

Queering Feminism

a perspective by Cassia Paigen Roth



“It is somewhat remarkable [in] a panel on queering feminism that there was no lesbian content,” Heather Lukes of Occidental College said in her closing remarks at the “Queering Feminist Theory” event at UCLA on October 1, 2009. “It is not a complaint,” Lukes continued; in fact, by not linking queer and feminist theory through the figure of the lesbian, the panelists “are working at a limit between what queer theory can think and what feminism can think.” The presentations of Jennifer Doyle and Carol-Anne Tyler attempted to historicize feminist contributions to queer theory by critiquing

contemporary queer theorists’ negation of feminist influences, particularly in the work of Lee Edelman.

In her response to Doyle and Tyler, Lukes analyzed Ariel Levy’s book, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (Free Press, 2005), to explore the contemporary intersections between feminist and queer sexuality. According to Lukes, Levy’s book takes an orthodox, pre-sex wars feminist stance towards the “tawdry, tarty, cartoonlike version of [female] sexuality” seen in female attendance at strip clubs and participation in shows like *Girls Gone*

Wild, which, Levy argues, “has become so ubiquitous [that] it no longer seems particular.” Lukes, however, described Levy’s book as an example of queer envy, or the heterosexual displacement of pleasure onto the queer community. As Lukes said, “Culturally I think we come to the queers with the ideas that these people know how to enjoy.” This “inherent” knowledge of pleasure, however, is made possible by the queer’s role in society: “We are now looking at a period where the pervert actually appears as this figure of too much enjoyment. And in our culture whether we like it or not that pervert tends to be

homo.” Levy’s work then, is functioning as a cultural superego, a police force, that uses the 1970s feminist sex war debate to promote socially “acceptable” forms of (hetero) sexuality. When mainstream society narrows its acceptable bounds for heterosexual performance, even straight female sexuality becomes “queered,” or placed outside the mainstream.



In the sex wars of the 1970s and 80s, second-wave feminists became vehemently divided over the issue of female sexuality in general, and pornography in particular. The feminist “anti-porn” crusades were led by attorney Catherine MacKinnon and radical writer Andrea Dworkin. MacKinnon argued that a truly feminist theory of sexuality would depict “sexuality as a social construct of male power: defined by men, forced on women, and constitutive in the meaning of gender.” Through pornography, female subordination “becomes both sexual and socially real.” As Dworkin wrote, “Male power is the *raison d’être* of pornography; the degradation of the

female is the means of achieving this power.” Feminists wanted to remove sexual liberation from the socially constructed and perverted version represented in pornography. Activists rallied around anti-pornography legislation, hoping to make pornographic images a violation of a woman’s civil rights.

The opposition saw this crusade as censoring free speech by employing a rigid definition of human sexuality. Using the “primacy of pleasure” theory which saw sex as physical and genital, not emotional, activists such as Gayle Rubin and Pat Califia denounced the position that one feminist theory of sexuality could encompass all women. Citing the need for their own “queer” sexual theory that did not associate the sexualization of women with sexual inequality, they supported sadomasochism and butch-femme dynamics as healthy and integral parts of queer sexuality and not something to be dismissed as male patriarchy. What emerged from the debate, according to B. Ruby Rich and Catharine R. Stimpson, was a rigid binary. Traditional feminism became equated with anti-pornography activism. This view saw political and social equality as inherently

opposed to women’s sexualization. Anytime you looked at a woman as a sexual object, you replicated her role as an object in society. The opposing side rejected the woman-as-victim model, positing that female eroticism was a form of resistance. Sometimes objectifying women—or men—was a healthy part of sexuality, and to repress someone’s practice or pleasure was just another form of social policing. While neither side truly represented a monolithic group, the public discourse separated feminist and lesbian activism. Relegating eroticism and homosexuality to the margins, this new definition of sexuality set up a duality that separated feminism from queer theory.



Yet the “queer as pervert” paradigm is being challenged today. According to Lukes, the “figure of the homosexual...in the United States is facing this movement of assimilation where gay marriage seems to be a mainstream issue.” Backlash against this movement has appeared in queer theory, especially as practiced by white men. As it moves away

from the realm of social engagement in an attempt to distance itself from any movement towards the mainstream, it separates itself from its feminist predecessors. Lukes argues that queer of color theorists, such as José Muñoz and Rod Ferguson, “give homage to Audre Lorde, give homage to the influence of Gloria Anzaldúa. And yet there seems to be this tremendous gap between feminist predecessors of contemporary [white] queer theory.” In fact, pivotal books such as Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* or Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* are now out of print.

While the absence of feminist theory in contemporary queer theory is commonplace, the panelists have particular criticism for prominent queer theorist Lee Edelman’s book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). In her presentation, “Blind Spots: Queer Theory and Abortion Discourse,” Jennifer Doyle worked to connect abortion and queer theory through a critique of Edelman’s book. As Doyle attested, “Abortion plays a key role in Lee Edelman’s *No Future*. This may come as a surprise to some readers of his work not only because his text is wholly

uninterested in women but also because this fact has not been taken seriously in any of the critical responses of his book.” In discussing current pro-life depictions of the fetus as separate from the mother and therefore deserving of life as a human being, Edelman connects women who abort to men who have sex with men; both represent a direct threat to compulsory heterosexuality’s reproductive futurism. As figures who are not “fighting for the children” by reproducing, they remain outside the boundary of heteronormative representational logic. Their conscious rejection of what many see as biological necessity comes to embody outsider status in Edelman’s view.

Then why, asked Doyle, does Edelman step over feminist theory’s “complex fight” against the humanistic logic surrounding reproduction and abortion? The absence of this historical debate puts Edelman “awfully close to speaking from exactly the reproductive position he so forcefully challenges, speaking as child cut from mother.” By not recognizing the feminist political, philosophical, legal, and artistic contributions to the abortion debate in this

case, and queer theory in general, Edelman and other queer theorists are disconnecting themselves from their roots.

In her presentation, “No-Future: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Ethics of Sex,” Carol-Anne Tyler asked the question, “Is there no shared future for feminism and queer theory where the ethics of sex is concerned?” While the two fields’ interest in sex is mutual, their approaches and understandings often differ considerably. According to Tyler, “Whereas feminist theory sees sexual difference at the heart of sex, queer theory sees sexuality, testifying to an antagonistic structure of sex that cannot be overcome...by a happily coupling of the two fields.” Yet in her critique of Edelman’s book, Tyler sees a rejection of both forms of sexuality. His dismissal of heteronormativity comes at no surprise. His denunciation of gay assimilation movements that seek to imitate the heterosexual drive for reproduction as a way to legitimate their worth, however, is provocative in that it separates queer theory from gay sexuality. As Tyler articulates, Edelman “repeatedly condemns reproductive futurism whether articulated by heterosexual

or liberal lesbian and gay imitators.” This aggressive stance not only rejects any form of homosexual attempts at the nuclear family, but also disallows for any political organization by homosexuals. Edelman sees both efforts as participating in a discourse of futurism in which gays have no part.



In his recent talk, “Queerness and Radical Evil,” at the 2009 LA Queer Conference also at UCLA, Lee Edelman elaborated on his thesis in *No Future* while exploring the place of queer theory within education. In what seemed a response to both Doyle’s and Tyler’s arguments, Edelman stated that he is not interested in queer theory’s connection to sexual orientation studies or the affirmation of various forms of identity. Instead, he argues that “queerness” is a larger issue; it is what we, as a society, choose to put outside the “knowable.” This, as we have seen, could include men who have sex with men or women who choose to abort. Moreover, in queer theory, as in any system of knowledge, there exists a continuous gap

in the ability to fully satisfy one’s desire for knowledge or desire for others. Edelman, working within a Lacanian frame, argues that all positive knowledge’s claims or desires originate from a “lack.” We desire others because they promise to complete us, and we look to the future because it promises to bridge the gap. Children represent our desire to continually gesture forward, to mask and suppress our current lack, which is why all political movements motivate us with the promise of a better future. Queer individuals, by embodying the present, rather than the promise of future satisfaction (of knowledge, sexual desire, or our continued life through reproduction), threaten our cultural investment in the future. By refusing the future of heterosexual reproduction, gay men and women, or women who choose to abort, refuse to suppress the present to the future. Yet as assimilation moves the queer’s status into the realm of the socially understood and “knowable,” there still remains the need to “other” someone else. In order to not do this, according to Edelman, gay individuals should embrace their status and refuse to buy into the dominant narrative of futurity.

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Note: Part of the the year-long Andrew W. Mellon Sawyer Seminar, “Homosexualities, from Antiquity to the Present: Worlds, Subjections, Visibilities,” “Queering Feminist Theory” was chaired by Kathleen McHugh; Lee Edelman, Tufts University, presented at the recent UCLA Queer Studies Conference 2009 organized by LGBT Studies. For more info on the Mellon Sawyer Seminar, visit <http://www.english.ucla.edu/sawyer/>