sent to those who contacted Janus (Collection of Gayle Rubin).

The view of identity politics as passively reflecting disciplinary identities is an oversimplification that obscures the complex, dynamic relations between political identities, on the one hand, and the medical categories and social identities to which they correspond, on the other. For most of the 20th century, SM subcultures were largely insulated from one another. In particular, they were divided according to sexual orientation. Heterosexual SM revolved primarily around producers of erotica (Bienvenu 1998) or SM-oriented businesses involving professional dominatrices for a male clientele. Gay male SM revolved around private parties, but it also gained a foothold in public institutions belonging to the larger gay male world (such as bars, bathhouses, and sex clubs) and in social organizations adapted from straight bikers (the "leather community" and the motorcycle clubs). As for lesbian SM, it did not really emerge as a subculture until the late 1970s. Although there were a few bridges here and there spanning these relatively autonomous and isolated groups, the connections remained marginal.[78] To the extent that shared subcultural practices and spaces help create a common sense of identity, the absence of the former inhibited the solidification of the latter.

SM identity political organizations such as TES and Janus, therefore, did not simply and uncritically reflect pre-existing and stable categories. Instead, they created a "relation among elements" and they transformed both discursively and practically the identity of

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[78] There were exceptions. Gay male SM writer Thom Magister (1991) notes for example that in the 1950s, in Los Angeles, "All of the men and women who shared the commonality of S/M and of leather, gay and straight, shared that experience and did not think of themselves as separate and apart because some were balling their 'old ladies' and others were balling 'their men'… My whip Master was straight but had been trained by a gay whip Master." However, this testimony to the existence of an SM consciousness crossing boundaries of sexual orientation is exceptional. There is no evidence for it elsewhere, so far as I know.

each of those elements: identities are therefore best conceived as "articulations" (Laclau and Mouffe 1986: 105). By bringing together SM people across boundaries of gender and, most important, sexual orientation, these early political organizations helped coalesce and unify a set of subcultures and identities that had been largely divided and inchoate before the emergence of SM political organizations. They made it possible for what Gayle Rubin would later call a "pan-SM consciousness" (2011 [1981]: 131) to emerge and co-exist with, if not entirely replace, such identities as "gay male SM" or "heterosexual SM." Far from simply reflecting a pre-existing identity, SM political organizations played an instrumental role in consolidating and solidifying an SM political identity. It was at least partly as a result of those organizations that there developed a sense that SM people shared a common identity beyond their differences of gender and/or sexual orientation. For one thing, those SM political organizations provided the main venue through which practitioners of different orientations could share a space and institutions. In time, that initial identity political movement would be one of the factors that would make possible the emergence of a lesbian SM subculture. In other words, in re-deploying the signifier "sadomasochist," TES and Janus transformed it from a medical, social, and sexual identity into a political one. This development did not simply reflect but profoundly altered pre-given medical, social, and sexual identities.

The creation of political SM is best understood as the bringing together, through political work ("articulation"), of elements that have no necessary connection to one another. Politics was instrumental in forging an SM identity: it is not the case that SM politics was simply based on a pre-existing SM identity that it re-deployed while leaving it unaltered.

To be sure, Pat Bond did act, in placing his ad, on the basis of a pre-existing desire and a sense of personal difference; he did propose to politicize his already established understanding of himself (that is, his identity) as a masochist. But the SM identity that emerged from the movement he started was distinct, and quite different from, the sexual identity that provided the impetus for his initial act and founding gesture. This confirms Tobin Siebers's contention that identity politics, rather than dividing a previously unified political landscape, in fact helps "create points of contact between individuals" (2006: 19) by offering a way to bring them together.

Rather than revealing an internal belief in an essential identity, moreover, the formation of an SM political identity was shaped at a fundamental level by forces external to it— that is, by *those who are other than we are* and, notably, *our enemies*. In an article published in *Gay Community News* on February 23, 1980, Michael Bronski wrote: "The popular, social definition of S/M may involve any number of activities: bondage, water sports, scat, flagellation, the wearing of leather, and any other devices or acts that people find in their imagination. *The only thing these acts may have in common* is that they are all somewhat taboo… it *is a community of shared rejection, and not necessarily of shared specific desire*" (my emphases). Bronski's definition of SM, by stressing the role of "taboo" and "rejection," posits the outside world as constitutive of SM identity. In a 2011 discussion organized by the San Francisco Leathermen's Discussion group, Guy Baldwin, a gay man and a leader in the US-American SM community, dramatized that point when he said: "To our enemies, we all look the same; they can't tell us apart; they don't distinguish between gay and straight and lesbian and trans... We all look the same to

them... That means that we have reasons to forge useful political alliances with each other."[79] Like Bronski, Baldwin suggests that identity is not intrinsic (we all look different to each other), but a social artifact constituted by the gaze of others ("we all look the same to them").

One critique of identity politics, which I confronted in the previous chapter, is that it is homogeneous and homogenizing, that it erases the social differences among the members of a group who share any particular identity. Another critique, at odds with the first, is that identity politics fragments a political landscape that had supposedly been, until its emergence, unified. Such a criticism obscures the complex work of articulation performed by identity political organizations. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, there came into existence SM political organizations which, rather than being pan-SM, were specifically dedicated to subgroups within the SM world: for example, the lesbian group Samois or the gay male GMSMA. The formation of organizations focused on specific groups, rather than the whole SM community, need not be understood as a fragmentation of the broader community. Although Cardea was more a social than a political organization, the way it operated will illustrate my point.

Cardea was a women-only group created in San Francisco around 1976. It was formed at the urging of Cynthia Slater, Janus's co-founder, by two SM women and a man (Kaye Buckley, Amber Rae, and the late Jay Magus) in order to help redress the "women's problem" in Janus – the fact that very few women were joining an organization that

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[79] See http://www.sfldg.org/all-programs/is-leather-dead-does-it-need-to-die (accessed on September 23, 2014).

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remained overwhelmingly male.[80] This suggests that the creation of Cardea was prompted not by a theoretical belief that women should, *as women*, have a separate organization, but by a pragmatic observation that in this time and place women were not joining a pan-SM organization. Within about two years of its founding, Cardea had helped recruit several women to Janus, some of whom became prominent community leaders (then-lesbian journalist, activist, and writer Pat [now Patrick] Califia, for example). In other words, far from fragmenting SM activism, Cardea helped recruit to an affiliated organization and to a larger movement new members who would not have joined either one of them, had it not been for the existence of a separate organization.

To be clear, I am not arguing that identity political organizations never produce effects of fragmentation. Rather, I am arguing that they may, in some contexts, serve the purpose of opening political spaces for groups that have been previously excluded. This means that over-generalized and normative statements about identity politics and its defects are neither sufficiently complex nor sufficiently attentive to empirical detail. In order to understand the effects of identity political movements, we need to look closely at each movement and the conditions in which it emerged.

Moreover, even when the multiplication of organizations such as Samois in 1978 or GMSMA in 1981 does produce a fragmentation of the SM community, it is essential to note that the emergence of such specifically lesbian and gay groups actually addresses,

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[80] According to a 1975 survey of the readership of *Growing Pains*, Janus's newsletter, 38% of the readers were heterosexual males, 37% were gay males, and 10% were bisexual males. SM women had not yet found their way to Janus: the readership comprised 11% of heterosexual females, 3% of bisexual females, and no lesbians.

rather than creates, the problem of multiple constituencies. GMSMA was created at a time when TES had become primarily heterosexual. Bond had warned as early as 1976: "One value of the Society, virtually unique, we have been in danger of losing, and that is our pansexual nature" (*P.*, 7, 1976: 2). On August 28, 1980, the very first meeting of what was then SAMNY (S And M New York) and would become GMSMA in December 1980, featured a "discussion of Eulenspiegel, a (*now straight*) S/M support group in NYC" (my emphasis). This suggests that TES was both a point of reference and a place from which the gay men interested in the possibility of forming a new group felt increasingly excluded.

Neither does the creation of specifically gay and lesbian SM organizations necessarily entail (as critiques of identity politics often claim) a belief in essentialized gay or lesbian SM identities. Instead, the emergence of both Samois and GMSMA reflected particular problems specific to different social groups; the creation of new organizations should not be understood as an expression of theoretical commitments on the part of their members but rather as a pragmatic answer to those concrete problems. Chief among the motivations that prompted the creation of Samois was, according to Gayle Rubin, one of the original members of the organization, the need "to create social worlds where kinky lesbians could find friends and partners": indeed, for the most part, "prior to the formation of Samois, lesbians who practiced S/M did so primarily in small, private networks or isolated couples, or else socialized along the borders of the more institutionally established S/M populations of heterosexuals and gay men" (2004: 67). Pansexual organizations could not redress that problem since SM lesbians were not

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numerous enough to form a critical mass in them, and the very existence of SM lesbian culture required separate spaces, if only temporarily.

A second important factor for Samois was the need to address the specific problems posed by the growing hostility to SM lesbians and lesbianism from within the women's community. The polemics against Samois by the Bay Area group Women Against Violence and Pornography in the Media (WAVPM, started around 1976-1977), a feminist group opposing pornography but whose denunciations of pornography more often than not amounted to denunciations of SM *per se*, would afford Samois a larger notoriety in the next few years. Responding to the attacks on lesbian SM by feminists was a goal that non-lesbian and non-female members of Janus could perhaps share, but they were arguably less sensitive to such issues than lesbians into SM.

Most important, it should be noted that the orientation of both Janus and Samois, far from being established once and for all at the moment of their founding, was discussed and re-negotiated at several important junctures. Thus, while Samois was a lesbian organization, there were (as early as the very first meeting) important and recurring discussions about how "to define the term lesbian (i.e., could bisexual women come to our meetings?)" (Califia 1982: 250). For the most part, "lesbian" was understood in a broad sense: although not everyone agreed with that choice, "most of us wanted Samois to be open to any woman who did S/M with other women" (Califia 1982: 266), whether or not she identified as a lesbian and whether or not she also had sex with men.

In their first meeting, GMSMA members also discussed "whether S/M lesbians could participate in this organization."[81] In the end, they decided to keep GMSMA centered on gay men, but to work closely with the Lesbian Sex Mafia (LSM)—founded in New York City around the same time by Dorothy Allison and Jo Arnone on the model of Samois (Stein 1991). On March 10, 1982, however, the group revised its initial determination. Now its members decided that women would be allowed at the general meetings (provided that they had been approved by the steering committee). On May 16, 1984, GMSMA granted honorary membership to three female members of LSM: Jo Arnone, Dorothy Allison, and Pat Califia (together with gay male SM activist and publisher Tony DeBlase, writer Larry Townsend, and artist Tom of Finland). Later, on February 24, 1988, the memberships of Pat Califia and Dorothy Allison were revoked when GMSMA and other activists (including Califia and Allison) found themselves at odds at the Dallas Conference of February 12-14, 1988.[82]

Meanwhile, GMSMA and LSM held several joint meetings. Some of those meetings were mostly political in nature: for example, on February 25, 1987, GMSMA hosted a meeting entitled "S/M and Politics: Are We the Target?" featuring GMSMA's David Stein and Jim Levin and LSM's co-coordinator Pat Califia as the main speakers.[83] Other such meetings were chiefly educational: for example, on June 16, 1982, GMSMA and LSM held a joint meeting on "Power Play: S/M and the Liberation of Gay and Lesbian

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[81] "Minutes of the (first) gay S/M support group meeting held 8/27/80. Present were Brian O., David S., John M., Noah B., Jim B." GMSMA collection, Leather Archives and Museum, Chicago.
[82] See letters to Pat Califia and Dorothy Allison by Gilbert Kessler, President of GMSMA, and Ted Heaney, Chairman, dated February 26, 1988. GMSMA Collection, Leather Archives and Museum, Chicago. On the Dallas Conference, see Stein 2011.
[83] For a detailed account of the meeting, see Newslink, Summer-Fall 1987: 3-5. The GMSMA Collection at the LAAM also contains an audio recording of the meeting.

Sexuality." But the two organizations also hosted a few workshops: for example, a flogging workshop was held on Saturday, February 16, 1985. At times, they invited each other to their respective meetings: for example, on February18, 1987, LSM invited GMSMA members to attend a flogging panel. Finally, the fact that those groups had separate organizations did not stop them from coming together at various moments. Thus, in 1985, GMSMA, LSM, and TES all participated in a fundraiser in the form of an SM Fetish Ball.

The analysis of the emergence of an SM political movement confirms the "articulatory" nature of SM political identity. Relying on structural linguistics, Laclau and Mouffe suggest that "all identity is relational" (1986: 113), which means that the field of the political is, like language for Saussure, "a system of differences *without positive terms*" (1986: 112, my emphasis). In other words, political identities are significant, not because of what they correspond to, but because of how they differ from one another. "The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity" (1986: 113, sentence emphasized in the original). This helps us understand why SM political identities are radically contingent on their context. They will vary according to the political stakes in a given time and place as well as according to what matters to practitioners at a given moment. For example, at different moments or in different contexts, SM lesbians will identify more as lesbians, or

as SM, or as feminists. Similar variations can be found among SM gays or SM heterosexuals.

SECTION II: POLITICIZING SM IDENTITIES THROUGH EQUIVALENCES

As I have said, Pat Bond's December 28, 1970 ad in *Screw* launched the creation of political movements centered around SM identity. It inaugurated the process whereby US SM practitioners detached their sexual practices from medical or moral paradigms and, through a process of re-articulation, reconfigured those practices in political terms, representing them as targets of sexual oppression.

In addition to its important role in launching the political and social movement of sadomasochists in the US, the ad is significant in another respect: the text of the ad contains information about the political logic behind Bond's initiative. It tells us, in particular, what provided Bond with, if not the impulse, then at least the means to politicize SM and to begin reconfiguring it in political terms. "There's women's lib., black lib., gay lib., etc. Isn't it time we put something together?" In his extremely succinct text, Bond cites three already existing movements and alludes to more. This highlights the role those other movements played in providing a model for, and thereby making possible, the politicization of SM. Bond's ad suggests that the politicization of an identity may depend on the availability of analogies with other identities—identities previously conceived as natural, biological, and personal that have since been politicized

by other social movements. In the concluding chapter, I will return to Laclau and Mouffe and their concept of "equivalences," and I will draw out some of the theoretical implications of the central role of analogies in the process of the politicization of identity. Here I will simply show the productivity of analogies, and of the possibility of establishing equivalences among stigmatized identities, in the context of SM politics.

Analogies provide SM activists with the means to reconfigure their situation as one of oppression. In a text entitled "Don't Close the Closet Door Just Because There's Leather Inside," which was initially published by Janus (but then quickly reprinted by TES in *Pro-Me-Thee-Us*, 12, 1981: 2, 4; and then again by Samois in "What Color Is Your Handkerchief," 1979: 26-27), Skip Aiken contrasts the respective situations of gays and of SM people in order to call the latter to do what the former have done: "While others were marching militantly out of their closets, we were urged to keep a low profile, leave our leather at home, and keep quiet about the whole business. We compliantly took off our boots, put on our sneakers, and put our best foot forward." And he adds: "The oppression we experience today is similar to that that other groups have known. Like homosexuals we are labeled 'sick.' Like women we are portrayed sensationally by the media and are denied a forum to refute the charges against us. Like all minorities we have been fragmented by shame and self-hatred." Analogies also give activists a sense of entitlement to a right to speak in their own voice and define their practices in their own terms: "Just as women have the right not to be defined by men, gays not to be defined by straights, and blacks not to be defined by whites, people invested with an SM orientation have the right not to be defined by persons whose life experiences have not provided

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them with the groundwork for digging the SM mystique" (Bond, P., 9, 1977: 11). This statement shows that standpoint epistemology, popularized by feminism, provided SM activists with a tool that they could, through analogical reasoning, use to frame their own struggle.

Analogies, notably with the gay movement, also allowed activists to derive a series of political goals for SM politics. In 1974, Pete Wilson, a (gay) member of TES, used an analogy with gay liberation to define a goal of legal change for SM activists: "Just as Gay Lib seeks to remove discriminatory anti-homosexual laws (a political effort), so all people in S/M seek to remove, for example, laws against S/M pornography of all orientations" (*P.*, 5, 1974, p. 8). Similarly, analogies with the gay movement inspired activists to adopt the campaign against pathologization as a program of struggle for the SM movement. Thus, in May 1971, Terry Kolb wrote: "Psychologists have challenged the immaturity theory in relation to homosexuality. I do not know of any who have done so in respect to masochism." Bond pursued that strategy when he wrote six years later that "alone we have had only the psychiatrist to talk to… This was also the case for gays before they organized" (1971: 62). In October 1974, recurring to a similar analogy, the founders of the Society of Janus identified the American Psychiatric Association as one of their targets and the declassification of SM as a perversion as one of their goals. In a text entitled "Effecting Social Change," published in the October 1974 Newsletter of Janus, they wrote:

> For many years our gay brothers and sisters suffered from the same discrimination, discrimination based on what a person does in the bedroom. They are still suffering, but through their own efforts their burden is slowly lifting…. In the spring of 1974 the members of the

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American Psychiatric Association approved a resolution adopting the position that homosexuality was not an illness. Through the use of the same tactics that brought about this change the gay community is beginning to change public opinion. These few steps are only a beginning, a light pointing the way…. We too can begin to effect changes. … Others have shown us it can be done (Janus's newsletter, October 1974: 3).[84]

The discrimination experienced by SM people is described as "the same" as that which "our gay brothers and sisters" experience. In the analogical process, in other words, the emphasis is put not on what is specific to SM discrimination but on what SM people have in common with others. It is that commonality which allows the politicization of SM identity. This enables the founders of Janus, after noticing that gays and lesbians have succeeded in getting homosexuality declassified as an illness, to design a project that will involve using "the same tactics." The goal of that project will be to improve the social situation of practitioners of SM by deploying the same tactics through which "the gay community is beginning to change public opinion." Success in such a venture can be hoped for, precisely because "others have shown us it can be done."

Analogies, or the notion that SM politics is a politics of oppression similar to that of other movements, do not merely provide SM activists with abstract or long term political goals. They afford immediate solutions to concrete problems in political organizing. For example, a year after the initial ad, TES had grown to the point where the meetings could no longer be hosted in members' apartments or on the 2nd floor of the Brothers and Sisters Bar & Restaurant on W. 46th Street. The organization had to find another place, and on December 4, 1971, TES held its first public forum at the Church of Holy Apostles. The reason for this choice was that the Church had provided space for other

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[84] Collection of the GLBT-Historical Society.

liberation groups, including, starting in 1970, the Gay Activists Alliance. TES would hold its bi-weekly Sunday meetings and public forums there until June 24, 1973, when they moved to the New York Mattachine Society at 59 Christopher St., where they held their first Sunday meeting on July 8, 1973. It was because TES viewed itself as analogous to homophile and gay movements that the activists went to these spaces; and it was because TES was viewed — by the Church as well as by Mattachine — as doing something analogous to what homophile and gay liberation movements were doing that they were granted access to these spaces.

Last, but not least, it is through analogies that activists designed techniques for politicizing their identity. As Slater and Olsen wrote in 1974, "Through observation of the tools and techniques employed by the various liberation movements we are trying to provide the same for devotees of S&M."[85] Carl Wittnebert, Janus's coordinator in 1975, further specified: "it is time for S&M people to make themselves heard, to develop organizations to further their interests, and to practice the consciousness raising activities which have worked so well for other liberation movements."[86] Thus, consciousness-raising, which was invented by second-wave feminists (Sarachild 1968; Sarachild 1975) in order to bring women to an awareness that they were oppressed, was used by several SM organizations for the same purpose of re-conceptualizing SM from a question of individual maladjustment to one of systemic and structural oppression. At TES, the first CR group was led by Pete Wilson, a gay liberationist. For the first few years, "the true

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[85] Cited from the 1974 letter, signed by Olsen and Slater, sent to those who contacted Janus (Collection of Gayle Rubin).
[86] Cited from the 1975 letter, signed by Wittnebert, sent to those who contacted Janus (Collection of Gayle Rubin).

business of TES" (as Larry Rosàn, a gay member of TES, put it in *P.*, 4, 1974: 2) would occur in the weekly CR groups — "the backbone of our Society" (according to Bond, *P.*, 7, 1976: 41). However, later, "we set up the weekly meetings to accommodate people who could not commit themselves to attending a consciousness raising group every week. Gradually, the weekly general meeting came to be the focus of our activities to which most people came." When announcing a new CR group in 1976, Bond wrote that he was "quite gratified that at least one c.r. group will now be going forward" (*P.*, 7, 1976: 41.)

It is important to note, however, that CR is not in and of itself a guarantee of politicization. In feminism, while it was initially a critical tool for bringing women to an awareness that their "personal" problems were in fact the result of systemic and political patterns of oppression and inequality, it was also critiqued as "navel-gazing" and "therapy" (Echols 1989: 47) and as an activity "result[ing] only in more consciousness-raising, never in action" (Echols 1989: 148). This changing assessment of CR was also visible in SM organizations. In the early years, according to Pete Wilson, CR had three goals (*P.*, Introductory Issue, 1973: 6). The first was "to chart the geography of our sexuality; on the individual level and also as a 'sexual minority' sharing a general orientation": thus, an important aspect consisted in defining what constituted the identity of the group. The second goal was "to free ourselves from guilt or conflict," so that "we can stop worrying about the causes of our desires, and can look instead at the causes of our guilt or conflict about them": CR served the purpose of helping SM practitioners reassess the values of the society in which they lived. Finally, a third goal was cathartic: "appreciating our sexual orientation can lead us to be less manipulative of other people."

In order to explain this third goal, Wilson opposes roles in society to roles in SM play: "Continually saying 'While you're up, honey, get me a drink,' in a supposedly equal and non-role-playing relationship, is manipulative and causes justified resentment. But the more each partner freely and appreciatively defines his/her own role, the less room and the less need there is, hopefully, for manipulation. And thus, hopefully, the more real equality."[87]

By the early 1980s, however, the purposes of CR in SM organizations had changed. Thus, on November 17, 1981, Janus members launched a new CR, co-chaired by members Josh and Betsy, which came to a close on March 23, 1982. In two articles he wrote about the CR in *Growing Pains*,[88] the newsletter of the organization, Josh certainly reused the "political" definition of CR. For example, he insisted that "if you don't believe that SM people are an oppressed community, *oy,* do *you* need to have your C R'ed!" (*GP*, April 1982, p. 9, emphasis in the original), thereby suggesting that CR was about becoming aware of one's oppression. But in spite of this survival of the political definition of CR, it was clear that CR had become about self-transformation rather than social transformation. "What I think 'consciousness' is," Josh wrote, "is self-awareness, awareness of your existence in the world and your interaction with it. By 'raising' it, I mean examining your conditioned habit and behavior patterns, as well as the intellectual and emotional assumptions we usually accept as 'givens.' It is thinking about the ways in which we think" (*GP*, Nov 1981, p. 9). To be sure, the CR experience led Josh to realize

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[87] On the discursive equation of SM with progressive discourses in early SM liberation discourses, see Section III below.

[88] From 1974 to June 1975, Janus's newsletter was simply called "The Society of Janus." After June 1975, it adopted the name "Growing Pains" (hereafter referred to as *GP*.).

"that deviance is just an arbitrary label." However, this realization no longer led to political struggle and to changing the world. Rather, the emphasis now fell on how CR would help activists navigate the world with more self-confidence and comfort. Josh said he felt "more secure about coming out to people," more "comfortable about aspects of my sexuality" that were less acceptable and "with people whose sexuality was less 'SM mainstream'" (*GP*, April 1982, p. 9). The emphasis was now on the personal rather than the political.

The important role of analogies in the SM political movement underscores the extent to which identity politics performs the crucial task of politicizing identities that once had been only social identities or medical categories. Identity politics is best understood not as the always already self-evident politics of an identity, but as a process of the politicization (and hence transformation) of an identity. The usual critique that identity politics necessarily implies a Balkanization of progressive politics seems reductive. At least in some contexts, identity politics actually allows for a multiplication of sites of struggle, transforming what Laclau and Mouffe describe as "relations of subordination" into "relations of oppression," *i.e.* "sites of antagonism" where the oppressed speak back (Laclau and Mouffe 1986: 153-54). I further theorize this shift in the conclusive chapter. Let me just note for now that the first condition for speaking back consists in reframing one's situation of social subordination into a situation of political oppression.

One question that arose quickly for SM activists was how to find a positive self-denomination. In order "to avoid the opprobrium of the terminology and to get away from the stigma of aberrance" (as Gerald and Caroline Greene put it in their 1973 *S-M: The Last Taboo*), many chose to avoid the words "sadists" and "masochists." Thus, in the early years of TES, the terms of choice were "M" and "S." But they were not the only ones. Other alternatives to the terms "sadomasochism" or "sadist" and "masochist" have included BDSM, SM, DS, Sensuality and Mutuality, Sex Magic, leather, leathersex, spiritual ritual play, or radical sex.

To the extent that they were trying to avoid reusing "a word whose origin and history is one of medical dysfunction and psychopathology" (as photographer Mark Chester put it in a 2014 interview for *The Leather Journal*),[89] SM activists' problem was analogous to that encountered by activists who, a few years earlier, had been relatively successful in replacing the word "homosexual" with the words "gay" and "lesbian." SM activists and practitioners, however, could never come up with one hegemonic term that would be accepted by all (as the terms "gay" and "lesbian" largely were at least until the early 1990s, when the word "queer" was increasingly adopted as an alternative).

But there was also another dimension, more specific to SM, of the terminology problem. It had to do with the popular use of the terms sadist to denote monstrous and criminal

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[89] The interview is not yet published. Cited with the permission of the author.

behaviors.[90] Thus, in 1974, Stan, a TES member, wrote a piece in *Pro-Me-Thee-Us* (4, 1974: 26-28) in which he suggested relinquishing the term "sadist." A sadist, he argued, is "a rapist; a torturer; a brutal, inhuman monster; an insensitive, unfeeling thug." And he added: "As a matter of fact, I do not consider myself a sadist in the contemporary vernacular sense." The piece, entitled "I'm an S, not a Sadist," was quickly reprinted in *Growing Pains* (vol. 1, 10, June 15, 1975). Others privileged the opposite strategy and reclaimed the words "sadist" and "masochist." At the end of Stan's article, the editors printed a note: "As readers may be aware, many members of Eulenspiegel prefer to use the term 'sadist' only in a positive sexual sense, denoting one who pursues an S/M art with a consenting partner, reserving other terms such as 'rapist' to mean someone who violates another without that person's consent and willing participation" (28). Using a similar strategy, J.S., a Samois activist, wrote that "Sm does not properly refer to murder, rape, wife beating, child abuse, political repression and torture or any other violence or cruelty,"[91] thereby reclaiming the term "sm" and opposing its negative connotations. Whatever the choices were, it is clear that politicizing SM forced activists to rethink and question the definition of their sexual identity and the semiotics of their sexual practices.

From the perspective of political SM, the labeling question was of critical importance, because it pointed to what seemed to many outside the movement a paradox in SM liberation: the fact that a sexuality based on the eroticization of domination/submission

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[90] This problem dates back to the very origin of the word "sadism." The word is derived from the name of the Marquis de Sade, whose works mix acts of abominable cruelty and erotic pleasure. When, in one of the earliest forensic studies of "sadism" and "masochism" (which were not unified as a single category of "sadomasochism" until Freud), Krafft-Ebing analyzes "sadists," most of his examples are derived from criminal behaviors, many of which do not involve any sexual practice at all.

[91] J.S., "SM and Feminism: One View," typescript, n. d., Collection of Gayle Rubin.

and on restraints could advocate and stand for liberation. One of the earliest articulations

of this paradox surfaced immediately after the creation of TES, in the weeks following

the first meeting after Bond published the initial ad in *Screw*. As Bond recalled in 1973

(*P.*, Introductory Issue: 20): "We tried to run this same ad in the *Voice* [*The Village

Voice*] and got a peremptory rejection, which Terry took up as a civil liberties issue…

The woman in charge of ads, when confronted, first simply said, 'We don't take ads

about masochism.'" As a result of this opposition from *The Village Voice*, Terry Kolb

started organizing, protesting, and insisted on talking to different people at the *Voice*. On

March 18, 1971, *Voice* columnist Howard Smith wrote about his exchanges with "a

group spokesman (who asked to remain anonymous, afraid of on-the-job

repercussions)"[92]:

> Masochists Lib? It seems like a contradiction in terms: why would a
> masochist want to be liberated? Can someone whose sexual ideal is pain
> and humiliation really desire social freedom and acceptance? Obvious
> twists come to mind: they announce a demonstration, and then register a
> complaint against the police for handling the thing with insufficient
> brutality. Or they stage a counter-demonstration when a neighborhood
> group protests the rising number of muggings in the area. And what could
> their slogan be? Beatings are Beautiful?
> But it's happened: the Eulenspiegel Society has been formed. (…)
> Most members have been in therapy, and a major Eulenspiegel gripe is the
> fact that psychiatrists usually try to cure them, whereas they want people
> to accept their sexual masochism as something positive, although
> "masochist pride" seems another total contradiction in terms (at least to
> me).

In spite of their tongue-in-cheek tone, Smith's comments posed a real challenge to TES

activists. Smith questions the very meaning or possibility of a masochist liberation

movement. In the next fifteen years, the same objection (among others) will be raised

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[92] Although he used the word "spokesman," Smith identified his interlocutor as a female but did not refer to
Terry Kolb by name (which suggests that she had not started using the pseudonym yet).

over and over again to SM activists by opponents who affirm the incompatibility of SM and emancipatory politics.

In pointing to the internal contradictions he saw in a masochist liberation movement, Smith prompted SM activists to reconceptualize SM in order to make it compatible with leftist politics. Two months later, on May 13, 1971, the *Voice* published (5, 62) what would come to be considered an "unofficial position paper" (Bond, *P.*, 8, 1977, p. 2) for TES. The text, penned by Terry Kolb (likely the first public occurrence of her pseudonym), was titled (by the *Voice* – Bond, *P*, 8, 1977: 2) "Masochist's Lib." It was reprinted in *Pro-Me-Thee-Us* (3, 1974: 39-41) as well as, later, in Samois's "What Color Is Your Handkerchief" (1979: 19-22).[93] In the opening lines, Kolb explicitly and earnestly addressed Smith's tongue-in-cheek reservations:

> Why a masochist's lib organization? A good question, since "liberation" is somehow antithetical to the masochist's ideal of bondage, suffering, and humiliation. And yet, the Eulenspiegel Society has been formed and I seem to find myself as 'spokeswoman,' so I must have an answer both for myself and for others. (5)

Kolb's article simultaneously deploys two discourses to describe SM in positive terms. One had a long history. The other was new.

A first strain in the argument consists in countering descriptions of masochists as degenerate with a notion that masochism is in fact a sign of spiritual or intellectual superiority. Using an anecdote about a conversation she had had with a lesbian friend,

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[93] In the intervening years, Kolb moved to the West Coast and became erotically involved with women; she was, in fact, a member of Samois (personal communication).

who said about sex ads, "But they are not really helping *these poor people*" (emphasis in the original), Kolb comments:

> The people I have met through the ads and in the Eulenspiegel Society were usually well educated and almost always highly intelligent — in original rather than in sterile stereotyped ways. This applies to sadists as well as masochists. Many of us work in conservative business firms and you would never guess our secret if you were to meet us on the job. More frequently, we are into socially oriented fields — we are teachers, social workers, therapists, etc. The highest number of us are creative, however — successful and struggling writers, composers, musicians and painters. Since joining the Eulenspiegel Society, I have developed a marvelous self-image by discovering who my "fellow degenerates" are (5).

Far from stopping at those empirical observations about SM practitioners, Kolb extends them, drawing a direct line between intellectual strength and SM:

> Surprising as it may seem, the high intellectual character of many masochists is only to be expected when you consider how intellectual the s/m mystique really is. Reik states categorically that a person with a weakly developed imagination cannot become a masochist (5).

In sum, Kolb is not content with countering her lesbian friend's notion that masochists are "poor people" with an empirical observation that those she has met are successful and creative professionals. She also advances a normative notion that SM in itself is connected to "highly intellectual" activities, because masochism requires a highly developed imagination — or, as she puts it later on, "masochism is a highly developed and sophisticated form of sexual expression." This places masochism "at odds with the Freudian notion of 'infantilism.'" The notion that Kolb inherits from Reik can in fact be traced back even further, to Havelock Ellis who thought that masochism "very frequently affects persons of a sensitive, refined, and artistic temperament" (Ellis, 1942, Part II, p. 112; cited in Rubin 1994: 446).

But in addition to that argument against degeneracy, which already had a long history,

Kolb introduces a new articulation:

> Let us clear up certain misconceptions about masochism. Not all forms of suffering are pleasurable to any masochist. We each have our pet ways of enjoying our misery. These ways will vary considerably from one individual to another. No two masochists are alike. We are not really "passive" either, although that is a favorite word we use. We all want to dictate the terms under which we will be treated as passive objects. (…)
> The conclusion is that there is no inconsistency whatsoever in a masochist wishing to alter the conditions of society so that he is not the really helpless victim of social repression. We desire the same freedoms other people desire and are enraged when forced to assume an inferior status against our will.

For Kolb and for other masochist liberationists, the stakes of this debate were extremely high. The discussion was ultimately about whether SM sexuality is compatible with a desire for social and political freedom—or whether SM Liberation is "a contradiction in terms," as Smith assumed. Smith's argument relies, according to Kolb, on "misconceptions." In order to make her claim, she redefined SM. Smith's equation of the violence caused by the police or by muggings with that sought by masochists prompted Kolb to disarticulate those different "forms of suffering" and to assert the radical irreducibility of SM to other forms of violence.[94]

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[94] In the opening lines of his 1982 *Fag Rag* article, "Whips, Welts, Chains & Bruises As Acts of Revolution," Charley Shively makes a similar distinction: "while two FBI agents watch, a Black transit policeman (son of a Christian minister) opens fire on the Ramrod Bar where Christopher Street meets the Hudson River. Two queers are killed; six wounded. About ten years ago when I was in that bar, which had a different name but the same milieu, two lovers went into the men's room where one beat the shit out of the other; they returned to the bar with the bruised boy looking very satisfied. The contrasts between the two — between the killer-cop and the happy boys, between the fear and the realization, the wish and the act — is it 'H-A-T-E' & 'L-O-V-E'? — have been muddled, purposely muddled in order to mystify and perpetuate a division to our great disadvantage" (Shively 1982: 13).

But she also goes one step further. One might have expected her to use this opportunity to sever the direct line drawn by Smith (and by most radicals of the time) between sexual subjectivity and politics. She could have argued that there is no continuity between the eroticizing of unequal power relationships in a sexual context, for purposes of mutual gratification and in a consensual manner, and the inflicting of social violence on non-consenting victims. But instead of breaking the link between sexual and political subjectivities, she simply reverses its direction. Exactly in the way she moved from an argument that there is no contradiction between SM and mental health to an argument that SM is a superior form of the imagination, she now moves from an argument that there is no contradiction between SM and leftist politics to an argument that SM is a superior form of leftist politics.

> In the eyes of the public, a sado-masochistic scene is a very sordid affair with a "sex fiend" brutalizing an equally weird victim. It is seen as a scene without sensitivity or any aesthetic feeling. The exact opposite is the case. The s/m relationship is the most democratic that exists. Yes, democratic!

What is so remarkable about this statement is that in order to counter the widely shared normative understanding of SM that stereotypically links it to oppressive behaviors ("fiend," "brutalizing," "without sensitivity or any aesthetic feeling"), Kolb advances a rival normative interpretation of SM based, this time, not on a spiritual or intellectual considerations, but on political ones. Kolb is not content with simply dis-articulating SM from social violence and re-articulating it as *a* "democratic" practice; instead, she insists that it is "the most democratic that exists." In response to a view that evaluates sexual practices in terms of their implicit politics in order to condemn SM, Kolb maintains the

link between sex and politics but reverses the valuation, arguing that SM is not only politically progressive but that it represents the vanguard of democratic politics.

At this point, in 1971, the new political valorization of SM in progressive terms is relatively inchoate. By 1973, however, the same Terry Kolb will have developed it further. In the first issue of *Pro-Me-Thee-Us* (1973, 1), she has an article entitled "Here and Now" in which she conceptualizes masochism as a political weapon against oppression:

> I am oppressed by society in many ways. As a woman I am oppressed. As a mental "patient" I am oppressed. As a child I was oppressed. As a masochist I am oppressed. And that's just scratching the surface. My fantasies read like a script for guerilla theater. They dramatize the absurdities of my oppression. In so doing, they provide a rich source of political consciousness raising…. Through masochism, I turn my very real oppression into a source of pleasure and I also provide myself with material which can be used to probe the nature of oppression at an even deeper level than is possible to others (18).

Kolb, as we see, reproduces the politicization of SM identity according to which masochists are oppressed and not sick. But she also moves one step further. She does not simply argue that SM is democratic; rather, she re-configures masochistic fantasies as a point of departure for political analysis and, thus, as a tool for consciousness-raising and for fighting against oppressive social structures. Acting out those fantasies turns "my very real oppression into a source of pleasure," but not in a way that will make her fetishize her very real oppression. On the contrary, it puts her in the position of a political vanguard: her masochism provides her with "material" that enables her to challenge oppression "at an even deeper level than is possible to others."

In a 1974 panel, Pete Wilson elaborated further on this insight. TES activist Larry Rosán wrote in his account of the panel:

> Gay Lib, Pete suggested, forces a redefinition of what constitutes "masculinity" or "femininity," and liberates these terms from any necessary connection with heterosexuality. Similarly, S/M Lib seeks to analyze the meaning of "power relationships" and distinguishes those which are merely social conventions from those built upon fundamental psychological needs; in so doing, it liberates us from attachment to war or other manifestations in which the S/M element is still primitive and un-self aware (*P.*, 5, 1974, p. 8).

Wilson is here using an analogy with homosexuality to argue that what gay liberation does for gender roles, SM liberation does for power. Drawing on the naturalist ontology of human beings widespread in 1970s radical circles, Wilson distinguishes, like Kolb two years earlier, power relations that are "merely social conventions" from "those built upon fundamental psychological needs." Not only is SM Liberation not a "contradiction in terms," as Smith believed, but in fact, here again, it contests oppressive power relations, inasmuch as it "seeks to analyze the meaning of 'power relationships.'" Once again, the assumption that SM is contradictory with progressive, liberationist politics gets inverted: SM is in fact a major force for liberation insofar as it "liberates us" from such "primitive and un-self aware" manifestations of power relations as war. Far from being complicit with social conventions and political domination, it is, in fact, a *critique* of power: just as homosexuality illuminates the conventional status of gender roles, showing that they have little to do with nature, so SM illuminates the artificiality of political domination.

This redefinition of SM was central to the discourses on SM that came to be taken up and embraced by many SM practitioners in the period. Canadian radical activist and SM

practitioner Ian Young, for example, wrote in 1979: "While the dynamics of S/M may reinforce the categorization of sex and sex roles I think it is more likely to break them down." Charley Shively would reiterate that view in 1982: "In so sharply defining who is on top and who on the bottom, S&M encounters actually subvert the class/gender social structure. The dispossessed openly negotiate their dispossession; masters blatantly reveal their dominion… in making the rule so elastic… S&M openly eroticizes power, makes it public, sexual and thus changes both its silences and its domain" (1982: 16).

Like Kolb in her 1971 text, Wilson is trying to work out a positive way of conceiving the relations between SM liberation and the struggle against oppressive structures and behaviors—structures and behaviors that SM scenes often mimic. However, in the three intervening years between Kolb's first text and Wilson's, the argument has slightly shifted. In 1971, Kolb sought to prove that masochism was not incompatible with leftist politics, was even the highest form of democratic politics. Wilson's argument, like Kolb's 1973 elaboration of her earlier position, is that masochism is fundamentally progressive, because it provides a tool against right-wing politics.

Of course, it is always possible to criticize such descriptions for their naïve belief that SM is incompatible with right-wing politics or with war. But the truth of the matter is not the chief point of interest here. For my purposes, what needs to be understood is not whether this new political valorization of SM is right or wrong but how it was arrived at—or "articulated"—and what it accomplishes.

In fact, what we have before us is a remarkable process. An initial, hostile articulation of SM to conservative (broadly defined) politics by left-liberal outsiders forced SM activists to dis-articulate SM from right-wing politics. Such a dis-articulation could not happen *ex nihilo*: instead, SM apologists use the tools available to them in their context in order to achieve it. In other words, they have recourse to another, pre-existing articulation: the articulation of homosexuality and sexual deviance to leftist politics. From there, through an analogy between SM and other deviant sexual practices, they re-articulate SM—but, this time, they articulate it to progressive political practices. Put differently: those articulations of sexual deviance to leftist politics provide them with leverage to disarticulate SM from right-wing politics. SM is thus redefined, in Charley Shively's terms, as "an act of revolution" (1982). This inversion of the existing, punitive political valence of SM by the leaders of a SM political identity movement is what I propose to call a "counter-articulation."

The new representation of SM as inherently progressive was also a way for SM activists to make room for SM identity at the table of left-wing politics. Thus, on June 16, 1974, on the strength of the argument for SM as a source of liberation, Kolb brought together "probably the most varied and advanced collection of different liberationists ever assembled in one place" (*P*, 5, 1974: 7) in order to discuss the topic of "S/M compared with Other Liberation Movements" (*P*, 9, 1977: 9, 25). In addition to two TES representatives (Kolb and Wilson), the panel featured radical feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson and two representatives from the Mental Patients' Liberation Project (MPLP). Not all the panelists shared TES's views on SM: in her comments, which would later be published

under the title "Why I'm Against S/M Liberation,"[95] Atkinson reiterated the view that SM had "some inner contradiction as a 'political/liberation movement.'" But the point is that the reconfiguration of SM gave activists an effective ground on which to engage practically with other liberation movements.

It was by reconfiguring SM as political through SM identity political organizations that SM folks succeeded in taking other liberation groups, notably feminist and gay and lesbian organizations, as interlocutors. This gave SM activists a sense of entitlement and it forced other groups to engage with SM liberation. Later SM groups would build on that initial foundation. It grounded the notion that Janus should take part in the 1978 Gay Freedom Day Parade in San Francisco, to which it contributed a small SM contingent.[96] It was also on that basis that TES gained the opportunity to participate in the New York City Gay Pride Parade in June 1981—which it did with a certain sense of humor. Leo notes in his account that "there were cheers from feminists in the crowd when a submissive male kissed the feet of a dominant mistress to whose waist he was attached by a dog collar" (*P.*, 12, 1981: 11). In 1981, Samois demanded on the same basis to be given access to the Women's Building of the Bay Area (Califia 1982: 279-280; Rubin 2011 [1981]: 124).[97] Similarly, when the original board of the Gay and Lesbian Community Center in New York refused to rent space to GMSMA, the group's President, Richard

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[95] Reprinted in Linden *et al.* 1982: 90-92.

[96] The participation of Janus was denounced by some of the Parade organizers, who opposed the open display of leather and SM in the Parade.

[97] Samois was denied access to the building. The Women's Building adopted a policy banning the rental of space to S/M groups. That policy was rescinded many years after Samois had disbanded, largely through the work of the activists of The Outcasts, which succeeded Samois (see Rubin 2011: 324, n. 16).

Hocutt, confronted them in public and GMSMA was finally allowed to use the Center's facilities.[98]

Integrating SM into the political framework provided by other liberation movements also forced SM activists to reflect on the relation of their movement to those other movements. Some of the relations they saw then appear strange now, in retrospect, largely because they reflected embryonic attempts at creating a linkage that has not been systematically maintained or elaborated in the intervening years. For example, in 1978 TES gay activist Larry Rosán made an argument that vegetarianism and SM liberation were deeply connected (*P.* 10, 1978: 19, 21). Another ally was the Mental Patients' Liberation Project (*P.* 5, 1874: 2). In exploring their relations to other movements, activists were led to reflect on differences and similarities among various movements. In 1979 Larry Rosán wrote a piece entitled "Liberation: Is It All One – Or Separate?" (*P.* 11, 1979: 2, 4) in which he distinguished between "two very different kinds of liberation movements": one type corresponds to the groups that are "almost always visible" (such as Black Liberation) and the other to those who "are rarely so unless they choose to be" (such as Gay Liberation). Having acknowledged the differences and tensions among various movements, Rosán went on to make the claim that they were all connected in spite of their differences: he wanted to show "how *all* liberation movements are premised upon *one and the same* foundation." That foundation, according to Rosán, was consent

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[98] See letter of Richard A. Hocutt to the Board of Directors of the Lesbian and Gay Community Center dated October 20, 1983 in which Hocutt thanks the Board for accepting to rent the first floor auditorium to GMSMA. The auditorium was not equipped to accommodate the large attendance of GMSMA's meetings and Hocutt pointedly notes: "I would also remind you that it was necessary for GMSMA to purchase chairs for the space, which we are making available to other groups using the first floor" (GMSMA, Collection of the Leather Archives and Museum in Chicago).

and the removal of "all obstacles" to consent. By this, he meant that "each individual is, and should remain, an autonomous ('self-governing') entity whose needs and desires are to be entirely dictated by his/her own consciousness (including his/her possible need to be dominated by another)."

While the relevance of his claim was rooted in SM experience, Rosán articulated it in such a way that it could be generalized to other liberation movements:

> Specifically, this means that, (1) conventional attitudes about "race," ethnic type, nationality, religious/cultural difference, etc., and that, (2) conventional attitudes about gender roles, sexual 'morality,' sexual behavior, etc., should in no way be allowed to interfere with this pure, innate freedom of each person's consciousness (2).

It would be easy, once again, to highlight the naiveté of Rosán's attempt to bring all liberation movements together under one single umbrella. But it would be a mistake to overlook the importance of his effort to theorize the basis for building coalitions among different liberation or identity political movements. By connecting SM liberation to other liberation movements, he transforms and effectively radicalizes SM. Rosàn argues that "Eulenspiegel is basically committed to 'an-archism'/libertarianism," thereby making explicit the linkage of TES with a broader, radical, political stance.

The linkage of SM to libertarianism and anarchism, what Thomas Pynchon once called "sado-anarchism," was to be made again in the following years, notably by gay men.[99] As

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[99] See *Gravity's Rainbow*: "'Ludwig, a little S and M never hurt anybody.' 'Who said that?' 'Sigmund Freud. How do I know? But why are we taught to feel reflexive whenever the subject comes up? Why will the Structure allow every other kind of sexual behavior but *that* one? Because submission and dominance are resources it needs for its very survival. They cannot be wasted in private sex. In *any* kind of sex. It needs our submission so that it may remain in power. It needs our lusts after dominance so that it can co-

early as 1979, Canadian activist Ian Young noted in a "Forum on Sadomasochism" (published in Karla Jay and Allen Young's *Lavender Culture*), "I think it is significant that among the people I know in the gay movement that have been most outspoken in pro S&M attitudes to one degree or another (I'm thinking of Pete Wilson, Charles Pitts, Fred Halsted, Mikhail Itkin, Larry Townsend, Charley Shively, myself) all of us, with the exception of Larry, are anarchists or libertarians!" (103-104).[100] In terms less politically defined, Geoff Mains also argued in his 1984 book *Urban Aboriginals* that "many leathermen share a basic sense of equality and are distrustful of power-seeking in others" (2002 [1984]: 80).

Bringing SM to the table of leftist politics forced SM activists to elaborate further on the politics of SM in relation to the political positions taken by members of the other movements. It is often argued that identity politics leads to a narcissistic Olympics of oppression and to the ignorance or neglect of other oppressions. In 1974, writing the

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opt us into its own power game. There is no joy in it, only power. I tell you, if S and M could be established universally, at the family level, the State would wither away.' This is Sado-anarchism…" (1973: 737).

[100] Pete Wilson was the TES activist already mentioned. Charles Pitts is a New York-based gay announcer who had shows on WBAI in the 1960s and WNCN in the 1970s. Fred Halsted was a porn artist and filmmaker, who directed the famous *L.A. Plays Itself* in 1972 (see William E. Jones's 2011 book *Halsted Plays Himself*). Mikhail Itkin (also known as Saint Mikhail of California after he was canonized by the Moorish Orthodox Church in America) was a gay radical, one of the founders of the Gay Church movement from the 1960s; he was also a bishop in The Order of the Divine Love. Larry Townsend, based in Los Angeles, was the author, among many other works, of the pathbreaking *Leatherman's Handbook* in 1972. Charley Shively is a retired professor of American Studies at the University of Massachusetts (Boston) and the author of several semi-historical books about Walt Whitman's sex life; in the 1970s, he was also a gay radical activist, a founder of the Boston-based gay anarchist paper *Fag Rag* and a frequent contributor to *Gay Sunshine*; in *Fag Rag*, he authored a series of texts about various sexual acts described as acts of revolution ("Cocksucking as an Act of Revolution," "Indiscriminate Promiscuity as an Act of Revolution," etc.) including, in 1982, " Whips, Welts, Chains and Bruises as Acts of Revolution" (*Fag Rag*, 12th Anniversary Issue, 1982: 13-20). Ian Young is a Canadian writer, gay radical, and SM activist; he was a frequent contributor to the Toronto-based gay liberation newspaper *The Body Politic* as well as to various US gay radical newspapers such as *Gay Community News* and *Gay Sunshine*; in Karla Jay and Allen Young's (ed.) 1979 *Lavender Culture*, he took part in a "Forum on Sadomasochism" in which four contributors wrote separate answers to the same questions; Young and Lyn Rosen articulated defenses of SM, whereas John Stoltenberg and Rose Jordan denounced it.

editorial of *Pro-Me-Thee-Us* (5, 1974: 2-3)*,* Larry Rosán offered a different model, describing in the opening of his article the proliferation of identity political movements as the emergence of a "symphony of Liberation music."

> Suppose there's a family with two dictatorial parents and seven very oppressed children. If one child says "I can't stand it any longer; I'm gonna run away," the parents may reply, "So, — Run!" But if all seven children pack their bags, then changes *will* be made! Similarly for the contemporary liberation movements: Black Lib, Amerindian Lib, Women's Lib, Gay Lib — though crying out with different voices, having different needs, the principle behind all of them is the same, and if and when they can cry out all together, they too will make a mighty noise, and not discordant, but a mutually supportive harmony, a "symphony of Liberation music" (emphasis in the original).

While acknowledging the differences among the various identity political movements he invokes (Black Lib, Amerindian Lib, Women's Lib, Gay Lib, and SM Lib), and while listening to their "different voices," Rosán also constructs points of convergence among them, claiming that "the principle behind all of them is the same." For Rosán, in the "symphony of Liberation music," two sections were crucial: the Mental Patients' Liberation Project (MPLP) and TES. It is noticeable that the movements he describes as crucial were arguably the least legitimate in the eyes of the Left at the time (as well as now) and also had the shortest historical longevity behind them. MPLP was important to Rosán because it offered valuable insights that could be extended to other movements: "when we realize that even the sanity/insanity dichotomy is only relative to the individual or at most to some social segment of time and place, we can see how every attitude to life, social role, or momentary value is also relative." TES was crucial because of its "championing of the most extreme (voluntary) acts."

Despite emphasizing the special value of MPLP and TES, however, Rosán does not imply that they should represent a priority for all activists or that they are somehow more urgent than other liberations. Instead, Rosán's argument evokes the one made by the Black lesbians in the Combahee statement of April 1977, when they asserted: "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression" (240). Rosán does not claim that SM liberation requires, or will result in, the destruction of all other systems of oppression; nor does he claim that SM people occupy the "position at the bottom." But like the Combahee activists speaking about the liberation of Black women, he describes MPLP and TES as having far-reaching consequences and implying the liberation of the whole of mankind: "If a person could accept the premises of both MPLP and Eulenspiegel, would he even raise an eyebrow at black or women's or gay liberation?!"

This emphasis on the specific value of SM liberation, a move typical of identity politics, could be seen as carrying the risk of splitting the progressive coalition and balkanizing leftist politics. But Rosán's metaphor of the "symphony of liberation" once again plays on a dialectical relation of difference and similarity to suggest on the contrary that new liberation movements add more instruments and more voices to an orchestra performing the same piece of music. In political terms, the proliferation of identity political movements does not so much, on this view, balkanize left-wing politics as it allows for a multiplication of sites of political struggle. The result could be to create sites of political dialogue, confrontation, and collaboration among different groups that would otherwise not have interacted. Calling SM activists to join TES (instead of some other, mainstream

political organization) does not therefore imply a fragmentation of the Left; instead, it means transforming SM into a site of political struggle and calling on SM practitioners to join the Left. As Rosán puts it,

> let us Eulenspiegelers exult; let us S/M devotees make a joyful noise. For our fascinatingly extreme sadomasochistic scenes are not only celebrations of our own mystique, but also definite *political* acts — assertions of our basic freedom in the face of lingering but mythic garbage-ideas. And our joyful noise will soon be understood as one of the most important and powerful instruments in the "liberation-group orchestra" as it plays the ever-mounting crescendo of the "liberation symphony" (*P.*, 5, 1974: 3, emphasis in the original).

SECTION IV: RE-ARTICULATING SEX AND POLITICS

SM activists' reconfiguration of their sexual practices as political, and their linking of SM to struggles for human liberation, prompted in turn new questions about SM as a sexual practice. Throughout the 1970s, the affirmation by activists that their sexuality was not incompatible with liberation was in fact a response to the increasing focalization on, and stigmatization of, SM on the part of many feminists, gays, and lesbians, as well as in the society at large. It may even be the case that the big leather and SM coming out of the 1970s helped generate controversies over and hostility to SM, particularly as homosexuality became more accepted by the left and became a less acceptable target for attack by progressives. While the old medicalizing and moralizing representations of SM as sick or degenerate did not by any means disappear, they were increasingly supplemented by a new critique which surfaced and blossomed among radicals. The new critique treated SM not as a sign of pathology, but as an erotic manifestation of a lurking

political danger. The fact that SM largely relies on the eroticization of behaviors and structures viewed as oppressive in other political and social contexts made it an easy target. The accelerating political problematization of SM by critics on the Left provided a unique impetus to some SM activists to refine a radical understanding of the relations between sex and politics.

In this section, I briefly trace the emergence of an increasing anxiety around SM in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I analyze in particular the processes through which in certain leftist discourses SM came to be interpreted as a fascist or Nazi sexual practice. In that context, the re-configuration of SM as a radical practice that earlier activists had elaborated, re-deploying for the purpose certain tools they had borrowed from other liberation movements, left SM practitioners vulnerable to the possibility that their sexuality and fantasies would be evaluated on political grounds. Thus, any explicit, politically-themed stage machinery used by SM practitioners in their sexual scenes could easily be connected to the outside world of politics and be taken literally as reenactments or commemorations of that politics or signs of complicity with it. The persistent critique by the Left of the politically-themed theatricality of SM scenes led SM practitioners to assert repeatedly that (in the words of Geoff Mains) "The act of coming to grips with role play and other forms of instinctive motivation that underlie human behaviour is by no means endorsement of either their rigidity or applicability in general human affairs" (2002 [1984]: 79). Finally, I show how SM identity politics provided a context in which SM activists, specifically SM lesbians, were able to re-elaborate the radical articulation of sex and politics and offer a new understanding of sexual politics.

Throughout the late 1970s and the early 1980s, SM was increasingly linked with fascism by progressive intellectuals, just as homosexuality had been in earlier periods (and still was, although that discourse was increasingly countered by a discourse articulating it instead to revolutionary politics). The tendency of articulating SM to fascism was extremely visible in European cinema where it came to function as a supplement to, or a replacement of, an earlier frequent articulation of homosexuality to fascism (for example in Costa-Gavras's 1969 *Z* or Bernardo Bertolucci's 1970 *The Conformist*). Thus, after having celebrated instinctual liberation as revolutionary in his 1967 movie *Teorema*, Italian poet, playwright, and movie director Pier Paolo Pasolini, in what was to be his last film, *Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom*, released after his death in 1975, insistently suggested that sexual liberation led to the right to inflict pain on others and to derive pleasure from it. In other words, instinctual liberation was now equated with sadism and then, in turn, with fascism. Liliana Cavani's 1974 film *The Night Porter*, by depicting an SM relationship between two characters who had been, during World War II, in the same concentration camp—he as a warden, she as a prisoner—made similar insinuations.

In her 1975 "Fascinating Fascism," published in the *New York Review of Books*, Susan Sontag offered one of the clearest examples of an articulation of fascism and SM. Focusing on the esthetics of fascism, she linked the images of German Nazi photographer Leni Riefenstahl and SS regalia. From there, because she viewed leather outfits as reminiscent of Nazi uniforms, she described SM eroticism as profoundly linked with fascism:

In pornographic literature, films, and gadgetry throughout the world, especially in the United States, England, France, Japan, Scandinavia, Holland, and Germany, the SS has become a reference of sexual adventurism. Much of the imagery of far-out sex has been placed under the sign of Nazism. More or less Nazi costumes with boots, leather, chains, Iron Crosses on gleaming torsos, swastikas, have become, along with meat hooks and heavy motorcycles, the secret and most lucrative paraphernalia of eroticism. In the sex shops, the baths, the leather bars, the brothels, people are dragging out their gear. But why? Why has Nazi Germany, which was a sexually repressive society, become erotic? How could a regime which persecuted homosexuals become a gay turn-on?[101]

The reference to "far-out sex" was plain: it was SM that had been "placed under the sign of Nazism." Exaggerating the number of swastikas adorning leather gear and ignoring the fact that the boots and leather chains of leathermen originated in the biker community and not in Nazi uniforms, Sontag could then raise the paradox: "Why has Nazi Germany, which was a sexually repressive society, become erotic? How could a regime which persecuted homosexuals become a gay turn-on?"[102]

Sontag was neither the only one nor the last one to make that equation. Gay novelist John Rechy made similar insinuations in his 1977 *The Sexual Outlaw*. In particular, he

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[101] In a 1974 discussion on Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter*, Michel Foucault asked a similar set of questions: "How could Nazism, which was represented by lamentable, shabby, puritan young men, by a species of Victorian spinsters, or women who were lecherous at best, have become everywhere today — in France, in Germany, in the United States — in all the pornographic literature of the whole world, the absolute reference of eroticism? All the shoddiest aspects of the erotic imagination are now put under the sign of Nazism" ("Comment se fait-il que le nazisme, qui était représenté par des gars lamentables, minables, puritains, des espèces de vieilles filles victoriennes ou au mieux vicelardes, comment se fait-il qu'il ait pu devenir, maintenant et partout, en France, en Allemagne, aux États-Unis, dans toute la littérature pornographique du monde entier, la reference absolue de l'érotisme? Tout l'imaginaire érotique de pacotille est placé maintenant sous le signe du nazisme." [[2001] 1974: 1521]; cited in Friedländer 1984 [1982]: 74 and in Patraka 1999: 91). Foucault's questions led him to a broader reflection on the erotics of power in contemporary Western societies. They illustrate a growing interrogation in the mid-1970s about the erotic aspects of fascism and the fascistic aspects of eroticism. However (and that is a crucial difference), unlike Sontag, Foucault did not single out SM nor, for that matter, fascism. In effect, he mentions the ways that then-newly elected French president Valery Giscard d'Estaing interacted with French citizens as an example of that erotic relation to power he is discussing.

[102] For a historical reassessment of the alleged Puritanism of Nazi Germany, see Dagmar Herzog, *Sex After Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth Century Germany* (2007).

combined a discourse vaguely inflected by psychoanalysis (when he claimed that "the motivation of the 'M' — *as well as of the 'S'* — is self-hatred") with a more properly political observation that "Here and there, actually begin to appear 'brown shirts' — now in imitation of the Nazis, who exterminated homosexuals before they began on Jews." He also added that "An S&M publication recently carried — and subsequently deleted — an ad for the National Socialist League — complete with swastika and eagle — though at least one leather club has refused its literature" (1977: 262, emphasis in the original). Rechy did not give more evidence for his claims and they are therefore difficult to assess.

The same association of SM with fascism was central to the argument of many of the articles in the 1982 feminist anthology *Against Sadomasochism*[103] (Linden *et al*. 1982) as well as to Irene Reti's 1986 *Remember the Fire: Lesbian Sadomasochism in a Post Nazi-Holocaust World*. This articulation has also resurfaced in queer theory, where it has been particularly popular among the proponents of the "antisocial" trend. For example, against what he called the "pastoral impulse" of "the redemptive sex project" (1987: 215) he saw in gay liberationist and activist discourses, Leo Bersani associated sadomasochism and fascism in his 1995 *Homos*. There, he argues (1995: 88) that even consensual sadomasochistic eroticism depends for its pleasure on a "polarized structure of master and slave, of dominance and submission" which "is the same in Nazism and in S/M" (although Bersani did not condemn SM on those grounds). Judith Halberstam reiterated the same association in her 2011 *The Queer Art of Failure*, particularly in her chapter entitled "The Killer in Me Is the Killer in You." Halberstam did not focus on SM itself,

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[103] See in particular Susan Leigh Star's "Swastikas: The Street and the University," in Linden *et aliae* 1982: 131-136.

but she used SM to reiterate the old association of homosexuality with fascism. In particular, she used a discussion "about the relationship of the artwork of [leather iconic artist] Tom of Finland to a fascist imaginary" (2011: 152) to introduce a discussion where she opposed gay historians' supposed exclusive focus on "the persecution of gays by Nazis" (2011: 148). To participate in the "project of not tidying up sex" (2011: 150), she proposed to excavate the "multiple examples of gays or lesbians who collaborate with rather than oppose politically conservative and objectionable regimes." This, however, leads her not to document examples of gays, lesbians, or sadomasochists who were involved in Nazi politics (in itself a valuable project, though hardly a new one), but to offer blanket statements about "the imagined and real relationship between homosexuality and fascism" (2011: 171) as if the fact that some homosexuals were fascists could serve as a ground to claim that homosexuality itself is fascistic.

The same critique also emerged within the SM community. In a 1991 piece referring to an incident that took place around 1971 or 1972, Arnie Kantrowitz, an early supporter of GMSMA in New York City, expressed concerns about the linkage of SM fantasy and Nazism. He mentions "the swastika used as a sex toy" in the gay male leather world and goes on to list several other instances of fantasies having to do with oppressive political regimes (only some of which involve Nazi Germany): a 1984 story published in *Drummer* magazine depicting a character who wanted to have sex with a Central American dictator; a June 1989 series of photos published in *Honcho* magazine with the model exhibiting a swastika tattooed on his arm; a Colt Studio publication featuring two models with swastikas. Kantrowitz wrote letters in which he expressed his concern. He

received a response from Colt Studio, claiming: "Be assured that Colt Studio never has nor will support Nazi politics." *Drummer* magazine also responded in terms reminiscent of Pasolini's late views: "I don't think the story is an endorsement of fascism. Rather its theme is the fascination of fascism, and sexual obsession… His theme is that unrestrained sexual obsession and a complete renunciation of free will and responsibility — situations often idealized and made attractive in erotic fiction — can in reality lead to disaster" (Kantrowitz 1991: 194-196).

Kantrowitz was convinced that "Playing with swastikas doesn't make someone a real Nazi" and he "believe[d] that most leather enthusiasts are supporters of a liberal philosophy that promotes their right to be different." Here, Kantrowitz was edging toward a distinction between sexual preferences and actual politics, but he did not push it further. Instead, he expressed concern about "the persistent Germanophilia that pervades the leather subculture," a Germanophilia he saw in the numerous clubs with German names (*Dreizehn*) or in the bars whose names referred to aspects of Nazi history (*The Eagle's Nest*).[104] Returning to the link he had been close to breaking, he asserted that "it is only a short step from eroticizing the swastika bearer to eroticizing the genuine fascist."

It would be easy to point out the numerous logical fallacies in Kantrowitz's reasoning. For example, in order to prove the Germanophilia of leather folks, Kantrowitz observed, "The *Ring Cycle* by Wagner, whom Hitler called his 'spiritual forebear,' is so popular in leather circles that the legendary Mineshaft had to post a notice forbidding loud

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[104] The Eagle's Nest, now most commonly known as the Eagle, was situated at 142 11th Avenue in New York City. It closed in March 2000, and re-opened at 554 W. 28th St in October 2001 (where it is still in business).

discussions of opera at the main bar because they were disturbing the men having sex in the back rooms."[105] Kantrowitz even took an interest in German history to imply a fascination for fascism, just as he took the fact that Hitler admired Wagner to suggest that any admirer of Wagner is a secret or latent partisan of Hitler. Whether the Mineshaft anecdote is true or apocryphal, it is not clear at all that the men discussing opera were discussing Wagner solely or even primarily. Moreover, while there may have been a few clubs whose names alluded to German culture or history, Kantrowitz, like Sontag, exaggerated their importance. The overwhelming majority of US sadomasochism took its cultural references not from Nazi Germany but from working-class, industrial, or popular cultures, particularly from elements that could have sexual undertones (prominent bars were named, for example, the Tool Box, the Spike, the Mineshaft, the Ramrod). In effect, even his mention of the Eagle's Nest, one of the two leather bars whose names he viewed as emblems of leather folks' fascination with Nazism, was based on a historical misinterpretation: before it was a leather bar, the Eagle's Nest was a longshoreman's pub (from 1931 to 1970);[106] its name was a reference, not to Hitler's chalet, but to the "crow's nest," an enclosure at the top of a ship's mast where a person, for example a whaling fisher, stands to spot whales; thus, the name was a tribute to the bar's history with sexual undertones and allusions to the cruising that happens in a leather bar.[107] Similarly, the predominant clothing style was derived not from the SS but from rebels and motorcyclists of the 1950s.

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[105] On the Mineshaft, a long-defunct but world-renowned gay male SM after-hours sex club in New York City, see Brodsky 1993; Tettelman 1997. See also Moore 2004: 16-33.

[106] Over the years, the bar changed names. It first opened as the Eagle Open Kitchen; then became the Eagle's Nest; and then simply the Eagle.

[107] This information about the origins of the bar was given to me by Gayle Rubin.

But whether or not Nazi references and fantasies were as prominent in SM culture as Kantrowitz or Sontag thought they were, those critiques raised a crucial question for SM practitioners, one they needed to address directly. *What if* some SM practitioners did have Nazi fantasies? What if some were playing with SS regalia? If one ruled that SM could not possibly reuse symbols of an oppressive political regime such as Nazi Germany without being politically implicated in fascism, where should the line be drawn? Why stop at Nazism? How about other forms of fascism? How about slavery? The very possibility of SM seemed at stake. The existence of SM political organizations provided a context in which SM activists could intervene in the discussions linking SM and fascism and re-elaborate and refine radical conceptualizations of the relations between the sexual and the political. In short, SM identity politics allowed some SM activists to interrogate the direct link that both they and others were making between sexual subjectivities and politics.

It was in lesbian circles that the discussion was the most productive. This should come as no surprise, inasmuch as it was also from within lesbianism and feminism that the notion that sexuality is political had been most fully elaborated. In November 1981, J.S., a Samois activist, published an article entitled "A Perspective on Nazi Fantasies" in the newsletter of the organization (November 1981: 4-5). She asked: "Are Nazi fantasies or Nazi symbols and paraphernalia acceptable in a Lesbian Feminist SM group?" Recalling the Nazi "slaughter of 6 million Jews," she nevertheless observed that "While Nazi anti-Semitism reached a *degree* unique in history, anti-Semitic violence was nothing new in Europe." Rehearsing numerous examples of anti-Semitic violence since the First Crusade

in the 11th century, she pointedly noted that "The Nazis weren't any more anti-Semitic than other anti-Semites; they were just more organized about it." She hypothesized that "the stronger reactions to Nazis is due in large part to the relative closeness in time."

Reviewing the long history of anti-Semitism in Europe allowed J.S. to deny that Nazi play in SM should be made a special case. "If you think that Nazi fantasies or trappings are unacceptable in Samois, then, I contend that you must insist all medieval fantasies are unacceptable, and (dare I say) anything European." She also noticed that this was a slippery road for SM: "If we delve into the historic and practical reality behind any SM fantasy we will undoubtedly find something terrible." The very possibility of SM seemed at stake: "If you really get going, I suspect you will have to give up on SM altogether." If the argument was that fantasies involving the mimicry of oppressive structures were incompatible with progressive politics, the result of the whole debate would be to bring SM lesbians back to the pre-liberation moment when the claim was made that SM was incompatible with liberation. In order to solve the problem, J.S. distinguished between SM fantasies and the realities that provide the stage setting for them: "What we need to remember is that the temporary assumption of a fantasy identity, in a consenting situation much like a play, is not the same as taking on the *totality* of the identity of the historical source" (emphasis in the original).

The article caused a stir in Samois. It is clear from the records of the organization, and its subsequent history until the group disbanded in May 1983, that the dispute also served as a cover for other conflicts—conflicts that had arisen from personal antagonisms, from

tensions among different factions within the organization as well as among members coming from different social positions (middle-class vs. lower class), geographical situations (East Bay v. San Francisco), and, most important, political and social persuasions (lesbian separatism or primary lesbian identification vs. identification with sexual perverts of all genders and sexual orientations). Without underestimating the importance of those divides, I want to take seriously the different positions expressed in the debates on Nazi play within Samois, in order to show that the discussions that occurred among the members of an identity political movement dedicated to lesbian SM made possible, and perhaps necessary, a broad re-elaboration of the politics of sexuality—a re-elaboration that may prove valuable for radical politics beyond the boundaries of that sole group.

In an angry response to J.S.'s article, another Samois activist, C.S., distinguished radically between, not so much SM *per se*, as *lesbian* SM specifically and Nazism.[108] She argued against J.S. that Nazi play was totally unacceptable. "The essence of lesbian SM is consensuality, safety, mutuality, and erotic pleasure. How can that compare to the non-consensual, excruciating, non-mutual brutality of the white and racist nazis [*sic*] who strove to totally exterminate the Jewish people in ways of horror we only know little of?" And, using the lesbian feminist term "womon," she added:

> When a white womon today poses as a nazi, she recalls and rekindles the horrors of not long ago. She alines [*sic*] herself with a racist group — she

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[108] It is important to bear in mind that while some members of Samois advocated for a defense of all sadomasochists, others, particularly separatist lesbians, claimed that SM was only acceptable in a lesbian context and that heterosexual SM was intrinsically oppressive. For a parallel move on the part of a gay man, see an undated document by David Varas in the GMSMA collection at the Leather Archives and Museum in which the author argues that gay S&M is of a fundamentally different nature from "sado-masochism in the 'Eulenspiegel' sense."

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speaks to that group — she is the nazi. A white woman who strives to deal with her own racism/anti-Semitism does not don the garb of a nazi. Dressing as a nazi is not SM fantasy — it is my reality and ever [*sic*] other Jew's reality — every dark skinned person's reality — every other homosexual's reality — every disabled person's reality. I see nothing pretend or make-believe when I see a white lesbian in a nazi uniform. I see those real flesh and blood nazi's [*sic*] in Skokie, Illinois, in Walnut Creek, in San Francisco [*the word "nazi" is not capitalized in the original*].

C.S. lobbied for a rigorous separation between acceptable and unacceptable SM fantasies. In the case of Nazi play, she refused to distinguish between fantasy and reality: playing with Nazi symbols meant "recall[ing] and rekindl[ing] the horrors of not long ago" and aligning oneself "with a racist group." For her, Nazi play could never be "pretend or make-believe" and was an unacceptable fantasy.[109]

In April 1982, another Samois member, S.S., also responded to J.S.'s article.[110] She, too, used her own Jewish identity in part to credentialize her claims: "I am a Jew. I was a Jew before I was a woman, before I was a dyke, before I was into S/M. My first memories are Jewish memories. I think the Jewish part of me is more fixed inside of me than any other part." From there, she added:

> This is what is inside of me, then and now. Deep -- deep. I do not want to play in Nazi scenes. Furthermore I do not want to be at meetings that have Nazi themes. There are instant reactions that occur in me when I see a Nazi uniform: fear for my life! I know (consciously) that the women I see aren't Nazis, but that doesn't matter, I still react.

While acknowledging that Nazi play did not equate with Nazi politics, she anticipated what has more recently been referred to as "triggers" and foregrounded the fear caused in

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[109] In a letter to C.S. written on December 31, 1981, editor Pat Califia refused to print the text in the newsletter, partly because "your article relies too much on personal attacks." (Collection of Gayle Rubin)
[110] Collection of Gayle Rubin.

her by Nazi-themed SM play. In part, her argument seemed to be that, since some women

do not want to be around such play, their choice should be respected. But she also went

further and argued that such play was unacceptable for all:

> … the line between fantasy and reality is thin for me on this subject. I
> don't believe that a non-Jewish woman (or for that matter a Jewish
> woman) can do a Nazi scene and not be affected by it in some part of her
> being. Not get mixed up (even an infintesimal [*sic*] amount) between the
> fantasy and the reality.

In effect, like C.S., S.S. was insisting on a firm separation between acceptable and

unacceptable fantasies:

> All scenes are not created equal. There is a difference between a Nazi
> scene and a pirate scene. Yes, in both one woman apparently has power
> over another. In that sense they are the same. The difference lies in the
> theme of each scene. One scene has as its theme the oppression of an
> entire group of people and that is what makes it different. That oppression
> is called anti-semitism to some, racism to some.

Having asserted that fantasies relying on imagery having to do with racist politics were

unacceptable, she saw very well that there was no reason to stop at Nazism:

> There may be other women in Samois who have other themes that push
> similar buttons: Black women may feel this way about slave scenes set in
> the south, a woman who's [*sic*] history includes repeated childhood rape
> may not want to be around scenes that bring that up for her. Women into
> playing in scenes that depict the subjugation and oppression of an entire
> people (Jews, Blacks, Women) need to be aware of and clear about the
> way most of those people feel about it. The fact that we don't want to be
> around it. The fact that it is not "just another scene" but it parallels some
> real life threats to some real life people.

It would be easy to point out the flaws in S.S.'s reasoning. The argument that any scene is

unacceptable that "triggers" (as we would say today) negative feelings among certain

women and therefore cannot qualify as "just another scene," would imply, if pushed to its

limits, that the only acceptable scene is one that appeals to everyone. And who is everyone? Those who feel uncomfortable around "scenes that depict the subjugation and oppression of an entire people," apparently, since S.S. generalizes this group in her text, defining them to include "most people." She might have noticed that "most people" would probably not feel comfortable around an SM scene (lesbian or otherwise) and that her argument therefore risked disqualifying SM as such. As it happened, although the question of Nazi-themed play was highly controversial within the group, Samois refused to take a definitive stance on it.

But in spite of their flaws, the critiques of Nazi play raised two profound questions for SM politics, and for sexual politics more broadly. Those questions had to do with the very notion that sex is political or, more precisely, with the way that sex was understood to be political. The issue was not *whether* sex is political, but *how* it should be articulated to politics. The critiques of SM called for a re-elaboration of what it meant to politicize sex and a reassessment of the political valence of sexual practices. First, they raised the question of the relation between sexual fantasies and political realities. Second, they raised the question of the linkage between sexual subjectivities and practices, on the one hand, and politics, on the other. Lesbian SM activists intervened in a debate with a long history: their identity political movement provided a context in which they could reframe it on the basis of their specific experience in order to solve theoretical, and yet very concrete, problems.

In his 1936 *The Sexual Revolution*, Wilhelm Reich had written about the effects of political regimes on sexual desires. The Frankfurt School, notably with Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality*, had described fascist subjectivities. In his 1955 *Eros and Civilization*, Herbert Marcuse had articulated a defense of sexual perversion that relied on the revolutionary potential of the sexual subjectivities of those who resist the subjection of their sexuality to the "performance principle." Common to all those progressive analyses of the politics of sexuality was a reliance on the notion of a direct connection between sexual subjectivities (and hence, sexual practices) and politics. Feminists as well as gay and lesbian liberationists had largely inherited that connection and used it to theorize their politics of sexuality. Lesbians into SM were uniquely positioned to re-conceptualize that linkage, to question the line drawn between acceptable and unacceptable fantasies, and therefore to construct alternate models for understanding the relation between sex and politics.

The very need to mount a political defense of SM, which lesbian sadomasochists felt with particular urgency, and to assert the compatibility of SM with progressive politics required a distinction between fantasies and political realities. That distinction was not exactly new, but in lesbian SM it was elaborated with a sweeping, categorical rigor that, to my knowledge, had never been previously witnessed. One form it took was the refusal to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable fantasies. As a Samois member wrote in a "Post Mortem for Samois" published in the May 1983 Newsletter: "We tried to draw lines between S/M fantasy and real world unpleasantness…" Drawing those lines turned out to entail dissociating SM fantasies from real world realities absolutely. This meant, in

turn, that any fantasy had to be tolerated. "We wanted to get rid of the line between acceptable and unacceptable fantasies. What such distinctions amount to is some version of 'what I like is politically responsible and what you like is politically reprehensible.'" Indeed, in an implicit response to the earlier argument that Nazi fantasies were specific, and specifically unacceptable, this activist wrote: "I think it is specious to approve of, say, scenes involving Roman slaves, but to condemn scenes involving black slaves. It is sheer hypocrisy to approve of a scene which involves a prisoner of the Inquisition, but to condemn as 'politically irresponsible' a scene involving a prisoner of the Gestapo."

Once again, at stake was the very possibility of SM and the very question of the compatibility of SM with progressive politics. Whereas earlier defenses of SM had tended to assert that SM was inherently progressive, this new defense was moving toward a repudiation of any direct link between sexual fantasy and politics. It implied the view that sexuality was a specific realm that needed to be distinguished from the world of traditional politics. That world, when transposed from history into the realm of fantasies, was fundamentally altered and, in that new context, it acquired a new value that was not preordained. "The truth is that all S/M draws on things that in the real world have negative emotional valences. It is the special alchemy of S/M that transforms these negative feelings into sexual intensity." Driving the point home that there was nothing to be gained by making a special case for the badness of Nazi fantasies as opposed to other fantasies, this activist insisted: "Either it is S/M psychodrama, or it isn't."

What made possible this radical re-conceptualization of the politics of sexuality in lesbian SM discussions was the pre-existence of an analogous discussion in feminism and lesbian feminism. There, the attempts to delineate politically acceptable practices, notably through the figure of the "political lesbian" or the "woman-identified woman," had led to the marginalization, from within lesbian feminism, of certain women who had sex with women, and to the promotion of other women who, despite having sex with men, were called "political lesbians." This tendency had tended to marginalize all those lesbians, including Butch/femme lesbians and sadomasochist lesbians, whose sexuality and erotic fantasy lives did not meet the standards of political correctness prevailing in the movement: their sexual preferences, it was often believed, made them complicit with patriarchy or fascism. The context of those debates had prompted Gayle Rubin, in her 1981 "The Leather Menace," to disassociate sexual preferences and political subjectivity with an argument that "There is nothing inherently feminist or non-feminist about SM. Sadomasochists, like lesbians, may be anarchists, fascists, democrats, republicans, communists, feminists, gay liberationists or sexual revolutionaries" (2011 [1981], 126).

Having been first articulated just two years earlier in the context of feminist debates, this argument could then be re-deployed and developed in the debates on lesbian SM. In making this categorical distinction between, on the one hand, sexual fantasy, sexual subjectivity, sexual pleasure, and, on the other hand, real world power and politics, those SM lesbians who were situated at the intersections of feminist politics and SM politics paved the way for the articulation of a radical politics of sexuality. According to this new radical politics and theory of sexuality, sex emerges as a distinct site of human activity:

one that is connected to, and draws from, other areas of human activity, but that also develops its own languages and enjoys a relative autonomy; one that "works" with various elements of the social world, but that also, to the extent that it introduces them into an erotic arena and uses them for mutual gratification rather than exploitation, transforms their value.

In order for that reconceptualization of sex to occur, a far-reaching re-elaboration of the politics of sexuality was necessary. Feminists into SM had to sever the connection between sexual practices or subjectivities and politics that had been accepted by radical feminist, gay and lesbian, and early SM activists. They articulated a defense of SM that was profoundly different from the one we have seen in early TES writings. In those early political justifications of SM, as I argued, the link between sex and politics was maintained but the political valorization of SM was reversed in order to produce the claim that SM was not reactionary but progressive. Compare, for example, the early 1970s statements by Pete Wilson or Terry Kolb on the revolutionary value of SM cited above with what J.S., the member of Samois already cited, wrote in the early 1980s in a piece entitled "A Proud and Emotional Statement"[111]: "I'm not making any extraordinary claims about sm either. I don't think that sm is superior necessarily to any other sexual expression. Sm is neither the road to spiritual enlightenment nor the height of political awareness. People who enjoy sm are in other ways just like other people. Just as good, just as bad." Or as Samois founding member Gayle Rubin put it in her recent "Blood Under the Bridge" (2011 [2010]: 210): "Samois never claimed that S/M was particularly feminist, only that there was no intrinsic contradiction between feminist politics and S/M

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[111] Typescript, n.d. Collection of Gayle Rubin.

practice. Nor did Samois claim that S/M was an inherently liberatory practice, only that it was not inherently oppressive."[112]

What I want to suggest here is that political arguments, like political identities, are not made from scratch: they are best conceived as "articulations." That is to say that they are discursive constructions made on the basis of other, pre-existing, discursive constructions, rather than expressions or representations of pre-given notions existing outside of any discursive formation. In order to politicize SM, earlier activists had had no other choice but to re-deploy the often literal linking of sexual practices and political subjectivities inherited from earlier radical traditions. However, when, in the context of this literal framework, SM came to be articulated to patriarchy, oppression, fascism, and Nazism, lesbian SM activists found themselves at an impasse. They had inherited from their predecessors an articulation of SM to radical politics, but that articulation now threatened to disqualify SM itself on political grounds. In this new situation, the only way out was to re-elaborate that discursive articulation by severing the direct and literal correspondence between sexual practices and politics in order to maintain a radical politics of SM. Rubin had done so in the context of the women's movement in order to defend SM against feminist reductionist views of it. Her argument could then be re-deployed within lesbian SM politics.

These observations on political SM within lesbian organizations shed an interesting light on an important concept that emerged in Gayle Rubin's 1984 article "Thinking Sex": her

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[112] See also Rubin's essay on Samois: "Samois never claimed that S/M was particularly feminist, only that there was no inherent contradiction or intrinsic conflict between feminist politics and S/M practice" (2004: 68).

concept of "benign sexual variation." With her concept, Rubin sought to create room for a politics of sexuality that did not start from the premise that different sexual tastes were a sign of oppression and that once liberated, we would all share the same sexual practices — in other words, with the notion that sexual practices had an inherent political valence.[113] Both with the later concept of "benign sexual variation" and with her 1981 essay on "The Leather Menace," Rubin tried to break the direct and systematic link made by earlier radical activists between sexual practices and politics and to disrupt the excessive focus on the political meaning of sexual practices. Her aim in doing so was to transform the ways that sex was thought to be political so that we would no longer focus on the supposed inherent political value of sex acts and develop instead closer analyses of the political treatment to which sexual minorities are subjected.

My analysis suggests two important things about Rubin's concept of "benign sexual variation." First, the activist context within which Rubin worked shaped profoundly her theories: even though we attach concepts to the name of the theorist who coined, developed, and elaborated them, concepts are also the result of context and of collective elaboration. In this case, Rubin's theory, however sophisticated and profound, arose from the urgent need to address very concrete political problems, both in the women's movement (as I show in Mesli 2016) and in SM activism. Second, Rubin's concept is, once again, best understood as an "articulation," *i.e.* as a discursive and original construction thoroughly dependent on already existing discursive articulations.

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[113] See Mesli 2016 (forthcoming).

Indeed, "benign sexual variation" was the product of the combination of several discursive breakthroughs. A dominant discourse that divided sexual fantasies into politically acceptable and unacceptable ones made it necessary to re-elaborate the politics of sexuality by severing the link between sexuality and politics. In order to do that, Rubin re-deployed two existing discourses: a discourse of race and a discourse of gender. First, she analogized sex and race and, relying on biology and race theories, she posited that there is human variation in sexuality just as there is human variation in race; that assuming that once liberated we will all share the same sexuality does not make any more sense than assuming that once liberated we will all have the same skin color. In other words, what will change is that the significance accorded skin color (or sexual practices) will vanish, but this does not imply that all differences will give way to homogeneity. Second, she analogized sex and gender and, relying on radical feminist notions, she argued that just as there is a distinct system of gender hierarchy, so there is a distinct system of sexual stratification. In short, by redescribing sex by analogy with two other categories featured in two other discourses, Rubin re-configured the way we theorize the politics of sex. This highlights the potential of "equivalences" for radical politics.

CONCLUSION:

IN DEFENSE OF EQUIVALENCE

SECTION I: QUEER CRITIQUES OF ANALOGIES

In its issue of December 16, 2008, *The Advocate*, perhaps the leading LGBTQ magazine in the United States of America, proclaimed on its cover: "GAY IS THE NEW BLACK: The Last Gay Civil Rights Struggle." The cover announced an article by Michael J. Gross entitled "Pride and Prejudice" (30-33). Gross's article was written in the context of the simultaneous election of Barack Obama as President of the USA and the passage of Proposition 8 by California voters — which overturned a California State Supreme Court ruling that had legalized same-sex marriage in May 2008. The context was also marked by the publication in *The Los Angeles Times*, in the days following the vote, of exit poll data indicating (inaccurately, as it later turned out) that 70% of African-American voters had voted for Proposition 8 (compared to 53% of White voters).[114] "At present," Gross argued, "we are the most socially acceptable target for the kind of casual hatred that American society once approved for habitual use against black people."

The *Advocate* cover, and Gross's piece, generated intense queer criticism. The notion that gayness was the object of the last civil rights struggle, and the implication that "Blacks

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[114] For an important critique of the poll, see Robinson 2014.

may have advanced beyond gays in their pursuit of legal protections and accrual of political power" (Stone and Ward 2011: 618), were appropriately judged outrageous. It has been noted that the cover problematically opposed the advancement of gay rights and the struggles to end racial discrimination. It has also been noted that the cover implicitly posited gayness as white and blackness as straight, thereby problematically "rendering the same-sex desires and queer subjectivities of people of color unintelligible or invisible within US queer politics" (Stone and Ward 2011: 607). As David Eng had already put it in *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*, "Equating gay and lesbian struggles for civil rights in the present to black civil rights movements in the past not only consigns racism to the dustbin of history– as a historical project 'completed'– but also suggests that all gays are white while all blacks are heterosexual" (2010: 2).

There is no question that *The Advocate*'s cover was deeply problematic. I would add, however, that the theses developed in the magazine by Michael J. Gross, the author of the article, in fact agreed with and, thus, anticipated most of the criticisms of the cover. Far from erasing queers of color, Gross noticed the intersections of sexuality and race when he emphasized that "my own angry confusion [at the exit poll results] was nothing compared to what my black gay friends were probably feeling." He denounced the "race-baiting, false conclusion that blacks lost the election for us." He argued that, whatever the exit poll data said, "to blame this loss on black people would be a terrible mistake," since a central fact was that "African-Americans represented just 10% of Californians voting, and the difference between full equality and abject disappointment was so small — 2.3%

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of the total vote — that it would be possible to blame almost any group of voters for it." Gross's story, far from blaming racial minorities for the passage of Proposition 8, was centered around an older Black woman and a young Yemeni taxi driver who had supported marriage equality. Far from implying that Blacks were ahead of gays in the path toward equality, he argued that "our oppression, by and large, is nowhere near as extreme as blacks', and we insult them when we make facile comparisons between our plights." And, contradicting the cover of the magazine, Gross argued that gay, in fact, is *not* the new black.

While I fully agree that the cover of *The Advocate* was problematic, I do not oppose the drawing of analogies between the political situations of gays and Blacks or between the anti-oppression struggles of different groups. A number of the writers who commented on this issue of *The Advocate* generalized their critiques to the practice of making analogies among oppressed social groups *per se*: they argued that analogies among different oppressions (based on race and sex, but also on gender, class, etc.) are, in and of themselves, problematic and that we should refrain altogether from making them. Russell K. Robinson argues that "marriage equality advocates ought to avoid ranking forms of oppression and treating African-American-like experience as necessary for a successful equal protection plan" (2014: 1058): in other words, he moves from a notion that one should not rank forms of oppression (with which I agree) to a notion that one should not model gay claims for equal rights on critiques of racial discrimination (which I will dispute). Others have also argued that "analogies between gayness and Blackness… have fuelled White racism in the movement" (Stone and Ward 2011: 608). Robinson does

specify that he is not "categorically opposed to analogical arguments" (2014: 1044), but since his essay focuses on "identifying pitfalls of arguments analogizing race and sexual orientation" (2014: 1045), he does not explain under what circumstances such analogies are acceptable, and he does not give examples either.

In her influential *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), Jasbir Puar also took a strong stance "against analogies" (117). Focusing, once again, specifically on "the analogizing of sexuality and race" (117), she echoes Eng's critique cited above that the analogy between race and sex relegates "racism to the dustbin of history." It implies, according to Puar, that civil rights "have already been bestowed on racial minorities," and it "perpetuat[es] a belief that the issues addressed by civil rights legislation for people of color have already been resolved" (Puar 2007: 118) A second critique is that this analogy exonerates gays and lesbians from racism. In Puar's words, it "relieves mainstream gays, lesbians, and queers from any accountability to racist agendas." As Amy Stone and Jane Ward also put it, the use of "race/sexuality analogies" by gay activists "obscure[s] racial privilege and hierarchies, both within and outside the gay and lesbian movement" (2011: 619).

A third, related critique is that the analogy of race and sexuality, by "differentiating and isolating components" (Puar 2007: 117), erases the experience of those individuals who belong to both groups and is therefore in conflict with intersectional analyses: it "produces whiteness as a queer norm (and straightness as a racial norm), and fosters anti-intersectional analyses that posit sexual identity as 'like' or 'parallel' to race" (Puar 2007: 118). As David Eng puts it, "Such an equation authorizes a political rhetoric of

colorblindness that refuses to recognize the ways in which race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation continue to be articulated and constituted only in relation to one another in the ongoing struggles for equality and social belonging in the U.S" (2010: x). Russell K. Robinson also argues that "arguments about what blacks and gays can and cannot do tend to overlook people who are black *and* gay" (2014: 1017, emphasis in the original). Focusing particularly on the marriage debate, David Eng adds: "by analogizing Proposition 8 to *Loving v. Virginia,* the 1967 U.S. Supreme Court decision overturning the state of Virginia's anti-miscegenation laws, mainstream gay and lesbian advocates deny the coevalness of sexual and racial discrimination, subjecting them to a type of historical violence by casting them as radically discontinuous" (2010: x).

In significant ways, those arguments reiterate the critique of analogies made in 2000 by Siobhan Somerville in *Queering the Color Line*:

> All too often, it is assumed that being a person of color is "like" being gay and that sexual orientation is "like" racial identity… In the ongoing debates about the right to same-sex marriage in the United States, for instance, activists often invoke legal precedents granting the right to interracial marriage. Proponents argue that the legal system eventually recognized that it was unconstitutional to prohibit interracial marriage and that, by the same logic, the courts should recognize the unconstitutionality of prohibiting same-sex marriage… whatever its other effects, the analogy obscures those who inhabit both identifications… Furthermore, such analogies implicitly posit whiteness and heterosexuality as the norm. To say that gay people are "like" black people is to suggest that those same gay people are not black. The underlying assumption is that white homosexuality is like heterosexual blackness (7-8).

It is now a widespread and increasingly hegemonic position among queer theorists that analogies between different oppressions (particularly between sexuality and race) are bad. Analogies rank oppressions; alienate individuals with multiple oppressed identities;

relegate one struggle (still ongoing) to the past.

In this concluding chapter, I seek to challenge this hegemonic view of analogies. Since I am entering tricky territory, let me preface my comments by stating explicitly that I fully agree that certain uses of analogies between different oppressions are problematic: *The Advocate*'s cover *was* a mistake. So was also a placard held by a gay protester that read: "I can't believe we still have to protest this crap: women's rights, African-American rights, gay rights" with the two first checked and the last one unchecked as though struggles for the first two were over.[115] Nevertheless, I want to claim analogies as a crucial tool for radical politics. To this end, I situate my reflection in the context of the pluralist and constructivist social and political theory articulated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their groundbreaking *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1986).

SECTION II: EQUIVALENCES TO CONSTRUCT HEGEMONY

Laclau and Mouffe (1986: 153-4) argue that the contemporary world is characterized by the absence of a universal and transcendental principle organizing the space of the political: for example, no "universal class" can be the guarantee of "the essence or underlying meaning of History," as used to be the case in orthodox Marxist theory (1986: 4). This results in a "proliferation of differences" (96) and a "proliferation of points of antagonism" (131): concretely, a number of social relations, until then viewed as "relations of subordination," have been, and are still being, transformed into "relations of

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[115] Reproduced in Robinson 2014: 1081.

oppression" and/or "relations of domination":

> We shall understand by a *relation of subordination* that in which an agent is subjected to the decisions of another — an employee with respect to an employer, for example, or in certain forms of family organization the woman with respect to the man, and so on. We shall call *relations of oppression*, in contrast, those relations of subordination which have transformed themselves into sites of antagonism. Finally, we shall call *relations of domination* the set of those relations of subordination which are considered as illegitimate from the perspective, or in the judgment, of a social agent external to them, and which, as a consequence, may or may not coincide with the relations of oppression actually existing in a determinate social formation (153-54; emphases in the original).

The transformation of relations of subordination into relations of oppression and/or domination has allowed, in the past few decades, the emergence of several political movements: feminist movements, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender movements, as well as struggles against racism, struggles for immigrants' rights, struggles for ethnic minorities, for regional autonomy, struggles against certain institutions, etc.

While, in some ways, Laclau and Mouffe's theory seems to describe what has been called the "new social movements," it is important to note that they introduce one crucial innovation with respect to the ways that those movements (and identity political movements) have been conceptualized. For them, the notion of "new social movements" is problematic because "it groups together a series of highly diverse struggles" whose only common denominator "would be their differentiation from workers' struggles, considered as 'class' struggles." This distinction between "new social movements" and "class struggles" posits a fundamental, ontological as it were, difference between the "new" movements, on the one hand, and the old class-based movements, on the other. This understanding of the class struggle does not hold in their account: it "amalgamates a

series of very different struggles at the level of the relations of production, which are set apart from the 'new antagonisms' for reasons that display all too clearly the persistence of a discourse founded upon the privileged status of 'classes'" (1986: 159), a privilege inherited from orthodox Marxism. In other words, with Laclau and Mouffe, we can do away with the traditional opposition between class politics and identity politics: "new social movements" are anything but new,[116] and "class politics" is just another variety of "identity politics."

The proliferation of points of antagonism opens up the possibility of a crisis for the Left. That crisis is what Gitlin called the "twilight of common dreams," a development that in his view dramatizes the divisiveness of identity politics and motivated his critique of a politics grounded in identity movements. Laclau and Mouffe also talk of "a growing complexity and fragmentation of advanced industrial societies": that complexity results from the "asymmetry existing between a growing proliferation of differences… and the difficulties encountered by any discourse attempting to fix those differences as moments of a stable articulatory structure" (1986: 96). Perhaps in simpler terms, "the proliferation of points of antagonism permits the multiplication of democratic struggles, but these struggles, given their diversity, do not tend to constitute a 'people,'" *i.e.* do not tend to "divide the political space into two antagonistic fields" (1986: 131).

Crucially, Laclau and Mouffe, far from indulging in nostalgia for a mythical unity of the Left à la Gitlin, view this proliferation of points of struggle as an opportunity for radical democratic politics. The "decisive mutation in the political imaginary of Western

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[116] See also Calhoun 1993.

societies" occurred in the French Revolution, when "the democratic principle of liberty and equality… impose[d] itself as the new matrix of the social imaginary" and marked "the establishment of a new legitimacy, … the invention of democratic culture." The proliferation of points of struggle is described (in the 2000 Preface to the Second Edition of *Hegemony*) as "a new stage in the deepening of the 'democratic revolution', as the extension of the democratic struggles for equality and liberty to a wider range of social relations" (2000: xv).

But while this proliferation can be an opportunity for radical democratic politics, there is no guarantee that it will advance radical democracy. Indeed, the relation of one struggle to other struggles cannot be pre-determined. Different causes have no necessary relation, and there is no natural connection between a given cause and the Left: all causes are polysemic. "All struggles, whether those of workers or other political subjects, left to themselves, have a partial character, and can be articulated to very different discourses" (1986: 169). To make their point, Laclau and Mouffe use the examples of feminism and ecology. "There are … a plurality of discursive forms of constructing an antagonism on the basis of the different modes of women's subordination" and feminism, like ecology, "may be anti-capitalist, anti-industrialist, authoritarian, libertarian, socialist, reactionary, and so on" (1986: 168). Indeed, for Laclau and Mouffe, "these new struggles do not necessarily have a progressive character, and… it is therefore an error to think, as many do, that they spontaneously take their place in the context of left-wing politics," just as it is mistaken to look for "a new privileged revolutionary subject which might come to replace the working class" (1986: 168-69).

If those struggles do not spontaneously take their place in progressive politics alongside other struggles, then it means that they have to be articulated to them. It means, in other words, that the solution for the Left is to engage in the construction of what Laclau and Mouffe call "hegemonic articulations" (1986: 168). Against the Right's attempts to form "a new historic bloc" to unify multiple subject positions "around an individualist definition of rights and a negative conception of liberty" (1968: 176), the Left has no other solution than to engage as well in a struggle for hegemony and to articulate the proliferating subject positions around a progressive politics. This has two major consequences. The first is to block facile, left-wing objections to identity politics. To those who claim that "it is time… to leave aside the obsession with 'identity politics', and to listen again to the demands of the working class," Laclau and Mouffe answer, "The solution is not to abandon the 'cultural' struggle to go back to 'real' politics." Instead, "struggles against sexism, racism, sexual discrimination, and in the defence of the environment need… to be articulated with those of the workers in a new left-wing project. To put it in terminology which has recently become fashionable, we insist… that the Left need[s] to tackle issues of both 'redistribution' and 'recognition'. This is what we mean… by 'radical and plural democracy'" (2000: xviii).[117]

But there is another major consequence of the way Laclau and Mouffe conceptualize

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[117] In this Preface, by using the language of "recognition" and "redistribution," Laclau and Mouffe seem to be re-introducing, under a new garb, the clear-cut divide between identity politics (based on social status) and class politics (based on positions in relations of production) that they so powerfully challenge in the book itself. However, I take their description of this terminology as having become fashionable as a way to use a convenient language easily understandable by their readers while at the same time distancing themselves from it.

social relations and identities. As Bonnie Washick puts it, "Where once concepts, identities, and claims were determined through reference to divine law embodied by the king, for example, we now find such concepts, identities, and claims can only be made legible *in relation* to others" (2010; emphasis in the original). In other words, the only way to create hegemonic articulations is precisely "to create a chain of *equivalence* among the various democratic struggles against different forms of subordination" (Laclau and Mouffe 2000: xviii; my emphasis). Or, as they put it elsewhere, the Left should "locat[e] itself fully in the field of the democratic revolution and expand… the chains of equivalents between the different struggles against oppression" (1986: 176).

SECTION III: "CHICK EQUALS NIGGER EQUALS QUEER. THINK IT OVER."

In profound ways, the theory of Laclau and Mouffe and the crucial role they attribute to "equivalences" among different oppressions resonate with the findings of the previous chapters of this dissertation. I would argue that there would not be a feminist anti-essentialism if it were not for equivalences. In Chapter 1, I showed that radical feminists came to non-essentialist definitions of gender through the analogies they saw between the gender system and the capitalist mode of production, on the one hand, and between the system of gender hierarchies and the system of racial hierarchies, on the other. This underscores the radical potential of equivalences. Those anti-essentialist views were then inherited by queer theorists and have by now become so hegemonic that we have forgotten where they came from and how they were arrived at.

Hence, I would argue that it is paradoxical to espouse anti-essentialist beliefs (as queer theorists do) while denouncing analogies between gender (or sex) and class or race. Anti-essentialist views of gender were built on analogies between gender and class or race. My point is not only that combining anti-essentialism with a refusal to draw analogies among forms of oppression flies in the face of the history of queer thought, and serves to erase that history from our consciousness by seeming to make the connection between anti-essentialism and a theory of equivalences impossible or inconceivable—although that is bad enough. My point is also that such a weird combination of positions produces a misunderstanding of anti-essentialism itself and its theoretical grounds. For anti-essentialism is not a truth, which lay waiting to be discovered and languished for lack of recognition until smart people like us came along. If radical feminists and queer theorists came to hold anti-essentialist theories of gender, it was not because they were endowed with special insight that had somehow been withheld from entire generations of men and women before them, but because they were able to conceptualize gender as a contingent discursive formation on the basis of the analogies they articulated between women and sexual minorities, on the one hand, and the working class and racial minorities, on the other. Thus, I argue, it is a mistake to view anti-essentialism as a "truth": following Foucault's view of discourse as it is described by David Halperin, I suggest that anti-essentialism should be analyzed strategically, "not in terms of what it *says* but in terms of what it *does* and how it *works*" (Halperin 1995: 30) as well as in terms of how the discourse of anti-essentialism was manufactured. In other words, for anti-essentialism as well as for any other discursive formation, we should "*shift the focus* of our attention from matters of truth to matters of power" (Halperin 1995: 31).[118]

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[118] From the notion that we should view anti-essentialism as a strategic and contingent discursive

Similarly, I would argue that there would not be a sexual politics if it were not for analogies. Another major strength of the theory offered by Laclau and Mouffe is that it does not take for granted the notion that identities (sexual or otherwise) are political, but instead provides an account of the process through which they are discursively articulated to a political field: put simply, sexual identities are not (any more than any other identity) in and of themselves *political*, but in a given context, under certain conditions, and through certain tools, they get *politicized*. "Equivalences" play an instrumental role in the process whereby a relation of "subordination" is transformed into one of "oppression": that is, equivalences contribute to the process of the transformation of social identities into political ones. They are the tools used by social agents in order to disarticulate their identity from a previous framework (for example, biology, medicine, religion, etc.) and rearticulate it to a new one (in this case, politics). In this model, the ensemble of previously politicized identities provides a repertoire from which activists draw to politicize their own identity. For example, in order to build their identity politics, "the lesbian and gay movements have stressed a politics of identity closely modeled on the politics of ethnic and racial minorities" (Escoffier 1985: 119).

The central role of equivalences too is confirmed by the findings presented in this

construction, it follows that essentialism should be viewed in the same manner. Thus, the debate between the two positions should not be viewed as a debate in terms of right or wrong, and not even as a debate in terms of "necessarily progressive" vs. "necessarily reactionary." Instead, it is the strategic effects of each discourse in a given time and place that need to be analyzed. In this respect, I could not agree more with Chantal Mouffe who, coming from a radically anti-essentialist perspective (as I do), writes nevertheless: "I certainly do not believe that essentialism necessarily entails conservative politics and I am ready to accept that it can be formulated in a progressive way" (1992: 370). I would add that in the exact same way, I certainly do not believe that anti-essentialism necessarily entails progressive politics and I am ready to accept that it can be formulated in a conservative way.

dissertation. It is particularly salient in Chapter 3 where, as we have seen, sadomasochist activists capitalize on the work previously performed by women's liberation and gay liberation in order to politicize their own identity. It is enough to remember what Pat Bond, the founder of The Eulenspiegel Society, wrote in the initial ad: "There's women's lib., black lib., gay lib., etc. Isn't it time we put something together?" or what Skip Aiken, a member of the Society of Janus, wrote a few years later: "The oppression we experience today is similar to that that other groups have known. Like homosexuals we are labeled 'sick.' Like women we are portrayed sensationally by the media and are denied a forum to refute the charges against us. Like all minorities we have been fragmented by shame and self-hatred": the merest glance at such texts makes the political work that analogies do blindingly clear. Analogies do not necessarily relegate women's liberation, black liberation, and gay liberation to the past. Nor do they necessarily erase women, blacks, or gays who are into SM. Nor do they necessarily construct SM as white, straight, and male (Skip Aiken was gay). Instead, they perform the crucial task of making it possible for SM activists to create an SM Liberation movement, to design an agenda for it, and to find answers to concrete questions about how to organize.

More recently, some SM activists, notably around the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, have been demanding the removal of sadomasochism and fetishism from the list of paraphilias in the *DSM*. This demand has consistently taken as its model and reference the campaign to remove homosexuality from the *DSM* in 1973. In other words, this demand by SM activists does not come out of nowhere: they use the precedent set by gay and lesbian activists and, through an analogical reasoning, demand the same thing for

themselves. Similarly, the insistence on marriage equality by gay and lesbian activists does not come from nowhere: as shown by George Chauncey in his 2004 *Why Marriage? The History Shaping Today's Debate Over Gay Equality*, the demand for marriage, at least in the USA, originates in the Black struggle that helped frame the right to marry as a fundamental civil right. Here too, it is through analogical reasoning that political demands get made.

Activists, then, use equivalences, not to imply that other struggles are over; not even necessarily in order to replace those other struggles with their own (though that certainly happens at times); but because established political movements serve as frames of reference for newer ones. The former help to spawn the latter, making possible a proliferation of points of social antagonism, resistance, and politics. Without equivalences, the process of politicizing itself would be impossible. Much as queer denunciations of analogies overlook the anti-essentializing consequence of equivalences, so the politicization of sexual identities is taken all too often to be an inevitability—grounded in some "truth" or objective fact about the intrinsically political character of sexuality—rather than a contingent construction, one we have inherited (in this case) from past activists and scholars, who relied on analogies to produce it.

Finally, as Laclau and Mouffe argue, equivalences also play a crucial role in the construction of coalitions among different insurgent movements. As early as 1969, the New York Gay Liberation Front took its name from the Vietnamese National Liberation Front. This name was certainly not meant to imply that the Vietnamese struggle against

the US occupation was over and that the gay struggle should replace it: it served to create commonality and to express a broad political vision on the part of the founders of the GLF.

In *Lesbian Nation*, Jill Johnston wrote about her lesbian consciousness: "I am (…) more in sympathy with the black cause than ever before, and in fact with all causes, for it has recently occurred to me that all causes are the same (as my critic said, we are all in the same boat) and that what we're doing here then is educating the members of ourselves [*sic*] to certain needs which have gone unheeded or unrecognized or worse damned and vilified and thrust underground so that we can all coexist more happily together" (1973: 136-7). For Johnston as well, recognizing the equivalence between her oppression and that of Blacks hardly served as a way to dismiss the struggle against racism or to deny it as a valid cause. Paul Goodman had famously equated homosexuality and blackness when he asserted, in the opening line of his 1969 lecture "The Politics of Being Queer," that "in essential ways, my homosexual needs have made me a nigger." Carl Wittman included women in the equation when he wrote in his 1970 "Gay Manifesto" that "Chick equals nigger equals queer" (332). According to this view, the exploration of the specificity of each oppression would lead to a realization that all instances of oppression are different yet equivalent. Italian gay liberationist Mario Mieli put it most eloquently when he wrote that oppression "strikes at different groups *differently but in the same fashion*" (440, my emphasis.) Such a view had long been implicit in the sociology of deviance throughout the 1950s and 1960s: consider Kardiner and Ovesey's *The Mark of Oppression* (1951) or Goffman's *Stigma* (1963).

In effect, when equivalences, which I take to be a crucial tool for radical democratic politics, are dismissed, we are faced with an insurmountable problem. The critics of equivalences know very well how to denounce coalitions forged by means of them, but they cannot tell us how to replace those coalitions or how to build new ones: they have no alternative strategy to offer. Or, more accurately, they are led to reintroduce, however implicitly, a universal that should be the ground for coalitions—for example, the co-implication and intersectional interrelation of all oppressions. But it is one thing to assert the existence of such a universal at an ontological or theoretical level: thus, racism is always already implicated in heterosexism (or vice versa). It is quite another thing to imagine that this sophisticated theory is somehow going to mobilize all sexual minorities against the US invasion of Iraq! There is a gap between the theory and the politics, and that gap resides in the fact that not everyone experiences race and sexuality as deeply intertwined.

Positing a single universal as the ontological ground of all progressive, coalitional politics ends up depoliticizing the work of coalition-building. It positively inhibits it, because it treats coalitions as the natural consequence of a true state of affairs which requires only to be universally recognized (and it makes such recognition not the outcome of a political struggle but merely the expression of some innate moral or intellectual virtue). One could apply to that position what French poet Charles Péguy once said about Kantian philosophy: its hands are pure, but it has no hands.

In order to make this point, let me turn to Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* and to a passage in her book where she takes to task several gay and lesbian organizations that opposed the 2003 war in Iraq — not because she was in favor of the US invasion of Iraq herself, but because they opposed it for what she considered to be the wrong reasons:

> Opposition to the war from various queer quarters… took bizarre forms. The decrease of funding for HIV/AIDS research was proffered as one rationale not to go to war. An even more egregious example is the equating of victims of homophobia with victims of the Iraq invasion; note, for example, the statement released by the Metropolitan Community Church:
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>> We call upon all people of faith and people of goodwill everywhere, especially our sisters and brothers in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities who know first hand what it means to be vilified, labeled, and violently attacked, and who also know how difficult it is to survive under such circumstances, to join with the friends and members of Metropolitan Community Churches to oppose any further acts of aggression against Iraq. (43-44)

Puar dismisses those interventions as "homonationalist discussions" (44).

In the introduction to her book, Puar defines "homonationalism" as the phenomenon through which "some homosexual subjects are complicit with heterosexual nationalist formations rather than inherently or automatically excluded from them" (2007: 4). Let us note that it is difficult to see how the passage she quotes by MCC corresponds to that definition of homonationalism. But, even more crucially for my argument, in this passage, we have remarkably moved to a new critique of identity politics. Identity politics used to be criticized for fostering narrow, single-issue politics. When, as here, identity politics impels gays and lesbians to take a stand for broader political causes, scholars like Puar deny that identity politics is a legitimate means of arriving at such

positions of advocacy: one should espouse the same causes, but only by coming at them from a different direction. In addition, Puar constructs a double bind around gays and lesbians: if they do not oppose the war in Iraq, they are guilty of being "homonationalist"; but if they do so on the basis of a perceived equivalence between gay oppression and neo-imperial oppression, they are also guilty of being "homonationalist." It seems that the only legitimate way for gays and lesbians to oppose the war was to do so not as gays and lesbians.

What is perhaps even more salient in Puar's thinking is the conflation of two distinct phenomena. Puar's outrage is motivated by an implicit hierarchization of suffering. For her, the analogy between victims of homophobia and victims of neo-imperialism is unacceptable because, implicitly, the suffering of gays is nothing compared to the suffering of Iraqis. Although I would not dispute that claim, I would make two points about it. First, it involves a moral judgment (based on a hierarchy of suffering) irrelevant to politics (understood as the construction of hegemonic blocs). But, second, the moral judgment itself is based on a misunderstanding of equivalences: it implies that the analogy drawn by the MCC is a metaphor (in the Jakobosonian sense, involving selection and substitution: A replaces B). That is not how an equivalence works. An equivalence is best conceived as a metonym (involving combination and contiguity) where A shares something in common with, or stands for, B).[119] In other words, an analogy does not deny that there are differences. Rather, "making connections between oppressions" helps construct what Barbara Smith in several instances called a "frame of reference upon

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[119] See Jakobson's famous 1956 essay "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances." Reprinted in Jakobson 1987: 115-133. See particularly pp. 129-130.

which to build" (1998: 115). As she puts it, talking about audiences that have already been taught about racism and sexism, "I have found both in teaching and in speaking to a wide variety of audiences that making connections between oppressions is an excellent way to introduce the subjects of lesbian and gay male identity and homophobia, because it offers people a frame of reference to build upon" (1993 [1982]: 101).

Ultimately, the trap Puar puts us in revolves around her rejection of identity politics. She clearly wants LGBT organizations to oppose the war in Iraq. But they should not mobilize to oppose it because of the impact the war in Iraq will have on their constituents (that is "bizarre") or because of equivalences between their situations and that of the Iraqi people (that is "even more egregious.") They should get involved in the anti-war movement, but not for reasons or motivations of their own. They should act because acting is right, because of a categorical imperative purified of all self-interest. What they are denied is the possibility of performing what Barbara Smith, in a June 1982 exchange on Black lesbians, defines as the very work of coalition. Talking about a protest in favor of disarmament, she remarked, "To me, for somebody to come and present that issue to a Black Lesbian organization is not disruptive or divisive. But it's up to Black Lesbians to figure out how do we relate to it *in such a way that we make it our issue*" (1983a: 309; my emphasis). Puar summons gays and lesbians to oppose the war in Iraq but she denies them the right to make it *their* issue. Here again, we see how far the precepts of current queer theory are from the thinking of women of color feminists.

If not that, then what? Reproduced here by Puar, from within and in the name of queer

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radicalism, is the very same objection that the old Left used to raise against Black activists, and then against feminists and gays and lesbians, and against feminists of color. What is ultimately denied is the right to autonomous organizing. If different groups should mobilize in opposition to the invasion of Iraq, but if they may not do so on their own terms and for their own purposes, the only reason can be that there is *one* and only one good rationale for getting involved in the anti-war movement, a sole legitimate ground of opposition common to all political subjects. What is that one legitimate rationale? According to the old Left, it was the class struggle and the destruction of capitalism, viewed as the primary oppression from which all others were derived. What is it for Puar? She does not tell us. Perhaps she knows better than to try and impose on us a single totalizing theory. But in describing as "bizarre" and "egregious" a situation in which different groups share the same political project but do so for different reasons that have to do their own histories and aspirations, Puar in fact denies the very possibility of coalitions. After all, coalitions imply, by definition, pluralism.

Here, in the name of queer radicalism, then, and in the name of differences, what we are offered is, paradoxically, a monolithic vision antithetical to pluralism; one that blocks the construction and expression of multiple perspectives; one that, to reuse Seidman's critique cited in the Introduction, "den[ies] differences by either submerging them in an undifferentiated oppositional mass or by blocking the development of individual and social differences through the disciplining compulsory imperative to remain undifferentiated" (Seidman 1993: 133); a vision, in short, according to which (as, Christina Crosby says) "everything is different, everything is the same" (140).

What Puar ultimately offers us is a new identity politics, but an identity politics of the worst kind: one that admits of only one identity. Bell Hooks once made a critique, similar to Puar's, of the Combahee River Collective. Because Black lesbians had decided to organize autonomously, she called them "reactionary" and accused them of inhibiting the formation of coalitions. To that critique, Smith responded: "Obviously she does not comprehend the meaning of the word coalition" (Smith 1983b: 43).

SECTION IV: ARE ANALOGIES REALLY ONLY USED BY WHITES?

To conclude, I would like to return to the claim that analogies between race and sexuality are only used by Whites and can therefore be described as racist. This critique relies fundamentally on the notion, outlined at the beginning of this chapter, that analogies among identities erase those who share multiple identities. The implication is that individuals with multiple identities do not use analogies. For example, the analogy of sex and race is said to imply that sexual deviants are White and that racial minorities are straight, which suggests that queers of color would not use an analogy between sex and race.

It is, to the best of my knowledge, Bell Hooks who, in *Ain't I a Woman* (1981), inaugurated that line of argument. In that book, Hooks denounced equivalences made by White feminists between patriarchy and slavery. "White women have used comparisons

between 'women' and 'blacks' to exclude black women and to deflect attention away from their own racial caste status," Hooks wrote (139). She saw these comparisons as "the most glaring example of [White women's] support of the exclusion of black women," since "what they were really comparing was the social status of white women with that of black people" (8). According to Hooks, "Just as 19th century white woman's rights advocates attempted to make synonymous their lot with that of the black slave was aimed [*sic*] at drawing attention away from the slave toward themselves, contemporary white feminists have used the same metaphor to attract attention to their concerns" (141). Puar reproduces Hooks' critique and transfers it to the example of Arabs and gays: she writes that "the drawing together of (presumably straight) Arab men and (presumably white) gay men" effaces "the apparently unfathomable presence of queer Arabs (particularly those in the United States)" (2007: 95-96).

Bell Hooks, in a later piece on "Homophobia in Black Communities," reiterated her critique of analogies between sexual oppression and racism. Opening her essay with an overtly anti-homophobic stance, Hooks castigates her "teenage nieces and nephews [for] expressing their hatred toward homosexuals" (1989: 120). She then goes on:

> Often black people, especially non-gay folks, become enraged when they hear a white person who is gay suggest that homosexuality is synonymous with the suffering people experience as a consequence of racial exploitation and oppression. The need to make gay experience and black experience of oppression synonymous seems to be one that surfaces much more in the minds of white people. Too often, it is seen as a way of minimizing the particular problems people of color face in a white-supremacist society, especially the problems encountered because one does not have white skin. Many of us have been in discussions where a non-white person — a black person — struggles to explain to white folks that while we can acknowledge that gay people of all colors are harassed and suffer exploitation and domination, we also recognize that there is

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significant difference that arises because of the visibility of dark skin. Often homophobic attacks on gay people occur in situations where knowledge of sexual preference is indicated or established — outside of gay bars, for example. While it in no way lessens the severity of such suffering for gay people, or the fear that it causes, it does mean that in a given situation the apparatus of protection and survival may be simply not identifying as gay.

In contrast, most people of color have no choice. No one can hide, change, or mask dark skin color. White people, gay or straight, could show greater understanding of the impact of racial oppression on people by not attempting to make these oppressions synonymous, but rather by showing the ways they are linked and yet differ (1989: 125).

I want to suggest that we should think twice before appropriating this view for queer theory. For three reasons.

First, Hooks's denunciations of analogies is based on an undue generalization about the intentions of those who use them, as if they were all animated by the same (malevolent and self-serving) motivation. In response to Hooks's scathing criticism of White feminists in *Ain't I A Woman*, Barbara Smith, in a very important review of the book published in 1983, made a crucial point: "What Hooks does not acknowledge is that the differing *politics* of white feminists have resulted in many differing responses to the issues of racism and cultural difference, ranging from cosmetic to absolutely serious. Hooks never admits that there are parts of the women's movement… that define taking responsibility for racism as a top priority" (1983b: 41; emphasis in the original). Hooks's "examples are overwhelmingly drawn from 'women's studies classes,' 'conferences,' 'books,' and 'groups' whose purposes are never identified" (1983b: 43) and her theories are exemplary of writings "untouched by a Third World feminist movement that is now [in 1983] at least ten years strong" (1983b: 38).

Second, Hooks's denunciation of analogies relies on problematic hierarchies of suffering. Her goal is to install Black women at the top of a hierarchy of suffering. This leads her to belittle the suffering of Black men in slavery in the first chapter of her 1981 book and to argue, in Smith's terms, "not only that black women suffered more in slavery, but that black men suffered less than is commonly believed" (39).

To Hooks's claim that "No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women," Smith responds that this reduces the history of women to a comparison meant to "emphasiz[e] the gulfs between women, black and white," and erases "the existence and struggles of Native-American, Asian-American, and Latin women" (41). Hooks's claim also, very importantly, erases the historical commonalities between white women and black women, according to Smith: it obfuscates "the reality of obligatory child-bearing, rape and battering, to name only a few common female life experiences." Finally, and not incidentally, Hooks's approach erases class as well as sexual exploitation: it ignores, as Smith puts it, "the complexities of being white combined with being economically *and* sexually exploited" and the fact that "class oppression is certainly something poor and working class women of all races have in common, no matter how much the system tries to obscure this fact" (42).

Third, in the case of homophobia, Hooks opposes analogies because she has no understanding of the suffering of gays and lesbians, and indeed she downplays it. While her point (well taken) in the passage cited above, that the oppressions experienced by

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racial minorities and sexual minorities "are linked and yet differ," seems to imply an indisputable differentiation (the first grounded in a visible fact, the second having more to do with the management of information, as Goffman had argued much earlier), it is clear that she assumes not just that racial oppression operates differently from sexual oppression but also that racial minorities have it worse than sexual minorities. What is presented, explicitly, as a valid analytic distinction ends up turning into an implicit hierarchy. This shows her lack of understanding of sexual oppression. She does not notice, for example, that while it is true that Blacks cannot hide their skin color (whereas many gays and lesbians do indeed have the option of passing), gay oppression also has other features that racial oppression does not have. For example, by and large, homosexuality is an isolating experience: gays rarely find at home a refuge against a homophobic world (since most gays are born to heterosexual families), whereas members of racial minorities can, in many cases, find in their families and communities a shelter, however precarious, from a racist world.

This downplaying of the oppression of homosexuals or sexual minorities has in fact become a recurring, though implicit, feature of contemporary queer theory as well. Thus, as "intersectionality," "assemblages," and even "homonormativity" have become more central concepts in the field, queer theorists have increasingly denounced the alleged privileges enjoyed by white, middle-class gays and lesbians. They have also tended to consider that non-normative sexual practices represent ongoing targets of social discrimination and hostility only to the extent that they coincide with gender non-conformity or with stigmatized racial or class identities. This view fails to take

homophobia or sexual stratification seriously. Moreover, so insistently and sharply opposing those supposedly privileged individuals to other, perhaps more stigmatized, minorities, is highly unlikely to bring them together in joint political struggles.

Against this view, I argue that it is important to remember the warning given to us by Barbara Smith in "Homophobia: Why Bring It Up?":

> It is essential… in making connections between homophobia and other oppressions, not to fall prey to the distorted reasoning that the justification for taking homophobia seriously is that it affects some groups who are "verifiably" oppressed, for example, people of color, women, or disabled people. *Homophobia is in and of itself a verifiable oppression and in a heterosexist system, all non-heterosexuals are viewed as "deviants" and are oppressed* (1982: 101; my emphasis).

Hooks also writes:

> Black communities may be perceived as more homophobic than other communities because there is a tendency for individuals in black communities to verbally express in an outspoken way antigay sentiments. I talked with a straight black male in a California community who acknowledged that though he has often made jokes poking fun at gays or expressing contempt as a means of bonding in group settings, in his private life he was a central support person for a gay sister. Such contradictory behavior seems pervasive in black communities…. a distinction must be made between black people overtly expressing prejudice toward homosexuals and homophobic white people who never make homophobic comments but who have the power to actively exploit and oppress gay people in areas of housing, employment, etc. (1989: 122)

In 1998, in "Can the Queen Speak? Racial Essentialism, Sexuality, and the Problem of Authority," Black gay scholar Dwight McBride rightly noted that "the rhetorical strategy she employs here is an old one, wherein blacks are blameless because they are 'powerless.'" And he pointedly added: "This is a particularly surprising move on the part of hooks when we consider that in so many other contexts her work on gender is so

unrelenting and hard-hitting. So much is this the case that it is almost unimaginable that hooks would allow for a space in which tolerance for black sexism would ever be tenable" (2000 [1998]: 29). Indeed, Hooks's argument, if applied to women, would lead her to excuse Black sexism just because Hooks, one day, has met a man who, although extremely sexist in public, adores his mother or his wife and showers her with presents. Hooks never excuses sexism, and one wonders why private kindness becomes a mitigating factor when it comes to homophobia among straight Black men.

The promotion of Bell Hooks to the status of an acceptable reference for queer theory is in fact a troubling phenomenon. It has required forgetting Hooks's homophobia — a homophobia that many Black gays and lesbians are well aware of. In her 1981 book, as I said, she criticized as "reactionary" the creation of black feminist autonomous organizations such as Combahee. Many early 1980s Black lesbians were "flabbergasted that Hooks should think it wrong for black feminists to organize independently" (Randall-Tsuruta 1983: 46). Smith explained Hooks's hostility by the fact that "many black feminists are also lesbians" (1983b: 43). Even more troubling, as noted by Smith, was the fact that "in a book of over two-hundred pages Hooks does not mention the word lesbian once" (1983b: 43). Her "heterosexist perspective" (1983b: 44), from which she reduced the debate between Black feminists and White feminists to "a competition that has always been centered in the arena of sexual politics with white and black women competing against one another for male favor" (Hooks 1981: 156), and her assertion that "Attacking heterosexuality does little to strengthen the self-concept of the masses of women who desire to be with men" (Hooks 1981: 191) were perceived by many Black

lesbians, in the words of Black lesbian poet Cheryl Clarke, as "a backhanded slap at lesbian feminists, a considerable number of whom are black" (Clarke 1983: 205). And they ranked Hooks's writings among the "undeniably homophobic pronouncements of black intellectuals" (Clarke 1983: 205) and denounced her "overriding homophobia" (Smith 1983b: 44).

Of course, as is also noted by McBride, Hooks was right to denounce attempts to single out Black communities as supposedly more homophobic than the society at large. In 1983, in "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community," Cheryl Clarke wrote, like Hooks, that "I sometimes become impatient with the accusations of homophobia hurled back at the black community by many gay men and lesbians, as if the whole black community were more homophobic than the heterosexist culture we live in" (1983: 205). But, unlike Hooks, Clarke did not go on to excuse homophobia or to underestimate its impact. Clarke too noted that Hooks "seems to purposely ignore the existence and central contributions of black lesbians to the feminist movement" and "does not even mention the word *lesbian* in her book. This is unbearable." This led Clarke to ask, pointedly, "Ain't lesbians women too?" (Clarke 1983: 205).

To conclude, then: I argue that queer theory—rather than recycling a critique of analogies inherited from a writer whose political thought is characterized by a desire to rank suffering and crown as the most oppressed identity an identity that, unsurprisingly, happens to be hers, I would urge us to take our cues, once again, from Barbara Smith, who crucially asserts, "A Black feminist perspective has no use for ranking oppressions"

(1983a: xxviii). And I want to derive from the lesbians of color with whom Smith worked, rather than from Hooks, a radical use of analogies. Which I will do now.

In her autobiographical account "La Güera" (1983: 24-33), Cherríe Moraga recalls that she is "the very well-educated daughter of a woman who, by the standards in this country, would be considered largely illiterate." By contrast with her mother, she was also "anglocized." Education is not her sole difference: "I was educated, but more than this, I was 'la güera': fair-skinned": therefore, unlike her mother, she could pass as White. Her entire life was meant to cause her to feel estranged from her mother's experiences: "I took her life into my heart, but managed to keep a lid on it as long as I feigned being the happy, upwardly mobile heterosexual."

> When I finally lifted the lid to my lesbianism, a profound connection with my mother reawakened in me. It wasn't until I acknowledged and confronted my own lesbianism in the flesh, that my heartfelt identification with and empathy for my mother's oppression — due to being poor, uneducated, and Chicana — was realized. My lesbianism is the avenue through which I have learned the most about silence and oppression, and it continues to be the most tactile reminder to me that we are not free human beings.
> You see, one follows the other. I had known for years that I was a lesbian, had felt it in my bones, had ached with the knowledge, gone crazed with the knowledge, wallowed in the silence of it. Silence is like starvation. Don't be fooled. It's northing short of that, and felt most sharply when one has had a full belly most of her life. When we are not physically starving, we have the luxury to realize psychic and emotional starvation. It is from this starvation that other starvations can be recognized — if one is willing to take the risk of making the connection — if one is willing to be responsible to the result of the connection. For me, the connection is an inevitable one (28-29).

Prior to "acknowledg[ing] and confront[ing]" her "own lesbianism," Moraga could not identify with her mother and instead she experienced "daily, a huge disparity between

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what I was born into and what I was to grow up to become." But her lesbianism makes her experience silence, oppression and "starvation." This experience, moreover, allows her to relate to her mother's own experience: "from this starvation… other starvations can be recognized." Focusing on her oppression as a lesbian does not isolate her, but provides a ground from which she can relate to her mother's: "one follows from the other." Therefore, "lift[ing] the lid to [her] lesbianism" allows Moraga to lift the lid on her mother's life as well, in spite of all their differences. Having acknowledged her own starvation, she can now relate to that of her mother.

Moraga's experience contains a powerful lesson that contradicts contemporary normative understandings of identity politics: it is not identity, but the refusal to embrace it, that inhibits what she calls "connections." Far from enclosing her in her particular pain, identity emerges from Moraga's account as an experiential ground that allows for connections. It does not lead Moraga to wallow narcissistically in her own specificity, but serves as a means for her to understand the oppression of a poor, uneducated, Chicana woman.

The structure of equivalence among different oppressions is also wonderfully captured in "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance," an essay by Cheryl Clarke published in *This Bridge Called My Back*. In it, Clarke relies centrally on the analogy between race and sexuality. And she teaches us a way to use that analogy in order to create connections rather than rank oppressions. She writes:

> … there is no one kind of lesbian, no one kind of lesbian behavior, and no one kind of lesbian relationship. Also there is no one kind of response to

the pressures that lesbians labor under to survive as lesbians. Not all women who are involved in sexual-emotional relationships with women call themselves lesbians or identify with any particular lesbian community. Many women are only lesbians to a particular community and *pass* [*emphasis in the original*] as heterosexuals as they traffic among enemies. (This is *analogous* to being black and passing for white with only one's immediate family knowing one's true origins.) Yet, those who hide in the closet of heterosexual presumption are sooner or later discovered. The "nigger-in the woodpile" story retells itself. Many women are politically active as lesbians, but may fear holding hands with their lovers as they traverse heterosexual turf. (This response to heterosexual predominance can be *likened* to the reaction of the black student who integrates a predominately white dormitory and who fears leaving the door of her room open when she plays gospel music.) There is the woman who engages in sexual-emotional relationships with women and labels herself *bisexual.* (This is *comparable* to the Afro-American whose skin-color indicates her mixed ancestry yet who calls herself "mulatto" rather than black.) Bisexual is a safer label than lesbian, for it posits the possibility of a relationship with a man, regardless of how infrequent or non-existent the female bisexual's relationships with men might be. And then there is the lesbian who is a lesbian anywhere and everywhere and who is in direct and constant confrontation with heterosexual presumption, privilege and oppression. (Her struggle can be *compared* to that of the Civil Rights activist of the 1960s who was out there on the streets for freedom, while so many of us viewed the action on the television.) (129; emphases added unless otherwise specified).

Clarke's text offers one of the most powerful examples of the radical potential of identity politics to build "connections" through equivalences. Her text also denies that specificity stands in opposition to commonality. She starts by acknowledging differences among lesbians ("there is no one kind of lesbian, no one kind of lesbian behavior and no one kind of lesbian relationship") and differences in the ways they respond to sexual oppression ("there is no one kind of response to the pressures that lesbians labor under to survive as lesbians.") However, that acknowledgment of differences works in a remarkable manner. Specifically, instead of using differences among lesbians (in a deconstructionist impulse) to undermine the coherence of the identity category "lesbian"

and bring its vacuity to light (as queer theorists would), Clarke on the contrary uses them, in a constructivist impulse, to point outside of the category "lesbian" and construe lesbians' multiple experiences as similar to those of Blacks. Put simply, differences among women "involved in sexual-emotional relationships with women" (and among Black people) serve not to undermine or atomize the category "lesbian" but to expand the surface of contact between Blacks and lesbians. In order to counter the risk of fragmentation, Clarke articulates a series of equivalences ("analogous," "can be likened," "comparable," "can be compared") between different positions that highlight the commonalities between the experiences of various sexually deviant women in a heterosexual world and the experiences of various Blacks in a White world, all of whom adopt a variety of analogous strategies for managing their identities in the larger social world.

Clarke's construction of commonalities, while built on identity politics, is not homogenizing: it accommodates differences at a fundamental level. However, it implies neither a dismissal of identity nor a collapsing of the experiences of sexuality and race. On the one hand, both lesbian and black identities may be diverse, but they are not for that reason non-existent or empty. Put differently, while emphasizing differences and variety, Clarke does not lose sight of commonalities among lesbians. On the other hand, lesbian and black experiences have much in common, but they are not for that reason collapsed into one another: they remain distinct. If they were not distinct, we would be dealing with "identity," not "equivalence." Instead of the one-sided emphasis on differences often characteristic of postmodern thinking, Clarke seeks to achieve a balance

between differences and commonalities or between what Laclau and Mouffe would call "logics of difference" and "logics of equivalence." Clarke, then, uses "equivalence" to construct a set of correspondences that enables each of those oppressed groups to relate to the other through identity, not in spite of it.

Chicana lesbian feminist Cherríe Moraga and Black lesbian feminist Cheryl Clarke are evidence that it is not only white activists who use analogies. Clarke, a Black feminist and a lesbian, even analogizes sexual oppression and racial oppression, and she does not seem to feel that her experience is erased by that analogy. On the contrary, she uses it to make sense of her own experience and to bring racial and sexual minorities together.

Both of them also teach us a powerful lesson. Embracing one's identity, far from de-politicizing, isolating, or dividing political constituencies, can be a powerful instrument to build bridges across identities through the use of equivalences. In sum—and this is the point of my entire argument—identities and equivalences are an irreplaceable tool for the work of politics. They are particularly important for the formation of progressive coalitions. What this suggests, then, is that denunciations of identity politics and of the political use of equivalences, while they may be intended as denunciations of identity and/or equivalences, are in fact denunciations of politics.

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